

The book cover features a man's face, partially submerged in water, with a sunset in the background. The title 'Unleashed' is written in a large, red, serif font with a yellow glow. Below the title is the subtitle 'Four all-new stories of unusual desire and strange seduction' in a smaller, white, sans-serif font. At the bottom, the authors' names are listed in a white, serif font.

Unleashed

Four all-new stories of unusual desire
and strange seduction

NATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHORS

REBECCA YORK

SUSAN KEARNEY

DIANE WHITESIDE

LUCY MONROE

Beyond Limits

from Unleashed Anthology

By

Susan Kearney

Chapter One

Never before had Ian Gordon shot Samantha Bessinger a devastating peel-off-the-panty-hose smile. "Why don't you take the copilot seat, Samantha?"

What had gotten into Ian? His suggestion to sit up front in her plane's cockpit right next to him floored her. Intrigued her.

Samantha gave him a thorough second look. Since when did her pilot exude pure male magnetism that sparkled like fine champagne? Maybe he'd been drinking. But his speech was crisp, his smoldering blue eyes clear as he met her gaze, his expression both burning and compelling.

Wow. Double wow. She'd known her pilot for more than a year and she'd never reacted to one of his smiles with a zing of pure female interest.

Strange how her normally reserved and businesslike employee called her Samantha—not Ms. Bessinger. Funny how an invite to sit in the cockpit and one suggestive smile had made her suddenly aware of his dark snappy eyes. Never before had he sent interested signals—not when he'd flown her to Chicago, Cleveland, Pittsburgh or LA. Even the night the two of them had been grounded during a thunderstorm, his demeanor had remained formal and respectful. Yet this invitation had sounded as if he were asking her on a date. His demeanor had most definitely been playful, his smile hot.

And every cell in her body wanted to sidle closer, even if she got burned. The idea of taking him up on the invite was inappropriate.

Oh really?

Since when had hot become inappropriate? Since when had sitting next to a sexy and interested man become wrong?

My God. Had she become so conditioned... so caught up in what was businesslike that she no longer responded to the signals of her own body? Her nerves jangled like a teenager's and her pulse accelerated. Strangely flattered by his interest, she forced her lips into a smile. And in the typical fashion that amazed her competitors and contributed to her success, Samantha altered her plans. Work could wait. She deserved a break and she would enjoy a change in scenery.

Putting her briefcase behind the copilot's seat, Samantha gazed back at Ian, wondering if she still remembered how to flirt. "Thanks for the offer."

He gestured to the empty seat. "Make yourself comfortable. Would you like a cup of coffee?"

"Thanks. Black, please."

He handed her an empty mug and poured steaming coffee from a stainless steel thermos. Since when had Ian cornered the market on virility? The delicious aroma filled the cabin, and her mouth watered—but it wasn't the coffee she was thinking about tasting.

Nevertheless, she settled for the hot Java and took a bracing sip. Ah, caffeine kicked in and revved her exhausted motor. "It's good."

The glimmer in his eyes as he gazed at her with keen appreciation suggested he'd like to offer her more than coffee, making her glad she'd taken extra care with her makeup this morning. Wearing her custom Armani suit that matched the Gucci pumps and bag she'd picked up at Saks, and sporting the new haircut she'd just gotten from the brand-new stylist she'd found on Forty-second Street, who had done wonders with her baby-fine hair, Samantha looked her best. The glamorous cut softened her jawline and the new honey color brought out her brown eyes. Her dad would say she looked like a million bucks. But, of course, Samantha was worth much more.

And wealth made her a target. A target for the paparazzi. A target for scam artists. A target for men on the make. But she reminded herself that the shields she'd put up for her own protection were also shields she could pull down when the occasion warranted it.

As she sipped her coffee and Ian completed his preflight check, she recalled a time when she hadn't been suspicious of a hot smile and a charming man's interest, a time when coffee this good had been a luxury she couldn't afford. She'd grown up poor, worked her way through college and bought her first fixer-upper before she'd graduated. In the beginning, she'd done most of the renovations herself, sanding and painting, fixing plumbing and hanging curtains. Later, she'd had to deal with contractors and building inspectors—not an easy task for a woman, especially one so young. She supposed she'd begun erecting defensive walls then, in order to make men take her seriously.

As Samantha had expanded into duplexes, then apartments and finally New York City skyscrapers, she'd developed a tough exterior. She now owned a real estate enterprise that would soon rival Donald Trump's. Contractors no longer looked down their noses at her or assumed they could sell her cheap materials or shoddy workmanship. But somewhere along the way, regular workingmen had stopped asking her out. As she'd made the Bessinger name a household word, she'd become insulated from her working-class roots and protected by her executive assistants.

So Ian's charming invitation had taken her aback, but on second thought, there was no good reason to decline. She slid into the copilot's seat and caught the pleasant spicy scent of him, mixed with a clean male aroma. She relaxed into the plush leather, sipped her coffee and tried not to ogle the man beside her.

A change of pace would be good for her. She had been working too hard, and although she'd owned the jet for more than a year, she'd never sat up front. A little adventure would help clear her head of the business deals that dominated her life of late. If she had to be honest, Ian's handsome smile and twinkling eyes had caused tiny butterflies to alight in her stomach and had a lot to do with her decision.

He most definitely had a fit body. Military-straight shoulders tapered to a flat stomach and lean hips—from what she could see of them. At about five foot ten inches, his lean frame complemented his short military haircut and his clean-shaven jaw.

Still, no matter how unexpected and pleasant his attention might be, in this day and age of corporate kidnapping and terrorism, it paid to be careful, and Samantha had given Ian a thorough perusal. As chief executive officer, she could have assigned an underling to hire her pilot, but since she often flew, putting her life in her pilot's hands, last year she'd hired Ian herself. And Ian Gordon, an ex-military pilot with a reputation for meticulous detail and careful flying had proven a fine choice. She always felt safe aboard this airplane—but until today, she'd never thought of him in any capacity except pilot, and he'd certainly never caused these tingles of sexual magnetism that drew her closer.

When he leaned over to help with her seat belt—a totally unnecessary move since she could have placed the coffee mug in a holder—his hand grazed her arm, and she didn't think his touch an accident. She would have expected Ian to act with a bit more subtlety and discretion. Instead... he seemed... different. More sexual. More male. As if this flight were a hot date—not a business trip.

"Ready to go?" he asked.

She nodded and he slid a headset over his ears. As he taxied the plane toward the runway, he spoke with the air traffic controller and was all business. She ignored the gauges and meters before her, stared out the front windows and wondered how she could so suddenly be attracted to a man. But as the engines revved, their speed increased and the nose lifted, she was no closer to an answer.

Once they soared into the air and climbed to cruising altitude, heading for her meeting in Miami, Ian flicked on the autopilot and again turned his attention to her. "Miami Beach is scorching in August."

She shrugged. "I'll be in an air-conditioned office building during the entire time. Meetings."

"Doesn't sound like fun." His expression turned playful, his lips turning up at the corners. "Why don't I reroute us to the Caribbean?"

She conjured up the delicious idea of playing hooky with him, then shook her head and smiled. "I wish."

"When was the last time you drank a piña colada with a paper umbrella?"

She laughed. "I can't remember."

"Or the last time you sank your toes into a pink-sand beach?"

With his silky, smooth tone, he made a trip to the islands with him sound enticing. Still, she had too much profit riding on her upcoming meeting to consider taking an unplanned vacation. "Some of us work for a living."

"Come on. Tell me you don't have a yen to swim in emerald green waters? Or watch the sunset from a hammock, your bare feet cooling in the breeze? I could have you in Barbados or Aruba in less than five hours."

He could have her? If he kept talking so suggestively, she might just agree. She'd been working for so long without a break that she owed herself a vacation. In fact she owed herself a fling. Twenty-hour workdays led to weekends where she barely had time to catch up on desperately needed sleep, never mind put energy into a relationship.

It was a measure of how long it had been since she'd really relaxed that she was finding his offer so very tempting, so very difficult to refuse. "I've been working on this deal for months. I can't skip out now."

"After the meeting?"

Her heart hammered. "More meetings, I'm afraid." She eyed him over the rim of her mug. His eyes twinkled as if he knew the secret to a happy life and she was clueless. Perhaps she was. She certainly hadn't made time to enjoy her wealth. Her penthouse looked more like a hotel room than a home, but she was going to decorate, as soon as her top designers completed the color scheme for the new hotel. No, then they had to move on to the theater renovation, a huge project, which took up an entire city block. The moment she returned to New York, she had a full day of meetings about her newest project, but suddenly the idea of spending some time on extracurricular activities with Ian tempted her.

"So if we crashed and burned—not that we will," he assured her, "but if we went down, what would you regret most?"

"Not growing old?" she quipped.

"I'm talking about specifics."

The image of sweaty bodies entwined in silk sheets filled her mind. Yum. Kissing Ian on a starry rooftop. Bathing together in her personal hot tub? She cocked her head to one side. "What would you regret most?"

"You so do not want me to answer that question." He grinned again, a grin so charming it ought to be illegal.

His I'm-so-interested expression caused her stomach to twist and her pulse to dance. Ian Gordon *was* flirting. With her. In fact, she suspected he was going to make an outrageously sexy suggestion, but what astonished her even more was that instead of cutting him off, she yearned to encourage him.

"Come on," she prodded. "Why don't you tell me what you'd regret the most if we crashed and burned."

"That I'd never marry my soul mate."

She buried her gaze in her coffee cup to hide her rising embarrassment. Samantha was so out of practice with casual conversation that she'd thought he'd been about to say something playful, like he'd regret that he'd never kissed her underwater or romanced her on a beach. And when she dared to look at him again, she caught his eyes dancing with amusement, as if he could read her thoughts.

Thank God, he couldn't.

"You believe in soul mates?" she asked, recovering almost immediately.

"Of course. I've dreamed of her."

Okay, this conversation was getting a little weird. Ian Gordon, ex-military pilot believed he had a soul mate because he'd dreamed about her?

"I see." She started to put down her mug and release her seat belt. Time to retreat to real life and work in the plane's main cabin.

"No, you don't see. You think I'm... a little eccentric."

"We're all entitled to our dreams," she prevaricated, trying to withhold judgment.

"All the men in my family dream about their soul mates."

"Really?"

"We dream about the right woman and then we go out into the world and find her."

Samantha had read Ian's file. When he'd been a teenager, his father had died during a classified mission over Iraq. His mother had run off and Ian had ended up in foster care. He had no brothers. No uncles. No grandparents. One of the reasons she'd hired him was that he had no responsibilities and could leave on a moment's notice.

She kept her voice steady. "I've read your file. There are no men in your family."

His tone turned serious. "It's true that there are no men in *Ian Gordon's* family."

The way he'd emphasized his name shot a tingle of fear down her spine. It was as if he was implying his file was incorrect. She put down her coffee mug before her trembling fingers dropped it. "What are you saying?"

"I'm not Ian Gordon."

"You're not Ian?" She stared at him, fear racing up her throat.

"I'm Ari Dillon. And I have four brothers."

"But you look just like—"

"You aren't an easy woman to approach. You're never alone, except behind guarded doors, and you travel in a limo with very protective drivers. Since we had to meet, I arranged to take Ian's place." Ari spoke gently, as if understanding she was in shock.

"What have you done to my pilot?"

"Don't worry, he's fine. He has no idea we took off without him."

No wonder this man had seemed so different from Ian. She'd known from the first moment he'd smiled that charming grin and called her Samantha that something was odd. But she'd forced her mind to accept the evidence in front of her eyes, even as her body had recognized the differences, responding to Ari as she'd never done to Ian. "Your resemblance to my pilot is... astonishing."

Could Ian have an identical twin not even he knew about? Or had Ari undergone plastic surgery to take the place of her pilot? She tried to come up with a logical explanation. But extensive plastic surgery took years and that meant he'd been planning to come after her for longer than Ian had been in her employ. The facts made no sense.

His words haunted her. He'd said they had to meet. "So why are you here?"

Ari's voice remained calm, gentle. "Because you are the woman I dreamed about. *You* are my soul mate."

Chapter Two

Ari wished he could draw Samantha into his arms and assure her that he wouldn't hurt her. However, he knew enough about the outside world to recognize fear in a woman's eyes. So he remained still and tried to look nonthreatening, allowing her to adjust to his words before he shocked her again with the rest of his story.

Samantha clenched her armrests, staring at him as if he'd grown four eyes and a tail. Her nostrils flared and her eyes dilated. She drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly, and finally a bit of color came back into her pale face.

"I don't know what to say." She licked her bottom lip, a nervous gesture, yet she was very good at hiding her feelings behind a mask he found difficult to read.

Clearly, she didn't believe him but at least she hadn't lapsed into hysterics. Supposedly the dreams were never wrong. After dreaming about and finding their soul mates, many New Atlantean men had returned home to brag that they'd felt an immediate and total connection with their soul mate at the first moment of meeting. But while Ari admired her intelligence, while he was attracted to her courage, he felt as if she was hiding most of herself behind a businesslike front. He wished he could have gotten to know her better under more normal circumstances before he'd inserted himself into her life.

But Samantha lived behind guarded gates. To even enter her office building required an appointment. Sure he could have slipped past security, but that wouldn't have gained him quality time with her.

So Ari had been forced to make extensive plans in order for them to spend time together. And he would make the best of the opportunity. "Would you like to know how I made myself look like Ian?"

"Sure."

"Do you remember high school biology class?" he asked, knowing he needed to explain before he showed her exactly who and what he was. Although shape-shifting was rare where he came from, no child would fear him or his ability. He prayed she wouldn't view him as a monster.

She frowned. "You learned how to make yourself look like my pilot in high school biology class?"

He laughed. "Not exactly. But do you recall how after a worm is cut in half, the head can grow a tail and the tail will grow a head?"

She shook her head. "I'm afraid I was never any good at science."

"Well, take my word for it. It happens all the time. And I use the same principle to change my shape."

"Change your shape? Uh-huh." She remained polite, but skepticism shined in her eyes.

"Now, don't freak out. I'm going to show you by growing another finger. Okay?"

She swallowed hard. "Sure. Go right ahead."

He could tell that, although she'd listened intently, she didn't believe him. Slowly, he lifted his hand and with a mental thought, he grew a second pinky.

"Oh... my God." Samantha's eyes widened, but she leaned forward in fascination, staring at his sixth finger. "Can I touch it?"

"Yes."

She poked his pinky and then massaged it between her thumb and index finger. Her touch didn't shoot an electric tingle through him as he'd hoped—however her touch was pleasant enough to urge him to reach out and place her hand in his. He remained still, forcing himself to let her proceed at her own pace. She might not have enjoyed science classes, but she took her time, thoroughly examining the newly grown finger.

Her voice rose in surprise. "It's genuine flesh and there's a bone in there—just like a real finger. Are you a magician?"

"Nope."

"You dropped down to Earth in a UFO?" she guessed.

"Wrong again."

"So you're a lower life-form?"

He shook his head and held back a sigh. The conversation wasn't going as he'd planned. "Have you ever heard of Atlantis?"

"The legendary ancient island that sank beneath the Mediterranean Sea? Of course I've heard of it. My interest in history is a bit better than biology. Why?" She picked up her coffee. For a moment he feared she might throw it on him but she remained too controlled for that. Instead, she took another sip, giving away nothing on a face once again composed.

He was pleased she had a good brain. That she hadn't run from him screaming. It was a start. And he couldn't help thinking that it was no wonder she'd achieved such success in the business world. He'd just showed her something she considered impossible and already she was adapting.

He leaned back into his seat. "My ancestors were born on Atlantis. They had special abilities that others did not."

"What kind of special abilities?"

"Our people have different talents. Some specialize in telekinesis, telepathy, empathy and shape-shifting."

"Go on."

"Thousands of years ago, our special abilities weren't understood by the masses and their distrust led to fear, persecution and jealousy. So we sank the island and disappeared to make a new home in the South Atlantic. We named it New Atlantis and that is where I call home."

He missed his house on the beach. The Caribbean breezes cooled him, the lapping waves soothed him, the palms rustled outside his windows—and a force shield protected them all from hurricanes and the prying eyes of outsiders. He couldn't imagine why anyone would want to live in a noisy, crowded city and was certain he

could convince her of the advantages of moving into his home. But he was thinking ahead of himself. Right now, it didn't appear as if she even liked him.

She looked him straight in the eyes, her stare challenging. "I've never heard of New Atlantis."

"That's because it's hidden and very private." He couldn't wait to show off his home. While he couldn't offer her the high-rise skyscraper's view of one of the premier cities in the world, there was a serenity on New Atlantis that could be found nowhere else on Earth.

"How do you hide your island?"

"Remember the special abilities that I told you that my ancestors possessed?"

She eyed his second pinky. "Yes."

"We all use our abilities to keep a shield between the rest of the world and New Atlantis. Radar, sonar, photographs cannot see our island. To your scientific instruments, New Atlantis appears to be ocean."

"You're good at storytelling. You ought to write a book."

"If I did, then New Atlantis would no longer be a secret. My people have no wish to be studied or kidnapped and used for ill gain."

She raised her eyes to his and then lowered them again to his hand. Her eyes sparkled with wary curiosity. "I don't understand."

He made the pinky disappear. "I'm changing to my real face."

Ian's face morphed before her eyes. To her, Ian was there one moment, the next, a stranger appeared in his place. And while Ian had been an attractive man, Ari possessed the chiseled cheekbones of his Greek ancestors, a haughty brow, and a longish aristocratic nose. Never would Ari be mistaken for pretty.

Her eyes widened. "That's amazing."

"I didn't change the rest of me because my normal shape won't fit in these clothes."

"You can make yourself into any size? You can look like anyone?"

He nodded. "Down to fingerprints and retinal scans."

"I can see why you wouldn't want the world to know. My God... you could make yourself the president of the United States, infiltrate any bank, corporation or country. You could be the ultimate spy."

"You're beginning to understand."

"I don't understand anything." Her eyes narrowed with suspicion. "Maybe you put a hallucinogen in my coffee."

"I didn't. And I drank the coffee from the same thermos," he reminded her.

"Maybe you're an alien from Mars."

"Isn't it easier to believe I'm from this world? Besides, why would I lie?"

She frowned at him. "Maybe you're the Devil."

"Because you like me?"

"I don't know you well enough to like you," she snapped.

He laughed. "Come on, Samantha. You liked me well enough when you thought I was Ian."

"I know Ian."

Damn, she could be stubborn. But she'd been interested in him—Ari. He'd seen it in the way her mouth had relaxed into a pleased little smile when he'd invited her into the cockpit, the way her eyes had returned his interest, the way she'd given him that thorough once-over when she'd thought he hadn't been looking.

"And you're going to get to know me. I'm not a bad guy."

She rolled her eyes. "Can you land this plane?"

"Of course. I went to the trouble of learning to fly so we could meet." He gestured to the instrument panel. "I assure you, I'm perfectly capable of operating every one of these—"

"Good." Her fingers drummed on her armrest. "If you intend to keep New Atlantis a secret, why are you telling me about it?"

"Even if you wanted to tell others, who would believe you?"

"Exactly." She arched an eyebrow. "So why should *I* believe *you*?"

"You've seen me shape-shift. And you've heard the legends about Atlantis."

"You've made your point, but I've also read about Greek gods, and I didn't expect to meet one of them." She leaned back in her seat, stared out the window and her tone softened. "And you dreamed about me?"

"Yes."

"By name?"

"Yes."

"And suppose I say no?"

"You're going to become one of us. Because you're my soul mate."

If looks could kill, he would have frozen to death from her icy stare. So much for his reputation for charm with the ladies. This was one stubborn woman and he had the sinking sensation that she'd put up one hell of a fight before agreeing to join him in Atlantis—but her resistance made her interesting.

"What do you mean I'm going to become one of you?"

"The shield that protects New Atlantis from your world is weakening. We need fresh minds. New blood. So occasionally we go into the world to find those who can help us maintain the shield."

She shook her head. "I assure you, I don't have any special abilities—unless you count business acumen."

"That's where you're wrong." Down to earth, practical and logical, she wanted to know every detail and he would explain as best he could. Yet, understanding she was still fearful, he braced for any reaction from her. "I wouldn't have dreamed about you unless you possessed the genetic sequencing that allows *you* to shape-shift."

"Me?" She shook her head and snorted. "You place a lot of stock in dreams."

She was so intense, so cool and collected, and he had always longed for a mate with warmth and fun in her soul. "We trust our dreams because they are always accurate."

"So now what?" she asked.

"Excuse me?"

"What are your plans? You've told me your secret. I've listened. Now what?"

"We need to spend time alone together. So we can bond."

At his words, alarm darkened her eyes. Her lips pressed into a firm line. Her hand reached into her purse to retrieve her cell phone.

He didn't try to stop her. "Your phone won't work at this altitude."

She frowned at the lack of signal and turned off the battery. "Suppose I don't want to bond?"

"Please, try to relax. I mean you no harm." He took the plane off autopilot and adjusted their heading. Instead of almost due south, he turned southeast toward the south Atlantic Ocean.

"Where are you taking me?"

"To a private island."

"New Atlantis?"

He shook his head. "We need to be alone."

"Why?"

"I want to teach you how to shape-shift."

She turned shocked eyes on him. "Me? Shape-shift?"

"It's part of your genetic makeup."

"Yeah, right. What happens if I don't learn how?"

He didn't like scaring her. But shape-shifting was difficult to learn. To teach her, he needed to spend a lot of time under conditions that would eventually lead to trust. According to his teachers, the best way for him to earn her trust was for her to believe her life was at risk so she could learn to depend upon him for her own survival.

"If you don't learn to shape-shift, you could die."

Her mouth trembled and she bit her lower lip, no doubt to stop from showing weakness. "I thought you said you meant me no harm?"

"Once you adapt to who and what you really are, you'll be fine."

She glanced at the radio as if it could save her life. He flicked it off, removed a fuse and pocketed it. "Sorry. No one will be coming to your aid. To shape-shift you must look to yourself. You must look inward."

"Even if I believed that you could teach me to shape-shift, I don't want to live on New Atlantis. I have a life in New York. I have friends, a business. A sister."

"We do travel into the world. There's no reason you can't return to visit."

Samantha's fingers clenched into fists. "You have no right to take me from my life. Change our course back to Miami. I refuse to cooperate."

Sad that he must abduct her, he kept his voice gentle. "If you refuse to cooperate, you will die."

Chapter Three

Despite the fact that the sexiest hunk on Earth seemed to have abducted her, Samantha had no intention of dying with him. When she and her plane vanished in the Bermuda Triangle, the news would make headlines. People would come looking for her. They'd discover her plane had taken off from New York and had never landed in Miami. A satellite would pick up the flight path and surely rescuers would come.

Ari flew the plane toward an island that possessed little more than a sand landing strip. As they'd approached by air, she'd seen no buildings, no people, no sign of civilization. Worse, she'd spied only limited vegetation on the spit of sand, indicating a lack of water.

So when the landing gear touched sand, she moved to the galley, dumped her contracts out of her briefcase and grabbed supplies. While Ari braked the plane, she loaded her now empty case with water bottles, grabbed a pack of matches, stuffed several low-carbohydrate Power bars into her purse, placed a life jacket over her head and then clung to a seat back as the plane skidded and bumped across the sand.

A glance out the portal told her the landing strip was too short. The plane had slowed considerably, but they weren't going to stop before plunging into the ocean.

Hands shaking, feet shifting for balance, Samantha placed the briefcase's strap over her shoulder and yanked the plane door's emergency exit handle. The door rolled back with a smooth hiss. Wind whipped her hair and she breathed in hot, humid air and the tang of the sea. Below her, the ground passed by, but Ari braked and they slowed down to bicycle speed. She prayed they'd stop before rolling into the sea. Another glance told her they wouldn't, but, the slow speed made surviving a jump doable, even for her.

Still, her heart battered her ribs in fear. She looked ahead one more time. The plane was clearly about to dive into the water. Oh God. If she didn't want to drown, she had to jump.

Fear racing up her throat, she forced her quivering legs to launch her into the air. She dropped with sickening speed, landing hard, toppling, rolling and skinning a knee and an elbow. She ended up on her back and breathed in a mouthful of sand. She spit out the sand, shoved to her side, and turned to watch her plane taxi into the sea with just enough speed to carry it deep enough to submerge it completely.

Squinting in the bright sunlight, she pushed to her feet. She was now highly suspicious that Ari could have slowed the plane enough to have stopped on land if he'd wanted to. The bastard had deliberately run her plane into the sea.

She wasn't surprised when, a moment later, his head broke the surface of the calm turquoise water. He swam toward shore, using the steady, powerful strokes of a long-distance swimmer. Damn him. Not only had he ruined her radio, he'd destroyed a

thirty million dollar airplane to hide their tracks. Finding her on this isolated spit had just become much more difficult, and she prayed the black box with a GPS locator beacon still worked, even as she tugged her cell phone from her purse and hit the power button.

No service.

Damn. Again, she switched off the power.

Now what?

She'd seen the island from the air. It wasn't larger than fifty acres and had few places to hide. All too aware Ari would soon catch up with her no matter what she did, she didn't bother to expend the energy to run.

She began to perspire in the heat and decided to head for the north shore where she'd seen several palm trees that might offer a bit of shade. Shrugging out of her suit jacket, she placed it over her head to wear as a hood to shield her from the Caribbean sun, worrying that the half dozen water bottles she'd grabbed wouldn't keep her alive for too many days.

Ari's irritating whistling warned of his approach. She'd never heard the tune and resented the cheerful tone.

She didn't bother turning to look at him, but kept trudging forward, her eyes straight ahead. "You ruined my airplane."

"You don't need it anymore. You have me."

"Right. Since you can teach me to shape-shift, I'll just grow myself a pair of wings and fly."

"You *can* fly, you know, but it's an advanced shape and shouldn't be attempted just yet."

She snorted. She supposed she should be grateful that he wasn't a rapist and didn't seem violent. However, her anger that he'd forced her into survival mode fed her temper. Samantha was a city girl and hadn't spent time in the woods. The only thing she had in her favor was common sense and that her favorite television show was *Survivor*. Unfortunately, her situation was far worse than a reality TV show.

When she turned to glare at Ari, her breath caught in her lungs.

Despite her fear, despite her harrowing leap from the plane, desire slammed her. And it wasn't natural. Now was no time to be bowled over by his awesome face and dynamite body.

He no longer stood at about five foot ten inches. Now he had to be at least six foot six. And he'd morphed out of his clothes. He'd lost his shirt, and his powerful chest could have graced a romance book cover.

When Ari had taken Ian's shape, the tug of attraction had been full-blown. But her response to Ari was over the top. Just looking at him seemed to set her nerve endings on a high simmer, and that she reacted to him at all annoyed her. That she could barely resist staring at the strong cords of bronzed neck muscle and the flat stomach that tapered to boxer shorts, muscular legs and bare feet rocked her.

He noted the direction of her gaze. "I left the boxers on for your comfort."

"Thanks. You're so considerate."

"Was that sarcasm I detected?"

"Is the moon round?"

"I'm sorry I had to sink the plane, but otherwise it would be too easy for rescuers to find you." He shot her a sideways glance. "You might as well know that I disabled the black box before you boarded the plane. The GPS won't lead anyone here."

She bit back a curse, as frustrated with him as her unwarranted reaction to him. "You seemed to have thought of everything—except bringing along food and water."

"I can forage from the land and the sea."

"Good for you."

He grinned. "You'll learn how to forage, too. Necessity is supposed to make you more determined to learn."

She saw no point in telling him again that she didn't want to learn how to shape-shift. Why should she learn to forage when she could afford to dine in the top gourmet restaurants in the world?

Unfortunately, none were on this island. Her credit card wouldn't buy her a drop of water.

Ignoring Ari, Samantha set her priorities and ignored the notion that if she was going to die, he could at least make her a happy woman and make delicious love to her. First, she intended to make a giant SOS in the sand that could be seen from the air. Then she would gather driftwood so she could start a fire to catch the attention of a passing boat. Third, she'd have to find water, food and shelter.

When she reached the palm trees, she sat and rested, her back propped against a tree trunk. She opened a bottle of water and drank, sipping slowly and appreciating the cool liquid as it wet her parched throat. Since Ari had claimed he could live off the land, she didn't offer him any and didn't feel the least bit guilty.

The ocean beckoned and she longed to take a swim, but she had work to do first. She decided, however, that although her beautiful suit and shoes belonged in the boardroom, not on a beach, she could at least get her feet wet. She kicked off the shoes, peeled off her knee-high hose, and unbuttoned her shirt's top buttons.

"Going for a swim?" Ari asked, his tone curious and slightly playful—almost as if he knew how difficult she found it to resist him.

"Just getting my feet wet." She ambled along the beach, keeping her eye out for driftwood and tried not to think about how pleasant the wet sand felt between her toes, tried not to think about the refreshing breeze in her hair or how much she wanted to go for a swim with Ari, lie on the hot sand and enjoy him and the beautiful island, instead of completing the tasks she'd assigned herself.

As if following the direction of her thoughts, Ari trailed behind her for a few steps. "I'm going for a swim."

"Whatever."

He held out a hand to her. "You could come with me. I'd enjoy the company."

Wanting to join him but holding back, Samantha refused to take his hand and saw disappointment in his eyes before he turned away and waded into the water, out past his hips. Then he sank below the surface and didn't come up, but the clear turquoise water allowed her to watch his smooth transition from man to dolphin. His bronze skin turned gray and shiny, his nose elongated, his arms retracted and his feet merged into a tail. Soon, a perfect-looking dolphin played in the surf, catching a wave and gracefully riding it to shore.

Amazing. Cool. Unbelievable.

When he swam near the beach and playfully splashed her, she had the urge to accept his invitation, plunge deep into the sea, grab his top fin and let him take her for a swim. But she wasn't about to start frolicking when she had work to do. Nor did she want to give him the idea that she was in a playful mood... she wasn't.

Perhaps some distance would help clear her mind from lusting over him. She had no idea what had gotten into her. Whenever she was near him, her pulse seemed to leap into overdrive and she was so keenly aware of his every glance. She should be thinking about survival, getting away, not his hot body.

But as she turned her back on the sea, she wondered for the first time what it would be like to swim in the sea like a dolphin, or fly like a bird. Or run as fast as a—

Stop it. While she couldn't doubt the evidence before her eyes, just because he could shape-shift didn't mean that she could. And even if she could shape-shift, did she really want to live a life like that?

However as she left the pleasant sea and walked along the beach, she had no doubt he'd gobble down a few fish for dinner and drink whatever dolphins drank. And the entire process amazed her. He really had a miraculous skill and she wondered if he ever put it to good use or only employed his abilities to play.

During her walk, she found three sticks, not enough for a fire, but she could use the longest branch to carve her giant SOS in the sand. Making sure she began above the

high-tide mark, Samantha traced oversized letters, then returned to scoop out a deep trough of sand with her hands so her plea for help would be visible from the air.

Bending over in the hot sun and digging in the sand was sweaty work, and she promised herself a refreshing swim when she was done. And if that meant peeling down to her bra and panties, well, so be it—she wouldn't be revealing any more skin than she would if she were wearing a bikini on a public beach.

She didn't know what to think about Ari. Or her reactions to him. He'd flirted only a little since he'd told her about the shape-shifting. But her response to him—her absorption with the meaning behind his every glance was not like her usual self. What was it about him that she found so attractive—besides the obvious exterior beauty? If she could have forgotten what he'd told her about becoming soul mates, she might have accepted that it had simply been too long since she'd been with a man.

But the soul mate idea turned her on in a way that she recognized as trouble.

And she couldn't forget. *Soul mates*. He had to be insane. And yet, if he was correct, was that why she found him almost irresistible? Why she had to fight the compulsion to agree to what he asked? Perhaps pacing around before him only partly dressed might not be a good idea—because while he might ignore her bare skin, she would feel even sexier when he looked at her.

If she was lucky, Ari wouldn't return until after she'd put her clothes back on. Pausing to drink, Samantha calculated that at this rate, her water would be gone in two more days. She'd have to ration more carefully.

Two hours of sweaty labor later, she finished her giant SOS. Pleased with her efforts but tired and smelly, she peeled off her shirt and slacks, folded them and set her clothes next to her briefcase and purse. Then she plunged into the water, letting the cool sea restore her energy.

And now that she'd done what she could to be rescued, she finally admitted to herself she wouldn't mind staying awhile. The island was so peaceful and she couldn't recall ever being out of touch with the million details of running her business. In addition, she admitted that she wanted to get to know Ari better. Her soul mate? There was no denying the effect he had on her. Her own life hadn't served up anything resembling a date lately, let alone a gorgeous, sexy soul mate.

As she swam into deeper water, a dolphin appeared beside her, almost as if it had been waiting just for her. At first she wasn't certain it was Ari, but when it again splashed her playfully with a flipper, she had no doubts.

"Come here," she told him.

He swam right over and she had the strongest urge to pet him. Reminding herself he was a man in dolphin's skin and that stroking him was a no-no, she placed one hand around his fin. "Take me for a ride, Ari."

The dolphin raised and lowered his head, clearly signaling agreement. Placing both hands on the fin, she let her legs float. And then he swam, slowly at first. Water rushed by and she held her chin out of the water, enjoying the sensation of the fluttering ripples that were similar to the jets in a whirlpool tub, but much more exhilarating.

Ari swam parallel to the shore, staying where she could easily swim to the beach if she lost her hold on him. Samantha wondered if he could think like a human when he took the dolphin's shape. How much of Ari remained in this dolphin?

She didn't know. But it must be marvelous to swim to the ocean's depths, explore without the need for scuba tanks and fins. Hanging on for the ride was fun but how much better would it be to swim like this under her own power?

Ari took her to shore and then left her to swim out alone again before he joined her on the beach. He'd morphed back into his own shape and had donned the boxer shorts that he must have previously stashed underwater.

"You're a good swimmer," he told her, his voice warm and full of approval.

"I competed in college, but swimming with you was... incredible." All those years in the pool hadn't prepared her for the power of swimming with a man/dolphin.

"It'll be even more incredible when you can shape-shift, too."

With a wide grin, he glanced at her bare shoulders, her breasts, her slender waist, and every cell in her warmed at the obvious approval in his gaze. "One advantage of being a shape-shifter is that you can always have the body of your dreams. Or your soul mate's dreams."

She supposed it beat plastic surgery, but she had difficulty concentrating as she beat down the flutter of desire to kiss him, right now. She would have liked to laugh off his soul mate theory, but what else could explain her response to him, her compulsion to know him better in every way? All that delicious bronze flesh covered by water droplets distracted her. She ached to have those wonderful lips on hers, but forced herself to answer him. "You don't get old?"

His grin widened and the heat in his eyes flared, as if he knew exactly how difficult she found it not to reach out and touch him. "We don't get sick. Ever. Once you know how to maintain your immune system, health becomes automatic. And fit cells don't age as quickly."

She had to cover up before he noticed her nipples tightening. "So what's the life expectancy of a shape-shifter?" She put on her shirt, hoping he'd think she needed to shield her skin from the sun. She didn't bother with her slacks. It was simply too damn hot.

"We live three to four hundred years."

Her lower jaw dropped. "How old are you?"

"Thirty. My people believe we should find our soul mates early in life, before we become set in our ways—so we can grow together."

He made the idea sound so appealing, she had to know more. "How many people live in New Atlantis?"

"A few thousand. Maybe another five hundred of us are traveling in your world." He glanced at her again, his eyes darkening with an emotion she couldn't read. "You're no longer worried that I'd hurt you, are you?"

She hadn't thought about dying—except for lack of having him. The powerful needs racing through her simply had to be induced by stress—not the notion he was the perfect man for her. "You said I would die if I don't succeed. That's pretty harsh."

"So you don't trust me?"

"Let's see. You impersonated my pilot, flew my plane off course and crashed it, virtually holding me prisoner on a deserted island where there are no supplies. Do you think I should trust you?"

Her tone was sarcastic, but oddly, she did trust him—at least to not hurt her physically—unless one counted dying slowly from arousal. She was almost shaking with the need to touch him. For him to touch her.

He laughed, the tone deep and knowing. "Since you still don't trust me, I suppose I won't feel too bad about destroying your SOS in the sand."

She frowned, spun around, and placed her fists on her hips, about to yell at him, when he grew a long flat tail that reached the sand behind him, effectively silencing her. He strode over to her SOS, his steps tracing her lettering. As he walked, his tail swished over the sand, the back-and-forth motion wiping out hours of her work in just a few minutes.

Furious with him and furious with herself that, despite his actions, she still wanted to make love to him, she stomped off to search the beach for driftwood in a direction she had yet to explore. Damn him. She hated the way he toyed with her emotions, one moment acting friendly and concerned, the next a calculating bastard. Ari and the sexual tension he generated kept throwing her off balance.

Or maybe she shouldn't be blaming him for her vacillating feelings. Even as a part of her wanted nothing to do with him, she couldn't discount her physical reaction—but her reaction wasn't just lust. She could have handled lust. She couldn't so easily dismiss their swim, how he'd carefully stayed near the shore in order to make her feel secure, how he hadn't dived deep, how he seemed to care about her safety and her feelings.

Too many hours had passed for her to still question whether her coffee had been drugged. If it had, any mind-altering effect would have worn off by now. And while her doubts that *he* could shape-shift no longer lingered, she had plenty of concerns over *her* ability to shape-shift.

But most of all, her maddening, ferocious attraction to him made her less certain of herself than she'd ever been before. She didn't want to face the possibility that his dream of a soul mate, his dream of her, had been accurate. That she remained fascinated by him—despite the fact that one moment he was giving her a marvelous ride through the ocean, playfully splashing her, the next destroying her hard work—worried her. The man most definitely had an agenda, and she didn't believe he would hurt her, but it was her own reactions she didn't trust.

So what *did* she want? Did she want him to teach her how to shape-shift? If she could do it, her entire life would change. While learning to shape-shift might be the only way she'd escape this island, if she succeeded, would that really mean she'd found her soul mate?

Chapter Four

While Ari admired Samantha's strong will to live and escape the island, her survival efforts were distracting her from his task to teach her how to shape-shift, but she intrigued him. One moment she looked as if she wanted to tackle him on the sand and have her way with him, the next she shut down into her business mode. Clearly Samantha didn't fully believe or trust him, but the complex body alterations took a level of belief and acceptance from one's partner that they had yet to establish.

However, if Ari waited until she weakened from lack of water or food, if he waited until she was desperate, she might not be able to learn what he had to teach her. His plan was coming apart because he'd overestimated their physical attraction, believing that lust alone would convince her they were soul mates. He'd mistakenly counted on her succumbing to their passionate connection. He hadn't expected her to be so stubborn. He'd thought once they arrived on the island that she would depend upon him and believe and trust him because he was the only other human being here and because she'd feel their connection as strongly as he did.

Although Samantha surrounded herself with assistants and ran a corporation of thousands of employees, Ari hadn't taken into account that the number-one person she depended upon was herself. She had an inner strength and fortitude that was working against him right now. Until they'd established a measure of trust, she couldn't learn what he must teach her.

He wracked his brain, trying to come up with a way to reassure her. And he could only think of one method. He would be taking a great risk with his own life, but if he wanted to earn her trust, he didn't see another choice.

Determined to do what must be done, he stripped, morphed into a wolf, picked up his shorts by the waistband of his canine teeth, sprinted down the beach and caught up to her in minutes. He morphed back into human form and dressed before she spied him.

Since scaring her was not part of the plan, he began whistling a tune to warn her of his presence. The wind teased her hair and the setting sun gave her skin a healthy pink glow. But it was the squared shoulders and the arms full of driftwood that caught his eye. She was ever industrious, and he had no doubt she was intent on building a signal fire.

He held out his arms for the wood. "Let me help you with that."

"Like you helped with the SOS in the sand?" she snapped at him, clearly still irritated.

"If I promise not to throw the wood out to sea, will you allow me to carry it?"

She stopped walking and looked at him, her eyes locked with his. "Why should I believe you?" Her tone remained slightly hostile and he realized he had to go through with his plan. He had to find a way to bring them into accord.

"I haven't lied to you," he said.

"Except by omission. I still haven't forgotten your Ian impersonation."

"Are you going to hold a grudge against me forever? I'd like to move on."

"So go. I'm certainly not asking you to stay here with me."

Her expression sent a different message than her fierce words. Her eyes called to him. Her lips softened.

He kept his tone reasonable. "You don't understand. It's time I showed you the different forms I can take. And if you're out here searching for driftwood and return to camp exhausted, you'll be too tired to learn."

"Fine." With a mischievous grin, she tossed the driftwood into his arms.

He lengthened his arms and increased the bone and muscle size to tuck the load under one arm, then placed his hand in hers with the other. When she tried to pull back, he tightened his fingers slightly. "I won't hurt you. Touch is necessary."

"Necessary for what?" Her voice trembled.

For bonding. But he couldn't tell her that. "Feel my hand. I'm going to slowly change the size and muscle tone. I want you to absorb the feel of the changes, not just see them."

"Okay, but if you do anything weird—"

"I won't. First, I'll soften my skin. Feel the calluses disappearing?"

"No. Wait. Yes."

"Good. Now I'll thin my bones. If you squeeze too hard, you could break them." This was her first test. Would she hurt him?

"But if I broke the bones, you could heal them, right?" She arched that knowing eyebrow, her gaze piercing and intelligent and very curious.

"You could cause me pain, but yes, I could knit the bones and repair the torn flesh."

She reached across her body to place one hand over his. He tensed, wondering what she would do now that both her hands were around his. But she didn't squeeze. She kept her touch light and explored the new shape of his hand.

"I'm about to grow fur on my hand, just like your cat." He changed the texture.

She ruffled his coat, her eyes showing excitement and curiosity. "You know about my cat?"

He laughed, happy that she was asking questions. He considered curiosity a very good sign that she was coming to accept him, what she could be, and that they were meant to be together. "I've studied everything I could learn about you for a year. If you hadn't kept yourself behind locked doors, I would have found a more casual approach for us to meet."

She kept stroking his fur. "But you could have impersonated anyone and walked right into my meetings."

"We don't use our skills unless we are certain the outside world won't learn of them."

She seemed to accept his explanation. "Can you do feathers?"

"Sure." He altered the fur, changing it to feathers. "And goose down." He changed again.

"Wow. That's awesome."

He knew better than to think that she was speaking directly about him. He'd thought she was talking about his shape-shifting abilities, but she'd stopped walking to take in the sunset. Magnificent slashes of orange and spears of pink streaked across the sky. The sun, a fiery red ball, appeared to sink into the sea.

He spoke with pride and longing. He ached to share his home with her, to show her how he lived. "On New Atlantis my home is at the foot of a mountain and overlooks the beach. I watch the sunset almost every night. And it's always different."

"I need to travel more. I've allowed work to take up too much of my time." She turned to him, her tone scolding, her eyes dilated, her nostrils flaring. "But that doesn't mean I'm interested in your offer."

Her words said one thing, her body told him another, yet, he didn't push what he sensed was her feminine interest in him—not yet.

When they returned to the spot she'd left her water bottles and Powerbars, he stacked the wood. She gathered dry grasses, stuffed it between the driftwood, and she started a fire with a pack of matches she must have scavenged from the plane before the landing.

With the fire crackling, the scene was almost cozy. She broke open a water bottle and helped herself to a Powerbar. Hesitating for a moment, she offered him a bar but he shook his head. "I ate while I swam in the sea."

Taking tiny bites, she made the food last a long time. Staring into the fire, she grew silent and the physical tension between them grew. When she finished her food, he knew it was time.

"I have more shapes to show you." His serious tone must have alerted her. She jerked her head up, caught his eyes and he swallowed down a gasp at the longing he saw there. And he prayed that longing was... for him. "Look what I can do."

He changed into a marble rock, shaped like Michelangelo's *David*, and his shorts fell by the wayside in the sand. Clothing was such a bother to a shape-shifter, since the only form that required clothing was the human one.

She leaned over to touch his rocky surface, her hand gentle, her strokes almost erotic. "Watching you change shape is better than television."

"And after your caresses, I'm so hot for you, I need to cool down." He morphed into a giant ice cube, but didn't allow himself to melt.

She chuckled. "If you're hoping I'm thirsty enough to lick you, you're wasting your time."

He compacted his cells down tight. And changed into a diamond. Leaning over, she picked him up and peered at his tiny, perfect lines. "What happened to your weight?"

He rolled from her palm, dropped into his shorts and changed back into human form. "When I don't need all my mass, I shove it into *Inf* space."

"*Inf*?"

"Short for infinity. Your scientists call *Inf* the fourth dimension."

"I thought the fourth dimension was time."

"It is." He thought she was going to ask him more about *Inf*, but her curiosity turned in a different direction.

She fed a stick into the fire, her face thoughtful, her hands shaking. "So size is limited to your mass. You can't become a whale?"

"I can do a small whale. Although I can't grow more cells, I can expand the ones I have."

"And what would have happened to you in ice cube form if you'd begun to melt?"

"As long as the water pooled around me, I would have been fine. If, however, you had decided to lick me"—at his reminder of her words, her face reddened, or perhaps it was the fire flickering off her skin—"I would have lost those cells forever."

"And if you lose a lot of cells?"

"Lose too many cells and I can't ever return to my human form." He kneeled beside her. "Some forms are very dangerous. If I became a bouquet of flowers, you could rip me apart."

Her gaze locked with his. "You would die?"

"Yes." He held her stare, gathered himself to place his life in her hands. "Pick me up again and I'll show you." Without further discussion, he morphed into a seed and waited for her to do as he'd asked. The moment he sprouted from the seed, Ari would be putting his life in her hands. He'd made certain to explain first, so she would understand. And he'd seen comprehension in her eyes, but he had no idea what she might do when he sprang into a blooming bouquet.

Time to find out.

Using his will to re-form his cells, he grew two dozen stems and made a variety of flowers bloom. Lilies, roses, carnations, pansies. He needn't conform to the rules of nature. With her hand around the stems, she could toss him into the fire before he could change to a shape in which he could defend himself. Or she could break him in half by slapping him against the remaining firewood, or shred him with her bare hands.

She sniffed, then very carefully placed the stems back inside his shorts. A few moments later, he was once again human, very relieved to be in one piece and trying not to pretend he'd had any doubts about what she'd do to him.

But she read him easily enough. "You weren't certain I wouldn't hurt you, were you?"

"What I must teach you requires trust." He spoke simply, watching her eyes flare with comprehension and heat. "To earn your trust I had to show you that I could give you mine."

She lowered her gaze and stared into the fire. "Just because I don't wish to harm you, doesn't mean the reverse is true."

"And knowing that, you were still careful with me." At his question, she shivered and he wanted to sling an arm over her shoulders and draw her against him. He wanted to hold her and tell her that shape-shifting was wonderful. But some things had to be done alone. She had to *want* the gift she'd been born with in order to make use of it.

He'd tried to show her the pluses but like everything in life, there were minuses, too. "Why didn't you toss me into the fire?"

"Because you abducted me to help your people. And you've tried to make me feel safe when you could." She tilted her head up to meet his eyes and again he saw a burning curiosity. "I'm considering having you teach me to shape-shift, but first I'd like to hear more about the risks."

Wow. She certainly knew how to lay her cards on the table, making him realize that he'd lucked out when it came to dreaming about Samantha Bessinger for his soul mate. She was tough—deep down where it counted—yet reasonable. She didn't hide from the facts, no matter how difficult the truth might be, and so he hoped that eventually she'd even admit their growing attraction.

He could barely keep his hands off her. He ached to draw her into his arms—not to reassure her, but to find out if he could coax the simmering heat between them into a blazing inferno. But as much as he wanted her, his task required patience.

She seemed to have figured out that danger—if it came—wouldn't be caused by him or survival on the island, but how she adjusted to the shape-shifting process. But she'd taken the first step toward making a transformation, she wanted to know more, and from the intensity in her gaze and the hardening of her nipples, she was sexually aroused by the danger. Samantha really was one amazing woman and even as he ached to have her, he tamped down his impatience.

As the fire flickered over her skin, as the breeze toyed with her hair, as her long bare legs teased him, his heart lightened. For the first time, he believed they had a good chance of success. That they'd make a good team. That he'd dreamed of his true soul mate. Shape-shifters didn't judge people on their appearances since they could take any form. Instead, his abilities had made him look deeper into her character. And what he saw, he could love.

And as his hope flared, so did his desire for this beautiful and courageous woman.

Chapter Five

"Can attempting and failing to shape-shift cause my death?" Samantha asked, fighting her excitement and finding resisting almost impossible. What he offered was way too incredible, way too tempting—she owed it to herself to explore.

Although Ari had effectively trapped her here, giving her only one way off the island—by learning to shape-shift—she'd always enjoyed the challenge of trying new

skills. And a tiny part of her wondered if there really was such a thing as a soul mate and if he could be hers.

She'd been alone for so long that she'd never really expected to meet the one right man for her. The one man above all others who would fill her needs and she his. The idea of him being her soul mate enticed her to dip in a finger and taste. Even if she'd been free to do so, she'd never forgive herself for walking away from all that Ari was offering—long life, healthy life—plus a mouthwatering man to share it with.

"Failing won't hurt you at all," he said. "But if you don't follow my exact directions, there can be... difficulties."

Samantha sensed that he'd chosen his words with care in order to avoid frightening her. However, if Samantha had had a life-threatening illness, she'd ask the doctor to be frank. If there was risk, she wanted to know the odds so she could assess her chances and increase her opportunity to achieve success. And if there was danger to her life, she wanted to know how and when and what to watch out for.

Samantha folded her jacket to form a pillow and made a bed in the sand, relaxing on her back. She'd never seen so many stars in the night sky and it made her feel as if life was precious, special.

She sensed a tremendous life-altering opportunity for her... and Ari, and her stomach tightened the way it often did when she was on the verge of a business deal—only more so. "Please, tell me about what can go wrong."

He lay next to her, rolled onto his side and rested his head in his palm. "I'm not supposed to dwell on the dangers."

"Says who?"

"Our dream instructors. New Atlantis doesn't just send us blindly out to find our soul mates. Esteemed professors instruct us how to teach. And they strongly recommend glossing over the dangers."

She turned her head to look at him, almost relaxed now that she'd decided to give the shape-shifting and Ari a try. He appeared so comfortable lying on the sand. With the fire dying, the embers glowing, just enough light remained to let her read his serious expression. "I hope there's a 'but' you're going to add to that statement."

"But"—he shot her a charming grin, then returned to serious mode—"I believe that you have a right to know exactly what you're facing, especially since shape-shifting is one of the most dangerous skills."

His calm and reasonable tone reassured her, and yet made her feel special, as if he were holding back his interest in her for fear of scaring her away. "I'm listening."

"It's important to learn simple shapes first. The danger of going too fast too soon is that you might become stuck in a form and not have the skill to change back."

She shuddered, recalling his diamond shape, a form where he couldn't move or talk, not until he'd morphed. "That sounds unpleasant. I wouldn't want to spend the next few days as, say, a rock."

"It would be more than the next few days. As a rock, you don't require food or air. You could live an eternity as a rock. That's why we'll pick a—"

"When you turn into a rock," she interrupted him, tried to ignore the clench of nerves in her stomach and punched her pillow into shape, "do you keep all your thoughts and memories?"

He nodded and curled an arm under her shoulder, offering himself as a pillow. She snuggled into his heat, enjoying the warmth of his flesh and appreciating how comfortable she felt in his arms—as if they were destined to fit. All her earlier lust was there, simmering, but she could ignore it and wait more easily now, now that she'd decided to make love.

Why not enjoy him? Why not find out if the connection between them was as electric as it seemed?

"No matter what shape we take," he said, "the brain goes into the *Inf* but we can tap into our thoughts. The second most common danger is panic. To me the morphing sensation feels like a combination of stretching and compression but it may seem very different to you. While it's not painful, you can't change your mind after you begin or you'll tear yourself apart."

She swallowed hard. "What else?"

For the first time, he avoided her gaze. "The best way to teach you is for us to link."

"Link?"

"Remember when you touched my hand? How you felt the changes?"

"You want us to hold hands?"

"I can wrap my body around you, so that I'm over you, under you. Inside you. Part of you."

Inside her? She assumed their atoms would mix on a very elemental level. And if she got stuck, it sounded like he would be stuck with her. "And what happens if we're linked and I panic?"

"We'll go real slow. You'll be fine. If our bodies are linked, I'll be right there with you. Knowing that should keep you calm."

"*Should?* You don't know?" She narrowed her eyes. "Have you ever linked before?"

"Not like this. We need to start by making love and then progress to—"

She turned onto her side, chuckled and splayed her fingers over his chest. "I've heard a lot of lines in my day, but yours has to be the most... outrageous."

"Touching is necessary," he insisted, clearly not understanding that she was teasing. "The more touching we do, the stronger the link and the greater the chance of success. In truth, I am not certain if it's possible to teach you to shape-shift without..." He tightened his lips. "I'm sorry you find the idea so distasteful."

She picked up on the hurt in his tone and sought to reassure him. "I won't deny that you fascinate me. Or that I want you. There's a connection growing between us that I'd like to explore."

"Thank you."

"For what?"

"Accepting a difficult situation. Giving us this chance."

Samantha had experienced lust. She'd experienced friendship. But she'd never known both at the same time. Ari appealed to her on the physical level—what woman wouldn't enjoy his masculine physique or his warm eyes following her every move? And his husky tone lapped with the same persistence as the waves rolling across the beach, soothing, caressing and exciting—all at the same time.

But what impressed her most was that he hadn't tried to use his physical beauty or his touch to convince her to do as he wished. Another man might have stolen a kiss, found excuses to touch her. He hadn't done more than hold her hand or offer his shoulder to pillow her head, mostly appealing to her intellect. And his plan was working. Once she'd gotten past the shock of his shape-shifting revelations, she'd realized that she wanted to know him better. She wanted to learn how he'd grown up, what he did for a living. She wanted to see his island. She wanted to kiss him and see where it led.

She wanted to make love.

Leaning toward his mouth, she kissed his lips. He tasted of the sea, slightly salty, fresh and with a tang of the wild. And best of all, he didn't hurry her, didn't grab her, allowed her to explore his mouth at her own pace.

She liked his patience and control almost as much as she liked the way his eyes sparkled in the reflected firelight. The way the pulse at his neck leaped. The way his hands threaded into her hair and massaged her scalp.

Yum.

With the starlight above, the warm sand cradling their bodies, the fire crackling and the waves lapping along the beach, she couldn't have asked for a more romantic setting. Or a more considerate partner. Ari kissed better than her best dream.

Although he didn't rush, she appreciated the intensity of his muscles, and heat coiled inside her. Wanting more of his flesh, so firm, so silky, so hot, she shrugged out of her shirt. She thought he might immediately disengage her bra. He didn't.

Ari seemed quite content to kiss her thoroughly, teasing her lips, their tongues dancing, their breaths merging. Her nipples tightened, her breasts swelled and her breath came in gulps. Inhaling Ari's scent, a combination of sea and wind and a male aroma all his own, she wriggled closer, breaking their kiss and toppling him to his back.

She ended up lying across his chest, her legs entwined with his. His sex strained against her, evidence of how her kiss had turned him on, and she filled with a joyful certainty that they would be good together.

His eyes glinted, searching hers, almost as if he needed reassurance that she wanted to proceed. "Being here with you... feels so very right." She whispered the startling truth into his ear, nibbled on his lobe, gently bit down, then licked away the sting.

He trailed fingers over her back, showing her with his hands and his mouth that angled and demanded another kiss what he didn't say in words. Never had a man's touch made her feel so cherished. He explored every hollow of her back, every dip, every exposed inch of needy flesh, until she could think of nothing but that she craved to be with this man.

Raising her hands to her bra, she was about to unclip it when he shook his head. "I'll do that."

But he didn't. Instead he lowered his head to her breasts and traced her exposed flesh. She yearned for more, and when he found her nipple right through the cloth, used his teeth to nip, she wanted nothing more than to be bare. She needed his flesh against hers, his mouth with all the heat he had to offer on her skin.

When she hooked her thumbs into his shorts, he lifted his hips and she freed him of them, which he kicked aside. As he did so, they rolled in the sand and she ended up on her back beneath him.

He wrapped her in heat and she couldn't wait to take him inside her. But he seemed content to begin kissing her mouth all over again. Her lips tingled, swelled, gave him more—even as her hands found his hips and tugged him to her.

"There's no hurry," he whispered.

"I'm ready. More than ready," she told him, her voice sounding needy and raw.

He nuzzled her neck and shot a shimmering thrill down her back. "We're going beyond lovemaking."

"Beyond?" What was he saying? Thinking was so difficult when with every breath she longed to get closer to him. She'd never known his hands could feel so good as he skimmed them over her bare shoulders.

"We can share the heat on a cellular level. And when we do, we'll shift into another shape together."

She couldn't focus on his words. She only knew that if his love-making had been a song, it would have been her favorite. If his love-making had been a movie, she would have watched it a hundred times. If his lovemaking had been a book, it would have been a number-one best-seller.

When he finally removed her bra, she didn't think her need could peak any higher. But she was wrong. He spent as much time kissing her breasts as he had her lips, and the wondrous sensations had her squirming for more of him. Her nipples tightened and when his lips teased her sensitive flesh, a corresponding sizzle ripped through her.

Gasping for air, her skin slick, she tilted up her hips and parted her thighs, groaning as she recalled she'd yet to remove her panties. Together they made short work of them, and he returned to press against her, chest to chest, stomach to stomach, thigh to thigh, remaining careful to keep most of his weight from crushing her. Ari's powerful shoulders had no difficulty holding his weight as he slid over her. She thought he might kiss her again. But instead he rubbed his flesh over hers, shooting a wild flame of sensations over her skin, under her skin, through her skin.

It was as if their touching flesh crackled with tiny jolts of electricity. Wondrous, but a bit unnerving, the sensation caused her muscles to tense in expectation of what would happen next.

Already this experience surpassed lovemaking. The heightened perceptions had an eerie and otherworldly impact that left her mind reeling.

"Relax. What you feel is our surface cells merging." He rubbed his chest over her breasts. At least she thought that was what he was doing. But when she stared at him, he didn't appear to be moving.

Oh God. It was as if the surface of her flesh were liquid and he was stirring the mix. Zinging bursts of pleasure sparked through her and she had to remember to breathe.

"Is this... going... right?"

He nodded. "Very right. We'll make love and merge soon if that's okay?"

More than okay.

Surely anything that felt this good couldn't be as dangerous as he'd claimed. She reached up and threaded her fingers into his hair and brought his mouth down to hers. His kiss upped the stakes because all of a sudden the zinging deepened at least an inch everywhere beyond the top layer of flesh. And the sensations multiplied a hundredfold.

Samantha hadn't known it was possible to feel too good. Too much sensation. A yearning so powerful that she felt as though she was riding a runaway train. Her ears roared. Her heart pumped.

Oh... my... God. She could now feel his heart hammering inside her own chest. His sex also inside her. Pure heat boiled through her. Her heat. His heat.

And they burned.

Chapter Six

Ari had made love before, but never had he merged with a lover. His feelings ran the gamut from exciting and exquisite to terrifying. He'd heard of shape-shifters who'd been caught in one shape with their lovers for all time. He couldn't even imagine the horror of failure. To be stuck in the same shape, unable to communicate with each other or the world would be a terrible fate, but even worse, he would have failed to return to help his people with the force field.

A merge followed by a failed separation would be the equivalent of complete paralysis, only with the exasperating awareness of knowing exactly how to extract himself from her without the means to communicate the process. But he'd seen no reason to share the frightening details.

Unfortunately, he had no words to explain the process. It would be like trying to tell someone how to use their eyes to see, or how to use their nose to smell, or their mouth to taste or their skin to touch. Either she would have the sixth sense to extract herself from their shape—or she wouldn't. She had to figure out a lot all by herself.

He had the power to merge them together, but only she could extract them. And while his dream that she could shape-shift was a true dream, sometimes the women couldn't cope with the changes of their bodies or the intimacy of the merge and they panicked—freezing the couple in one shape. And so Ari had proceeded as slowly as possible, letting her become accustomed to the feel of their cells slipping and sliding within each other before he'd deepened the meld.

Holding back had been more difficult than he'd anticipated. Perhaps soul mates came in an irresistible custom package designed to ignite the senses. Samantha's scent certainly drove him wild with distraction. Her sexy soft skin blended perfectly with his. Even her accelerated pulse urged him on. His blood pumped hot through his veins, and yet when he felt her tightening—despite how ready she'd told him she was—he suspected the merging sensation had begun to panic her.

Worried, he reminded himself that he'd had a lifetime to prepare to give up his identity in the merge. Samantha had had only one day to come to grips with the idea of shape-shifting. He had to pull back.

Slow down.

Cool his motor.

But every primal instinct to mate burned through him. Her incredibly silky skin bewitched, compelled, taunted. Her courage drew him as much as her bold sexuality—because she hadn't once asked him to stop.

Gritting his teeth, he pulled out of her. She gasped as if insulted, but he had to allow her time to understand that after she merged she would once again be her complete and independent self.

"What's wrong?" She lazily trailed her hands over his buttocks and the tingling pleased him.

"How do you feel?"

"Uncertain. Impatient. Edgy."

"We don't have to do this all at once."

Her beautiful eyes narrowed. "We began to merge, didn't we?"

"Yes."

"Did I do something wrong?"

"Why would you think that?" he countered, not wanting to point out that she'd tensed up on him. He certainly didn't want to sound as if he were criticizing. He wasn't. Only he wanted her so badly that stopping had left him with a wallop ache in his groin. "We're doing great."

"Then why did you stop?" She sounded confused and needy, but he heard a thread of relief, too.

"We don't need to rush. And there's more pleasure if we don't force—"

"I am a little anxious. But surely that's to be expected?" She looked straight into his eyes, obviously searching for an honest answer.

Never had she seemed as brave as when she faced her own fear with head-on directness. His heart twisted and he gathered her close. "We should let you become accustomed to the merge before we go all the way."

She wriggled against his hardness. "What about you? Don't you need—"

"I need you to feel at ease with me." He tried not to let pure desire color his tone hot red. "I need *you* to want to continue. Any time you want to stop, up until we totally merge, I will break off."

"All right then." She lifted her head to kiss him and he lazily ran the tip of his tongue over her top lip. She opened her mouth, welcoming him and he kissed her long and

hard and deep, until her hands clenched his back and urged him to continue to make love once more.

Ari took his time, grateful that he was no longer an impatient lad in his teens. And finally when flesh once more slid into flesh, he felt no tension in her. She seemed as relaxed and ready to go as far as he was, maybe even eager to see what happened next.

And as his hips pumped into her, as he thrust deep within her body, their surface skin again blended until he couldn't tell where his skin ended and hers began. Ari had shape-shifted many times, but he'd never combined his cells with another living being. It was the most erotic and intimate sensation he'd ever encountered.

Samantha's softness seeped into his hardness. Her warmth combined with his and together they stoked an inferno. Bones shifted, slid, melted into one another.

And all the while, the sexual tension inside him grew. He breathed in ragged breaths, reached down to touch her sex to find that he'd become so much a part of her, and she a part of him, that using his hand to arouse wasn't necessary. His flesh had melted into her heat, encasing her sweet spot, tickling, taunting, teasing.

"You feel so good," she murmured. "I want more."

He gave her a little more and watched her eyes dilate in wonder and need.

She hung on tight. "I feel... You feel... like part... of me."

"Soon, we will be one."

She tensed. He stopped moving. His words might have been a mistake but better to back out now than push before she relaxed into him. He'd been so close. Stopping this time... hurt. His balls ached. His sex felt uncontrollably hard, stiff and excruciatingly full.

His pent-up needs demanded release. Just a few more seconds, another few inches and they would have been... complete. They would have literally been one heart.

Knowing what was at stake—no less than their lives—pulling back still took every ounce of determination he possessed. Damp with perspiration, muscles on edge, his entire body ordered him to finish. Now.

Sheer willpower alone allowed him to rear back and pull out, before he lost himself in her forever. Chest heaving, muscles straining, he forced himself out of her body and away from her touch.

"Oh... this is... sweet... torture." She panted the words in time to the waves lapping the beach as if the sea's rhythm had become her own. She reached out a hand to him. "Come back. Please."

"Give me a moment." His body trembled and he fought for control.

"Can I..." She hesitated.

"What?"

"Can I be on top?"

He shook his head. "I have to be in charge of the merge."

"Can't you do that from under me?" she asked. "I'd feel less trapped if I could control the speed of our merge."

Her suggestion rocked him. He'd never thought about it but her request made sense. He could open the door and then let her decide how quickly she wanted to walk through—if he could hold on that long. "We need to crest together to finish the merge. I may not be able to hold on if you are—"

"I trust you." She grinned, rolled over and straddled him. "Ah... so... much better."

Samantha was accustomed to running a company. And she much preferred to be the one to decide exactly when and how far they would merge. The entire process was so strange. For a moment there she'd felt as if Ari's heart had been beating for her, that his lungs had breathed for her.

The sensation had been nerve-wrenchingly intimate, yet the sensations had left her with a startling euphoria—as if her body had been created to give both of them pleasure she hadn't imagined. Putting the sensations into words was like trying to describe hot and cold. The intensity had overwhelmed her but now that she had a better idea of what to expect, she planned to push through and keep all doubts at bay.

She could merge with Ari. She wanted to merge with him—not to get her off the island—because being with him gave her a sense of Tightness, as if fate had brought them together for a good reason. Also the experience of merging, of giving herself to him had changed her deep down in her soul. Samantha had finally recognized that part of what drove her, part of why she worked so hard, was to escape a loneliness that had always been so much a part of her—so much so that she'd thought it normal. And she'd plugged the empty holes in her life with work.

But Ari didn't merely show her that he could fill the barren parts of her soul, he colored them with a spicy palette that lifted her spirit in a way she had yet to acknowledge or comprehend. If she'd been back in New York safely ensconced in her own world, she would still go through with the merge. Because she wanted to see what she could do, because Ari had earned her respect by yielding to her wishes when he could, and because merging wasn't giving up her identity, merging with him was adding another half to her own to make one whole.

Samantha lifted her hips and took Ari's sex inside her. Her mouth found his and she began to move over him. With his hands on her hips, he helped without trying to take

over. As her confidence grew, she scraped her nipples over his chest, rubbed her belly against his, ground her pelvis into him.

And this time when her flesh melted, she welcomed the unity. Reveled in uniting their flesh, their blood, their hearts. She took him deeper, and well-being suffused her. Desire erupted and frothed in a raging river, poured into a welcoming sea, where the waters whipped into a frenzied wave that crested higher than she'd ever imagined. And when that crest broke through her, when all of his desires fused with hers, she shattered into a billion fragments, taking him right with her.

The merge was complete.

She could no longer tell what part of her new shape had come from her and what had once been part of him. Where they'd been two separate beings, there was now only one. The joining, total and complete, was done.

But what had they become?

She wanted to speak but she didn't have a mouth or vocal cords. She didn't seem to have hands or feet, either, but instead, thick stubs that thrashed the sand. Her eyes seemed hooded and it was very dark, but then she flexed her neck and...

Oh... my. She was on her belly. Heavy. Low to the ground. She moved her front flipper-like stubs, very sensitive flippers that felt every grain of sand, and rear legs that shoved her massive body forward in an awkward, yet oddly powerful movement.

She could hear the low vibrations of the lapping waves and concluded she had ears. And while she possessed eyes, she was quite nearsighted and colors were odd, violets and blue green instead of grays and blacks.

Whatever animal Ari had turned them into was massive. And she longed to immerse herself in the sea to feed. Only a small part of her mind remained in the creature. The rest was in the *Inf*, but as Ari had promised, she could tap into her thoughts.

Yet, the creature's body drove her forward toward the sea in search of food with a primitive urge she couldn't deny. Heavy, full of hard cartilage, Samantha pressed to the sea and the promise of filling her belly.

Slowly, she crawled forward, her walk steady and ungainly. When the full moon came out from behind a cloud, she glimpsed her shadow, startled to see that she and Ari had become a giant tortoise.

Chapter Seven

Samantha didn't know much about sea turtles or marine biology, but the moment she lumbered into the ocean, she felt as though she'd come home. Her nearsighted eyes could see just fine in the clear dark Caribbean Sea, and she suspected her sight was in the ultraviolet range due to the odd green-violet colors. Her sense of smell acute, she inhaled the sweet scent of shrimp through a pulsating movement in her throat. Mouth open slightly, she drew in water through the nose and then immediately emptied it out again through the mouth in a motion as natural as if she'd been breathing in her human form.

Samantha sensed Ari was with her and wished they could communicate. But they wouldn't be able to speak until they returned to human form, shape-shifting back into their bodies. And as much as she wanted to make sure she could once again become herself, the yen to swim, eat and explore the new underwater world of night fish, coral reefs and spectacular sea creatures pulsed stronger than any desire to return to shore.

She had no idea if sea turtles possessed natural enemies. But when she spied a shark hovering over a school of silver-scaled fish, its ominous dark shadow menacing, she shuddered and swam the other way. Her flippers, which had been short, clumsy and inept on land, now powered her swimming with tireless ease.

And when she spied sweet shrimp on the bottom, she feasted hungrily. Belly full, thirst quenched, she circled the magnificent coral reef that formed an atoll around the island. Sea urchins, their black spines like the quills of porcupines, dotted the sand, along with sea crabs and lobster. She noted a huge variety of fish swimming in and out of her submerged airplane and wondered how many years it would take for the metal to become part of the coral reef ecosystem and was pleased to see no fuel spillage.

But most of all, she thought over the puzzle of how to reverse the shape-shifting process. Ari had told her if she didn't panic, she would succeed, but he hadn't given her detailed instructions. And so eventually, as she headed back to the island, she made a nonspecific plan. She would begin by trying to do what he'd done—in reverse.

At least if she didn't succeed right away, they would have the freedom to swim and eat. She was grateful he hadn't turned them into a rock or an ice cube.

However, as much as she'd enjoyed exploring as a turtle, she certainly didn't wish to spend the rest of her life under a giant shell, unable to communicate, and she certainly didn't wish that fate on Ari, either. Making love with him had been awesome and if both of them got stuck in this turtle's body, she'd never be able to repeat the incredible experience.

She suspected it had been difficult for Ari to place his fate in her hands, or flippers. If she failed, he, too, would be caught in turtle form forever. And she really didn't understand the specifics of the shape-shifting. Was all of Ari's mind and will in the *Inf*? She controlled the turtle's body. Her will decided when to feed, when to swim, when to return to the sand beach.

Their organs and blood and cells had combined, but what of his mind? Was he totally locked away in the *Inf* or was he aware of what their turtle body was doing? Could he see what she was seeing, feel what she was feeling, read her thoughts?

She should have asked more questions and wondered why he hadn't told her more. She lugged her big torso and heavy shell up the beach and settled near the campfire, but not too close. If she managed to change back, she didn't want to risk a limb landing in the embers.

Closing her eyes, she sought to recall the merge. How had Ari altered their cells to slip and slide into one another? She needed to duplicate the process so they could return to human form.

She imagined the cells re-forming into human shapes, but nothing happened. She tried again. Still nothing.

Now what?

Suspecting Ari's mind was in the *Inf*, knowing most of hers was there, she tried thinking at him. Again nothing happened.

Frustrated, tired, she fought off sleep. What was the answer?

Why hadn't he explained better? He'd told her shape-shifting was a sixth sense. Obviously, she could do it. She'd frickin' changed into a sea turtle. According to Ari she had the ability to go back to her human shape.

But how was she supposed to use her new sense?

The part of her mind that remained in the *Inf* was connected to her turtle brain in ways she didn't understand, and the thinking process was a bit different from human form. It was as if her mind was on a hard drive and she had to call up the information onto a screen in her limited turtle brain where she could only process a limited amount of information at a time.

Maybe she needed all of her mind to figure it out. She tried to force her turtle brain into the *Inf*. Nothing.

Damn.

She had to think outside the box. If she couldn't bring her turtle brain into the *Inf*, perhaps she could bring the *Inf* brain cells into the turtle. Samantha's brain cells felt very compressed inside the turtle. And the *Inf* stretched out forever, but she gathered her mind, condensed it, tried to reel it into herself.

Her brain cells budged. Flipped. Rolled over trying to make room for her *Inf* mind.

Only there was no room. And her turtle body began to morph. Yes. Yes. Yes.

She'd created a change—of sorts. Bringing her mind together seemed to be key. And since there wasn't enough room to hold all of her in the turtle, the extra cells forced the turtle to morph.

Pulling, gathering, merging was hard mental work. She concentrated with fierce determination, fueled by her success that she was on the right track.

And as she sucked her brain back, she noted a hitchhiker clinging to her mind and prayed that was Ari. She had no idea if she could bring back both bodies and accidentally leave behind his mind in the *Inf*, but she was not changing him to human and leaving any delicious part of him behind.

So she grabbed the hitchhiker and used the very last of her mental strength to take him with her. Her mind stretched, expanded, popped.

And then everything went black.

"You did it." Ari raised her beautiful head into his lap, smoothed back her hair and watched her eyes flutter open and slowly focus. "You were wonderful."

She blinked sleepily, muttered a few words he couldn't understand and closed her eyes again, succumbing to a deep but natural sleep. Apparently the shape-shifting had exhausted her, depleted her energy reserves.

Ari's teachers had warned exhaustion might happen. Shape shifting took energy, and she would have to build her mental muscles just as a weightlifter had to create physical ones. He'd go slowly, not tax her too much. But the most dangerous part was over.

She'd brought them both back. And he held her in his arms and let her sleep, rocking her gently, very much content with her and the world. As eager as he was to speak, he could wait for morning.

He held her tenderly through the night, watched the sun rise in the eastern sky to create quiet rose streaks with slashes of hot pink. And this time when Samantha opened her eyes and awakened, she was seemingly back to her normal self.

He smiled. "Hi."

"Hi, yourself." She sat up slowly and held up her hands as if counting her fingers.

"You did great. When you headed into the sea, I was certain you'd lost control—"

"You were there?"

"In the *Inf*. I watched you from there. And now that you've learned what to do, we can morph into two animals and it'll be much—"

"Hold up. You're going too fast." She shoved a stray lock of hair behind her ear.

"Sorry." He grinned. He couldn't seem to stop smiling from ear to ear. He handed her a Powerbar and a water bottle. "Have something to eat and you'll feel—"

She frowned. "I'm still stuffed. I ate... shrimp." She screwed up her nose. "I ate *raw* shrimp?"

"You'll get used to it."

"Yuck." She spat into the sand as if she could still taste the shrimp. She couldn't, of course, but this part of the shape-shifting could be almost as dangerous as the actual morphing. Some people couldn't accept themselves in the animal state and literally went insane.

Twisting open the water bottle, she took a healthy swig. Then she peered at him, her eyes narrowing. "Why didn't you tell me I had to take the part of my mind in the *Inf* and fuse it with the part in the turtle in order to shift back to normal?"

His eyes widened. "I've never heard shape-shifting described anywhere near like that. We all do it differently, and if I'd told you what works for me, it probably wouldn't have worked for you."

"What do you do?"

"I shrug into myself."

Her eyebrows raised in disbelief. "You shrug?"

"And a friend of mine can only shift as he's falling asleep. I've heard of shape-shifters who require the taste of sour pickles or the smell of raspberries. Or—"

"But there aren't raspberries or pickles here. If I'd needed them, I would have failed."

"Those stimulants are rare. Most of us use our minds."

"And you watched the entire process of me swimming around as a turtle from the *Inf*!"

"Only the tiniest part of my brain remained with you—just enough to observe."

She dug her toes into the sand. "I don't know if I want to shape-shift again."

Uh-oh. He cocked his head to the side, trying to remain patient. "Was there any part you liked?"

"The sex was good." She half smiled and then it faded. "And once I waddled into the water, the swimming underwater was cool. But you know, now that I've done it, I'm not that eager to repeat the experience."

"What if you were a dolphin?"

She shuddered. "Don't they eat live fish?"

Samantha was having a problem with the eating. He picked his words with care in order not to criticize. "When you're in the animal shape, animal feeding habits will be normal. Once you return to human, you may have a little difficulty adjusting to the idea—"

"You think?"

"But animal feeding habits are part of nature. We aren't doing anything wrong."

"Easy for you to say."

"And imagine what it's like to fly like a bird?" She winced and he recalled that birds ate everything from beetles to worms. "You could eat seeds."

"Somehow the prospect of eating seeds can't compare with a filet mignon."

"Yeah, but wait until you fly under the power of your own wings. It's mind-blowing."

"And addictive?"

He shrugged. "What if it is?"

"I'm not sure I want to become addicted."

"Shape-shifting isn't like taking drugs. It can't harm you."

"When I tossed the firewood at you, you elongated your arms to hold the wood. I'd imagine that it wouldn't take long to become accustomed to the luxury of that kind of shifting."

"So?"

"So if I don't stay with you in New Atlantis, I don't want to rely so heavily on my new skills that I'd be uncomfortable staying in human form."

"Once you shape-shift, you're never the same."

"What do you mean?"

"Once your mind accepts what your body can do, it becomes instinctive. Can you tell yourself not to use your eyes? Or your ears?"

"Are you saying I can never go back to staying in human form?"

Chapter Eight

"I don't know." Ari spoke with a sincerity that chilled Samantha. "No one in my people's history has ever shape-shifted then refused to do it again."

Samantha suspected his people had a long and interesting take on history. "So you're telling me that every shape-shifter lives on New Atlantis?"

"We all make our homes there, although some of us travel and spend extended periods of time in your world."

"So there's nothing to stop me from shape-shifting into a bird and flying home and resuming my former life?"

"Nothing unless..."

"Unless?" she prodded, fascinated by the changing light in his eyes that made reading his emotions difficult.

"Unless you can give up living with your own kind."

"My own kind live in the world."

He had the good sense not to argue that she no longer fit with those who couldn't shape-shift and instead changed the subject. "Wouldn't you like to visit my home and see New Atlantis for yourself before you make such a decision?"

She noted that he didn't say anything at all about their personal relationship. He hadn't tried to convince her to stay with words of love, or even a mention of their lovemaking. He spoke of being with her own kind. Of seeing his home. And yet he'd said they were soul mates, and she'd felt that connection so strongly that surely he'd felt it, too?

"If we go to New Atlantis, I'd be free to leave at any time?"

His tone was gruff, threaded with hurt. "Do you think so little of me that I'd force you to stay where you'd be unhappy?"

"You forced me to come here," she countered. And then he'd made love to her so sweetly that her heart still beat with joy. She so badly wanted to kiss the hurt from his face, but she also owed it to herself to ask lots of questions.

His eyes darkened. "I thought we'd moved past—"

"We have. I have. I just like to understand all my options so I can make the right decision."

"Don't you ever choose with your heart?"

The question ringing in her ears, she stood, brushed the sand from her palms and realized she was nude and hadn't given it a thought. She'd been naked when making love, naked as a turtle and was carrying on a conversation as if she were fully clothed. And it seemed so natural.

She hadn't particularly noticed his nudity either. She'd become accustomed to seeing his bare chest and with his sitting on the beach, she simply hadn't noted he wasn't wearing his boxers. She could blame the oversight on the distraction of shape-shifting—but in truth, if she hadn't been so damn comfortable with him seeing her own skin, she surely would have reached for her shirt sooner.

One whiff and she scrunched up her nose. The shirt smelled. She picked up her clothes and carried them down to the water and tossed them into the sea. After swirling them around for a few minutes, she wrung them out and carried them back up the beach and laid them out in the sand to dry.

"Clothes are a problem for shape-shifters," Ari told her with a smile. "We're forever leaving them behind and arriving naked."

"How do you cope?" she asked, curious about his lifestyle, but oddly not the least bit uncomfortable walking around naked in broad daylight. And it was more than that he'd already seen every inch of her flesh. She simply didn't feel the least bit self-conscious around him, no doubt due to his attitude. He wasn't indifferent to her body but she could tell that the way her body parts went together wasn't his primary concern.

"Sometimes we carry clothing in our mouths. Or have someone tie them to our animal shape. Or we hide them in a place where we can shape-shift. On New Atlantis shape-shifters contribute more to the force field than many of our people with other powers. Perhaps that has gained us a measure of respect. If we're caught nude in public, people don't make a big deal out of it—although nudity isn't our practice. Many public places keep robes on hand to offer us."

He'd sounded so happy when he spoke of his world. She lifted her chin and locked gazes with him. "I'd like to visit New Atlantis."

Warm approval shined in his eyes and he gestured across the sea. "I'll take you there. We can swim there in a day."

She recalled swimming with fondness—except for the shrimp-eating incident. "How long would it take to fly?"

"A few hours, but mastering the bird form is more difficult."

Soaring through the sky under her own power excited her. She couldn't imagine the freedom. Heights had never bothered her. And if she ate, she could eat seeds, although she'd seen none here. But she also wondered if what he'd told her was true—that if she kept shape-shifting she'd never again be satisfied to stay in human form. However,

she had to get off this island—so she didn't have much choice. She'd have to change shape to leave—of course which animal form she chose was up to her. "I'd like to try, but I'm not sure I'm ready to greet strangers without any clothes."

"Even dry clothing is too heavy to fly with us. But my home is isolated on a beach. There are no neighbors nearby and I have clothing you can borrow." He took her hand. "I understand you have not yet decided whether you want to remain with me, but I'm glad you're considering it."

His words startled her—not because of what he'd said, but because she hadn't previously considered that once she shape-shifted into a bird, she could fly anywhere. She would be free to leave him.

She hadn't even thought about escaping from him—not since they'd made love. What was happening to her? It was one thing to choose to go with him, but it was unlike her not to consider what spending more time would cost her. She could lose the Miami deal. The theater renovation would come to a complete standstill.

And yet, if she didn't spend more time with Ari, if she didn't take this opportunity to visit New Atlantis, she might never have another. If she didn't go with him, she suspected she'd regret it for the rest of her life.

His warmth and sincerity had gotten to her on levels she hadn't suspected. And unlike other men who admired her for her wealth and her business acumen and her looks, Ari looked deeper to her core. And that's what he wanted. Her wealth didn't matter to him, at least not that she could ascertain. Neither did her looks. Sheesh—once she became accustomed to shape-shifting, she could change to any shape she wished.

Ari looked beyond the usual trappings. No man had ever looked so deep into her character and wanted what was pure Samantha. And it scared her because that kind of love was for life. That kind of love could change her entire world, and thinking it could be hers was both exhilarating and terrifying. She didn't know if she wanted to allow Ari to mean that much to her.

But she couldn't shape-shift and fly away either—not before seeing if they were meant to be together as he'd claimed. Soul mates. She'd never expected to meet a man who understood her as well as Ari. He'd seemed to instinctively know what would convince her to consider staying with him—and it wasn't words, but actions.

Knowing he would welcome her embrace, she stepped into his arms. With him, she felt anything less than giving him real truth about her feelings was dishonest. But he already seemed to know and, therefore, she didn't feel kissing him was leading him on or promising anything she couldn't deliver.

His arms closed around her and his mouth angled over hers, taking what she offered. And with the gentle breeze bathing her flesh, the sunlight warming her with a golden glow, she'd never felt so certain of her attractiveness.

She could see he wanted her by the gleam in his eyes, by the fierce beat of his heart and the pulse throbbing in the cords at his neck. Most of all, she was touched by the tender way he held her, even as his mouth took fierce possession.

Warmth and happiness suffused her from the inside out. And when she imagined waking up beside this man for the rest of her life, giving up her life at home didn't seem so much of a hardship.

"When we make love again, I want to do so on New Atlantis." He pulled back, his nostrils flaring with desire, leaving no doubts how much he wanted her. "And if you want to fly there, we have work to do. Are you sure I can't talk you into swimming?"

"An all-day swim or a few hours' flight?" She grinned at him and arched a suggestive eyebrow. "The sooner we arrive, the sooner we can—"

He cleared his throat. "If you're through distracting me, we should begin."

"All right. But I thought if we made love again, it would lead to shape-shifting."

"You must come to New Atlantis on your own. It's one of our laws."

"So what do I do?"

"Close your eyes."

She followed his directions and enjoyed the smooth cadence of his voice. But she also noted the way her toes dug into the sand, the way her breasts lifted with every breath, the way her hair whipped over her face during a gust of wind. "Now what?"

"Think about how you felt when our cells merged."

"When you were making love to me?" She'd never forget the merging of his breath with hers, his heart with hers. The details remained sharp in her mind, especially how he'd taken such care not to frighten her, how he'd taken such care to arouse her.

"Recall the process of sinking into me. But this time you are sinking into a bird."

She opened her eyes. "What kind of bird?"

"Whatever kind you like. Now close your eyes and imagine your cells shrinking, imagine your mind entering the *Inf*."

She shook her head. "Nothing's happening. I think you're going to have to make love to me again."

"Focus."

She sighed. Obviously he was taking this much more seriously than she was. Samantha had been one of those hit-or-miss students. When a subject interested her, she was at the top of her class, but when she was bored, she'd barely passed.

While shape-shifting did interest her, making love with Ari again interested her more. She wanted to do so without the shape-shifting complication. She wanted to find completion in her own body.

"What are you thinking about?" Ari interrupted her musings, a bit of frustration in his tone.

"You. I was thinking about making love in my own body. It would be—"

"Impossible if we don't fly out of here."

At his sharp tone, she opened her eyes again. "What's wrong?"

His gaze stared to the west at darkening skies and dark gray clouds that cast murky shadows across the sea. "A storm's blowing in. We should leave before it arrives. Fighting wind currents takes practice and you have—"

"Fine. I'll concentrate harder." She turned into the wind so her hair blew back from her face. As the wind gusted and brought in cool air and a mist of fine rain, her nipples tightened.

"Push your mind into the *Inf*. Focus on shrinking your body into a bird. A bird with strong wings and feathers to protect you from the rain. A bird that can fly tirelessly for hours, soaring above the sea."

His voice relaxed, almost hypnotizing Samantha but finally she focused. And her cells felt as if she were melting, shrinking. Pressure on pressure, she coaxed her mind into the *Inf*. If Ari hadn't shown her how, she'd have never been able to start the process, but once initiated, her body took over as if it knew exactly what to do.

She shrank. And her excess mass flipped into the *Inf* along with most of her mind. Her toes became webbed. Her bird body grew feathers with no more thought than her human body grew hair.

And her eyesight... oh... wow. Her eyesight grew keen. Her only regret was that in animal form she could no longer communicate her thoughts to Ari.

But he whooped at her success and then transformed into a bird beside her. Together, they flapped their wings and with almost no effort, she followed him into the air.

She was flying. She was a bird and she was flying. She'd defied physics and the experience was exhilarating. The entire time she'd taken the shape of a turtle, she'd worried whether she could change back. This time she had no worries.

Her heart was as light as her bird-boned body. And flying was magical. Sure, she'd flown in airplanes and helicopters but machines had powered the metal. Flying under her own power was like the difference between navigating the ocean in a submarine or swimming in the sea.

The wind whistled past her ears. Rain began to fall, but her feathers kept her dry and she wasn't the least bit cold. And with her wings outstretched, she was surprised how little energy it took to keep her in the air.

She could have flown for hours, and without any hesitation, she followed Ari and left the island far below. He flew higher, faster, racing away from the storm. And she stayed on his wing, enjoying a freedom she'd never known before.

Chapter Nine

The whipping wind told Ari's keen senses that the storm was catching them. He could smell the change in ions, feel the drop in temperature. The air carried the feel of a dangerous electric charge before a major summer thunderstorm.

Normally, he'd have dived into the sea, morphed into a fish and continued the journey, but Samantha wasn't ready to try the complex change from animal to animal. As the winds lashed them, Ari searched for a smooth slip stream of air to fly in. But despite his best efforts, the wind gusts buffeted them.

As New Atlantis's dark green mountains came into view on the horizon, he increased their speed and hoped they'd make landfall before the storm caught up with them. But as thunder roared and the wind whipped the sea below into a frothing cauldron, slashing rain nicked them. The sudden summer storm had turned what should have been an easy flight into a fight to make landfall.

Sensing Samantha's struggles to make headway, he feared she might panic and fall into the sea, but he hesitated to decrease their altitude. If they flew lower and she panicked or succumbed to exhaustion and morphed back into human shape, the fall might not kill her, but it would be dangerous to fly so close to the ocean where one strong downdraft could fling them into the waves with enough speed to break a bird's neck.

Ari shouldn't have been in such a hurry to bring her to New Atlantis. After the wind had picked up, he should have known better than to have her solo so far in unpredictable weather. He'd been too anxious for her to see his home, too eager to make love to her again on New Atlantis, and his impatience may have placed her life in jeopardy.

He thought about landing on the water and morphing back into human form. Although she was a strong swimmer he knew from his own efforts how tired he was. Staying afloat in those waves would take a superhuman effort.

Ari worried and fretted and blamed himself as Samantha gamely flew toward New Atlantis. When they were only a mile out, he began to believe they would make it to shore.

But fate was against them.

A lightning bolt caught them in its fringe. The near miss stunned him and as he fought to maintain balance, Samantha plunged toward the sea, her wing bent at a peculiar angle, indicating severe damage.

Fear activated his instincts. Ari pulled in his wings, tucked his head and dived after her. Within seconds his streamlined form caught up to her out-of-control plummet. He flew under her, then shape-shifted into a larger bird and extended his wings. Knowing even at this size he hadn't the strength to fly her to safety, he focused on breaking her fall.

He couldn't stop their plunge into the sea, but he could slow their rate of descent. His muscles burned. His lungs worked triple time. And still they fell sickeningly fast and hard, the wind whistling in his ears.

Just before they crashed into the sea, he morphed, wrapped himself around her still body in a cushioning ball. They struck the water hard. If he'd still possessed lungs, he had no doubt the landing would have knocked the air from his chest.

Had he cushioned her enough? As they dropped into the water, he changed shape once more. This time he altered into a giant manta ray. Spreading his pectoral fins, he floated Samantha to the surface and prayed she was still alive, still breathing.

As a manta he couldn't see her on his back, couldn't tell if she moved or lay on his cartilage broken and hurt. The wave action kept washing her back and forth, but he swam her to the deserted sandy shore of his home, morphed back into human shape and used his last energy to gently pull her into his arms.

"Samantha. Samantha."

She didn't move.

"Are you hurt?"

Damn. Damn. Damn. She looked bad. Her eyes were shut. Blood oozed from her beak. Her chest rose and fell, but erratically. If she tried to morph before she could heal, she'd use up the very last of her life forces.

He gathered her gently against his chest, shielding her from the wind and rain with his body, his heart skipping in despair as he noted her broken wing. "I know you can't talk. I know you're in pain but it's important that you listen to me."

One eye fluttered open.

"Don't try to morph. You're too weak." He tried to keep his voice calm but he wanted to rail at fate, which had hurt her and left him sound. He ached to howl into the wind and cry out his pain.

"Just breathe. Relax. Remember when we spoke about self healing. I'll explain the process and you'll fix the damage."

Samantha closed her eyes but at least she didn't appear to be attempting to morph. But he wasn't certain if she remained conscious, either, and his fear escalated.

"Come on, Sam. Stay with me. Fight. I know you're a fighter and we can do this, sweetheart." Ari's every muscle wound tight and he had to force himself to breathe. He took a calming gulp of air, told himself that to talk her through the process he had to stay coherent, positive and upbeat.

Samantha opened her eyes again.

"Good. Now, focus on your damaged cells, but don't morph. The healing process is more delicate. Think of your cells as torn. Heal the tears. Stop the bleeding first. Try to change just one cell until you get the hang of the process. It's not hard. Repairs take less effort and energy than morphing, and once you stop the internal bleeding, the pain will lessen."

He kept talking, repeating his instructions and adding encouragement. When she closed her eyes to rest, he allowed her a few minutes to recover before urging her to continue. And finally, beneath his hands, her heartbeat strengthened, giving him hope.

"You're doing wonderfully well. You're healing yourself. Your pulse is stronger. Keep going. And when you're done, we'll work on the bones."

Ari had no idea how long the process took. But the storm had passed over them and the sun shone brightly on the beach once again before she healed her broken wing. Knowing she didn't have enough energy to morph back to human, he carried her up the beach in his hands.

"You did great. Now sleep, and I'll take us home."

Samantha awakened in a room she'd never seen before. She tested her wing with a small movement and when she remained pain-free, she morphed back to human. Mouth dry, stomach growling with hunger, naked as the night they'd made love, she stretched and worked the kinks from her neck while she glanced at the room.

She must have slept through the night. Morning sunlight lit the room of white stuccoed walls, a white-stained wood floor, elegant gauze curtains that framed open windows. The only color in the room was Ari's bronze flesh resting on a thick white comforter.

Ari had been sleeping beside her but the moment she altered her shape to human, she must have depressed the mattress with her increased weight. He opened his eyes, sat up and handed her a glass of orange juice that he had waiting on a nightstand.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

Grateful to wet her parched throat, she gulped greedily, surprised to find the juice was cold, as if he'd just taken it from the fridge. After she'd finished the juice, she discovered the glass remained cold. "Does the glass possess its own refrigeration unit?"

"It's nano technology." He fluffed a pillow and pulled her next to him. "I'm so sorry. I should never have brought you here during a storm."

He sounded sad and she didn't understand why he was blaming himself for her injury. He'd saved her life. After the lightning had shocked her, her last thought had been of death as she plunged to the sea. Yet, he'd risked his own life to break her fall, swam her to shore, taught her to heal herself.

Snuggling against his warmth, she tilted up her head to look at him. "You couldn't have predicted that storm. And you saved my life. Thank you."

"Do you hurt anywhere?" he asked, smoothing her hair from her brow.

"I'm fine. In fact, I've never felt better." She marveled at how good she felt, awake, alert and very alive. Surprisingly, she didn't have one sore muscle, not even a twinge of pain.

"When you healed your injuries, you also revitalized your cells. You can always feel as good as you do right now—every day for the rest of your now extended lifetime."

"Wow." For the first time, his earlier words sank in. She would never go back to what she'd been before she'd learned how to morph. Now that she understood how easy it was to coax all her cells into perfect health, she would repeat the process whenever she felt the need. To do anything less would be like putting sugar in her car's gas tank instead of fuel.

Even if she rejected New Atlantis, she could rejuvenate her cells. But did she want to outlive her friends and associates? If she married, she'd outlive her husband and her children—and she didn't want to think about if her children inherited her abilities. The possibilities were mind-boggling.

The longer lifespan and her health would cause any number of problems in the outside world—certainly ones that could be solved with her wealth—but did she want to live the rest of her life hiding her abilities?

Still, the morphing didn't come without risks. She could have died in that lightning storm. Without Ari beside her, she'd be one dead bird right about now.

"You risked your life to save me, didn't you?"

He pulled her onto his chest. "You are my responsibility. It was my fault you were hurt."

"But—"

"But more important, I wouldn't have wanted to live without my soul mate."

"We've only known each other a short time."

"Time has nothing to do with love." He placed her hand on his chest over his heart. "Can you not feel our connection? Surely I can't be the only one who—"

"Ari, I'm not like you. I'm not certain I believe that there's only one perfect love for me."

His eyes darkened. "You wish to search for another mate?"

"I didn't say that." She didn't want to hurt him but she simply couldn't give him more of her thoughts when she hadn't come to terms with her feelings. "I need more time to decide what I'll do with the rest of my life."

"Why do you need more time?"

His question left her flabbergasted. "We... you and I... I have no idea what you do for a living."

"And that is important to you? Would you reject me if I was a carpenter?"

"Of course not. I'm not that stupid. Do you know how hard it is to find a good carpenter?"

She teased him, and it felt good to be in this peaceful white room with him. She could hear the waves lapping on the beach, catch a view of the mountains behind them and couldn't have imagined a more perfect location for a house.

He laughed at her. "Does what I do for a living matter so much?"

"My point was that I don't know you."

"Afraid I'm after your money?" He eyed her hungrily. "My family is extremely wealthy. I could keep you in the lifestyle to which you're accustomed by simply living off my trust fund but I prefer to dabble."

"Dabble?"

"In nano technology. That glass is one of my inventions." He spoke with pride. And she didn't blame him. His invention would make him even wealthier.

"I'm impressed, but until you just mentioned them, I didn't know you had a family."

"I have parents, grandparents, great-grandparents and great-great-grandparents. My family is huge. The entire population is related if you go back far enough. That's why we need new blood. That's why we need you."

"Your entire family lives on New Atlantis?"

"Most of us. But we all like our privacy so you needn't worry about—"

"A large family sounds wonderful but you keep missing the point. I don't know what you like to do for entertainment"—her stomach growled—"or what you like for breakfast."

He chuckled in delight. "As for breakfast, I believe I'd like to have you."

"I'm serious. I'm starving."

"So am I." He wriggled his brows suggestively.

Samantha decided she could wait to feed her belly. Leaning forward, she kissed Ari with an abandon that surprised her. She'd never been so relaxed with a man and suspected his simple admission of his feelings for her had a lot to do with it. Ari had the courage to say what he felt and go after what he wanted—her—and she admired him for it.

That he'd been willing to risk his life to save her from that horrific fall out of the sky proved he spoke the truth. For the first time in her life, she felt unconditionally loved—and not for her wealth or her looks but for her true self. Ari's love was a truly liberating feeling and it transferred to making love.

Samantha suddenly wanted to try everything she'd ever fantasized about with Ari. She wanted to spend as much time as possible with him today and tomorrow and as long as it took to be sure she'd never have regrets.

His powerful arms closed around her and his clever fingers skimmed up her back, shooting tingles into her core. He surprised her when he broke their kiss and gazed at her with a twinkle in his eyes. "I have a surprise for you."

"I'm not too certain how many more of your surprises my heart can take," she teased.

"I want to show you the force field that protects New Atlantis."

She narrowed her eyes on him. "I thought you were starving for me."

He chuckled. "I am. I can do two things at once."

"I don't understand."

"You will," he promised and went right back to kissing her, leaving her curiosity aroused while he worked on exciting the rest of her.

Between the magic of his lips and hands, it didn't take long for them to come together physically, but in another way that was totally new. Seemingly in no rush, Ari stoked her embers, until fire licked into a blaze of need.

And then as if she'd always lived in isolation, her mental bubble broke. She sensed thousands of people going about their daily lives... and gasped. There was warmth, humanity and love keeping up the force field. And she could feel this elemental connection to others of her kind that didn't intrude or overwhelm but shined down on her like the sun, bathing her in a oneness.

And when Ari wrapped his arms around her and held her close, as he moved inside her, building the tension, taking her with him, she'd never felt so close to anyone in her life. There was intimacy of mind and body. There was sharing, caring. And love.

Later, Ari cooked her breakfast. They ate in silence on his back deck that overlooked the sea, sharing waffles and fresh strawberries and sliced pineapples. She contentedly sipped her coffee, listened to the birds caw, the sea lap to and fro over his pink sand beach, but most of all, she enjoyed looking at Ari.

She didn't think she'd ever met a man so sure of himself, who was both simple and complex. Ari had told her that what he did for a living didn't matter, but his nano technology that kept her coffee hot and her juice cold impressed her as much as the house he'd built with his own hands.

She almost hated to break the perfect morning by speaking. "Can we stay here today instead of going into town?"

"We can do whatever you like, but I thought you were eager to see the island to see if you could live here?"

She put down her coffee cup and took his hand. "The rest of the island doesn't matter."

"It doesn't?"

"If there aren't enough shops or restaurants... I'll build them."

He grinned. "Building commercial businesses could take quite a bit of time. You'd have to stay here to oversee the construction."

She gazed straight into his eyes. "I want to stay here. With you." Ari whooped. Scooped her into his arms and twirled her around, his expression happy and loving. "You won't regret your decision. I'll make sure of it."

Deep in her heart she knew she could count on him to keep his promise. When he kissed her with fierce pride, she knew without a doubt that she'd found her home. Her love. Her soul mate.