



eBooks are *not* transferable. They cannot be sold, shared or given away as it is an infringement on the copyright of this work.

This book is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the writer's imagination or have been used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, actual events, locale or organizations is entirely coincidental.

Samhain Publishing, Ltd.
577 Mulberry Street, Suite 1520
Macon GA 31201

Trinity Broken
Copyright © 2007 by Jamie Craig
Cover by Anne Cain
ISBN: 1-59998-845-3
www.samhainpublishing.com

All Rights Are Reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

First **Samhain Publishing, Ltd.** electronic publication: December 2007

Trinity Broken

Jamie Craig

Dedication

This book is dedicated to the memory of John Espinoza, who could always be counted on for support and love.

Chapter One

The silent street unfurled in front of them like black ribbon, cold and glittering as the pair followed the trail. Behind the tract homes, the Nevada desert mocked their slow progress, but neither man nor beast allowed themselves to be hurried in their task. The objective was too important. They had been searching for two very long years for her. They would not rush at this point, only to lose her yet again.

Cameron Koster kept his head high, sniffing out the frigid January air for her scent. Every once in a while, he would lower his nose to the road, pausing for a moment as he sought another clue, another fragment of a trail, and when he caught the musk again, he resumed his path, his padded feet silent on the cement. Choosing the form of a German shepherd was proving the best decision he and Josh had made yet on this trip. In this body, Cam could track as easily as breathing.

There was no doubt she was here. They could be separated for decades, and Cam would never forget her scent.

Josh shivered at his side, the man's entire body shaking with the force of the cold. He had opted to wear nothing but a thin jacket, but to his credit, he hadn't made a sound or voiced a single complaint.

"Is she here?" Josh breathed.

The inability to answer Josh with words was the only disadvantage to shifting. Without breaking stride, Cam closed the distance between them and nuzzled the top of his head against Josh's hand.

Josh's fingers curled in acknowledgement, his hand resting for a moment between Cam's ears. "I can't see a thing."

He wished he could tell Josh he saw perfectly well, but he knew he had to settle for a brief brush of his nose against Josh's hip before pulling out in front again. There was no

time for dallying. The cold was an unforgiving mistress, and he was not prepared to lose Josh too.

They had only walked another twenty yards when the trail changed. Cam stopped dead in his tracks, ears sharpening, his heart quickening from its slow pace. Undercurrents of civilization coated the air—motor oil and perfume and human bodies too many to count—but now, a new aroma mingled with hers, something metallic that made his form's natural instincts come alive.

Blood.

Hers.

He broke into a run.

Cam wasn't worried about Josh. He heard the rhythmic sound of Josh's breathing and the soft slap of his shoes against the pavement, but Josh couldn't keep up with Cam's long strides. Soon, Cam left him behind, following the smell of blood like a bright red rope, winding through the blackness.

He stopped short outside an innocuous house that looked like every other house on the long road. There were no lights, no signs of life, no cars in the short driveway, nothing to indicate the house wasn't abandoned. Nothing except for the sickening, gut-twisting cloud hanging over the entire building—the pungent smell of something more than blood, something darker.

Josh caught up with him, his breath coming in shallow gasps. Cam stood at the door, prepared to shift, but Josh put a hand on the scruff of his neck.

“Not yet. There could be somebody waiting behind the door.”

Cam growled in frustration. Josh had a point, but when they reached her, he wanted to be able to take her in his arms, feel her body against his, hold her as he'd been denied for the past two years. He couldn't hold her in this form.

But if there were others, he would be far more lethal as a German shepherd. With a duck of his head, Cam stepped out of the way, waiting for Josh to get them inside.

Josh had anticipated the locked door. He pulled a small case of tools out of his jacket pocket and held a small flashlight between his teeth. Cam paced back and forth while

Josh picked the lock, understanding it would be best to slip in and out of the house quietly, but frustrated that he had to wait. Plus, having the flashlight, no matter how small, was a risk.

His ears perked forward as the lock clicked, and Josh slowly turned the knob to push the door open. They both braced themselves for an immediate response, but the house remained completely silent.

It was also dark. Josh's hesitation was the only impetus Cam needed to slip noiselessly inside first.

He waited on the other side of the threshold for Josh to enter. Though his muscles screamed at him to bolt forward, he didn't move until he felt the familiar touch at his shoulder, but even then, it wasn't the frantic pace he would have preferred. He guided Josh through the empty front room, leading him straight for the kitchen in the back. His nails clicked against the tiled floor, but he didn't stop until they reached the closed door leading to the basement.

The trail was strongest here. The scent of her sweat and skin and blood was dizzying, but something else made Cam's stomach nearly retch.

Fear.

Josh hesitated for only a second before opening the basement door, but it was a second too long for Cam. Sara wasn't the only thing he could smell; Josh reeked of adrenaline and sweat in the small space. From the corner of his eye, he saw Josh put his hand down, as though he wanted to touch him again, but he paused, his fingers hovering just above his head before pulling away. Cam realized he probably looked more than a little intimidating, and Josh's more basic instincts to avoid large, tense, dangerous dogs had probably kicked in at that moment. Especially since Josh wasn't accustomed to seeing him in canine form.

He pushed the door open and stepped aside, allowing Cam to race past him.

The first bound almost made him tumble down the rest of the flight of stairs, but he recovered well enough to get to the bottom on his own four feet. Where he'd expected an open room, indicative of any other normal basement, Cam found himself staring down a

narrow hall lined with closed doors leading to unknown rooms. It was an obvious construct, probably done after the fact, but he didn't care about why. She was behind one of those doors. He tensed, ready to go bolting forward to nose out which one, when a flashing light above made him pause.

He tilted his head back, aware of Josh descending the stairs behind him. Just because he couldn't see red in this form didn't mean Cam couldn't recognize an alarm going off when he saw one.

A man sprung from a nearby door, gun drawn, the barrel pointed at him. Cam barely had a chance to adjust before a shot exploded in the small corridor, reverberating off the walls and making his skull vibrate. He ducked his head automatically as the man in front of him fell face first to the ground, and fresh blood obscured the trail he had been following to Sara.

Cam spun around to see Josh slowly lower his arm, his face blank in the revolving light. "Hurry," was all he said.

Fear there would be more men spurred Cam to run. His paws slipped in the blood pooling on the cement floor, and he skidded several feet before he realized her scent was growing fainter. Whirling, he backtracked, but the instant he saw the door opening, he leapt into the air.

His powerful jaws sank into the man's neck before the would-be assailant drew his gun. Cam's aim was true, and blood spurted from the jugular to coat his muzzle. Though they fell to the ground, the man's attempts to dislodge Cam from his throat grew weaker with each passing second, until they stopped completely, his thready pulse disappearing altogether.

Josh's thin form stepped between the dead man and the wall, his shoulder pushing the door open to reveal a brightly lit room. Cam forced his way past Josh and barely noticed the way he slumped against the wall, as if somebody had punched him in the chest.

The room was nearly devoid of furniture. There was a chair near the door with a discarded *Sports Illustrated* next to it and a low table bolted to the opposite wall. But

Cam didn't see the furnishings. He saw the thin form stretched out on top of the table. He saw the slack hand resting at its side, the steel cuffs chafing around the wrists to restrain it. He saw the strong jaw, and the dark hair spilling over the pillow, and the steady rise and fall of her breasts as she slept.

He saw Sara.

On the first step toward her, he changed, almost unknowingly. His need to touch her, to know she was real, superseded the need for the dog guise. The air was cool against his bared skin, but Cam didn't care. He didn't care about anything until he'd crossed the room and stood at her side. Then he saw what had stopped Josh inside the door.

"Oh, my God," he murmured.

Josh circled to the other side of the table, meeting Cam's eyes over Sara's prone body. The woman in front of him and the woman who lived in his memories were not the same person. This version of Sara was pale, drawn and gaunt, the thinnest shadow of her former vibrant self. The hospital gown barely covered her thighs, but her legs, arms and face told a story of torment, pain and every nightmare he had during the past two years.

Josh reached out to touch her, gently brushing his fingers against her cheek. His hand looked much too large, much too strong, against her fragile skin—her stained and bruised skin. The blood covering her wasn't fresh, it was merely a pink stain, like they couldn't be bothered to clean her properly. A recent wound on the inside of her thigh slowly seeped blood.

"We need to break through these chains," Josh said, his words matter-of-fact but thin.

Cam knew Josh expected him to do something, but the shock of seeing her like this had turned his muscles to lead. It was the embodiment of everything he'd feared; the fact she was still alive was the only thing saving his sanity.

"What did they do to her?" The words were barely a whisper. "How could they *do* this?"

“Cam.” He didn’t look up or acknowledge Josh. “*Cameron.*” The unexpected sting in Josh’s voice caught his attention. “I know. I know. But I can’t get her out of these chains by myself. We need to keep it together right now.”

Keep it together. Right. The important thing to focus on was that Sara was alive, and they were here, and they were going to take her home. Where she belonged.

Cam took a long, shuddering breath before grasping the cuff around her nearest wrist. Gritting his teeth, he poured all his strength into it, wrenching the metal until it began to scream and beads of sweat popped out on his brow. Josh reached across her body to hold her arm, and as soon as the cuff had been stretched enough, he slipped her hand through the opening. Neither of them could do more than glance at the raw patches where the steel had worn against her skin.

They repeated the process with her other wrist and both her ankles, until they freed Sara of all the restraints. Cam panted from the exertion, but she hadn’t moved, not even a muscle. Tenderly, he brushed his fingertips over her cheek.

“They’ve drugged her,” he said. “How are we going to get her out of here?”

Josh pressed the back of his hand against his mouth and took a deep breath. “I’m going to have to carry her out. You’re going to need to shift again.”

“Can we wake her up?”

He looked up, and Cam saw his own pain reflected in Josh’s brown eyes. “I don’t think we should spend any more time here than necessary. We can wake her up when we’re somewhere safe.”

Cam nodded. Josh was right. Always the voice of reason in the face of a crisis. He had been Cam’s rock for the entirety of the past two years.

Turning away, he prepared to shift to the shepherd again only to hesitate and glance back at Sara.

“But she’s alive. That’s what counts.”

“That’s all that counts,” Josh agreed softly, lifting her into his arms. He held her like she didn’t weigh any more than a doll, cradling her close to his chest. “She feels so cold.”

Sara would not survive the Nevada winter dressed as she was. It took only a moment for Cam to march back to the men in the hallway, and only a few more to strip them out of the clothes. They were too big for her and stained with blood, but they would protect her for now.

Josh set her on the edge of the table, holding her in an upright position as Cam layered both shirts and both pair of pants on her tiny frame. She looked like nothing more than a child, completely swamped by the outfit. Even the belt Cam cinched around her waist didn't do much to keep the clothes in place.

"When we get her home—" Cam started.

"We're not going home," Josh said, cutting him off. "Not now. Maybe not for a long time."

"What?" He stared at Josh in disbelief. "Why not?"

Josh gave him a look of infinite patience, tinged with more than a hint of sadness. "Cameron, where do you think they're going to look for us? Whoever went through all the effort to...to take her...they're not going to let us just walk away with her."

He wanted to argue that nobody was letting them do anything; the two dead bodies in the hall were proof. They had searched for over two years for Sara, and all he wanted to do was get her home where she belonged, where she was loved, where they could take care of her properly. But Josh had a point. Someone had snatched Sara from their lives for a reason, and she still lived for that same purpose. They had no way of knowing if whoever was behind it all wouldn't try it again, and the easiest place for them to start would be back in Delta.

His brain worked, searching for a solution. Josh had done the driving to the tiny Nevada town, following the lead he'd been given. Cam had little idea what options they might have.

"What do you suggest then?" he asked. Josh would have the answer. He was so much better at this type of arrangement than Cam was.

Josh cradled her again. "Vegas is about three hours away. We shouldn't have a problem finding a place to lay low. We'll stay there until...until her condition is stable."

Cam didn't mistake Josh's careful terminology. Stable. Like he needed the reminder that someone—or someones—had stolen the woman they loved from under their noses and tortured her until she was a shadow of her previous self.

A raw anger he hadn't felt in months made his heart bleed. "I want whoever did this," he growled. "I want to find them, and I want to rip them apart until not even the vultures will pick at the remains."

Josh brushed past him, stepping out of the bright room into the revolving light of the hallway. He paused there and looked over his shoulder to where Cam still stood. "We'll find them. We will."

He didn't reply. As he followed Josh back to the car parked at the edge of the neighborhood, only one thought consumed Cam's mind.

Someone would pay.

Chapter Two

Las Vegas was gray and asleep as Josh navigated the surface streets, winding deeper and deeper into the city. He glanced in his rearview mirror with a sigh. Cam held Sara tightly beneath a thick blanket, and at some point in the last hour, he had fallen asleep. In the faded light, they looked almost normal.

Normal.

Nothing would ever be normal again, but that didn't matter. Sara was back where she belonged, and he had the visual proof, and if he reached behind the seat, he'd be able to touch them. He had held her in his arms, felt the faint rhythm of her pulse, heard her soft, regular breath. His heart twisted so painfully he had to look away again and focus on the road. They needed to get her in bed, needed to doctor her wounds, needed to see this through until the end. Only then could he focus on his own tumultuous, mixed, overwhelming emotions.

He ultimately chose a small lodge that was not part of a national chain, mainly because of the diner attached to it. She would need to eat something healthy, something besides fast food or what they could get delivered, and Josh's tired, over-taxed brain insisted this would be the best choice.

Josh left the car idling with the heater on while he went into the small office to check for vacancies. He asked for a room with two beds and paid for three nights. The old woman behind the desk handed him two keys, and he took them with a sort of detached exhaustion. They slipped through his fingers once, and she silently handed them to him again.

They were both still asleep when he returned to the car. The early morning air was surprisingly chilly against his cheek after the heat of the car, and he was hesitant to bring Sara out in the cold. He wanted them both to be warm and comfortable for as long as possible. Working quickly and quietly, he took the few bags they had out of the trunk and

brought them to their room. Fortunately, they were able to get something on the ground level.

Josh inspected the room, though he knew it didn't matter if the place was below par. He wasn't driving anywhere else that morning. Everybody needed to rest, and the room was just like every other hotel he had ever been in.

Returning to the car, he opened the door and gently touched Cam's shoulder. "Hey. We're here. Let's get her inside."

Cameron's eyes opened without even a flutter, as if he'd merely been biding his time until he had to move. His first glance was down at Sara, but soon enough, he nodded and relaxed his hold on her. Josh slid his arms beneath her thin shoulders, lifting her away while Cam climbed out of the car. He led the way to their room, but when they reached the door, he hesitated.

"Key's in my pocket," he said.

Cam reached in and took it out, opening the way for them. The soft light from the lamp on the nightstand lit the path to the beds, and he hung back as Josh laid Sara down where the blankets were already drawn.

"We should clean her up," Cam said as Josh straightened. "She's going to be pissed if she wakes up and finds out we let her sleep like that."

Josh nodded, drawing on what remained of his energy to begin undressing her. He tossed the clothes aside, knowing it would be best if they destroyed them, rather than simply throwing them away. It had been difficult to look at her before, but once she was naked, it was nearly impossible. The luscious body that he had worshipped had been replaced with a stick figure, a woman who didn't have any flesh on her bones.

"I brought some clothes and a first-aid kit," Josh said, brushing her dirty hair away from her brow.

"Maybe we should put her in the bath," Cameron suggested. He sat on the opposite side of the bed, picking up Sara's hand to hold it in his palm. The contrast between hers and Cam's skin was almost gone; her caramel-colored skin was now sallow from lack of sunlight. "I think she'd like that."

“Yeah.” If Sara were awake, she’d probably want nothing more than a bath. When would she wake up? Would she ever wake up? What if she didn’t? The stray thought made Josh ill, but he couldn’t abandon the question. It needed to be considered. Needed to be answered. “I’ll fill the tub.”

Cam’s hand caught his arm before he could move to the bathroom. “You’re dead on your feet. Get undressed and get in first, and I’ll bring Sara in. You can hold her while I clean her up.”

Josh would have smiled at the suggestion, but he could only nod, knowing Cam would understand his gratitude. As the tub filled, he stripped out of his filthy clothes with relief, and then lowered himself into the clear, warm water. He closed his eyes for a moment, trying to blink away the gritty feeling behind his lids, and when he opened them again, Cam was standing above him with Sara.

Gently, Cam crouched down, lowering her body so she rested against Josh’s chest. Once upon a time, she would have seen the position as an invitation to play, wriggling against his cock until he was hard against her ass. There were no such antics from her now. Only the ends of her dark hair moved, longer than he remembered with threads of gray visible in the strands, trailing along the surface of the water. Josh had to blink back the sudden sting of tears.

“We need to find someplace with a kitchen soon,” Cam was saying. He knelt at the side of the tub, his hand immersed as he soaked the washcloth. “I can cook all her favorites. That’ll help her get some weight back.”

Cam’s simple suggestion set off a chain reaction for Josh, and suddenly everything they needed to do and should do filled his mind. There were too many things. It was too much. And he didn’t know how to live on the run. He didn’t even know who they were running from, or where they were running to, or what it meant to be safe. They had lives, they had careers, they had a home, and he would happily trade every bit of it to have Sara back, but now he didn’t know how they were going to live.

“I paid for three nights,” Josh said, gently wrapping his arm around her waist. “That should give us enough time to get a plan and figure out our first step. Maybe we can get a place with a short lease instead of another hotel.”

Cam nodded. As he ran the cloth over her stomach, the sandy-colored hair he’d let grow too long the past few months fell over his face, nearly obstructing his profile. But Josh could still see the clear blue eyes, and the lines that had grown more pronounced at their corners. Sara was not the only one who had aged in her absence. The hole she’d left in their lives had weathered them all.

“If I can go back to Delta and get my laptop,” Cam said, “I can work anywhere we find here. That’ll help the money situation. I think there’s just enough still in the savings account to cover us for a couple months before we really have to start worrying.”

Josh nodded. He knew they should discuss all of this, but it was getting harder to form words. Cam would need to go back for more than just his laptop. Josh had packed as much as he could before they went to find Sara, but it wasn’t enough.

Cam ran the washcloth over Sara’s body, and Josh followed him with his hands, rinsing away the soap. He cupped his hands and dribbled water down her arms, her breasts and her stomach. The work was oddly intense, as though they were performing some sort of rite, some sort of sacrament. They didn’t miss a single inch, working together to gently maneuver her nearly lifeless body. The rise and fall of her chest was a constant comfort to Josh, and he kept pressing his palm against her body, seeking out her pulse.

“I know we shouldn’t.” Cam’s voice was low, barely louder than the lapping water, and he didn’t look up from where he was washing her feet. “But I can’t stop thinking what it would be like to fall asleep in a bed with her between us.” He shook his head. “It’s just been so long...”

“I know.” Tears threatened again, but Josh resisted the oncoming gale. His body wanted to fold in on itself. “But we should give her some space. We don’t...we don’t know...”

“We know she’s alive. And she’s with us. That’s all that matters.” Cam set the cloth away and reached for the complimentary shampoo, but Josh caught a glimpse of how shiny his eyes were before his hair hid them away again. “Anything else, we’ll fix.”

“It might not be that easy, Cameron. She might be injured or damaged beyond...beyond what we can see. We don’t know what they did to her. She could have been...” Josh stopped. The word was too hard to say. It was too hard to think. But he knew he had to think it. They needed to be prepared for any revelation, and they needed to be prepared to help her.

Cam hesitated, then set the shampoo back down. “They wouldn’t have.” His gaze flickered down her body, but it jumped back to meet Josh’s before it went too far. “You don’t really think...?”

Josh hated bringing it up, and he hated the look on Cam’s face. “Do you think there would be anything stopping them? They obviously wanted to hurt her. Or at least, they weren’t too careful about not hurting her.”

“She would’ve fought.”

Josh looked down at the bruises around her wrists and ankles. “I don’t doubt she would have tried. I think we should try to get a doctor to examine her, somehow.”

“No.” The firmness of Cam’s tone surprised him. “A doctor’s going to take one look at Sara and think we had something to do with this. And if we have to explain about her being missing, that blows keeping her safe until we find the bastards responsible.” His hand broke the surface of the water, skimming over her sunken stomach. “I don’t like it, but we have to do this. We know her best. We’ll know if there’s something wrong.”

Josh blanched. “I don’t...I don’t know if I can. I know you’re right. I know if anybody sees her, we’ll be the number one suspects. But...you’re going to have to do it.”

As soon as he saw Cameron’s hand move downwards, Josh shut his eyes. He couldn’t watch. This was a necessary evil, but Sara had already been violated in so many ways that he hated the fact that they had to add one more indignity to the list. That didn’t mean he didn’t feel every wave of water displaced against his skin as Cam eased her thighs apart, or that he didn’t envision the hands he knew so well exploring Sara in ways

that should never have been needed. At least he hadn't eaten yet. Otherwise, he might be sick.

"I don't see anything."

"Okay. Good. That's good," Josh muttered. "But I think I'll talk to her about it...if I get the chance."

"Yeah." Cam reached for the shampoo again, dripping water along Josh's arm. "Sara's the best one to confirm that for us."

Josh wet Sara's hair, soaking the strands before Cam gently massaged the shampoo against her scalp. "Not going to let her go again," Josh vowed, more to himself than to Cam. "Never again."

Together, they rinsed her off, but when Cam reached to lift her out of the water, Josh sighed, already wishing he didn't have to relinquish her, even for a second. He let her go, though, draining the tub as they disappeared to the outer room.

Cam was drying her off when Josh emerged. She looked tiny in the bed, too small to be real. Sara always seemed larger than life in his memories; how could this be the same woman?

"We can take shifts," Cam said. "I'll keep an eye on her while you get some sleep, then we can switch over once you've gotten some rest."

Josh collapsed on the other bed without removing the towel from around his waist. He stretched out on his side, unable to look away from Sara. He expected to fall asleep almost immediately, but the world didn't darken, it blurred. Everything around him began to swim as hot tears covered his face. He opened his mouth to take a deep breath, and that breath turned into a single sob before his entire body began to shake.

He didn't see Cam move, but within a heartbeat, strong hands were on Josh's shoulders, pulling him upright and crushing him to Cam's chest. "I know," Cam murmured, his lips brushing against Josh's temple. "I know. But we've got her again, focus on that. And she's going to wake up, and she's going to laugh at us for overreacting, just you wait."

Josh shook his head, unable to explain it was the very fact they got her back that prompted the tears. The entire time she was gone, he hoped she was still alive, but he had fully prepared himself to never see her again. Yet here she was, a miracle, an unexpected second chance. He clung to Cam, burying his face in his lover's neck, knowing he wouldn't be able to hold back anything. The tears would have to run their course.

They stayed like that, bodies entwined, hearts pounding, until the onslaught began to ebb. It left him drained, his muscles like lead, and Josh couldn't fight when Cam drew him to his feet.

"I don't think it would be so bad to stretch out beside her," he said. "I'll be awake in case anything happens, and if she wakes up, that makes us the first things she sees."

Josh only nodded before lowering himself to the mattress. He pulled her against him gently, tucking her into the curve of his body. She didn't respond at all. He ran his fingertips over her lips, thinking of the thousands of times he had kissed her, and the millions of times he had longed to feel her lips again while she was gone.

When Cam slid onto the other side of the bed, Josh looked up and mouthed, "I love you."

The corner of his mouth lifted. "I love you, too." He slid closer until Sara was nestled between them and reached across to run his fingertips down Josh's arm. "Thank you."

Lulled by Cam's touch and Sara's reassuring warmth, Josh closed his eyes. "For what?"

"For never giving up. For fighting when you could've left." His hand caressed Josh's cheek. "For finding her for us."

Josh nuzzled against Cam's fingers. He didn't know how to tell him staying and fighting and finding her had been the only thing that gave his life any sort of meaning. But the great thing about Cam was that he knew it, knew without being told. So he smiled and wrapped his hand around Cam's before allowing himself to drift to sleep.

Chapter Three

Josh sat with his back against the wall, idly rubbing Sara's shoulder as he watched the two of them sleep. Cam had resisted falling asleep at first, doing everything he could to keep his eyes open after hunger and a heavy bladder roused Josh. But gradually, he closed his eyes and his body naturally sought out Sara's, until they were spooned around each other like nothing had ever separated them.

He felt refreshed, like a different person, and he didn't mind being left alone to watch over them. Josh never dreamed he would be trusted as the caregiver to two shapeshifters—especially two shifters as strong, physically and mentally, and overwhelming as Cam and Sara. Normal humans—outsiders in the shifters' parlance—were not supposed to share a bed, a home or a life with shifters, and there wasn't anybody who would think what Josh did was right.

Except the three of them. He knew this decision had been the correct one. He knew what his real role in this life was, and that was why losing Sara made everything seem so utterly pointless, drab, without purpose. Pure chance had brought Josh into their world, and it had seemed the cruelest fate that ripped Sara away from him.

It was hard for Josh to believe he even had a real existence prior to meeting Cam and Sara. From the moment he asked Sara if he could interview her for his study, he knew he needed more than just a few answers from her. When he first met her, he had taken himself and his work too seriously, and he had been ridiculously overeager to work with her. Not just because she had been vibrant and captivating. It only took a few days in Delta to ascertain that she hadn't been raised in the small Utah town. Her experience with outsiders gave her a unique perspective on what it meant to be a shifter, on where she fit in the world, and how she differed from human beings. Josh assumed that she would be more self-aware than other shifters, and thus, easier to talk to.

Of course, that assumption had been wrong in every way. Yes, she was very self-aware, but every shifter Josh ever spoke to demonstrated an equal amount of self-awareness. Shifters weren't animals. Anybody who spent five minutes in the shifter community would see that right away. But *nobody* would do such a thing. After earning a degree in anthropology, Josh had shifted gears in his graduate training. Due to his strong interest in researching shifters, he had been forced to switch to zoology. He had also been obligated to spend more time researching in laboratories, far away from anything resembling a shifter. Josh had spent most of his training trying to prove that the prevailing assumptions about shifters had been false, but nobody would listen to him until he had field work under his belt.

So he had applied for grants. It was difficult because universities had very limited funds they would not offer to anybody who wasn't a full-time tenured professor. And six years before he began his doctorate work, over ninety-five percent of all federal funding to the sciences had been stopped and the private sector had taken over the research and development field. That meant securing a position within one of the giant mega-corporations devoted to everything from developing vaccines to building war machines. That meant convincing his new bosses they stood to gain something from his research. That meant nearly a decade of preparation that culminated in him arriving in Delta, looking for the perfect shifter to match against his proposed study.

And Sara had been beyond perfect. Josh had wanted somebody who had a prominent role in the community. Sara was a popular, widely loved elementary school teacher. He wanted somebody who had met certain measurements of success. A little background research revealed that Sara had chosen to come to Delta, but she had job offers across the country. He had wanted somebody young enough to perform certain physical tests. She had been in her mid-twenties when they met. He wanted somebody who was physically fit. Nobody could ever complain about Sara's body. She was fit. He wanted somebody who showed an aptitude for shifting at an early age. She had shifted as a toddler. He wanted somebody who didn't mind shifting for him and describing what it was like. Sara

was extremely articulate, and would often paint pictures with her words, drawing him into an experience he could never truly know.

But there was one small problem. Scientists were supposed to be objective, unbiased. Scientists were supposed to be able to observe their work from a distance. Scientists needed to be reliable, patient, and above reproach, so their later work could not be called into question. But Josh could not keep that distance when it came to Sara. He wanted to know her every single way a man could know a woman, and later, when she introduced him to Cam, the powerful connection he had with the other man shocked him.

He had spent the last two years living in his memories, holding onto her shadow as tightly as he could because he didn't know what else to do. He and Cam often spent entire nights swapping stories, sharing fond moments, sharing memories of jokes and laughter, sharing secrets and insights, while passing a bottle of whiskey back and forth. But Josh had his own private stash of memories he never discussed with Cam, and he knew Cam must have his own secrets he clutched jealously to his heart.

It was easy for Josh to slip into one of those memories while he waited for the next part of their future to begin. And it was just like that. Waiting. Hanging on the edge of uncertainty until they woke up. Four years separated him from the memory he visited whenever he needed strength, but it was still as vivid as the day before. More so, in many ways.

How could it not be the most vivid day in his recent memory? It was the day his life changed in every way that mattered.

* * *

Josh knew frantically hitting the refresh button would not make the message arrive in his inbox any faster, but he couldn't help himself. He fell into a routine of checking his email, checking out the news, skimming over his favorite blog, and then checking his email again. The whole process took approximately three and a half minutes.

The Iocor Board of Directors Research and Development Division had promised him he would receive an answer that afternoon. If they liked his article, *The History and*

Development of Shifter Jane Doe from Adolescence to Maturity: A Study of Mental, Emotional and Physical Changes Within a Closed Shifter Community, they would offer him more funding. More than that, they would offer him a permanent position in the research division. His future could be made or broken with this report. He would be sitting on top of the phone, but they had specified they would respond by email. Both times he had called to ask.

It took him over six months to write the damned thing. If they didn't want it, if they didn't like it, if it wasn't good enough, he wasn't sure he had it inside him to try again. He didn't know if he had anything else to offer.

Josh did know he needed to find a way to take his mind off of it, but what could distract him from the fact his future was hanging in the balance?

A soft knock seemed to be the answer to his question. With a smile of relief, he closed his laptop and stood to open the bedroom door. Sara would understand his current anxiety—and being around her usually made him feel better.

“I am so happy you're home,” he greeted.

She still wore the clothes she'd left for work in, the skirt swirling around her long legs, the soft button-down blouse doing nothing to hide the plush curve of her breasts. Dark eyes danced, and her darker hair hung in waves about her shoulders, but the smile on her full lips faded as their gazes met.

“What's wrong?” She lifted a hand to his brow, testing his temperature like he was one of her students. “You haven't locked yourself in here all day, have you?”

“All day.” When Cam was away, it messed up both of their rhythms. “Every time I left my computer, I thought I probably missed the email. So I've just been waiting and driving myself insane.” He wrapped his arm around her waist. “Literally insane. How was work?”

She relaxed against his lean body, looping her arms over his shoulders. “The usual. Oh, but I caught Starr trying to talk Meg into changing into a fish again. And Jared told Chris he really, really, *really* doesn't like Ali, which means of course he does, only she

likes Mason because he's got smaller ears apparently." She smiled. "The exciting lives of eight-year-olds. Aren't you glad you have your job and not mine?"

"Right now, I think I'd rather deal with the eight-year-olds." Josh sighed. He kissed the top of her head, breathing deeply to catch the scent of her hair. "Want to help distract me from my torment?"

As he rubbed the small of her back, Sara nuzzled against his chest. "Always. Are you thinking food distraction? You probably didn't eat at all today, did you? Or something a little more active?" Her mouth curled into a playful smile. "Or we can find a way to combine the two. That's always fun. And Cam isn't here to tell us we're being childish."

His stomach growled at the mention of food, and his cock stirred at her last suggestion. "Have I told you lately that I love the way you think?"

Laughing, Sara twined her fingers with his and pulled him to the doorway. "You need to tell me more. Compliments encourage me to stretch my imagination."

"Really?" he asked, following her into the hall. "In that case, let me also add that not only are you brilliant, you're captivating, fascinating and gorgeous."

"Now that's just sucking up. That's supposed to be my job."

Josh grinned. "It's only sucking up if it's not true, and I assure you, every word is the God's honest truth." He tilted his head, watching her hips sway as she walked. "Did I mention you have an excellent ass?"

Though she rolled her eyes, her light laughter drifted back to him, warming him through. He wondered if he'd ever get accustomed to hearing it. It was still fresh and new, and the twinkle in her eye was enough to make his stomach flip-flop.

When they reached the kitchen, Sara let go of his hand and headed straight for the refrigerator. "What're you in the mood for?" she asked, holding the door open to inspect its contents.

"Besides the obvious?" He settled in his typical spot, the barstool by the counter. She grinned at him over her shoulder in response. "Is there any of Cam's chili left?"

“Nope. I took it for lunch today.” She pushed aside the half-empty milk carton. “We’ve got squat. Unless you want a blue cheese and tuna omelette.” She opened the egg container. “Made with one egg.”

Josh grimaced. “Cam will be very disappointed if we can’t even feed ourselves while he’s away.”

“Cam should’ve left more leftovers for us before disappearing then.” Closing the fridge again, Sara opened the narrow drawer next to it, pulling out an array of brightly colored menus. “We need to celebrate anyway, don’t we? If you’re waiting on your email, that means all your work is done.”

His work was only finished if the email contained good news. But he didn’t want to think of the possible ramifications of bad news, so he nodded. “It’s unfortunate Cam can’t be here to celebrate with us, but...” He slid off the stool and wrapped his arms around her. “But I think we can make do.”

Sara folded her arm over his, flipping through the menus with her free hand. “Of course, we can. Plus, when Cam gets home, we get to celebrate again. Tell me that’s not a brilliant idea.”

“It’s a brilliant idea,” Josh agreed obediently. He kissed the side of her neck, pressing his mouth against her hot skin. He was almost overwhelmed by how good she felt against his body, overwhelmed by the way he could hold her and kiss her on a whim. But on the heels of that thought came a cold sliver of reality. One he couldn’t bear to acknowledge.

Sara sighed at the first touch of his mouth, tilting her head to offer him better access to the sleek line of her neck. Forgetting the menus, she reached around to run her hand along his hip, pulling him closer. “You’re going to stay in my room tonight, right?”

He didn’t know if he imagined the soft longing in her voice or not, but believing it was there prompted him to hold her even closer. “Of course. You know I don’t like leaving you.”

Twisting in his arms, she searched his face with such hope that even he couldn't deny it. "Then why go at all? You know you can move in with me and Cam whenever you want."

Josh didn't know how to explain the final barrier standing between them. Despite everything they had shared up to that point, it seemed too intimate, like taking the last step into their world. Moving in had been hard enough. This wasn't a step he knew how to take, or even if he should. Even if a part of him yearned to do just that.

"I want to. I've been wondering...what's going to happen now that I'm finished with my article."

"Are you planning on leaving?" Her voice was hushed, and her eyes burned into his. His chest tightened at what he thought he saw there, but just as quickly, he dismissed it.

"This was only supposed to be temporary. I have a job, I have more research, friends I left behind, a life I put on hold." He watched her deflate as he spoke, and his heart twisted painfully. "But I don't think of any of those things with any sort of desire. It all seems pretty insignificant now." He held her closer. "So I was planning to leave, but I'm going to put those plans on hold."

Sara buried her face in his neck. Her cheeks were hot against his neck, her mouth moving over the skin. "It wouldn't be the same around here without you," she breathed. "Our lives are so much better with you in them."

The feeling was more than mutual. This all was so impossible, but real. Perfect. "I wouldn't know what to do with myself if I left," he admitted. "It was lonely here today." He reached around her, grabbing the familiar orange menu from Jose's. "Can we get something from here?"

She let go enough to see which menu he'd picked up. "It'll take awhile for it to get here. That new driver is snail slow." Without looking back, she dropped her hand to toy at his waist, slipping beneath his shirt to delicately stroke his spine. "We'll have to find ways to entertain ourselves until he gets here."

He caught her chin, coaxing her to face him again. Her eyes were bright, her hair warm and soft where he slid his hand to her nape. Tilting his head, Josh teased her mouth

with his tongue, pulling back each time she attempted to deepen the caress. The line of his cock ground against her pussy, and somewhere in her throat, whimpers she couldn't contain echoed in his ears. Only then did he part his lips, capturing hers in a long and hungry kiss.

Josh broke away first and flashed a grin. "One more like that, and I'm going to forget about eating."

"Eating? What's that?" Her tongue dragged along his jaw, stopping to nibble at random spots as she moved down to the hollow of his throat. "So am I only good for distracting you from meals and keeping you from getting lonely?"

"Not just that. You did proofread my article, after all." He laughed when she nipped playfully at his neck. He wanted to tell her what she really did mean to him, but he wasn't sure how. Instead, he gripped her hips and lifted her onto the counter, freeing his hands so he could begin removing her shirt. He released the top two buttons, exposing the lacy top of her bra and the soft curve of her breasts. "But keeping me from getting lonely is worth a lot, you know. I was very lonely before I met you two."

"I hate thinking of you like that." Her nimble fingers traced his belt, freeing it without having to look away from him. "I can't imagine why someone like you would ever be lonely at all. I love spending time with you."

"Maybe I was just waiting to find you," Josh said solemnly.

Her hands paused on the buttons of his jeans. "Then I'm glad you did. This past year has been one of the best of my life."

Josh concentrated on her shirt, avoiding making eye contact. "Why? It's not as though you were really missing anything from your life before you met me." His blood thundered in his ears, and the query slipped out beyond his control. "Were you?"

"I didn't think I was. And I know Cam was happy with how things were. But it's like thinking your favorite food is apple pie your whole life, and then somebody gives you a slice of something you've never had before, like cherry, and you realize it's absolutely amazing, too." She ducked her head to force him to look at her. "You know this is more than just sex, right?"

“I know I want it to be more.” He braced himself against the counter, his hands on either side of her hips, locking her against him. “Honestly, I didn’t know if I should hope my article gets accepted or not. I was worried that if it did, it would mean all of this would be over.”

Her fingers cupped his face, pulling him down to meet her lips in a tender kiss. “It’s only over if you leave,” Sara murmured against his mouth. “And Cam and I don’t want that. There would be this huge hole in our lives where our best friend used to be.”

A loud chime came from his bedroom, and he knew it was his email notification. He also knew it could only be one thing. But he had no desire to leave her, and instead of hurrying to his laptop, he kissed her again. “Then I won’t leave.”

“Good.” Sara wrapped her arms around his neck, repeating the single word in between kisses, and for now at least, Josh understood.

Pushing her skirt up high over her thighs, he growled when his fingers brushed against the thin material of her pantyhose. He curled his fingers around the edge and gently pulled the nylons down, rolling them over her calves and off her toes. His fingers glided up her legs again, caressing the smooth, firm skin until he reached her thighs. As his hands moved over her, he slid his mouth down her jaw and neck, licking a path to her breasts. He scraped his tongue over her bra, teasing her until he felt her nipple harden against his lips.

Sara leaned back on her hands, eyes fluttering shut and then open again as Josh caught the taut bud between his teeth. “Did you decide you weren’t hungry for Jose’s anymore?”

He looked up at her through his lashes, pulling his mouth away from her long enough to say, “Not hungry for food, at any rate.”

She smiled. For the first time since he’d brought up the topic of the future, she looked like the carefree Sara who had brought so much light into his life. “And what if I am?”

Without looking away from her, Josh reached for the phone resting on the counter and slipped his hand under her skirt, his fingers sliding between her wet folds to stroke

her soft skin. He dialed the restaurant from memory, hesitating before hitting the last number. “The usual?”

“Yeah.” Though her gaze remained fixed on him, everything about her softened, wistful and intent as he placed the order. She squirmed against his gentle caresses but never said a word, not until he’d disconnected and returned his full attention back to her. “Why aren’t you going to check your email?” she asked.

“It’s not going anywhere,” Josh said, matching her soft tone. “Being here with you...it doesn’t really matter what that email says because...well, let’s just say that I realized it doesn’t seem like the most important thing in my life anymore.”

Her rapt attention didn’t fade as Sara reached out for him, but the way she curled her body around his forced Josh to abandon touching her pussy. Her breasts crushed to his chest, so close he was sure he felt her heart pounding beneath her skin.

“Let’s go in the bedroom,” she said. “I want to get you out of these clothes, and I want to feel you against me, and I want you to bury this beautiful cock of yours anywhere you’d like, and then everyplace else.” Her breath was sweet as she skimmed her lips over his. “I want you to know how important you are to *me*.”

Josh swallowed hard and nodded. He wrapped his arms around her, holding her tightly as he lifted her off the counter. He carried her into the bedroom she shared with Cam without speaking, but even when he lowered her to the bed, she didn’t loosen her grip on him. That was fine. He didn’t want to be separated from her by even an inch, for even a moment. He kissed her hungrily as he pressed her against the mattress, and she moved her hands down his body to push his pants away.

He busied himself with her bra, undoing the front clasp, but Sara curled her hand around his aching cock, distracting him from her breasts.

“Did Cam ever tell you how close we came to turning around and going back for you that first time you met him?” She pulled once and then swiped her palm over the wet tip. “I think we’ve always known you belonged here.”

“He told me once that you both wanted to, but he never told me how close you were,” Josh said, doing away with her skirt. Their shirts still hung from their bodies, but

he didn't care. He was throbbing with desire for her. "Did I ever tell you how close I came to following the two of you home?"

"You should have." Sara's eyes burned into his as she angled his cock downward, dragging the head across her wet folds. "We didn't even make it home before jumping each other. He fucked my ass in the backseat of the car, while I kept whispering to him what it would feel like when you finally fucked *his* ass."

Josh whimpered. The heat coming from her body was intense. "I definitely never heard that story before." He looked at her a little sheepishly. "I just went back to my room and jerked off." Unable to resist for another moment, he thrust into her, electricity rolling down his spine as she finally enveloped him. "Three times," he added hoarsely.

Her long legs wrapped around his hips, too powerful for him to fight against. She so rarely used her strength against him that Josh forgot just how strong she could be, but every time was like a special surprise, forcing him to walk a razor edge. Now he could only hold there, waiting for her to release him.

"Did you think you would be here almost a year later?" she whispered.

"Think it? I didn't even dare to hope for it," Josh whispered back. She relaxed slightly, giving him enough room to rock back and thrust forward again. He felt her power when they were this close, a sudden reminder she was different, not like him, or any other woman he had ever been with. This power, this strength, this unexpected rawness had frightened him in the very beginning, but now he welcomed it—it was familiar, and it was *her*, just one more reason to adore her. "Sometimes I still can't quite believe it."

"Believe," Sara said before devouring his mouth with hers.

Their bodies moved in a rhythm that always seemed to come naturally, finding the matching tempos without pause or hitch. Her wet heat welcomed him in, coaxing him to prolong the minutes they got to share, and by the time their mouths parted, each panting for breath, Josh wondered why they'd even bothered with the pretense of lunch.

Her hands smoothed over his back, slick from the sweat that had risen to the surface of his skin. "You know what I hope?"

Josh almost didn't hear her over the sound of his own ragged breath and the blood roaring in his ears. "What?" he asked, silently vowing to do whatever he could to make her unstated desire a reality.

Sara's eyes were luminous. "That you're still here a year from now..." she licked along the sharp edge of his chin, "...and two years from now..." the tip of her tongue tickled at the corner of his mouth, "...and for years and years after that."

Josh tilted his head, catching her mouth in a soft kiss. A million reasons why he couldn't stay in Delta crowded his mind—with just as many reasons why he couldn't leave Delta—and all of them were good, legitimate reasons. As he explored her welcoming mouth with the tip of his tongue, none of them mattered. Sara alone would be enough to keep him there.

"I hope so, too," he answered honestly against her lips.

The curve of her pleased smile was accompanied by the tightening of her muscles, around his back, around his cock, around everything. "You better," she teased. "Or else, Cam and I are going to have to go out and drag your ass back."

Josh knew that probably wasn't an idle threat. Sara wasn't big on saying things she didn't mean. "I never had anybody threaten to drag my ass anywhere, before." He lowered his head, sighing against her skin and allowing all the pleasure to simply roll through him. "You feel so good."

When he skimmed his mouth along the planes of her strong jaw, Sara shivered. "Obviously, nobody has ever loved you as much as I do then."

Josh froze, pulling back to study her face. There was nothing but sincerity in her eyes, and she'd delivered the sentiment in such a straightforward manner he knew he couldn't doubt her. "I... Jesus, Sara." She looked back at him, unwavering. Whatever had been blocking his feelings before was broken now, and the words came to him with an almost practiced ease. "I love you." He lowered his mouth to hers, saying the words again against her lips.

She eased her hold enough for him to start moving again, though this time, he didn't refrain from pouring his all into it, sliding out nearly all the way before thrusting back in

as deep as he could go. Whimpers rose in her throat as he caught her wrists and twisted them over her head. It pulled her breasts taut, and Josh used his free hand to pinch and pull at her nipple, but it only spurred Sara to push him harder, writhing beneath him as she swallowed each of his endearments.

Every movement she made—from arching her back to clenching around his cock to biting at his lips while he kissed her—sent chills down his back. She seemed to be consuming him with her body and her mouth. The chills multiplied, rolled down him in wave after wave, until every inch of his body vibrated. His fingers tightened around her wrist and she arched her back one more time, rising off the bed to match his final, hard thrust before he exploded inside her.

Sara remained still for long seconds after they came. It wasn't until Josh began raining kisses along her neck that a final, deep shudder wracked her body, and she broke free of his grasp to twine her arms around him and seek out his mouth with her own.

“Do you get it yet?” she said. “You can't go. You *have* to stay.”

“I get it,” he assured her. “I get it. How could I possibly leave now?” He rolled onto his back without breaking the contact, pulling her onto his chest. They were silent for several moments, enjoying the slow comedown, before he tentatively asked, “And does Cam...I mean, what does he...think?”

She drew lazy patterns along his skin. “About you, you mean?”

“Yeah. About me. About what you just told me.”

“He knows.” Lifting her head to look at him, Sara rested her chin on his chest. “I can't put words in his mouth, Josh. But I can promise you that he'd hurt just as much as I would if you weren't here.”

Josh nodded. He didn't expect Sara to be able to put words in Cam's mouth, but he was relieved Cam knew Sara's feelings—and he was relieved Cam appeared to have strong feelings, too. Josh's feelings for Sara were as straightforward as these sorts of things could be, but his feelings for Cameron seemed to be more complicated, if only because he had never been *this* close to another man.

“Think we should move my stuff in here before or after he gets back?” Josh asked.

Her blossoming smile was slow and brilliant. “After,” Sara said. “I want to see his face when you tell him you want to move in here. I want *you* to see his face. And then I want both of you in this bed with me, naked.”

“I mentioned today how brilliant I think you are, right?” He kissed her forehead and the doorbell echoed through the house. “And there’s our food. Nice timing. Do you want to go answer the door?”

Her answer was to roll off him and grab her robe from where it was thrown over the footboard. “You stay. I’ll bring everything in here.” She shot one last grin over her shoulder. “I want you to get used to that bed.”

Josh wanted to, but as soon as she was out of his sight, all of his nerves, excitement and fear from earlier roared back. He wrapped the sheet around his waist and hurried into his bedroom. He opened the laptop without sitting, refreshing his email one final time. Holding his breath, he opened it. And smiled.

* * *

Josh was pulled from his own mind by Sara shifting positions, a small moan escaping her throat. He tensed, his gaze darting to Cam, but the sleeping man was still dead to the world. She moved again, slowly swimming out of sleep. He took her hand, holding it lightly, wanting to tell her without words that he was there.

She turned towards him, her lashes fluttering open. Josh caught his breath as he looked into her dark brown eyes for the first time in two years.

For a moment, there was no response. She didn’t even blink.

Then a small line appeared between her brows.

“No...” It was barely a word, barely a breath, and her voice was rough from disuse. Her tongue darted out to moisten her dry lips, but it swept over the fullness as if in slow motion. “Please. Don’t do this.”

“Sara?” He said her name like he was testing it. “Don’t do what?”

His question seemed to alert her even more to her surroundings. She glanced down to look at their clasped hands, which brought Cameron's arm around her waist fully into view, and she tilted her head as her gaze followed it over her body.

Josh saw her tense the moment before she jerked as if electrocuted, catching her as she tore away from Cam's embrace with strength he didn't realize she had.

But he never anticipated her scream.

It was the sound of an animal in serious pain, or a terrified child. It was the sort of scream that echoed in his mind long after it faded from his ears. Acting without thought, Josh scrambled to his feet, wrapped his arms around her, and lifted her from the bed. He didn't know what was wrong with her; he only knew he had to get her away from whatever had prompted that horrible sound.

She didn't struggle against him or try to break away, but she didn't stop screaming either.

Until somewhere amidst the cries he caught her litany of denial, more of the *don't* and *please* he didn't understand. The back of his knees hit the other bed, and he sat heavily onto it, Sara still in his arms.

Cam had jumped from the bed, the sheets tangling around his legs, nearly sending him sprawling to the floor. He lurched towards them, and the closer he got, the more piercing Sara's denials became. Cameron looked worried, reaching out to touch her. The second his fingers landed on her shoulder, she became frantic. Josh nearly dropped her as she thrashed in his arms, her feet connecting with his shins, her fists landing on him and Cameron in turn.

"Get out of here," Josh shouted, recognizing the source of her anxiety even if he didn't understand why.

"I'm not leaving her," Cam growled. He tried to grab her wrist, but this time, her wild swing connected with his jaw, and the blow rang throughout the room.

"Don't touch me!"

Sara's hysterical tone drove Cam away. He stared at both of them in growing horror. "It's me—" he began, but when she buried her face in Josh's neck, he stopped, his throat working as if he was choking on the words.

Josh rubbed her back, trying to comfort her, but he knew only one thing would quiet her. Cam looked at him helplessly, and Josh wished he could say something, but he had nothing.

"Go," Josh said softly. "Go get her something to eat."

With a shaking hand, Cam picked up his wallet from where he'd dropped it on the desk. He didn't take his eyes off either of them as he backed out of the room.

As soon as the door clicked, she relaxed against him, but the fear still rolled off her in waves. "Shh. Sara. It's okay. Nobody is going to hurt you."

"Lies. Always lies. He always hurts me."

An icy hand gripped his heart. "No. No, Sara. Cameron would never..." She tensed again, arching away from him, and he realized he was going down the wrong path. "Okay, he's gone. We're alone now. Nobody is going to hurt you."

Her eyes were haunted when she finally lifted her head and looked at him. "That's what they always say. Why should I believe you now?"

Josh cupped her cheek. "Sara, it's me. It's *me*, Josh." She tried to turn away but he wouldn't let her. "No, please look at me. You're safe."

"There is no such thing as safe." It sounded like she'd been forced to memorize it. Her gaze slid sideways, and he knew she was contemplating something, but as long as she wasn't fighting him anymore, he didn't care how much thinking she did. Then her attention turned back to him, and a ghost of sly intelligence lurked in those brown depths. "If I'm safe," she said, choosing her words slowly, "then I'm not there. So tell me. Why would you drag my ass back?"

"Because nobody has ever loved you as much as I do," Josh whispered, knowing it was a lie but meaning it at the same time.

Her eyes widened, and in the second after, they welled with unshed tears. “Josh...” But no sound came out of her mouth, not even when she crumpled and buried her face in his neck.

Her tears wet his neck, and he shed a few of his own in sympathy. “Yeah, it’s me,” he said. “It’s me. It’s me.” Over and over, rocking her gently and praying she’d be better by the time Cam returned.

Chapter Four

Waking hadn't been the same.

The light had been different, for one. In spite of the basement's dark corridors, the rooms they always kept Sara in were brightly lit, too bright most of the time. There had been no stab through her eyelids when she'd woken up this time, and when she'd opened her eyes and been greeted by the soft shadows of Josh's face, she was convinced she was dreaming.

Those dreams turned very quickly into a nightmare when she saw the face of the man who held her close.

Instinct took over, and she battled as best she could, clinging to the one who at least hadn't hurt her yet. If that was their intention, if they wanted to catch her off guard to force her allegiance to a new captor, it succeeded, at least temporarily. She couldn't look at Cameron's face and not feel every burn and every cut and every shred of agony he'd inflicted over the past two years. She was half-convinced she would bleed just by his presence. She couldn't even think about relaxing until long after he'd gone.

Except...her captor wasn't what he appeared. Or rather, he was exactly as he appeared. For the first time in months, a faint glimmer of hope flared inside her heart. It blinked out almost immediately, of course, because hope was too fragile to risk revealing. They always used whatever chink they could find. Sara wouldn't be so foolish to hand over an opening even now.

It took repeating words back to her only Josh would know for hope to return. She searched his face, noting how he looked different than the dreams she'd concocted to save whatever humanity she had left. His brown hair was longer, the ends curling, and there was a scar snaking along his jaw, but stubble he had never worn before hid it mostly from view. The eyes, though...

The eyes were exactly the same.

She cried in relief. She cried in joy. She cried simply because she truly felt something other than anguish for the first time in a very long time. All the while, his reassuring hands never stopped stroking her back, and his voice stayed soft in her ear, and Sara thought she could stay like that forever.

But she didn't. Because the one lesson she had learned was that it was better to give something up rather than have it torn out of her bleeding hands.

She pulled back, reluctant to separate from his warm body. Lifting a hand to her face, she wiped away the last of her tears. "I'm sorry," she murmured.

"Don't. Don't apologize." Josh looked at her with glistening eyes. "Please don't apologize." He sniffed and wiped his nose, a gesture that made him look about five years old. "I was so..." His words faltered and he tightened his arms around her, like he was afraid she'd disappear.

With the rush of adrenaline now abating, Sara lacked the energy to resist his embrace, even though that was the farthest thing from her mind. She didn't remember his arms seeming so long before, and it took a few seconds of staring at them for her to realize Josh wasn't the one who had changed. She was thinner. There was less of her to hold. There was less of her everywhere.

She lifted her heavy head to look at him, and the sight of his reddened nose brought a ghost of a smile to her face. "You need a Kleenex. You look like one of my kids."

His smile matched hers, and he reached for a towel abandoned on the foot of the bed. He wiped his eyes and nose with a corner, then gently cleaned her face. Watching her carefully, he said, "Are you hungry? Cam went to get some food."

His words brought back the tension, erasing her lightening mood at the blink of an eye. "No. No...that was *Cam*?"

"It was." He frowned. "Who...who did you think it was?"

She shook her head. Talking about it was as bad as it seeing it. "I'm cold," she said, wrapping her arms around herself as her shivering grew worse.

Josh reacted immediately, reaching across the short space between the beds and pulling the ruffled blankets off the mattress. He wrapped them around her shoulders, engulfing her completely. "I'm sorry. Is that better?"

Sara nodded. It was only partially true. The heat that still warmed the fabric brought with it reminders of who she'd woken up next to, and she ducked her head, hoping Josh didn't notice the panic in her eyes.

"Sara..." He brushed his lips across her forehead. "I'll do anything I can for you. Would you like it if...you only shared this room with me?"

The possibility brought her more to life than anything else he'd said so far. It wasn't so much about not having to face those eyes as it was the implication the offer carried. "We're not...going home?"

"No, we can't right now, sweetheart. I want to take you home, but it might be too dangerous for awhile. So we're going to do a little traveling."

"We. You, me and..."

Josh looked ill for a moment before saying softly, "I'm not going to leave Cam behind. It's too dangerous. We'll work something out. We'll have separate hotel rooms. Get a second car, if you want. But we're all in this together, Sara."

"Are we?" The accusation came out without thought. "Where were *you* the past two years?"

All the color drained from his face as soon as she spoke, and his cheeks looked ashen and waxy. If she had struck him, he couldn't have looked more surprised. Or hurt. "I know that I...I let you down..." His mouth worked silently for a few moments before he found his voice again. "To put it mildly. But I'm not going to let anything else happen to you. I'm *not*."

"Don't make me face him then."

Josh swallowed. "You don't have to. But we will not leave him behind... He took you out of that place, which means they'll be after him, too."

It was a mild balm, but Sara nodded in agreement anyway. Her Josh wouldn't turn his back on Cam, either, and if she'd had any lingering doubts about whether or not it

was really him, this banished them. But that didn't make it any easier. It only raised more questions, crowding inside her already befuddled head.

"I thought... Who rescued me?"

"We both did. It was a two-man job. You know, I can't do the things he can do." Josh's voice faded on the final two words, and he looked at her like he was trying to work through a riddle. "Sara, why don't you want to see him?"

How could she possibly explain? Images too painful to process offered themselves, but that meant facing what she had finally escaped. "Do you know what they did to me?" she asked instead.

"No, I don't. And you don't have to talk about it now, or ever, if you don't want to. Just answer one question for me, okay? Did one of...them...look like Cam?"

Leave it to Josh to be smart enough to save her from having to say it out loud. Sara nodded, watching him carefully for his reaction.

The sadness in his eyes only deepened. "You don't have to see him. You don't have to do anything you don't want to do," he reassured her again, "but you do know our Cam...*your* Cam...would never hurt you. He's going to do anything he can to help you, too, and keep you safe."

Sara pulled the blanket more tightly around her. She heard the words, but it was hard to believe in them, no matter how much Josh might want her to. "I thought he was somebody else." She couldn't meet his eyes. "When I woke up. And all I wanted was to...get away. It's all I've ever wanted. To go home."

"I know. I know. I want to take you home. I promise I will as soon as it's safe. Tell me what you need. Are you thirsty?"

"No." She rested her cheek against his chest, breathing in his scent. "Because that means you're going to leave."

"I won't leave," he murmured. "I'll be here as long as you need me."

If he said it often enough, maybe sooner or later she could let herself believe it. Her hand ghosted over his chest, not quite touching, and she turned her head just enough to graze her lips along his shirt.

“Lie down with me?” Sara asked. “Please? I want to fall asleep without being forced to, and I want to wake up...and not be *there*.”

Josh nodded, turning to lower her to the mattress. He made sure the blankets were still covering her before lying on his side beside her and pulling her against him. It seemed like he was touching every inch of her, gently warm and familiar. He even smelled right. He put his arm around her protectively, and positioned his other arm to pillow her head.

“Are you comfortable?”

“Yeah.” With her last ounce of energy, she snuggled deeper into his arms, already welcoming the thick cloud looming on the horizon. “The only thing that would make this better is being in our own bed.”

She was asleep before he had time to respond.

* * *

Part of Cam knew he should be out getting the food Josh had instructed him to retrieve, but the force of Sara’s screams had kept him glued to the door, his hand on the knob as he fought every instinct he had not to break it down and go back inside. She was in pain. She needed him. Nobody understood Sara like he did, not even Josh.

It had been easier to stave off the urges after hearing the fear in her voice when Josh brought him up. She couldn’t even say his name. Sara. Didn’t want to see Cam.

Because she thought he would hurt her?

He loved her. The only thing that had gotten him through the past two years without her was having Josh at his side, having someone with him who loved Sara as much as he did, who was as determined to get her back as he was. It was inconceivable that she could ever doubt Cam or his intentions. The one thing they had always treasured was how much they understood each other, without having to speak or offer explanations.

The bastards who had ripped her away from them had destroyed far more than he had imagined. The vengeance that had burned in his gullet since finding her surged anew.

When the door opened, he was sitting on the floor next to it, his head buried in his hands. He didn't look up, but instead blinked away his tears and asked, "Is she asleep again?"

"Yeah." Josh slid down the wall, sitting beside him. "It didn't take her long to drop off once she laid down."

"Once you laid down with her, you mean."

"Yeah. I guess you heard everything."

Cam snorted. "She was screaming down the building, Josh. It was kind of hard not to."

"I mean the parts she wasn't screaming," he said softly.

His head was pounding. "For what she was saying, she might as well have been."

Josh put a comforting hand on Cam's thigh, but otherwise, they weren't touching. "We just need to give her some time."

Time. Two years of their lives, dark and desolate and desperate, should have been enough. All his Pollyanna comments to Josh before she'd awakened, that she was alive, that all that mattered was she was with them now, made Cam want to retch. It wasn't all that mattered. It was so far from all that mattered that he couldn't see it anymore.

"How can she hate me?" he wondered aloud. His voice was rough from the tears that still wanted to come. God, he was so fucking tired of crying. He had actually believed it was all behind them now. "How could she ever think I'd do *anything* to hurt her?"

"She doesn't hate *you*, Cameron. Not really. Somebody who looked like you hurt her very badly, and right now, the very large part of her mind dedicated to self-preservation can't tell the difference. They've conditioned a certain reaction from her that has nothing to do with you," Josh pointed out. "I know how much this must...hurt..."

"Do you?" He finally lifted his head, meaning to glare at Josh in fury, but the first sight of his lover's swollen face tamped the rage. Sara hadn't been the only one crying inside. Cam took a deep breath and tried again. "She asked you to hold her, and what did she ask from me?" His voice grew bitter. "'Don't make me face him.' Yeah, you really understand what I'm going through right now."

Josh's cheeks turned a bright red, and his eyes flamed. "Do you think I'm happy about this, Cam? Do you think every second in there wasn't killing me? You belong in there. More than I do. And we both know it. How do you think it makes me feel to soothe her to sleep, knowing the entire time that you're out here, hurting just as much as she is? Knowing there's nothing...nothing I can do..."

Cam gripped Josh's arm, heedless of his strength. "Help me get her to understand. Don't let her shut me out."

"You know I'll do everything I can," Josh said, the anger suddenly gone from his voice. "I think making her understand I'm not leaving you, and that you helped with the rescue, is a step in the right direction. The safer she feels, the easier it'll be."

"She was fine with me when she was asleep. She knew me then. She let me hold her without a problem." With a fresh burst of hope, he reached for his wallet and tossed it into Josh's lap. "You go get something for us to eat. I'll go back inside and slip in next to her."

Josh grabbed his shoulder and pushed back against the wall with surprising strength. "No. Are you crazy? If she wakes up and you're in there, it'll ruin everything. She'll panic and she won't trust me anymore. I *promised* her she wouldn't have to see you. It's horrible, but there it is. Right now, we have to do our best not to upset her further, or give her any reason to doubt me."

In his heart, Cam knew he was right. Somehow, the thought doubled his pain. "So you can see her, and I can't. You get to hold her, and all I have are memories. You get to talk to her, and I get to remember her screams." He sagged against the wall. "How? Tell me how I can do this, Josh. Because I don't have the foggiest clue."

"Maybe for now, I'll worry about taking care of her, and you focus on finding out who did this. Whoever it was, they have a shapeshifter working for them. Or maybe they're all shifters. And they know what you look like, apparently well enough to trick the person who knows you better than anybody."

So caught up in his own hurt, Cam had completely forgotten about how such conditioning could've been possible with Sara. Another shifter. It was hard to believe that

in their small numbers, one would turn against another in such an awful way, but it was the only explanation for what had happened to Sara. For what purpose, though, remained a mystery.

Josh had given him exactly what he needed, just like he had every time over the past two years when the need had arisen. The ache was still there, and there it would remain until he could hold Sara, and kiss her, and tell her he loved her without seeing terror in her eyes, but he could ignore it if he concentrated on the one emotion burning even hotter. His anger.

Settling his hand over Josh's, Cam squeezed it, grateful when the other man tightened his fingers and returned the gesture. "Do you think she's really going to be all right? None of this is worth it if they've stolen her spirit from her."

"I think she's going to be all right. I do. I saw a few hints of her old self, and she does know who I am. That's definitely a step in the right direction. She's going to be herself again, someday. She is." He picked up Cam's wallet. "If you promise to stay out here and wait for me, I'll go get some food and take care of everything else."

Cam shook his head. He hadn't even been able to get away from the door; without Josh around to stop him, he couldn't promise he'd be able to stay away from Sara, even if it was in her best interest. "We look like shit anyway," he said. "Unless you're starving, I say we wait. Let her sleep." He paused. "We have to get another room for me. And move my stuff out."

Josh pushed himself to his feet slowly and then offered his hand to Cam. "Why don't you go get your room and I'll get your stuff? She'll probably be asleep for awhile, if you don't want to be alone. I don't think she's had any real rest in a very long time."

Cam accepted the help to his feet. He didn't want to be alone, but the thought that Sara might wake up and find herself without even Josh around was even more painful. Tugging on Josh's hand, he pulled him against his body and held him close, kissing the soft spot below Josh's ear.

“Only for a few minutes,” he said. “Just enough for you to tell me whatever you can about how you found Sara. She’s been alone for too long. I don’t want her to be alone again.”

Josh leaned against him for a moment. “I don’t want her to be alone either. But I hate to leave you, too.” Taking a deep breath, he stepped away. “So we better hurry.”

Cam nodded and watched him slip back into the room. There had been plenty of purpose over the past two years, months spent in resolute searching as they fought to find the woman they both needed, and there was still purpose now. The hunt for whoever had done this. The need to return Sara to health. But for the first time in two years, he was floundering. They were a family, him and Josh and Sara. They had always worked best together. In fact, Sara’s forced absence had only driven Josh and Cam closer.

Now it was different. Josh and Sara on one side. Cam on the other. For the first time, he was terrified his worst nightmare might come true, in spite of Josh’s assurances to the contrary.

He could lose both of them.

His steps were heavy as he headed toward the lobby.

Chapter Five

Josh paused to watch Sara sleep, Cam's bag hanging heavily over his shoulder. She didn't stir, but she looked different than before. This was a deep, but healthy, sleep without the weight of sedatives. She looked small and lonely on the large bed, nothing visible except her lax face. She needed Cam, whether she knew it or not.

Reassured she'd be fine, he stepped into the hallway as Cam returned from the lobby.

"Were you able to get a room close by?"

Cam merely nodded and walked several feet down the hall. There was one room between them, but Josh supposed they were lucky he wasn't on an entirely different floor. Cam wordlessly unlocked the door and took the bag from Josh's shoulder. Josh waited for him to say something, anything, but his eyes were distant. He just dropped his bag and collapsed on the corner of his single bed, hunched over with his forearms on his knees as he stared at the carpet between his feet.

"I'm going to have to check on her, but I'll come back when I can," Josh promised.

Another nod. "Take as much time as you need. The important thing is Sara knows she's being taken care of." Cam paused, passing a weary hand over his eyes. "If you're okay with it, I think I'll drive back to Delta this afternoon. The sooner we have our stuff, the better."

Josh blinked. "This afternoon? I know we agreed you should go pick some things up, but I didn't think you'd be leaving so soon."

"What else am I going to do? Sit around and wonder what you two are doing?" He shook his head. "This is better. If I'm not here, I'm not...tempted."

I can't do this by myself. But he knew even if it were true, it wouldn't be enough for Cameron right now. Josh hesitated at the door, the need to go two different directions

leaving him frozen. Sara needed him, but Sara was asleep, her body desperate for rest and quiet. Cam needed him, too. He shut the door behind him and joined Cam on the bed.

Though he didn't lift a hand, Cam leaned until their shoulders touched. The simple contact bolstered Josh's flagging spirits. "I'll probably be gone until tomorrow," Cam said. "You should start looking for a short-term lease as soon as you can. Tell people it's a corporate rental and use my business name instead of any of ours. That should make it a little harder for us to be found."

Josh nodded. "Are you going to take the car or get a rental?"

"I'll take the car. We don't want people back home wondering why I might be in a rental if they see me." He finally looked up; Josh would have sworn the lines around his eyes had deepened in the last hour. "A shifter hurt her, Josh. We can't trust anybody, not even the people in Delta."

Josh heard how lost Cam felt. The people in Delta weren't just his neighbors; they were his family. He had grown up with them, Sara taught their children, and they stuck together. Somebody had betrayed the implicit trust in their small, but strong, community. Cam didn't need this blow on top of everything else. Cam needed to know that despite everything, he wasn't alone. He would *never* be alone.

Josh tilted his head and pressed his mouth against Cam's in a soft kiss, his hand sneaking up to grip Cam's shirt so he couldn't pull away.

Cam didn't so much respond as he sighed into the caress. Beneath his hand, Josh felt a ripple shudder through the other man's chest, and then Cam reached to cup the back of Josh's neck, holding their mouths together. It never moved beyond a tender exploration, but when the kiss finally ended, Cam leaned his brow against Josh's.

Josh ran his hand over Cam's hair, down his neck, and over his shoulder, pulling him closer. There were so many things to say, so many things Cam needed to hear, but he didn't know where to begin. So he kissed Cam's chin, his jaw, his cheek, his neck, and gently pushed him backwards.

The soft breath flowing over Josh's skin was the only sound Cam made as he tentatively returned the caresses. The hand that had gripped the back of his neck now

skimmed over Josh's back, mapping out the flex of each muscle as he moved down Cam's body. Even when he was beyond reach, Cam simply shifted his touch to Josh's arm, pulling just enough to coax him more fully onto the bed.

Josh sat up on his knees, freeing his hands to push Cam's shirt out of the way and unzip his pants. He knew he didn't have anywhere near enough time to do this right, but he wasn't going to stop now. He ran his palms down Cam's muscled chest and over his ribs, seeking out as much contact as he could get. His gaze darted to Cam's, trying to gauge his reaction, but the other man's eyes still seemed distant, his touch tentative.

"Oh, Cam," Josh breathed, before leaning forward to draw his mouth down Cam's body.

The stomach muscles contracted beneath his lips, and a sound that was half-whimper, half-cry was strangled from Cam's throat. When Josh glanced up his body, he saw Cam squeeze his eyes shut, the lashes wet, but still, no words came. He only reached to curl fingers into Josh's hip, dragging his body across the shiny surface of the comforter and toward Cam's turned head.

Josh settled on his side next to Cam, their legs entwining. His hands were still busy seeking out Cam's warm skin while he peppered Cam's face with soft kisses. Cam clutched him tightly, turning his head to seek out his mouth. This kiss was much deeper, longer, tinged with desperation as salty as Cam's skin.

Cam took him by surprise by pressing Josh back into the mattress, rolling on top to grind their hips together. Without stopping the kisses, his hand snaked between their stomachs, searching for the button of Josh's jeans, and as soon as the denim was out of the way, he pushed down the waistbands of their underwear in order to grasp both cocks in one, trembling grip.

Josh lifted his hips, his cock sliding against Cam's smooth shaft. He welcomed Cam's weight pressing him against the mattress, feeling almost comforted by the new position. But he didn't need to be comforted; this wasn't supposed to be about him. He wrapped his arm around Cam and thrust forward, building friction between their bodies.

With ragged breaths, Cam broke from Josh's mouth, staring down at him in unabashed need. "You and Sara are all I have. I can't lose you."

Josh didn't look away from the intensity of Cam's gaze. "You won't, Cameron. I need you too much." He kissed the corner of Cam's mouth. "And she does, too."

Cam tightened his hold on their cocks, though his strokes remained long and slow. "You'll tell her how much I love her?"

Josh nodded. "I'll tell her. I won't let her forget *you*, Cam. I won't let her forget everything you mean to each other."

"To both of you." He captured Josh's lips in a lingering kiss, whispering against his mouth, "Family. All three of us. Together no matter what."

"Family," Josh agreed. "No matter what." He reached between their bodies, his hand covering Cam's, encouraging him to quicken his pace. The added pressure against their cocks prompted a sigh from both of them. "Hurry back. I'll worry while you're gone."

But Cam seemed to be done with talking, his mouth hungry as it returned to Josh's. His thumb passed over the wet tips on each stroke now, slicking the shafts just enough to allow a swifter tempo. It was almost frantic, accompanied by the uneven jerks of his hips. When his body stiffened, his come splashing hot on Josh's belly, Josh almost lost the rhythm for his own release.

The orgasm wasn't earth-shattering; Josh received the most satisfaction from seeing a spark of light return to Cam's eyes. Cam fell forward, stealing one more moment of intimacy, one more spark of warmth before they were forced apart. Josh held him, enjoying the warmth of his breath against his cheek.

But Josh couldn't stay and enjoy it. He gently freed himself from Cam's embrace and rolled off the bed. Cam didn't move at first, even as Josh wiped his stomach clean and zipped his pants.

"I'm not going to stay in Delta long," Cam said. Sitting up, he pulled off his shirt and used it to clean away the come on his hand and chest. "Just long enough to get what we're going to need and maybe talk to a few people."

Josh wiped his hand over his face. “What we’re going to need? Cam, what do we need? How do you decide what we need when we don’t even know what the hell we’re doing?”

“But we know what we’re doing.” Rising to his feet, he grabbed the back of Josh’s neck and pulled him close for a hard kiss. “We can’t take Sara home, so we’re bringing home to her. Make me a list. I don’t want to forget anything.”

“So if you forget something it’s my fault?” Josh teased. “Who are you going to talk to while you’re there?”

Cameron seemed to have found a new resolve and tossed the shirt aside as he headed for the bathroom. “I thought Sammie Jo first. She knows more about shifters outside of Delta than anybody I know. Maybe she can point us in a new direction.”

“Sounds like a good start,” Josh agreed. “I’ll wait until you get out.”

Cam nodded and shut the door behind him. Josh stood in the middle of the room for a second, trying to pull his thoughts together. Bringing home to her? How can one narrow a home, a life, down to just enough to carry in the back of a car?

The phone in his hip pocket rang, distracting him from his task. At first, he wanted to ignore it, but few people had his cell number—and most of those were friends or family he needed to contact anyway. The familiar name on the caller ID almost made him smile.

“Hey, JD.” He thought it was a little early for her to call, but knowing JD, she might not have gone to sleep at all the night before.

“Josh? Oh, I was worried about you.”

Josh frowned. “What? Why?”

She paused. “I just meant that I tried to call you last night. At home. But there was no answer. It’s not like you to stay out all night.”

“Why were you trying to call? Is something wrong?” It wasn’t unlike her to call him once or twice a month, but she rarely called their home number.

“Nothing’s wrong,” JD assured him quickly. “I just...I just wanted to talk to you last night. You know, one of our late-night bitch sessions. When was the last time we had one of those?”

“It’s been awhile. You’re sure everything is okay, though?”

“Everything’s fine now, Josh. Really. What’s up with you?”

Josh sat on the edge of the bed and reached for the message pad by the phone.

“Something unexpected happened last night. I’ve been called out of town.”

The announcement was met with silence.

“JD? You still there?”

“Is something wrong? Where are you now?”

“No...no, it’s nothing. I’m just not going to be online. And I may not always be accessible by phone either.”

More silence. Josh let it stretch for several seconds before adding, “I’m sorry I can’t tell you more right now.”

“But are you okay?” JD asked. “I mean, you sound tired. And let’s face it, Josh, it’s not like you to be away from your computer for longer than ten minutes at a time.”

“I’m fine. I promise. I’m just saying, don’t be surprised if you don’t see me for awhile.”

JD sighed. “I understand. But...it’s going to be weird, you know? You’re the only one who understands what a psycho Dr. Rich is.” Josh smiled. Their shared nemesis since their first year in graduate school, their hatred for that man alone bonded them in a lifelong friendship. “I always thought once we finished our dissertations, we’d get free of that man. He is making me insane, Josh. Every day, I’m a little bit closer to snapping, I swear to God.”

“I’ll call you if I can,” Josh said. “But I can’t make any promises.”

“Try to, please. I worry about you, you know. Living in Delta...”

Josh sighed. It didn’t matter how many times he told JD he was perfectly safe and happy in Delta, she never quite believed him. “I will. I’ve got to go now.”

“Don’t forget to take care of yourself. I know you. You’ll get distracted by whatever is going on and make yourself sick.”

“I won’t,” he said softly. “Bye.”

Josh turned the phone off before slipping it into his pocket. He didn't want it to ring again while Sara was trying to sleep, or worse, when she was awake. He needed to give her as much of his attention as he could. The overwhelming task of curing her would be on him, at least in the short-term.

Refocused by that thought, Josh began writing his list.

* * *

As the picture faded to black, he didn't even blink. "Again."

The gaunt man seated next to him glanced sideways for the briefest of moments before his knobby fingers typed in the commands on the keyboard. The monitor stayed black for several seconds before the hum of electricity came through the small speakers and the room appeared on the screen again. Perspective came from the camera mounted in the ceiling corner near the doorway, and for the first time, Nolan regretted not approving the funding for the sound to be added to the picture. Because as he watched the man and the shapeshifter enter the room, he would have killed to know what it was they were saying.

It played out exactly as it had the first half-dozen times he'd watched. The man entered first, the gun that had killed Eddie still dangling from his hand. Then came the dog, pushing past the man, shifting to human form as he crossed the room to the bed. They spoke for a few moments over her unconscious body, and then the shapeshifter tore the manacles away like they were tissue paper, they stole the guards' clothes and carried the girl out. The sole purpose for the last four years of Nolan's professional career. Gone.

The pencil in his hand snapped with a sharp crack. All he had was a surveillance tape and bloody paw prints going up the basement stairs. Any clues where they might have gone disappeared as soon they exited the house.

Gone.

Without the girl, Nolan would be crucified. His boasts had been many, but his results few, and without the means to step up his experiments, he was going to look like a fool when asked to prove his findings. He would be shuttled out to the most inane of projects,

and everything he had worked for would disappear. Worse, somebody else might try to pick it up and get the credit he deserved.

That was unacceptable.

The technician looked at him expectantly, his fingers poised over the keyboard. Nolan nodded and focused on the monitor yet again.

He'd find her. He had no other choice. And maybe this time, he'd take both of the animals. Having two shapeshifters to study would halve his efforts.

He smiled. These creatures weren't smart enough to outrun him for long.

He would find them both.

Chapter Six

The first hint of nightmares drove Sara awake. The dreams were common enough—she'd had them often while in captivity—but always, she had fought against them, hating that she couldn't wake up when she so desperately wanted to, hating that they forced her to live through them night after night after night. So when the shadows began to creep into her deep sleep, Sara did what she always did when they came. She fought back.

The difference was...this time, she woke up.

Her eyes shot open. She saw the orange glow filtering around the edges of the closed curtains first. In the dark room, it made the window pulse with life, and she had to blink several times, staring at it in confusion, before she remembered where she was.

Josh had come. He'd gotten her out of there. Josh and...

Her throat tightened, and for a brief moment, Sara squeezed her eyes shut again. It was still too hard to think about him, even if Josh insisted he would never hurt her.

Gradually, she became aware of the lean arm wrapped around her waist. Her heart thudded as she risked glancing over her shoulder, afraid of whose face she was going to see. The sight of Josh's long lashes, smudges against his cheeks as he slept behind her, made her exhale in relief. He had stayed. He had kept his word and he hadn't left.

The urge to kiss and touch him was great, but Sara was paralyzed by fear. Fear of overstepping bounds, fear of his response, fear of waking him when he was so obviously tired. Even in the dim light, the shadows under his eyes were visible. Better to let him rest. There was no telling what the night held for them.

Lifting his arm as gently as she could, Sara slipped out from Josh's hold and off the bed, her gait wobbly as she headed for the bathroom. It was odd how liberating it was to go to the bathroom of her own free will, without the need for begging for permission, without the shame when permission was denied. By the time she reached the dark

doorway, her legs were a little more solid, and she groped for the light switch with an ounce more bravery.

The woman who greeted her when she found it made Sara's blood run cold.

She stared at her reflection in the long mirror over the sink. That wasn't her. That was a ghoul, a gaunt shadow of her previous self. Her pale skin molded over bones she shouldn't have been able to see, and scars riddled her abdomen, reminders of only a few of the "exercises" she'd been forced into. Strands of gray shot through her hair, and it hung to her waist, thick and untamed though mercifully clean. That had to be Josh's doing. Hygiene wasn't a top priority with her captors.

What frightened her the most, however, was her face. She didn't know it. Her already high cheekbones were even more pronounced, as was her strong jaw. Her mouth looked swollen without the balance of some of the fullness in her cheeks, but the eyes looking back at her made Sara want to smash the mirror. They were dead.

But she wasn't. She wasn't. As she watched, the eyes grew wet and shiny, and Sara stretched a trembling hand toward the cold glass, as if touching her counterpart would make it disappear like it was a reflection on the surface of a shimmering pond.

"Sara," Josh said softly from the door. When she didn't look away from the mirror, he stepped behind her, putting a gentle hand on her hip. She expected to see the same horror she felt in his eyes, but they were soft as he studied her reflection, his face lined with concern.

"How can you look at me?" she whispered.

He traced her face with his other hand, his fingers tenderly caressing her cheek. "Because you're my girl. Because I've spent the last two years hoping and praying for the chance to see your beautiful face again."

Her lip quivered, and she tilted her head into his touch. "You always did wear rose-colored glasses. I think I'm a little grateful for that right now."

"No. I can see you clearly, Sara." He slid his hand from her hip, wrapping his arm around her waist. "And a part of me still can't believe you're really here."

“It has to be real.” She ran a hand over her hair. “I wouldn’t look like the corpse bride if one of us was dreaming.”

“Oh, I don’t know.” The corner of his mouth lifted. “I always thought the corpse bride was quite attractive.”

Sara lifted her gaze to meet his in the mirror. She saw nothing but warm appreciation in his eyes, and in spite of how odd it was to see the changes in his features, it was far better than witnessing the ones in hers. Reaching again for the mirror, though this time with a surer hand, she ran her fingertip over the reflection of his scar. “What’s this?”

“I was in a car accident.” Her eyes widened and he added, “A minor one. Everybody walked away in one piece. And it was the other guy’s fault.” His fingers traced the scar that spanned the narrow width of her abdomen. “What’s this?”

She couldn’t help it. She flinched. Josh immediately retracted his hand, and though he covered it quickly, she caught the hurt look in his eyes. The last thing she wanted was to be the source of his pain, so she swallowed the terror that welled inside to give him the answer he sought.

“They cut me open,” Sara admitted. “Near the beginning. They thought it was impossible for me to look human on the inside, too, and they didn’t trust their x-rays.” She swallowed the bile burning in the back of her throat. “They wanted to see it with their own eyes.”

“Sara. There’s one thing...I need to know, but I don’t want to ask. So, I apologize...believe me, Sara, I’m so sorry about this. But while...while you were gone, did they ever...” His lips thinned and he took a deep breath. “Did they ever...were you sexually assaulted?”

The notion was so ridiculous that she wanted to laugh. It was the stricken look on Josh’s face, though, that held it back.

“Look at me.” She said it, even though it was the very last thing she wanted. “I wasn’t human to them, let alone a woman. The only way the doctor ever touched me was to poke or prod or cut or stick me with a needle. And the only way Cam—the other one touched me, was to hurt me. So, no. I wasn’t. Not sexually.”

“Jesus Christ,” Josh whispered. His hand tentatively returned to her hip. “I’m sorry, Sara. I shouldn’t have asked.”

“But you wanted to know.” Or maybe he didn’t. Maybe she’d lost the ability to read him. Maybe they’d both changed so much that she couldn’t trust anything she thought she knew anymore. “Did you bring clothes for me?” she asked, changing the subject. If neither of them could see the scars, it might be easier not to wince every time they looked at each other.

“Yeah, we brought a bag. Cam left earlier to go back to Delta and gather the rest of your belongings. Come on,” he said, turning her to the door, “why don’t you pick something out and we can go get dinner?”

Sara hesitated. “You want me to go out? Isn’t that dangerous?”

“I want you to get something to eat, and I don’t think it’s healthy for you to be cooped up in this hotel room. I don’t think it’s dangerous. The diner is just across the parking lot, and I don’t think anybody followed us.”

She didn’t want to do it. Everything inside her crawled with terror, mostly at the prospect of venturing somewhere where they could get to her again. Staying inside, staying hidden, that was how she would survive.

On the other hand, she had been locked inside for what felt like an eternity. She wanted to breathe fresh air, and she wanted to see the sky. And she had Josh at her back, strong and sure, ready to protect her as he’d promised. It was just a meal. She would eat quickly.

Sara let Josh guide her to the outer room, watching as he placed a suitcase she didn’t recognize on the other bed. He stepped back to allow her room to look through it at her leisure, and she lifted the lid with nervous fingers. The sight of her favorite skirt quickened her breath, but as she started to pull it out, she paused.

“I’m not sure they’ll fit me. Apparently, the kidnapping diet works wonders.”

“Put it on,” Josh prompted. “We’ll make do for now, and later we can go shopping. I know we passed a mall not too far from here.” When she still hesitated, he took a step

forward. "I know all of this is hard for you, Sara. But I promise you, it's not going to be easier to hide in here."

"But if we're not going home, aren't we hiding anyway?"

Josh smiled. "Well, you've got me there. But I propose that we take small steps for now. Ease ourselves back into our own lives. And the first small step will be enjoying a bowl of soup and a cup of coffee."

Her mouth watered at the mention of coffee, and Sara plucked out the garments she needed without any further pause. She dressed as quickly as she could manage, fumbling only a few times with clumsy fingers and awkward fits, until she stood there with the skirt swirling around her legs and her blouse hanging loose from her shoulders.

"Does it look all right?" she asked, fidgeting with the fabric. Fishing for compliments had never been her style, but right here, right now, she needed to believe for a few minutes that it didn't appear as bad as she thought it did.

"It looks better than all right," he assured her, reaching for his jacket to drape over her shoulders. "It's probably getting a bit warmer out there now, but it was really chilly this morning."

It wasn't until they had stepped outside of the hotel and she saw the neon twinkling in the distance that Sara realized where she was. "Don't tell me I was in Vegas this entire time."

"No. You were much further north, in the middle of the desert. We thought Vegas was our best short-term option. We're going to find an apartment. I was just going to use the newspaper and make some calls, but if you'd like, we can go out and find one you like sometime."

He was using that word again. We. All three of them. The way it used to be. Except nothing was the way it used to be.

Sara hugged the jacket closer around her thin frame. "No basements," she said, but his smile at her small joke faded when she added, "We can't get two?"

"Would a two-bedroom place be an acceptable compromise?"

"Are you really going to give me a choice?"

Josh didn't answer immediately. "Cam will agree to anything that you like. If you want him to be in an entirely different apartment, he won't put up a fight. But you don't want to talk to him, and I don't think I can be the one to send him away."

He held the diner door open for her, allowing Sara to enter first, but his hand returned to the small of her back almost immediately, and it stayed there while the hostess led them to a corner booth. Sara slid onto her seat, shivering at the cold vinyl, and waited silently while the menus were placed in front of them. She didn't say a word until the waitress left them alone again.

"I trust you, Josh. What do *you* want?"

He studied the cover of his menu like it held the answers he needed. "If we can find a sufficiently large apartment or house that allows you the space you need, we'll do that. If we can't, then we'll...we'll find a second apartment."

It would do. Tentatively, she dropped her hand between their bodies and settled it on his thigh. "Thanks. I know...I know what you said. About him, and...how he feels. I know this isn't easy for you."

He covered her hand with his and squeezed her fingers. "No, it isn't easy. But it's just one of the many sacrifices I'm willing to make to have you here and safe."

She did it on a whim, probably because he looked so devastatingly sincere, and she was so hungry for real human contact, and for a host of other reasons. But without thinking, Sara stretched sideways and brushed her lips across his cheek, catching the corner of his mouth for more than a moment.

Josh froze. His eyes were closed and his lips were parted slightly. When he looked at her again, his eyes seemed a little unfocused. "Your lips feel the same," he said.

She ran her tongue over her lower lip. "And you still taste the same."

Josh was saved from answering by the appearance of their waitress. "Hi, guys. Can I get you anything to drink?"

"Two coffees," Josh said, without looking from Sara.

"Okay, anything else? Or do you need a few more minutes?"

"A few more minutes, please."

“Can I see if you still taste the same?” he asked, once they were alone again.

The fact that he thought enough to ask first made her heart swell. “Please,” Sara whispered and held her breath while she waited.

Josh mimicked her, his mouth brushing across her cheek to linger a moment on the corner of her lips. He pulled back, licking his lips thoughtfully, “Yeah, it’s still the same.”

The inside of her cheek was tingling from the contact, and her gaze fell to his mouth, memories of how many times she’d lost herself in it superseding any from her captivity. “Do I look greedy if I ask for another?”

“Not greedy.” He tilted his head again, pressing a gentle kiss to her lips. He didn’t linger, and it was almost chaste, except his mouth was against hers for a second too long. “I think I’m the greedy one.”

Sara’s head was spinning. She had gone so long with only pain for company that this solicitude was undoing her, second by second. Still, she managed to swallow once, and ask, “Why do you say that?”

“Because I want one more,” he said, caressing her mouth once more with his. And that’s all it was. The softest caress, a whisper of contact. He was still holding her hand, his fingers warm and strong around hers.

“God, I’ve missed you,” Sara breathed. “I don’t think I knew how much until now.”

Josh touched his forehead to hers. “I missed you, too. I am so sorry, Sara. I’m sorry I didn’t find you sooner.”

“Are y’all ready to order now?” the waitress asked, her voice startlingly loud, as she set the coffee in front of them.

Josh pulled away from Sara with some hesitation and glanced up, his smile pleasant with no signs of the frustration she thought he must have been feeling—the frustration she was feeling herself.

“What’s your soup today?”

“The kitchen just made a batch of chicken noodle. And we have some clam chowder, too.”

“Can we get a bowl of each, please? And a cheeseburger.”

“Want fries with that?”

“Yeah. That’d be great.”

The waitress jotted all of it down, gathered up their menus and bustled away. Josh smiled wryly. “I hope by making a batch she doesn’t mean just heating up one of those giant cans.”

It was easy to match his grin. “Hell, we could’ve done that,” she teased. “Unless you’ve managed to learn how to cook while I’ve been gone.”

“I’ve actually had a few lessons, and expanded my catalogue to include several types of pasta, a variety of egg dishes, and I’m quite good with a barbecue. Not to mention the fact that I’ve perfected the meals I was already quite good at. Nobody makes a better tuna salad sandwich than yours truly,” Josh said with genuine pride in his voice. “As soon as we get settled, I’ll make one for you.”

Cooking. The car accident. What else had happened to him while she’d been gone? How much had she missed? Her smile faded a little, but she kept her hand on his leg, spreading her fingers to touch even more of him. “Make me one of your fried peanut butter and banana sandwiches, and we’ll call it good. Though I might have to work up to fried food.”

“I’ll make you a fried peanut butter and banana sandwich every morning, if you’d like.” Josh sipped from his coffee, watching her over the brim of his cup. “What did they feed you?”

“Basic stuff. Soups. Sandwiches. A lot of vitamins.” She snorted. “Well, they told me they were vitamins, at least.”

Josh frowned thoughtfully. She recognized that look from a long time ago, when they first met. It meant he was storing the details in his mind, wishing he had his notebook, and preparing to analyze and reorder everything until it made sense.

“But not often. Just enough to keep you alive? I wonder if they were worried about administering an accidental overdose when they gave you the sedatives. That’s a risk,

especially since..." His eyes caught hers and he looked away quickly. "Sorry. I didn't mean..."

Sara squeezed his leg in what she hoped was reassurance. "Don't. You're being you." Her gaze flickered to where his fingers were toying with his spoon, the urge to write manifesting in the only way it could. "I need that."

"I know I said you didn't have to, but maybe we should try to talk about it a little. Not right now. But you might remember something that'll give us a clue of who we should be hiding from—or going after."

"Go after?" A burn of adrenaline shot through her veins at his almost careless afterthought. "But how did you find me if you don't know who it is?"

He abandoned the spoon in favor of tearing at the corner of the napkin. "Once we realized you had disappeared, we contacted the police, of course. And eventually, the federal authorities got involved. They didn't... Well, we thought it would be best to be in contact with other shifter communities through the wonders of the Internet. One of the members of a forum we used called me with information on where to find you. Well, that's who she claimed to be. It occurred to me it could have just been some prick sending us on a wild goose chase. But we had to take that chance."

"So you don't know who's behind all this," she said. "But we're going to find out, right? We're going to stop them?" Her hand started to tremble, and Sara pulled it away, slipping it under her leg to try and control it. "Do you know...do you know if there are others? Or did they pick me on purpose?"

"We *are* going to find out who's behind this, and we're going to put an end to this. But I hope you understand now why we can't go home. We don't even know who in Delta we can trust right now." He wrapped his arm around her shoulders and pulled her against him. "This isn't going to be over for us until we know who it is and we stop them."

Ignoring the casual glances from the teenagers at an adjoining booth, Sara turned into Josh's body, slipping her arms around his waist so that she could nestle into his chest. "Thank you," she murmured.

Her ordeal might be over, but the thought that the monsters who had tortured and tested her without reprieve were doing it to others ignited every protective instinct Sara possessed. Nobody deserved that treatment. She would do everything she could to make sure it didn't happen again. Josh wouldn't fail her.

Chapter Seven

The journey to Delta was more excruciating than Cameron had imagined. It wasn't just the growing miles separating him from Josh and Sara. It was the sheer loneliness of the drive. Hours behind the wheel with only the radio for company. Though he had begrudgingly grown accustomed to the hole Sara had left in his life, he wasn't used to Josh not being there. Cam needed his presence like he needed to breathe.

He needed both of them. Josh's assurances they'd be together, the three of them, were all he had to cling to.

He entered city limits after sundown and headed straight for the house. Pulling into the narrow, winding road of their community, he tried not to notice the lights at the neighbors' windows or the outdoor toys scattered across a few of the lawns. These were families. People who loved and went to work and celebrated holidays and laughed with their kids. These were all he'd known all of his life. It was impossible to believe a shifter could be responsible for everything that had happened to Sara, for tearing their lives apart. Even with the truth from Sara's lips, Cam wanted to think it could only be an outsider.

Sara didn't have enemies. She was outgoing and generous, always looking for the silver lining, always believing in the best of people. It was the one trait that Cam and Josh had long ago decided had been her downfall. She had trusted the wrong person, and that person had taken her away. They had always assumed it was an outsider who had captured her attention, but if it was a shifter, that was even more reason for her not to suspect anything amiss.

He parked in the drive behind Josh's Camry, grateful when nobody poked their heads out to ask why he was alone. The sensors activated the porch light as he approached, and Cam hurried with his key to get inside. He didn't need questions. He needed to get their things and get back on the road as soon as possible.

The door closing behind him boomed louder than he expected, and Cameron froze. The house hadn't felt this empty since the day Sara had disappeared, when he and Josh had walked in and realized for the first time she wouldn't be coming home that night. It took everything he had to force one foot in front of the other. The sooner he finished packing, the sooner he didn't have to face his ghosts.

He chose a suitcase for each of them. His and Josh's clothes were simple, but when it came to face Sara's wardrobe, Cameron hesitated. They had taken her favorite skirt and blouse for the rescue mission, but those were going to hang on her when she finally put them on. She had to have lost at least twenty pounds since her abduction, and on her five foot eight inch frame, it might as well have been double that. The last thing they needed was for her to feel self-conscious about her appearance. They had enough to try and cope with.

So he chose clothes she could cinch, jeans she'd complained were getting too tight and skirts with drawstring waists. Underwear was trickier, and in the end, he only picked up a couple of her favorites. They would buy the rest. Sara had always loved a good shopping trip.

Cameron moved through the rest of the house, picking up items that would lend a sense of home to any place they rented. He took her scrapbooks to remind her of happier times, the cards sent by her kids at school, DVDs of her favorite movies. He packed up his and Josh's laptops, as well as a box of their files so they could both conduct business as if nothing was wrong. From the back of the couch, he grabbed the afghan Sara's grandmother had given her as a graduation present, and in the kitchen, he dug around in the junk drawer until he found her stash of green ink pens with the turtle toppers that she'd bought at the San Diego Zoo.

It took two hours for him to get a sense that he'd done as much as he could and make sure he hadn't missed anything on Josh's list, and then another thirty minutes to get the car loaded. They would have to make the arrangements about the mail and the bills long distance, he decided. It was too late to deal with it tonight, and he didn't want to have to

stick around until morning to take care of it. A light came on next door as he locked up, and his neighbor stepped out on the porch.

George Ramsey was in his fifties, short and stout like somebody's jolly grandfather. He had been the first to welcome Cam and Sara when they'd bought the house together and the first to put a stamp of approval on Josh after he'd moved in. With Sara's family in Southern California and Cam's parents taking early retirement in Florida, George was as close to a father figure they had. But Cam didn't want to have to deal with him now. Of all the people in the neighborhood likely to ask questions, George was at the top of the list.

"Little late, isn't it?" George asked as he came over to the fence. His curious gaze flickered over the shadowed car. "What's going on?"

Keeping his keys ready in his hand, Cam crossed to stand between George and the car. "Josh and I decided to make our getaway a real vacation," he lied. They'd told nobody about the tip on Sara. Her parents didn't need their hopes dashed yet again if it didn't pan out, and Cam didn't need more of his friends' pity for not giving up. "The break will do us good."

George nodded. "You two haven't had a vacation since..." He stopped. Nobody mentioned Sara's name around Cam or Josh anymore. "Too long," he finished. "Where are you off to?"

"Wherever the wind takes us." Though he hated lying to George, until they knew more about how and why Sara had been taken, nobody was to be trusted. "We might be gone for awhile."

"You need me to take care of your mail for you while you're away?"

It would be one less thing for him to worry about. "I'll call you when I know more," Cam said. "Most of our bills are payable online, so it should just be junk anyway." He paused. "Listen, Josh asked me something this morning I couldn't answer. Maybe you can help me."

"Sure. What is it?"

“He was wondering about shifters turning against shifters, why the crime rate was so low in Delta and if that held true for other shifter communities.” He smiled. “You know Josh. His brain never stops working.”

George’s bushy brows pulled into a frown. “Shifters turning against shifters? Never heard of such a thing. We got enough to worry about from outsiders without adding to our problems.”

“That’s what I told him.”

“Well, you tell him to stop thinking about such things. You two have had to deal with enough badness in the world. You don’t need to be looking for more of it.”

“I’ll make sure and do that.” He gave George a little wave and stepped around the front of the car. “Thanks. And I’ll call you in a couple days.”

Sliding behind the wheel, Cam started the car and watched George go back into his home. He still wanted to go talk to Sammie Jo, but he was growing more and more sure he would get some of the same answers. Shifters didn’t hurt shifters.

And yet, someone had hurt Sara.

He was a block away before he decided he should let Josh know what he planned to do. It was just gone midnight, but odds were good Josh would still be up, watching over Sara. Even if he was asleep, he would rather be awakened and told than wait until morning.

Cam pulled over to the curb, dialing Josh’s cell phone at the same time. As it rang, he turned off the engine and rubbed his tired eyes. He needed to get some coffee if he didn’t want to fall asleep at the wheel.

When the call connected, he glanced at the clock on the radio, wondering if Josh had been awake or not.

And then promptly froze when Sara’s soft, “Hello?” came over the line.

When she was sure Josh had fallen asleep, Sara slipped out from beneath his arm and got out of bed. Her brain wouldn’t stop working, and with a meal larger than she’d had in months sitting heavy in her stomach, her body wasn’t faring too well, either. It was just

as well. After so many nights of being drugged into unconsciousness, it was a good feeling to know she could stay awake if she wanted to.

Unwilling to wake Josh, she curled up cross-legged at the foot of the bed and turned on the television. Beyond their foray to the diner, it was her first glimpse at the outside world since leaving Delta. Her heart thumped in excitement at getting to enjoy something as simple as a sitcom. Sitting in the dark with the volume as low as she could get it without losing what was being said, she watched Jo and Blair bicker over some inanity, smiling without reserve as the lights flickered across her face.

The ring of a phone startled Sara, and she dropped the remote as she twisted in the sound's direction. Josh's cell sat on the desk, and when it rang again, she reflexively jumped up to answer it. He needed to sleep. And somebody needed to learn not to call in the middle of the night.

"Hello?" Her voice was almost a whisper. She didn't want Josh to wake up.

"Sara? Is that you? Where's Josh? Don't hang up."

The sound of Cameron's voice washed through her, leaving her flesh alternating between fiery hot and icy cold. Sara's first instinct was to throw the phone, followed quickly by an overwhelming sense of yearning to hear more of him. She hadn't heard him this close for so long; her torturer—not Cam, somebody else, she reminded herself, somebody else—never spoke a single time whenever he'd come to her. If she blocked out the memories of pain, she could imagine this wasn't the voice of someone who had hurt her. This was the voice of someone who'd only loved.

Her hand trembled as she gripped the phone more tightly, and she stumbled back until her legs hit the mattress and she could perch on the end of the bed. "Josh is...asleep," she managed.

"Asleep?" Cam sounded surprised. "I guess he's had a long day. What are you doing? I thought you'd be asleep, too."

"No, I'm watching TV." Her gaze flickered to the set. "*Facts of Life*."

Cam laughed. “*Facts of Life*? Remember the drinking game we used to play? One shot every time we thought Jo would punch Blair, two shots every time we thought Jo wanted to kiss her.”

She hadn’t until he’d elicited the memory, and in spite of the terror crawling through her veins, Sara smiled at it. “Jo was in complete denial,” she said softly. “She should’ve just admitted she wanted Blair and been done with it.”

“A night with Jo probably would have done Blair a world of good, anyway.” There was no missing the forced lightness of his tone. “Do you think *Diff’rent Strokes* will be on later?”

An answer was on the tip of her tongue before Sara realized what she was doing. “I..I don’t know,” she said, squeezing her eyes shut. Her voice broke a little on the words. Even more was breaking inside as she struggled to reconcile the schism of hearing his voice and seeing his malevolent snarl in her mind’s eye. “Let me get Josh.”

“Sara, wait. Please. Please, wait just a few seconds. I just need to hear you. Look, I’m still in Delta. Would you like me to get something for you?”

“No.” Then she remembered the conversation she’d had before dinner. “But Josh needs his notebooks.”

“I got them. Tell him I grabbed his laptop and his other files, too. Are you sure you don’t want anything? I have your afghan, and most of your movies.”

This time she couldn’t help but blurt out her response. It just felt too normal not to. “Did you get *Bill & Ted*?”

“Of course. Both of them. And I didn’t forget any of the Harrison Ford flicks, either.”

The bed moved behind her, and Sara turned to see Josh propping himself up on his elbows, a slight frown on his face. Holding out the phone to him, she had to swallow once in order to say the words. “It’s...Cam.”

Josh shook his head and gestured that she should keep the phone. “I’ll be right back,” he mouthed, rising from the bed. Before she could protest, he disappeared into the bathroom.

Sara had no choice but to put the phone back up to her ear. “Sorry,” she said. “Josh woke up.”

Cam hesitated. “Sara...thank you for talking to me. You don’t know how much it means to me.”

If she could focus on everything Josh had said, she might make it through the rest of the conversation without falling completely to pieces. “I should be the one thanking you,” she forced herself to say. “Josh told me, it was both of you that got me out of there.”

“Yeah. We needed to track you, and Josh is clever, but you can’t beat a German shepherd’s nose. He drove the getaway car, and I...I held you...”

The cry came from her throat unbidden, the horror she’d felt in waking up in his arms that morning returning with a full vengeance. Leaping from the bed, she ran to the bathroom and pounded on the door until Josh opened it, then thrust the phone into his hand.

“I can’t,” she said, backing away. “I can’t.”

Josh took the phone, but wrapped his free arm around her. She didn’t resist, burying her face in his chest.

“Cam...what? No, I’ll call you. Cam, listen to me... I know. I know. I’ll call you... I know, she’ll be fine... I know.” He tossed the phone aside and embraced her, holding her tightly. “Hey, it’s okay. You’re okay.”

“I’m sorry.” The shaking wouldn’t stop, but at least she wasn’t crying. “I tried, I really tried, but he... I...I’m so sorry, Josh.”

“I know. I’m sorry I didn’t take the phone. I thought it might help if you talked to him a little bit.” He rubbed her back in slow circles. “Can you tell me what upset you?”

“He...he... I thanked him for getting me away from, from...and then he said he was holding me in the car.” The words came faster as she spoke, until they were coming so swiftly her tongue tripped over the syllables. “And I remembered waking up, and what that felt like, and then I was back there, back in the cage and I had to fight him, but he was so strong, and he wouldn’t stop, even after I was down. He wouldn’t stop. He never stopped.”

“Oh, Sara. Sara.” Josh simply held her, giving her his strength, warming her skin with his body, until she finally stopped trembling. She didn’t know how much time had passed, but Josh never shifted, never pulled away from her. “Come on, let’s lay down. The bed is more comfortable than standing here in the cold.”

She nodded, a small movement that rubbed her cheek against his shirt. Josh laced his fingers through hers and led her over to the bed, guiding her to stretch out beneath the blankets. The moment he laid down, though, she curled into his side, almost more on top of him than on the bed, and he wrapped his arms around her, steady and sure.

“I hate this,” she confessed. Her voice was tiny, nearly lost against his skin. “I hate being scared, and I hate feeling weak, and I hate that half of what I say or do gets you upset.”

“I know you do. But you don’t have to be scared forever. And you’re not going to be weak forever.” He kissed the top of her head. “I’m not upset, Sara. Don’t worry about upsetting me.”

It was a mild relief to hear him say the words, even if she didn’t believe him. She’d seen his face. She knew how hard this was for him.

“Talk to me,” she said, almost pleading. “Tell me...” She searched for something that would be easy, something she wanted that wouldn’t create undue pain. “Tell me what’s been going on with my kids. Did they get somebody good in to replace me?”

“Well...Linda Peters took over your class. The kids call her Miss Linda. She’s really good with them. And your kids are all growing up so fast. I know this because several of them still visit pretty regularly...”

* * *

Cam stared at the phone for several seconds after Josh hung up on him without seeing it. All he heard was Sara’s voice in his head, saying over and over *I can’t. I can’t. I can’t.*

I can’t.

“You can’t what, Sara? You can’t even talk to me?”

He opened his fingers and dropped the phone to keep from throwing it. As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he'd known he'd made a mistake. She didn't want to see him, and she sure as hell didn't want to think about him touching her. Now he'd be lucky if she even spoke to him again, much less let him see her.

"Fuck." He slapped the steering wheel with the flat of his hand. "Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck, I'm so sorry."

Cam wasn't angry with Sara. He wasn't even angry with himself. But he was furious at the bastard who wore *his* face, who hurt her so badly she couldn't even think of him touching her.

Whoever it was would pay. The bloodlust pounded in his veins, darkening his vision. Tearing that fucker from limb to limb may not heal Sara, but it would sure make him feel better.

He ran his hand over his face, wiping away the familiar dampness, and put the car in gear. At least he got to hear her voice. At least he knew she still remembered the good times, somehow. At least they hadn't taken everything away from her.

Forcing his anger aside, he concentrated on the thrill of joy he felt when he first heard her voice. Cam pulled back out onto the road, his headlights slicing through the darkness. He'd visit Sammie Jo as planned, and maybe when he was done talking to her, Josh would be free to call him.

Chapter Eight

After taking four meals at the diner, Sara wasn't as hesitant to venture out of the hotel with him when it came time to go apartment hunting. Josh had hesitated outside Cam's door, but Sara didn't notice. Or, if she noticed, she didn't acknowledge it. Josh could easily imagine him stretched out on his stomach on the bed, his laptop open, his brow furrowed, scraps of paper surrounding him as he made notes to himself. He would be pretending to work, pretending it wasn't killing him that they were leaving him behind.

Josh escorted Sara out to the car, watching her carefully for any signs of being overwhelmed by the outside world. She tensed when a few cars passed them in the lot, but otherwise, she seemed to be okay. He made a point to lock the car doors once she was buckled up.

As they drove to the first address, Josh kept up a steady flow of conversation, describing the three places they were going to see and how he had narrowed it down from the initial dozen options.

"I wanted a place with at least two bedrooms, but I also looked at apartments with three, and even four. I did find a house that was easily within our range, but it's not quite as nice as the apartment we're going to see first, even if it is a bit more spacious."

Sara offered him a wan smile. In the brilliant Vegas sunlight, the shadows beneath her cheekbones and eyes were still prominent, but two days of regular sleep—even when he woke up in the wee hours of the morning and found her watching Nick at Nite—and meals that were more than broth and bread had smoothed over the pallor in her skin. It was nowhere near her normal rich caramel tone, but it was an improvement and that was all Josh saw.

"I didn't have to see them, you know," she said. "Anything you pick is automatically going to be better than where I've been."

“You deserve to pick your own home, Sara, no matter how temporary that home might be.”

Her eyes seemed to engulf her face as she looked at him. “*Our* home, you mean.”

“Our home,” Josh corrected. “I just meant I want you to be comfortable. Happy, if that’s even possible.”

She nodded in agreement and turned back to the window, staring out at the flat horizon. “I’ll be happy when I know those people aren’t hurting anybody else,” she said softly.

Josh wanted to tell her Cam had foregone sleep for the past forty-eight hours in the name of research, but he avoided mentioning Cam. She was happier when his name didn’t come up at all, even if it was like a knife twisting in his chest every time he bit Cam’s name back.

“They won’t.”

Josh pulled into a sprawling apartment complex and parked in the red *future residents only* space.

“Ready to go in?”

She looked anything but ready, but she pushed the door open without any further prompting and stepped into the sunshine. When she paused before closing her door, Josh held still, too, watching in rapt attention as Sara closed her eyes and turned her face up to the sun. Little steps, he told himself. That was how she would get better. But when she did things like this, he had to quell the urge to barrel through the little steps for the huge ones to come later.

She glowed. With life.

He climbed out of the car with a small smile playing on his lips.

Connie, the property manager, was waiting for them in a smart blue suit, a folder in her hand. “Are you Josh? You must be my one o’clock.”

Josh held out his hand. “Yes, we talked on the phone yesterday. And this is Sara.”

Connie nodded at her, but before Sara could greet her, they were being hustled out of the office. Connie talked as she led them to the model apartment, going about one

hundred words per minute. Josh barely paid attention to a word she said, though he caught a few important phrases, like *gated communities* and *on-premise security guard*.

“Here it is,” Connie announced, unlocking the door.

Josh stepped aside to allow Sara to enter first, and then followed her into the spacious living room. Though it was furnished, it was large enough not to look cluttered, even with the overabundance of accoutrements such places put in to make it look like “home”. A smaller dining room led into the large kitchen, but Sara seemed fascinated by the sliding doors that led to the small patio.

“What floor is the available apartment on?” she asked as she gazed out into the community.

“Oh, the second floor,” Connie answered.

As Sara’s face fell, Josh moved to her side. “Do you want a place with a backyard?”

“No, that’s all right.”

But she wandered through the apartment with far less enthusiasm than she’d shown for the patio, and they left Connie behind to head back to the car without anything definitive being said.

Josh’s next appointment was at another apartment, but he decided to bypass that and go directly to the house. She never looked away from the window, but he noticed she had her hands cradled over her stomach, like she was in some sort of pain. Josh worried his bottom lip, keeping one eye on her and the other on the road.

“The owner will be here in about fifteen minutes,” Josh said as he pulled into the driveway. “We’re a little early.”

Sara leaned forward to look at the house through the windshield. “It’s big. Why do you think it’s not as nice as the apartment?”

“A house this size in our price range? The interior is less than stellar. It’s not disgusting, but it does need some major work. If we were staying longer than a month or so, I wouldn’t even suggest it.”

She got out of the car and walked down to the sidewalk, looking around the neighborhood. It was working class, but clean, and Josh had seen enough of the

neighbors not to be concerned about local trouble. But as he watched her, her hands kept straying back to her midsection, and one was still there when she returned to the car.

“If the inside is livable,” she said, “let’s do this one. I like it. It feels like home.”

“I like it, too.” He glanced at her stomach. “Do you want to get an early lunch?”

Sara grimaced. “No, I don’t think I can eat anything. My stomach feels weird again. But if you’re hungry, don’t let me stop you.”

“No, I’m not hungry.” He looped his arm through hers and led her around to the side of the house. “Look, they just installed this fence. The previous renters had a few large dogs they kept back here. And there’s a new security system.”

Her gaze crawled up the side of the house. “Are the bedrooms on the second floor?”

“The master bedroom is on the bottom floor, but there are decent-sized bedrooms on the second floor. I thought Cam would take the room downstairs.”

She flinched slightly at his name, but it was the way she tried to cover up her reaction that hurt Josh the most. Pulling her arm free of his, Sara walked back up to the front porch, leaving him to trail behind.

“Is it available right away?” she asked when he approached.

“Yeah. The guy who owns this place is going to perform some major renovations in the spring, but wants to rent it out in the meantime.” She sat on the top step and he stood beside her, watching the interplay of light on her hair. He remembered his promise to Cam to try to get more information from her. There was never a good time to ask for her memories, never a good way to fit it into the conversation, but if he didn’t at least try, they were never going to get anywhere. “Sara, can I ask you something?”

The trusting way she tilted her head up to him only tightened the knots. “Anything.”

For a moment, he assumed his identity of scientist, desperately in need of the distance it provided. He could pretend he wasn’t asking this question of his lover, but of a subject. “What do you remember of the day they took you?”

Her gaze slid sideways, softening with the pain of memories. “All of it. What do you want to know?”

Josh reached for the small writing tablet in his shirt pocket. “What time of day was it?”

“They came the first time at lunch. I was on playground patrol, and they were standing near the fence with Mrs. Ehle. She said they were checking out the school for their daughter.”

Josh swallowed, already his persona slipping. This was going to be painful for both of them, but a necessary evil. “Did you see them again after school?”

Sara nodded. She pulled her legs up and wrapped her arms around them, resting her chin on her knees. “I saw them talking to Mrs. Ehle again, so I went over to see if there was anything more I could tell them, to help them make their decision.” Her foot began to twitch, her heel tapping against the step. “They asked if I had time to talk to them over a cup of coffee, and I...said sure.”

“A man and a woman?” She nodded and he made the note in his book, but he felt sick. A man and a woman who knew exactly where and when to find Sara. A man and a woman who could have taken a child, or one of the other teachers, but targeted Sara. Were they shifters? Based on what she had said earlier, he felt certain they were definitely looking for a shifter. “Did you agree to drive to the coffee shop with them?”

“It seemed easier. I mean, you know what parking is like there, especially after school. All the high school kids hang out in the lot and it’s a zoo.” Sara leaned forward, a sudden fervor in her dark eyes. “They were normal, Josh. They had pictures of their daughter and everything. How was I supposed to know?”

“You *couldn’t* have known, Sara. You had no reason to know anybody would...could...do what they did to you.” He brushed his thumb over her chin and coaxed her to look up to meet his eyes. “You couldn’t have known.”

“Did you know about them?” she asked. “When you were trying to figure out what happened to me. Did Mrs. Ehle tell you and...Cam?”

Josh didn’t miss the way she used Cam’s name without any prompting from him. Every little breakthrough was worth celebrating. “Mrs. Ehle gave a statement to the police, and they found the couple she identified and brought them in for some follow-up

questions.” He paused, the words falling out of his mouth like stones. “Their story checked out.”

“Their story was a lie!” It was the most vehement he’d ever seen her, without it being directed at Cam. Knocking his hand away, Sara rose to her feet and began pacing along the edge of the grass in front of the house. “That bitch wasn’t even a shifter. When I realized something was wrong, I shifted to fly out of there, and she screamed at him to go after me.”

“There was a shifter working with an outsider...” Josh murmured. What if there had just been one shifter? Everybody had a price, after all, and the shifter may not have even known Sara. “Sara.” She didn’t stop pacing. He crossed the yard to take her arm. “Were there any other shifters there? Where they were keeping you. Do you ever remember seeing or sensing a second one?”

It took a moment for his questions to break through her discomfiture, like she was processing each word individually. “You mean other than Ca—the one who looked like Cam?”

Josh didn’t wince from her near slip—at least, not visibly. “Were there two? Or was the shifter you saw that afternoon the same one who changed into Cam’s form?”

“I don’t...” She shook her head. “I don’t know. Don’t you get it? I only ever saw Cam. Him, and the doctor, and the guards. When they weren’t poking me with everything under the sun, they’d lock me in the cage with him, and then stand back to watch the show.”

Josh backed off immediately, both from the questions and physically. She had answered his question indirectly, but it was enough for him. A truck pulled to a stop in front of them, and a large man with a friendly smile lumbered around the front.

“Are you Josh? I’m Bob. We talked earlier, right?”

Josh returned his smile and went through the required pleasantries. Sara didn’t speak at all, her mouth compressed in a thin line, her arms folded in front of her stomach again.

When Bob unlocked the front door, a musty smell struck them, and Bob waved his hand in front of his face. “Sorry about that. It does need to be aired out a bit.”

Sara seemed oblivious to the stale atmosphere and was the first to step over the threshold. By the time Josh entered, she was already gone from the front room, her footsteps echoing from deeper inside the house. He followed the sound to find her standing at the back door, overlooking the enclosed yard.

“I want this,” she said without preamble. “This is the one.”

“I brought the paperwork with me,” Bob volunteered. “It’s in my truck.”

“Great. I’ve got my checkbook. I’ll sign everything now.” Josh watched Bob leave silently before reaching for his phone. “I think you should call Cam and tell him what we’ve found.”

Sara whirled to face him. “What? Why? No. You do it.”

“Nothing can hurt you over the phone, can it?” Josh pointed out. “And the shifter that looked like Cam never spoke, did he?” She didn’t look convinced. “Will you do it as a favor to me? You don’t have to have a long conversation with him. Just tell him what we’ve found and where we’re at.”

A muscle ticked in her jaw. Her hand rubbed distractedly over her stomach while she weighed his words, then shot out, palm upward, toward him. “Fine. Give me the phone.”

Josh scrolled to Cam’s number and pressed the call button before handing it to her. “You can give me the phone as soon as you want,” he promised, as she brought it to her ear.

When the silence became too much for Cam to stand, he turned on the television, finding a movie that didn’t require his attention. The room filled with voices and music, and he was horrified to find the sound actually comforted him. When was the last time he needed the television to help alleviate his isolation?

He wanted to call Josh. But he was careful to avoid contacting him when he knew Josh was with Sara, so he shifted his attention back to the laptop. Public records, search engines and the horde of shifters in the online community who had been following their story had all turned up bits and pieces of information, but not enough to fill in the puzzle yet.

It didn't help that his thoughts kept straying to Josh and Sara. Where were they? What had they found? What were they doing? Did she like any of the apartments Josh had picked out? He knew there was the chance Josh would return with two signed leases. It was hard to stay optimistic in the face of that thought.

The phone resting next to his fingers burst to life, and he grabbed it on the first ring. He knew it was Josh without looking. "Hey. What's going on?"

Silence filled the line. Then...

"We found a place." The soft sound of her breathing elicited memories of long-ago nights with her in his arms. "A house."

Cam's heart seized. He still felt the same bittersweet relief when he heard her voice or caught a glimpse of her. "A house? That's great. Do you like it?"

"Yeah." There was another pause. For a second, he was terrified she would hang up on him. "It kind of reminds me of that place you were renting when we met. Except it smells better. And it has a bigger backyard."

"It smells better than stale bologna? I find that hard to believe." He paused a beat, waiting for her to laugh, but she didn't. "A big backyard sounds nice. It'll be good to get some sun. How many rooms does it have?"

"I don't know. Josh knows. Hang on."

"Wait, Sara. Please. It doesn't matter."

Her breathing quickened. Somewhere in the background, a door slammed followed by a man's muffled voice. More breathing. Cam thought he could listen to it all day if she let him.

"Josh is signing the lease now. I think we're coming back when we're done here. Do you...want anything?"

Yes, I want you to come back here and look at me without screaming. I want you to be able to say my name again. I want you to let me make this better. "No, I don't want anything. Thank you, though." He wanted to say something else, but he didn't dare. He didn't know what would send her running again. "I'm glad you found a place you like, Sara."

“One less thing to worry about,” she said. “And it’s only one lease. I know that was important to Josh. He doesn’t want us to be separated.”

Cam let out his breath in a long sigh. He knew Josh would fight for him, but there was no guarantee of victory. Especially since both of them would happily do anything she asked. “Thank you. I...that means a lot to both of us.”

“I...I think you’re going to like it here.” Her voice was softer, her words more even. “It really does look like the house on Marshall Street, Cam.”

Cam closed his eyes, savoring the sweet sound of his name on her lips. “There were a lot of good times in that house. Have you had a chance to look at the kitchen?”

“Not yet. Are you the reason Josh is claiming he can cook now?”

Cam couldn’t help but smirk. He remembered dragging Josh into the kitchen and insisting he learn to do something other than peanut butter sandwiches—partially because he was worried about the other man’s health, partially for something to do. They had spent much of the past two years looking for something to do.

“Josh claims he can cook? I guess scrambling eggs and boiling waters counts as cooking, technically. But yeah, I taught him everything he thinks he knows.”

“While I was gone.”

“Yeah,” Cam breathed. “But now maybe I can show him how to make you chile rellenos.”

Sara paused. “It won’t be the same. Nobody does it like you do, Cam.”

“Maybe I can cook something tonight for dinner?” Cam suggested. “If you’re not up to chile rellenos, I can make some Italian wedding soup.”

“No, no, that’s okay,” she said quickly. Too quickly. “My stomach’s actually been bothering me a little bit. But you could make it for Josh.”

“Bothering you?” Cam asked, food forgotten. “Bothering you like how?”

“Just...bothering me. Achy. Like I’m going to be sick. It’s probably just getting used to real food again. It only gets intolerable at night when it doesn’t let me sleep.”

“How long have you been feeling this way?”

“I don’t know, a few days maybe. What does it matter?”

Cam frowned, startled by the question. A stomachache was traditionally one of the signs a shifter had gone too long without changing shape, and Josh had told him earlier that Sara hadn't shifted once since they rescued her. But then again, maybe she was just adjusting to the food. He didn't want to worry her yet.

"It...uh...it doesn't. I'm just concerned about you." He wanted to speak with her more, but he also wanted to have a conversation that didn't end in screaming. Maybe if they ended on a good note, she wouldn't be wary of talking to him again. "Sara, is Josh finished with the lease? If so, I'd like to speak with him."

"Almost. The Bob guy who owns the house talks a lot. Josh is trying to be polite." The sounds over the line grew deadened as if she'd covered the phone, but almost as quickly, she returned. "Okay, he's done. Are you sure you don't want us to bring you anything for lunch?"

"Oh, you know, a cheeseburger would be great. Thanks." *And I love you, and if I thought you could stand to hear it, I'd never stop saying it.*

Cam heard the shuffle of the phone passing from one hand to the other, and then Josh's familiar voice announce, "We have a house."

"Yeah, that's what Sara said. Thanks, by the way."

"For?"

"Making her talk to me."

"You guys had a good conversation, it sounded like."

"Yeah, but I can't imagine she was too thrilled when you gave her the phone."

"She wasn't. Look, technically, it's ready but if you'd like to come over tomorrow and make things a bit livable..."

"Are you asking or telling?"

"Telling. Sara loves it here, but it could use a good cleaning and airing out. I would do it."

"I know. I'll go over there after you guys get back."

"Hey, are you okay?"

Cam smiled sadly at the concern in Josh's voice. He didn't want to tell Josh what it had done to him to hear Sara's voice. Not because he wanted to keep anything from the other man, but because he knew Josh was trying to be Sara's emotional center. Josh would never say it, but Cam knew there wasn't much left over. He was stretching himself too thin as it was. Cam would have to deal with this on his own for now.

"I'm good. I am. Why shouldn't I be? You found a temporary home for Sara, and she managed to speak to me for more than five minutes without screaming in fear. It's a banner day."

"I guess it is. Hey? I love you."

"Love you, too," Cam said softly before hanging up.

He dropped the phone and shut down his computer, his attention shifting from searching for clues to making a game plan for the evening. Josh had done his part by finding a place Sara could be happy with. Now it was going to be up to Cam to make it as much of a home as possible before she moved in.

* * *

The night was like any other in Delta, crisp and clean, lending itself naturally to sniffing out intruders. George Ramsey knew his path like the back of his paw, winding through the streets of his community, always on the alert. It was a precaution taken after Sara Vail had disappeared. If somebody could take their favorite schoolteacher out from under their noses, nobody in Delta was safe. George had done his first midnight patrol a week after she vanished.

There had been rumblings for awhile that maybe it wasn't an intruder. Maybe the threat was a little closer to home. Dr. Joshua Ames wasn't a shifter, after all, and outsiders weren't to be trusted, no matter who they were sleeping with. But George had squelched that gossip at every corner. "You don't live next door to them," he'd argue. "You don't see what I do."

Not that he saw a lot, but what he did was sufficient. Josh was a quiet sort, polite and gracious. But when he was around Cam and Sara, he was almost a different person. He

came to life, playful and gregarious with Sara, supportive and outgoing with Cam. And they both worshiped the ground he walked on. George had seen a lot of threesomes in his lifetime, but never one that included an outsider so effortlessly. It was completely infeasible that Josh would ever hurt either of them.

There was still a potential threat, though. George had been a Delta resident for too long to just sit back and pretend everything was all right. Even now, two years later.

He detected the new scent when he rounded the corner of his block. George stopped and lifted his head, sniffing at the air as the hackles rose on the back of his neck. Slowly, he resumed his pace, following the delicate tendrils with ears pricked, and when it grew stronger with every step, a sense of dread began to curl in his gut. He noticed the car within several yards. California plates. His head turned.

It was parked in front of Cam's place.

A dark shadow stood on the porch, and even from a distance, George knew it wasn't either Cam or Josh. This figure was taller than either man, broad across the shoulders. As George watched, he stepped back from the door and to the side, cupping a hand over his eyes in order to peer into the darkened windows. He wasn't going to see anything. Cam had been gone for three days now.

George slunk down, skirting the property in order to reach his backyard unseen. After clearing the low wall, he shifted immediately, grabbing the bathrobe he had waiting as he went in his back door. He navigated through the darkness, moving to the front of the house, and glanced out the side window in the living room before exiting through the front. The stranger was stepping back off the porch, looking up at the house as if he still expected somebody to come to the door.

George pocketed his cell phone before flipping on his porch light. The police would be at his fingertips if he needed them now.

"Little late for a visit, don't you think?" he called out as he stepped outside.

The stranger might have been startled by George's sudden appearance, but it didn't stop him from crossing the driveway to the property boundary. "Do you know where Cam is?" the man asked. "Or Josh? Nobody's answering."

George's eyes narrowed as the man approached. "Maybe because it's the middle of the night."

His face fell into the circle of illumination cast by the porch light. He was younger than George would have thought, with dark hair and eyes that looked vaguely familiar. "I know," the man apologized. "But I tried calling ahead to let them know I'd be in town, and I never got an answer." He stuck out his hand, and George noticed the darker tinge to his skin. "I'm Marco Vail. Sara's cousin."

As George accepted the greeting, seeing the family resemblance was easy now that it had been pointed out. There was a shade of Sara's wide mouth, too.

"Why are you looking for Cam?"

"I was in Salt Lake City visiting friends, and Aunt Rosie asked if I could bring up some stuff for her. Some pictures of Sara and things she'd found that she thought the guys might be interested in." There was a hint of sadness in his smile. "The longer Sara's gone, the harder it is for Aunt Rosie to keep her stuff around, I think. She can't bring herself to throw it away because it means she's giving up, but she can't look at it, either. Cam and Josh haven't gotten to that point yet."

George nodded in understanding. He'd been inside Cam's house often enough since Sara's disappearance to know that she still lived within its walls in one way or another.

"The boys have actually gone away on a well-deserved vacation," he said. "But if you want, you can leave the stuff with me and I can pass it along."

Marco brightened. "You'd do that for me?"

"Sure." He paused. "You should call Cam. I'm sure he'd love to hear from Sara's family."

"I told you, I already tried."

"You don't have his cell number?" When Marco shook his head, George gestured toward the house. "Bring in whatever you've got and I'll write it down for you. Just promise me you won't try and make them cut their vacation short. They need this."

Marco laughed. "Me stop someone from slacking? Never happen."

* * *

The van waited outside city limits. Delta residents were too wary these days of outsiders; it was impossible to do much of anything without raising suspicion of some sort. It didn't help that the type of information Nolan wanted would raise more than a few eyebrows, either.

This was his specialty. Information gathering. It was why he'd launched the entire project in the first place. He knew exactly how to get the strongest results, and even if he didn't have everything he wanted yet from Sara Vail, he stood by his methodology. They had brought her in, cut her open, conducted test after test after test on her. They'd exposed her to heat, to water, to cold, all in search of the strongest reaction to study.

And they'd found it. By sheer accident, really. When natural stimulation had failed to elevate the subject's biorhythms to easily monitored levels, he'd manufactured new stimuli. Cameron Koster's form had been twenty-third on the list. Marco took on his shape, and her heart rate, blood pressure, and adrenaline levels all spiked. It made the most logical sense for them to continue exploiting that. At one point, Marco had raised the question about the psychological effects of forcing her to fight her partner, but Nolan upped his salary and the shifter had shut up.

If he'd had time, he might have explored the implications further. But he wasn't a psychologist. He was an engineer. In the end, all he cared about was reproducing the shifter ability. That's what had been sold with the contract, and getting that far had already proven difficult. He didn't need to add more when shifters weren't even human.

When the car pulled up behind him, Nolan got out of the passenger seat and walked back to meet it. His dark form cut across the headlights that slashed into the desert night, but his steps didn't slow until he stood at the driver's side window.

"Well?" he asked. It was a little disconcerting to see the features of the female shifter he'd been studying mirrored so closely in Marco's, but Nolan hid his feelings behind a practiced bland mask. He'd seen Marco take on many faces over the past two years. And nobody would question his cover story with this resemblance. "What did you find out?"

"They're not in town. They convinced their neighbor they were going on vacation."

Nolan swore under his breath. He knew it had been a wild shot that Ames would bring the girl back to their home, but he had been hoping for at least one thing to go in his favor.

“I did get Cameron Koster’s cell phone number, though,” Marco added. He grinned. “And when the old man wasn’t looking, I copied down the forwarding information Koster left with him.” He pulled a piece of paper out of his breast pocket and held it through the window. “It’s just a PO Box, but it’s a start.”

Nolan took the paper and tucked it away for examination later. “I want you to keep an eye on the town for the next few days. Just to make sure they don’t return. If you see anything out of the ordinary, report in as soon as possible. Otherwise, you’ll hear from me about where we need you next.”

He didn’t look back as he returned to the van. Marco would do as he was told. The creature was motivated by greed, and Nolan’s coffers weren’t empty yet.

And if for some reason he failed to cooperate, well then, Nolan would have at least one shifter to conduct more studies on.

Chapter Nine

Cam immediately understood why the house reminded Sara of the one on Marshall Street. It was the same basic bungalow style, though this one was a bit newer and a bit more modern. There were no walls separating the living room, dining room and kitchen, giving the first floor an open, welcoming look. A small hallway off the kitchen led to the master bedroom—which was his, according to Josh—and a half-bath. The kitchen was decent, though by no means spacious, and the wallpaper was a handsome, blue shade, if a little faded and peeling in spots.

He had come armed with a broom, mop, bucket, and a wide array of soaps and chemicals to get the place into shape. It wasn't as bad as he had expected, but he could see why Josh wanted him to work there before they officially moved in. He couldn't help but smile—he had gone through the same thing when he had moved to Marshall Street, though he hadn't been alone that time. His family and friends had all chipped in, and they ended up having a big pizza party that night. Enough beer had been involved to nearly nullify all their previous hard work.

The cleaning party was the first good memory of that house, but it wasn't the only one, and it was far from the best.

The best was the first time Sara had stayed the night.

Cam walked through the house, opening every door and every window until he had fresh air circulating through the rooms and a draft in the hall. The fresh air helped, but Cam hoped to have the house smelling like lemons and freshly baked bread by the time Josh brought Sara over the next morning. He rarely baked—he not only did not have the time, he didn't enjoy it—but Sara liked fresh bread.

He dusted first, his mind working over the list of things he wanted to accomplish before the next morning. It wasn't a daunting list, but it would require a night of work. When he started to mop, his mind drifted other places.

Sara had not been impressed with his house on Marshall Street. She only came to love it later. But he had hardly given her the guided tour that first night. He barely had the time and concentration to get her from his front door to his bedroom.

Smiling, he reached into his cooler for a beer and sat down heavily on the blue and white sofa. If he concentrated, he could still hear her laugh—the slightly tipsy, slightly wanton sound always sent a shock down his spine to his toes. When Sara was happy, truly delighted, she had a laugh that would charm the birds.

* * *

Though the sun had already set, the heat of the day still smothered the earth like a thick blanket. He noticed the difference as soon as he got out of his car, but if it bothered Sara, she didn't say a word. She was too busy standing on the sidewalk, looking up at the house. The moonlight cast silver streaks over her dark hair and outlined the graceful lines of her bare shoulders, making Cam pause before coming around the car to her side. Maybe it was because he'd lived his entire life in Delta, but he thought he had never seen someone appear so exotic and so natural all at the same time. She was breathtaking. The life she infused in the small town made his heart pound a little bit faster in excitement, as much for the sake of her new students as his own.

“So you get to work at home, too?” When she twisted her long neck to look back at him, her smile was mischievous. “Where do you go if you want a break from everything then?”

“The bar. Or camping. Sometimes I drive out to the desert for a few days to stretch my muscles, so to speak.”

“Wings or legs? Wait.” Her gaze swept over him, taking in every detail, lingering for a second on his groin before traveling back up. “I'll say legs.”

“You can tell just by looking? I'm impressed.” It was his turn to eye her—not that he hadn't spent the entire night looking her over thoroughly. She almost vibrated with energy, which made sense. Anybody who wanted to spend a life wrangling fourth-graders needed to have energy to spare. “I guess you're wings.”

Sara nodded, strolling up to the start of the path leading to his front door. “San Diego’s got a little bit more hustle and bustle than Delta. Flying is a hell of a lot safer.” She paused, waiting for him to join her. “You’ll have to show me where you go. Unless it’s one of those secret hideaways guys get weird about girls knowing.” She smiled. “In which case, I’ll just have to follow you to find it.”

“Are you imagining a club house with a hand-painted ‘no girls allowed’ sign?” Cam returned her smile. “I had one of those, but I outgrew it around the time I realized that girls did not, in fact, have cooties.”

He led her up the walk and pushed the door open. She arched her eyebrow questioningly and Cam shrugged. “We don’t need to lock our doors around here. Besides, everybody knows I don’t have anything worth stealing.”

“I think that’s going to take some getting used to.” Sara followed him inside, hanging near the entrance while he flipped on the light. “You can take the girl out of the city, but trying to get the city out of the girl can lead to an awful rash.”

Cam laughed. “You know, I’m more than happy to do anything I can to help you adjust to life here in Delta.” He gestured at the living room. “Sit down, I’ll grab you a beer.”

Though she wandered into the room, Sara didn’t take a seat, choosing instead to prowl around the edges as she looked over his meager belongings. With her attention focused elsewhere, it was a chance to watch her unabashed, watch her long, toned legs disappear beneath the short skirt she wore, the slight gleam of sweat shining over her dark skin. It had been a long night, imagining what those legs would feel like wrapped around him; each time he got the chance to see Sara, the desire to find out only grew. He had been thrilled when she’d finally agreed to come back to his place for a drink after the movie.

“You lied to me,” she announced from where she stood in front of one of his bookshelves. Before he could question her, Sara turned with a DVD case in her hand. It took a moment to recognize the packaging for *The Fugitive*. “This is totally worth stealing. Harrison Ford is the best actor ever.”

“I don’t disagree,” Cam said, carrying two bottles into the living room. “Would you be impressed if I had the entire Harrison Ford *oeuvre*?” He gestured to the top shelf. “You’re welcome to steal any that you like.”

Her gaze followed his finger, and he almost laughed at the childlike excitement lighting her face. “Okay, that’s it, I’m moving in. My dad made me leave almost my whole collection behind because he said he was too old to start having to buy them all again.” Turning around, she took the beer he offered and added, “Which is total BS because the man is never going to die. He’s got more energy than a dozen power plants. I have no idea how he does it.”

“Well, now I know where you get it from.” Cam watched as she tilted her head back to swallow the liquid. When she lowered the bottle, he noticed a single stray drop had escaped. It glistened on the corner of her mouth, transfixing him. They had shared a few brief goodbye kisses before, but he hadn’t yet initiated one besides that. She must have noticed him staring, because her tongue darted out to wipe the drop from her bottom lip.

That did not help. It only gave him more to think about. Unconsciously, he took a step forward. She tilted her head slightly, looking up at him with sly eyes, as though daring him to make his move.

What the hell, Cam thought. It wasn’t like him to back down from a challenge.

She moved at the same time he did, coming forward as his mouth descended. Her breath was warm against his cheek, but all he could taste was the sweet tang of her tongue as she parted her lips, inviting him in without hesitation. Though no other parts of their bodies touched, Cam felt wrapped in heat, more so than the sultry air had done outside. His head was spinning by the time they parted.

“About time,” Sara murmured.

Cam pulled her against him, eager to feel her firm flesh and soft curves against his own harder planes. He realized in a distant way that she was the perfect height for him; her body fit with his like she had been made to occupy that space. She tilted her head expectantly, but before he touched his mouth to hers, he unclasped the clip in her hair, allowing it to fall over her shoulders.

“It’s hot,” she complained, though a smile ghosted over her full lips.

“It is.” He drew his fingers down her neck and over her bare shoulder, before tracing the thin ties keeping her shirt in place. Her damp skin glowed in the overhead light, and her eyes were bright as they tracked his touch. “But you’re beautiful.” He leaned forward, inhaling the scent of the lingering summer night in her hair, and kissed the smooth skin at the curve of her neck.

Her soft sigh as she licked a teasing path along his jaw tickled below his ear. “I wasn’t sure you were that interested,” she confessed. “You seemed more interested in arguing with that produce guy at Harmon’s than asking me out. I thought I was going to have to shift into a giant pineapple in order to get your attention.”

“Arguing with the produce guy was merely an excuse not to leave the area. I was more interested in you than anything he had there,” Cam said, between kisses. Just the way her skin felt and tasted was enough to make him a little heady. He took her by the upper arms and began guiding her backwards to the couch. “That, and he was a dick. Did you see what he was trying to pass off as fresh?”

Her laughter rang out, clear and strong. “Yeah, I definitely see pineapples in our future.” Her teeth caught his bottom lip as she slipped a hand beneath the hem of his shirt, nails catching along his side. “Just name your fruit. I aim to please.”

“Hmm.” Cam lowered her to the couch and knelt between her legs. He pulled the knot of her halter free, the silken fabric falling to expose her chest. He could only stare at her, consuming every detail and hording it. The caramel complexion of her skin, the slightly darker shade of her nipples, the taut roundness of her breasts. “I like fruit. Something I can lick.” He ran his tongue down her neck. “Nibble on.” He scraped his teeth across her nipple, a thrill going through him as she moaned. “Suck on.”

“Do that again.”

With a crooked grin, Cam obliged, though his mouth slid to her other breast to fulfill her desire. Sara arched back, eyes fluttering shut as her hair spilled down her spine, and she coiled one long leg around his hips, using him as an anchor in order to bring her body

closer to his. The motion pushed her skirt up, exposing the taut muscle of her thighs and the black line of her bikini briefs.

“I think I’m going to like it here in Delta.”

His hand sneaked under her skirt to massage her thigh. “I think I’m going to like having you here.”

He slid his thumb along the outline of her briefs, tracing it but not yet delving beneath the thin material. She moaned, spreading her legs wider, and his cock jumped in response to the wordless invitation. Desperate to taste the sweet heat of her mouth, he kissed a trail up her body to claim her lips, as he continued to tease her with his thumb.

Tiny whimpers from her throat made his lips vibrate, growing in volume and intensity until Sara finally pulled away, flushed and panting. She stared at him with eyes nearly black, then let go of his shoulder in order to skim fingertips over the planes of his face. Cam held still as she leaned forward, and his eyes shut when her mouth made contact with his skin. It took everything he had not to shudder in pleasure at the feather touches, and when they disappeared, he opened his eyes again, almost disappointed she had stopped.

“I think *you’re* beautiful,” Sara breathed. “Will you let me go with you some time when you go out to the desert?”

Cam paused, a little surprised that she had asked. Even though she had grown up in a very different world, with her family living in a mixed environment, he thought she understood what he meant, what a holy place the desert was for him. After studying her steady eyes for a moment, he realized she did understand. She understood very well.

“Yes.” He took her hand and kissed each finger in turn. “I’d like that. We can go out tonight for a bit, if you’d like. Not to the desert, but there’s plenty of open space here.”

Sara smiled. Trailing her hand along his jaw, she stood and slipped around Cam, discarding her shirt as she toed off her shoes. The skirt and panties came next, and all the while she was walking, heading toward the back door. She only stopped when she’d pushed it open, glancing back to meet his curious gaze.

“Don’t take too long,” she said. In the next breath, her muscles rippled, limbs shortening, skin darkening, until Cam was left looking at the sleekest black hawk he had ever seen.

Cam shed his clothes quickly, unable to take his eyes off her as she hovered near the door, her powerful wings keeping her just above his porch. He felt his muscles change first, his skin stretching tight across his new limbs, before a full coat of fur covered him from snout to tail. He shook, as though he was trying to dry himself after an unexpected bath, becoming reacquainted with the form he only used rarely, at his most private moments. The reflection of the mountain lion stared back at him from the glass door, and he trotted out of the house into the clear night, reaching for Sara playfully with one large paw.

She darted beyond his reach, one graceful wing swiping across his nose, before swooping out to perch on the eave of his shed. Obsidian eyes turned to him, and Cam knew even if he hadn’t seen her shift himself, he would have recognized her. The same intelligent spirit gleamed in the black depths, a sparkle of life that made him crave to know even more of her. He padded closer, and Sara cocked her head as she watched his approach. When he’d reached the shed, she opened her wings and took to the sky.

He bounded forward, his sharp eyes able to follow her, even against the darkness. She swooped lower, almost within reach once again, but she was too fast, even for his sharp reflexes. He jumped into the air, claws retracted, and missed her by a hair. The hawk’s scream shattered the night, and Cam could have sworn she was laughing at him.

Sara led him further from the house, circling above in tighter concentric rings. Once, she landed on the hard-packed earth and waited, watching, as he slowed his pace and crept close. Every second, he expected her to take flight again, but she never moved, not until he was practically on his belly in front of her.

Lifting a broad wing, Sara extended it toward him until the soft feathers at the tip brushed along his jowls. Her eyes remained fixed on him, even when they began to lighten, the feathers extending to form fingers. After she transformed back into her

human form, she reached out with her other hand, massaging the strong muscles of his neck.

“Thank you,” she breathed.

Cam crept forward, placing a paw on her chest to gently push her to the soft grass. She fell back without releasing him, her long hair framing her face. He put both paws against her shoulders, pinning her, before shifting back into a man. His mouth was near hers, and he could see her eyes in the silver moonlight.

“Thank *you*.”

* * *

The new house was ready for Sara by morning, but this welcome was far less pleasant than the one on Marshall Street had been. Cam was forced to watch from the shadows as Josh brought Sara in, the desire to step out and show her everything he had done to make this a home eating him up. The only thing that helped was watching her profile when she leaned over to smell the fresh bread. Because he knew she would understand who had given it to her.

It also helped to remember the good times. He was an expert at picking and choosing which memories of Sara to tide him through the dark night, but here, in the house that she had chosen, he was stuck reliving the beginning. The first night that had been *more* than just one night. She had stayed with him all the next day, and the next evening as well. He was almost ready to devote his entire life to her then; he became completely ready to devote his entire life to her sometime within the week after that.

He was still devoted to her now, though with time ticking away, she barely acknowledged him, and very rarely spoke to him. When he was downstairs, she haunted the second floor, only creeping into the backyard when Cam was out or locked in his own room. He couldn't live like this. The first week he had been patient, he understood, and he had Josh to help. The second week, his patience fizzled, but he still understood. And now it was the end of the third week, almost a full month since they found her in that basement, and he didn't understand anything anymore.

Cam stood outside her bedroom door, listening to her sleep. Josh was in the shower, and Cam knew he could be in there for a very long time. Josh liked long showers, and this was his only chance to have any time for himself. But every second Cam stood outside her door hesitating was a second he lost.

He didn't want much. He wanted to hold her. He wanted to smell her hair, he wanted to feel her heart against his hand, he wanted to listen to her breathe, and after two impossibly long, painful years, he wanted to be close to her. She didn't mean to hurt him, it really wasn't about *him* at all, but jealousy was a bitter bile in the back of his throat.

He held his hand in front of his face, watching his fingers shorten slightly and turn a lighter shade. Three freckles dotted the knuckle on his index finger. He knew this body as well as he knew his own. If Sara woke up—and he had no intention of waking her—she wouldn't be able to sense a difference at all.

Chapter Ten

Josh ran his fingers under the water, waiting for it to warm. He only wanted to stand under the spray and see exactly how big their hot water heater was. Sara had had a long day, and he suspected she would sleep straight through the night. After he stood under the spray until his skin turned a bright shade of pink, he planned to make himself several sandwiches and enjoy some quiet time before sleep overtook him.

Maybe I should check on Sara one more time.

Josh shook his head. He did not need to check on Sara. She was asleep, and she did not need him to hover over her twenty-four hours a day. Besides, she knew where to find him if she needed something.

What about her stomach?

“There’s nothing I can do about that,” he murmured, ready to step into the welcoming water.

You’ll feel better if you look in on her.

Josh wondered if he was actually going insane. The urge to check on her constantly didn’t worry him, but the innate, undeniable sense he had to do something to fix her did. Even after a month, he couldn’t shake this persistent notion.

He wasn’t surprised when he tied a towel around his waist to go back into the hall. It always took at least three attempts before he could leave her in peace and find a little of his own.

He *was* surprised when he stepped out of the bathroom. Because he didn’t expect to see himself opening Sara’s bedroom door.

Josh reacted without thinking, launching himself across the hall and pushing Cam away from the door. He poked his head into the bedroom to see if Sara had been disturbed, but she was still deeply asleep. Shutting the door, he rounded on his double and hissed, “What the fuck do you think you’re doing?”

Cam straightened, but didn't shift back. It wasn't the first time Josh had addressed his own face, but it was the first time where it wasn't a post-coital game instigated by Sara. And though he had asked the question, he knew exactly what was going through Cameron's mind. At least, he recognized the need.

"Get out of the way, Josh." It was a plea, as much as an instruction. "I have to do this."

Josh planted himself firmly in front of the door. "No. You're *not* going in there. Especially not looking like that."

"You can't stop me."

Josh tensed. Cam was stronger than him, and they both knew it, even if Cam didn't shift into some big animal with horrible teeth and claws. He wanted to think it wouldn't come to a physical altercation, but he had never seen that particular look in Cam's eye before. Or heard the low determination in his voice.

"Cam, think about what you're doing. Have you really thought about this?"

"I've done nothing but think of it," he hissed. "I think of how I have to tiptoe in the shadows, staying out of Sara's way so I don't scare her any more than she already is. I think of how she crawls into your bed every night, how she lets *you* hold her, and comfort her, and love her. And then I think of how I can't even hold her hand, or touch her cheek, or push back her hair, all because she can't stand the sight of me. So yes, I really have thought about this."

"She's scared of you because she doesn't think she can trust you right now," Josh countered, frustrated. "How much damage do you think you'll do if you pull this stunt? How much do you think it'll hurt her?"

Cam's gaze flickered over Josh's shoulder at the closed door. There was no mistaking the longing in his eyes; Josh saw it in his own every time he looked in the mirror. "She's not going to know."

"Maybe she won't. Maybe you can get away with lying to her just this once. But what if she wakes up? Dammit, Cam, she, of all people, will know the difference."

"And you, of all people, should know why I need to at least take that gamble."

Josh wanted to back down. He wanted to let Cam have the one thing that would make him happy, because that's all he ever wanted for Cameron. But the risk was too high. Cam still had a chance to reach Sara again, but not if he lied to her.

"I'm doing this for you, Cam. You may not believe me now, but you'll see—"

The blow came out of the blue. Considering how highly strung Cam was, Josh should have anticipated it. As it was, he barely had time to duck his head as Cam swung, and the fist that would have smashed into his jaw slammed into his mouth instead. The force split his lip, and the coppery taste of blood hit his tongue.

Josh didn't feel anything—not physical pain or the emotional shock of an attack he never thought would happen. But he did react instantly. Josh balled up his fist and struck Cam in the nose. When the other man doubled over, blood dripping on the carpet, he brought his knee up and connected with Cam's midsection. It was a cheap shot, but he didn't want to risk catching Cam's fist with his face again.

"Cameron." It was a plea and a warning—but not a threat. Josh had nothing to threaten him with. "You don't want to let her see us like this."

Cam didn't look up. He stayed hunched over, sliding down the wall and sinking to the floor until his head rested in his hands and his fingers were knotted in his hair. His knuckles were white, the blood red where it dripped to the floor, and as Josh watched, his form changed, the shoulders broadening, the brown hair lightening.

But still, Cam didn't look up.

"I just want to see her," he whispered.

Josh wiped the back of his hand over his lip absently, smearing the blood on his mouth. Unwrapping the towel from around his waist, he knelt beside Cam. "I know you do. I know." He gripped the back of Cam's head. "Look up. You're getting blood all over yourself." Josh gently wiped the blood from Cam's face, then held the towel against his nose. "But she talked to you again today. You had a good conversation. I know it doesn't seem like much, but it was. It was a huge step for her."

"We talked about *cooking*." His voice dripped with bitterness. "She still won't even accept my offer to make her favorite food. Yeah, that was a really big step."

“But you *talked*. It’s not all you want, or need, but Christ, Cam. You *talked* to her. Think about all those nights you couldn’t sleep because you were missing her so much, and what you would have given for one more ten minute conversation about food.”

Though he still looked discontent, the memories Josh evoked were stronger than Cam’s frustration. There were too many of those instances when either of them would wake up and find the other staring up at the ceiling or worse; Josh still vividly remembered how long it had taken them to invade the space Sara had always filled in their bed. And just because Josh happened to be in a bed with her now, didn’t make it any better. The world only felt fully right when the three of them were together.

In spite of his assurances to Cam, he didn’t know if the world would ever feel fully right again.

“What have you talked to her about?” Cam asked. “Tell me she at least trusts you enough to talk about what happened.”

“She’s told me a little bit,” Josh said, focusing on the blood and not Cam’s eyes. How could a nose and a lip shed so much blood? “We’ve talked about what happened the day they took her. About her scars. Where they came from. She told me what the shifter did to her. How they used to...put her in a cage with him. To fight, except she wasn’t strong enough to defend herself.”

Cam swore under his breath, his face twisting into a pained grimace. “No wonder she hates me.”

“We need to make her understand that wasn’t you. I think she knows it intellectually, but she doesn’t *really* know it. That’s why we shouldn’t give her a single reason to doubt you, to doubt who you are. Not one.”

“So what am I supposed to do? Call her every day and talk about nothing until she agrees to see me?”

“Cam, I don’t know. We’re just sort of...making this up as we go.” He lowered the stained towel. “I think she’s sick.”

Cam’s head snapped up. “What? How? What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know. She won’t eat. I didn’t realize it at first, because she was eating when we went out. Except, she was barely eating anything at all. She’s constantly holding her stomach. She says she feels *weird*. Is it because of what she went through? An aftereffect of the sedatives? The standard flu? I would take her to the doctor, but it’s not safe.” He sat back on his heels, his hands falling to his side helplessly. “She probably should be in a hospital.”

“Is she running a temperature? Or getting sick?”

“No. Her temperature is normal, and she does keep the food down when she eats.”

“What about other pains? Headaches, her eyes hurting, fingers or toes tingling?”

“I...I don’t know,” Josh admitted. “Whatever she’s experiencing, physically, she won’t talk about it. The only reason I know about the stomach pain is because I’ve noticed her discomfort and tried to ask her about it.”

“She’s mentioned that when we’ve talked about food, too,” Cam said. “I’ve always thought it was just an excuse to get out of having to face me over dinner.” His frustration had been replaced with a more focused concern, his eyes dark with worry. “I know you said she hasn’t shifted since we got her out, but has she said anything about how long it’d been since she’d shifted at all?”

“She mentioned that it’s been a long time. She stopped as a defense mechanism, I think.” He looked up. “Do you think that’s making her ill?”

“No, I *know* it is. Damn it.” Pushing himself to his feet, Cam wiped at his nose almost distractedly, his brow furrowing as he stared at Sara’s closed door. “You have to get her to shift, Josh. The longer she goes without, the worse it’s going to get.”

“How?” Josh looked up from the floor. “They took her because she’s a shifter. From her story, I’m sure she was targeted. She mentioned doctors. Clipboards. If they were doing something because of her abilities, what can I do?”

“Have you asked her to do it?”

“I haven’t thought to,” Josh said softly.

Cam grabbed Josh’s arm and hauled him up, pushing him toward the door. “Go. Ask her to do it. Now.”

Josh didn't even think to argue. Yes, she was finally asleep. No, he didn't want to frighten or upset her. But this wasn't like the earlier dispute. It wasn't selfish need prompting Cam to issue orders; it was genuine concern. "Fine. I will. But wait out here."

Releasing his hold, Cam stepped back, giving wide berth for Josh to go inside. "Shifting is the important thing. Just tell me what happens."

Josh didn't wake her immediately; naked and bloody probably would not contribute to her peace of mind. He pulled on his sweats and found another towel to wipe his lips until they were clean. Hopefully, she wouldn't notice the swelling.

Easing himself to her side on the mattress, he watched her sleep for a few seconds before touching her face gently. "Sara? Sara, sweetheart, wake up."

She sighed in her sleep and turned into the touch, her lashes fluttering open. "Hey."

"Hey. I'm sorry. I wanted to let you sleep, but I need to ask you to do something for me."

"Is something wrong?"

"No. Well, that's what I need to find out." He brushed a strand of hair out of her eyes. "Sara, will you shift for me?"

She jerked as if she'd received an electrical shock. "Why?"

Josh hesitated, remembering what he told Cam about not lying to her. But she was already agitated, and he didn't want to make it worse. "I was looking at some of my old notebooks. And I had a note about the detriments of not shifting. How it could make you sick, like the stomach pain you've been complaining about. Does that sound familiar?"

Slowly, Sara shook her head. "But that can't be it. It's just...I'm not used to the food. That's all. It's not about shifting."

"Maybe it's the food. But didn't you say they were feeding you broth? Sara, you haven't touched anything but soup and the occasional sandwich in the past three weeks. Why do you think it can't be the shifting?"

"Because..." her eyes were luminous, shifting sideways as she worked for some kind of answer, "...it can't," she finished lamely.

"It can't? Have you tried to shift at all in the past three weeks?"

“No. I don’t want to.”

“I know. But I’m worried.”

The lines between her brows softened, and she fell back against the pillow. “You worry too much.”

“I probably do. Can you humor me?” He smiled, as playfully as he could with his split lip. “I’ll pay you back the favor.”

She still looked unsure, but her sleepy state made her more susceptible to his persuasion, and she nodded after only a few moments. Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath, inhaling through her nose, and Josh pulled back, waiting for the change to come.

It didn’t.

The line returned, and Sara’s breathing quickened, her lips parting as she concentrated a little harder. The anxious knots in his stomach constricted as the seconds passed and nothing happened. When she finally opened her eyes and spoke, her whispered words weren’t even a surprise.

“I can’t.”

Josh wondered if her pain was the result of the physical change she couldn’t undergo, or the unconscious anguish she couldn’t even acknowledge.

“What can I do to help?” he asked, knowing he wasn’t the one to give it to her. That was Cam’s job.

Her tongue darted to moisten her dry lips. “Do you have to? I mean...maybe it’s a good thing I can’t shift.”

He thought about Cam, his concern that bordered on panic. “It’s not a good thing, Sara.” A thought occurred to him, but he shied away from it at first. It was one of the few areas of her life he never felt entirely welcome, though she never deliberately shut him out. “When was the last time you...changed into the hawk?”

“The day they took me. When I tried to escape. After that, I wasn’t going to let them see. I wouldn’t do that.”

“I understand.” He picked up her hand, wrapping his fingers around hers. “But it’s not a good thing you can’t shift. It’s not a good thing they took that away from you. It’s

hurting you, Sara, but more than that, you need to shift to be happy. What are you going to do if you can never shift into a black hawk again?" Josh lifted her hand to his mouth, pressing a long kiss to her fingers before he added, "I think you should let Cam help you."

She jerked, but Josh kept his grip firm, not letting her pull away. "I'll do it myself. I'll try harder."

"Is that the way it works, Sara? Be honest with me. Be honest with yourself."

Sara fell silent, her lashes ducking in guilt. Even though he'd been a part of their lives for five years now, there were still aspects only she and Cam were privy to. Josh had never pressed; their spirituality was something he wasn't sure he'd ever understand. It didn't make him happy, but he'd accepted it. Perhaps now that would finally work in their favor.

"If I can't shift," she finally said, "then there's no reason for them to come after me again." She looked up. "If I can't shift, I'm safe."

"I know why you think that's true, but it's not. If they took you because they wanted to know about shifters, this wouldn't remove their curiosity. In fact, they'd..." Josh stopped, momentarily overwhelmed by the logical path he was following. "You're going to be safe. I promise you that. But not because you deny an important part of your very existence."

She offered a wan smile. "I would've thought you'd like it if I was more like you."

"No. I never wanted you to be anything except who you are."

Her eyes searched his; he wondered what it was she saw.

"You won't leave if I do this?"

He squeezed her hand. "I won't. I'm going to call Cam in now, okay?"

She looked to the door, swallowing once before nodding. "Don't leave," she repeated.

"Never." He knew Cam was waiting breathlessly on the other side of the door. Josh hoped he had the good sense to clean his face while he was waiting. He barely raised his voice at all. "Cam? Can you come in here, please?"

Chapter Eleven

Her nerves were on fire the second she realized she was going to yield to Josh's request. It felt like her guts were trying to crawl out through her skin, trying to tear her apart from the inside out, and there was nothing she could do about it but sit and stare at the closed door, waiting for him to come in.

Not him, she corrected. Cam.

Her heart pounded a little bit harder.

He's not the same. He's not the same. You've talked to him on the phone, and he's always funny and nice and he's not the same Cam you've seen for the past two years.

Then the door creaked open. He stepped inside.

And he was the same. He looked the same. And the memories of savage claws ripping into her seconds before his face melted back into its familiar form were exactly the same.

She jerked back against the headboard, but Josh's arm flew out to catch her across the chest. It effectively pinned her to the bed, though Sara knew she could break free if she wanted. She could get free, and she could run, and...

Except her only route of escape was through the door. Which Cam now stood in front of.

Sara froze. She couldn't do it.

She stared, unblinking, facing the mask of the man who'd been the source of so much of her pain. His hair was longer than she remembered, hanging almost to his shoulders, and he'd grown out a moustache and goatee. His nose looked red, like he'd been blowing it a lot, and the clothes looked more like something Josh would wear. For a brief, hysterical moment, the thought that the two men were even starting to dress alike made her want to giggle out loud, but Sara stifled it, transfixed by the clarity of Cam's blue eyes.

Those were different. Oh God, those were the eyes she knew.

“Hi,” Cam greeted, almost hesitantly. She expected him to approach the bed, but he kept his distance. He shot one nervous glance towards Josh before asking, “Do you need some help?”

Her gaze jumped to Josh. He didn’t expect her to answer, did he? But when he didn’t speak, when he only regarded her without removing his arm from her waist, she knew he was going to force her to respond.

The words choked in her throat, and Sara licked her bottom lip in an attempt to make the passage easier. “Josh asked me to shift,” she managed. The men exchanged a glance. “And I can’t.”

Cam nodded, still hovering by the door. “Did you ever have to learn Strahan’s Breathing Technique when you were a kid? It was something we learned in Kindergarten to help us focus. You know how kids can be at that age.”

Sara shook her head. It was easier than speaking.

He shrugged. “It must be a regional thing. I think that’ll be a good place to start.”

Josh pulled her closer. “Cam, why don’t you sit down over here?” He pointed to the chair on his side of the bed.

Cam nodded, hurrying over to the chair, giving the bed a wide berth. He sat down, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees. “It’s a really simple technique. You don’t have to close your eyes if you don’t want to, but it helps. First you take a deep breath and hold it for ten seconds.”

There were pros and cons to closing her eyes. She’d welcome anything to make this easier, but Sara’s every instinct screamed at her not to lower her guard around this man. On the other hand, Josh was there, and if she couldn’t see Cam’s face, it was easier to focus on his voice, easier to ignore the panic that made her world bleed red.

Sara sat up against the headboard. Without looking away from Cam, she slowly shut her eyes and inhaled.

“That’s good,” Josh said.

“Now, we want to clear your mind. When you exhale, focus on how you feel when you breathe, what your lungs are doing. With your next breath, just focus on how it feels to inhale.”

Cam’s voice sounded softer with her eyes closed, like the caress of a warm summer wind. Following his instruction was frighteningly simple, and when she took in a second breath, she loosened the fingers she’d had crushed around Josh’s, the sensation of her chest rising and falling hypnotic.

He coaxed her through the breathing exercise for what could have been several minutes. His voice was lulling, even soothing, and soon, she could feel Josh’s breath begin to echo hers, like he was following the same directions.

“Now I want you to think about the first form you ever shifted into. I want you to think about every single detail. What did it feel like to shift? What did you look like? Recreate it.”

It was a memory she had relived more than once. Josh had been fascinated by the stories of her childhood, and even Cam had been amused and more than a little impressed when he heard how early she’d done her first shift.

She was two, and the world was a loud place, with laughter and the television blaring in the background and her father playing Santana’s ‘Abraxas’ over and over and over again. And there was Tofu curled up under the coffee table, her long black tail swishing around the wooden legs.

It was easy to crawl over, easy not to get stopped, not so easy to actually catch the cat’s tail before Tofu woke up and leapt out of the way, jumping to the window ledge and glaring down at Sara with narrowed eyes. Her mother went out into the kitchen, and her father trailed afterward, and all Sara could see was the cat’s black tail, sweeping along the wall beneath the ledge.

The weight of Josh’s arm disappeared, and the mattress moved beneath her bottom. It took Sara a moment to realize that the bed hadn’t shifted.

She had.

Sara immediately backed into Josh's body, trying to wedge herself in the space between his back and the bed.

"Sara." Cam's voice startled her, and she ducked against the pillows.

"Hey," Josh murmured, lifting her and repositioning her on the bed. "Be careful there."

"Sara, don't tense up and be frightened. You'll lose your concentration. Look."

Her nose quivered as Cam's distinct smell faded, replaced by the scent of another cat.

Opening her eyes felt odd this time, especially with her perspective unexpectedly altered. Josh's legs were mountains in front of her, while on the chair sat a large ginger tom. With blue eyes.

Her tail flicked.

Cam only blinked.

She should have been terrified. Just because she couldn't see his face didn't mean she didn't know it was Cam sitting there. And her captors had made him—the other him—shift in front of her all the time. That was his whole purpose for being there, she'd reasoned.

However, they'd never had him shift into an everyday, normal housecat. This wasn't scary. She'd seen him, fought him, even flown with him, in guises more dangerous than this one.

Her tail flicked again.

Cam dropped to his haunches, wiggled his back legs, and then sprang across to the foot of the bed. He walked up Josh's legs, coming to a rest on Josh's stomach.

"Thanks, Cam. You weigh a ton," Josh said, but didn't push him away.

From his perch, Cam looked down at her and blinked. He chattered softly—a sound not quite a meow—then dropped his head to rub it against Josh's chest.

Sara tilted her head. It looked appealing, especially when Josh lifted his hand to begin scratching Cam behind the ears. But his lap looked small, and there would be no avoiding Cam if she attempted to get any closer. There would be the warmth of their

bodies, yes, but even as that called to her, it also raised an iota of fear, and she began to back away, her paws awkward as she navigated the soft terrain.

The side of the bed came sooner than she anticipated. Her back paw met open air, and she tumbled over the edge of the mattress.

By the time she hit the floor, she was back in her human form.

Josh was beside her in an instant, giving her his hand to help her to her feet. Cam the cat watched her from the bed inquisitively. The serious look on his face was almost enough to make her smile; she had never seen an expression like that on a cat before.

“What happened?” Josh asked. “Did you hurt yourself?”

“Only my ego.” She rubbed at her bottom. “And maybe my ass. Falling off the bed is not my favorite way to get rug burn.”

“It’s not mine either.” He sat on the edge of the bed, and Cam immediately nudged his arm. “Did Cam startle you?” To Sara’s surprise, Josh scooped him up. Cam did not like to be handled when he shifted, especially when he was so small. But Josh cradled him easily, rubbing his ears. “You have to admit, he’s not very scary like this.”

He wasn’t—hadn’t been. And he was even less so now that she was five feet taller than him. “I lost my concentration,” she said. “I can probably do it again.”

She sat on the floor, unwilling yet to go up onto the bed. There was no room for flight up there, at least, not without falling on her ass again. It also brought her down to the level of Josh’s lap and Cam’s steady eyes, and for a long minute, she gazed at him.

“You never used to like to be petted,” she said to Cam.

He chattered again, his eyes drooping as Josh continued to stroke him. “He’s not always a big fan of it, but after you...when he shifted, we both ended up being pretty lonely. He didn’t have anybody to shift with, and I didn’t want to just pretend there wasn’t an animal roaming through the house. So, we gradually worked out a compromise.”

It wasn’t a concept Sara was familiar with. She had always had shifters around her, always had somebody she trusted to share it with, from her family all the way up to Cam.

Until she'd been abducted, the notion of being alone had been a foreign one, especially when she took another form.

Slowly, she stretched out an arm, fingers skimming over the ruff of Cam's neck. "I never thought about how Cam was coping being alone," she confessed quietly. "Well, I did in the beginning. Before I stopped trying to think of Delta."

Cam closed his eyes blissfully as they both petted him. "He wasn't entirely alone. I helped when I could. People were constantly coming over, and they offered to help in any way they could, but he just sort of shut down without you."

The coarse hair at her fingertips brought back other, stronger memories than the ones that had driven Sara away. Nights spent under the desert moon, curled into the body heat of his chosen spiritual form, his tongue rough against her skin when he would absentmindedly lick her. Or soaring high above the dry earth only to come diving down at a breakneck speed to land on his outstretched wrist.

Cam had always said she was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. In any form.

"I haven't shifted except to fight for my life since I left Delta." Her voice was hushed, her eyes burning from unshed tears. When she realized her hand was shaking, she withdrew it, tucking it into her lap as Cam opened his eyes to see where she had gone. "There was this cage. Not with bars, but with this fine mesh, like a screen. So I couldn't shift into something small enough to get out of it, I guess. They put me in there to see how I would react to different situations, what form I would shift into, how long it would take me to do it, how long it would take me to give up."

The pain had returned to her stomach, and when she went to rub it, both Cam and Josh followed the movement with their eyes. If it was possible for a cat to frown, Cam did it.

"I finally figured out that they didn't want me dead," Sara finished. "If I didn't shift, they called off the fight before it got too bad. So I stopped."

"That was a smart move. It's hard to do something when your instincts are telling you it's a bad idea. But I think you need to shift longer. You take your time. I've got Cam, so you can stay there if you like, or come back up to the bed."

She looked to Cam. Some of his earlier contentment seemed to have fled, his tawny body more tense than when she and Josh had been petting him. She didn't want to shift again, but the pains had disappeared while she'd been in feline form. Josh wouldn't try and force her hand if he didn't believe it was well and truly necessary.

But as smart as Josh was, and as much as he'd learned about shifters, there was somebody else in the room who knew even more.

"Is he right, Cam?" she asked softly. "Do I need to do this?"

Cam opened his mouth wide, like he was about to yawn, and yowled. He jerked his head, the sound shifting in tone as he moved, and his blue eyes flashed. The inflection rose and fell, and Sara knew even though he couldn't form words, he was still talking to her. Josh only smiled.

"I think that means yes."

Her smile was small but genuine. "Me too."

Sara closed her eyes. Though she didn't have Cam's breathing exercise to help her focus this time, she wasn't sure she needed it. She was calmer now than she'd been the first time, and she'd shifted already. She could do this. She just needed to stop thinking about it so much. It wasn't a parlor trick to be done on command; it was a part of what she was, a muscle waiting—yearning—to be stretched.

This time, she was far more aware of the change when it came. She felt the prickle at the back of her neck where the energy seemed to collect before dispersing across the length of her skin. She felt the muscles constrict and shorten, sinew stretching anew to form limbs both familiar and not. She felt the absence of cold as her body took on its fresh coat, ebony fur sleek and soft.

And when she opened her eyes again, the world had moved with her, furniture looming larger, sounds and smells gone keen. She looked up and saw both of them gazing at her. Waiting.

Leaping into the air and onto the bed was effortless.

Sara did a slow circle, testing her new form, making sure it wasn't going to disappear on her at the first sign of conflict. She came to a stop facing Josh and rubbed up against

his side to assure him she was all right. The simple action brought her level with Cam. He didn't flinch from her approach, didn't move, and she regarded him for several seconds before realizing he wasn't going to. He didn't want to frighten her.

Staving off her sense of trepidation, Sara ducked her head. Her whiskers tickled against his, making her nose twitch, and she paused, aware of the caution holding both of them back. Slowly, she opened her mouth and licked along his neck.

Cam lifted his head, pointing his nose to the ceiling, and began to purr unevenly. Small cracks and pops came from his throat, and his entire body vibrated. He remained still except for his twitching ears and tail. Josh leaned against the headboard, and she expected him to stroke one or both of them, but he folded his hands against his stomach.

Cam's reaction emboldened her. Sara lengthened the strokes of her tongue, gliding over the fur, feeling his muscles rippling beneath the surface. Once, she caught on a small knot, and she closed her jaws, catching it gently between her teeth and tugging until it was smooth again. Cam lowered his head, making it harder to duck beneath him without stronger contact, but Sara continued for a few more minutes before choosing to stop.

She sat back on her haunches, her tail flicking behind her. It was the most relaxed she'd felt in far too long, more relaxed even than waking in Josh's arms. The irony that it came with Cam did not escape her.

Cam stood, stretching his hind legs so he could reach her without actually taking a step. His nose quivered, his muzzle not quite touching hers. He froze, his gaze darting from her, to Josh, and back again, as though he was waiting for somebody to push him away. When nobody did, he opened his mouth to mimic her earlier action, sliding his rough tongue along the fur beneath her ear.

A shiver ran through her at the almost delicate touch. She hadn't transformed into cats very often before; the instinct to fly always overpowered others when the urge came on. But Cam had preferred it, and so she had played along on the odd occasion when he wanted more intimate company than just another shifter. She had forgotten how utterly satisfying something as simple as cleaning each other could be.

He pulled back after the first lick, watching to gauge her reaction. Sara rose and climbed up on Josh's lap, circling once before kneading the muscles of his thighs with her front paws. All the while, she kept an eye on Cam, aware that he was still so close. When she finished preparing her spot, she lay down and curled up, resting her head on Josh's stomach.

Cam still didn't move. So she flicked her tail at him. Just once.

Josh didn't flinch, even when Cam jumped on his legs. He watched them with half-closed, thoughtful eyes, and Sara would have loved to know what he was thinking. She knew watching them not only take on the appearance of animals, but some of the behavior as well, was weird for him, disquieting even. But he didn't seem tense beneath her, or uncomfortable. If anything, he seemed even more relaxed.

Cam slinked up Josh, his chest rubbing against Josh's leg. Her ears twitched back, following his slow approach. She felt him lay down, then the warmth of his belly seeped through her back as he curved his thick body around her more lithe form. He buried his nose in the fur behind her ear, his tongue moving over her in dainty strokes.

The purring started without thought. All Sara knew was how warm she was, how protected she felt, how soothing the rhythm of his licks were. She closed her eyes, focusing on her breathing, on Cam's, on Josh's heavy scent so near her nose. Within moments, she was asleep.

Chapter Twelve

Josh watched the two cats sleep for nearly an hour before he even attempted to move. It was odd looking at the giant tom and the more delicate girl and knowing inside their fragile bodies were the hearts, spirits and minds of his two lovers. In the very beginning, he hadn't been able to stand watching them shift and tried not to make an issue of the fact that he didn't want to see it. They had respected his wishes until he finally grew accustomed to it.

Now it seemed just as natural as breathing. They were his lovers, and at the moment, they were cats, and nothing could please him more. He knew Cam preferred the feline form to anything else, and shifting like that brought him a sense of comfort and peace. And clearly, Sara needed this.

Josh almost felt sick with relief. Like all their compromises since they rescued her, it was far from perfect, but it was a step in the right direction. The three of them were again sharing a bed. Sara was sleeping deeply, without any apparent nightmares, and he thought she wouldn't be waking up at three in the morning to watch old sitcoms.

But he couldn't enjoy the moment for what it was. And he couldn't fall asleep with their warm weight pinning him to the bed, lulled by their steady, unceasing purrs.

Josh lifted them off his lap in turn, resisting the urge to pull them against his chest and simply hold them. As he set Cam down, the cat lifted his head and blinked inquisitively.

"Go back to sleep," Josh whispered, running his hand down Cam's soft body. Cam yawned and buried his nose between his paws, his eyes falling shut again.

He set Sara as close to Cam as he dared, and she naturally sought out his heat without opening her eyes. They curled around each other once again, and only the disparate coloring told where one body ended and the other began. A part of him wished they could stay that way forever, Sara's pain and Cam's desperation forgotten.

Josh reached for his laptop and turned it on, hoping to find a wireless signal to leech from. They hadn't been able to get their own connection—or any other utilities besides the most basic electricity and water—because of their concern for safety. But as soon as his computer booted up, he saw he had no need to worry. They were surrounded by a wireless cloud. Thankful for his good luck, he chose the strongest signal. He knew a web page that masked IP addresses. It wasn't totally secure, but that combined with his anonymous email and leeching from somebody else's signal would increase his security several times over.

As he expected, there were about a hundred emails waiting for him—from friends, family, work and concerned strangers from the forum. He didn't know when he'd get around to reading them, let alone answering them. His gut said never. They just didn't seem that important anymore.

Josh opened a new window, but his eyes were once more drawn to the sleeping cats. He had been turning the same information over in his mind all night. It had been so much of a distraction he couldn't even truly enjoy the interplay between Cam and Sara before they both fell asleep.

He bit his bottom lip thoughtfully, then began to type.

JD,

Are there any other places looking for Shifter research? Any places offering any grants?

J

Absently stroking Cam's back, he pressed send. JD responded in less than two minutes. He sometimes wondered if she had a medical condition that made it impossible for her to be away from her email for more than five minutes.

Hey,

Why? You looking for a job?

I've been thinking about you. Why haven't you called?

JD

Josh didn't miss the subtext of the question. His decision to stop active research after Sara disappeared had grated on JD, and she never lost the opportunity to let him know that.

JD,

I've had a few ideas for more study, but I doubt Iocor is going to give me another grant. What do you think?

Josh

Josh deemed that an acceptable lie, to join a long list of other acceptable lies.

Haha. Yeah, I don't think Iocor is going to offer you another grant. You know how they felt about your "questionable" ethics. You burned that bridge. On the other hand, your paper was groundbreaking. You might still have some clout if you tried. Jake owes me a favor.

The response was not at all unexpected. Josh knew she'd try to work that angle. A part of him was even tempted to see if she could pull it off.

JD,

My so-called questionable ethics aren't going to change. I already had my chance to take it all back and "do the right thing" and I told Jake to fuck off. It doesn't matter how groundbreaking my paper was. But Iocor isn't the only game in town, is it?

Maybe Jake forgot the part where I actually told him where he could shove his ethics?

Josh

Cam lifted his head and stared at Josh without blinking. Josh knew what he would say if he could talk—turn off the damned laptop and go to sleep. Josh scratched behind Cam’s ear and shook his head.

“Maybe in a minute,” he muttered.

Cam dropped his head again, but he didn’t close his eyes.

Heh. Doubtful. Unless you had something bigger to offer Jake to distract him. And we both know you do.

Her short message was like an arrow to his brain. Grimacing with pain, he contemplated not responding to her at all. This wasn’t going where he wanted it to go, and he didn’t want to have this fight again.

JD,

How many times do I have to tell you no, it’s never going to happen? Look, I have some things that could use further study. Can you help me? I’ll probably do it on my own anyway, but I’d like to at least pretend my life work is worth something.

Josh

Josh never understood how JD could suggest he use Cam and Sara to advance his own career. Not use his connections, or his unique situation to provide an insight never before published—but actually use Cam and Sara as subjects. She often made the suggestion in the same breath she used to admonish him for his unethical behavior.

Josh,

Try Donovan IND. They’ve got a new grant.

JD

That didn't seem right. Donovan wasn't a full-time research institution, though he had heard rumors they were staffing biologists and a few chemists. But he had been out of the loop for some time. After enjoying the heights of superstardom in his community of researchers, he hit the ground hard. There was nothing to sustain him after people realized he didn't plan to leave the shifters' community in Delta, and then he didn't even have the heart to fight for himself after Sara disappeared.

Josh set aside his computer and watched Cam and Sara. He didn't regret it. Much. It didn't seem like a brilliant idea to throw out eight years of education, three years of low paying—or no paying—internships, and two years of kowtowing to every asshole with money just so he could write and publish his own research. But he never felt he had a choice.

Sometimes he wondered if Cam and Sara knew what it cost him. But then, what did it matter if they did know? It wouldn't change the fact that he'd make the same decision again, and again, and again. Even if maybe it was the wrong one. But that seemed to matter even less than the cost.

Josh made a show of turning off the laptop and getting ready for bed, hoping to satisfy Cam. It seemed to, but Josh couldn't see in the dark, so he had no way of knowing for sure. While their small, furry bodies vibrated and clicked beside him, like tiny cars with powerful engines, Josh thought about scientists, and doctors, and clipboards full of the very scribbling that could make, or break, a researcher. The very scribbling that had changed his life irrevocably.

* * *

The bar was a good, neutral place to meet—well, as neutral as they were likely to find anyway. It was obvious Cameron and Sara were more comfortable meeting him there than anywhere else, and he respected that. He was relieved they agreed to meet with him at all. They could have told him to fuck off, like most of the population of Delta, Utah, but they didn't. That was worth the price of a few beers.

His notebook was sitting near his hand, but he ignored it as they made small talk about the weather and traveling and movies over the first round of drinks. By the time the waitress brought another round, Josh felt like it was time to push forward with his actual purpose.

“I thought you might feel more comfortable if I just took notes, rather than recording the conversation,” Josh explained as he pulled the pen from his pocket.

Cameron and Sara exchanged a glance, and Josh got the distinct impression they shared more than merely a moment of attention. “Does this mean we should’ve brought our own notebook?” Sara said with a small smile.

Josh returned her smile. “Only if you intend to publish a paper about me.”

Leaning back, Cam rested an arm across the back of the seat. The stretch of his legs beneath the booth’s table brought them in closer proximity to Josh’s, though he didn’t move them away even after Josh met his gaze. “I think our intentions are a little more personal than that. This is the way this is going to work. You want to know about us? We think it’s only fair we get to know about you. So every time you get to ask a question, we get one, too.”

Sara’s smile broadened. “You get two answers for the price of one. I’d say that’s a pretty good deal.”

Josh hesitated, surprised by the deal they were offering. For one thing, it would prolong their meeting—though he wasn’t sure if that was a problem. There were worse ways to spend an evening than in Cameron and Sara’s company. For another thing, he couldn’t imagine why they would want to ask him anything. But he inclined his head. “That does sound like a pretty good deal.”

“Good. We go first. We’ll even start with an easy one. Favorite food.”

Josh frowned thoughtfully. “That’s not such an easy question. What does favorite mean? Is it the food I could eat every day for the rest of my life? Or maybe the food I always spend exorbitant amounts of money on whenever I go out to eat?” He sipped his beer. “Doesn’t matter, I suppose, since the answer to both questions is the same. Fajitas.”

Sara laughed. “Looks like this one likes to think too much.” She elbowed Cameron playfully. “Someone’s giving you a run for your money.”

“Food is a very serious matter,” Josh said, only a little defensively. He looked at the blank paper and wished he had thought to write down the questions that had been his obsession for the past three years. Now they refused to come. “I’m afraid my questions are a bit more difficult. When did you first realize your abilities, or have you always known?”

“Always known,” Sara answered without pause.

At her side, Cameron nodded in agreement. “It’s not something that needs pointing out to us. Think of it like...breathing. Not an autonomic response, but a part of you that just...is.”

Josh leaned forward, the pen flying across the smooth paper, recording every word they said. “Like breathing? So you have the ability as infants as well?”

Sara mirrored his position, her slim hand reaching across the table to stop his writing. “Someone’s cheating already,” she teased. “That was two questions in a row for you. It’s my turn now.” She didn’t wait for him to agree. “When you were a little kid, what did you dream about being when you grew up?”

It was difficult to shift modes and actually become a participant in the discussion. What did it matter what he wanted to be when he grew up? He was doing something nobody had even attempted to do in decades. “I...uh...well, I wanted to play the drums. In the symphony. I could keep a beat pretty well, and I liked to dress up, so it seemed like a good gig.”

“Cam plays piano,” Sara volunteered. “If you get him drunk enough, you can even get him to sing along.”

Cameron snorted and reached for his beer. “Don’t get me started on the shit you pull when you’re drunk. I don’t think Mr. Ames is looking to bag the *Playboy* crowd with this paper of his.”

Josh cleared his throat. “No, no. Not yet, anyway. But I’ll exhaust all avenues when it comes to publication. So, then, can you...shift as infants?” He frowned. “I hope this doesn’t count as cheating, but I have a follow-up question. Is shifting the proper term?”

Sara looked to Cameron, obviously expecting him to answer. Sipping at his beer, he took a moment, his eyes growing thoughtful as he pondered the question.

“Babies *can*,” he said. “They just usually don’t. You can’t take a form you don’t know exists, so most of us don’t do it until we become more cognizant of our surroundings.”

“I was two the first time I shifted,” Sara said.

“Which is early,” Cameron clarified.

“We had a cat named Tofu, and my parents wouldn’t let me play with her because they were afraid of me getting hurt. According to them, Tofu jumped up on the window ledge to get away from me when I tried to pull her tail. My mom went into the kitchen to get something, and when she came out, there were two Tofus on the ledge.” She laughed. “It took them forever to figure out which one was me.”

Josh laughed slightly, nervously. It was clearly a funny anecdote, but the thought of a little girl mimicking, shifting, *becoming* a cat made his stomach twist. He wrote swiftly, focusing on the words so they couldn’t see his eyes. After a moment, the discomfort passed, and he lifted his head again. “It sounds like you were a precocious girl.”

“*Were?*” Cameron only smiled when Sara jabbed at him in mock annoyance, reaching to grab her waist and pull her into his side. “Don’t judge anything by her standard,” he directed to Josh. “Sara’s one of a kind.”

“I’ll make a note of that,” Josh promised, but he didn’t need to be told she was one of a kind. She was the sort of woman who demanded a second look, and then a third, and a fourth, and not just because of her remarkable beauty, or even her strange ability to change her form.

There was no missing the devotion in her eyes when she looked to Cameron. “Your turn to ask a question.”

He smiled. “I think Mr. Ames is going to be wishing for another favorite food question after this one.” Draining the rest of his beer, he set down his mug and pushed it to the edge of the table for the waitress to refill. “Why us? You’ve been pretty persistent since hitting town which means this is important to you. I’m curious as to why.”

It felt like two questions to Josh. Why he was sitting in a bar with the two of them was a very different answer than why he was being persistent—or maybe, like the food question, it was all the same.

“This *is* very important to me. I know I don’t have to tell you how little is known in the scientific community about you. There are several reasons for this, I suppose, but none of them really matter. Nobody else is doing this work. Nobody else even wants to. And that’s not right. They’re scientists and that should be enough to...” Josh realized he was getting a little loud and stopped suddenly. He didn’t want them to think he just saw them as subjects of scientific perusal anyway.

And he couldn’t tell them why, out of everybody, he chose them. *I just like to look at you* was honest, but not necessarily appropriate.

His answer seemed to sober Sara, and while her gaze was still warm, there was something penetrating about it that testified to her intelligence, far more than her joking manner did. “You’re a romantic in a scientist’s clothing,” she mused.

“I think all scientists should be romantics,” Josh said softly. “But they’ve all turned into politicians and board members and stockholders.”

Cameron’s eyes never wavered. “And yet, these are the very same people you’re hoping to impress. You’re either tenacious or blind. I haven’t decided which.”

“Who said I’m trying to impress *them*? Sure, if I don’t impress them a little, I won’t have a job anymore. But that’s not...that’s not what I’m about.”

“Then that makes this personal,” Sara intervened. “Which means you didn’t really answer Cam’s question.” Her mouth twitched, but her smile didn’t return. “Does that mean I get another one?”

“Maybe it’s a little personal,” Josh acknowledged. “Fire away.”

The waitress appeared with three more beers, giving Sara a few extra seconds to contemplate her choice before they were alone again. “The last time you went out on a date...where did you go?”

“Oh, um...this was about three years ago, I guess. We went out to watch the whales. She always said we lived so close to the beach, and we never even saw a whale. So that’s what we did.” He met Cam’s eyes. “What was your first...form change?”

“A bird when I was four.”

Sara grinned and leaned forward conspiratorially. “He was trying to run away.”

“I don’t think he cares about that, sweetheart.”

“Of course, he does. It’s a cute story.”

Cameron scowled, though Josh got the impression it was more put-on than anything else. “Cute or not, he’s not going to hear it. Because if you tell it, I’ll tell him the story when you fell off the—”

“You’re right. He doesn’t need to hear it.” When she lifted her mug to her mouth, however, she winked at Josh right before taking a long swallow of her beer.

“I think as the researcher here, it’s my job to decide what I need to hear. Every little detail could be necessary.”

“Let’s save something for next time, shall we?”

“You’ll see me again?” He blurted the question, both out of surprise and gratitude. He didn’t want to take the situation for granted, though he had hoped they would agree to a second, and even third, meeting. He frowned. “Wait, that was a question. Are you going to try to get two from me again?”

This time, it was Cameron who smiled. “Only if you want me to answer that one.”

“Please do,” Josh said, slightly mesmerized by the other man’s smile.

Cameron left streaks in the condensation as he absently stroked the side of his mug. “The way I see it, I think you’re going to write your paper, regardless of what happens here. The more we help you, the better the odds of your research actually being accurate. So really, it’s in our best interest to help you as much as we can, don’t you think?”

Something indefinable sparkled in his eyes. “And yes, that was my next question, so you can have another if you like.”

“I agree, it’s in everybody’s best interest.” Josh reached for his beer to soothe his suddenly dry tongue and throat. He didn’t know if his sudden attack of nerves was due to professional excitement over future meetings, or something more personal. “How long have you two been together?” As soon as he spoke, Josh realized that wasn’t the question he intended to ask.

“Three years.” The answer came from Sara, but instead of moving closer to Cameron, she leaned forward, her dark eyes intent on his. “That’s how long it’s been since your last date, you said. So why haven’t you dated anybody since then?”

“My work. Turns out it’s impossible to sustain a relationship on about three hours a month, so I decided to stop trying.” Josh was impressed with his ability to sum up such a difficult decision in a single sentence. He straightened, thinking of a way to force his earlier question into his research. “Part of what I’m looking into is the similarities between our...cultures, despite the relative isolation. Is there a marriage ceremony?”

“There can be,” Cameron answered. “But it’s not nearly as common as you might think. Our relationships tend to be a little more...” The word failed to come to him, and after a moment, he looked to Sara for help.

“Fluid,” she finished.

Josh arched his eyebrow. “What do you mean by fluid?”

“We don’t have the same...restrictions most cultures have on sexuality,” Cameron said. “So we have a higher ratio of same-sex relationships than you’re probably used to.”

Sara nodded. “And committed threesomes. I’ve even seen a foursome work.”

“Oh.” A hundred questions sprang to mind, and he hoped he sounded merely intellectually curious. “Have you two ever been in a committed threesome?”

“Committed? No.” On the heel of her reply, something skimmed across Josh’s ankle, and he didn’t need to see the welcoming glint in her eye to know that it had been Sara. “But that’s only because we’re picky.”

Josh finished his beer before responding—partly because his throat had gone dry again and partly because he needed to buy some time. “I...I think I owe you three questions now.”

“Have you ever been in a threesome?”

It was a question he would’ve expected from Sara. Hearing it come from Cameron’s mouth had Josh twisting to find the waitress.

Josh asked for another beer, and after a moment of consideration, included a shot of whiskey to his order. He didn’t know why they wanted to ask him a series of personal questions, but he figured if he expected perfect honesty from them, they deserved the same from him.

“Yes,” Josh answered as the waitress walked away.

“Two girls or two guys?”

Josh didn’t shy away from meeting Sara’s eyes. “Both.”

“My turn.” In a swift movement he barely saw, Cameron plucked the notebook out of Josh’s hand and began thumbing through the pages. “What happens after you get the information you want? What is it you’re hoping to accomplish?”

Josh straightened, finding this much easier to answer, though having the notebook out of reach left him uneasy. “Once I finish gathering the information, I have to publish all my findings. The article itself might take several months to write, depending on my notes. Once it’s submitted for publication, I’ll go through a rigorous peer review, and once it’s published I’ll probably spend the next five years of my life defending every single word and punctuation mark. When the dust settles, I hope that I’ll have answers to some questions that everybody wants to ask and nobody has yet.” Josh leaned forward. “You two, your lives, your culture, your abilities... It’s just about the closest thing to magic left in this world. One of the last, best mysteries. So I guess ultimately I’m doing this because I want to know.”

They regarded him intently, Sara’s dark eyes as steady as Cameron’s blue ones. “And then so will everybody else,” she said softly. “Delta won’t be as quiet then, I don’t think.”

“I don’t think any of our lives will be the same again,” Cameron agreed.

“I know,” Josh said, deflating a little. It was so easy to forget himself when his excitement overtook him. “There are several communities that I considered before coming here. My current location is actually classified. That was one of the stipulations of the grant. Identifying information will also be changed in the final report.”

“Was that your idea?” Sara asked.

“Yes. I’ve been preparing for this for the past several years. I know how dangerous exposure can be for everybody here.”

Cameron tossed the notebook back onto the table and it slid across the surface to come to a rest in front of Josh again. “Sara jumped the gun,” he said. “We owe you two questions.”

Josh nodded. “Right. How often do you shift?”

He almost spilled his drink when Sara countered with, “Do you want to see it for yourself?”

“Yes. If you don’t mind, that is.”

Cameron’s hand on her arm stopped Sara from sliding out of the booth right then. “And again, Sara’s jumping the gun,” he said. “You’ve obviously made an impression on her.”

If that was the case, the feeling was definitely mutual. “Jumping the gun how?”

“I already told you we’d be meeting again. How else was I going to entice you back to our place?”

Josh could think of at least two ways to entice him back to their place. Neither one of them involved luring him with promises of shapeshifting. “Well, I would like to see a demonstration tonight, if possible. But I’m sure one wouldn’t be sufficient.”

Gently, Cameron nudged Sara out of the booth. Though her brows were drawn together in confusion, she did as she was told, hovering at the side of the table as he joined her.

“Next time,” he said. “Sara’s got to get up and teach in the morning, and I’ve got a feeling that if you come over tonight, nobody’s going to get any sleep.” Picking up Josh’s

pen, he leaned over and scribbled something down in his notebook. He stood so close, Josh smelled the faint scent of his aftershave. “Think of what questions you want to ask.” His smile was sly as he straightened and took Sara’s hand. “We’ll have ours all ready.”

Josh stood as well, suppressing the urge to ask them to stay and extending his hand to grip Cameron’s. Cam’s fingers were strong and a little rough, and Josh swore the other man held his hand for a beat or two too long. Something electric frizzled along the surface of his skin, and he knew without a doubt that Cameron had been right. If Josh went home with them, there wouldn’t be a great deal of talking. “I’m already looking forward to it.”

* * *

Josh’s gut twisted so painfully he thought his intestines might actually be trying to escape his body. He curled into a fetal position and caught his breath, frightened any stray thought or puff of air would wake the sleeping creatures behind him.

They had targeted Sara because he had given them all the information they ever needed to know. He had offered a template of her life. They knew where to look, because they knew where to find him. And they knew who to target, because...

Because he considered Sara to be the better subject. They wanted Sara because he would have targeted Sara. He had created the temptation, dangled the bait, and ultimately led them directly to her.

Every moment, every bit of pain, every tear, could be laid at his feet. Josh knew he couldn’t volunteer that information, but Cam would figure it out, if Sara didn’t first. And how could he hope they’d ever forgive him? He didn’t even know how to forgive himself.

Chapter Thirteen

There was a second, harrowing and forever, where Sara was afraid to move, afraid to breathe, afraid to do anything for fear of shattering the illusion winding around her. She felt warm. She felt safe. She felt whole for the first time in too long. And what made it so truly terrifying was she knew beyond a shadow of a doubt it was completely the doing of the body currently curled around hers.

Every detail of the previous night was etched on her brain. Josh's request. Her inability to shift. Her panic at accepting Cam's aid. But she also remembered the calm of his voice, the freedom when she'd finally shifted, the sense of knowing she had nothing to fear from Cam. She remembered the desire to assure him, and she still felt his purring satisfaction on her tongue. Even more, she recalled the easy joy at feeling his body wrapped around hers and the simplicity of falling asleep.

But now she was awake. And Cam couldn't remain a cat forever.

Opening her eyes, Sara eased out from his more muscular form, leaping to the floor as soon as she was free. She stretched, front legs fully extended as her chest touched the floor, then padded silently to the open door. She only stopped to look back once she was on the threshold.

Cam hadn't moved. He was still curled into a bow, the empty space in front of him a hole waiting to be filled again. Stretched out on the other side of the bed was Josh, his head buried beneath his pillow.

She didn't shift until she was in the bathroom. She didn't want to risk her heavier steps waking either of them up.

What am I doing to do now? she wondered as she lathered the soap between her fingers.

Facing Cam when he was a harmless tabby was one thing. Confronting the face of her attacker on a daily basis was something else entirely.

Sara knew how much Cam was hurting. Even if Josh didn't make that clear in his actions, she heard it in Cam's voice, saw it in the fleeting glimpses of him she'd tolerated so far. Spending the night as they had would give him false hope. From the beginning, there had always been a connection between them when it came to their shifting, something innate and powerful and unlike anything she'd ever had before. That was part of how the previous night had been possible.

But Sara didn't know whether or not she could ignore all the fear in her body and listen to all the logical arguments her head kept throwing at her. This wasn't the Cam who had hurt her. This wasn't the Cam who pushed her to her limits. This was the Cam who loved her, and wanted her, and would do anything in his power for her, including giving her the space she had needed when she had first woken up. Her head knew all this. Her heart even knew it, when she didn't have the vicious mask of terror blinding her to the truth. It was just a matter of convincing her body what the rest of her already knew.

She looked at her reflection. Maybe today was the day to stop letting the bastards win.

With fresh resolve, Sara walked back to the bedroom. She pushed the door open quietly, planning to slip in, grab her clothes and slip back out again, but the sight of a human Cam, standing at the side of the bed pulling on his pants, made her pause.

He touched his finger to his lips and then pointed to Josh. "Long night," he mouthed.

She glanced at him only briefly before returning to Cam. First sight had made her heart start jackhammering, but her tightened grip on the doorknob had been enough to stifle her flight instinct. It didn't mean she was completely comfortable standing there naked in front of him, though.

Reaching around the door, she grabbed her robe from where it hung on the back and put it on, cinching the belt tight around her waist. Cam still watched her, and she knew he wouldn't make a move until she said or did something to break the ice. So she swallowed her knot of fear and nodded toward the hall, hoping he would take the hint and follow her out.

Cam pulled a shirt on quickly. Shutting the door behind him, he murmured, “Every time I woke up last night, he was staring at his computer. I don’t even know what time he finally put it away.” He looked up, catching her eye briefly before looking away again. “Did you sleep well?”

“Yes. Thank you.” She paused. Would the awkwardness of their conversation ever go away? “My stomach doesn’t hurt this morning, so I guess the theory about me not shifting for so long was the right one.”

“Yeah, I guess so. Josh...he really knows his stuff, doesn’t he?”

Though she wrapped her arms around herself, Sara braved keeping her gaze steady on Cam, even though he was still avoiding hers. “We both know it wasn’t his theory, Cam.”

Cam smiled, almost self-consciously. “He told me how you were feeling, and it reminded me of somebody I used to know.” He looked over her shoulder to the stairs and shifted his weight back against the wall, like he planned to lean there all morning. “He must have gone to a dozen doctors, getting worse by the day, until they realized he hadn’t shifted once since his wife left him.”

“Well, however you figured it out, thank you.” Another clumsy silence settled between them while Sara wracked her brain for something to say. It shouldn’t be this hard, she kept telling herself. She’d had little problems with him when they were both cats. She ended up grasping at a straw. “You said you kept waking up. Didn’t you sleep well?”

Cam’s self-conscious smile turned tender. “I slept...really, really well, actually. But cats have heightened senses, and Josh...something was keeping him awake.”

“Usually, that’s me. He worries too much.”

“He does. But then, he wouldn’t be our Josh if he didn’t worry too much, would he?”

A sudden notion sprang to mind. “We should let him sleep in. And then surprise him with breakfast.”

Cam’s eyes lit up and he nodded slowly. “He’d like that. Anything particular in mind?”

“That depends on whether you expect me to help or not.” Sara took a deep breath, ignoring the trembling in her knees. *Focus on how familiar this feels. This is not the Cam who hurt you. Remember what it felt like when you woke up.* She tried her best mischievous smile. “You don’t really think I got cooking lessons while I was gone, do you?”

“Why don’t we split up the work? You make him his favorite sandwich, and I’ll whip up an omelette. How does that sound?”

“Do I get a piece of that omelette?”

Cam finally met her gaze, his eyes warm. “Absolutely. I’d fix you anything you wanted.”

Of course you would. But she didn’t say it aloud. Instead, she darted forward before she lost her nerve and brushed a kiss over his cheek.

“Last one down has to do the dishes!” she said as she whirled on her heel and flew down the stairs.

“I always do the dishes anyway,” Cam called after her as she reached the bottom stair. She looked over her shoulder to watch him slowly descend. His voice was gruff, but he was still smiling. “I bet you can’t name one time you or Josh did the dishes.”

“Can, too.” She shot him one last grin before bolting for the kitchen. It was easier if she made it a game. She didn’t look like a big ol’ scaredy cat about facing Cam then. “It was the one and only time you had the guts to try and teach us how to make your chili. And it only happened then because Josh wimped out and told you how we’d ordered in the entire time you’d been away at that conference in Houston.”

Cam shuddered, following her, but she noticed he kept several feet between them. “I still have nightmares about what you two did to my kitchen.” He went directly to the fridge and started pulling out food. “Cleaning it up was the least you two could do.”

Though Cam shook his head, she caught the smile he tried to hide as he stuck his head in the refrigerator. It was proof there was an abundance of good memories for all of them; the trick was in remembering them when the bad ones refused to be ignored.

* * *

Sara hopped up on the counter, her legs swinging, her heels hitting the cupboards on every downswing. “I still don’t get why we have to do this,” she complained.

“Because Jose saw me at the store today and thanked me for sending his child to college,” Cam shot back.

Sara waved him off. “Jose’s a big liar. There is no college in this country that’s going to accept Antonio Andrade. Not with his grades.”

Cam began systematically removing the pans from the cupboard and placing them on the stove. “The kid won’t need good grades. His father will be so wealthy, he’ll have his pick of schools. They’ll drink a toast in my honor every Christmas, while we dine on a feast of ramen noodles.”

“That must be Josh’s year to do the holiday cooking then.” She looked pointedly over at where Josh sat quietly at the table. “And don’t think I don’t know you didn’t rat us out, too. One of these days, you might actually remember these walls are like paper.”

“Hey,” Josh protested. “He tricked me. He doesn’t play fair.”

Sara rolled her eyes. “No, you’re a sucker for a good blow job.”

“And he knows that, and that’s why it’s not fair,” Josh said with a sense of finality. She arched her brow, so he shifted tactics. “Plus, he found all the receipts. Even the ones you said you’d throw away.”

She tossed her hair. “You know, maybe we’re looking at this completely wrong. Maybe the problem isn’t that we ordered too much food. Maybe the problem is that Cam didn’t leave enough leftovers for us, so we were forced to go looking elsewhere for sustenance.” Reaching sideways, she grabbed a bag of cheese from the growing pile of ingredients. When she tried to open the bag, however, the plastic split, sending shredded cheddar flying every which way. “Oh, shit.”

Josh’s lips twitched into a smile, but one glance at Cam wiped the smile away. “I’ll get that,” he said, jumping to his feet to retrieve the broom.

Cam returned to the fridge and pulled out a large cube of cheddar. “First, I don’t see why it’s my responsibility to feed you two. You’re adults. Second, I left you plenty of

food. It was enough to last any reasonable people at least two weeks. Third,” he added, gripping the counter on either side of her knees and holding her in place, “I know you were the one who ate all the food and led Josh astray. You’ve corrupted him.”

Sara grinned. Looping her arms over Cam’s taut shoulders, she said, “I’ve never heard you complain about my brand of corruption before.” Leaning in, she caught Josh’s eye and winked just as she began nibbling along Cam’s neck. “And maybe if I didn’t keep working off all these calories, I wouldn’t be so hungry all the time. So, again? Not my fault.”

“So it’s Josh’s fault after all?” Cam asked, sliding his gaze sideways to watch Josh sweep up the cheese. “I guess that means I’ll have to punish him.”

Josh emptied the dustpan into the garbage. “I think I’m being punished enough.”

Cam turned his head and caught Sara’s mouth, biting her bottom lip playfully. “I haven’t even begun. Sara, you grate that cheese, Josh, you start chopping up the onions and the tomatoes.”

She laughed as Josh’s face fell. “I knew proving dangerous with knives would work in my favor someday.”

Josh obediently took his place at the other end of the kitchen, wielding the knife with easy dexterity in spite of the way the cutting board hung over the edge of the counter. Water streamed down his face as he worked on the onions under Cam’s watchful eye. But then Cam turned to warm the skillet for his meat, and Sara looked down, and the next thing they knew, the cutting board crashed to the floor, sending bits of onions and one large, ripe tomato skating across the floor.

She was ready with the paper towel before either of the men, but as Sara turned to kneel down and clean up the mess, her heel caught on the tomato, bursting the tender skin and causing her to skid backwards onto her ass. Her hands flew out to catch herself, but one palm landed in the middle of a juicy puddle, and she pitched sideways with a surprised cry.

“What is this?” Cam asked, eying Sara without a hint of sympathy. “Some sort of sketch comedy routine? Did you two rehearse this while I was gone?”

She glared up at him from her spot on the floor. “No. Because we were smart and avoided the kitchen once it was out of food.”

“You avoid the kitchen when it’s full of food,” Cam said, bending to grip her wrists. He pulled her to her feet in a smooth motion, yanking her against his body. His mouth was barely an inch from hers, and he smelled sweet, like the orange he had been chewing on earlier. She tilted her head and closed her eyes, expecting him to close the distance between them. But her eyes flew open again when he growled, “Where do you think you’re going?”

“You can’t make us cook if you don’t have any vegetables,” Josh pointed out reasonably.

When Cam began to move away, Sara coiled her calf around the back of his leg, keeping him firmly against her. “He has a point, you know.” Though he still held her wrist, she reached down and cupped his cock through his pants. “But I bet we can find other ways to keep him in the kitchen.”

“I don’t believe you should be rewarded for your bad behavior,” Cam said against her mouth, but he reached behind her to turn the burner off.

“Admit it.” His looser grip gave her room to catch his zipper and slide her hand inside. He was already getting hard, but she bypassed his cock this time to stroke his balls. “You like me when I’m bad.”

He smiled. “Tell you what, you keep Josh from fleeing, and you don’t have to cook anything.”

Her brows shot up at the same time Josh’s did. Before Cam changed his mind, she pulled her hand free of his pants and slipped past him, grabbing Josh’s shirtfront before he could escape too.

“I’m just following orders,” she said in mock innocence as she fell to her knees.

Josh looked from her to Cam and held up his hands. “Look, Cam, I can’t be expected to cook while she’s doing this. I can barely cook under the best of circumstances.”

Cam circled to stand behind him and rested his chin on Josh’s shoulder. “I’ll make a deal with you, because I’m a reasonable guy.”

Sara watched from beneath her lashes as Cam gripped Josh's hips.

"I'm listening," Josh said.

"You and Sara convince me there's nothing in this world I want more than to be your loyal servant."

"By being your loyal servants." Sara tugged at Josh's belt, yanking him to his knees alongside her. She leaned in and nipped at his jaw. "Think of it as payback for how he got you to talk," she murmured in his ear.

Josh didn't seem at all put out by the plan. In fact, his eyes were shining. "He deserves it, too. You wouldn't believe the things he did to me. Talk about corrupting influences."

"You loved every second of it," Cam said, unbuckling his belt.

Josh narrowed his eyes thoughtfully. "Unless, of course, you taught him everything he knows. In which case, he was right about you."

"Of course, he was right about me." As soon as Cam's pants were completely open, Sara batted his hand out of the way and pulled out his hard length. "Tell me how I'm supposed to behave myself when he's teasing me with this gorgeous cock." Cradling it in her palm, she leaned in and dragged her tongue along its length. "Can't be done."

Cam reached behind him and gripped the counter, bracing himself as she teased him. She split her attention between watching Cam's face transform with bliss, and noting the way Josh's eyes widened and his lips parted. It was hard to know what got under Josh's skin more; she knew he loved Cam's cock as much as she did, but he also had a major weakness for her mouth.

"Josh," Cam muttered.

"What?"

"Are you just going to watch, or are you going to help her out?"

Josh cocked his eyebrow. "Oh, I'm going to help her. Don't you worry about that."

"He'll get his turn." She skimmed the edge of her teeth along his shaft, eliciting a sharp hiss from Cam. "I promise."

"Sara?" Josh asked.

She lifted her head. “Yeah?”

He gripped the back of her neck and plunged his tongue into her mouth, kissing her with the sort of hungry intensity she’d learned to expect from him. “I want a turn with you, too.”

Cam’s cock was forgotten in the seconds Josh plundered her mouth, and by the time Sara pulled back, she was already breathless. “Or you could make it the same turn,” she teased. She angled Cam in order to drag the wet tip along Josh’s lips. “This cock. My pussy. Your mouth.” She glanced up at Cam through her lashes. “If that’s okay with Cam, of course.”

* * *

Cam crackled with energy as he strolled into the kitchen, his mind on things other than food. He hadn’t slept that well in a very, very long time—even though he felt tension rolling off Josh in waves. It had been too difficult to acknowledge Josh’s anxiety and still lose himself with Sara. So he chose Sara. And he didn’t regret it.

Her eyes were distant, her cheeks a little flushed. Was she thinking about that time in the kitchen? Did she still remember the way the onions and tomatoes had smelled, the way Josh’s hot mouth felt? Did she still remember that sometimes, when everything was just right, it felt like they were all one, equal, whole?

Cam needed that again. Last night, it had almost been within their grasp. He rarely thought about the fact that Josh wasn’t a shifter, but last night, the regret had been acute. He wanted Josh to feel their bond, to know how to be with somebody on a basic, sensual level that didn’t have anything to do with sex. Could outsiders experience that? Cam didn’t know. The only time he had was when he shifted with Sara.

Sara settled on a stool near the counter, watching as he began assembling his food. She seemed a little tense, and in the morning light she still looked pale and drawn, but despite that, she had never looked better to his eyes. She was getting a bit of her weight and color back, and for once she didn’t look exhausted.

“Sara? I...” He didn’t want to ruin the morning, but he also didn’t know if there would be another time that lent itself to this conversation so perfectly. “I think we need to talk.”

Sara knotted her fingers together where they rested on the counter, but otherwise, she didn’t move. That was a good sign. No running away. “I thought we *were* talking,” she said. “Or did I just imagine the plan to make Josh breakfast?”

“We need to talk about something other than Josh’s breakfast. I know you told Josh you wanted to find a second apartment, so you wouldn’t have to see me. And I know Josh instigates any contact the two of us have. I’m not saying that after last night I expect to move into your bedroom. But I do need to know if I’m causing you more harm than good here.”

Her knuckles whitened. “You did a lot of good last night. I couldn’t have done that without you.”

“Maybe not. But you never wanted my help.”

“Because I was scared.”

“I know.” Cam started cracking eggs to keep his hands busy. “But it’s...it’s really hard knowing you won’t even come downstairs to watch television because there’s a chance I might be in the kitchen. It’s hard living this way. If it’s hard for me, I can’t imagine what it must be like for you.”

Her gaze was heavy on his back, but Cam knew he didn’t have the strength to both have this conversation and look her in the eye. He didn’t want to see her kick him out of her life.

“How much has Josh told you about what happened?” she asked.

“He’ll answer my questions as much as he can, but I think he’s trying to protect both of us. He keeps things from me he thinks you wouldn’t want me to know, and he holds back on details that might...upset me.” He looked over his shoulder to meet her eyes briefly. “I think he might have told me enough.”

She nodded, once, a tentative dip of her head that was as much for her as it was for him. “He loves us. He doesn’t like seeing us hurt.”

“I know. And he’s holding us all together the best he can. I don’t want his efforts to be in vain.” Cam turned back to his eggs, beating the yolks into a frothy mass. “Would you be comfortable telling me about what happened?”

“No.”

He tried not to wince. The fact she didn’t even hesitate hurt, not the response itself. And then, more quietly...

“But I will.” The stool squeaked where it slid across the floor, and he glanced over in time to see Sara take the few steps to his side. He held his breath as she stretched out her hand and rested it on his forearm. Her touch was so light, he wouldn’t have believed it was there if he didn’t see it with his own eyes. “Last night was wonderful, Cam. This morning was the first time I woke up feeling right. Like me again. I don’t want to lose that. So I’ll do whatever I can to make sure I don’t.”

“You don’t want me to leave then?” Cam asked, hardly believing his ears. But she looked at him with such solemn eyes, and she stood so close, he knew he hadn’t misunderstood her.

Sara shook her head. “I need you.”

“You...” He couldn’t even pretend to care about the eggs. “You need me?”

“If you go, I’m only ever going to have the other Cam living inside my head, and I don’t want that. I want the Cam who remembered to bring my turtle pens, and who made me fresh bread my first morning here even though he hates to bake, and who always made me feel like I was beautiful even when I looked a wreck. If you go, I lose him.”

The more she spoke, the harder his heart pounded, until his blood was roaring in his ears. “I don’t want to let the other Cam live in your head, either. And I’m not going anywhere. I guess I just needed to know if there was some hope, for both of us.”

“There has to be,” Sara whispered. “Otherwise, what was the point of it all?”

“Sara.” He turned to face her, breakfast entirely forgotten. “I’d like to kiss you now.”

He saw the way she tensed at his request, the way her thick lashes ducked to look at his mouth. If she hadn’t just said such wondrous things, he might have ached at her

reaction. But she *had* said those things, she had asked him to stay, she had come to him first.

So he waited, perfectly still, for her response. And hoped.

Sara's tongue darted out to sweep across her lower lip, and she brushed a tremulous hand over her hair, pushing it off her face. "Okay," she breathed. "Just...okay."

Cam wanted to hold her, but he settled for taking her hand, loosely entwining her fingers in his. She tilted her chin up, only a hint of fear in the depth of her eyes, but otherwise she didn't flinch. He moved slowly, leaning in to touch her lips gently with his. The kiss was the barest caress, but Cam tried to imbue it with as much of his love and passion as possible. He pressed another light kiss on her cheek, thrilling at the soft warmth of her skin, the intimate smell of her soap, conditioner and breath.

When he drew back, her eyes were closed, her breathing quick and shallow. Her fingers tightened with his, and she swallowed twice before turning her head so that his mouth skimmed over her temple.

"Talk to me," she said without opening her eyes. "Don't move away. Just talk to me for a little bit. Like it's midnight and we're lying in bed in the dark, waiting for Josh to get out of the shower and come join us. What would you say?"

Cam took a deep breath. "Every morning for the past two years, right when I woke up, I imagined you were still beside me, where you belonged. Every morning, I'd convince myself it was all a bad dream, and when I opened my eyes, you would be curled against my side, watching me with sleepy eyes." He paused, swallowing around the burning sensation in his throat. "I talked to you. I told you everything, and I wrote you letters, but I always felt you the most when the sun first touched the bed, and your favorite birds sang outside the window."

Sara stepped closer, the hand he didn't hold coming up to press flat against his chest. "I'm sorry this has been so hard for you. They got all of us when they did this, didn't they?"

"Josh asked me last night how many times I lay awake, thinking about what I would give to just have ten minutes to talk to you. I did think about it. What would I say in ten

minutes? I already knew I'd give anything I had. I decided I'd tell you that the years we had together were the happiest in my life. And I don't think I ever thanked you for that."

"You didn't have to." The heat of her cheek near his disappeared, and she pulled back just enough for their eyes to meet. "They were for me, too."

She didn't have to move more than an inch or two for their mouths to meet. Her lips parted, and the faintest brush of her tongue along his made Cam shudder.

It was almost enough to sweep his self-control away completely. He had longed for this very kiss for so long that he didn't want to wait another moment for a second one. He wanted to make up for the entire time they were apart. He wanted to wrap his arms around her and kiss her until they weren't just breathless, but giddy, faint and on edge for more. But he didn't give in to that—a part of him still understood they were moving underwater. Slow and heavy with the past, but still reaching for each other. So he returned her kiss, giving just as much as she did, and never tried to take more than she was willing to offer.

* * *

Josh watched silently from the stairs. They were too enraptured in each other to notice him, but that was fine. He heard every word Cam said with such a layer of emotions that it was difficult to pull them apart. Guilt, of course, sympathy, empathy, relief, joy and love. But ultimately, they were all the same emotion. He couldn't separate his guilt from his love, his sympathy from his relief, his empathy from his joy, anymore than he could extract a single raindrop from a river.

When Sara stretched to kiss Cam, Josh exhaled softly, the stale air rushing out of his lungs. It felt like he hadn't taken one breath until she touched Cam, and the bands around his chest suddenly loosened. They would be fine. They had each other, and they would be fine again.

They no longer needed him to hold them together. Which might have been the greatest relief of all, because he didn't have much more to give. He never saw a better

matched pair. Josh knew Sara wasn't magically cured, she wouldn't behave as though the previous two years never happened, but the hardest part was behind the two of them.

Josh silently slinked back up the stairs. Any other time, he might have crept into the kitchen, content to simply be with them, but now he just wanted that shower.

Chapter Fourteen

Josh didn't know if Sara was suffering from cabin fever, or if her growing comfort with Cam allowed her to be comfortable with the rest of the world, but either way she wanted to get her hair cut. And she wasn't going to be happy with the Supercuts next to the grocery store around the corner. She wanted to go to the mall. The weeks they'd spent in Las Vegas had lulled them into a sense of security. False or not, Josh couldn't say, but he didn't have the heart to tell her she couldn't do something as simple, something as basic, as cut her hair.

Josh sat quietly on the bench outside of the salon, watching everybody pass with a suspicious eye. From his seat, he saw Sara sitting in the back of the large, brightly lit room, holding a magazine, while a swarthy man fussed and fluttered around her with a pair of scissors. Cam stood beside the door, trying to look casual and failing miserably.

The food court was just around the corner, and the hot, salty smell of pretzels tormented him. He would have bought himself something if he thought he could keep it down. There were also the giant cardboard boats of nachos that smelled yellow, the neon-orange drinks, and the cookies larger than his head. Why did mall food never look or smell like real food? It always looked grotesque once it was removed from the artificial lights and the sound of giggling teenage girls.

Sighing, Josh stretched his legs. He was very pleased with Sara's progress, but why did she have to choose the mall?

"It could be worse." Josh looked up to see Cam smiling at him. "She could have stuck with the idea that we all had to get haircuts."

Josh snorted. "Yeah, but you need one. If you're lucky, she won't insist she can do it herself."

Self-consciously, Cam ran a hand over his head. "She won't. I'll tell her I'm going for the Indiana Jones look. She's got a soft spot for scruffy."

“I hate to break it to you, but you’re going way past scruffy and into crazy mountain man territory,” Josh said, softening his words with a smile.

Cam turned to look back into the salon. “I think I’m in danger of having longer hair than our girl, too,” he mused. “Does it look like he’s going shorter than her hair used to be to you?”

Josh tilted his head and watched another lock hit the floor. “I think she mentioned she wanted something a little shorter. She saw something she liked on one of those fashion shows the other night.”

With a sigh, Cam abandoned his post at the door and crossed the aisle to sit next to Josh. His gaze remained soft, fixed on Sara, but his thigh was warm and solid where it pressed to Josh’s. “She’s doing better, right?” he said quietly. “It’s not just my wishful thinking?”

“If she wasn’t doing better, we wouldn’t be here at all.” He squeezed Cam’s knee reassuringly. “I know you didn’t see her much before, but just last week she was jumping at her own shadow.”

“Any progress she’s made is all your doing, you know.” Cam curled his fingers over Josh’s, his longer hand enveloping Josh’s smaller. “We’d all be well and truly fucked if it wasn’t for you holding us together.”

Josh shook his head, uncomfortable with taking credit for any of the positive results. All he could think about was their home in Delta, and Sara’s brightly decorated classroom, and how he had taken that from her, perhaps permanently. “She wasn’t comfortable in her own skin until she let you in.”

“And the only reason that happened is because you saved me from my own stupidity. Maybe after Sara crashes tonight, you’ll let me thank you properly. In the shower, maybe.”

Josh smiled wryly. “Do you know what happens when Sara crashes? You crash, too, like you haven’t slept in a week.”

“I did that once.”

“If you say so.” He glanced up and thought Sara was watching them through the mirror. “Did she mention what else she wants to do today? I think we might have some marathon shopping ahead of us.”

“Probably.” Cam paused. “Have you two had a chance to sit down and compare notes on everything? I’ve hit a dead end trying to follow the paper trail on the house she was in. I think we’re going to have to come up with a new angle.”

Josh hesitated. “I think I have something. It’s not much, though. Based on what she told me, I’m almost certain...I think whoever took her was authorized and funded by one of the research centers. But it’s difficult to narrow down which one. You probably didn’t get a good look at the equipment in the basement, but it was all new, top-of-the-line stuff. Most of the grants are on public record, but not all of them. And most of the centers aren’t interested in shifters at all, but the few that are either send people out like me, or hire shifters to be subjects...” He looked at Cam’s hand, still covering his. “I guess that’s the long way of saying I found a trail, but I can’t make any promises right now.”

“What do you need me to do?”

Still keeping his eyes averted, Josh decided to send out a trial balloon. “I’m going to contact a few places, see if they’re looking for somebody right now. It’s risky because... Well, anyway, I might have to leave for a few days...or more.”

Cam’s attention snapped away from the salon as he frowned at Josh. “Not by yourself.”

“Why not? I’m not in any danger, Cam.”

“Because we’re not splitting up. Not again.”

“I wouldn’t suggest it, but Sara is doing well now, and things have been quiet. Plus, it wouldn’t take long.” Josh didn’t know why he was pushing for this. There was no reason to think anybody would even return his email, and if they did, what made him think he could learn anything from a brief tour of the facility?

Cam’s eyes searched his, clouded and concerned. “You’re serious about this. I can’t believe you’re serious about this. Things are finally starting to get back to normal for us. For all of us. You can’t go.”

He smiled, trying to ease Cam's concern. "You're right. I was just thinking out loud." He almost explained that, in a way, he was betrayed, too. It was bad enough to know a shifter had helped drag her away, but to think it was somebody he might have known? "I'm just feeling so...helpless."

Releasing his hold on Josh's hand, Cam curled it around Josh's neck and pulled him in for a long kiss. It was slow and thorough, and maybe, any other time, Josh would have been able to enjoy it for everything it was. Now, though, it was difficult to savor.

"What do you think the odds are of talking Sara into a quiet dinner at home, just the three of us?" Cam asked. He didn't let go, just held Josh firm, his gaze unwavering. "I'll cook our favorites, we'll have some wine, and since you don't think I'll last after Sara crashes, I'll just have to thank you before and hope she joins in."

Josh's stomach dropped. He wanted that in a way he couldn't articulate. So he kissed Cam again, knowing he would take the caress for the answer Josh couldn't give. He thought Cam might be a little too optimistic; Sara hadn't really given any indication she was eager to jump into bed with them again. Though he wasn't spending every waking, and sleeping, moment with her and Cam anymore, so maybe something had changed.

Josh pulled back from the kiss, running the tip of his tongue over his bottom lip. "It's been awhile since we've done that."

The corner of Cam's mouth lifted. "Too long."

"Too bad we're probably scandalizing all these nice people, or I might try for a third one."

"This is Vegas. We're the tamest show on the strip." As if to prove his point, Cam leaned in again, this time with unmistakable hunger as his tongue pushed past Josh's meager defenses.

Despite his conflicted emotions, Josh responded to Cam with matching desire. He'd always want Cam. He closed his eyes, blocking out the people, the sounds, the blaring music, the flashing lights. In the back of his mind, he realized Sara was probably watching them, kissing and pawing at each other like teenagers. What was she thinking? And would he have the chance to kiss her like this before...

Before what?

Josh pushed the question away.

Cam was panting when they parted, his pupils blown. “Maybe we’ll skip the dinner part,” he rasped.

“Can we skip the shopping part, too?” Josh was ready to gather up Sara with her hair half-shorn and go directly home. A part of him resisted all of this, but his body, and his heart, and his instincts all encouraged him to just let go and be happy, and let the pieces fall later.

“I’m all for that.” Cam finally released the back of Josh’s neck, but rather than pull his hand completely away, he dropped it discreetly to Josh’s lap and squeezed his aching cock. “You convince Sara to go straight home after this, and I’ll fuck you like it’s our first time. Like I’ve been waiting to get my hands and mouth and cock on you for months.”

“Oh,” Josh moaned softly. Had it been months since Cam fucked him? It couldn’t have been, but it sure as hell felt like it. “How am I supposed to convince her that we all need to go straight home so you can fuck me?”

Cam let him go and leaned back in the seat again. “You’re a smart guy. I’m sure you’ll figure something out.”

“Maybe I’ll go with the ‘if you love us...’ strategy.” Josh rubbed the back of his neck. “Though that particular strategy never really worked before.”

“I was always rather fond of the ‘get out of cleaning free card’ strategy, myself.” Sara stood in front of them with an amused grin. The hair that had hung down her back was gone, now ending just below her shoulders in thick, lustrous waves. “Do I want to know what you two are scheming about?”

Josh pointed at Cam. “He kissed me. Three times. And then he said dirty things to me.” Flashing his nicest smile, he added, “So we’d like to go home now. Please.”

She laughed, a clear, crystal sound Josh had thought he would never hear again. At his side, he felt Cam stiffen and knew it had gotten to him, too, but before either could do or say anything, Sara was standing in front of them, tugging at their hands.

“I think I’m a little jealous,” she said. “Nobody’s tried saying dirty things to me in absolute ages.”

Josh touched her hair briefly. “You look fantastic. It was worth the wait.”

She twisted, showing them the back. “You don’t think it’s too short? I don’t have that queen of the jungle look going anymore.”

“It’s not too short,” Josh assured her. “Not that I thought the queen of the jungle look was bad, either.”

When Sara glanced back, her gaze slid to Cam. “What do you think?”

Cam smiled and reached out a careful hand, catching a silken tendril and curling it around his finger. “I think Josh and I are the luckiest bastards in the world.”

Her eyes shone, but she ducked her head before either man could see anything more. It was a common gesture the past few days since she and Cam had reconnected, as if she was frightened of revealing how much Cam’s displays got to her. It was one of the few things Josh didn’t worry about. Sara was still coming to grips with her conflicting reactions; the fact that she could stand in front of them and joke about dirty talk was such a huge step in the right direction that ignoring her small retreats was easy.

“Somebody’s just sucking up so that I won’t do any shopping,” she teased, pretending to fuss with her reflection in the salon window.

Josh wrapped his arms around her from behind. Kissing her cheek, he asked, “Is it working? Should I throw in a few passionate declarations and fervent promises?”

“I’ll settle for getting some burgers to take home and eat.” She glanced at Cam. “I’ve got a feeling somebody’s going to be too busy with you to think about cooking dinner tonight.”

“Burgers it is,” Josh said with a sudden stab of guilt. What did he expect her to do? Sit quietly in the corner? Hang out downstairs and watch television? “But I think Cam would be happy to make you dinner.”

They both looked to Cam. He had been hanging back, allowing Josh the room to be her focus, but there was no mistaking the longing in his eyes. “Of course, I would. But...you can always join us, Sara.”

She stiffened in Josh's arms, and he fought the urge to tighten his hold on her. He knew Cam's earlier suggestion had been optimistic. Exchanging a few kisses was entirely different from opening her whole body to them.

There was a beat of awkward silence before Josh took the situation in hand. "Come on," Josh said, turning her towards the exit. "We'll compromise and have Cam make his special burgers and beer-battered fries, yeah?"

Though she let him lead her away, there was still a tension in Sara's body as Cam fell into step on her other side. "No, carryout is fine," she insisted. "His burgers are good, but we both know what's better. You two deserve some time for putting up with all my vanity today. Don't worry about me."

Josh nearly announced he would spend the evening with her; they were working through the dozens of movies Cam had acquired in the past three weeks. But he looked up, catching Cam's eye over her head, and he was right back to aching for him. There was no ambiguity about Cam's desire, and Josh knew that look. Lust snaked through him, temporarily stealing his ability to speak.

"You heard the girl," Cam said. "She's sick and tired of us hovering all the time, anyway. I distinctly remember hearing someone call someone else a helicopter under her breath last night."

Josh knew he was teasing Sara, but her head snapped to the side to gawp at Cam. "I did not!" she protested.

Cam shrugged. "Okay, you didn't." They walked a few steps in silence. "Except you did."

"Helicopter, huh?" Josh asked with an exaggerated sigh. "I see how it is."

With a flounce of her hair, Sara pulled ahead, leaving both men to trail behind her. "It's a good thing I'm back," she announced. "You two have obviously been terrible influences on each other."

Cam chuckled. Closing the gap, he slid his hand behind Josh's back and cupped his ass. "Ten bucks says she's in our bed before the end of the night," he muttered.

Josh pretended Cam's strong hand on his ass had no effect on him at all. Joining them would make Sara vulnerable, and he knew she couldn't tolerate that. "I'll take that bet."

Cam smirked, and Josh knew he was already counting his money. Quickening his pace, he caught up with Sara and wrapped his arm around her waist. She smiled up at him as they stepped out of the mall, her eyes catching the sun. Josh's chest constricted, and he tightened his hold on her.

Chapter Fifteen

The ride back seemed to take forever. Cam hadn't been kidding when he'd teased about waiting months to get his hands on Josh; that's what it genuinely felt like. He credited it to his good spirits, to the fact he and Sara were slowly reconnecting, to the fact that piece by piece, brick by brick, they were rebuilding the shambles of their lives. He felt alive, and all he wanted to do was wallow in it. And if Sara didn't necessarily want to join in yet, then that was all right. She would eventually. Cam didn't doubt it.

She disappeared into the kitchen with her bag of burgers, the scent of her food wafting behind her. Before Josh followed her, Cam grabbed his hip and yanked him back against his body, sliding his hand over Josh's groin as he ground his still-hard cock into his ass. He mouthed a wet trail along Josh's neck, but just as Josh began to melt against him, Cam called out, "We'll be upstairs, Sara. If you need anything, just come on up."

"Your bedroom is closer," Josh pointed out.

The tip of Cam's tongue traced around Josh's ear. "And stack the deck against winning the bet?" he murmured. "I don't think so. If we're in your room, Sara's more likely to join in. She feels safer there."

"Oh. Makes sense," Josh breathed, pulling out of Cam's grasp. "In that case, I'll race you up there."

He let Josh get halfway up the stairs before lending chase, deliberately keeping a few steps behind so he didn't reach him until they were outside the bedroom. There, Cam grabbed his shoulder and pushed him playfully against the wall, pinning him as he attacked Josh's neck with tongue and teeth.

"If we hadn't been in a public place, I would've been buried in your ass before that third kiss," he said against Josh's skin.

Josh shivered, and his skin broke out in goose bumps beneath Cam's tongue. Josh put both hands flat against the wall, tilting his head and moaning softly. "If we hadn't been in a public place, I would have been begging for it."

Sliding a hand around Josh's stomach, Cam pulled the shirt up until his fingertips grazed along Josh's hot flesh. "Well, now that wasn't very smart. Now you're putting ideas in my head."

"I'm not worried," Josh said, rotating his hips. "You don't have the patience right now for any new ideas."

"You're the one who ran."

"Because if I hadn't, you probably would have dragged me bodily up the stairs."

Cam popped the button of Josh's jeans. "Something tells me you wouldn't have minded."

A strangled groan escaped Josh's throat as Cam pushed his hand down Josh's pants, palming his hard cock. "No...no probably not." He glanced over his shoulder. "You don't plan to fuck me right here in the hall, do you?"

"For someone who was ready to beg for it, you're getting awfully picky," Cam teased. Stretching his fingers, he caressed Josh's balls, returning his mouth to the taut sinew of Josh's neck. "I'm just having an appetizer. I'll have you spread out on the bed soon enough."

"For the record, I wouldn't have minded if that was your plan." He reached behind him to grip Cam's hip. Cam scraped his teeth across Josh's skin, smiling as he jerked impatiently against his hand. The head of Josh's cock rubbed against his arm, smearing hot pre-come on his skin. "I really wouldn't."

Cam's cock jumped. He'd had images of Josh laid out on the bed, legs spread while Cam licked a path from head to toe and then settled down to tongue fuck him first. But the urgent need in Josh's voice and the hard tug on Cam's hip drove those thoughts from his brain. All he could think of now was finally getting inside him and feeling those tight, hot walls squeezing around his cock.

“It’s been too long.” Keeping one hand on Josh’s cock, Cam grabbed Josh’s wrist with the other and guided him to help in undoing Cam’s jeans. “Do you realize we haven’t had sex since moving in here?”

“I realize it,” Josh said. “I try not to dwell on it too much.” As soon as the buttons were free, he gripped Cam’s shaft with strong fingers. “But I did...” He slid his thumb over the tip of his cock. “Dwell on it a little.”

Cam groaned. Resting his forehead on Josh’s shoulder, he tried to ignore the rushing need searing his skin, abandoning Josh’s hand to push the other man’s jeans down his hips. “I’ve missed you. I fucking hate sleeping alone.”

His pants fell to his ankles and he stepped out of them, kicking them aside. “I know. I’ve missed you, too.” In a much softer voice he added, “So fucking much.” Josh tilted his head back, searching for Cam’s mouth. “But I don’t think you’ll have to sleep alone anymore.”

The kiss was hot and hungry, and Cam sank into it with all the need of a parched man in an oasis. For all his assurances about Sara, he wasn’t as sure as Josh about how soon things might change for her, or how much longer he was going to have to tolerate lying in his bed at night alone, knowing the two people he loved most in the world were just upstairs out of his reach. There had been one time since that incredible morning where Sara had come to him, shyly, and asked if they could sleep in shifted form that night. Cam had grabbed at it gratefully.

But he wanted more. He wanted his lovers back, both of them. He wanted to go to sleep to the sound of their breathing, and he wanted to wake up to the touch of their bodies. They were closer now than they had been since finding Sara, yes, but they were still beyond his reach.

He was going to take whatever he could get in the interim.

The kiss stretched on until they both tore away, gasping for air. Josh’s breath fanned over his face, and less than an inch separated them. “Right now...Cam...I need you.”

Releasing Josh’s cock, Cam lifted his hand to Josh’s mouth, teasing his lips until they parted. He slid two fingers inside, watching Josh’s cheeks hollow as he sucked at

them. It was tempting to push Josh to his knees and watch his mouth hollow around his cock, but Cam knew that wasn't what either of them wanted right then.

He pulled back, pressing Josh back to face the wall, and slipped his wet fingers between the taut cheeks of Josh's ass, tracing the hollow until he found the tight ring of muscle. Josh groaned as Cam circled it with a fingertip, spreading his legs even wider, and as Cam began nibbling at his neck, he slowly sank his index finger into the hot depths.

Josh sucked his breath in sharply, holding it as Cam began to pump his wrist. But he was only silent until Cam's middle finger joined his first finger, and then he started gasping Cam's name, over and over. Cam thrust forward, curling his fingers to brush against Josh's prostate, and Josh stiffened, his breath turning to a whimper.

"What do you want, Josh?" Cam breathed.

"Fuck me, Cam. I need to feel you. I need to feel...I need you...please."

The ache in Josh's voice as much as the way he trembled against Cam's body prompted him to pull his fingers out, grabbing his cock and smearing the pre-come around the head. He angled his hips away, nudging between Josh's cheeks, and when he found the waiting pucker, Cam slowly pressed forward, moaning as his cock breached the tight outer ring.

"Oh, fuck..." he muttered. Taking Josh's hand, Cam intertwined their fingers before bracing them against the wall, using the leverage to push a little harder. Without lube, he wanted to take it slow, but the searing vise of Josh's ass was making it very hard to control his pace. All he wanted was to plough into Josh's hot depths and remind him how much Cam needed this.

For Josh's part, he didn't seem the least concerned about the lack of lube. He moved with a sort of desperation—not like it was their first time in weeks, but their last time. Cam wrapped his other arm around Josh, holding him tighter with each thrust. Each time Cam moved a little faster, thrust forward a little harder, Josh offered soft words of encouragement. "Yes...like that...God, Cam...God...more...love you..."

Cam started trembling long before he felt his balls start to tighten. It was more than hearing how much Josh wanted it, or the heat surrounding him on every stroke. It was the relief at having him close, the knowledge there was an end in sight to all the misery of the past two years. And he knew it was all because of Josh, because of his dogged determination to find Sara. Josh was the reason they were going to be whole again. Cam had never loved him more than in that moment.

His hand slipped to find Josh's cock, anxious to have him come as well. As his fingers curled around the long shaft, however, a feather touch on his forearm made him start, and he jerked in his thrusts to see Sara standing next to them.

Her eyes were large and dark, and through the thin material of her blouse, Cam saw the tight points of her nipples. "Can I?" she asked.

Josh froze, the tendons on his neck standing out. He watched silently, his mouth half-open, his eyes wide, as Sara stood with her back against the wall, her leg easing between Josh's. She slid her hand beneath Cam's, gripping Josh's slick shaft.

"Sara," Josh murmured, like a benediction, before tilting his head to kiss her.

Cam held there, quivering, watching their mouths come together. Sara was hesitant, just as she had been with him, and Josh was equally gentle, the caress as slow and tender as the kiss Cam and Josh had shared had been hungry. A small part of Cam wished he could be a part of it, but he knew in time, his turn would come. She had come to them, after all. And Josh deserved this, for being the one to bring them back together.

He didn't start moving again until he felt Sara's hand begin pumping along Josh's cock. It was even better knowing she was just on the other side.

"Love you," Josh said against her lips but Cam knew he wasn't just talking to her. He let Josh set the rhythm, pushing against Cam, thrusting into Sara's hand. He moved slower now, and Cam didn't blame him for wanting to prolong and savor it. But just having Sara that near was almost enough to make him come, and Josh was making the softest, hungriest sound in his throat, and clenching around Cam's cock with each thrust.

Josh buckled without warning, his long moan caught by Sara's lips.

Cam's head wasn't clear enough to know for sure whether or not Josh had come, but the sudden collapse of Josh's body made Cam react on instinct, his arm clamping around him to hold him up. The jerk back against his chest slammed his cock in deeper than it had been going before, and Cameron came with a guttural cry, his body spasming as his hot come coated Josh's ass.

They both slumped forward, leaning heavily against the wall. Sara still held Josh, her other hand gripping his shoulder. Josh turned his head slowly, his mouth brushing against Cam's. His lips were salty and below that, Cam recognized Sara's familiar taste. The kiss was over far too quickly as Josh turned his attention back to Sara.

"Let's go to bed," Josh said, his voice ragged.

Cam held his breath while he waited for Sara to respond. It was easier than trying to get his lungs to work properly.

Sara licked her lips. "I'm not sure that's such a good idea yet."

He could feel the disappointment in Josh's body, but Cam wasn't ready to give up yet. "Why not?" he challenged. "We love you, Sara. Let us show you."

She didn't answer, instead sliding her liquid eyes to Josh.

"Sara...I...I really want to be with you tonight. I'll understand if you're not ready, but I want to be with you."

Her mouth softened, the barest hint of a smile curving its fullness. "Still greedy, I see."

"It's not something I've outgrown," Josh admitted.

Long seconds ticked by. Sara was the first to move, lifting her hand to Josh's face and tracing over the planes of his cheek.

"This is all I've wanted for the past two years," she said.

Josh mimicked her, cupping her face delicately. "Me, too." He looked over his shoulder, and Cam noticed his eyes were soft. "Both of us."

Her knees were shaky as Josh led her into the bedroom, her heart pounding so hard it felt like it was trying to break out of the prison of her rib cage. She wanted this so badly,

and if it had been only Josh making the request, she wouldn't even have considered saying no. But seeing Cam over his shoulder had made her pause. Things were better between them—almost impossibly so—but there were still moments when Sara had to stop herself from turning on her heel and running, or from lashing out if he came up on her unexpectedly.

But his hand was as gentle as Josh's, and when the trio came to a stop next to the bed, he hung back, looking to Josh to take the lead.

“We're going to take it slow, right?” she asked.

“Any way you like it,” Josh said, running his fingers through her hair. His other hand went to her waist, his fingertips creeping under her shirt to rub the smooth skin just above her waistband. He kissed the corner of her mouth, then traced her jaw up to her ear. “Where would you like Cam to touch you?” he whispered.

Sara swallowed against the lump in her throat. She caught Cameron's eye and held it as she replied, “I trust him to do what he thinks is best. All I ask is that he doesn't shift.” She looked back to Josh. “And that you're the one who actually fucks me.”

Josh smiled. “Fair enough, and I trust him to do what he thinks is best, too. But I want to know where you want to be touched right now.”

She had no idea. This whole situation was overwhelming, to say the least, but when she'd seen Cam fucking Josh in the hall, she'd been transfixed. Her mouth had watered, and her body had responded, and all she could think about was how it felt to be a part of that.

Sara took a step back, toward the edge of the bed. She was a part of them. They wanted to do whatever it took to convince her of that. Whatever she wanted.

“You could help me get undressed,” she suggested.

Josh unsnapped and unzipped her pants as Cam stepped behind her. She remained still as Cam hooked his fingers under her shirt, then slowly dragged the material up her torso, exposing her flat stomach, her ribs, her lacy bra, before finally whisking it over her head. Josh didn't touch her at first, but he watched her so intently it seemed like his eyes

were caressing her. Cam caught his fingers in her belt loops and pulled her jeans down as slowly as he removed her shirt.

It was hard not to try and cover herself up. Sara was still very aware of the scars riddling her body. Even when Josh didn't join her right away, she slept in a long nightshirt to hide most of them. Add in the fact that she was still so thin and it took everything she had not to grab her clothes and run. How could they want her like this? They were in love with a memory of the woman they knew.

Josh might have sensed her desire to hide, because he threaded his fingers through hers, taking both hands and holding them at her waist. Cam unsnapped her bra, but didn't push the material aside, and the straps hung loosely from her shoulders, the soft material just covering her breasts. She looked up, trying to read Josh, and found she couldn't look away from his eyes. He held her gaze, releasing one hand to reach for Cam's.

She felt their touch at the same time, Josh's thin fingers entwined with Cameron's larger ones, their skin warm. They started at her neck, then glided over her shoulder and down her arm.

Goose bumps rippled over her skin, and Sara inhaled sharply as a fresh surge of want shivered through her. Reaching out, she ran her fingertips along Josh's trim stomach, almost smiling as the muscles twitched beneath her touch. "Are you still ticklish?"

"Yes." He grinned. "And I still don't like to be tickled."

Her back warmed when Cam leaned forward. "That sounds like a dare to me," he whispered in her ear.

"No, it's not," Josh said quickly. He shot daggers Cam's direction. "Don't."

"Don't what?"

It was the mock innocence in his voice that made Sara smile. "Maybe next time," she said.

Josh kissed her forehead. "Sounds fair to me."

He slid one strap down her shoulder, then the other, and then pulled her bra off, leaving her utterly exposed in front of him. He didn't say a word, but he didn't have to;

the look on his face said everything. He was enthralled by her, fascinated, without a single flash of surprise, disgust or disappointment.

Sara was caught up in what Josh was doing to the point that the sudden tickle of Cam's mustache against the back of her neck sent a shockwave through her body. His lips whispered across her skin, kissing her throat, the soft spot below her ear, her shoulders.

She couldn't hold back her cry, or stop from arching an arm back to tangle in Cam's hair. The movement thrust her breasts out, hard nipples even closer to Josh, and as she watched, he skimmed his palm over the sensitive tips.

While Cam continued to use his mouth, Josh channeled his energy into touch. His palms were smooth and light, and she shivered each time he brushed against her. He weighed her breasts in his hands, kneaded the soft flesh gently, massaged his fingers over her skin. It seemed like he was trying to touch her everywhere. And the entire time, Cam never stopped kissing, licking, tasting her.

"God..." Sara's lashes fluttered shut, and she reached out blindly, fisting Josh's open shirt and yanking him forward. She honed in on his mouth with remembered expertise, and the first swipe of her tongue against his drew a whimper from her throat. She'd missed this. The few chaste kisses they'd shared to this point were nothing compared to the hunger driving her now.

Josh's hand went to her hip as he deepened the kiss. She sensed his hesitancy, the same gentle patience he had exhibited since the first morning she woke up, prompting him to move slowly, deliberately. But each second of contact steadily stoked the fire growing in her, and Josh responded in kind, unleashing some of the desire he had kept such a careful grip on.

Cam abandoned her neck and shoulders, slowly falling to his knees as he dragged his tongue down her spine. Every brush of his mouth and hand was almost reverent. When he reached her bikini-briefs, his tongue traced the edge of the material, first along her lower back, and then over the curve of her ass, and then following the line down to her inner thighs.

Her legs trembled. Breaking away from the kiss, Sara clung to Josh's shoulders, every rapid breath scraping her nipples across his chest. "Maybe we should think about moving this to the bed," she panted.

Cam straightened, stepping back to finish removing his clothes. Josh took her shoulders lightly and guided her backwards until her legs hit the edge of the mattress. He lowered her to the thick blankets, and Cam crawled onto the bed beside her.

"Roll onto your side," Cam suggested.

She did, and he spooned behind her, his thighs and chest against her back. Josh stretched out on his side facing her, his leg sliding between hers. Despite being positioned between the two men, she wasn't crushed, both maintaining a distance of a few inches.

Sara propped her head up on her hand. "It's been too long. Thank you for being so patient with me." She glanced back at Cam. "Both of you."

"It was worth the wait," Cam said, idly tracing patterns on her back. He hadn't ventured to explore the front of her body at all, but she was thrilled by all the small sources of pleasure he found. She hadn't even known her back was so sensitive.

"Just be sure to tell us if you're uncomfortable," Josh said, his hands as earnest as his words.

"I will." She reached down to stroke his semi-hard cock. Recovery time was a good thing right now. It gave her more time to relax with both men. "This doesn't tickle, does it?"

"No, thank God," Josh sighed. He slid his fingers just under her briefs and paused, looking at her questioningly.

Sara released a long, drawn-out breath, quelling the sudden jump in her nerves. Unable at the moment to voice her agreement, she leaned forward and found his mouth again, a slow caress she hoped told him what he needed to know. Josh moved with the kiss, pushing the lacy fabric down over the curve of her hip, but when it went beyond his easy reach, Cam took over, stripping her of the last line of her defenses.

Even though she was now completely naked between the two of them, Cam kept the contact almost chaste. His hands were gentle, and he wasn't shy to use his mouth, but his

fingers didn't sneak below her waist or between her legs. She looked back to see his eyes were half-closed and dark, fixated on her like he had never seen anything so precious. Like he couldn't even see the scars, the defects, the horrible evidence that would probably never fade.

Josh's soft touch drew her attention back to him. Deep concentration, and even confusion, marked his face. She followed the line of his eyes to a scar on her hip. It was small, but just one of many. The only difference was he didn't stop looking at this one, while he had ignored the others.

"It doesn't hurt," she whispered, hoping to banish any worries he might have.

"No. I guess it's been healed over for awhile." He brushed his fingers over it once more, then slid his hand between her thighs.

Sara thought Josh wanted to say more, but the first glide across her wet folds drove any desire to talk about her scars straight out of her head. She bent her knee, opening her legs further, and gripped his biceps as the pleasure rolled through her. Nothing had ever felt so good. Though he never entered her, Josh stroked along her lips, outlining her opening before using her wetness to slick a path up to her clit.

The first time he flicked his finger across the sensitive tip, Sara arched back against Cam and cried out Josh's name.

Josh sought out her mouth in a gentle kiss, his tongue sweeping through her mouth. Each time he brushed against her clit, she moaned, and he deepened the kiss. With their mouths sealed and his finger massaging her sensitive flesh, it was almost too easy to let the rest of the world fall away. But every time she was tempted to focus entirely on Josh, Cam touched her, kissed her, whispered soft words in her ear.

"You're beautiful. You and Josh are both beautiful, together."

She knew Cam wasn't expecting anything. It was written in his careful caresses and the gentleness of his mouth. But the quiet reverence in his voice made her want to do more than just accept his attention. There were three people in this bed, and not even in the beginning with Josh had their relationship been about inequality.

Sara pulled back from Josh's kiss and lowered her leg. Rolling onto her back, she caught the curious glance the two men exchanged before she reached for the back of Cam's neck. He didn't fight her as she brought him to her mouth, and when she touched the seam of his lips with her tongue, he groaned.

Cam opened his mouth to the kiss, but allowed her to control every aspect of it. She tentatively explored with the tip of her tongue, and he followed her lead, kissing her slowly. Josh's hand was still between her thighs, pressing his finger against her swollen flesh. As he rubbed her clit, and Cam kissed her with a restrained, yet hungry, passion, Josh flicked his tongue over her hard nipple.

She came with a whimper that Cameron swallowed down, her body trembling from the unexpected throes of her orgasm. It was the most pleasure her flesh had known in years, and while it wasn't as powerful as she knew it could be, it still made her eyes burn and her ears ring. Not even clutching the back of Cam's neck, refusing him the room to move away, was enough to contain the fire now scorching its way through her veins.

Josh's cheek brushed against her jaw as he kissed her neck, and it shocked Sara how cool it felt. Was she that hot? She had to be. Even Cam's chest where she rested her palm felt cooler than she did.

Cam lifted his head, his long hair falling over his forehead and partially obscuring his face. "I want to taste you, Sara." He glided his fingers down her body, coming to a stop where Josh's hand still rested. "Can I?"

Her thighs quivered at the thought of his beard rasping softly across her pussy as he ate her out. Sara's gaze ducked to his swollen mouth, and she licked her lips once before nodding. Before he could move, though, she turned back to Josh, reaching down to the thick length of his cock pressing against her hip.

"Can I taste you, too, then?" she asked.

"Yeah," Josh breathed, looking more than a little surprised.

He moved up the bed, sitting with his back against the wall. His cock was hard now, jutting forward like it was waiting for her mouth. She turned over to her hands and knees,

positioning herself between his thighs. Cam slid beneath her, tracing her lips with the tip of his finger, before touching his tongue against her flesh.

She jerked, her pussy still sensitive from her first orgasm, and Cam stilled for a moment as she fought to collect herself. A slight frown pulled Josh's brows together, but she gave him a little shake of her head to indicate nothing was wrong. To prove her point, she leaned her head down and dragged the flat of her tongue up the length of his shaft, at the same time lowering her hips back down to Cam's waiting mouth.

"Oh, Sara," Josh moaned as she rolled her tongue around the sensitive head of his cock. His hands curled into the bed, his hips lifting off the mattress.

While she teased Josh, Cam was busy sliding his tongue up and down her lips. He brushed against her clit, but didn't linger there before moving on. It seemed like he was intent on tasting every bit of her—as intent as she was on sampling every inch of Josh's cock. She looked up through her lashes to see his gaze locked on her, his color high, his eyes bright.

"This tastes the same, too," she said with a half-smile, wondering if he'd remember that kiss in the diner.

"Feels better than I remember."

She hid her satisfied smile by ducking her head, opening her mouth enough to suck the head of his cock past her lips. The tang of his come still clung to the velvety skin, and she wrapped her tongue around him in search of every morsel, breathing in the musky scent of his skin as she concentrated on how wonderful he tasted. It was tempting to do him this way, to bury him in her throat until he came so she could savor every drop, but Josh had already come once. If she finished him with a blow job, it would be awhile before he'd be up for more, and she needed to feel him inside her.

The idea came to her as she began sucking down his length. She'd wake him up with a blow job. He had always been helpless against her first thing in the morning.

Josh's quickening breath made her warm with satisfaction, but she almost couldn't hear him over the sound of her own pants and moans. Cam lapped at her clit before

licking a path to her slick passage. He circled her opening, collecting her juices against his tongue, and then slipped it into her quivering flesh.

It was almost too much, and Sara slid off Josh's cock, holding him steady at the base with one hand while she struggled against the wave of sensations Cam sent through her body. The soft caress of Josh's hand along her shoulder, pushing her hair back to touch her face, made her groan and turn into it, and she squeezed her eyes shut against the flood of emotion threatening to overwhelm her.

"I love you both so much," she whispered.

Cam moaned against her body, the vibrations sending another hot wave of pleasure through her. He gripped her hips tightly as he did unbelievable things with his tongue. He didn't stop as she spoke, but she knew from every physical reaction that he heard her, and he felt the same way.

Josh curled his fingers against her cheek, caressing her softly. "I love you, too," he said, so quietly she almost couldn't pick out the words. "Always have. Always will."

Sara looked up. The sight of Josh's eyes, shining and dark, fixed on her, was all she needed to say, "Stop, Cam, stop."

Cam pulled away immediately, but before she had to see any hurt or confusion in his face about why, Sara reached behind and took his hand, pulling him with her as she straddled Josh's lap. Her skin was slick against both men's, and she fumbled for a moment as she tried to position Josh's cock. Soon enough, she was poised in readiness, her muscles quivering as she paused to meet Josh's eyes.

The pause lasted only long enough for her to smile. With Cam's hands on her hips, Sara sank down Josh's length, not stopping until she felt his balls brush against her ass.

Josh held the back of her neck and guided her mouth to his. She pulled back then thrust forward, riding Josh in shallow strokes. Cam continued gripping her hips, moving with her, but not controlling her. As soon as Josh lifted his head, Cam reached for him, smashing their mouths together.

Cam might have thought she and Josh were beautiful together, but the sight of her two lovers together, whether it was kissing or fucking or even something as simple as

holding each other, had always turned her insides into jelly. It was why she hadn't been able to stop herself from interceding in the hallway, and it was why there had never been any hesitation on her part to draw Josh into their arms when they'd first made the decision to push their friendship further. Seeing Josh's mouth attack Cam's in ways he'd probably deemed too rough for Sara made her covetous for even a fraction of what they shared.

Leaning forward, she nibbled at Josh's neck, lengthening the strokes of her hips against his. When she reached the softer skin at the bend into his shoulder, she licked the spot she wanted, then sank her teeth into the pliant flesh.

Josh stiffened against her, pulling away from Cam to gasp for air. "Oh, God. Oh, God, Sara. You feel so..." He smoothed his hands over her shoulders, arching back to thrust deeper into her. "Sara...I missed you..." He took Cam's hand and guided it to her body. "Touch her," he encouraged.

Cam's hand hesitated on her stomach. "Sara?" His voice was rough and uncertain, and his fingers trembled against her skin where he held himself still.

Sara folded her hand over Cam's, pushing it lower until he grazed across her clit. She gasped and automatically clenched around Josh's shaft, but she continued leading him, prompting him to scissor his fingers around the base of Josh's cock as his thumb caressed her clit.

Josh peppered her face with light kisses—her cheeks, forehead, nose, lips. He kissed every bit of her he could reach, zeroing in on her neck when she dropped her head back. "Never going to forget this," he breathed, his words warm against her skin.

"You won't have to," she replied. And he wouldn't. Sara had every intention of making sure both men knew her bed was theirs, from that night on.

With every downstroke onto Josh's cock, Cam pushed his hand harder and harder into Sara's mound until her whole body was pulsing with the need to come. The scrape of his mouth against her neck made her shudder, and when she felt the two men kiss at the junction of her shoulder, their tongues hot and wet along her skin, everything inside Sara erupted.

Josh cried out as she clenched around him, riding out her orgasm before he thrust forward once more, burying himself completely. His cock jerked against her walls several times, his body shuddering with each spurt. He wrapped his arms around her, pulling her against his slick chest. Cam gripped Josh's shoulders, enclosing her between their bodies.

The heat pouring off them was soporific, and Sara snuggled into Josh, burying her face in the crook of his neck. "Can we just stay like this all night? And tomorrow, too. No moving."

"Not quite like this. I'm not sure Cam can sleep kneeling upright," Josh said, a smile in his voice.

After some shuffling and shifting, she found herself between them once again, Cam curled around her back, her head resting on Josh's shoulder.

"I think my burger's gone cold by now," she mused, tracing idle patterns along Josh's stomach.

Josh smiled. "You should have eaten it before you came up to spy on us."

"I wasn't spying. I was investigating the loud bang." She nudged Cam with her heel. "And you call me the impatient one."

"Hey," Cam protested, "Josh was the one who couldn't even wait until we got to the bedroom."

"It didn't look like Josh was the one who was doing the driving to me."

"But Josh knows how to push all my buttons and get just what he wants."

Josh shrugged. "It's true. We'll make Cam go get us something for dinner later. After sleep."

Sara made noises of agreement in the back of her throat, and her eyes drifted shut. Almost immediately, they opened again to look back at Cam. "I want you to move your stuff in here in the morning. I don't want us separated any more."

Cam's smile was wide and made him look like he was about six years old. Kissing her temple, he said, "Yes, ma'am. Whatever you want."

As she nestled back into Josh's chest, Sara sighed in contentment. Dealing with her fears and readjusting to the world seemed infinitely more manageable with their strong

arms around her. These two amazing men would do anything in their power to protect her, to help her, to give her strength to face what she needed. She had always considered herself lucky to have found them in the first place, but now, Sara knew it was more than that. They were a family, bound by their love to overcome whatever they had to.

She could do anything with Josh and Cam at her side.

Chapter Sixteen

The call of nature pulled Sara from sleep, and she rolled from bed to stumble to the bathroom, only blinking half-awake once she washed her hands. Her muscles ached in fresh, old ways, and for the first time since moving into the house, the sight of her nude body in the mirror didn't leave her horrified or wondering who it was staring back at her. There were scars, yes, but Cam and Josh loved her as she was. If they could ignore them, then so could she.

She was quiet as she slipped back into the bedroom, unwilling to wake the men up. She owed Josh a blow job, after all. Maybe she would just wake Cam up and they could blow him together. Except the planning in her mind came to a halt when she realized that the object of her attention wasn't in the bed. Only Cam lay sprawled across the blankets, in the same position she'd left him in. It dawned on Sara, then, that she didn't remember climbing over Josh to get out.

Her head turned to the door. He must've gotten up early, to work, most likely. Josh had been researching like crazy, trying to figure out who was responsible for kidnapping her. And he'd gone downstairs so she and Cam could sleep a little longer.

Grabbing her robe, Sara pulled it on and headed for the stairs. Cam could sleep. She wanted coffee and to thank Josh.

The house was eerily silent, slivers of light visible around the edges of the curtains. Sara paused at the bottom of the stairs, looking first one way toward the living room, and then the other toward the kitchen. She frowned. Josh wasn't there. The only other option on the lower floor was Cam's bedroom, but she knew he wouldn't go in there to work, not with Cam still in their room.

That left only one of the spare rooms upstairs. She'd make a pot of coffee first, then take him up a cup once it was brewed. If he was up this early, she had no doubt he would need it.

The envelope was propped up in front of the coffee machine, hers and Cam's names written across it in Josh's careful script. With a frown, Sara picked it up and pulled out the single piece of folded paper.

You're asleep while I'm writing this, and I know I don't have the time to sit here and watch you, but I can't help it. You moved in the night, like I expected you would, your bodies naturally seeking each other out. I can't look away because you two look so right together. And I've been waiting so long to see it again.

I'm doing this because it's my fault the two of you were ever separated. They took Sara because of my article. I promised it wouldn't disrupt your lives. But it ruined everything. Sara, it kills me to look at you and know I took everything away from you. The people who kidnapped you worked for Iocor. No doubt, my supervisors authorized it, my colleagues, my friends, carried it out. It had to be my friends, because they were the only ones who ever saw my private notes.

I would never do anything to hurt you. You know how much I love you both, but you can't trust me. You need to leave Vegas. They can trace the IP's on the emails I sent JD back to this neighborhood. You can't go to Delta, either. And because I foolishly trusted JD, you should avoid going to Cam's family. Find another shifter community, one where you'll be protected. And please, don't try to contact me. Don't tell me where you are. That's how they'll find you again. I won't be contacting you either.

I'm so sorry. You were the best thing that ever happened to me. Thank you for last night, and for the last five years. I'm going to do what I can to fix things. Maybe one day you can forgive me for bringing this down on your heads, but I swear, I never thought they would do this. I never thought they could.

Sara, I know last night didn't magically heal everything. When things get difficult, remember Cam loves you. Hold onto that. Cam, remember she loves you, even when she can't say it, or show it. I don't want to leave you ever, especially not now. But I don't feel like I have a choice.

Love you, always.

Josh.

Her hands were shaking so badly by the time she finished the note, the paper rattled. She wanted to read it over, to prove Josh wasn't saying goodbye, that he wasn't telling them not to contact him, but the words were swimming, her eyes burning as the tears refused to fall down her cheeks.

Gone? How could he be gone? After everything he had done, knowing how much she needed him, how much they loved him, how could he just go?

He wanted to fix things. That's what the note said. And maybe he was right and none of this would have happened if he hadn't published his article, but leaving didn't fix things. Leaving made things worse. Leaving tore them apart and left them weaker. He couldn't be gone. He couldn't.

Sara whirled on her heel and raced up the stairs, taking them two at a time. Heedless of how much noise she was making, she burst into the bedroom and rushed to the bed, calling out Cam's name as she shook him awake.

"What? What?" Cam sat up into a sitting position, his body tense, poised for flight. "What's going on? Is something wrong?"

She thrust the now-rumpled letter into his hands. "Josh left. He says he's not coming back."

"Josh...what?" He picked up the letter, as though he didn't know what it was. "Josh left? He couldn't leave."

"He did. He says all this is his fault." She didn't have time to sit around and wait for Cam to read the letter. Leaping back off the bed, Sara tore off her robe as she went to the dresser. "We have to go and bring him back."

Cam was silent for a long time. When she looked up, he was still staring at the letter. She didn't think he was reading it. He just stared. She said his name and he looked up, and then over to Josh's side of the bed, like he expected to see the other man there.

Sara's heart clenched. "Cam," she tried again. She forced her feet to take a step closer to the bed. "The longer we take, the further he gets away."

“He led them to you,” Cam murmured, like he was trying on the words. “The entire time you were gone... No.” He jumped off the bed. “No. He wouldn’t just leave. He wouldn’t just write a letter and leave. How could he do this?”

She didn’t have an answer for him, but at least Cam was moving now. Turning back to the dresser, Sara resumed pulling out her clothes, leaning to pick up her underwear when she dropped them. “We’ll call him on his cell first. And if he doesn’t answer, we’ll just figure out where he’s going.” Her clothes slipped through her shaking fingers again, and Sara sank onto the edge of the bed, trying to get a hold of her tremulous limbs. “I just don’t get how he knows it was Iocor. Did he say anything to you about it?”

“No. No.” Cam ran his fingers through his hair, leaving it standing on end. He looked a little wild. “Yesterday, while we were waiting for you, he said he thought it was another research facility. He said he was going to go check things out. I told him he couldn’t leave, but he never mentioned Iocor. And he said he wasn’t going to leave. He wasn’t going to leave.”

She stared at him, aghast. “He told you yesterday he was leaving?”

“No. Yes. He said he was going to contact a few places to see if there was any interest in his research, and he might need to go for a few days. I told him I didn’t think he should leave right now. He agreed. That was all. He never mentioned Iocor, and he sure as fuck didn’t mention leaving forever.”

“Obviously, he lied to you. You should have said something.”

“I should have said something? What would you have done, Sara? And Josh doesn’t...Josh doesn’t lie to me. Josh never lies. Look at the goddamn letter, Sara. He didn’t even lie in his letter to protect himself. He told the truth even though he thinks we’ll hate him for it.”

“If that’s the case, then what the hell happened to convince him it was Iocor between yesterday and whenever he left?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know.” He sat at the foot of the bed, his hands hanging uselessly between his knees. “When did he even have time to come to that conclusion? He was with us for nearly the entire night.”

She felt completely and utterly helpless. How much of this had been premeditated? Cam said Josh couldn't lie, and before this morning, Sara would have agreed. But he'd said yesterday he was going to go, and Cam was right. There was no time for Josh to have learned anything new.

Sara felt hollow, like someone had taken a part of her and carved it out. Vaguely, she wondered if this was how Cam and Josh had felt when she had disappeared. How had they gone on for two years living like this? The tears that had begun to abate at her flurry of activity returned with a vengeance, spilling over her cheeks without a sound.

"I didn't even hear the phone ring," she said. "Do you think he was up in the middle of the night checking his email? He mentioned JD. Maybe JD said something."

"He made it sound like trusting JD was a mistake. Do you think she'd send a confession to him? God, I don't know the woman. Maybe that's just what she'd do." He looked up. "I have his password."

Hope returned, brilliant and brief. "You can check his email?"

"Yeah. My computer is downstairs. It's worth a shot."

Sara followed Cam out without a word, trailing after him even when he headed unerringly to his bedroom. He went straight for his laptop, and she hovered at his side, her hand resting on his shoulder, as he logged in.

Cam navigated to the proper web page, explaining, "He has all his email go into this box, private and professional. He keeps every message, sent or received, archived here. When we were looking for you, he was in contact with several people he met online, looking for leads. He wanted me to have access to those. Just in case."

Her eyes widened as she saw the extent of their search, spelled out in email addresses and electronic bytes. A new emotion whisked through her, a sense of overwhelming awe, and she looked away to stare down at Cam's intent face. "You did all that for me?"

"This is the least of it. Josh...didn't really do anything besides conduct the search. I helped him when I could, but somebody had to keep food on the table and a roof over our heads." Cam clicked the mouse and typed a few words. "Yeah, he's talked to her. But it's

been nearly two weeks since she emailed. And..." He narrowed his eyes, skimming the messages. "Nothing that would indicate guilt."

"But he mentioned JD by name."

"Yeah. But if she emailed him, I'm pretty sure it would have been here. You know how he likes to keep his notes..." Cam looked down, his eyes narrowing. Without warning, he ran his thumb over a scar. The same scar Josh had noticed the day before. "Do you remember how this happened?"

She stepped back, breaking the contact. His attention to her scars made her self-conscious, but she masked her uneasiness by pretending to examine the mark more closely. It didn't look all that special to her, just more history she'd rather forget. "It was..." Sara shook her head. "No, I don't. It all blurs together."

"Stay right here. Don't move."

Before she asked what he was doing, Cam disappeared, hurrying out of the bedroom. She heard him running up the stairs, but whatever he was looking for, it didn't take him long to find. When he came back, he had a light blue envelope in his hand. He thrust it into her hands without speaking.

The California address meant nothing to her, but Sara's gaze was captured by the logo in the corner. It was an elaborate I, with a lowercase c merged into its lower half, embossed on the expensive paper. At first glance, it didn't resemble anything more than the Iocor symbol, but when she slowly turned the envelope upside down, her breath caught.

It was almost the same as her scar. There were a few more marks on her leg that might have been a part of the figure, or might have been unrelated, but it was the same pattern, same shape.

"Oh, God..." she murmured. "He figured it out from me."

"They branded you." He couldn't hide the disbelief from his voice. "It wasn't enough that they treated you like a lab rat?"

The shaking started almost immediately. "They did it *because* I was just a lab rat. I was their property."

Cam's glare was fierce. "You're not a thing, Sara."

"That's not how they saw it. To them, I was just an experiment."

"And what if you'd escaped?"

Sara shook her head. "You saw me. I wasn't going anywhere on my own. Who would ever see it except for them?" The look on Josh's face the night before came rushing back. "Except Josh did. Josh knew. And now he's gone."

"I think he might have already been blaming himself a little, if he suspected it was some research institution. But....seeing that...it was probably too much for him." He went to the closet and started pulling out clothes. With his back turned, she couldn't see his face, but his shoulders were squared and rigid. "God, Josh..."

"So I did this. He left because of me."

"Don't," Cam said, spinning around. "Just don't say that. God, don't ever say that. You didn't do this. Some asshole did this to us."

"Yeah." She tossed the envelope aside and headed for the door. She had to get out of there, she had to go find Josh, she had to stop thinking about all this, and she couldn't do it without any clothes on. "And apparently that asshole is Iocor."

"Sara, you really do think it's your fault, don't you?" Cam asked, following her out of the room. Clearly, he wasn't just going to let her walk away.

"You talked him into staying, didn't you?" Stopping at the bottom of the stairs, Sara whirled to face Cam, her knuckles white where she gripped the railing. "Josh is the most honest person I've ever known. If he told you yesterday he was going to stay, then he was going to stay. The only reason he's gone is because he saw...he saw..." She choked on the words, and she felt her control slipping even further away. "Josh saw the scar last night," she tried again. "And that's when he changed his mind. So don't tell me it's not my fault."

"No. No, goddamnit, it's not. It's not Josh's fault he was betrayed, and it's not your fault you were kidnapped. It's not his fault he was too good to believe the worst of somebody he knows, and it's not your fault you weren't jaded enough to believe somebody could hurt you. If he had found out some other way Iocor was involved, would

you be standing here blaming yourself right now? He left because he blamed himself and he shouldn't, and now God knows what could happen to him. Don't go down the same path he did, Sara, please."

It took a moment for his meaning to cut through her anger. "You really think I would leave you again? After everything last night, after letting you touch me, after everything I've done to try and see you and not that bastard in the cage, do you honestly believe I'd do that to you? Or to myself?"

"I never, ever, for a second, thought Josh would leave me...leave us. How could he? How could he leave the woman he's been looking for and dreaming about for the past two years? How could he leave me when he knows how much I need him?" Cam shook his head. "But guilt can do odd things to a person."

"There's a difference. He thinks he's protecting us. He left because he loves us so much he'd rather we were safe than satisfy his own desires, his own needs. But the difference between him and me, Cam, is I've always been more selfish than Josh. I'd rather spend the rest of my life looking over my shoulder, than spend it without you."

He pulled her into a loose embrace, burying his face in her neck. "Good, because if I lost you again, that'd be it for me."

She held onto him, relishing the strong bands of his arms around her back, and listened to the ragged music of their breathing fill the empty house. The memory of Josh's final words in his letter joined in the song, until Sara pressed her mouth to Cam's jaw and whispered, "We need to find him. We need to show Josh he's too big a part of us to just walk away. Without Josh, we're both lost."

Cam stepped back, nodding. "We need to get a plan together, then. When I woke up this morning around two, he was still in bed, so at most he's got a four hour head start on us. The problem is, we don't know where. He might be going to JD's, but I don't know exactly where she lives."

"He won't have her contact information in his email somewhere?"

"He might. I'll check that out. You get us packed up. If nothing else, he's probably right about the fact we need to leave."

With a nod, Sara turned to go upstairs and get their things together. Before she'd gone two steps, she turned on her heel and chased after Cam, surprising him with a hard kiss when she caught him. His arms came around her without pause, but she kept the caress as brief as she could.

"I love you." She pulled away. "Listen to Josh. Don't forget that."

And with his smile burning onto her brain, Sara raced back upstairs.

* * *

"Oh, fuckity fuck," JD muttered, sliding her finger along the run in her stocking she hadn't noticed until she was about to walk out the door. "I do not have time for this shit today."

A quick glance at the clock confirmed she didn't. It would take forty-five minutes to get through traffic, and that was being optimistic. Hurrying over to the full-length mirror on the back of her bedroom door, she eyed her outfit critically. Nobody would notice, unless they happened to see her in a room with a light on.

Kicking off her shoes, she half-walked, half-stumbled over to her dresser. Did she have any other clean pantyhose? Or, barring that, a clean pair of slacks? After tearing through her drawers, her closet, and her drawers once again, she realized the answer to both questions was a negative.

If it had been any other morning, she would have thrown on a pair of jeans and called it good. But this wasn't any other morning. It was the morning of her annual review, and if she didn't get her ass on the road, she'd miss it, and get fired, and it wouldn't matter if she showed up in a skirt, slacks or her birthday suit.

Hoping they'd be more dazzled by her performance than worried about her legs, she stepped into her shoes and grabbed her purse. Her hand was just on the knob when the phone rang. JD ignored it. That's what voicemail was for, after all.

Plus, if she lost her job because she was late and looked like a bag lady, she'd have plenty of time later to return it.

JD yanked the door open and stopped short. Her annual review, her pantyhose and the phone call were completely forgotten.

“Josh? What are you doing here?”

He smiled, only it wasn't a smile that belonged to Joshua Ames. It belonged to a much older man than the person she once knew. A much older, much scarier man. His eyes were bloodshot, and he hadn't shaved or combed his hair. He had a bag over his shoulder, and the taxi pulling away indicated he had just come from the airport.

“Surprised to see me?”

“A little. I thought you were in Vegas.”

The smile turned menacing. “Did you? I never told you that, JD.”

“Oh.” She laughed nervously. “You didn't? I could have sworn you mentioned Vegas.”

“I didn't.” He pushed the door open wider and shoved his way into her house. “Sit down, JD. We're going to have a chat.”

Chapter Seventeen

Josh spent the journey from Vegas to JD's front door hoping he was wrong. He planned to have a little talk with her, confirm she was ignorant of the whole fucking mess, and then get on the road to find the real culprit. He had to focus on his mission, because if he forgot for just a moment what he was doing, he'd think about Cam and Sara, still asleep, still peaceful and warm. And if he thought about them, he'd lose his determination and turn his ass around and go home.

But as soon as she mentioned Vegas, he had all the confirmation he needed.

Josh sat on the couch, stretching his legs in front of him, and holding JD's hand in a mockery of friendship.

"So, JD, where should we start?"

She was thinner than he remembered, with expensive highlights in her sand-shaded hair that didn't do anything to enliven the color. Small lines were now etched around her mouth, evidence that in spite of all her protestations to the contrary, she hadn't quit smoking. In hindsight, Josh wasn't surprised. If she could lie so easily about things that were actually important, what would a *oh, yeah, those nicotine patches are really helping* mean to her?

Now, her narrow mouth was pulled even tighter, emphasizing the fine lines, and her fingers were tense as she obviously struggled with herself not to try and yank her hand away. "Not that I'm not glad to see you, Josh," she said, "but now's really not a good time. Why don't you go find a hotel and we'll have lunch? My treat." She laughed. It was high and reedy, her nervousness showing. "I think I'll deserve a special something after facing the firing squad this morning."

Josh barely tightened his grip, just enough to let her know he wasn't going anywhere. "Firing squad? Is it time for the review? Don't worry, JD, I'm probably doing

you a favor. After all, you don't want to be the one to explain why their favorite toy is missing, do you?"

She shook her head. "What are you talking about? Are you all right? You're supposed to be off celebrating."

Josh moved closer, until their bodies were flush, increasing the pressure of his grip. It wasn't unusual to sit that close to her. They had never been lovers, but they had been close friends for a long time.

"Celebrating what, JD?"

She looked away. "Josh..."

"I saw the Iocor mark on her leg, JD. The one they use when cataloging lethal, toxic or otherwise dangerous lab animals. And while I never did as well as you in our studies, I'm not a stupid person. There were two people besides me who were studying shifters, and only one person who ever saw my notes." Now he pressed so hard the bones in her hand ground together.

Twin spots of color appeared high in her cheeks, but JD didn't flinch. Her pale eyes fixed on him, her smile fading, and it was a long minute before she spoke.

"But you've got Sara back now," she said. "That's what's important here, Josh. That's what you've wanted, isn't it?"

He eased back to friendly pressure. "No, that's not what's important here, JD. What's important is you betrayed me, you kidnapped somebody I love, you nearly fucking broke her, and do you even have an explanation? Can you even defend yourself?"

"And I gave her back to you. Or were you really that naïve to think that a perfect stranger could lead you straight to a basement in a backwater Nevada town? I even made sure there were only two guards on duty that night, so you'd have better odds getting her out of there." Her free hand reached out and touched his arm. "I know what it was doing to you, how miserable you were without her. If there had been any way possible for me to help you before now, Josh, don't you think I would've done it? You're way too important to me to hurt like that."

The hell of it was, he knew she meant every single goddamned word. She really thought doing the right thing made up for the entire two years they systematically tore Sara apart.

“Who else was involved? And why now? Why did you decide to help me now, and not two years ago when I was about ready to jump off a fucking bridge?”

“I helped you as soon as I could.” Sighing, JD shook her head and leaned back against the couch. “You’ve been out of the game for a long time, Josh. And you never did learn all the rules.”

“What are the rules, JD? That it’s fair play to kidnap people and torture them? That’s not...that’s not a fucking rule. That’s not even good science. Who else is involved?”

“She wasn’t tortured. She was studied. That’s what we do, remember? We study shapeshifters, we don’t fuck them.”

Josh had his fist formed and halfway to her face before he realized what he was doing. She didn’t cringe or try to duck, but he stopped himself before he made contact.

“You know what your problem is, JD? What it’s always been? You’re book smart, but you don’t know fuck all about being a scientist. That’s why you spent most of your life in my shadow, and why you had to fuck half the board to get where you are now.” He stood, hauling her to her feet. She tried to pull away, but he wasn’t going to let her go. “Come on. We’re going to Nevada.”

Mention of Nevada made her react more violently. Her foot lashed out and connected with his ankle, surprising Josh just enough to loosen his grip for her to slip away. She darted behind the couch, fingers digging into the back as she glared at him.

“I’m not going anywhere with you. I’m going to walk out the door, and I’m going to go bullshit my way through my review, and when I get back, you’re either going to be gone or willing to talk about this calm and rationally.” Her eyes softened. “I know you’ve been under a lot of stress about this whole Sara situation, and I hate knowing that I was even a small part of that. But I am not your enemy, Josh, and I am not going to let you treat me as such.”

“No, JD, that’s not how it works.” He briefly wished he had his gun, but realized he wouldn’t be able to threaten her with it. Anybody else, yes. But not her. So he leaned against the door, blocking the only way out. “You’re not going anywhere. You don’t want to go to Nevada right now? Fine. You can tell me who else was involved.”

“Why? So you can go off and threaten somebody who won’t be as understanding as I am and have you thrown in jail for assault? What do you think you’re going to do, Josh?”

“I’m not going to threaten anybody, JD. But I am going to Nevada, and I am going to bring you with me.”

Her gaze flickered from the door, to Josh, to her watch, and then back to Josh again. “I don’t know what you think you’re going to accomplish. You want to know who else was involved? The better question is, who wasn’t involved. You were an Iocor employee when you left for that shifter community, and you were still an employee when you submitted your research. Sara Vail was an Iocor project, from the start all the way to the finish. Do you really think you’re going to take down an entire corporation?”

“She was not an Iocor project. Nobody at Iocor was even supposed to know her identity. Only one person did, JD. And that was you. So don’t you fucking tell me you’re sorry, this wasn’t your fault, you would never want to hurt me. You toddled off to tattle on me because you were never going to get anywhere if you didn’t.” Josh shook his head. “I’m not getting into this with you. If you’re really sorry, you’ll help me. Right now.”

It took several seconds of staring each other down for JD to exhale and shake her head. “I think this is a big mistake. I think...I think you’re asking for more trouble than you can even conceive. But you’re my friend, and I am sorry that you suffered at all because of this.” She came around the edge of the couch, slowly, as if approaching a wild dog. “The name you want is Nolan. David Nolan.”

Josh’s lips thinned. He wouldn’t have immediately suspected Nolan. When Josh was with Iocor, Nolan had been a little pissant, fresh out of school. “Since we had to stage a breakout, I’m assuming he’s not aware you were behind it, and didn’t think it was time for her to go?”

“I told you it wasn’t safe when you called me. Nolan needs her.”

“And it’s better for you if he doesn’t get her?”

She paused for a fraction of a second too long. “It’s better for me if you’re not miserable, Josh.”

Josh nodded. “I believe you. But you’ve gone this far, why don’t you go all the way and help me get him off her tail? You’ve had her to...study...for two years, and if there’s anything else you need to know, I’ll answer all your questions.”

The calculating gleam that appeared in her eye made him want to retch, but Josh kept his features impassive as he waited for her response. “I miss my annual review by helping you. You know how serious that is. I’m going to need a very good reason and plenty of material to show for it if I don’t want to lose my position.”

“It’s going to be a long drive to Nevada. And I won’t limit my answers to Sara.”

He straightened when she headed for the bedroom. “Then I’m changing my clothes. Something tells me jeans will be better for this trip anyway.”

His phone vibrated in his pocket, but he didn’t need to take it out to know who was calling. He had several missed calls listed now, all from Cam’s phone. A part of him wanted to answer so he could tell them to get the hell out of Vegas and go east. All the way to Maine, and maybe even beyond that.

“Do you have any food?” Josh called out, determined to seem as normal as possible. She couldn’t think he viewed her as the enemy. They were friends again, united against the common enemy and true bad guy—David Nolan.

JD came strolling back in, buttoning up her jeans. “We’ll grab something along the way.” She tossed him a heavy key ring. “Let’s go.”

Josh opened the door and gestured for her to lead. She walked like a woman who didn’t have a care in the world, like they really were just going on a bit of a road trip. “Just like old times, huh?”

She responded by flashing a smile over her shoulder, and Josh felt sick again. When the dust settled on this, he was going to lose everybody, and everything, he had ever really cared about. Given what Sara had been forced to endure, that seemed fair.

* * *

The drive to Los Angeles was long and silent, both of them absorbed by their own thoughts. Cam didn't know what Sara was thinking, but he was considering what he would do when he saw Josh again. He was torn equally between kissing him and killing him. Maybe kissing him, and then killing him.

He picked up the paper that had JD's address scribbled on the margins, along with directions. They still had about twenty miles ahead of them—which was nothing in the early afternoon traffic—but it seemed more like a hundred. Especially since Cam had never been to Los Angeles.

“How are you doing?” Cam asked, eager to have something other than his own thoughts and anxiety to focus on.

She stared out the window, her hands knotted in her lap. “Okay, I guess,” came the noncommittal answer. “I was just...” But her voice faded away, and she shook her head as if changing her mind about speaking.

“You were just what?” Cam prompted.

“Thinking too much.” Sara took a deep breath and shifted, gazing at him more directly. “Remember when we had to drag him to your parents' going away party? How he kept arguing that he wouldn't fit in? You don't think...he's thought all along that we'd split up, do you?”

Cam frowned. Josh had always been hesitant to mingle with their families and the broader community. He was always self-conscious about being the outsider, though Cam thought after two or three years, people stopped thinking of him as that, first and foremost.

“No. I really don't think he ever had any intention of leaving. He quit his job and moved six hundred miles from his home. People don't do that for relationships they think will end. Well, not smart people like Josh, at any rate.”

She nodded, though she still looked dubious. “And...while I was gone? Did it get easier for him, being around Delta?”

Cam shrugged. “He didn’t try to avoid anybody who came by to see us. And he was less hesitant to go out and run errands by himself. I think...I think once everybody saw how hard it hit him, they were more willing to welcome him into the community, you know?”

“I hope so. I’d like to think we’re not as closed-minded as the outsiders he knows, but I’d hate for him to have another excuse not to come home with us when we find him.”

Cam tightened his grip on the wheel. “He’s probably going to think everybody is going to be as angry at him as he is at himself.”

“But they wouldn’t be, right?”

“Are you?”

She blinked. “Am I what? Angry with Josh?”

“Yeah. Everybody will take their cues from you. At least, publicly.”

“But it’s not his fault. Why would I be angry with him?”

Cam shook his head. “You shouldn’t be. What are you going to do if we do find him, and he doesn’t want to come with us?”

Even with the sunlight streaming through the window, Sara visibly paled. “Don’t say that. Don’t even think it.”

Cam didn’t want to say it, or think it, but Josh was stubborn. And Josh also had a honed sense of morality. If Josh believed he was doing the right thing by leaving and cutting off contact, Cam wasn’t sure how they could convince him otherwise.

“I’m sorry. You’re right.”

Her brows drew closer and closer together as they sped along the highway, her eyes never wavering from his profile. She finally broke the silence with, “You’re still thinking it.”

“I am,” Cam admitted. “I don’t like it any more than you do. It’s hard for me to even remember what our life together was like before him. And it’s not fair. It’s not fair that we get one single night with the three of us together.”

Sara seemed to fold in on herself as she returned her attention to the window. “Maybe. But I’m glad I got it, just the same.”

“Yeah, me too.”

They passed through another long silence. Cam couldn’t stop thinking about the way Josh smiled when he watched Sara and he thought nobody was looking. A sort of confused joy lit his face, like he wasn’t quite sure how he got to be so lucky. That wasn’t a new smile. It had been reserved for her since the night he officially moved into their house.

“You know,” Cam said, “I don’t think Josh will be able to resist coming home with you. But he might insist we can’t go back to Delta. Where have you always wanted to live?”

That pulled her back into the conversation, and her gaze was curious as she regarded him. “Would you consider living outside a shifter community?”

“If it made you happy, and Josh comfortable, I’d consider living on the moon. Or even Arkansas.”

“It’s not as hard as you think it is.” The shift in subject matter brought something back to life in her, like Cam had given her hope again in their futures. “What about San Francisco? It’s a big city, and it’s pretty liberal. It would be easier for us to live there as a family than most other non-shifter places. Plus, artsy. You and Josh would love that.”

“San Francisco?” It was a big city full of non-shifters, both of which were major problems for Cam. On the other hand, she had a point about how it would probably be easy for them. And both Josh and Sara would thrive in the sort of environment that San Francisco offered. Plus, he made good money, Sara could be a teacher anywhere, and Josh would love to be in California again. “I like the sound of that. I like it a lot.”

She smiled and began chattering about the advantages of the city, how it would be nice to be in the same state as her family even if it was a long drive south to San Diego, and how it would be nice to have green around again instead of the arid brown of the desert. The more she spoke, the faster her words came, her excitement about the possibility almost contagious.

And for a few minutes, it felt like nothing had ever changed.

Chapter Eighteen

The kitchen was warm and spiced with the scent of the chilies Cam was cooking for dinner, the low throb of music from the radio swaying Cam to hum along. Grabbing a potholder, he bent over and opened the oven door, blinking against the rush of heat. Fresh aromas assaulted his senses, and he smiled as he pulled out the Dutch apple pie. Perfect. For as little as he baked, it was nice he could have the things that mattered turn out right.

As he set the hot pie plate on the trivet he had waiting, he caught Josh out of the corner of his eye. “Are you planning on hovering there all night, or are you going to actually set the table?”

“I’d rather hover,” Josh said, obediently pulling plates, silverware and glasses out of the dishwasher. He paused to inhale the rich aroma of baked apples. “Can we skip right to the dessert?”

Cam smiled and rolled his eyes. “You’re as bad as Sara. And no, no skipping the food I slaved over all day. You’re going to appreciate every last mouthful.” He nodded toward the fridge. “Take the wine with you. By the time I get everything on the table, it’ll be ready to drink.”

Josh shot one last hungry glance at the pie before reaching for the wine. He carried everything over to the table and carefully laid the places out. Cam smiled a little as he watched. Josh always took the task so seriously, frowning as he made sure everything looked just right.

“What’s on the menu?”

“Chile rellenos to start, then paella, and apple pie and ice cream for dessert. I would’ve done a cake, except, well...you know.”

There was no reason to elaborate. The meal consisted of all of Sara’s favorites, and for as long as Cameron had known her, she had always insisted on blowing her candles out on pie. Just because she wasn’t here this year, didn’t mean they would break tradition.

Josh struck a match and lit the two long candles at the center of the table. “I bought something. I put it with the gift I bought last year, even though we said we weren’t going to do that.”

Relief flooded through Cam, and his eyes fluttered shut for a brief moment. “I did, too. Mine’s in the attic. I was afraid you’d find it and give me a hard time.”

“I still might,” Josh said, opening the wine. “What did you get her?”

He carried the platter of chilies to the table. “A reproduction of one of the sculptures from that Aztec exhibit we went to last month. I snuck it out to the car when you thought I was going to the bathroom.”

“I found a painting of a black hawk a few weeks ago while I was looking around an auction site. I’ve been hiding it in the guestroom, under the bed.”

As he took his seat at the table, Cam smiled. “She’ll love that. Of course, she’ll give us hell for being such saps while she’s away, but it’ll be worth it to see the look on her face.”

Josh poured the wine before responding, filling each glass to the top. He looked pointedly at the feast Cam had prepared and said, “She’d probably give us hell for being saps absent of the presents.”

“Hey, it’s not like we don’t have to eat.”

“That’s true. Since you cooked,” Josh said, taking this plate, “I’ll serve.”

Cam watched Josh in silence as he dished out the food. Some of the shadows that usually darkened his eyes were gone, his smile easy. It made him look years younger. As bittersweet as it was to know the significance of the day, Sara’s birthday was one of the times when they gave each other freedom to openly mourn her absence. They let go of the pain in not finding her to celebrate what she had given to them in the time they’d had together. Because in the end, she had also given them each other, and Cam would be grateful for that to his dying days.

Before Josh could pick up his fork, Cam lifted his glass. “To Sara,” he said simply.

Josh tapped the lip of his glass against Cam's. "To Sara," he repeated. They both sipped, then Cam watched as Josh sampled a chili. His smile told Cam all he needed to know.

"Did you learn how to make this for her?" Josh asked between bites.

"I learned how to make a lot for her." As Cam dug into his food, his stomach growled at the rich scents. "The food she grew up on was very different from what I had here in Delta."

"I have to admit, I'm grateful for that. I never ate like this until I moved here." He paused for a moment before adding, "I never did a lot of things until I moved here."

Stretching his leg, Cam curled his foot around Josh's ankle so that their calves intertwined. "Lucky for me you did, though. I don't know what my life would be like now if you weren't around."

"Well, there would probably be fewer blow jobs." Josh touched the back of Cam's hand briefly. "Even though it's been...hard...I wouldn't take anything back."

They lapsed into a comfortable silence as they settled into their meal, each lost in his thoughts. Every once in a while, Josh would reach across the table and spear a shrimp from Cam's plate, but while he might have protested the theft any other night, today Cam let it slide. In the grand scheme of things, one less shrimp meant nothing at all.

"George was asking me this morning if we were going to take a vacation anywhere this year," he said as he took the last chili. "It dawned on me that I hadn't thought about it at all. Have you?"

"Vacation?" Josh said the word like he wasn't quite sure what it meant. "No, I hadn't given it any thought. But if anybody deserves one, you do."

Cam snorted. "I sit on my ass all day in front of a computer. You're the one doing the hard work keeping everything running." Rising to his feet, he gathered their empty plates and carried them to the sink. "Anyway, I was thinking maybe it might be a good idea. You and me. Get away from Delta for a little bit. For a reason that wasn't...about Sara."

Josh leaned back in his chair thoughtfully. “I wouldn’t be against getting away from Delta. For a little bit. And while you were thinking this over, did you imagine where we would go?”

“Someplace warm. With lots of excuses to get naked.” He shot a wicked grin over his shoulder. “Unless your idea of a vacation doesn’t include lots and lots of sex, in which case we’ll seriously have to reevaluate this relationship.”

Josh carried an empty platter into the kitchen—which would likely amount to his single contribution to clearing the table.

“Actually,” he said, reaching around Cam to put the dirty dish into the sink, “that’s my very definition of vacation.” Josh pressed his body against Cam’s, and there was no mistaking the bulge in Josh’s pants. “Thank you for the wonderful dinner.”

His breath was warm at his ear, and Cam turned his head to catch Josh’s mouth in a slow, lingering kiss. It wasn’t nearly often enough that they could ignore their ghosts and simply be together. “We still have dessert. Unless you want to take it up to our room and have it there.”

“In my experience, pie tastes best in the bedroom,” Josh said, kissing his neck. He took the pie in one hand, and Cam’s hand with the other. “Come upstairs with me.”

He didn’t even think of protesting as Josh led him from the kitchen. Dishes could wait. The desire to feel the mattress at his back and Josh in his ass was far greater than any sense of responsibility.

He took the pie plate from Josh’s hand as soon as they stepped inside their room, setting it aside in order to pull Josh into his arms. Without a word, he curled a hand around the back of Josh’s neck and drew him in for a kiss that was far hungrier than the one downstairs. Their lips parted immediately, and the hot probe of Josh’s tongue was enough to draw a whimper of need to Cam’s throat.

Josh broke the kiss long enough to lift Cam’s shirt over his head, and as their mouths came together again, he smoothed his hands up Cam’s chest and over his shoulders. Cam returned the favor, yanking Josh’s buttons free and seeking out his hot skin. Josh moved

deliberately, his mouth slow and thorough, and it seemed like he wouldn't be happy until he touched every inch of Cam's skin.

Fingertips grazed over his chest, and when Josh caught his nails on Cam's flat nipples, Cam gasped at the shock of pleasure that went straight to his cock. "Need you," he muttered against Josh's mouth. His hands went to Josh's waistband, fumbling for a moment with the fastenings, but the moment he touched the hot length of Josh's cock, both men sighed.

Josh unzipped Cam's pants and pulled them down his thighs. After another lingering kiss, he dropped to his knees and brushed his lips across the head of Cam's cock. He slid his hands up Cam's thighs, massaging the firm muscles. Josh didn't wrap his lips around his shaft, but he kissed, licked and nuzzled him, and there was nothing teasing or playful about the contact.

With a groan, Cam laced his fingers through Josh's hair, desperate for whatever contact he could get. Long swipes down his length were followed by nibbles at the tender skin of his balls, and soon, Cam was trembling, his knees threatening to buckle beneath him.

He dropped his gaze, tugging at Josh's head to force him to look up. "I want you to fuck me," he said, his voice thick with emotion. "God, I just...I need you."

Josh nodded and straightened. As Cam stepped out of his pants, Josh quickly finished undressing. Once they were both stripped naked, Josh grabbed the tube of lubricant from the bedside table. He gestured at the bed, and Cam stretched out on his back, bending his knees. Josh knelt between his legs, running his fingers up and down Cam's sensitive thighs, smiling each time he hissed and jerked.

"You do that on purpose," Cam growled.

"It's not my fault you're so sensitive," Josh said, bending to nip his skin. Cam narrowed his eyes, but Josh's grin didn't fade. He poured a good dose of lubricant on his index and middle finger. "But I do enjoy it quite a bit."

"Just remember. I know where you're ticklish."

Josh's grin widened as his fingertips brushed against Cam's pucker. He teased him for a second before pushing his index finger past the tight ring of muscle. "By the time I'm finished, you won't even know your own name."

There were no more words as Cam squeezed his eyes shut at the slick intrusion, widening his legs further in silent invitation. His cock lay heavy on his stomach, but as much as he wanted to reach down and start stroking himself, Cam wanted to get lost in the sensation of being filled. It might just be Josh's fingers right now, but soon enough, the long, lovely length of his cock would be buried inside him, and Cam would wrap his arms around Josh to get him as close as possible. He wanted all of Josh. He wouldn't settle for anything less.

One finger became two, but by the time Josh added a third, Cam was thrusting back against his hand, unable to control the urge any longer. He fisted the sheets, the sweat already rising to the surface of his skin. "Any time now," he said, meeting Josh's heavy-lidded gaze.

Josh thrust his hand forward once more, brushing his fingers purposely against Cam's prostate before pulling back. He poured more lube into his hand and slicked it down his hard shaft, never taking his eyes from Cam as he stroked himself. His pulse beat erratically and his heart thundered in his ears as he arched his back. Josh positioned himself, gripping the base of his cock and guiding it to Cam's slick opening.

He pushed in so slowly Cam thought he was going to scream. Every inch stretched him more, left his skin scalding and his breath short, but Cam kept it together all the way until he felt the coarse brush of the hair at the base of Josh's cock scrape against his balls.

"Come here," he said and tugged at Josh's arm.

Josh fell heavily against Cam's chest, trapping Cam's cock between their stomachs. His mouth parted as if to say something, but Cam wasn't interested in his words at the moment. Digging his heels into Josh's ass, he cupped the other man's face and pulled him down for a deep, ravenous kiss.

Josh surrendered to Cam, and for a moment, they were completely connected. There wasn't an inch of space between their bodies, or even a border defining and separating

them. There was just their damp, hot skin, their desperate, seeking mouths, and Josh's cock buried inside of him, pulsing and twitching against his tight flesh. As Josh broke the kiss, he eased away, but not completely out, then rocked forward again.

There were moments when he was with Josh that Cam had to fight not to shift. Before, with Sara, Josh had grown to accept the changes that suddenly seemed urgent, allowing Cam and Sara to satisfy needs with each other he couldn't quite touch. But Cam was careful never to allow that to happen now. As primal as the instinct could get, what mattered was the connection with Josh, and even now, he refused to succumb to it, too needy for this man that made his life worthwhile to risk it.

So he concentrated on the brilliant flare in Josh's eyes, the solemn set of his kissable mouth. He licked away the sheen of sweat that gathered at Josh's temple, and he brushed his lips along the slight stubble on his jaw. Pushing his heels into Josh's ass, Cam prodded Josh into moving even more, to take long, slow strokes in and out of his tight passage.

On the fifth, Josh scraped across his prostate, and Cam hissed as fire sizzled through his veins.

"That's it," he breathed.

"God," Josh moaned as Cam clenched around him. "God, Cameron." He slid against Cam's shaft with each thrust, and his hot breath fanned across Cam's face with each grunt and sigh. Josh probed Cam's mouth with his tongue and angled his hips to hit Cam's prostate with each thrust.

He choked off moan after moan, clutching at Josh's shoulders. Josh pressed harder into his torso, offering more sweaty friction for Cam's aching cock, but his even strokes gradually grew more erratic, faster and rougher as their need to come overwhelmed everything else.

"Harder," Cam panted into his mouth. "Fuck, need you so badly, Josh. Just give it to me."

Josh seemed to unleash himself, gripping the bed on either side of Cam's shoulders to brace himself. Panting turned to shouting, and Josh looked half-wild, his face flushed,

his eyes wide. Cam tightened around him, and a strangled groan escaped Josh's throat before he froze, his cock erupting deep within Cam's ass.

The heat and the taut rub of Josh's body and the force against his prostate proved too much for Cam, and he cried out, Josh's name on his lips, as his hot come coated their stomachs. He shuddered, fighting for breath, even when the other man lowered his head to rest his brow against Cam's shoulder.

"God, I love you," Cam whispered. He pulled their bodies flush, his mouth raining kisses along the side of Josh's face. "Don't go. Don't you ever go."

"I won't," Josh promised, his salty lips moving against Cam's skin. "Couldn't ever leave. I love you too much."

He held onto the promise as tightly as he held onto the man.

Sara would've called it a very happy birthday indeed.

* * *

Cam glanced at her out of the corner of his eye as they pulled to a stop outside the address they had for JD. Her cheeks were flushed from her burst of conversation, and there was an animation to her voice that he hadn't realized he'd missed until it had returned. If he told her now how they'd celebrated her birthdays in her absence, Cam was certain it would elicit a laugh and a smile that would warm him to his bones.

On impulse, he leaned across the gap between them and brushed his mouth over hers. He pulled back before she had the chance to stop him.

"Let's go get Josh," he said with a grin that surprised even him.

They climbed out of the car, and though she didn't take his hand, Sara did fall into step at his side, her arm brushing against his. She didn't speak as he pushed the doorbell, but when seconds passed and nobody came to answer, she frowned.

"Her car's gone," she said, twisting to look back at the empty driveway.

Cam stepped off the porch to peer in through the window, cupping his hands around his eyes in order to block out the California sun. "I don't see anybody."

"I'm going to go in."

Before he could stop her, she was shrinking, her skin going black and brittle. A blink later and Sara was gone, only a pile of clothes left on the step. Cam picked them up in time to see an ant scuttling beneath the door. While he was glad she was feeling more secure in her shifting, he was more than a little self-conscious about her doing it out in the open and glanced around to see if anybody might have seen her.

He was still scanning the neighborhood when the door opened behind him. Cam turned to see a pale Sara standing in the entrance, her eyes wide and desolate.

“Neither one of them are here.” Reaching out, she yanked him into the privacy of the house, shutting the door to the outside. She held up a scrap of paper. It took him a moment to realize it was an airplane boarding pass. “But Josh was.”

Cam’s stomach sank. No Josh. No JD. No hints about where they might have gone.

“We can still find him.” Setting her hand on his arm, Sara squeezed it in reassurance. “Nobody knows the way Josh thinks better than us. All we have to do is figure out where he would take JD.”

The answer came almost as fast as the dread in realizing it.

“The house,” Cam said. He folded his hand over hers, hoping it was enough. “The one where we found you.”

Chapter Nineteen

Josh carefully placed the full gas can in the trunk, sliding it to the back and covering it with a spare blanket. He didn't think JD would have any reason to look in the trunk, but he didn't want to risk it. Even if a gas can could be completely innocent. Who wants to be stranded in the middle of the desert? Towns were few and far between in the stretch of Nevada that unfolded before them.

He slammed the trunk shut and leaned against the car. He could see JD in the gas station, her hands full of junk food, waiting impatiently behind an old man using pennies to pay for his gas. According to his calculations, this would be their last stop until they reached their final destination. By this time tomorrow, it would all be over.

Josh put his hand in his jacket pocket, his fingers brushing against a handful of bullets. The gun they belonged to was under the driver's seat. It had been ridiculously easy to buy a gun in Las Vegas. All he had to do was walk into a sporting goods store, point to the gun he wanted, and smuggle it back to the car so JD wouldn't see it. No waiting period, no muss, no fuss. He had been tempted to buy more than one, but that wasn't necessary, and it would have been difficult to hide a rifle, anyway.

"Do you want a smoke?" JD asked as she stepped out of the gas station.

Josh nodded. He hadn't smoked in years, but suddenly the slow burn of the nicotine seemed to be exactly what he needed. Despite everything, he felt calm. Everything was in place, and he knew what he needed to do and...well, everything wasn't quite in place. Despite the letter he left Cam and Sara, he felt like there was more to say. He wanted to know if they had listened to him, or if they were being fools and trying to follow him. He wanted to make sure they knew he loved them. He wanted to hear their voices. He wanted to ease this horrible pain in his chest.

“So,” JD said, shattering the quiet inside the car, “what did your shifter friends say when you told them you were coming to talk to me? From the way you made it sound, I would’ve expected at least one of them to be ready to Bronson my ass.”

“They didn’t say anything because they don’t know where I am, where I’m going, or who I’m with.”

She stopped in mid-chew, the red licorice string dangling almost comically from her lips. It took her a moment to bite through the strand and then another to swallow what was in her mouth. “You just left?”

“Yes. I snuck out while they were asleep. I couldn’t even tell them the truth to their faces.”

“So they don’t know about Iocor.” It was more a musing to herself than any kind of question, and JD sat there for a minute contemplating the implications. When she finally spoke up again, a fresh excitement was animating her features. “You know, if we work this right we can get rid of Nolan and end up spearheading the new research project ourselves. We could be partners, just like old times.”

Josh ground his teeth together, sending a spark of pain through his temple. “What new research project, JD? Are you planning one?”

“Oh, not me, but...” Her voice faded, the realization that she’d said the wrong thing sinking in.

Josh stepped on the gas, pushing the speed up over eighty. “What’s your new project, JD? Is that why you sabotaged what Nolan was doing?”

Anger flared in her pale eyes. “Don’t. You’ve been out of the game too long to be making any kind of judgment calls on me, Josh. Not after everything you’ve done.”

Josh knew he should say something soothing, hide his anger. He needed to keep JD on his side for now, and picking fights with her wasn’t the way to do it. “What’s your proposal?” he asked neutrally, professionally.

JD shook her head. “You tell me why you didn’t tell them first. You promised me answers, remember.”

Josh shrugged. He could be honest with her; in twelve hours it wouldn't matter anymore. "I couldn't stand to see the disappointment in their eyes. I promised them that nothing would happen to them because of me."

"So you'd just leave them. After everything."

Josh tightened his grip on the steering wheel. The speedometer hovered around one hundred, and the pain in his chest tightened. What did heart attacks feel like? "It wasn't right to stay."

JD's eyes flickered to the dash. "Slow down, Josh. What good are you going to do if you kill us before we get there?"

Josh eased off back to eighty and set the cruise control. "What do you think, JD? I should have stuck around and waited for Nolan to find us? Or waited to get an up-close-and-personal introduction to your new research project?"

"Nolan's on borrowed time. If you'd stayed hidden, it would've just been a matter of time."

"A matter of time until what?"

Her lips pressed shut, so thin that they nearly disappeared. She turned away from him, staring out the window, as she twisted the licorice around her fingers, but her prolonged silence lasted for nearly five minutes before she broke it.

"Iocor was in negotiations with some government agency about using our shifter research for a new project. Nolan wasn't getting the results he wanted, and then there was an upper management shuffle. The new CEO didn't like the direction Iocor was going. So they changed his due date for the final report and moved it up by nearly a year."

Josh wasn't surprised. He knew his vision of Iocor was never quite in line with their actual purpose. He was born in the wrong era. Once scientific research became entirely privatized, nobody was interested in knowledge for the sake of it. Nobody wanted to devote time and money to research that wasn't going to have a direct, positive financial impact on the quarterly report. Peer reviewed articles weren't as important to board members as the projected figures. They weren't running a charity, after all.

"What was Nolan looking for that he wasn't getting?"

She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. “Sara didn’t tell you what they were doing to her?”

“Sara didn’t like to share, and I wasn’t going to push her. Maybe eventually she would have felt comfortable giving details, but it didn’t really matter.”

“Why not? You used to live for that kind of detail.”

“I don’t live for the details about how the woman I love was tortured and tormented for a solid two years.”

When JD fell quiet again, Josh risked looking over to see what had stopped the conversation this time. He needed more answers, damn it, but if JD wasn’t going to cooperate—

“I don’t get it.” At his frown, JD elaborated. “I mean, I understand she’s important to you. I really do. But I don’t understand how you could’ve let it happen. They’re not even human, Josh. Not really. How could you let yourself forget that?”

“I guess that depends on your definition of human. Biologically, they’re the same. Same number of organs in all the right places, and same nervous system, same blood. I could have a child with Sara if I wanted, and our child wouldn’t be infertile. I don’t yet know the mechanism of shifting, and I don’t think they know either. Is that what Nolan was trying to figure out?”

“Isn’t that what we’re all trying to figure out?” But her curiosity wasn’t satisfied, it would seem, and some of the color leached from her cheeks. “You wouldn’t really consider having a child with her, would you? That’s just... God, Josh, how? Why?”

“Well, not now,” Josh snapped. “It was just an example, JD. Humans and shifters have the same number of chromosomes.” He paused, watching the desert speed by them and thinking about Sara’s smile. “And if I ever did consider having a child with her, it’s for the same reason people typically have children together. I know you probably can’t understand ever loving somebody else that much, but most people do, at least once in their lives, at some point.”

“But that’s what I don’t understand,” she argued. “She isn’t just someone. She’s a shifter. A freak of nature. How do you love that?”

“She’s a teacher, JD. She teaches the fourth grade because her fourth grade teacher is her hero. She doesn’t know it, but she’s a hero now, too. The entire time she was gone, we were besieged with gifts, and visitors, and cards and children who didn’t understand why Ms. Sara wasn’t at school. She’s a dancer. She loves the ocean. She’s a San Diego Charger fan, even though she’s not that interested in football. She’s a lot of things, JD, but she’s not a freak.”

JD shook her head. He doubted she would ever get it. “If she’s as special as you seem to think, then how could you just leave her behind? Not that I’m not glad you did. Maybe you can find a real relationship now that you’re not under their influence anymore.”

“I left her behind because she and Cam deserve to have their lives back. The lives they had before I interrupted everything. I’m putting an end to all of this, JD.”

“What is it you think you’re going to do?”

“Atone. And so are you.”

She looked at him sharply. “I haven’t done anything wrong. And you might not be interested in any kind of future with Iocor, but that’s all I’ve ever worked for. I agreed to help you, but I’m not slitting my throat to do it.”

“No, there won’t be any throat slitting,” Josh said mildly. “Is Nolan definitely going to be there?”

“He should be. He’s been living there, trying to piece together enough so he doesn’t lose his job over this.” She paused. “What are you going to do, Josh?”

He ignored her direct question. She wouldn’t get any more answers from him. “Did you call him like I asked?”

“I’ve done everything else you’ve asked for, haven’t I?” Her voice softened, and she reached across the distance to lightly touch his arm. “I only want you to finally get some peace. That’s all I’ve ever wanted.”

Get some peace. Josh smiled. That was exactly what he planned to do.

* * *

She knew her silence wore on Cam, but Sara couldn't help it. There had been a few precious minutes of peace when she'd been talking about how fun it would be to live in San Francisco, when she could forget about why they were really on the road and about everything that had transpired the past couple years, and about how she looked in the mirror and still saw a stranger. Those had disappeared with the realization of what Josh was doing, and now, on the lonely stretch of Nevada highway as Cam drove carefully along, her earlier enthusiasm was lost.

She needed Josh back. He was her rock, the one who better understood her more playful spirit—well, back when she'd had one. But life didn't make sense without him around, and she failed to see how he could ever believe they didn't need him.

Cam needed him, too. His shock when she'd delivered the letter to him had been palpable. Damn it, didn't Josh understand that?

But he'd always been stubborn about accepting his place in their lives. Even the small things had sometimes been cause for argument...

* * *

Sara swore under her breath when she dropped her earring back, pausing in the hallway to stoop and pick it up before resuming her path to the bedroom. They were going to be late, and Cam's parents would be too polite to say anything, but Cam would be disappointed which would only make Sara feel bad and—

“Damn it!”

She dropped to her knees to pick up the small earring back again, running her fingers over the carpet when she didn't see it right away. At this rate, they were never going to get out of the house.

Cam's shadow fell over her hand, and he joined her on his knees. “Lose an earring?”

“The back. If they weren't the ones your mom gave me last Christmas, I'd say forget it and wear my hair down.” The heel of her hand grazed over something hard, and she pounced on it, beaming at Cam in satisfaction. “Ha! Stupid thing.” She tilted her head to the side, staying on her knees while she finished putting it in. “Is Josh ready?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t seen him all night.” Cam leaned forward and kissed her cheek before standing. “You look beautiful, by the way. Josh?” He called. “You ready?”

Josh’s voice drifted from his office. “For what?”

Sara frowned. “What does he mean, for what?” Rising to her feet, she hurried down the hall and pushed open the office door to see Josh sitting at the desk, his face alit from the glow from his laptop monitor. “What do you mean, for what?” she repeated. “The going away party is tonight.”

“Oh, I know,” Josh said, looking over his shoulder. “You look nice. Is that a new dress?”

“Yeah, but...”

That was when she noticed his jeans and T-shirt. There was no way he’d go to a party at the best restaurant in town without getting dressed up. She’d even managed to get Cam into something presentable, in spite of his argument that he was their son and they wouldn’t care if he showed up in a pink Speedo as long as he showed. That only meant one thing.

“Aren’t you going?”

“No,” Josh said slowly. “I thought I’d get caught up on some important work.” He gestured at the half-finished game of solitaire on his screen.

“Did he just say he wasn’t going?” Cam demanded from behind her.

Josh frowned. “Did you guys expect me to go?”

“Why wouldn’t you go?” Sara asked. “They invited all of us.”

“I didn’t realize I was invited as well.”

“Of course, you were.” Sara marched into the room to the desk, reaching over his shoulder to the keyboard. With a click, she closed his game and then grabbed his hand to pull him to his feet. “Come on. You can wear that new brown shirt I got for you.”

Josh gently pulled his hand away. “Sara, I’m not going. I’m sure you’ll have a lovely time, and please give Adam and Rita my best wishes.”

“Why aren’t you going?” Cam asked calmly, though he sounded concerned.

“Because I’m not...it might be awkward.”

“It’ll be awkward having to explain why you didn’t come,” Sara argued. “Everybody’s expecting you. And who’s going to dance with me when Cam starts complaining that his feet hurt?” Carefully, she took his hand again, only this time, she used the hold to get closer to him instead of pulling him along. “It won’t feel right if you’re not there,” she added softly.

Josh sent a helpless look over her shoulder to Cam. “Sara, do you really think anybody there wants to see me? Cam’s parents might ask where I am to be polite, and maybe a few of the guests will be curious, but I promise, my absence won’t hinder the celebration.”

“They don’t think less of you because you’re an outsider,” Cam said.

“Is that it?” She lifted wide eyes to Josh. “Nobody’s said something to you, have they?”

“The last time I went to a family gathering, most of the people refused to talk to me because they didn’t want to end up in my research, and everybody asked if I wasn’t finished yet.”

“But that was months ago. And you’re done now. They know that. But what does it matter anyway?” Sara laced her fingers through his, pressing her body to him as she rested her cheek against his shoulder. “You’re a part of us, whether they like it or not. And if anybody treats you differently than how they treat me, then I’ll leave with you.”

Cam stepped behind him, taking his shoulders, and sandwiching Josh between the two of them. “Josh, you know everybody does expect you to be with us. Nobody’s surprised by you anymore.”

“Maybe they’re not surprised, but how do you feel when you can’t shift because somebody has to sit with me while everybody else does...whatever it is that everybody else does?”

“It doesn’t bother me,” Sara said. “It’s not like shifting is all we are.” She smiled, trying to lighten his mood. “Besides, have you ever seen a group of cats and dogs dance? I need at least one person I can rely on to keep me company.”

“It bothers me,” Josh admitted. He looked back to Cam. “Do your parents really expect me to be there?”

Cam nodded. “Just like they expect Sara to be there.”

“Do they want me there?”

“Of course they do.” It broke her heart seeing him still doubt his place with them. Though he now shared their bedroom like they’d wanted for so long, it was still fresh and new enough for Josh to make him insecure beyond the safety of their home. “You’re family. You’re part of us.”

Josh smiled shyly. “I guess I’m being kind of silly.”

“Kind of,” Cam agreed, his mouth near Josh’s ear. “But we love you anyway.”

“I just didn’t want to make anybody uncomfortable. I’ll wear the brown shirt, Sara.”

“Good, because you look devilishly handsome in it.” On a whim, she wrapped her arms around both men, hugging them as tightly as she could. “Everybody’s going to be jealous of me tonight. I’ve got the two best looking men in town as my date.”

“No,” Cam protested, “Everybody’s going to wonder how a bum like me managed to trap the two of you.”

“Nobody’s going to be jealous of anybody if we don’t get moving,” Josh noted dryly. He kissed Sara’s temple. “I hope I didn’t upset you.”

“You would’ve upset me if you’d stayed home.” She took his hand and began dragging him out of the room. “Now let’s go. I feel like dancing.”

Chapter Twenty

Cam's anxiety grew as they sped through the desert. How far behind were they? Had Josh stopped for anything? Did they have a chance of catching them? What did Josh plan to do? Why was he going to that awful place? And what was he going to do if they didn't find Josh? What the fuck was he going to do?

Sara's tension did not help his anxiety. He didn't need to shift forms to smell her nerves, smell the apprehension rolling off her in waves. It was suffocating him. He felt sick. Nearly as sick as Sara looked.

"You don't have to do this," he finally said, to break the silence, for something to say. "You don't have to go back there."

"Yes, I do." Her voice was small and tight, her fingers knotted in her lap. "If that's where Josh is, that's where I have to be."

Cam knew he wouldn't be able to talk her out of it, and he wasn't even sure he wanted to. That wasn't how they worked. He didn't forbid her from doing things, and didn't presume to know what was best for her. But...

"He wouldn't want you to go back in there."

She wasn't as quick to answer. Her head fell forward, and though her hair covered her cheek, it wasn't long enough any more to hide the way she squeezed her eyes shut. Cam saw her lips moving, but he had to strain to pick up what she was actually saying.

"I'm not going to be scared, I'm not going to be scared..."

It was her mantra, he reasoned. But he didn't think it was working. She might want to think she was strong enough to face that place again, but her body was telling her differently.

He couldn't ignore her chant, and he didn't know what to do to help. But hurling her towards the damned house was not going to make anything better. Not for the first time,

he felt utterly helpless. Josh had left too soon. He must have thought they'd be able to take care of each other, but Cam was helpless, and Sara was frightened.

Cam slowed and pulled off to the shoulder, the car bumping over the rough gravel as he left the pavement.

“Sara?”

The moment the car stopped, her hands were flying to the door, fingers fumbling with the handle before she managed to push it open. She scrambled out, the cooling desert air filling the space she'd just been in, but before Cam could follow, the reflection of the moonlight on her skin began to dull, black feathers taking over.

In the next breath, her clothes fell to the ground.

In the one after that, Sara took to the air.

“Goddammit,” Cam muttered before willing his body to take the form she chose. He flapped his wings, swooping out of the car and up into the blue sky. She was easy to spot, and he followed, soaring higher and higher, then drifting back to the brown earth, every beat of their wings taking them farther from the car.

There was no pattern to her path. She wound in circles, she flew in straight lines, she dove and rose, and always Cam was right there, matching her every stroke. More than once, she screamed, her bird's cry splitting the clear air. It sliced through him every time.

The flap of her wings grew slower, her sleek body coasting through the air as she began to descend. When her claws touched the ground, she lowered her head, and the soft sound that came from her throat drifted back to him as he landed behind her.

Cam hopped over to her, watching carefully and waiting for any signs she planned to take off again. But she looked exhausted. She lay on the ground, spreading her wings out against the sand, and the last glints of the sun glinted off her feathers. Finally, she changed back into herself, her hair covering her face.

Cam shifted as well, his arm going around her shoulders, his chin resting on her head. He tried to think of something to say, but it felt like they were past talking. He kissed her warm hair, pulling her closer.

He was relieved when she didn't pull away. She even turned enough to burrow into his chest. "You think I'm a coward," she murmured.

"No, I don't. I don't think that at all," he assured her. "Do you know why?"

She shook her head. Her hair tickled where it brushed against his jaw.

"Because I know even though you're frightened, and nobody will blame you if you'd rather not finish this trip, you're going to see it through. You're going to go back there to get somebody you love, the way he went to save you. Even if I insist you don't."

Sara lifted her head then. Her large eyes were dark and luminous, catching the orange glow of the sun low on the horizon, and she looked at him in such a way that a slow burn began to creep along his skin. She hadn't looked at him like that since...since before.

"But you won't insist," she said. "I've always loved that about you."

"No, I won't, because you've always done what you think is right. That's what I love about you." Tentatively, he leaned forward to kiss her forehead. When she didn't pull away, he brushed his lips against her cheek, and then her lips. "Josh should have realized that, too."

"Josh is upset." Her body seemed to sink against his, her soft breasts tantalizingly warm against his chest. "It's hard to...remember things right when you're upset."

"Yes it is," Cam agreed, holding her as he rolled onto his back. The sand irritated him, but he barely felt it once Sara was settled on him, her skin soft, her hair smelling like the wind. "Do you remember the last time we were like this?"

The corner of her mouth lifted. "You fell asleep and sunburned your ass."

"Yes, I did. And you thought it was the funniest thing you ever saw."

"Because you made that face every time you tried to sit down."

Her fingers began stroking the line of his arm, caressing the muscle. It was different than the casual touches she'd increasingly bestowed since the night before. And the fact that she was doing it without Josh present did not go unnoticed.

He waited for her to speak, unwilling to disrupt whatever was calming her down. When she finally broke the silence, her voice was low and tremulous.

“I’m scared, Cam.”

“I am, too,” Cam admitted softly. He ran his hand down her back, following the curve of her spine. “I wish I could tell you I wasn’t. Do I sound like a coward now?”

“No.” Her mouth skimmed over his bare skin, and his heart sped up with each inch she covered. “You came after me.”

“I always will.” He shivered as she continued to kiss him, the tips of her hair brushing over his chest with each dip of her head. His hard cock nudged against her thigh, twitching as the contact increased. “God, you feel good.”

Her breath fanned over him in a warm pulse. It took Cam a moment to realize she was chuckling. “You spent all night wrapped around me in a big, comfy bed,” Sara said, lifting her head to look at him. “And it takes lying in a hot pile of sand in the middle of the desert with me to get you to tell me that. Typical Cam.”

“You felt good last night, too.” He pushed the hair out of her eyes, then ran his fingers down the side of her face. He traced a path along her jaw and neck, and she tilted her head back, exposing the curve of her neck to his touch. Above her, the first stars of the night were beginning to twinkle. The heat from her flesh seeped through his body, feeding the ache in his groin.

When she looked back down at him, her eyes glowed. “Good enough for me to do this?” Sara adjusted her position, moving her legs to straddle his hips instead of stretched out atop them. It nestled his cock between her outer lips, and the first hint of her wetness slicked his skin.

He jerked forward, automatically seeking out more of her. His breath came in sudden gasps, and he knew there was no mistaking how much he wanted her. Before, he would have been thrusting into her, sheathing himself completely without another word or second of hesitation, but now he just held still, his entire body quivering. “Good enough to make me crazy.”

“You’re not crazy,” Sara breathed. Her fingers brushed over his beard, stroking the fine hairs, and she began rocking against his arousal in small, almost infinitesimal

movements. “You’ve always made the most sense to me when we’re in the desert like this.”

Everything made more sense when they were in the desert, the concerns of the world stripped away until they were nothing but flesh, and breath, and shadows in dim light. When they were together like that, there was nothing between them. It was like stepping into a sanctuary, and the peace Cam always found in the wilderness was amplified by her presence.

Cam smiled slightly, his hand resting on her hip. “That’s another reason why I love you as much as I do.”

The undulations of her body grew longer, her nipples growing harder with each scrape they made across his chest. Without stopping the caress of his jaw, Sara leaned down to skim her mouth over his, her honeyed breath warm and inviting.

“I want my life back. Do you think I can have it?”

“Yes,” Cam answered immediately, kissing her softly with each word. “Yes, absolutely. I’ll do anything I can, I’ll do anything you need. And we’re all going to be together again. They won’t take anything else from you.”

“And I can have you again?”

“Yes. I’m always going to be yours.”

Sara sighed at his words. When her mouth met his this time, the touch was firmer, her lips parting as her tongue tentatively sought his out. She reached down and covered his hand with hers, guiding it to cup her ass.

As soon as Cam palmed the taut flesh, she sank onto his cock. The pleasure of finally feeling her around him was intense, but it paled in comparison to the emotional satisfaction of finally feeling connected to her, of being complete once again. His other hand went to the back of her head, and he buried his fingers in her hair, kissing her deeply as her walls fluttered and constricted around his shaft. A soft breeze cooled his heated skin, and there wasn’t a single inch between their bodies.

She moved with the shallowest of strokes, as if she was reluctant to allow him to leave her body at all. Her kisses grew more demanding, her tongue more forceful, and her

hands began dancing over his arms and shoulders, touching and mapping his muscles with such hunger it left Cam trembling. This was his Sara. In his arms. Embracing him as though no time at all had elapsed since the last time they'd lain together in the desert.

Cam didn't try to change the rhythm—he needed to feel as much of her as he could, every pulse, every bit of heat. His hands mimicked hers, seeking out each inch of her skin he could reach, reacquainting himself with her entire body. The night before, when she had allowed him to touch and taste her, had been amazing and more than he hoped for, but now he felt like he was truly with her again.

But they couldn't keep up the slow pace forever. Cam didn't know who changed the rhythm first. He couldn't have known, their bodies were moving perfectly together, as though whatever boundaries kept them separated had been removed. She shifted her hips, quickened the tempo, deepened the strokes.

Sara found his hands with hers, lacing their fingers together as she lifted his arms above his head. It changed their position slightly, separating skin from skin, but now, with her weight bracing against his forearms, she brought them eye to eye.

Her skin glistened with a sheen of sweat, and for a brief moment, Cam worried that she was overexerting herself. But then she smiled, her full lips curving with what looked like unmitigated pleasure, and that fear dispersed, scattering to the wind as if she'd plucked it out of his heart and tossed it away with her own hands.

“Being like this with you...” her voice was breathy, her body refusing to slow their accelerating pace, “...makes me believe everything's going to be okay.”

Their lips fused together, their tongues winding against each other. “It will be,” he promised when they broke apart. “It will be.”

And then talking was beyond him. With every slide of her body against his, he thought he would ignite and the flames would consume him. He could still see her bright eyes in the dying light, and he watched her carefully, noting each flicker of emotion across her face. His heart swelled until his chest ached.

“Love you,” Cam whispered, “Love you, love you.”

“I love you, too.” Her lips parted as if there was more she wished to say, but they were arrested by shudders suddenly wracking her body, her channel fluttering and squeezing around his cock, her nails digging into his palms where her grip convulsed. Her head fell back, her long neck bared to the open sky, and a cry not unlike the scream of her hawk tore from her throat.

Cam arched off the ground, thrusting into her once more as he shouted her name. He trembled, wave after wave of pleasure rolling through him, his body echoing the aftershocks shaking her frame. She collapsed, the tension going from her limbs, and buried her face in his neck. He just held her, watching the full moon as it rose over the horizon and cast silver light on her hair. For a moment, he felt utterly at peace.

And then he remembered.

“Josh,” he said.

Sara didn’t move, though her lips traveled over his skin. “We’ll find him. Everything’s going to be okay, remember?”

Cam didn’t want to move, and he didn’t want to make her move, or ruin her mood, but he wasn’t feeling quite so tranquil. Something scratched at the back of his mind. It made his skin crawl, and settled like hot coals in his stomach.

“Everything will be fine,” he agreed, “but we’ve got to go now.”

She took the hint and peeled away, the sweat cooling his skin even more once she was gone. A small frown marred the peace of her features as she rose to her feet, and her dark eyes searched his own.

“Did you think of something else?” she asked. “Are we heading in the wrong direction?”

“No, I think we’re going in the right direction.” He began wiping the sand from his legs. “I don’t know what he plans, but he’s going back to that house. It’s just...” Cam felt silly trying to explain he had a bad feeling, but what else would he call it?

Sara didn’t argue, simply nodding as if she understood what he couldn’t express. Her head tilted back to the heavens again, and after a moment of scanning the sky, she shifted into the hawk again, stretching her wings and flying off into the distance. She had an

unerring sense of direction; Cam had no doubt she was headed straight for the car. After the last of the sand was gone from his skin, he did the same, the air gliding over his feathers as he followed her.

They were close. They would be there within the next half hour.

He just hoped they wouldn't be too late.

Chapter Twenty-One

Josh double-checked the chains holding Nolan's arms and legs in place, humming a random tune under his breath. He kept his gun pointed at Nolan's head, but the other man wasn't going to give him any trouble. That might have had something to do with the bloody gash on his temple, or maybe the overpowering stench of gas fumes that seemed to be slowly sucking the oxygen out of the room. The chains might have been overkill, but Josh wasn't going to take any additional risks.

"Mmmm fmmm hmfmfh fffmmm!"

Josh looked over his shoulder to JD. "Shh. It's quiet time now, okay? You had plenty of time to talk on our way up."

She struggled against her ropes, her eyes wide and rolling. She worked her jaw around the makeshift gag—Nolan's neck tie—and he could tell she would try to spit it out again. He didn't really mind if she shouted. The only person who would hear her was the one person he needed to make this party complete. But he was getting tired of listening to her.

"Mmm fffmfff mmhhmm!"

"Yes, I know. Best friends," Josh said, with more than a touch of sadness. "And I don't want to do this, but you already admitted you had further plans for Sara. What am I supposed to do? Pretend I never heard that? Come on, JD, you know me better than that. I mean, really."

"You're insane."

He turned back to Nolan. "Don't make me gag you, too. I've got a rag with your name on it, but it's been soaked in gasoline, and I don't think you'll enjoy it."

"What do you want?"

"Call your shifter down here."

"Marco's not here."

“Then shut the fuck up,” Josh said, as he walked over to the door. He knew it needed to be in this room, the room where they found Sara, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t check out the rest of the facilities. “I’m going to step out of here for a moment. Don’t worry, I’ll lock the door, so you’ll be safe.”

He took a deep breath once he emerged into the hall, his lungs burning from the prolonged exposure to the heavy fumes. He knew there was a ventilation system in the basement, and they probably weren’t going to suffocate. Which was good. If they suffocated now, they’d miss all the fun. Through the thick door, he could hear Nolan’s shouts. Did they listen to Sara shout like that from the hallway?

He’d have to remember to ask.

Josh kept his gun cocked and ready in case Marco really was around, grasping the two gas cans with his other hand. He didn’t want to shoot Marco, but he knew the shifter was the most dangerous of his captives, and it wouldn’t do to allow somebody like that the chance of escape.

The first room Josh came to was the one with the cage. He nearly dropped to his knees when he saw it, the air rushing out of his lungs. It wasn’t even a place he’d keep an animal. It was large, but it wasn’t designed with comfort in mind. The floor was covered in shredded newspaper, of all things, and there were empty dog dishes. Had they really forced her to eat out of those bowls? Of course, there was no toilet, no sink, no pillow, and no sign of mercy or consideration. Even if they considered her nothing more than an animal, wouldn’t it make sense to treat her well to get the best results?

They were fucking morons. Josh almost wished he could shoot them, resurrect them, and then carry out his plot of arson. Though he hadn’t initially planned to, he dumped the full can of gas into the cage, spreading the fluid evenly across the newspaper.

The next room was clearly Nolan’s records room. Even though the man’s brain was apparently barely functional, he kept copious notes. There were several free-standing filing cabinets, and each one was stuffed with notes, reports, files, photos, graphs and receipts. They told the story Sara would never be able to share. They spoke of the horrors visited on her, and the photos were graphic, explicit, undeniable.

Two years of research surrounded him, and despite the disgusting and highly unethical ways of collecting the information, Josh knew there would be nuggets of worthwhile information. How could there not be? He didn't pause to study any of it. Every scrap of paper went into a massive pile in the middle of the floor, and that was doused with the third and final can. He saved just enough at the bottom to pour a trail of liquid behind him down the hall. Some of it splashed on the cuffs of his pants and his shoes, but he didn't mind. The bottoms of his feet were already coated.

By the time he returned to the first room, JD had managed to spit her gag out. She opened her mouth, but he leveled the gun at her head. "Think real carefully about what you want to say, JD."

"Look," Nolan said weakly, "can we talk about this?"

"There's nothing to talk about. Really. There's nothing you can say that'll make this better for you."

"What are you going to do?"

"What do you think? I'm wiping this, all of this, off the face of the Earth. Sara will never come back to this place, she's never going to see your face again, and nobody is ever going to see your research." Josh perched on the edge of the table, his leg dangling over the side. "I think that's what really is going to hurt. Dying for your work? It's a bit melodramatic, but you'll be famous. They'll talk about you for years. Dying for the work nobody is ever going to see? That'll probably be the last thing you think about while the flesh is burning off your bones."

"Josh, what the hell is wrong with you?"

"Shut up, JD."

"Do you think you'll get away with this?" she demanded.

Josh studied his gun idly. "Nope, and I don't plan to. I told you JD, we're atoning. Do try to keep up."

"What the fuck is going on here?"

Josh looked up at the new arrival and smiled. "You must be Marco. Good to meet you. Now the party can really start."

Marco wasn't what he expected. For as much trauma as Sara had undergone at the hands of this man, the specter of the shifter responsible had built to larger-than-life proportions. He hadn't anticipated he'd be facing off with someone who would've looked perfectly at home standing behind the counter at the ice cream parlor back in Delta.

Watery blue eyes darted from the gun in Josh's hand, to Nolan tied up in the chair, to the empty gas can at Josh's feet. By the time they returned to meet Josh's, a fresh wariness was in his thin frame.

"You're the other one," Marco said carefully.

"I guess I am. Why don't you come in here and have a seat? Or I could shoot you now, but one spark from this gun is all it would take, and I don't think Nolan has made himself right with God yet." Josh looked over his shoulder. "You don't want to die yet, do you?"

"No."

Josh turned back to Marco. "I have to admit, I'm curious about something. I get what JD and Nolan think they're doing here. But why did you do it?"

Marco didn't move. "All I did was my job."

"Just following orders, eh? Does that defense *ever* work? Okay, this question is for anybody. If you had a shifter who is clearly as dense as our friend Marco here, why not just tell him it was his job to be *studied* for several years and give him a token paycheck?"

"Because you know Sara's special," JD offered. "You said it from the beginning, Josh. Remember how excited you were when she started talking to you? I do. You wouldn't shut up about her, about what a strong shifter she was, how smart, how she'd blended for so long. She was the single best source for answers, and you know it."

A fist squeezed Josh's heart. "Yeah, I guess I do know it," he said softly. "Any last requests? No? Good." He pointed the gun at Marco's head, his finger slick over the trigger.

It happened in the space of a single blink.

One moment, he was ready to kill the monster who'd spent the past two years of his life torturing Sara because it was his fucking *job*.

The next, he was staring into familiar brown eyes, pleading with him for mercy.

"Don't, Josh, *please*," Sara begged.

"Change back," Josh demanded, his hand shaking. He knew it wasn't Sara, of course. He had lived with shifters long enough to be accustomed to this sort of swift morphing, but didn't a part of him always wonder if they really became cats, birds, and even other people? "Goddamnit, *change back*."

She ignored his commands, lifting her hands, palm out, as if to calm him down. "You don't want to do this," she said. "*I* don't want you to do this. Please, Josh, just...give me the gun."

Josh backed up, trying to keep as much distance between him and Sara—Marco—that he could.

"Make him change back," he said, glancing down to Nolan. Nolan only shook his head. Josh wanted to smash his skull. "*I have* to do this. Do you think I won't shoot you? I'm about to torch one of my closest friends, I can shoot *you*."

"Can you?" The shifter—*not Sara, not Sara*—took a single step closer. "You would've done it already. And you don't want to, not really. You don't want me to hurt any more."

"That's why I'm here." Josh felt the burn behind his eyes and in his sinuses. He told himself it was from the gas. His gaze slid to JD, who was watching the back and forth with wide eyes. When he looked back to the door, there were two Saras.

It was easy to spot the difference. Even without the haircut or the new thinness to her features, the Sara who looked at him now glowed with the radiance that had struck Josh the very first time he'd laid eyes on her. In a million years, Marco could never replicate that.

"I told you we would drag your ass back," she said.

For the first time since Josh left them in Vegas, something like real panic consumed him. "What the fuck are you doing here? Get out of here. It's not safe."

“Not without you.” Cam materialized at Sara’s shoulder. “You should’ve told us, Josh. We would have dealt with this together.”

“No, *we* are not dealing with this. You were supposed to be gone.” He sent a frantic glance to Marco, his borrowed face twisted in a sickly amused grin. “Somewhere safe. Why didn’t you listen to me?”

“Because we love you,” Sara said. “And safe doesn’t matter if you’re not there with us.”

“That’s *all* that matters,” Josh shouted. “Goddamnit, that’s all that matters. That’s all that ever mattered.”

Marco spun on his heel, as though he was going to take advantage of Josh’s distraction, but Cam caught his shoulders and threw him back to the ground. As Marco hit the cement, he snarled, his face shifting from Sara’s to Cam’s.

Sara froze. She had been poised for a fight upon entering, but now, with her tormentor sprawled at her feet, she looked like a bird preparing to take flight. Her gaze was fixed on Marco, on the clean angles of Cam’s face that he’d shifted to, and it felt like time stood still as she stared at him.

“Sara...” Cam said behind her.

“Sara...” Marco mirrored Cam’s tone, though there was a mocking edge to it that Josh didn’t miss. “You know safe doesn’t matter because you know you’ll never win. You never could.”

If it weren’t for the fact that it would kill Sara and Cam, too, Josh would have emptied his clip into Marco right then. But he was forced to stand and impotently watch as Sara finally began to move.

“You’re right,” she said, still staring at Marco. “But times change.”

Her foot lashed out, slamming into Marco’s jaw. She connected with such force that his head snapped back and hit the concrete floor with a wet thud. The pool of blood began spreading almost immediately.

Nobody moved or made a sound as the blood flowed across the floor. Josh thought he might puke. Cam moved first, wrapping his arms around Sara and pulling her away

from the body. The body. There was a body now. A murder, justified as it was. Sara couldn't be linked to this. Josh hurried across the room, nearly slipping on the wet floor, and gave Cam a hard shove.

"Get out. Please. Just go."

An iron grip shot up and caught his wrist. "We're *all* going."

Josh shook his head. "No, I can't. Look around you. Do you think I can walk away from this? It's too late."

"Why? Because you've spread some gas around? Nothing's happened here that we can't fix."

"Nolan and JD might disagree," Josh countered, wondering if he was going to puke. He felt very tired. "This is kidnapping and attempted murder. They put you in jail for that."

"We ran that risk the first time we came here, when we killed those guards to get Sara out." Cam's gaze was unwavering. "And I don't think you'd change that decision, would you?"

Josh looked at them helplessly. "You're going to be in danger for the rest of your lives. Don't you want things to be like they were...before?"

"Before you?" Sara shook her head. Pulling away from Cam, she stepped forward and slid her arms around Josh's waist, nuzzling her cheek against his. "How can you possibly think our lives would be better without you in them?" she said. "We need you, Josh. Just like you need us."

"Oh, brother," he heard JD mutter behind them.

Josh silently passed the gun to Cam, kissed the top of Sara's head, and turned back to JD. Nolan was still staring at Marco's prone form, but JD looked mostly bored. Josh bent and picked up the tie, then pulled his lighter out of his pocket and dropped to his haunches beside her.

"This place is still going to burn. I'm assuming you'd rather not be here when it happens."

Her eyes narrowed in shrewd calculation. "What are you suggesting?"

“Let it go, JD. Find something else to do with your time. Because if *anything* ever happens to Sara again, I’m coming after you. I will hold you personally responsible. I know it sounds like I’m asking you to destroy your career, but I’m not. You keep your mouth shut and redirect your efforts, and I won’t leave you down here.”

Her gaze flickered to Nolan. “And what about him?”

“Leave him to me,” Cam said from the doorway.

“Do we have a deal?” Josh asked. He didn’t want to help Nolan, and he didn’t think he could, but he didn’t want to walk away and leave JD behind. He didn’t know if he could live with himself.

It took a few more glances around the room—at Marco’s dead body, at the empty gas can—before she finally nodded. She didn’t say a word until he’d untied her and she was rising to her feet.

“You’re not the man I thought you were, Josh,” she said.

“That just means you never knew him at all,” Sara interjected. When he glanced up, Sara was holding her hand out to him. “Come on. The sooner we’re out of here, the happier we’re all going to be.”

Josh took Sara’s hand and straightened. Her fingers felt right wrapped around his, and the full weight of what he intended to do hit him. He swayed on his feet, but her grip only tightened, like she didn’t intend to let him go again. She gently tugged him toward the door, and they gave wide berth to Marco’s body.

JD darted out of the room, hurrying around them and up the stairs. He didn’t blame her for wanting to make a quick getaway, but her keys were still in his pocket.

“I’m sorry,” Josh said, to nobody in particular.

“Don’t.” Sara squeezed his hand and pressed closer to his side. “You wouldn’t let me apologize for...for everything after you guys got me out. I’m not going to let you do it now.”

Josh looked over to Cam, trying to find some sort of clue on his impassive face, but there was nothing. Did they think he was crazy? They’d probably be right. He felt

hollow. He allowed Sara to lead him out of the small room and up the stairs, and how hard must it have been for her to come back to that place?

Josh stumbled as they stepped into the night, like he wasn't quite prepared for the force of the cool, fresh air.

Cam's hand steadied him. "Get him to the car, Sara," he said. "I'll meet you outside town."

Sara nodded and walked him to the vehicle. He looked around for any sign of JD, but she was gone. Maybe she was hiding, or maybe calling the police. Josh didn't care. Sara opened the car door, and he crawled into the backseat, the fumes from his pants and shoes overwhelming in the closed space.

He didn't speak as Sara started the car and navigated it through the silent streets to the edge of the town. If he opened his mouth, he'd just apologize again and again and again until he couldn't form the words anymore.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Sitting on the end of the hotel bed, Sara wrapped her long arms around her knees as she stared at the closed bathroom door. The sound of the shower still emanated through the walls, but with each passing minute, her stomach knotted even more. Josh hadn't said a word the entire trip to the nearest town, and when she'd gently made the suggestion that he could wash up to get rid of the smell of gasoline, he'd simply gone into the bathroom and shut the door.

That had been thirty minutes ago.

Cam's flicking through the channels on the TV wasn't helping.

"Maybe I should go in there and check on him," she finally said out loud.

"He might want to be alone," Cam warned. He looked to the closed bathroom door and grimaced. "But I don't really care. You should go check on him."

She was off the bed before Cam had finished speaking, bounding across the room to push open the bathroom door. It wasn't locked, thankfully, but the interior wasn't nearly as warm as she would have expected from a thirty-minute shower.

"Josh?"

He turned the water off, but didn't push the curtain aside. "Yeah?"

She approached the tub slowly, fearful of pushing him even further away. "Are you all right? You've been in here an awful long time."

"Yeah. Yeah, I just needed some time to think." He reached from behind the curtain for a towel. "I don't know...I don't know what I was thinking."

Sara reached the towel before he did and pressed it into his hand, pushing aside the curtain at the same time so it no longer stood between them. "Talk to me," she said. "Please. Tell me...tell me anything, just don't shut me out. Please, Josh?"

Josh clutched the towel to his chest. "I don't know what to say. I saw that mark on your leg and I knew...I knew...Sara, how can you even be around me?"

“How can I not?” Ignoring the water dripping from the showerhead, she climbed into the tub to stand in front of him. He flinched when she reached out to touch him, but she pressed on, taking the towel from his hands to start drying him off. “None of this was your fault, and nothing you can ever say will convince me it was.”

“She’s right, you know,” Cam said as he stepped into the bathroom. “Do I have to give you the same ‘we don’t blame the victims’ lecture I gave Sara?”

“We don’t blame the victims?” Josh asked.

“When we found your letter,” she said, her voice low. “I thought it was my fault you left. But it wasn’t. It’s not our fault that we choose to believe in the best of people, not the worst. So I can be around you, because you’re still the same man I fell in love with five years ago. You and Cam are the two most giving, brave, brilliant men I have ever known, and no two-faced bitch in cheap shoes will ever be able to change that.”

Cam held out his hand, waiting patiently until Josh took it and stepped out of the tub. His teeth were starting to chatter, and Sara put the towel over his shoulders and pressed against his back, hugging him from behind. Cam embraced them both, his hands resting on Sara’s hips.

“It isn’t your fault,” Cam repeated. “But I don’t understand how you thought we could be happy without you. You said you weren’t going to leave.”

Josh rested his forehead on Cam’s shoulder. “I know. Leaving made sense at the time. Everything seemed very...clear. What I needed to do and where I needed to go...”

Sara skimmed her mouth over the back of Josh’s neck. “Except our world doesn’t make sense if you’re not in it. Remember how lost you said you were when I was gone? It works the same when you’re the one who’s missing, Josh.”

Cam kissed the ridge of Josh’s shoulder, his tongue darting out to sample the drops of water resting on his skin. “And did you really think we’d just let you go? Really?”

“For some reason, I thought you’d listen to me. Why wouldn’t you take Sara somewhere safe?”

Cam shrugged. “If you had been in my shoes, would you have let me go without doing anything about it?”

“No,” Josh admitted.

Lifting his head, Cam caught Sara’s eyes. “What do you say? Should we take him to bed?”

“Well...” She leaned in, inhaling the fresh scent of his skin for long seconds, ending at the soft spot just below Josh’s ear. She shot Cam a playful smile. “He does smell really good. I say yes.”

“What about you two?” Josh asked, as though he missed the part where they were taking him to bed. “Are you more comfortable together?”

Sara reached and brushed her knuckles over Cam’s bearded jaw. “Yeah,” she murmured, meeting his warm gaze. “We got a chance to figure some stuff out while we were on the road.”

“Good. Good.” Josh shivered, the chill shaking his entire frame. “I guess you better get me to bed before I freeze to death.”

When Cam took Josh’s hand, Sara darted past them, getting there before they did in order to pull back the blankets. Josh climbed in gratefully, leaving Sara to stretch out in front of him, snaking her arm around his waist as she snuggled into his chest. Cam slipped in behind him, tugging the blankets back up to cover all three of them.

“It’s not our bed, but at least we’re all in it together,” Sara said.

Josh sighed, his arm going around her, his legs entwining with Cam’s. “I’m glad you saved me from myself.”

“We’ll call it even.” Already, the warmth of his body and the familiar scent of his skin and the rough caress of Cam’s hand where it reached across both of them to stroke her side were making Sara sleepy. Her eyelids fluttered shut as she buried her face in Josh’s neck. “Welcome home.”

* * *

Josh watched the passing desert and decided if he never drove through Nevada again, it would be too soon. Was there an uglier place on the entire planet? He looked over his shoulder, finding Sara’s peaceful face far more interesting. She had barely opened her

eyes when Cam herded them down to the car, and fell back into a deep sleep as soon as she stretched out in the backseat.

Josh didn't blame her. A part of him wished he could curl around her and go back to sleep himself.

"Do you think I'm crazy?" Josh asked, resting his forehead against the cool window.

Cam frowned and cast a glance sideways. "Why would I think you're crazy?"

"Because I kidnapped a good friend of mine, and plotted to kill us all in a horrible fireball that would probably have been seen for miles around," Josh said flatly.

"I don't think that makes you crazy. Maybe not the best candidate to plan our next big secret mission, though." When his joke fell flat, Cam reached across the distance separating them and rested his hand on Josh's thigh. "You've been under a lot of stress ever since we got Sara back. What you did...is understandable."

Josh covered Cam's hand with his own. "I don't think stress is usually a valid defense. What I did was scary, Cam. I feel like I just took a vacation from reality."

Cam looked in the rearview mirror before responding. "I think we've been walking that line ever since Sara went missing," he said, his voice slightly lower. "We killed two men to get her back, Josh. And another one to protect her from having it happen again. And the truth is...I'd kill a hundred more without batting an eyelash if it got us the same result. You thought you were protecting us, and you were broadsided by JD's betrayal. I don't think that makes you crazy. I think it makes you human."

"Did you make it look like Marco did it?"

"Yeah. I shifted to do it. Iocor should think Marco turned on him and then got caught in the blaze, and the police will just write it off as an animal attack. I'm not sure how they're going to write off the fire, but there's nothing left to tie us to it. As long as JD doesn't change her mind, we should be good."

"I wish I could tell you she won't, but I don't know her. I *thought* I did." He looked over his shoulder again at Sara. "Maybe me going off like that wasn't so awful. Maybe you two needed some time."

“No, your going off like that *was* so awful. Sara and I would’ve found the time one way or another.” He squeezed Josh’s thigh. “The three of us belong together. Weren’t you the one telling me to be patient before?”

“It’s much easier said than done, isn’t it?” Josh’s skin itched for more contact. They were nearing Vegas, and he knew he’d have plenty of time later for the physical intimacy he craved, but his fingers snuck up Cam’s arm anyway. “Are we going to be able to put all of this behind us?”

“I think so. Sara suggested something when we were on our way to JD’s...” He grew thoughtful. “How do you feel about San Francisco?”

“San Francisco? You mean...how do I feel about it in general, or how do I feel about living there?”

“Living there.” Cam smiled. “You should’ve seen the way Sara lit up when she talked about it. I haven’t seen her that excited about something since the spring pageant she was organizing right before...well. You know.”

“I think San Francisco is a beautiful city. I would love to live there. And I can see why Sara wants to live there. I think she’ll always be a California girl at heart. But I can’t imagine the prospect of living in a city like that fills your heart with joy.”

“Maybe it wouldn’t be my first choice,” Cam conceded. “But this isn’t about me. This is about us. What’s going to make me happy is having both of you with me, and it doesn’t matter if that’s in Delta, or San Francisco, or Timbuktu.” He paused. “Well, maybe it would matter a little if it was Timbuktu. I can’t live anyplace if I can’t get Internet access.”

Josh leaned over to brush his lips across Cam’s cheek. “We would never ask you to live somewhere without the Internet. I think San Francisco is a great place to be happy.”

“We house hunt *together* this time.”

“I think that sounds like a fair arrangement. You are aware of the price of housing in the Bay Area, right? I’m just warning you now so you don’t have a heart attack and ruin all our plans.”

The casual flick of Cam's fingers said that he probably didn't, but Josh merely smiled and shook his head. The reality check would come soon enough.

They drove in silence for a few more miles, passing into the city before getting slowed by traffic. When they pulled to a stop at a red light, Sara sighed in her sleep, and both men turned at the same time to see if she would wake up.

Cam smiled in embarrassment as he sat back in his seat. "Part of me still can't believe I can touch her whenever I want again," he admitted.

Josh couldn't help but smile at the sense of awe in Cam's voice. He didn't care what Cam said, if it somehow eased things between Cam and Sara, then he didn't regret leaving at all. "Can you tell me what happened? I wasn't gone that long."

His smile faded, and his eyes flickered to the mirror again. "It was on the way back to the house. She was scared, more scared than she would admit, and when I pulled over to make her talk about it, she bolted from the car and shifted to the hawk."

Josh nodded. It wasn't hard to piece together what happened after that. "Then you shifted and followed her into the desert."

"I wasn't even thinking that I had to calm her down so much. I was terrified of losing her again. Of losing you, too." The car jerked a little as he pushed too hard on the accelerator to get through the green light. "Those seconds were the worst of my life."

Josh's heart twisted. "Cam, I thought you were going to be so angry with me when you figured out who took her. I laid there and watched you sleep and tried to think of what I would do if you...I'm glad you followed her."

"I'm glad he followed me, too." Sara smiled sleepily when her sudden appearance between them made both men jump a little. "Do you guys always talk about me when I'm asleep, or is this just a special treat for this car ride?"

"This is pretty standard actually," Josh said, leaning over to steal a kiss. "Did you sleep well? We're almost home."

"I want my bed. And a shower. And then my bed again." Her hand cupped his cheek, stopping him from pulling away yet. "Hey, you."

Josh allowed her to draw him closer. "What, you?"

The honeyed kiss she gave him was almost dreamy in its languor, lingering on his lips long after she'd pulled back. "No more being gone when I wake up," she said. "I mean it."

"It'll never happen again," Josh promised. "I'll be the first thing you see when you wake up from now on."

"Good." Her gaze caught Cam's in the mirror. "That goes for you, too."

Josh couldn't remember the last time he'd seen such a pleased smile grace Cam's face. "Yes, ma'am."

They lapsed into silence as Cam drove the last few miles to the house that had been acting as their home—the house Josh had left with no intention of ever returning. He had been so hurt and angry that the suicide mission seemed like the right—the logical—thing to do. But now he was simply grateful. Grateful to see the house again, grateful to feel Sara's breath on his neck as she leaned over his shoulder, grateful for Cam's large hand on his thigh. Grateful they loved him. And he intended to show them just how grateful he was.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Josh counted out several bills and handed them to the bored-looking delivery girl from the nearest Italian restaurant. She snapped her gum as she took the tip and said, “I can set this up for you, if you want.”

“No, I’ve got it, thank you.”

“Did you just move in or something?”

Josh looked around at the cluttered house. The only flat surface that wasn’t piled high with boxes was the table, and that was only because he took the time to clear it off.

“Yeah, we just moved in.”

“That’s cool. You sure you don’t need my help?”

“No. Thank you. Have a good night.”

Josh gently pushed her out of the house and shut the door. He heard Cam and Sara in the bedroom, moving around each other to get ready for the evening. They thought they were going out for a night on the town, but Josh had a different idea of how they should celebrate. Restaurants and clubs were nice, but what he really wanted was a quiet night to enjoy their company. Between the moving, the house hunting, the job search, and a million other little stresses, they hadn’t even had the chance to eat dinner together in over a month.

He set the table quickly, arranging the first course and storing the rest of the food in the kitchen. By the time they emerged from the bedroom calling his name, everything was waiting, from the wine to the candles.

“Why do I smell...?” Cam’s voice trailed off as he stopped at the mouth of the hallway, brows quirking when he saw the table laden with Josh’s arrangements. The suit he only dragged out for weddings hung elegantly on his muscled frame, but the long hair and beard that Sara had insisted he keep for awhile longer softened the effect.

“Why did you stop?”

Sara's confused voice came from behind Cam, and she ducked around him to enter the room without waiting for an answer. In the two months since they'd left Las Vegas and Delta behind, she'd gained enough weight to almost match her pre-Iocor measurements. The red sheath she'd chosen to wear for their date out accentuated her full breasts, while the long slit up the side of the calf-length skirt still managed to hide most of the fading scars. She glowed with health. Josh smiled simply at the sight of her.

"What happened to going out?" she asked with wide eyes.

Josh smiled a little self-consciously. "Well, going out sounded nice, but then I got to thinking about the last time we had dinner together, just the three of us, and it's been a long time. And you two are beautiful, and I don't want to share you."

Though Sara eagerly approached the table for a closer inspection, Cam hung back. "It actually smells edible," he commented. His mouth twitched into a smile. "You didn't cook, did you?"

Josh frowned. "I can make edible food. I can. But I *chose* to have some food from Rosario's delivered, because I know how much Sara enjoys it." He pulled out a chair and bowed. "My lady."

She stepped forward and sat down, but not before skimming her palm over Josh's cheek. "Well, I think it's wonderful," she announced. She unfolded her napkin into her lap. "If Cam wants to be a grump about it, then I'll just eat his share."

"I'm not a grump." He sat in the chair opposite. "I'm merely protecting my palate."

Josh took his seat as well, relieved they weren't disappointed about his last-minute change of plans. Especially since they both spent over an hour getting ready.

"Your snobby palate is going to be fine," Josh assured him. "I wouldn't dream of serving you anything less than the very best."

"Did you get the cheesecake?" Sara asked.

Cam snorted. "We haven't even had our salad yet, and here she is, wondering about dessert. Ow!" The tablecloth shifted as he bent down and rubbed his shin, but Josh knew it was more about show than actually being hurt. "No kicking in high heels, remember?"

"Big baby," she teased.

“To be fair, we do have a no-kicking-in-high-heels rule,” Josh said, passing Sara the breadbasket. “And of course I have cheesecake. I even bought some of that expensive Ghirardelli cocoa you like so much. This is a celebration, after all.”

She plucked out a soft roll and handed the basket to Cam. “But we already had the buying-the-house celebration.”

“Yes, we did. But we have something else to celebrate today. John Dexter from Washington Elementary called this afternoon while you were out.”

Sara stopped in mid-chew. “He said they weren’t going to be making a decision until next week.”

Josh frowned with mock confusion. “Really? Because today he told me they had made their final decision, and he’d like you to meet him in his office tomorrow morning at seven thirty.”

It took a moment for his implication to sink in. When it did, Sara burst from her seat, her napkin falling forgotten to the floor as she threw her arms around Josh’s neck. Laughter bubbled from her throat, and her excited kisses rained along his cheeks.

“I don’t know why you’re so surprised,” Cam said behind her. “We told you all along they were going to love you.”

“She’s just happy because now she has an excuse to avoid unpacking,” Josh said, between kisses. He caught her chin and kissed her squarely on the mouth. When she pulled back, her eyes were still sparkling. “I am going to miss having you around and underfoot, though.”

She squirmed in his lap. The thin fabric of her dress left little to the imagination, her heat seeping through it into his groin. “You just like having me under you period,” she taunted.

He gripped her hips. “If you keep that up, I’m going to forget about dinner and get you under me right now.”

A slow tilt of her head was followed by her arms snaking back around his neck. “Something tells me that might’ve been your real reason to have this dinner at home.”

Josh looked over her shoulder to Cam. “Am I that obvious?”

Cam shrugged. "Subtlety has never been your strong suit," he said, rising from his seat. He stood behind Sara, his hand skimming over the fine lines of her back, exposed above her dress. "How much do we spoil dinner if we don't eat it right away?"

"Oh, it'll keep," Josh declared, though he didn't really know. He didn't care too much, either. "And if subtlety wasn't my strong suit, I wouldn't have bothered with food to begin with."

"Maybe we just know you best." She nuzzled his cheek with her own. "I thought it was wonderful."

Josh linked his fingers through Cam's and pulled him until he bent at the waist. He teased Cam's lips until they parted, then ducked away and found Sara's mouth for a similarly brief caress.

"That's all that matters to me," he said, toying with her zipper.

She sat back, leaning against Cam's legs, trapping Josh's hand between them. "I don't want to spoil your dinner. If you tell me to behave, I will." The corner of her mouth lifted. "But I'll be thinking naughty thoughts while I eat."

Josh looked up to Cam for his opinion, but he merely looked amused. "I think we should have at least one or two courses. You'll need your energy later."

Sara pretended to pout, but returned to her chair easily enough, picking up her bread before she'd even sat down. "I wonder if he called Mrs. Ehle." It took a moment for Josh to realize she had gone back to the subject of her new job and flashed a smile at Cam. "I'll have to call and thank her for whatever she said."

"She probably said you were the best teacher in the school, and I was a right bastard for taking you away from Delta," Cam said as he sat down. "She might not know language that strong. What's another word for bastard?"

"Jerk?" Josh provided.

"Right, she probably called me a jerk."

"Is it a mixed school, Sara? I'm assuming it might be, since it's private."

“It’s about sixty/forty, but I’ll be the first teacher who’s a shifter.” She grinned. “Maybe that’s why he was so eager to hire me. Maybe he’s got some equal opportunity quota he has to fill.”

Josh arched his brow. “Doubtful, since I’m not aware of any law about discriminating against shifters.”

“Let’s face it. You got the gig because you’re brilliant and they knew if they let you slip away, they’d regret it forever.”

Josh smirked. “They probably felt sorry for you because you live with a bastard, oh, excuse me, a jerk, like Cam.”

Sara chattered on happily about her new job, her new boss, how she planned to decorate the classroom, how she only had two weeks until the beginning of the term, and though she knew what she was doing, it was always nerve-racking right before a new group of kids. They took turns assuring her between bites that the children would love her, and she was going to be brilliant, but Josh could tell she wasn’t nervous. She was just excited. And beautiful. It wasn’t long before his food was forgotten, and he noticed out of the corner of his eye that Cam wasn’t eating either.

“I don’t know about you,” Josh declared after he finished his wine, “but I’m stuffed.”

That seemed to be the cue Cam was waiting for. He dropped his fork and set his napkin aside. “I definitely need some time before dessert.”

Josh rose and pulled Sara to her feet. “I had other plans for our celebration tonight.”

Her eyes sparkled, and she pressed closer. “You mean it wasn’t just dinner on your mind?”

“No. I’m hungry for other things,” Josh murmured, “And Cam looks famished.”

“It’s true,” Cam said, scooping her into his arms without warning. Before Josh said a word, he was carrying her down the hallway, her feet kicking helplessly over his arm. “You better hurry,” he threw over his shoulder.

Josh blew out the candles and grabbed the second bottle of wine before following them to the bedroom. Cam was still fully dressed, but he was concentrating very hard on Sara’s zipper as she sprawled across the large mattress.

“You’re tickling on purpose!” she squealed.

Her high-heeled foot shot out in retaliation, but Cam caught her ankle easily, holding it still as he looked to Josh.

“Wanna make her a little less dangerous and get these off?” he asked with a glint in his eye.

“Gladly,” Josh said, wrapping his fingers just above Cam’s. He held her firmly as he unstrapped the shoe and tossed it aside. “Did somebody say something about tickling?” He brushed his fingers from her toe to her ankle, her stocking smooth against his skin.

“Hey!” Sara twisted on the bed, her undone dress slipping around her waist. Her luscious mouth was curved into a smile, and in spite of the warning in her voice, her eyes were dancing. “I seem to remember not tickling you the last time you asked me to stop.”

“I guess that just means you’re nicer than me,” Josh said, reaching for her other foot. He tossed the shoe away and caressed the arch of her foot until she squirmed. Before she could pull away from him, he pressed his mouth against her instep and ran his fingertips down her calf.

Cam pulled her dress further down to her hips, exposing her stomach. “I can’t remember. Isn’t she ticklish here, too?”

“Hmmm,” Josh confirmed, moving his mouth down her foot.

Her giggles turned into breathless gasps as Cam licked along her bare abdomen, and she arched away from the bed, trying to break the hold Josh still had on her ankles. She wasn’t fighting hard. Josh knew she had more than regained her normal strength, and if she truly wanted to get away, she could. She was playing, which only spurred him to want to play as well.

“I didn’t think I was going to be dessert,” she panted.

“Well, that’s exactly what I had in mind. Help me out here, Cam.”

Cam felt for the top of her stockings, pushing the material down her leg without lifting his head. Josh finished the job, one stocking joining her shoes on the floor, and then the other.

“You taste so sweet.” He licked the top of her foot. “I can’t get enough.” He released one foot, and she immediately hooked it around his waist as he moved down to her ankle. His mouth followed the path his fingers took, and he kneeled on the bed, the tip of his tongue dancing over her skin, making swirling, soft patterns up her calf to her knee.

Sara ran her foot up and down his back, the breathy sounds escaping her throat only making him harder. Her fingers tangled in Cam’s long hair, trying to hold him in place, but Cam broke free, licking downward over the silken skin until his mouth was over her hip.

He glanced up through his lashes and caught Josh’s eye. “Staying in was the best idea ever.”

“Mmm, I do tend to have them once in awhile.” Josh inclined his head, tracing the seam of Cam’s mouth with his tongue. Sara wrapped both legs around them, trapping him between her thighs. “I have another one, if you want to hear it.”

“What?”

“Help me get this off her,” Josh said, guiding Cam’s hand to the line of her thong.

Cam didn’t hesitate to loop his finger beneath the waistband, pulling the elastic down the curve of her hip to expose her glistening pussy. When she lay completely exposed to them, Sara stilled, her hands smoothing over the top of Cam’s head as he nibbled along the top of her mound.

“I am so glad we unpacked the bedroom already,” she breathed.

Josh smiled, stretching out on his stomach between her legs, looping his arms around her thighs. “What? Aren’t you turned on by endless rows of boxes?”

Before she answered, he drew his tongue down her lips, collecting drops of her arousal. He heard Cam breathing, and the two of them filled his senses completely. As Josh moved lower, Cam followed, and soon his lips and tongue were playfully battling Josh’s.

When Cam used his thumb to spread her lips, Josh did the same. They each traced opposite sides of her opening, meeting at her clit, but only glanced over it before Cam

caught Josh's mouth with his. His beard scraped over her sensitive flesh, and she squirmed beneath them, her hands molding over each man's head.

"You're tickling again. Please, guys..."

Josh chased the vague hint of Sara's juices in Cam's mouth before dipping his head to find her clit again. He lapped at her flesh until it throbbed against his lips, and then slid lower, leaving Cam to tease her with his tongue. Her hand tightened on the back of his skull, pulling his hair. He blew cool air across her flesh until she gasped and jerked her hips forward.

"I guess tickling is a little mean."

Cam nodded in agreement, the tip of his tongue drawing lazy circles over her clit.

He looked up to Sara's face, noting the high color in her cheeks and the extra shine in her eyes. "Please, guys, what?"

The rise and fall of her breasts were hypnotic, her nipples hard peaks that made his mouth water almost as much as the scent of her pussy did. "Stop teasing me," she said. "I need you. I need both of you."

"That's a lot of need," Josh said. Cam nodded again. "I guess we better stop teasing her."

He pressed the tip of his tongue against her passage, moving it in circles, licking her until she squirmed. He looked up from beneath his lashes, watching Cam, his nose pressed against her mound. As soon as Cam pulled her clit between his lips, he thrust his tongue into her.

Sara cried out, tightening her thighs around their heads. Her nails scraped into their scalps as she ground against their mouths, the sounds coming from her spurring them to bite harder, push deeper. A breathless litany of *oh God* and *more* tumbled from her lips, but even those grew unintelligible as the muscles of her legs began to quiver. Then Cam caught her clit with his teeth.

She bucked away from the bed, a fresh rush of her juices filling Josh's mouth. Her walls fluttered around his tongue, but he didn't stop, didn't retreat until after he saw Cam rest his cheek against her hip.

Josh reached for Cam's head, his hand covering Sara's as he drew the other man closer. Their lips clashed, wet and sweet, their tongues winding against each other. Josh's cock was throbbing, and he wished he had thought to unzip his pants before getting between Sara's legs. He felt too hot, and the smell of Sara's orgasm, coupled with the thrusting of Cam's tongue into his mouth, made him heady and weak.

"Gotta get out of these clothes," Josh gasped as soon as the kiss broke. "Right now."

Cam nodded without a word. As he moved off the bed, Sara rose to her knees and reached for Josh's waistband, her fingers trembling as she helped him push his pants down over his hips. Cam watched from a distance, his eyes growing darker as Sara grasped Josh's cock, and when she bent over to swipe her tongue over the wet tip, Josh moaned.

Cam stepped behind him, reaching around to unknot his tie and begin unbuttoning his shirt. Josh leaned back against Cam's solid chest as he pulled the shirt down his arms. Sara swiped her tongue over him again, and Cam's cock pressed into his thigh. Moaning, Josh dropped his head back against Cam's shoulder, knowing he wanted—needed—more than just her lips and tongue, but at the same time, unable to move.

"I want to fuck her," Cam whispered in his ear.

Josh nodded.

"While you fuck her."

"Yeah," Josh breathed.

Cam gently pulled Josh away from Sara's grasp. "You get yourself ready."

As Josh watched, Cam climbed back onto the bed, his eyes locked with Sara's. A small smile played on her mouth as he prowled forward on his knuckles and knees, but she remained in place even after he came to a stop in front of her. Bowing his head, he licked along the top of her breast, trailing his tongue upward to the hollow of her throat. Sara's eyes fluttered shut, and she coiled her arms around his back, pulling him flush against her heated body.

They were a tangle of limbs, soft against hard, tawny against tanned, and as they stretched out on the bed, Josh could only gaze at them, transfixed by their beauty. He

would live to be a hundred, and they would never cease to astound him. It was even more amazing to know how far they had come with each other in the past few months in order to be this tender with each other now.

Cam's broad hands cupped Sara's ass, guiding her until she was lying along his length. His cock was trapped between their stomachs, but when she began to roll her hips, the juices from her pussy coated the base and his balls.

Josh momentarily forgot Cam's orders to get himself ready. His mouth watered watching the two of them and he couldn't help himself. He crawled back onto the bed to kiss the back of her neck, and then licked the length of her spine to the top of her ass. He ran the tip of his tongue over the seam of her cheeks, and Cam looked over her shoulder with a smile, bending his knuckles to pull her flesh apart for his mouth.

Sara whimpered as Josh licked around her waiting pucker. For a moment, she froze, and he heard Cameron whispering something before she began to move again. Each roll of her hips was slower now, pushing back against Josh's mouth as he teased the tight opening. It was slick from where her juices had run down from her pussy, and he followed the path up and down, grazing over Cam's balls along the way.

Josh reached between their bodies, wrapping his fingers around the base of Cam's cock. He never moved his mouth away, his tongue busy on her slick flesh and Cam's heated skin, but when Sara moved back, Josh guided Cam's cock to her opening. As the tip of Cam's cock was poised to thrust into her, Josh returned to her ass, thrusting his tongue past her ring of muscle.

"Oh, God..."

Sara's cries were muffled by the sound of kissing, and Cam kept her steady as, together, he and Josh slowly pushed his cock inside her wet channel. As Josh's hand brushed against her outer lips, he slid it down to fondle Cam's balls, rolling them between his fingers, never slowing his assault on her ass.

He might have been able to ignore the pain in his groin and continue focusing on her, but Cam's soft grunts of satisfaction were just too much. He knew how it felt to have Sara clenching around his cock, all hot and sweet, writhing against his body, and he

couldn't wait another second for her. She moaned in protest as he pulled away, but Cam caught her mouth, capturing her attention while Josh reached for the lube.

Josh didn't take his eyes from them as he slicked his cock up. He was almost hypnotized by their slow, rhythmic motions. The strokes were shallow, their bodies barely moving, lifting and falling like long sighs. He positioned himself behind Sara, sliding two lubed fingers into her ass. She gasped, pushing against his hand and arching her back.

"I can't wait to be inside you," Josh said. "I can't wait to feel you."

Sara moaned, dropping her head back to look at him with wide, hungry eyes. It was the sort of look that could completely undo him, make him forget his own name. When he glanced up, Cam was watching him with the same sort of hunger, and his ass clenched. He'd have to figure out a way to get between Sara and Cam before the end of the night. There was nothing better than being surrounded by them, feeling their breath on his neck, their bodies sliding against his.

Josh put a hand on Cam's shoulder, silently telling him to pause. He slid the tip of his cock between Sara's cheeks, guiding it to her slick opening. She tensed, and he put a comforting arm around her waist, holding her as he pushed inside. Cam seemed just as tense as she did as Josh filled her, inch by careful inch.

Neither of them moved until Josh was fully seated. Sara dug her fingers into Cam's shoulders and pulled herself forward, the length of Cam's cock sliding against Josh's, separated by a thin barrier. It seemed like they all exhaled at the same time, then took a deep breath in unison. Whenever he was this close to them, his brain shut down and his body took over. Sara moved first, and they followed her lead, finding a rhythm that matched her gentle rocking.

Cam's hands went to Josh's hips, enclosing Sara, and Josh kept his arm around her. She clenched around him, and as the spirals of pleasure went from the base of his cock to his head and then echoed down to his feet, he only had one coherent thought.

"Love you so much," he sighed.

Josh looked up, catching Cam's eye. Cam smiled and mouthed the words back to him, his hands tightening on Josh's hips.

"Love...you...too..." Sara said.

Warmth poured through him, and he knew all the pain had been leading to this one perfect moment. He felt something shift within him, like the last of his fear had finally evaporated and he could just be happy—they could all just be happy. But even that thought was sent to the ether when Cam began to move faster and carried all three of them away.

About the Author

Jamie Craig is the sum of two wholes: erotica writers Pepper Espinoza and Vivien Dean. Pepper has been writing since she was a child, but began her professional writing career in 2005 and now writes full time as well as attending graduate school and working toward a Masters in British and American Literature. A former resident of Los Angeles, she now lives in Utah. Vivien, the daughter of an author and sportswriter, also began writing at an early age, but eventually explored storytelling through acting and film production before coming back to prose. Vivien, her British husband and two children live in Northern California.

To learn more about Jamie Craig, please visit www.jamie-craig.com. Send an email to Jamie at jamie@jamie-craig.com.

Look for these titles by Jamie Craig

Now Available

Liaisons in Jubilee
Craving Kismet

Desire doesn't care how settled your life is.

Craving Kismet

© 2007 Jamie Craig

Jenny Rohm thinks she has it all—a job she loves, an engagement to her high school sweetheart, a future bright with promise. Then she meets attorney Ashley Edwards and discovers desire doesn't care how settled your life might be.

It starts with a single fantasy. His. Hers. One leads to two, two leads to three, three leads to more. Fantasizing about his wicked mouth or her sinful curves doesn't satisfy either of them for long, though. The more she gets to know him, the harder Jenny finds it to deny the truths Ashley insists on exposing.

The question remains. Is it worth risking everything she has to quench the cravings? Not even Ashley can answer to that. When it comes to what she wants, only Jenny can make the choice.

Warning, this title contains the following: explicit sex, graphic language, anal sex, mild bondage.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Craving Kismet:

Ashley stood outside Jenny's apartment for several minutes, fighting with the instinct to knock on the door again. Bryan wasn't going to wake up. What harm would one kiss do? He just needed to taste her. It wasn't like he was going to fuck her on the bed next to Bryan's unconscious body.

Fuck.

He walked away from the door quickly, trying to will his erection down. Had she been able to sense how much he wanted her? Did she know that nearly every word she said sounded like an invitation to him? Had she been taunting him? Her card burned him through his pocket, and she had just seemed so very...eager.

Except, she wasn't eager. She was engaged. She was just a flirty, carefree, sweet creature who knew how to play nice. That didn't mean she wanted him to slam her

against her door and fuck her into oblivion. Even if she flirted back. Even if she offered her card. Even if she drove him to absolute distraction.

Ashley didn't know if he could make it all the way back to his apartment without shoving his hands down his pants, but he intended to give it the old college try. There was the chance that his blood would cool the farther he got away from her. Maybe he wouldn't even need to jack off by the time he got home.

That was too much unfounded optimism.

He was still hard as a rock when he opened his front door.

The table, he decided. Not the door. The table. Over the dinner she made for her fiancé, while he was passed out on the couch. And Ashley had absolutely no ulterior motives for agreeing to take Bryan home instead of just putting him in a cab.

Ashley went directly to the bathroom, shedding his shirt along the way. It would only take a few minutes, and then maybe he'd be able to concentrate on all the work he still had to do.



“And I suppose you think you know what those would be,” Jenny dared.

Ashley was certain he knew what would make her happy, what she needed. He licked his bottom lip, his tongue toying with the skin for a moment, attracting her attention. “I know *exactly* what those would be.”

Almost lazily, Jenny leaned against the counter, eyes dark and inviting as she set her beer bottle down and out of the way. “One of these days, I’m going to make you put your money where your mouth is.”

“One of these days?” Ashley stood, stretching his legs before he approached her. He walked slowly, giving her the chance to bolt if she wanted to take it. “Why not today?”

She never moved. Her eyes never wavered. “Because Bryan’s just in the next room.”

“He’s not waking up. Still...” He touched a finger to his lips. “We’ll just have to be quiet.”

When he stopped a hair's-breadth away from her, Jenny finally let her sooty lashes dip long enough to glance at his attire and lower. "I'm not really good at being quiet. Especially if you're half as good as you think you are."

"Actually, I've been quite modest." His hands went to her hips. He moved his mouth over her jaw, never quite touching the skin, as he inhaled deeply. "I'm twice that good. But..." Now his lips skimmed over the same path, a light caress. "I promise, he won't hear a thing."

Her sharp breath was audible, her subsequent exhale warm and ticklish in his ear. She didn't fight the curl of his fingers into the soft denim, but neither did she add to the embrace by lifting her arms and pressing closer. She simply stood there, absorbing the feather kisses along her jaw, her pulse pounding visibly in the hollow of her throat.

"You should stop," Jenny breathed.

"Oh, absolutely," Ashley agreed, the trail of his mouth shifting, bringing his lips closer to hers. He rotated his hips, grinding his hard cock against her, his grip on her tightening. "Make me."

"Stop." Her voice was barely a whisper, and when his mouth skimmed the corner of hers, her tongue darted out to taste him almost delicately. "I mean it."

"Okay," he sighed, before his mouth closed over hers. Her lips were inviting, welcoming, and they parted for him without hesitation. The kiss began slowly, as though he really did think she'd push him away, but soon the pure lust that had been settled low in his gut since he saw her erupted through his body, and the kiss became something harder, more demanding. She clung to his arms, her nails digging through his jacket as he spun her around, backing her up against the table.

Though she tasted faintly of garlic, the beer lent a sweet tang to her mouth as Ashley devoured her, every swipe of his tongue releasing a fresh explosion of flavor that had him hungry for more. Jenny shoved at his suit coat, until only the thin cotton of their shirts separated his hot skin from hers.

She broke from his mouth, gulping for air. "You can't kiss me forever. And if you make me come, I *will* scream."

Ashley smiled briefly at the challenge, his hands going to her pants. He worked them open with quick efficiency, his lips teasing hers in a series of hard, short kisses. His fingers dipped between her thighs, testing the dampness of her thong, and he knew she was ready for him, perhaps had been since the moment they shut themselves in her tiny kitchen.

Her hands were busy as well. With his jacket gone, Jenny worked at his shirt buttons, pulling them free so roughly that he wondered if he would lose one or two in the process. “Want to feel you.” Her nails caught on his bare stomach, scratching up his torso as she pushed the shirt out of her way. “I can’t stop thinking about you. You’re driving me fucking crazy.”

Jenny’s hurried words sent a jolt of desire right to his cock, and Ashley knew that he wasn’t going to be able to hold off. He wanted her too much; his need was almost palpable between them. He could almost taste it. He kissed her fiercely before turning her around, his hand moving between her legs to spread them apart. She put her hands flat on the table, looking over her shoulder at him with naked longing.

“Are you *trying* to let Bryan know what’s going on between us?” she taunted.

Ashley shook his head and tapped his lips again. “Shh.” He unzipped his pants, pulling himself out of the constricting material and guiding the head of his cock to her wet heat. Jenny didn’t look away as he slid into her, slow, measured, filling her an inch at a time. He didn’t want to force a gasp or yelp out of her. Ashley saw the strain on her face as she bit back the moan and knew it was a mere reflection of his own efforts.

On a frigid winter night, vengeance is what he seeks. A love strong enough to melt the ice surrounding his battered heart is what he finds.

Shameful

© 2007 Amanda Young

Second book in MIA series.

After six years of forced exile and servitude, Shamus Long is finally going home. A grisly discovery upon his arrival plummets Shame into a world of darkness and vengeance that threatens to consume him.

With single-minded purpose, Shame tracks down the Master Vampire responsible for ordering the hit on his family. Upon his arrival, a vicious snow squall postpones his attack on the murderous cartel, forcing him to seek refuge in a small motel on the edge of town to wait out the storm.

There he meets Gail, a shy loner working the night shift. Instant chemistry and a power outage throw them into one another's arms for a night of scorching passion. When Ty, a man accompanying him, with his own retribution to deliver unto the supernaturals, disappears, Shame grows paranoid and seeks anonymity by following Gail home.

Hot nights of blistering lovemaking, while he continues the search for both the cartel and the man he has grown to consider a friend, put Shame on edge and leave him feeling emotions he refuses to accept.

All of Shame's secrets come to light when he's forced to involve Gail. What he doesn't know is Gail has secrets of her own. Secrets strong enough to rock the very foundation of his beliefs and threaten not only his bruised heart, but his very life.

Warning, this title contains the following: explicit sex, graphic language, and violence.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Shameful:

Gail pattered around in the kitchen, trying to figure out what she could cook for Shame. There wasn't much in the fridge and besides that, she had no idea what the man even liked. Staring blankly into the half-empty cupboard, she wondered what was taking

him so long in the bedroom. She'd been standing in the kitchen waiting on him for a good ten minutes. It would be easier for her to figure out what to make if she could ask him about his likes and dislikes.

Impatient, Gail turned to go find him, only to see him standing in the doorway, lean hip propped against the wall and one leg casually draped over the other. His chest was gloriously bare above tight, faded blue jeans and though he'd taken the time to pull them on, he'd left them unbuttoned, allowing her a tantalizing glimpse of soft skin beneath his ridged abs. When she finally forced her gaze up to his face, she realized he was staring at her with a weird expression on his handsome face, as if she had snot running out of her nose or something.

"What?" Gail asked, her hand flying to cover the lower portion of her face, worried that maybe she really did have a booger showing.

Shame smiled, twin dimples popping out on either side of his full, supple lips. "Nothing. I was just watching you. Has anyone ever told you that you look damn cute when you're concentrating on something? You start gnawing on your bottom lip and you get this adorable little wrinkle in the middle of your forehead."

She felt her face morph into a scowl but her brain was doing a happy dance. He thought she was adorable. "Um, thanks," she muttered, not knowing what else to say. Compliments always made her uncomfortable. She'd never quite mastered the art of accepting one gracefully. "So," she said, changing the subject. "What do you like?" She pulled open the fridge and stared at the meager contents for the umpteenth time. "I can do omelets. Would that be—?"

Hard, muscular arms snaked around her waist and yanked her back against Shame's rock-solid chest. Impossibly, she felt a renewed erection pressing against her bottom through the thick fabric of her robe. Though she knew full well what he was up to, she asked anyway. "What are you doing?"

Soft lips brushed over the curve of her shoulder. "You asked me what I was in the mood for." His hands toyed with the belt around her waist, untying it. One calloused palm slipped inside to cup her breast, manipulating her nipple.

With a sigh, she leaned into him, the back of her head coming to rest on his shoulder. “I guess I should have been more clear about what was on the menu.”

He squeezed her nipple, sending a bolt of heat to her core. “I’m glad you didn’t.”

“Me too,” she whispered, before twisting and wrapping her arms around his neck. She stretched up to kiss him. As her lips pressed to his, his stomach growled loudly, reminding her why they’d come into the kitchen to begin with. She snickered. “You want to rethink skipping dinner?”

Shame smiled, his eyes twinkling down at her. “Yeah, maybe eating first isn’t such a bad idea after all.” He let her go and stepped back. “Do you need help with anything?”

She turned away and opened the fridge before she gave in to her body’s demand that she jump back into his arms to insist he finish what he’d started. “Sure. You any good with a grater? You can grate cheese and crack the eggs, while I cut up some veggies.”

“I’ve never used one, but I’ll give it a shot, as long as you don’t mind if I accidentally grate some of my fingers in with the cheese.”

Gail laughed and began to pull out the ingredients they would need for the omelets. With her arms laden down, she turned back to him and handed him the carton of eggs. “Why do you think I don’t want to do it?”

Shame accepted the eggs and carried them over to the table where she’d set out a bowl and the cheese grater. With his back turned, she noticed another small tattoo on his left shoulder blade. It was a little pink teddy bear. Across its chubby tummy, the name Sophie was written in cursive.

“Who’s Sophie?” she blurted out before she could think better of it.

Shame’s spine stiffened and she didn’t need for him to turn around and show her his face to know the polite mask of barely leashed civility had slipped over his features. She bit into her lip, cursing herself for asking. Gail resolved to change the subject before he said something to ruin her good mood. Like for her to mind her own business. She turned away from him and busied herself with chopping vegetables. “I hope you like mushrooms. I always have to have a lot of mushrooms and cheese in mine. It just doesn’t seem like an omelet without them.” *Could she sound any more lame?*

After several tense moments, during which time she grew sure he wasn't ever going to speak to her again, he finally broke the silence. "Whatever you want to throw in is fine with me. I'm not all that picky about what I eat."

The rest of their late-night meal was prepared in virtual silence, only the banging of implements and the hiss of butter on the skillet to fill the quiet void. It wasn't until they sat across the table from each other, no longer busy, that the silence began to grow uncomfortable.

Frantically, she racked her brain, trying to come up with some menial small talk to fill in the chasm growing ever larger between them by the second. Thinking of things to say to him shouldn't have been so hard. She imagined that if they had gone about things the normal way—forced themselves through an awkward couple of dates before they'd jumped into bed together—then it wouldn't take such a stretch of the imagination to come up with something to talk about.

Though she'd been more intimate with him than any other, she found herself at an intellectual loss for conversation. The little details one usually knew about someone they'd slept with were missing. While she knew all about his body, his sexual wants and needs, she didn't know the first thing about his life. And judging by his reaction to her asking about his tattoo, he didn't want to share any of those details with her.

For longer than she can remember, Veronica has been wolf. Dreams give her a name and the image of a brother. Memory gives her nothing and no one.

The Strength of the Wolf

© 2007 Jorrie Spencer

One late winter day, David Hardway saves a malnourished wolf from a trap and takes her in. During her time with David, the wolf finds in herself the desire to be human again.

David loves the wolf he saved, but dislikes the strange woman who asks for his help. Still, he is incapable of turning away someone in need and, despite himself, David becomes intrigued. As Veronica strives to remember why she abandoned humanity for wolfdom, David becomes determined to save her from her violent past.

But others are in danger and Veronica will have to act to protect her newfound pack.

Enjoy the following excerpt for The Strength of the Wolf:

She sat forward and he realized she was nude. “The knife scared me.”

He reached for her scored side, touching the scars gently.

“Why would he knife me?” she asked. “Because I wouldn’t sleep with him?”

“Oh, babe, I don’t know.”

She came forward then, wrapping her arms around his neck, and kissed him full on the mouth. He responded to the hum of her skin, the urgency underneath, and the kiss went long and deep. She broke off to pull his shirt over his head and explore his skin with her mouth, teeth and tongue. Her touch was expert, his body sang in reaction, and yet he could feel her speed up when he needed them to slow down. He touched her arms, the scars, the long, narrow spine that ran down her back.

“So beautiful,” he murmured. A weight lifted off him as she became his total focus. He pulled her to him so he could kiss her mouth again, the intimacy entrancing him with her sweet taste and her eagerness. Joy even. They sat chest to chest, tongues entwined. One hand captured her lovely breast.

He tried to keep her there at foreplay and touch, where she didn't tense up with fear, but the pressure was building, and not just within her. Still, her pliant body could, he knew from past experience, stiffen to shatter. He wanted soft and slow, and he didn't want their mutual need to break the spell they'd woven.

She pushed against him, depriving him of her touch while she pulled his boxers down. As he shifted to help her, the seductive haze was broken by David's memory of the other time they had gotten naked together, when they had moved too quickly.

He caught her wrists in one hand.

"What?" she demanded a little wildly.

"What are you doing?"

"What do you mean?"

"Why so fast?"

"This is fast?" Her bewilderment added tension to her body and he worked to ease it, skimming a hand over her side and back, lightly running a palm over the cleft of her buttocks to see if that calmed or unnerved her.

She seemed to be at a loss for words. With her wrists still trapped, he leaned forward and kissed her, closed-mouth, tender. She began to pant.

"Hey." He released her and pulled her into a hug. She liked hugs and kisses. He knew that. Maybe this was where they should begin and end. He hoped to manage that without too much frustration.

She was shivering in his arms. "I want to make love with you," she said through gritted teeth.

A part of him was gratified by her intensity. But he needed the sex to finish well.

She pushed at him. "*David.*"

He rested a hand on the inside of her thigh and she looked down at it. His fingers brushed the fold between her thigh and pubis, stroking closer. She jumped when he touched her clit.

"Yes," she said, but faltering.

"Okay, but let's wait until you're wet." With some relief he understood kissing and hugging was not going to be enough for Veronica either.

He kept his fingers there, circling the sensitive skin, coming back to her clit, and she gasped.

“Should I stop?” he asked.

“No.”

He leaned her back and trailed kisses down her neck and breast until he caught her nipple between his teeth. She jumped again. He kissed the nipple in apology, then spoke.

“No?”

“Yes.” She was panting again, but not the tense, tight pants of earlier.

He continued.

“It’s just, David,” she began.

He made an encouraging sound.

“I’d forgotten,” she blurted.

He stopped teasing the nipple but didn’t remove his fingers from her sex. She was softening under his touch, getting ready to ride his hand.

He leaned his forehead against hers. “What did you forget?”

“What this is like.”

“Tell me,” he murmured.

“The heat, spreading outwards, the, uh, feeling hazy good. Do you know what I mean?”

“Maybe,” he teased.

“I can’t explain. Especially right now.” She arched and moaned. An orgasm, perhaps, but not an intense one. Still, that was good, very good.

She came back to him. “I’ve missed it.” She kissed him hungrily, some of her desperation coming back, but not out of control. He was more comfortable with her, too. He no longer feared he would lose her along the way. Her hands roamed his skin, exploring with less urgency and more wonder.

She gripped his cock, one thumb circling the glans expertly and he almost said, *You’ve done this before*, then censored himself. There was open and there was too complicated for the moment.

She broke away, smiling. “You’re wet, too.”

“Uh, yeah.” With the pressure building again, he didn’t know how well he was going to control this wave.

“I was worried you didn’t want me.”

“That is not something you have to worry about.”

He reached for a condom. As he ripped open the package, she stared down, biting her lip as he rolled it on.

“I’d forgotten this, too.”

“So I gathered. But you’ve remembered a few things,” he added appreciatively.

She looked pleased.

He caught her chin in his hand. “Are you ready?”

She pushed him down and climbed on top. He hadn’t actually wanted the same position as last time, but perhaps she was most comfortable this way. At least he would be able to hold on past entry this time.

She slid down his length and he groaned, no longer able to think about anything except this connection. Placing her feet on either side of his thighs, she settled into a crouch. She rode him, hard and fast, overwhelming everything but the rising need of his cock. Her hands pressed down on his chest and she breathed quickly, too quickly. He broke the enchantment by pulling her down to him so she lay on his chest.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

He nibbled her earlobe. “You’re wonderful.”

“Then why did you stop me?”

“Just a coffee break.”

She laughed, the note a little high. “I don’t understand.”

“Did you like that?”

“I like not thinking,” she admitted. She kissed his shoulder. “Is that bad? Did you like it?”

“No. Yes.”

“Oh good,” she said with clear relief. “I thought I’d had it wrong.”

“No.” He was emphatic. “There are many rights. I thought I’d try another.”

They kissed for quite some time. He moved beneath her, kissing her, one hand on the back of her nape so she couldn't get away. The lovemaking was slow and languorous, exactly how he wanted it. An appreciation. Then the tension built and she pushed up again.

SAMHAIN PUBLISHING, LTD.

It's all about the story...

Action/Adventure
Fantasy
Historical
Horror
Mainstream
Mystery/Suspense
Non-Fiction
Paranormal
Red Hots!
Romance
Science Fiction
Western
Young Adult

www.samhainpublishing.com