



# Secrets of the Dragon's Heart (Mysteries of Dragon's Island #6)

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** He's hiding a dangerous secret. She's determined to uncover it. But love was never part of the plan.

Cameron Sullivan is desperate to escape his fate as the next leader of his dragon shifter clan. Retreating to a tropical island, he hopes to focus on his DNA research and avoid the magical pull of destiny. But when investigative journalist Kennedy Fisher crosses his path, his carefully guarded world begins to crumble.

Kennedy needs the perfect scoop to save her career, and Cameron's mysterious life is the story of a lifetime. But her quest for the truth becomes complicated when sparks fly between them. Determined to stay professional, Kennedy tries to ignore her growing feelings—even as Cameron's undeniable charm and protective nature make that impossible.

As danger brews and secrets unravel, Cameron and Kennedy must decide: Will they risk everything to protect their hearts, or will their love become the key to overcoming the forces that threaten to tear them apart?

**Total Pages (Source):** 24

## PROLOGUE

Max sat staring out at the ocean in the darkness, stars glimmering in the sky above his head, the moon slowly beginning to rise over the water, but he didn't see any of the beauty of his island home; he was lost in a funk of self-doubt and confusion. His dream of running a successful island resort had come true, but he could no longer ignore all the strange, wonderful, and, at times, slightly frightening things that had been happening over the last few months. It appeared as if trouble seemed to find its way to the island, especially where his friends were concerned, and he was both excited and wary about Cameron coming to the island.

One by one, his oldest and closest friends had come to visit, and one by one, they'd had strange experiences that couldn't be explained that resulted in each of them falling in love and getting married, three of them right there on the island. He'd done his best to deny, explain away, and ignore all the unexpected things that had happened until recently, when he'd been forced to admit that something was going on with the island. If that wasn't bad enough, he was going to have to admit to Mateo, the appointed guardian of the island, that he'd been right, that the island was special.

Of course, that's as far as he planned to go. He wasn't going to admit that building the resort had been a bad idea, and he wasn't going to give Mateo that much satisfaction. Nothing truly terrible had happened to any of his friends. In fact, all of them would say that the island was a wonderful place. A few might even, at this point, say that the island saved their lives.

Letting out a long sigh, he started to get to his feet, but then saw a long figure walking down the beach toward him. "You're up late." Mateo said, sinking down

next to him on the sand. “I thought you’d already be in bed. Isn’t your friend Cameron due to arrive tomorrow?”

“Yeah, and I guess that’s what’s got me worried,” he said, then looked over at Mateo. “I’ve been thinking about telling him not to come, not with the way things have been going around here.”

Mateo’s face looked surprised. “Are you finally ready to admit that I was right?” he asked. “This island has a mind of its own. It affects people and their lives. You never should have built the resort here.”

He was silent for a second. “I might be ready to agree that the island is special,” he said. “But I still think the resort was a good idea. I just don’t know if my friends should visit anymore. Haven’t you noticed all the strange things only happen to them and no one else?”

“That little fact had crossed my mind,” Mateo said, then looked over at him. “I find it utterly fascinating, I just wish I could figure out what the connection between all of you is. I don’t think it’s your friendship, as close as you all seem, I don’t think that’s enough. There has to be something else, something more we haven’t figured out.”

Max had a pretty good idea what that something was, but he wasn’t about to tell Mateo their secret; he couldn’t tell a regular human what he and his friends could do. “Well, I wish I knew,” he said with a big sigh. “It’s probably too late to tell Cameron not to come, and he probably wouldn’t listen anyway. He’s convinced everything that’s been happening can be explained by science.”

Mateo snorted. “He may have a big surprise coming then,” he said. “But at least he’s been warned.”

“A lot of good that will do. There’s nothing I can do now but hope that Cameron’s

visit is nice and quiet, that the island behaves itself,” he said, getting to his feet and dusting the sand off his shorts. “I think I’ll try to get some sleep, but you should do the same.”

### CHAPTER 1

Cameron walked down the dock in Bermuda, barely noticing the warm breeze blowing in from the ocean or the crystal blue water. Instead, all he could think about was his friend Max and his sudden change in attitude, a shocking turn of events that left him not only exasperated, but wondering what had gotten into his friend to make him suddenly lose control of his ability to reason.

Besides himself, Max had always been the most rational of their little group, the one most likely to discard any idea of the paranormal, superstition, or magic, and believed just as he did that their abilities streamed from something in their DNA. He was always the first in any discussion to refute the old legends, the first to argue that science was the only explanation for what they were capable of doing. The eight of them had spent many a long night locked away in the house they shared during college, arguing the origins of their gift, and while they'd never been able to agree, he and Max had always been on the same side.

Now, he wasn't so sure. The last phone call he'd had with Max had been alarming. He seemed like a changed man, a bit unhinged, if he was being totally honest. He went off about native tribes taking over the islands, Simon turning ugly, a gangster finding his way ashore, and a long story about Archie having a shared dream with a woman. His friend had been rambling the whole time, making little sense, and he was truly worried about him.

Of course, Max's little...breakdown couldn't have come at a worse time. He was so close to a breakthrough he could almost taste his victory, so close to finally showing his father what he'd been telling him for years. Then he'd be free, the only thing he'd

wanted since the day he realized that his life wasn't his own, that clan loyalty and a debt to his parents that he could never repay would rule his life. Taking a deep breath and pushing away the panic that started to form in the pit of his stomach at the thought of what his life would become if he didn't prove that the ability to shift was nothing more than a few slight alterations in their DNA.

Forcing himself not to think about his problems, he turned his thoughts back to Max. He was here to help his friend, here to talk some sense into him. Islands didn't affect people's lives. They didn't make them fall in love; it was just a piece of land, not a living, breathing thing. The whole idea was crazy, and he intended to make sure that Max was back to his usual rational self before the two weeks he was supposed to stay were up, even if he had to beat it into him.

He realized with a start that he'd reached the slip where he was supposed to meet the boat that would take him to the island and looked behind him, wondering how he'd found his way there. It wasn't the first time something like that had happened to him; he often found himself somewhere with little memory of how he got there and admonished himself for letting it happen again.

"Hey there, you must be Cameron," a man said, stepping off the boat. "I'm Montgomery, your captain for the day. Come on aboard. Do you need some help with your bags?"

He'd packed light for the trip since socializing wasn't on his agenda. "No, I'm good. I just have this one suitcase and my computer bag," he said, jumping on board. "I'd like to stow it down below if possible just in case. I don't want my computer getting wet."

"Sure, no problem," Montgomery said. "We won't be taking off for a few minutes. We're waiting on another guest, and she's running a little late."

“Oh, I hope it won’t be long,” he said, a bit disappointed. “I’m anxious to see Max. He hasn’t seemed himself lately, he’s been...”

He let his words trail off, realizing that he was talking to one of Max’s employees, but the man didn’t miss a beat. “The island changes people,” he said, shrugging his shoulders. “Usually for the best, so I wouldn’t worry too much.”

The man’s words surprised him, then made him curious, but before he could open his mouth, a woman came hurrying down the dock toward them. The question he was about to ask faded from his brain as a strange feeling slowly spread through him, and he could only stand there and stare at her. The woman stopped next to the boat, a big smile on her face, her hair a riot of blonde curls that framed her face and showed off a pair of blue eyes the same color as the sea around them.

Slightly breathless, he didn’t move as she threw her bags onto the deck, then jumped on like she’d spent her life on boats. When she sat down across from him, she gave him a big smile. “Isn’t this amazing,” she said, her voice bubbly. “I’m so excited to be here. I’ve heard so much about the island. I was so ready for a vacation. It’s been forever since I’ve been able to get away, and of course, I’ve never been to any place like Heart of the Ocean. My vacations usually involve a trip to the lake a few miles from home.”

The woman had stopped talking and was looking at him expectantly, but he discovered that he wasn’t capable of speech, thanks to the attraction that suddenly flooded his system. Having never reacted to a woman the way he was right at that moment, he had no idea how to shut down the desire that was racing through him, making his body begin to tingle and tighten.

Knowing that he had to get control of himself and say something, he took a deep breath and blurted out the first thing that popped into his head. “My friend Max owns the resort,” he said. “He thinks it makes people fall in love.”

The woman stared at him for a second, then burst out laughing, surprising him. “If that was a pick-up line,” she finally said, “you really need to work on it.”

\*\*\*Kennedy\*\*\*

The shocked and panicked look on Cameron Sullivan’s face told Kennedy that she might have gone too far, and she took a deep breath, trying to think of a way to salvage the conversation. “I didn’t...that wasn’t what I...I’m not...” he stammered before she could say anything. “That wasn’t a pick-up line. I shouldn’t have said that.”

Frantically trying to think of something to say, Kennedy forced herself to stay calm and ignored the voice in her head telling her not to screw up this opportunity. Stumbling into Cameron on the way to the island was the perfect opportunity to get close to him; she just hadn’t expected it, and it had thrown her for a loop. It also didn’t help that the same attraction she’d felt the first time she’d seen him was slowly coming to life, leaving her slightly breathless and her body tingling. But she was a professional. She could control her baser instincts and cool the flames of the desire for the story that would earn her the respect she deserved after all her years of hard work.

“I’m sorry, I was just joking,” she said, trying to look embarrassed. “I guess it wasn’t a very good joke. I’m a little nervous. I’ve never been anywhere like this before.”

A look of relief appeared on Cameron’s face. “That’s okay,” he said, shrugging his shoulders, clearly still a little uncomfortable. “I just didn’t want you to think I was that kind of guy.”

How sweet, she thought to herself as a wave of warmth washed over her, then inwardly cringed when she realized what was happening. You’re not supposed to like him. He’s the bad guy, she reminded herself. He’s doing something illegal behind the



closed doors of his lab. This is the break you've been looking for. Your instincts have never been wrong before; don't let your hormones derail you, there may never be another opportunity like this again.

"How about we start over?" she asked, sticking out her hand. "I'm Kennedy Fisher. I'm from a small town just outside of Milwaukee, and I won this trip on a game show."

"Cameron Sullivan, I'm here to visit my friend Max," he said. "It's nice to meet you. I hope you enjoy your stay on the island."

"It's definitely going to be the trip of a lifetime. I can't wait to get there. I've heard so much about the island," she said, then looked over her shoulder at Montgomery before leaning closer to Cameron. "I heard some rumors about the island last night at my hotel. Did Max really say that people fall in love when they come to the island? It can't really be true; I mean, it's probably just a rumor to get people to visit, right?"

"I couldn't really say, not until I see the island for myself," Cameron said, shaking his head. "But I very much doubt any of the rumors you heard are true. However, I can also assure you that Max didn't start them to get people to come to the island; the resort is doing quite well already."

"I didn't mean...oh, dear, I did it again," she said, shaking her head. "I wasn't trying to say that your friend's resort needed help or anything, I was just curious about what I heard."

"I didn't think that," Cameron said, shaking his head. "I'm a man of science, Ms. Fisher. Rumors and superstition don't affect me."

"Oh, well, okay," she said. "I understand, I'm glad I didn't insult your friend. After all, it is his island I'm going to visit, it wouldn't do to insult him. I won't say

anything about the rumors, so don't worry about that. I know when to keep my mouth shut."

"I'm sure Max will be relieved to hear that," Cameron said, a little smile on his face. "He's got enough problems keeping people off the island as it is."

"Oh, really?" she asked, her reporter's instincts kicking in. "I'd love to hear about it."

Cameron looked like he wanted to slap his hand over his mouth, but before he could answer, Montgomery turned to them. "There she is," he called. "Heart of the Ocean."

She turned and gasped at the sight of the island, thinking the only way to describe it was a tropical paradise. She forgot about Cameron as they slowly motored up to the dock. Pristine white sand beaches stretched as far as she could see, and the dense green of the jungle was such a striking contrast that it took her a few seconds to spot the little village in a clearing just in front of them.

The group of huts surrounded an eating area covered by a bright canopy, and as she continued to scan the shore, she realized the roofs of cabins could be seen through the dense growth of trees. As the boat gently bumped into the birth, the smell of food reached her, and her stomach began to growl, reminding her that she'd missed breakfast. When the boat was tightly secured, Montgomery helped her with her bags, and she stood on the dock for a moment, taking it all in for a second time, trying to remember that this wasn't really a vacation. She was here to work.

"Well, it was nice to meet you," Cameron said. "I'm supposed to meet Max in the village. He's probably already waiting for me."

Her instincts told her not to let him go so easily. "Maybe we could meet for coffee sometime," she said. "Not like a date or anything, just two friends meeting up for some conversation. After all, it looks like we're both here alone."

“Oh, I don’t know...I should really meet up with Max before I make any plans,” Cameron said, backing away from her. “I’m sure we’ll run into each other while we’re here.”

He turned and practically ran up the dock. Before she could follow him, a young woman approached her, a big smile on her face. “You must be Kennedy,” she said. I’m Stephanie. I’ll be your host while you’re here. If you need anything, I’m the one to ask. If you’re ready, I’ll show you around the island and then help you get settled in your cabin.”

She smiled at the young woman. “Sounds great to me,” she said. “Do you think we could grab something to eat? I missed breakfast, and I’m starving.”

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*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 7:28 am*

### CHAPTER 2

\*\*\*CAMERON\*\*\*

Cameron could feel Kennedy's eyes following him up the dock but he didn't slow his pace, so desperate to get away from her, he didn't care if it looked like he was running away, and the truth was that's exactly what he was doing. The last thing he'd expected out of the day was to find himself attracted to a woman, especially one like Kennedy, not that there was anything wrong with her. She just wasn't his type, or at least he didn't think she was, not that it mattered. He wasn't looking to get involved with anyone, he was here to help Max.

Pushing the pretty blonde out of his mind, he took a deep breath, relieved to find that his equilibrium had returned and he felt completely normal. It must have just been the excitement of the trip, he decided. It was a one-time reaction, completely normal for most men, if not for him, and he shouldn't be too concerned. Feeling even better, he finally looked around him, surprised to find he was almost to shore, then spotted Max waiting for him on the beach.

Hurrying just a little more, he studied his friend, noticing the dark circles under his eyes, the faint lines of stress on his face, and a look he could only describe as resignation. It disappeared a second later when a smile spread across Max's face. "I can't believe that you're really here," he said. "I never thought I'd be able to drag you away from the lab of yours."

"You're about the only thing that could," he said, studying Max again. "After our last phone call, I had to come. You didn't sound like yourself, my friend."

Max's smile faded, and he shook his head. "I don't want to talk about that right now," he said. "You just got here. Let me give you a tour of the island, and then we can have some lunch. Keith and Stella are coming to dinner tonight, so it will keep until then. This is supposed to be your vacation. I didn't invite you here to solve my problems."

"That's what friends are for, Max," he said. "I really think we should talk about it now..."

"Nonsense, you just got here," Max said, grabbing his bags. There's an ocean out there, in case you missed it. We're not going to talk about anything but you enjoying the island for a few hours before dinner."

Max was already striding up the beach toward the village, and he was forced to follow him or get left behind. "I do have some work I could do," he said, catching up. "I hope you have a reliable internet connection. I'm expecting some results from a bank of tests in the next couple of days...I'll need to review them to decide what my next step is, and I..."

He stopped talking when he realized that Max was standing behind him, his face filled with a mixture of anger and annoyance. "Which one of these is your computer?" he asked, holding up both bags.

"That one," he said, pointing to the larger of the two, suddenly suspicious. "Why do you want to know?"

"You are not going to spend your time here working," Max said, putting the computer bag over his shoulder, then handing him the other one. "I'll be keeping this until you leave. If you want to contact your lab, you'll have to use the computers in the clubhouse like everyone else."

“You can’t do that,” he said, lunging for the bag, feeling a little desperate. “I have to keep working. You know how important it is, and I’m almost there. I’m going to get it this time, I just know it.”

Max studied him for a second. “You need a vacation, Cameron. You’ve been at this for years without a break,” he said. I know how important this is to you, but you’ve been saying that for a year. A few weeks won’t make any difference, and who knows, maybe getting a little distance will help.”

He opened his mouth to argue, then closed it again, knowing all too well that Max wasn’t going to change his mind by the stubborn look on his face. “You’re not going to back down,” he finally said. “But I would like to point out that I came here to help you. I don’t suppose that will make any difference.”

“Nope, not a bit,” Max said, shaking his head. “You need some island time, my friend, and I’m going to make sure you get it.”

“Then could I suggest a compromise,” he said, knowing he’d been beaten. “I get two hours a day on my computer, more if there’s a major breakthrough.”

Max considered that for a second. “Fair enough, two hours a day,” he said, handing over the bag. “And don’t think about cheating. My cabin and the clubhouse are the only places on the island where you can get internet.”

He let out a long sigh. “And what exactly am I supposed to do the rest of the time?” he asked. “I’m not the outdoors type, and you know it.”

“I have no idea,” Max said, shrugging his shoulders. But I’m sure you’ll find something to occupy your time. You might try just relaxing for a change. There are plenty of fun activities to do, such as sailing, snorkeling, fishing, and miles of hiking trails. Give something a try; you might be surprised.”

“Fine,” he said, sighing again. “Sign me up. Anything is better than sitting around worrying what’s going on back in the lab.”

“Well, that isn’t exactly the attitude I was hoping for, but I guess it’s a start,” Max said, slapping him on the back. “I think we’ll start with a sailing lesson. I’ll book you with Montgomery, he’s the best I’ve got.”

\*\*\*Kennedy\*\*\*

Kennedy stood on the porch of her little cabin, watching the colorful birds frolicking in the trees, completely charmed by everything around her and wishing that she was really there for a vacation. The resort was more than she could have imagined with its adorable little village, cabins suspended in the trees, and the miles of white sand beaches, and she hoped she’d have some time to explore while she was there.

But the story came first she thought, pushing herself away from the railing, and going inside to get to work. Her editor, a tough no nonsense kind of man, already had misgivings about her being here. She had to get something going and quick. After setting herself up on the little desk shoved into one corner of the room, she turned on her computer, then signed into the satellite connection that had cost the paper a small fortune.

When the computer was ready, she sat staring at it for a second, working up the courage to do what she planned, then began typing, trying not to feel guilty about hacking into the resort computer system. Telling herself that she was only looking for information she could get from the staff with a little work, she found a way through the sadly pathetic security program. A few minutes later, she had exactly what she needed, and a smile slowly spread across her face when she saw that she would be taking a sailing lesson with Cameron in the morning.

After adding her name to the roster for the next morning, she wrote down the rest of

Cameron's schedule and his cabin number and then, hoping she hadn't left very much of a footprint, logged off. Looking up at the clock, she quickly calculated the time difference, then grabbed her phone and punched in Steve's number, hoping her editor wasn't already in bed. When he answered on the third ring with a growl, she winced, but he'd been the one who had demanded a daily update.

"I told you to email me," Steve grumbled. "Do you have any idea what time it is here?"

"I know it's late, but I wanted to let you know things are going really well. I've already made contact with Cameron," she said. "We were on the same boat on the way to the island, and I've got a sailing lesson with him tomorrow."

"A sailing lesson, huh," Steve said slowly, "sounds more like a vacation than work to me, or maybe a date, could be that too."

"It's not a date. He doesn't even know we're taking the lesson together," she defended herself. "I hacked into the resort computer. I know where he's going to be for the next few days, and I plan to be right there. I'll get him to open up to me, one way or another, and if it takes pretending to like him, then that's what I'll do. I'm going to get this story, Steve, and it's going to be big; that man is up to no good, and I'm going to expose him."

"I'm going to be honest with you, Kennedy, I'm not sure there's a story there," he said. "But I went out on a limb for you, so I hope that I'm wrong. This little trip is costing the paper a fortune, so you'd better come up with something, or we'll both be out of a job."

"I know what you think, Steve, and I know what you're risking for me, but I promise you, there's a story here, and I'm going to find it," she said, then hesitated. "I did stumble across something else a bit interesting while I've been here. I don't know if



it's enough for a story, but it's got me intrigued."

"I'm listening," Steve said. "Maybe we can salvage something out of this if the Cameron Sullivan angle goes south."

She hesitated again, feeling a bit silly, "Well, I've been hearing all these rumors about the island, some believable, some not so much," she said. "People are saying that the island makes people fall in love and then tests that love. I've heard a few crazy stories about people changing their appearance, the jungle coming to life, and...well, dragons flying through the air. Some of my sources were a bit questionable, so I don't know how reliable they are..."

"Follow up on it," Steve said. "Work both of the angles, and we might just survive this insanity of yours. Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to get back to sleep. Email me next time instead of calling."

The line went dead before she could say a word, and she disconnected the call, frustrated that she'd have to divide her time between the two stories. Human interest wasn't her spatiality. She wasn't good at the tears and smile journalism it required, she liked hard facts, digging for the truth and Steve knew it. He was just punishing her for making him go out on a limb for her, but she knew deep down that Cameron was up to something. She felt it every time she saw him. A fluttering in her gut, a sense that there was more to the man that he wanted the world to see, and she was going to find out what that something was.

She'd follow up on the other story if there was time. Steve would just have to be happy with that, she thought, snapping her computer shut. Cameron Sullivan was her target, and she'd get her first shot at him in the morning. Until then, there was nothing she could do. Looking around the cabin, she decided there was no reason she had to hang around the cabin all day; there was an island out there waiting to be explored, and there was nothing wrong with having a little fun while she was working

on the story.

Grabbing her bathing suit out of her suitcase, she quickly changed, then grabbed a towel off the stack in the bathroom and headed for the beach. She climbed down the ladder from the cabin, feeling optimistic that she might run into Cameron. It might happen again, and this time she'd be prepared. If not, she'd spend a few hours enjoying the beach, then see what she could dig up about the rumors she'd been hearing just to make Steve happy and herself not feel quite as guilty.

### CHAPTER 3

\*\*\*CAMERON\*\*\*

Still annoyed that Max hadn't warned him that he would be out of communication for most of his trip to the island, Cameron stomped across the sand, looking for a place in the shade to set up his chair. The idea of spending the rest of the afternoon hanging out at the beach wasn't very appealing to him, but Max hadn't really given him much choice since it was that or hiking around in the jungle. Setting up his beach chair, he tried to tamp down the frustration that was slowly building inside him when he thought about all the wasted hours, time that could have been spent working on his latest battery of results.

Positioning the cooler that he'd picked up in the village next to his chair, he sat down with a loud sigh, then dug around inside for something cold to drink before looking up and down the beach. There were several couples and a family spread out on the white sand. They all seemed to be enjoying their time in the water, and he felt a little pang of jealousy that something so simple could bring them so much joy.

He wondered for a few minutes what it would be like to live a different life, a life that left him free to be himself, to make his own decisions. It wasn't that he didn't appreciate all that he'd been given, he knew how lucky he was, how hard other people struggled just to have the basics, but he would have gladly given it all up to have his freedom. Letting out another long sigh, he forced himself not to think about what he couldn't have. He was in a beautiful place, and he should at least try to relax.

Taking a deep breath, then letting it out slowly, he watched the waves rolling up on

the shore, and to his surprise, he felt his tense muscles begin to loosen. A breeze off the ocean rolled over him, bringing with it the fresh scent of salt, and the trees above him began to rustle, adding their own scent to the air. Wondering if Max might have been right, he sat, letting nature work its magic on him for a long time, sipping his drink and entertaining himself by watching the people around him.

He was just thinking about closing his eyes and taking a nap when a figure walking down the beach toward him caught his attention, and a little thrill shot through him. Sitting up straighter, he watched as the woman got closer, his heart pounding just a bit harder with each step she took, his stomach beginning to churn uncomfortably when he realized that it was Kennedy Fisher. His first instinct was to run, and he started to get up from his chair, then realized that she hadn't seen him yet and sank back down, slouching a little, hoping she wouldn't look over.

To his relief, Kennedy was staring at the water, a happy smile on her face as she stepped into the waves up to her ankles, then retreated with a little squeal when a big wave washed up on the shore. Relief slowly began to change into desire as he watched her strip off the shorts and top she'd been wearing to reveal a bikini that left little to his imagination. Cursing the woman for showing up just when he was beginning to relax, he sat there watching her, unable to look away. The magic inside him was making his body tingle as it slowly came to life.

Even more alarmed, he closed his eyes and took deep breaths, willing his body to calm down, telling the creature inside him to go back to sleep, but it did little good, and when he opened his eyes, his reaction to the blonde beauty was even stronger. It didn't help that she was splashing around in the waves, her body glistening with water droplets, a look of pure pleasure on her face. To his horror, his body began to throb with need, and he forced himself to look away.

On one level he understood what he was feeling; knew that animal instinct had taken over, but that didn't stop the panic slowly spreading through him. He'd never reacted

to a woman the way he was to Kennedy, and he didn't know how to stop it, let alone control it, and retreat seemed like the only option at that point.

Getting to his feet, he folded up his chair, grabbed the cooler, and, with a determined stride, headed back toward the beach, hoping Kennedy would keep her back turned so he could make his escape. He wasn't that lucky. Only a second later, she turned and spotted him, a big smile spreading across her face, and she waved to him. Frozen for a second, he could only stare at her, then to his shock and horror, his feet started to move toward her, and only a few steps later, he was standing just a few yards from her.

She waded out of the ocean toward him, her skin glistening in the sun, water running down her body, and it was all he could do not to stare at her breasts in the skimpy top. When he tried to look away, he found himself looking at her shapely legs, the flare of her hips, and his hands suddenly itched to touch her, to feel her velvety soft skin under his fingers. Realizing that he was losing control again, he dragged his eyes back up, forcing himself to keep them focused on her face, only to discover that she was studying him with a curious look on her face.

"Did you just get here?" she asked. "You look hot. You should come into the water, it will cool you right off. It's a long walk from the cabins, and I didn't think it was supposed to get this hot here."

"I was just heading back to my cabin," he said, gesturing up the beach. "I've been here for a while."

"And you haven't been swimming," she said. "That seems like a crime."

"I'm not much of a swimmer," he said, shrugging his shoulders. "I'm not that hot."

"Your face is all red, and you're sweating," Kennedy said, putting her hands on her

hips. “You don’t have to swim, you can just wade around. It doesn’t get deep until you’re a long way from shore, you’ll be perfectly safe.”

“I’m not afraid if that’s what you’re thinking,” he said, a bit insulted. “I just don’t feel like getting wet right now.”

“Okay, suit yourself,” she said, shrugging her shoulders. “I’m going back in. This is the most fun I’ve had in a long time.”

\*\*\*Kennedy\*\*\*

Kennedy was smiling as she waded back into the water. Without even trying, she’d run into Cameron again. Fate must really be on her side for a change, and she frantically searched for a way to use it to her advantage. She hadn’t missed the spark of attraction in his eyes, but going that route was a bit risky, especially since a part of her was thrilled by the idea. She’d never used her sexuality to get a story before. It was cheating in her view. Even if lots of other female reporters weren’t above the practice, she’d never stooped that low and wasn’t planning to start now .

Discarding the idea as too dangerous, she turned back to Cameron, ignoring the way her heart was pounding when she saw the interest in his eyes. “You’re going to roast standing there on the beach,” she said. “You’re beginning to make me feel bad. Maybe I should get back out.”

“No, don’t do that,” Cameron said, shaking his head. “You look...cool in the water, and it is a little hot out here. Maybe I will wade around a little. I’m not in any hurry to get back to my cabin.”

“You look a little tense; it will help you relax,” she said, kicking her feet up so she could float on her back. “Just close your eyes and let the waves take you where they will.”

“I’m not tense,” Cameron said. “I’m just not used to doing nothing...I’m usually in my lab working...”

She pushed herself back up. “You’re not doing nothing, you’re enjoying the ocean, at least I think you are,” she said, cocking her head to study him. “You’re one of those workaholics, aren’t you? I’ve met a few people like you. All they want to do is toil away, they don’t know how to have fun, it’s just work...work...work.”

“I’m not a workaholic,” Cameron argued. “What I do is important. If I get too wrapped up sometimes, that’s just...well, the way things have to be.”

“When was the last time you took a vacation?” she asked, surprised to see a spark of anger in his eyes. “I bet it’s been years. I bet you don’t even take days off, and I bet you’re planning on working while you’re here.”

When he didn’t answer right away, she let out a sigh. “See, I knew it,” she said. “Life is too short to work all the time, Cameron. You need to lighten up every once in a while, have a little fun, or you’ll die an early death or something like that.”

“What makes you an expert?” he asked, his voice dripping with sarcasm. “Are you a life coach or something? ”

“Nope, I’m just a girl from a small town who knows a few things about life,” she said, shrugging her shoulders. “I’m just trying to help, Cameron. It seems like you could use some.”

“I don’t need your help. What I need is to be able to finish the work in my lab, then I’ll be able to have all the fun I want,” he said, grabbing the chair and cooler again. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I think I’ll go back to my cabin and see if I can get some work done; not all of us have the luxury of free time.”

“Seems to me that’s your choice,” she said, deciding to push him just a bit harder. “You could run back to your cabin and tap away at a computer for the rest of the day, or you could enjoy the beauty around you and get into the water. No matter how important your work is, I’m sure it could wait for a few more hours.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, I ran out of choices a long time ago,” he said. “You couldn’t possibly understand, so I’m not even going to try and explain. Stay out of my business. I’m perfectly happy with my life just the way it is.”

She watched him stomp away, thrills shooting through her, feeling a bit bad that she’d made him mad, but she’d learned a few things, including the fact that Cameron was even more attractive when he was angry. Inwardly groaning at the thought, she forced herself to go back over their conversation in her mind, trying to remember every detail in case she needed it later.

He’d introduced the topic of the lab for her, making it easy to ask questions the next time she saw him, after she apologized for making him mad, of course. She could see exactly how it would go and was looking forward to their sailing lesson the next morning. If she could keep things going the way they were, he’d spill the beans in a couple of days. The article she would write was already coming together in her mind, she just needed the ending to make it complete, and she was getting closer every time they met.

Wading out of the water, she grabbed her towel and dried off before slipping her clothes back on, then headed for her cabin to shower before heading to the village for dinner. It wouldn’t hurt to give the other story a little of her attention since things were going so well with Cameron. If she was lucky, she might be able to turn in two stories instead of just one. That thought lifted her spirits even more, and she arrived at her cabin only a few minutes later, looking forward to the evening.

There was nothing she loved more than getting information out of unsuspecting



witnesses. Sometimes, all it took was a well-phrased question, and other times, it was harder, but no matter which, she loved the game. If she could come up with something light and fluffy to accompany the investigative piece, Steve would give her anything she wanted. She'd have a green light to tell the kinds of stories she wanted to, and the disaster with Cliff would be a thing of the past.

Feeling more optimistic than she had in a long time, she climbed the ladder to her cabin, ignoring the little voice in the back of her head shouting that she was making the same mistake with Cameron. She pushed the voice away, reminding herself that she was being careful, that her attraction to the man wouldn't interfere with getting the story, and that for once, she'd keep her head where a man was concerned. She'd learned her lesson with Cliff. Men couldn't be trusted, and neither could her body. No matter how much she was attracted to Cameron, he was off limits.

### CHAPTER 4

\*\*\*CAMERON\*\*\*

Max answered the door wearing an apron, a bowl of something white and frothy in one hand, a whisk in the other, and it took Cameron a second to absorb what he was seeing. “You’ve gone domestic on me,” he said, trying not to laugh. “That apron looks good on you. A few ruffles would add something, though.”

“Very funny,” Max said, stepping back to let him in. “I’m just finishing up dessert, and you won’t get any if you aren’t nice.”

“I gave you a compliment, that’s nice,” he said, following his friend through the cabin into the kitchen. “And something smells good. You clearly know what you’re doing.”

“That’s better,” Max said, plunking the bowl down on the counter. “I’m on my own here. Learning to cook was mostly a matter of survival, but I do enjoy it at times, and strangely enough, I’m good at it.”

“Well then, I’m in for a treat,” he said. “Are Keith and Stella here yet?”

“They should be here any time,” Max said, then turned to look over at him. “I know you think I’ve got a screw loose, but I want you to keep an open mind. I’m beginning to think that we can’t explain everything away with science.”

“I’m a scientist, Max, so those are fighting words, but I don’t jump to conclusions,”

he said. "I promise to listen to everything you have to say, just don't expect me to change my view of the world that easily."

"I wouldn't want you to," Max said, shaking his head. "Hell, I don't want to, but you haven't been here the last few months. Things have happened, things that can't be explained."

Before Max could say more, there was a knock on the door. "Is anybody home?" Keith called. "We heard there was a wild party going on here tonight, and we wanted to get in on it."

His old friend appeared in the doorway a few minutes later, with a big smile on his face, looking happier than Cameron had ever seen him, a very pretty dark-haired woman trailing behind him. Before he could say a word, Keith strode across the kitchen and gave him a big bear hug, then stepped back and studied him for a second.

"You haven't changed a bit, you're still the geek of the bunch," Keith said, grinning at him, then pulled the woman up next to him. "I want you to meet my wife, Stella."

"It's nice to meet you," he said, shaking her hand. "Max tells me that you're an architect."

"And an engineer. Stella is smarter than all of us combined," Keith said, beaming at his wife. "We're building the new staff quarters for Max. You should come over to the other side of the island and take a look when you have time. Stella's designs are brilliant."

"Ignore him," Stella said, a blush on her cheeks. "He gets a bit carried away sometimes."

"Can you blame me? I'm the luckiest man alive," Keith said, pulling Stella into his

arms. “And if it wasn’t for the island, it might have never happened. Now I have the perfect little family, and it’s going to get bigger in a few months.”

“Congratulations,” he said, truly happy for his friend. “You don’t really think the island had anything to do with it, right?”

The three exchanged a look. “I think you’d better hear about what happened to us before I answer that question,” Keith said. “There’s something special about this island. I don’t know what it is. The truth is I don’t really care. Without the island, Stella would be dead, so I’m not going to question it.”

“Come on, everyone. Dinner is ready,” Max called, coming back in from the patio. It’s going to get cold if we don’t eat it right now, and we can talk about all of this while we eat.”

The table, which had been groaning with food, looked like it had been hit by a tornado; empty plates, bowls, and platters littered the surface. There were smudges of food on the white tablecloth, and the candles had burned away to nothing. He’d listened to Keith and Stella’s story first, then, with growing concern about the rest of his friends who’d visited the island. When Max finally sat back and let silence fall over the table, he wasn’t sure what to say and needed a few minutes to absorb what he’d heard. He didn’t believe for a second that the island has some kind of special power to make people fall in love; he wasn’t even close to conceding that point.

“Well, what do you think?” Max finally asked. “You have to admit that there are a few too many coincidences to think that there isn’t something going on around here.”

“I can understand why you might think that,” he said. “But I’m sure there are logical explanations for everything that’s happened.”

“Then I’d sure like to hear them,” Max said, an edge of anger in his voice. “Explain

to me how Theo and Eden traveled back in time or something and found an ancient tribe of natives. While you're at it, I'd really like to know how Simon changed his entire appearance. You didn't see him, Cameron, it was...strange."

"What about Archie and Felicity sharing the same dreams?" Keith asked. "I know that you're the smart one in the group, Cameron, but even you can't explain that. There's a force on this island that brings couples together. I can't tell you how it works, but it does. Maybe you have to experience it to understand. Things happen on the island, strange but wonderful things, and there's not a single one of us who would have wanted it any other way."

Feeling a little panicky, a sinking feeling in his stomach, he searched his mind for anything that would explain what had happened to his friends, but he couldn't think, couldn't process anything at that moment because his head was filled with visions of Kennedy. Battling a wave of desire that rushed through him, he took several deep breaths, telling himself that he was just getting caught up in the moment. He wasn't next, he wasn't going to fall in love. It was all just superstition and legends; none of it had any real place in the modern world, no matter how much his friends seemed to believe it.

"What you're talking about just isn't possible," he finally said, shaking his head. "Magic isn't real, and this island is just a pile of rocks and dirt, there's nothing special about it. I'll find a way to prove that to you all, I just need some time."

"Take all the time you want," Max said, shrugging his shoulders. "You're in the hot seat now, so if things go the way they have been, you'll be finding out what the island is capable of any time now."

"What is that supposed to mean?" he asked, looking around the table. "Are you trying to say that I'm going to fall in love and get married next?"

“That seems to be the way things are going,” Max said, an apologetic look on his face. “For all we know, it might already be too late.”

Kennedy popped into his mind again, but he wasn’t about to let her stay there because hey, he couldn’t afford to, so he pushed her back out. “That’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard. I’m not going to fall in love. It wouldn’t matter if I did anyway, I can’t marry anyone but a woman my father approves of. You all know that. I’d like to see the island change that; I’d like to see it free me from my obligations to the clan and my family. That would really be magic, but we all know that isn’t going to happen.”

There was a long silence around the table, and he regretted his outburst instantly but knew that he couldn’t take it back. “Sorry, Cameron, I guess I forgot about all that,” Max said. “Falling in love with someone while you’re on the island might not be the best thing. Maybe I shouldn’t have invited you.”

“I keep telling you that I’m not going to fall in love. It’s time you gave up on this idea about the island,” he said, stubbornly. “Now, didn’t you say something about dessert?”

\*\*\*Kennedy\*\*\*

Kennedy rushed up to Montgomery, pretending she didn’t see Cameron standing by the little sailboat, a look of annoyance slowly spreading across his face. “Oh, dear, I hope I’m not late,” she said. “I can’t seem to keep track of the time since I got to the island. I guess it must be vacation brain.”

Cameron let out a little snort.

“There’s no such thing,” he said. “Haven’t you ever heard of a watch?”

“Oh, Cameron,” she said, looking surprised to see him. “Are you taking a sailing lesson too?”

“I was planning on it,” he said, crossing his arms over his chest. “But it looks like we’re never going to get started...”

Montgomery looked a little surprised by their exchange but stepped between them. “Now that we’re all here, I think we should get right to it,” he said. “We have to go over safety first, and then we’ll see about getting into the water. Have either of you ever sailed a boat before?”

They both shook their heads. “Good, then no one will be bored when I go over the basics,” he said. “It’s going to be a lot to remember, so don’t feel bad if you can’t remember everything, that’s what I’m here for.”

Half an hour later, they were putting on lifejackets, then climbed into the boat after giving it a push, and Montgomery fired up the little engine on the back. “Sit back and relax for a few minutes,” he called over the sputtering. “We’ll cut the engine as soon as we get past the current that runs around the island, then we’ll unfurl the sails and see how much you learned on the beach.”

Taking her seat, Kennedy looked over at Cameron, who was staring out at the water, a look of uncertainty on his face. She felt a little twinge of empathy for him. “You’re going to do fine,” she called. “I bet you’ll be better at this than me.”

He gave her a dirty look and let out a long sigh. “Water has never been my favorite thing,” he said, shrugging his shoulders. “I’m not exactly scared; I’m just not comfortable around it. I had a bad experience when I was a kid.”

She scooted as close as she could without tipping the balance in the boat. “I’m sorry about all that yesterday at the beach,” she said, meaning it. “I get carried away

sometimes. I should have kept my mouth shut. What you do with your life is your own business. I was out of line. ”

“You might have been right, well, just a little bit,” he said, relaxing for the first time since she’d walked up. “The thing is, I wasn’t very happy to be there. I did want to be working, heck, I’d rather be working now, but I came here to help Max, so…”

“You’re doing what he wants you to do to make him happy,” she said, hating the way that made her feel just a little warm down deep inside. “That’s very sweet, especially since water isn’t your thing.”

“Max and I have been friends for a long time. We’ve been through a lot together, and I don’t mind making a few sacrifices for him,” he said. “It’s everybody else in my life I don’t want to bend over backward for, I wish they would all just leave me alone.”

She was as surprised by the admission as he was and they both fell silent for a few minutes as the island slowly faded from view. “Well, it was a nice thing to do,” she finally said, unable to think of anything else to say. “Who knows, you might like it. Stranger things have happened.”

He studied her for a second, his brown eyes locked on hers, making her stomach do funny things. “I bet you’re one of those people who see the glass half full,” he finally said. “Do you always try to see the bright side of things?”

Surprised by the question, she had to think about it for a second. “I guess so, I’ve never really thought about it before,” she said. “Why, is that a bad thing?”

“No, I guess not,” he said, shrugging his shoulders. “But it must be exhausting to always look on the bright side, that’s all I’m saying.”

“So, I should wallow in my pain and disappointments?” she asked. “That seems like a



terrible way to live.”

“No, that’s not what I meant,” he said, then hesitated. “I don’t know what I meant. Let’s just pretend we never had this discussion. I’m not very good at this stuff.”

“What stuff?” she asked, confused.

Cameron didn’t say anything for a second. “Talking to women,” he finally admitted. “I do fine at work, but this...here with you...”

“You’re doing just fine,” she said, reaching over and putting her hand on his arm, surprised when a tingle of electricity traveled through her fingers into her hand, up her arm and spread through her body. “Don’t give up so easily.”

“Okay, you two, we’re far enough out for the sails,” Montgomery said, cutting the engine. “Who wants to go first?”

She looked over at Cameron, who looked slightly miserable, and wondered for the first time if she’d made a mistake. He didn’t seem like a master criminal or a criminal at all. But she had the proof, she reminded herself: the invoices for special equipment and supplies, the mysterious trips Cameron took all the time, the locked door in the lab, it all pointed to something illegal. Just because he didn’t fit the profile didn’t mean he wasn’t up to something. In fact, this might all be an elaborate act he put on in public to keep people from being suspicious.

“I’ll go first,” she said when Cameron stayed silent. “I just hope I don’t sink us.”

“No worries about that while I’m around,” Montgomery. “Just listen to what I tell you to do and everything will be fine.”

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*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 7:28 am*

### CHAPTER 5

\*\*\*CAMERON\*\*\*

Cameron jumped over the side of the boat and helped guide it gently into shore, then held on until Montgomery secured it to the beach with a long line. Sailing had turned out to be more fun than he'd anticipated, just like Kennedy had predicted, but he wasn't about to give her the satisfaction of knowing she was right, not after all the emotional upheaval she'd put him through that day.

Not that it was her fault that he was attracted to her. She couldn't control that, but she'd made him open up to her, got him talking about things he never shared with anyone, and that was alarming. He'd almost told her his entire life story, but managed to stop himself at the last second, which was even scarier since he never told anyone but his closest friends anything about his life.

Wondering what it was about the woman that made him act like an idiot, he watched her climb out of the boat. The now familiar thrill shot through him, but this time, it was followed by a wave of warmth. Feeling his power beginning to stir as the creature inside him slowly began to awaken, he looked away, shocked by his reaction to just the sight of the woman.

"Well done, you two," Montgomery said, a big smile on his face. "I hope I'll see you both for another lesson before you leave. I think you're ready to handle the current around the island. It's a beautiful trip, and you don't want to miss it."

"Sounds great," Kennedy said, a big smile on her face, her eyes sparkling with

excitement. “What about you, Cameron? Are you up for another sailing adventure?”

A strong stab of desire left him speechless for a second. “I don’t know...I’ll have to check my schedule,” he stammered, suddenly wanting nothing more than to get away from Kennedy and the confusion she had caused. But thanks for a great morning, Montgomery.”

“My pleasure. I love this job,” Montgomery said. “Easiest money I’ve ever earned, but don’t tell Max that.”

“I won’t,” he said, smiling at the man as he backed away. “I should really go. I’m supposed to have lunch with Max.”

He turned and started up the beach without even saying goodbye to Kennedy, but he didn’t care. He had to get away from her before he did something stupid. The woman had a way of throwing him off balance, making him think about things he had no business thinking about. He needed to be thinking about the lab. If he didn’t find the answer to why they could shift and other people couldn’t, if he couldn’t prove that there was nothing magical or mystical about it, his fate would be sealed.

This couldn’t be happening to him, not now, not after he’d made it all his life without getting tangled in a messy relationship with a woman he could never have. He wasn’t about to make that mistake now. He’d stay as far away from Kennedy as he could, walk the other way if he saw her coming, and banish the longing he felt around her to the deepest part of his brain .

Knowing that work would calm him, when he got to the village, he grabbed some lunch from the deli and headed for the clubhouse to claim his two hours of internet time. He found Max in his office, knocked on the door jam, and then sat down in the chair across from his desk, hoping his old friend couldn’t tell that something was bothering him.

“Was it that bad?” Max asked, after studying him for a second. “I know that you’re not crazy about water, but I thought sailing would be different.”

“Actually, I had a good time, and I’m thinking about going again,” he said, shrugging his shoulders. “I think I’m just tired. It was a big morning. I thought I’d work for a couple of hours before doing whatever you’ve arranged for my afternoon.”

“Maybe you should go take a nap instead,” Max suggested. “You’re supposed to be on vacation.”

“Don’t start in on me again,” he said. “I just want to check in with the lab and then if it will make you happy, I’ll go take a nap.”

“Make it a long one; I just heard from the fishing fleet that they’re bringing in a big catch,” Max said, a big smile on his face. “We’re going to have a crab boil tonight, which means a clam digging contest, live music, and some of the best fish you’ve ever eaten.”

“Sounds like fun,” he said, faking enthusiasm he didn’t feel. “What time does this little shindig start?”

“An hour before sunset,” Max said. “We’ll ring the big bell at the marina when it’s time.”

“I’ll be there,” he said. “Now, about that internet connection...”

When his time was up, he left the clubhouse and, as promised, went to his cabin to take a nap, but he lay staring up at the ceiling for a long time, unaccustomed to sleeping during the day. He finally drifted off, but his dreams were filled with visions of Kennedy, first in her bathing suit, then laughing as she manned the tiller on the boat. As he dreamed, his body responded to the desire that was slowly building,

waking the sleeping creature that was the other half of him and stirring deeply buried instincts.

He woke an hour later, his body throbbing with need, Kennedy's face in his mind. He let out a groan of frustration and jumped out of bed. Not even his sleep was safe from the woman, he thought, heading for the bathroom. I'm a grown man. I should be able to control my desire. After turning the shower on as cold as he could stand it, he jumped in, wincing when the cold water washed over his heated skin, then leaned against the tile wall, taking deep breaths.

When he got out of the shower, he felt more in control. Kennedy was just a woman like a billion others on the planet. There was nothing special about her, he'd just let himself become a little infatuated. He refused to believe it had anything to do with the island, his hormones were just out of control. If it hadn't been Kennedy, it would have been some other unsuspecting woman. He wasn't falling for her, he wasn't capable of that. He knew better. This was just a phase, it would pass, and he just had to stay away from her.

\*\*\*Kennedy\*\*\*

Kennedy sat back in her chair and quickly reread her entry in her notes, a bit disappointed that the sailing lesson hadn't gotten her more juicy information about Cameron. All she'd learned was that he wasn't a very happy man, that much had been easy to pick up from his words, but it was the underlying desperation she'd felt emanating from him that had her interested. One of the first lessons she'd learned as a young reporter was that no matter how good a person was, desperation could lead to risky and unwise choices, and she couldn't help but wonder if Cameron was in that group.

If he was acting out of desperation, that could explain why he seemed like such a nice guy on the surface, but that didn't change the fact that he was hiding something, and

it was her job to find out what it was. Steve had taken a big risk for her; she couldn't let her personal feelings get in the way of the story, even if she was beginning to think she might have read her reaction to Cameron the first time she'd seen him wrong. Reminding herself that she'd just started her investigation and that there was still a lot more to uncover, she closed the file with a sigh, feeling torn, and not for the first time since she'd met Cameron.

Opening the file, she'd started on the rumors about the island. She reread her notes and shook her head at some of the crazy stories, especially the one about dragons flying around the island. But somewhere in all of it was a story, she just knew it, and a way to save her job if she was wrong about Cameron. She just had to sift through the fantasy for the truth. What she needed was reliable witnesses, and the island was full of them; if even a quarter of what she'd heard was true, the people who worked on the island would know. The trick was getting them to trust her enough to talk about it.

After shutting down the computer and putting it away, she headed for the shower, determined to make some progress on at least one of the stories that day. When she was ready, she headed to the village, deciding that the best place to start was the café. Everyone on the island visited it daily, even the staff, and she hoped there was someone working there who loved to gossip.

When she walked into the village, she was surprised to find all the shops closed and the restaurants in the process of shutting down, but the café looked like it was still open. Wondering what had changed since she'd been in the village a few hours before for lunch, she walked over to the counter that ran along the back of the little space and sat down in one of the chairs. The smell of coffee drifted over to her, and she let out an appreciative sigh. Then, she waited until the young woman behind the counter came over.

"I'm sorry to keep you waiting, it's been a little crazy around here," she said. "What

can I get you?"

"As long as it's got coffee in it, I don't care," she said, then looked out the door.

"What's going on? Is there a hurricane coming or something?"

"Oh, no it's nothing like that," the woman said. "The fishing fleet just got back with a big catch. We're having a crab boil on the beach tonight. I'll be closing up in just a few minutes, too."

"Oh, I'm sorry, I shouldn't be keeping you," she said. "I'm sure you're anxious to get down there. The coffee can wait."

"That's okay, I have to wait for this last pot to brew before I can go," the woman said, then pointed to several rolling carts. "Then I have to haul all this down there."

"All by yourself?" she asked, seeing a way in. "That's going to take two trips. I'd be happy to help you. I don't really have anything else to do."

"I don't know. Max might not like it, but we are shorthanded today," the woman said. "It might be okay just this once."

"If Max has a problem with it, I'll just explain that it was my idea," she said. "I'm Kennedy, by the way."

"Sheila," the young woman said, smiling at her. "I can't tell you how much I appreciate this."

She grabbed a cart and followed Sheila out the back of the building to a concrete path that led down to the water. "Have you worked here long?" she asked, slightly out of breath. "It must be a great place to work. The view is incredible. "

“I’ve been here since Max opened the resort. There was a lot of competition to work here,” she said. “The benefits and the pay are very generous, and he really cares about us. You should see the new staff housing he’s building on the other side of the island.”

“That’s great, and I bet this job is a lot of fun,” she said. “I bet you get to meet all kinds of interesting people too, a lot of really rich people.”

Sheila shrugged. “Not really, I mean, Max’s friends have all been super rich, but that’s about it,” she said. “Most of them didn’t even act like they were rich, well, except for Simon, but he sure got what he deserved. It was fun to watch.”

Kennedy knew that she couldn’t seem too interested and let a few seconds pass, hoping that Sheila would say more. “Hey, you’re not going to say that and then just leave me hanging, are you?” she finally asked. “I’m always up for a little gossip.”

Sheila looked around and then back at her. “It’s kind of a strange story; if I hadn’t been there to see it, I wouldn’t have believed it happened,” she said, keeping her voice low. “If I tell you, you’ll probably think I’m making it all up, and it did work out in the end; Simon found the love of his life and became a new man. This island is a special place, that’s all I can tell you. Working here has been an experience I’ll never forget for a lot of reasons.”

Just then, Max came walking up. “Sheila, what are you still doing working?” he asked. “Everything looks great here. You should go get changed and join the fun. We’re about to start the fires, and you don’t want to miss that.”

“I was getting ready to head back to my cabin,” Sheila said, then looked over at Kennedy. “Thanks for the help, I better go change.”

“See you later,” she said, very aware that Max was studying her.



“Kennedy right?” he finally asked. “You’re the one who won the trip on a game show.”

“That’s me,” she said, smiling at him. “And it’s already been the trip of a lifetime. You’ve done something really special here. I probably won’t want to leave when the trip is over.”

“That’s good to hear,” Max said, smiling at her. If you need anything, let me know. I hope you enjoy the rest of your stay.”

She watched him walk away, wishing she could question him about the island, but she knew better and let him go with only a thank you. After grabbing something to drink from the carts, she headed for the beach where the bonfires were being built, pleased with her progress on the island story and hoping that she’d run into Cameron. She ignored the little thrill that rushed through her when she thought about him, reminding herself that the man wasn’t all he seemed and it was her job to expose him.

### CHAPTER 6

\*\*\*CAMERON\*\*\*

Cameron looked up and down the beach, hoping not to see Kennedy, but he wasn't surprised when he spotted her down by one of the bonfires. It looked like the entire island was gathered next to the water. The sun was just beginning to set on the horizon, and he could tell by the wide expanse of sand between the fires and the water that the tide was going out. There was a line of tiki torches stuck in the sand further down the beach, sending up happy flames, and he knew it would be a pretty picture once it got dark and the piles of driftwood were lit.

Deciding that it wouldn't be that hard to stay away from Kennedy in the big crowd, he made his way over to where drinks were spread out, got a big glass of iced tea, and then went in search of Max. He found him chatting with Keith and Stella, but it wasn't long before he put the three of them to work helping set up the huge pots for the crab boil. After lugging the pots over to where the fires were just being lit, they filled them with little red potatoes, ears of corn on the cob, and a spicy sausage made right there on the island.

"No one told me this was going to be work," he said, wiping the sweat from his face. "I thought this was supposed to be a vacation."

Keith laughed. "There's no sitting around on your butt and being waited on around here," he said. "Besides, this is fun, even if it is a lot of work, and don't forget the reward is fresh crab. Once you taste it, you'll forget how much work it was."

“It was a good distraction, if nothing else,” he said, shrugging his shoulders. “I can’t stop thinking about our conversation the other night. I have to prove to Max that all he’s got is a bunch of coincidences. It’s killing me that he believes this island is magical or something.”

Keith and Stella exchanged a look. “Cameron, I know you’ve always been the most...logical and rational of all of us, but this is real. Everything Max told you about really happened,” he said. If you don’t believe him, maybe you should make a few phone calls. What I can tell you is that we’ve experienced it. I promise you that it’s real.”

“And there has to be a logical explanation,” he said, stubbornly. “There’s no such thing as magic; everything can be explained if you look deep enough, and that’s exactly what I’m going to do. And I can promise you something: I’m not going to fall in love while I’m here; I’m not even sure that love is a real thing, so if nothing else, that should put an end to all this talk.”

Keith and Stella exchanged another look. “Have it your way,” his friend said. “But I’d be careful what you say. The island seems to love a challenge, and I think you might have just issued one.”

Cameron made his escape as quickly as he could after that. His friends had every right to believe what they wanted to, but that didn’t mean he had to stand there and listen to them. He wandered through the crowd, sipping his now warm iced tea and keeping an eye out for Kennedy, ready to flee if he saw her, but she was nowhere to be found. He was both surprised and annoyed at the rush of disappointment that flooded him but shook it off, telling himself that it was for the best.

“It’s almost sunset,” the man standing next to him said to the woman with him. Let’s go down to the water; the view will be better from there.”

The woman laughed and pointed to the groups of people slowly making their way over to the water's edge. "It looks like everyone else had the same idea," she said. "Come on, let's go find a spot."

He watched them walk away, wondering if he should follow. That was when he finally spotted Kennedy, and he braced himself, prepared for the wave of desire he knew was coming. But standing there watching her laugh and smile at the handsome man standing next to her, another emotion slowly began to build inside him, leaving him slightly breathless and the creature inside him slowly awakening again.

Rooted to the spot, he could only stand there staring at Kennedy and the man, jealousy making irrational thoughts pop into his mind, the urge to stomp over to them and stake his claim to her one of the strongest. When the man wrapped his arm around Kennedy and pulled her close to him, it was all he could do not to follow through with the urges now thundering through him.

To his relief, Kennedy slipped out of the man's arms and put a little distance between them, making it clear that the man's attention wasn't wanted. The jealousy faded to a manageable level, but he still didn't move, couldn't walk away from the scene in front of him, even though he kept telling himself to escape while he had the chance. She wasn't his and would never be. It was impossible and forbidden, and it was another reason to stay as far away from her as he could .

When the sun finally slipped out of sight, the man standing next to Kennedy walked away, and the last of the jealousy drained away. He expected to feel normal again, but under the jealousy, he discovered desire still smoldering deep inside him, and before he could stop himself, he was walking over to her. She turned and looked over at him. A big smile spread across her face, and he knew that he was in trouble.

"Wasn't that beautiful," she said with a big sigh. "Sunset is one of my favorite times of the day."

“Yes, beautiful,” he said, unable to drag his eyes away from her face. “Very beautiful.”

To his surprise a blush spread across her cheeks. “I didn’t picture you as a watching the sunset kind of guy,” she said, her voice a little shaky. “I thought you never left your lab.”

“I wasn’t watching the sunset, something else caught my eye,” he said, surprised to find himself flirting with her. “I’ll have to try and catch it tomorrow night.”

\*\*\*Kennedy\*\*\*

Kennedy was a bit stunned when she realized that Cameron was talking about her and not the sunset, and even more unprepared when he began to flirt with her. “Well, I think it happens every night,” she said. “And you don’t even have to do anything.”

“So, there aren’t any rules about watching the sunset?” he asked. “I mean, I’ve never really done it before, so I wouldn’t want to screw it up. Maybe you could give me a couple of pointers.”

She laughed. “You might be able to convince me,” she said. “But I promise you it’s not that hard.”

“Relaxing doesn’t come easy to me,” Cameron admitted with a shrug of his shoulders. “But you and Max both seem to think that it’s important, so maybe I’ll give it a try. ”

“That’s the spirit,” she said, smiling at him, deciding this was her opening. “What exactly is it that you do in that lab, anyway?”

“A lot of things, but it all centers around DNA sequencing,” he said. “It’s a little

complicated...but we work with medical professionals and research facilities running the tests they need.”

“Wow, I’ve never met anyone who works with DNA,” she said. “It must be really exciting. I guess I can see why what you do is so important.”

“Microbiology always intrigued me, even as a kid,” he said. “I don’t know how exciting what I do is, but I enjoy it, and I feel like I’m contributing something to science.”

She studied him for a second, sensing that he wasn’t telling her the entire story, but knew she was getting closer to what was happening behind the locked doors. “Okay, everyone,” Max called, interrupting them. “The sun has set, the crab pots are ready, now all we need are some clams. I want you to split up into teams, grab a bucket and get digging. The team that brings in the most clams gets the first pick of the crabs.”

There was a flurry of activity around them. “Come on, let’s go grab a couple of buckets,” she said, grabbing his hand, trying to ignore the bolt of electricity that traveled up her arm. “I’ve never been clam digging. This is going to be fun.”

Cameron started shaking his head. “No thanks, I think I’ll just watch,” he said, trying to pull his hand free, a weird look on his face. “I’m not much into digging.”

“That’s the lamest excuse I’ve ever heard,” she said, putting her hands on her hips. “Are you scared to get dirty or something?”

“I’m not scared to get dirty,” he said. “I just don’t want to crawl around digging in the sand like a little kid.”

“Oh, Cameron,” she said, shaking her head. “Try having some fun for a change; it will be like a game. Don’t be such a stick in the mud.”

“I’m not being a stick in the mud,” he said. “I just don’t want to...”

Before he could finish, Andy came rushing up. “Hey, Kennedy, do you want to be partners?” he asked. “I bet we could win.”

She looked over at Cameron, who had that same weird look on his face. “She’s my partner,” he said. “We were just going to get our buckets.”

It hit her then. Cameron was jealous, and a delicious thrill rushed through her at the thought, but then she got herself under control. “I thought you didn’t want to dig in the sand like a little kid,” she said. “Maybe I don’t want to be your partner.”

A frown appeared on Cameron’s face. “I changed my mind,” he said through clenched teeth. “But it’s your choice.”

She studied him for a second, hating the fact that she was enjoying herself so much, afraid that she was crossing a line but unable to stop. “Sorry, Andy, I asked Cameron to be my partner first,” she said. “I hope you understand.”

“Oh, sure, I get it,” he said, looking between the two of them. “Have a good night. Maybe we’ll see each other around the island.”

“Not if I can help it,” Cameron said under his breath, but she pretended not to notice even though it sent another thrill shooting through her.

When Andy was gone, she looked over at Cameron. “We should really get started if we want to win,” she said. “I’m glad you changed your mind. This is going to be fun, and when we’re done, we can stuff ourselves with crab.”

They grabbed their buckets and shovels, then walked over to the open stretch of beach lit up by the tiki torches. “I wondered why these were all over here,” Cameron

said, looking around at the people already digging. “What do we do now?”

Just then, Sheila came over to them. “You look like you could use some help,” she said. “All you have to do is look for the little airholes in the sand. When you find one, start digging. The clams will be a few inches down. You may have to reach in and feel around for them.”

Kennedy looked at the sand around her feet. “Oh, look, there’s one,” she said, dropping to her knees and starting to dig. A few seconds later, her shovel came up with a big clam, and she let out a whoop of excitement. “I found a clam, and a huge one.”

“Now you’re an expert,” Sheila said, handing her the bucket. “Put a little water in with them to keep them alive until we want to eat them.”

She dropped the clam in, then got back to her feet and filled her bucket half full of water before carrying it back to where Cameron was standing. “Come on, start digging,” she urged him. “This is fun; it’s like a treasure hunt.”

Scanning the sand, she saw another depression in the sand and started digging again, but this time she was forced to reach into the hole to pull out the clam. After dropping it into the bucket with a splash, she looked up at Cameron, who was still watching her, with a look of amusement on his face.

“Are you just going to stand there, or are you going to dig?” she asked. “I thought you wanted to do this.”

“Not really,” he said, shrugging his shoulders. “I just didn’t like that Andy guy. He wasn’t right for you, so I got rid of him. I’m happy just to watch.”

She could only stare at him for a second, then slowly got to her feet as anger slowly



began to build inside her. “I’m sorry, what did you just say?” she asked, a hard edge to her voice. “I don’t think I heard you correctly, at least I hope I didn’t hear you correctly because you have no right to decide who I talk to or when. That is not your choice to make.”

“It was clear to me that he was bad news, I was just watching out for you,” Cameron defended himself. “You can’t be too careful, you know, guys like that... well, they only want one thing.”

“And what if I wanted that one thing?” she demanded. “You have no idea who I am or what I want. Maybe I wanted a vacation fling, maybe I wanted to have it with Andy.”

“I don’t believe that for one second,” he said, his eyes flashing with anger. “You’re not that kind of girl and if you were, you’d pick someone better than that jerk.”

“Oh, you think so, do you?” she demanded, taking a couple of steps toward him. “And who would this mystery man be? I’d love to meet him. After all, I only have a couple of weeks on the island, we should get on with it.”

### CHAPTER 7

\*\*\*CAMERON\*\*\*

Cameron was angry and jealous, the urge to show Kennedy just who she should be with thundering through him, fueled by the creature inside him and the ancient instincts his jealousy had awakened. He tried to control it, tried to push it away, but the anger making her eyes sparkle in the dim light of the torches only made him want her more. It didn't help that she was standing so close to him that he could smell her unique scent, a combination of wildflowers and vanilla, or that her chest was rising and falling with anger, making it impossible to ignore the swell of her breasts under her shirt.

Desire raced through him, wave after wave, each getting stronger until he was overwhelmed by the intensity of his feelings and, with a groan of frustration, told himself to step away from her. But the creature inside him was fully awake, and he could no longer control it or the driving need to claim the woman standing only a few inches from him.

Reaching out, he grabbed her and pulled her into his arms, then slammed his mouth down on hers; she resisted for only a second before her arms came up around his neck with a long sigh. Pleasure made it impossible for him to think as feelings he'd never experienced before rushed through him, and it wasn't until they were both struggling for breath that he managed to let her go, but a low growl of disappointment came from deep in his chest. Knowing that it would be too easy to pull her into his arms again, he stumbled back a couple of steps, desperate to put some distance between them.

As he backed away, he stepped into a big hole in the sand, tipping him even more off balance, and before he could right himself, he landed on the wet sand with a thud and a little splash. Kennedy was staring at him with a look of shock on her face, but it slowly melted away and was replaced by amusement. Then, she started to laugh before coming over and offering him her hand. He looked up at her, knowing that he should be horrified by what he'd done, but suddenly didn't care, and instead of letting her help him up, he pulled her down next to him.

Kennedy let out a shocked gasp, her laughter gone, then turned to give him a dirty look, but he wrapped his arms around her and kissed her again, this time parting her lips with his tongue. Threading his fingers through her hair, he let instinct take over as he kissed her deeply, deciding that she tasted even better than she smelled. Then he abruptly let her go when the urge to take the kiss further slowly began to take over.

She stared at him, eyes wide for a few seconds, her breath coming in short gasps, then began to scoot away from him. "You have to stop doing that," she said, stumbling to her feet and shaking her head. "We can't...I can't...it's not right."

He got to his feet, unable to tear his eyes away from her, desire still pulsing through him, fed by the power of the dragon inside him, and he couldn't speak for a few seconds. Not that he knew what to say. He'd crossed a line, kissed her not once but twice, and would do it again given the chance. He was clearly out of control, nothing more than an animal unable to control its baser instincts, and he wouldn't blame Kennedy if she never wanted to see him again.

Realizing that was the answer to his problem, he got to his feet and took a couple of steps toward her. "I don't think that's possible," he said, hoping she could see the hunger in his eyes. "Every time I'm around you, all I can think about is kissing you."

His words had the desired effect. Kennedy gasped, her eyes widened, and a look of panic slowly spread across her face. "Don't say that, don't even think it," she said,

still backing away from him. “We’re just friends, that’s all we’ll ever be.”

“You said you wanted a vacation romance. I’m just trying to give you what you asked for,” he said, taking a couple more steps to close the distance between them. “Why waste your time with that jerk when you could have me?”

He didn’t know how much further he could push it; his body was going haywire. A part of him was hoping that she’d take him up on his offer, but she finally backed away again. “I didn’t say I wanted a vacation romance, I just said I might,” she said. “I think I should go now. I think the clam digging is over.”

She scooped up her bucket, then hurried toward the bonfires before he could say a word, and he stood watching her go, wishing he could follow her, but he bit back the disappointment, telling himself it was better for both of them this way. Nothing but heartache could come from getting involved with her, and he’d promised himself a long time ago that he’d stay away from women until he was free of his legacy. Until Kennedy appeared in his life, he’d never been tempted to break that promise. Now it was taking every ounce of his willpower to let her go .

“Here you are. I’ve been looking for you everywhere,” Max said, walking up to him. “What are you doing standing here in the dark? Who was that you were talking to?”

He forced himself to look away from the spot where Kennedy had just disappeared into the crowd. “No one really,” he finally said, shrugging his shoulders. “Just a woman I was digging clams with.”

Max studied him for a second, then let out a long sigh. “It’s happening already, isn’t it?” he asked. “Who is she? You might as well tell me. Hiding it isn’t going to make it go away.”

“She’s no one,” he insisted. “Even if she was, I just got rid of her, and I’m sure she

won't come near me again."

\*\*\*Kennedy\*\*\*

Kennedy's lips were still tingling when she walked away from Cameron, shocked by the sudden change in him, her body throbbing with need, and it was all she could do not to fall in the soft sand, thanks to her trembling legs. Taking deep breaths, she carried her bucket over to the table and plunked it down a bit harder than she intended, but her hands were shaking and she was afraid she would drop it. She looked up to find a pretty young woman watching her, a look of worry on her face, and tried to manage a smile.

It must have been more like a grimace because the woman whispered something to the man standing beside her and came out from behind the table. "You look like you could use something cold to drink," she said. "You're flushed and your hands are shaking, a sure sign of dehydration. It's easy to let it happen here on the island, but a nice cold bottle of water will take care of it."

Kennedy let the woman guide her over to a bench and sat down with a thump when her legs wouldn't hold her anymore. "I'll be right back," she said. "Don't move."

She was only gone for a few minutes, but it was long enough for Kennedy to relive everything that happened on the beach. To her utter humiliation, her body responded to the memory. "Here we go," the woman said, sitting down next to her and holding out a sweating bottle of water. "Drink some of this, it will help."

Twisting off the cap, she put the bottle to her mouth and drank half of it, hoping it would cool the desire still flowing through her, then let out a long sigh. "Thank you, that helped," she said, finally able to find her voice. "But I don't think I'm dehydrated. I wish it was that simple."

The woman was silent for a second. "Did you have a fight with your boyfriend?" she finally asked. "You look upset."

"Not exactly. It's kind of complicated," she said, then looked over at the woman. "I work with this guy, well, sort of, and he just kissed me twice. This could ruin my career, maybe even get me fired. I didn't see it coming, at least I don't think I did..."

Her words trailed off as she realized the enormity of Cameron's kiss, and she let out a long sigh of frustration, seeing her career go up in smoke. "Did you tell him that it wasn't a good idea?" the woman asked. "I mean, mistakes happen. Maybe you two can get past this."

"He more or less told me he was going to do it again if we were together again, and I can't stay away from him; it's part of my job," she said. "I don't know what I'm going to do. This wasn't supposed to happen. We were just supposed to be friends, and then he went and kissed me. Do you want to know the worst part? I want him to do it again."

"Oh my, I can see why you're so upset," the woman said, shaking her head. "It's this island. It does strange things to people. I thought it was only Max's friends, but maybe it's spreading."

"You think it's the island," she said, looking over at the woman. "I heard some rumors, but I don't usually pay attention to that kind of talk. Besides, what could an island do? It can't affect people or anything like that."

"I shouldn't have said anything. Max would kill me for talking about this with a guest," the woman said. "But I thought it might make you feel better."

"Thank you, I don't know if it helped," she said. "I'm Kennedy, by the way."

“Stella,” the woman said. “My husband and I are in charge of building the new staff quarters on the other side of the island.”

She knew instantly who Stella’s husband was; her research had told her that much, and she realized with a start that she had a reliable source for the other story. “It’s nice to meet you, Stella,” she said, truly meaning it. “I don’t know what I’m going to do now, but I do feel better. It was all just such a shock.”

“I’m glad. You had me worried there for a second,” Stella said, smiling at her. “I probably should get back. Everyone will be looking for me. If you need someone to talk to, I’d be happy to listen. I know how hard it can be to be a woman in a man’s world. Come by anytime you want, we’ll have coffee and bitch about men.”

“That sounds like an offer I can’t refuse,” she said. “I’ll bring something sweet with me.”

“That’s a deal,” Stella said, getting to her feet. “I’ll be looking forward to it.”

When Stella was gone, she slowly sipped the rest of the water bottle, outlining the questions she would ask when they met for coffee, relieved to have something to distract her. In only a few minutes, Cameron had managed to completely distort the line between personal and professional, and she wasn’t sure how to go from there. Just kissing him had ruined all her creditability as a journalist. It would cloud anything she discovered in her investigation, and on top of that, she was beginning to think that she might have gotten it all wrong.

The sound of laughter from over by the bonfire interrupted her thoughts, and she got to her feet, her stomach growling. Cameron had already ruined her story, and she wasn’t about to let him ruin the rest of the night. There was crab to eat, and she didn’t want to miss out. The mess her life and career had become could wait until morning. All wasn’t completely lost. If she could get Stella talking about the island, she might

be able to salvage her career.



### CHAPTER 8

\*\*\*CAMERON\*\*\*

After a nearly sleepless night, Cameron was in no mood to go traipsing around the jungle like a boy scout, but he'd made a deal with Max, and he wasn't going to back out even if he already felt like he'd run a marathon. He'd spent half the night berating himself for kissing Kennedy and the other half wishing he could do it again; now he just wanted to forget about the woman for a few hours. She'd completely captivated him, making him forget everything else, including Max and his increasingly worrying belief that the island was magical or mystical or something.

Pausing in mid-step, it suddenly hit him that what was happening to him was exactly what Max had said had happened to their other friends, at least in the beginning. His heart began to pound, his breath came in short gasps, and panic made every muscle in his body tense up as a strange sense of inevitability slowly settled over him as if his future had already been decided. Forcing himself to slow his breathing, he reminded himself that he was in control. He made the decisions about his life, not the island, not the dragon inside him .

Love wasn't in his future. He'd known that he was destined to take over for his father from a young age. That had been written in stone the first time he shifted. Falling for Kennedy would be a huge mistake, even if he'd never felt anything like what he felt when he was with her, even if he could sense that being with her would be one of the most incredible experiences of his life. He wasn't free to have that experience, he was tied to the clan and the family business, restricted by the rules and traditions of both, a man unable to make his own choices.

Realizing that he was still standing in the middle of the trail leading to the village, he sighed and started walking again, wishing he could just go home and forget about the island. When he arrived at the meeting point for the hiking trip, he scanned the eight or ten faces in the group, relieved to find that not one of them was Kennedy, and began to relax.

“Welcome, everyone. I hope you all got a good night’s sleep because we’re going to cover some miles today on our hike,” the instructor called. “I’m Matt, and I’ll be your guide for the morning. I know some of you are seasoned hikers, so all I ask is that you be patient with the rest of us. I also want to remind you that the jungle is a much different place than you’re used to, and while we don’t have any predators or poisonous snakes to worry about, there are still things that can hurt you, and we’re going to talk about some of them now.”

Matt was halfway through his speech when a familiar scent drifted to him on the breeze. It only took him a second to identify it, and his heart began to beat faster. A second later, he spotted Kennedy sliding into the group, her cheeks pink from rushing, her hair still wet from the shower. He let out a groan as warmth spread through him, making the woman standing next to him look over. He flashed her a smile and then looked back up at Matt.

When they finally set out, he slipped into line in front of Kennedy so he wouldn’t have to watch her while they hiked. He told himself that he could survive a couple of hours if he stayed away from her. The first hour they hiked passed more quickly than he’d hoped, and he managed to keep his distance when they stopped for a break, hiding himself in the shade under a big tree. Kennedy seemed to be happy to keep her distance as well, even if he did catch her watching him a few times, and he told himself that it didn’t bother him, that it was for the best. But he caught himself staring at her as she laughed and talked with the other hikers.

By the time they got back to where they’d started the hike, Cameron was having an

even harder time ignoring the pretty blonde who'd wormed her way into his life. "Wasn't that fun?" Matt asked the group. "There's nothing better than getting out in nature and taking advantage of what she has to offer. I hope you'll all sign up for another guided tour, but if you'd rather strike out on your own, I've got maps here for anyone who wants one."

The last thing he wanted was more nature, but he waited patiently as several people in the group took a map, including Kennedy. "I guess that's it then," Matt said. "I just want to remind you to use the buddy system, especially if you're going to tackle one of the harder trails. If there aren't any questions, you're all expected in the village for lunch, and I'm sure you're all starving after our hike."

There were murmurs of agreement and groups began to head down the path to the village, but he found himself hanging back watching Kennedy again as she chatted with Matt about something on the map. When she finally walked away, he told himself to go the other way, but instead, his feet took him over to her and there was nothing he could do about it.

"I'm sorry about last night. I don't know what got into me, well, I kind of do, but that's not what I'm trying to say," he said, shaking his head, knowing he was screwing up. "I shouldn't have come on so strong, I shouldn't have kissed you, I shouldn't have meddled in your life, but there's something about you that makes me do stupid things."

Horried that he couldn't seem to keep his thoughts private around Kennedy, he snapped his mouth closed, feeling like an idiot and wishing he'd just stayed away. "Are you blaming it on me?" she asked, narrowing her eyes at him. "Because then I'd have to remind you that you kissed me, not the other way around."

"I wasn't blaming you," he said, holding his hands up in front of him. "It was completely my fault. Honestly, I've never done anything like this before. I've barely

even kissed anyone, and I'm not exactly the kissing type."

This time, a groan escaped when he realized what he'd just said, and he waited, embarrassed, as Kennedy studied him. "Well, you sure could have fooled me," she said, a blush spreading across her cheeks. "But it can't happen again. It will mess everything up. It probably already has."

This time it was his turn to study her. "What does that mean?" he asked. "Do you have a boyfriend? You never said anything about a boyfriend."

\*\*\*Kennedy\*\*\*

Kennedy froze for a second, silently cursing her choice of words, then quickly tried to decide if she should lie to him, but in the end, she couldn't do it. "No, I don't have a boyfriend," she said. "That's not what I meant."

"You didn't answer my question. You said I messed everything up," Cameron said, his voice full of suspicion. "What does that mean?"

"I was talking about our friendship. It was going fine until you kissed me and said all those things," she said, scrambling for the right words. "It changed everything, and I wasn't ready for that."

"So, you didn't mean it about the vacation romance?" Cameron asked, his voice full of disappointment. "I thought...never mind...it was stupid."

"No, not really...you were right, I'm really not that kind of girl," she said, then let out a long sigh. "I just didn't like you making choices for me. I didn't even like that guy, but you were being such a..."

"Jerk, yeah, I know," he said, his voice full of regret. "I wasn't lying to you last night,

I don't ever act like that. I'm not exactly good with women; I'm not really the dating type, and I spend most of my time in my lab."

"Someone told me last night that the island does weird things to people," she said. "Let's blame the island and try to forget about it."

Cameron studied her for a second. "Don't tell me you believe that garbage," he said, suddenly annoyed. "That's all just a bunch of superstition and rumor. I thought you were smarter than that."

"Hey, I was just trying to give you a break," she said, wishing she hadn't said anything. "It was just something someone said to me, okay?"

"Sorry, I guess I'm a little sensitive about it," he said, shrugging his shoulders. "I know there's a perfectly good explanation for everything that's happened on the island, and I'm going to find it before I leave."

"What do you mean everything that's happened?" she asked. "I just thought the island made people fall in love. Is there more? I mean, I guess I never thought about how it happened, I just assumed...well, I don't know."

"I shouldn't be talking about this," Cameron said, shaking his head. "I don't want to encourage Max or make the rumors worse, not that you would say anything. At least, I don't think you would."

"Come on, Cameron, just a few details, I'm not a gossip," she said, trying to hide her excitement, sure that she might still be able to salvage something from her trip to the island. "I heard it only happens to Max's friends. Is that true? Are you sure it hasn't happened to other people? Has anyone tried to find out?"

As soon as the last question was out of her mouth she knew that she'd gone too far

and shut up, but the damage had already been done. “You sure are asking a lot of questions,” Cameron said, studying her again. “I really can’t talk about it.”

“Sorry. I get carried away sometimes, forget I even asked,” she said, frantically searching for a way to change the conversation. “I’m thinking about making the hike up to the cliffs on the other side of the island tomorrow. I need to ask Matt a couple more questions, so maybe I should get going.”

“That’s a difficult hike,” Cameron said. “I hope you’re taking someone with you.”

“I’ve been hiking my entire life, I don’t need a buddy,” she said. “Besides, the island isn’t that big, how much trouble could I get in?”

“Kennedy, you can’t go on a hike like that alone,” he said. “There are lots of things that could go wrong. It would be foolish, and I’m not going to let you do it.”

“Do I have to remind you that you’re not the boss of me?” she asked, narrowing her eyes at him. “If I want to go on a hike alone, I’m going on a hike alone.”

Cameron let out an exasperated sigh, “Then I’m going with you,” he said. “And don’t say no, I’ll just follow you the entire way if you do.”

She was both annoyed and touched that he was worried about her, then a little panicked at spending that much time alone with him. “You don’t have to do that, I’ll be fine,” she said. “I’m sure you have work you need to do.”

“It can wait,” Cameron said with a shrug. “I wouldn’t be able to concentrate anyway, knowing that you were out here alone.”

It was her turn to sigh, this time at the wave of warmth that enveloped her when she looked up into his eyes. “I told you this was a bad idea,” she finally said. “But you

aren't going to listen, are you?"

"Guess not," Cameron said. "What time do we leave?"

"Eight a.m. and bring a lunch; we'll be gone all day," she said, giving up the battle. "We can meet here. It's a long hike, so I'll understand if you change your mind."

"I won't," he said. "See you in the morning."

She watched him walk away wondering when she'd lost control of her investigation, how it had come to this, and how she was going to resist Cameron if he pushed her. But she knew the answer, she wouldn't be able to and that scared her more than anything, more than her career imploding again, more than losing her job. The man was dangerous and could break her heart in a second if she let him in, and she wasn't about to let that happen. She'd just gotten over Cliff and his treachery.

### CHAPTER 9

\*\*\*CAMERON\*\*\*

For the second day in a row, Cameron grabbed his lunch from the village and took it over to the clubhouse, hoping that work would distract him from the confusing thoughts in his head. He'd been over and over his conversation with Kennedy and concluded that something wasn't right. He couldn't pinpoint exactly what was bothering him, but the feeling wouldn't go away.

Max was coming out of the door when he stepped onto the porch, took one look at him and paused, waiting until he reached him. "I was going to ask how your hike was this morning," he said. "But I can see from your face that it didn't go well."

"The hike was fine, but she was there again," he said. "I swear, no matter where I go on this island, she's there."

"And she would be the woman you were with last night, the one who wasn't going to come near you again?" Max asked, then sighed when he nodded. "Well then, we'd better go to my office. It really has started again."

"This has nothing to do with the island, so don't even go there," he said, following Max down the hallway. "I just don't understand how Kennedy can turn up everywhere I am. It's like she knows ahead of time where I'll be."

"Cameron, this isn't a very big island, you're bound to run into her," Max said, opening the door and gesturing to the chair across from his desk. "It's not like she's



stalking you or something.”

When he didn't answer right away, Max sighed, “Cameron, that's a little...well, crazy,” he said. “Why would she be following you around? What possible reason could she have?”

“I know how I sound, but I've been thinking about it. She was on the boat that brought me to the island, and she showed up at the beach that first afternoon when I was there,” he said, ticking each incident off on his fingers. “The next day, she was at my sailing lesson, and then the crab boil. This morning, she showed up to the hike. That's more than coincidence, Max; that's a pattern.”

Max was quiet for a second. “Maybe, but everyone was at the crab boil, and I know for a fact that most people end up on the beach the first day that they're here, so I don't think you can count either of those,” he said. “What exactly do you think this woman is up to?”

“I don't know, but she was asking a lot of questions about the island and all the rumors today. That's what made me feel weird,” he said, scowling his face. “She sounded more like a newspaper reporter than a...well, I don't know...”

“You don't know...” Max said. “You mean you don't know what she does for a living.”

“I never thought to ask, it didn't seem important,” he said, then looked over at Max. “You don't think...no, that's ridiculous...what would she want with me?”

“It looks like we have more questions than answers,” Max said, sliding open a drawer next to his desk. “But I might be able to help a little. ”

He pulled out a folder, opened it, and scanned the pages for a second before looking

over at Cameron. “Are you sure you want to do this?” Max asked. “This is private information. It’s a bit of a violation of Kennedy’s privacy.”

“I don’t care, the woman is driving me crazy,” he said. “There can’t be anything in there I couldn’t find on the internet.”

“Good point,” Max said. “Okay, it looks like she’s from a small town just outside of Milwaukee. She’s twenty-four years old, never been married, but she didn’t list her occupation.”

“Of course not,” he said. “That didn’t really help much, but it is the same story she told me.”

“Normally, I would have had more information, but she won the trip on a gameshow,” Max said. “I don’t remember exactly which one. The producers contacted me at the last minute. Another sponsor dropped out and they needed something quick.”

“Well, then we could contact them. They have to keep all kinds of information on the contestants. Maybe they can tell us where she works,” he said. “I may just be looking for an excuse not to like her. This might all be my imagination, but I’ll feel better once we know for sure.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Max said, picking up the phone. “Why don’t you go eat your lunch? I’ll come find you when I find something.”

He picked at his food while answering emails, but his mind wasn’t on the lab, and he found himself watching the clock most of the time, hoping Max didn’t take too long. When his friend came out of his office with an unhappy look on his face, his stomach twisted into knots as a feeling of disappointment washed over him, and he stood up, unable to stay seated to hear the bad news.

“Well, there was no game show, at least I don’t think there was. The number they gave me was a dead end,” Max said. “I searched the internet for any mention of it, but there was nothing. I can’t tell you any more about Kennedy than I already have, but you can bet I’m going to start digging. Your gut feeling might have been right, she’s up to something.”

“Great, I finally find a woman who...well, never mind,” he said, letting out a long sigh, knowing it was for the best anyway. “I’m going to stay away from her now for sure.”

Just then, Stella walked into the clubhouse. “Oh, good, you’re both here,” she said. “I thought I was going to have to go look for you.”

“What’s wrong?” Max asked. “Did someone get hurt?”

“No, it’s nothing like that,” Stella said, then hesitated. “There’s just something that’s been bothering me, and well...I figured it was better to just ask. It’s probably nothing, just normal life stuff...”

“Stella, just spit it out,” Max said. “You’re starting to make me worry.”

“Okay, sorry, I just don’t want you to be mad at me,” she said. “I met a young woman at the crab boil last night. She looked really upset, so I took her aside and gave her some water. She told me that a man she was working with kissed her, that he suddenly seemed like a different person, and she liked it. She kept saying it was going to mess up her career, maybe even her life, so I...well, I told her it was probably the island and it would pass. I know I shouldn’t have talked about it, but well...she seemed so upset, I thought it would help.”

Max looked over at him, but he was staring at Stella, a weird feeling in his stomach, and didn’t notice. Something about her story was too familiar. “Stella, I’m not mad at

you,” Max finally said. “But I didn’t hear a question in all of that.”

“I’m just wondering if this is the first time the island affected someone who wasn’t connected to you, Max,” she finally said. “I mean, it’s never happened before, has it?”

“Not that I know of, but I guess it’s possible,” Max said with a shrug of his shoulders. “Honestly, nothing surprises me anymore.”

“She said it was going to mess up her career?” Cameron asked, the feeling still there. “That’s what Kennedy told me earlier today, that I messed everything up, but she wouldn’t explain.”

“That was the woman’s name, Kennedy,” Stella said, then looked over at Cameron. “Oh my, she was talking about you, wasn’t she?”

\*\*\*Kennedy\*\*\*

Kennedy knew that the smart thing to do would be to cancel the hiking trip. Being near Cameron had become almost painful since he’d kissed her, but she still wasn’t ready to give up on the story. She’d been over and over it in her head, and the truth was, she’d done nothing wrong. She’d just been doing her job, working a story. He was the one who’d stepped over the line, and she’d immediately set him straight. Her integrity was still intact, and the story was still viable if she could only figure out what Cameron was up to in that lab of his.

The hike would be her last chance to get what she wanted, then she’d have to back away. There was really no choice, the longer she hung around him, the more likely she was to give into temptation. That could not happen. Even if the story was dead, her feelings for Cameron had grown enough that she knew her heart had become involved, a dangerous place for her to be. Cliff had already done enough damage;

another broken heart was more than she could endure, and Cameron would break her heart of that, she was sure.

Her phone buzzing on the desk next to her computer made her jump, and she picked it up, surprised there was enough signal for her to get a call, then groaned when she saw who it was. Switching on the satellite connection, she took a deep breath, then connected with her editor with no idea what she was going to say. She couldn't tell him the truth. He'd just say I told you so.

"Steve, I was thinking about calling you," she lied. "I was trying to figure out the time difference. I'm horrible at it."

"It doesn't matter what time it is. I haven't heard from you in days," Steve said, an edge to his voice. "What's going on down there?"

"I'm sorry, I keep meaning to email you, but I'm making progress," she lied again. "I've been working on both stories, and I think you'll be pleased with what I've got."

"Work something up and send it to me asap," he said. "The big guys upstairs are getting anxious about the money we're spending. What have you got on that Cameron guy?"

"Well...nothing concrete yet, but I'm hiking with him tomorrow. I'm sure I can nail him down then," she said, then, hoping to distract Steve, quickly changed direction. "The other story is going even better. I made friends with someone who has direct knowledge of what this island does, and I think it's more than just making people fall in love. I'm going to have coffee with her tomorrow."

There was a long silence. "Kennedy, I didn't send you to the island to get a feel-good piece about love and romance. That kind of stuff doesn't sell papers," Steve finally said. "It would be a nice addition to the investigative piece, but it's not going to be

enough to make up for what we spent sending you there. I don't have to tell you that both of our jobs are on the line here, so you had better not be wrong about Cameron Sullivan. I was worried about this. You promised me that you were sure, but now I'm hearing something else in your voice."

"Steve, I'll get the story, I always do," she said. "You're just going to have to trust me. I know what I'm doing."

"You'd better," Steve said. "I'm not going down for you, Kennedy. Get me something soon, or I'm pulling you back in and taking the cost of the trip out of your salary."

The line went dead and she sat staring at her phone for a second, then quickly turned off the satellite connection, just in case it was on her dime. "At least he didn't threaten to fire you," she said, slamming her computer shut, getting to her feet, and walking over to the mirror on the wall. "You've made a big mess of this Kennedy. What are you going to do now?"

Quickly turning away from her reflection, wondering if she was losing her mind, she took several deep breaths, telling herself that she wasn't beaten yet. She just had to come up with a plan, treat Cameron like any other subject of a story, and stop letting her feelings interfere. If she could do that, she could get the story. Control was the key, she decided while climbing into bed. She had to keep Cameron off balance, sneak in her questions while he was distracted, then she could go in for the kill.

She fell asleep thinking about the moment Cameron revealed all his secrets to her, a smile on her face, her confidence restored, no idea that the reality of what would happen in only a few hours was going to be vastly different than her fantasies. Nor did she know that right outside her cabin, a man was settling down to wait out the night under the shelter of a bush with leaves so big they completely concealed him. Around him, the creatures that roamed freely in the dark kept their distance,

frightened by the foul scent of the anger and jealousy that consumed him .

He was still hunched under the bush the next morning when Kennedy came out of the cabin and started down the trail, a backpack slung over her shoulders, another one in her hand. When she was out of sight, the man climbed out, took a couple of seconds to let his cramped muscles relax, then started after her, mumbling under his breath, having his own fantasies about what was going to happen that day. He'd waited a long time to give Kennedy Fisher what she deserved, and his pulse quickened as anticipation flooded his system. After two years of waiting, he would finally have his revenge.

### CHAPTER 10

\*\*\*CAMERON\*\*\*

Cameron couldn't believe he'd let Max talk him into keeping an eye on Kennedy. The woman was bad news all the way around, and he just wanted to be done with her before he made a huge mistake. But here he was, setting off on an all-day hike, just the two of them. It would be a test of his control, one he wished he didn't have to endure, but Max didn't want her on her own until they knew who she really was.

He'd been telling himself that there was probably a perfectly good explanation and had even suggested that they just talk to her, but Max had shut him down. Now he was playing reluctant spy, a job he was sure that he was going to screw up since Kennedy kept him so off balance that half the time he didn't even know his own name. If she really was up to no good, he probably wasn't the best person to be watching her. He'd tried to tell Max that, but he wouldn't listen.

Spotting her waiting for him, he ignored the way his heart sped up, the thrills that swept through him, and the little surge of power when his dragon began to pay attention. "I was beginning to think that you weren't going to show up," Kennedy said, throwing a backpack at him. "This one is yours."

"What's this?" he asked, holding up the surprisingly heavy backpack. "Are there rocks in this thing or something?"

"It's your day pack," she said, looking at him like he was an idiot. "I knew you wouldn't come prepared, so I put that together for you. It's just a few essentials:



emergency supplies, extra water, and food.”

“Do we really need all this?” he asked, letting the backpack drop to the ground.

“We’re just going for the day, and the island isn’t that long. We can’t really get lost.”

“I guess you were never a boy scout,” Kennedy said, shaking her head. “Always be prepared, surely you’ve heard that before. A lot can happen out there, and I’d rather go in prepared for the worst than find myself in trouble because I was unprepared. But if it’s too heavy for you, I’m sure we can leave something behind.”

“That’s not necessary,” he said, picking up the pack and swinging it onto his back. “It seems excessive to me, but you’re in charge. I’m just along to make sure you don’t get into any trouble.”

He winced at his choice of words, but Kennedy just rolled her eyes at him. “I think it might be the other way around, but think what you want if it makes you feel better,” she said. “I hope you can keep up. We’ve got ten miles to cover, and we can’t take it slow.”

“Ten miles,” he said. “You’re kidding, right?”

“Nope, you should have looked at the map,” she said, a superior smile on her face.

“It’s not too late to change your mind.”

“Let’s go, we’re wasting time,” he said. “Don’t worry about me, I’ll be just fine.”

Kennedy turned without another word, with a look of determination in her eyes, and started down the path at a normal pace, but she began to push them over the next ten minutes. At first, he had a hard time keeping up with her; it felt like the pack weighed a hundred pounds, and he was sure that if he stopped and took the time to look, he’d discover that it was full of rocks. When they finally stopped to rest, Kennedy was

breathing as hard as he was, her hand shaking as she raised a water bottle to her lips, and it hit him that she was as tired as he was.

She's doing this on purpose because she wants me to give up. She's trying to get rid of me, he thought, his mind spinning. Max was right, she was up to something, but he couldn't figure out what it could be. There was nothing at the end of the trail but a cliff with a view of the ocean. A dozen crazy ideas popped into his mind, but he discarded them all. He was no closer to a solution than he'd been a few minutes before, but one thing he did know was that he wasn't going anywhere. He was going to stick with Kennedy and find out the truth.

When she got to her feet, her cheeks still pink, making her eyes look even bluer, he did his best to ignore the punch of desire that hit him square in the stomach. "You look tired," she said. "Are you sure you don't want to turn back? I can go on from here by myself."

"Nope, I'm good. In fact, I think I'm just getting warmed up," he said, grinning at her as he slowly let some of his power bubble to the surface. "Do you want me to lead?"

"You don't know where you're going," she said, unable to hide her frustration. "So I'll lead. You'd probably just get us lost."

When she turned and stomped up the trail, he couldn't hide the little smile that slowly spread across his face, and he didn't bother to fight the wave of desire that swept through him. He was getting used to it. This time, he had no problem keeping up with Kennedy, and he even had to force himself to slow down a few times, but he refused to feel guilty about using his power to give him the advantage. They reached the final ascent to the cliff a couple of hours later, and Kennedy stopped, her breath coming in short gasps, sweat glistening on her face, but she gave him a big smile like she was having the time of her life.

“We’ll stop here and rest for a while, have some lunch,” she said, her words coming in stops and starts as she tried to catch her breath. “The last part of the hike is the hardest. We’ll want to be fresh and rested before we try it.”

“You’re the boss,” he said, slipping off his backpack. “That was really fun. I didn’t think I’d like it, but I was wrong. The jungle is beautiful, and it felt good to push myself. I don’t know about you, but I’m starving.”

Kennedy stared at him for a second, her chest still rising and falling a little too rapidly, then forced a smile. “I’m glad that you’re having fun,” she snapped, then wrestled out of her backpack. “I hope you like sandwiches because that’s what we’ve got for lunch.”

\*\*\*Kennedy\*\*\*

Kennedy plopped down onto the ground next to her backpack, wanting to curse out loud. She couldn’t catch her breath, her legs ached, her back throbbing, and it was clear that her plan had backfired once again. Cameron was strolling around the little clearing, not the least bit tired after hiking five miles, and she began to wonder if he really spent as much time in the lab as he claimed.

She took her time unpacking her lunch, trying to buy some time so she could recover before she started questioning him. “I’m still a little out of breath. You must be in really good shape. You’re not even tired,” she said. “How do you do it? I thought you spent all your time in the lab.”

“I make time for exercise,” he said, sitting down next to her. “For my health and all that.”

They ate in silence for a few minutes, then she looked over at him. “Tell me more about what you do in the lab,” she said. “I know you said you work with DNA for

medical research, but I'm not really sure what that means."

"Like I said, it's complicated," he said, shrugging his shoulders. "And a little boring, if you want to know the truth."

"You should let me decide that," she said. "I did go to college, you know. I may not be as smart as you are, but I get along."

Cameron laughed. "Fair enough," he said. "I can't give you any specifics because most of what we do is confidential, but an example would be a drug company that wants to find out what gene causes a certain disease. They bring us the samples, we run the tests, and send them the results. It's not that glamorous, just a lot of exacting work. You wouldn't believe the paperwork we have to do."

"I can just imagine," she said. "But you seem to enjoy it, or you wouldn't work so much."

He looked over at her. "I've been working on a special project for the last few years. It's kind of personal, so I have to put in extra hours, but I'm close to a breakthrough, and it will all be over soon," he said, then shook his head. "That's enough about me and my boring life. I just realized that I don't know that much about you."

Kennedy hesitated long enough that she could tell he was beginning to get suspicious. "There's really not that much to tell," she finally said. "I have a boring job I go to every day, a little house that I love, and this is the most fun I've had in a long time. "

It was an acceptable answer, especially if someone didn't want to share anything personal without lying. "What kind of job?" he asked, refusing to let her off the hook. "You didn't really say."

"It's kind of embarrassing," she said, getting to her feet. "We should get going."

We've still got a way to go, and it's getting late."

Clearly disappointed that Kennedy wasn't going to answer him, he stepped over to her and put his hands on her shoulders. She didn't want to have to lie to him, and she tried not to look up at him; although she wasn't sure she could avoid it. Bracing herself for a direct question she couldn't answer, calling herself a fool for thinking that she could control the situation, she waited for what she knew was coming.

"Kennedy, I think we should talk," he said. "I know that..."

Before he could finish, there was a loud crack in the jungle a few feet away, and they both turned to look, but there was nothing to see but the wall of green foliage encircling them. A second later, the birds in the tree around suddenly all took flight, squawking and calling as they filled the sky with a rainbow of colors. The silence that followed was almost deafening. She felt Cameron tense up beside her, then he lifted his head and smelled the air.

"That's impossible," he said, looking around them.

"Cameron, what's wrong?" Kennedy asked. "It was just a limb breaking or something. There's nothing out there."

Another sharp crack made Kennedy jump and she turned to face the jungle, her face full of uncertainty. "Who's out there?" she called. "Come out now."

There were a few seconds of silence, then a low rumbling growl came from behind a large fern only a couple of yards away from them. Cameron shoved her behind him and started backing up. "I don't like the sound of that," he said. "I think we should get out of here and fast."

"What was that?" she asked, letting him push her back over to the trail. "Cameron,

that sounded like a growl.”

“It was,” he said, trying to get her to move faster. “I promise I’ll explain later, but we need to get out of here right now.”

They had only gone a few more steps when there was another growl, and a tiger strolled out of the bushes, its eyes locked on the two of them. Shocked, she could only stare for a second. “That’s a tiger,” she finally said. “What is a tiger doing here?”

“I don’t know, but he’s not very happy to see us,” he said, giving her another shove. “Just keep moving, but don’t run. He’ll just chase you.”

“Cameron, this can’t be real,” she said, stumbling a little. “There can’t be a tiger on the island.”

Before he could answer, the tiger growled at them, showing a set of razor-sharp teeth, then closed the distance between them in only a few strides. Trying not to scream, Kennedy clung to Cameron’s arm, taking deep breaths to keep the panic at bay, her brain still rejecting what her eyes were telling her.

“What are we going to do?” she asked, then let out a little cry when the tiger took another step toward them. “He’s going to attack us, Cameron.”

Cameron pushed her back a couple more steps. “I’m going to distract him while you go for help,” he said. “Step away slowly and then run as fast as you can. Don’t stop no matter what you hear.”

“I can’t leave you,” she said, shaking her head. “That thing will kill you.”

“No, it won’t. I promise, I know what I’m doing,” Cameron said, a strange look in his

eyes. “I need you to trust me, I’ll be fine, but I need to know that you’re safe. Can you just do this for me, please?”

She started to argue, started to tell him that she would be devastated if something happened to him, but the tiger growled again. “Please, Kennedy, just go,” he said. “I care about you. I may not be able to have you, but dammit, I won’t be able to live with myself if something happens to you.”

Mouth hanging open she could only stare at him for a second, thrills rushing through her, a strange warmth filling her. “This discussion isn’t over,” she said. “You better come back to me alive, or I’m going to kill you.”

He leaned down and kissed her, then gave her a little shove before turning to face the tiger again. His body tensed for a fight she knew he couldn’t win. She only made it a few yards down the trail before she heard the tiger growling and turned to look back at Cameron, but he was already out of sight. Taking a few more steps, she told herself that he would be fine, that she was only doing what he asked, but visions of the tiger tearing him apart while she slunk away filled her mind.

She turned and started back toward the clearing, the growling getting louder. She came to a sliding stop when she saw Cameron facing the tiger, a scream trying to break free from her chest. Sure that the tiger was about to pounce, she looked around for a weapon, but before she could find one, the clearing began to fill with electricity, the air began to shimmer, and a second later, Cameron was gone.

Standing in his place was a huge dragon, its wings slowly unfurling from a feather-covered body, a hiss coming out of its mouth as it advanced on the tiger. The air came whooshing out of her lungs, her legs turned to rubber and she plopped down on the ground just as the tiger let out a roar of fear, then turned and fled back into the jungle. When the tiger was gone, the dragon slowly turned to face her. Their eyes met, and she let out a little gasp, the brown eyes looking back at her so familiar that

she couldn't breathe for a second.

She finally managed to fill her lungs, then got slowly to her feet, her heart breaking when she saw the look on the dragon's face. "Cameron, is that you inside there? She asked, taking a couple of steps toward him, but he backed away from her. "I'm not scared, just...well, I'm not sure...maybe the other you could come back so that we can talk about this."



### CHAPTER 11

\*\*\*CAMERON\*\*\*

Cameron's protective instincts were still thundering through him, making it difficult to control the dragon as he stood staring at Kennedy, but the urge to chase the tiger down finally began to fade. With it went some of the power that fueled his change, and he could feel himself begging to shift; then, he was suddenly back in his human form, staring at the only regular human who had ever seen him in his other form. Not wanting to scare her even more than he already had, he didn't move, didn't rush to her side like he wanted to. Instead, he waited her out, wondering what her reaction would be.

She let out a little gasp and put her hand on her chest, but she didn't move either, and the seconds slowly ticked by until Kennedy let out a little sigh and started to crumple to the ground. He caught her before she hit the dirt, swept her into his arms, carried her over to the shade, and carefully lowered her to the ground. Her eyelids fluttered, but she didn't open her eyes, and he started to panic, then took a deep breath and tried to put himself in her place.

Leaving her only long enough to grab one of the packs, he knelt next to her and pulled out a water bottle and then a sweatshirt. Wadding up the sweatshirt, he lifted her head and shoved it underneath, then opened the water bottle and dribbled a few drops on Kennedy's lips. She opened her eyes a second later, let out another gasp, then closed them again, and he was afraid that she'd fainted again.

"It's okay, Kennedy. I would never hurt you," he said, stroking her cheek. I'm sorry I

scared you, but I didn't know how else to get rid of the tiger. Please wake up; you're scaring me."

"Scaring you?" she asked, her eyes fluttering open again. "After that little stunt you should be scared. When I can get up from here, I'm going to make you pay for that. What was that? What did you do?"

He was so relieved that she was okay, even if she was threatening him with violence, that he scooped her up into his arms and kissed her. She fought him for only a second before she curled her body around his and kissed him back, sending waves of pleasure shooting through him and awakening the passion between them. He groaned deep in his chest, threaded the fingers of one hand through her hair, then flipped her onto her back, and crushed her under his body.

Waves of pleasure, unlike anything he'd ever felt before, washed over him one after another, quickly followed by a throbbing need between his legs that threatened to take over all rational thought. He wanted Kennedy naked under him, wanted her writhing with pleasure, crying out his name as he claimed her, and he knew instinctively that he could have her right then, that he could take what he wanted and she wouldn't fight him.

Instead, he broke the kiss and looked down at her, his body growing warmer when she looked up at him with pleasure-filled eyes. But the passion slowly faded away and she sat up, gave him a big shove, then scrambled away from him, a touch of fear in her eyes, her lips red from his kisses, her hair a wild halo of curls.

He knew in that instant that everything had changed; they'd crossed a line and there was no going back. The truth was, he didn't want to go back, he wanted the woman sitting in front of him. What he was supposed to do next, he had no clue, but he was sure of one thing: nothing mattered but keeping Kennedy in his life, not what his parents wanted, not what the clan demanded. He'd give it all up and take banishment

with a smile if she was by his side; he just had to figure out how to make that happen.

Wondering if he'd lost his mind, starting to believe the rumors and stories about the island, he got slowly to his feet. Deciding that the first test was the simplest one, he held out his hand to help Kennedy up off the ground, holding his breath when she just studied him for a second. She finally reached up, placed her much smaller hand in his, and let him pull her to her feet, but he could feel the tension radiating from her.

"I'm guessing the hike is over," he said. "You probably want to head back now."

"You promised you wouldn't kiss me again," she said. "You can't keep doing that."

"That's what you're upset about?" he asked, smiling at her. "I did warn you it would probably happen, so you only have yourself to blame."

"Don't you turn this on me," she said, then let out a huff. "You're impossible. I can't deal with you, so stop smiling at me like that."

"Sorry," he said, wiping the smile off his face. "Is that better?"

Before she could answer, a raindrop plopped onto the ground between them, and he looked up at the sky to find dark clouds swirling around above their head. "We'd better find some shelter," he said. "Looks like it's going to rain. Where's that map of yours? Does it show a cave or something?"

Kennedy gave him a dirty look. "There's one not far from here," she said, grabbing her pack. "See, you should have been prepared."

"Well, it's a good thing you were looking out for me," he said, the smile back on his face. "Come on, let's go. We're going to get wet if we don't hurry."

By the time they got to the cave, the rain was coming down in sheets. They were both completely soaked, and Kennedy had begun to shiver. “It will be warmer inside,” he said, helping her up the little slope that led to the cave. You go on in. I’m going to see if I can find some dry wood to build a fire.”

Kennedy’s face was white, her teeth were chattering, but she nodded and ducked inside, leaving him standing in the rain. It didn’t take long to find enough fuel to keep a fire burning for several hours. He carried it all back to the cave and stacked it inside, then turned to find Kennedy still in her wet clothes, staring into the empty fire pit shivering.

\*\*\*Kennedy\*\*\*

“Kennedy, you should have put on something dry,” Cameron said, throwing the armload of wood he’d been carrying down next to the firepit. “You’re going to make yourself sick sitting there in those wet clothes.”

She looked up at him but couldn’t move, teeth chattering, head spinning, trying desperately not to faint again as the events of the last hour slowly played over and over in her mind. The shivering wasn’t just because of the cold; her world had just been turned upside down, and she was struggling to accept everything that she’d seen. Nothing would ever be the same after what she’d witnessed. That was the only thing that was clear to her at that moment; everything else was a muddle in her suddenly crowded brain.

“Oh, sweetheart, I’m so sorry,” Cameron said, grabbing her backpack. “Let me help you get out of those wet clothes. You’ll feel better, I promise. Then I’ll build a fire and make you something hot to drink.”

When he brought her sweatshirt over to her, she could only look at it. The effort it would take to put it on was more than she could handle, and she shook her head. “I

don't think I can," she said, teeth still chattering. I can't move; I'm too tired."

"That's okay, sweetheart, I'm right here to take care of you," he said, kneeling down next to her. "We're going to get your wet shirt off first, then we'll put this on."

With gentle hands, he carefully pulled off her wet shirt, then slipped the sweatshirt over her head and began to rub her arms. "I think you should take off your wet shorts, too," he said. "But I don't think I can be trusted to help you with that."

A wave of warmth washed over her and she let out a little moan of pleasure at the sensation, then looked up into his eyes. "I trust you," she said, the truth of her statement resonating through her, creating another wave of warmth. "You would never take advantage of me."

"You have more faith in me than I have in myself," Cameron said, but got to his feet and helped her up.

The feel of his warm hands on her chilled skin when he reached up under her sweatshirt to unbutton her shorts made her gasp, and thrills rushed through her, chasing away more of the cold. She didn't mean to moan, but it came from deep in her chest before she could stop it, and Cameron froze, his hands hovering near the zipper on her shorts. Then he took a deep breath and, teeth clamped tightly together, slid the shorts down her legs. Reaching up to steady herself, she put her hands on his shoulders, sending a wave of desire rushing through her and making her begin to tingle deep inside.

Legs shaking, she managed to step out of the shorts, not sure now what was making her tremble this time, the cold or the passion suddenly burning brightly between them. Swallowing back the urge to throw herself into his arms, she let Cameron help her back down on the blanket he'd spread on the ground, aware that she was too vulnerable right then to make such a big decision. Crouched next to her again, he

took her chin in one hand, tipped her head up, then kissed her tenderly before slowly backing away from her.

“I want to hold you right now, Kennedy, but I’m afraid to,” he said. “I’m going get a fire started and make you something hot to drink, then if you’re up to it, we’ll talk.”

“Okay,” she managed to croak. “Thank you for taking such good care of me.”

“It was my pleasure, sweetheart,” he said, smiling at her, but his eyes still burned with desire, and her body responded. “Sit tight. I’ll have it warmed up here in just a few minutes.”

With a proficiency that surprised her, Cameron built a fire that instantly began to warm the chilled air in the cave and gave off a happy glow that was just as comforting as the heat. After digging through the backpacks, he produced a hot cup of instant coffee, which he carefully put into her hands before pouring one for himself and settling down next to her on the blanket.

They sipped in silence, the popping of the fire the only sound in the cave, and she finally began to relax as the cold slowly seeped back out of her bones. When her cup was empty, Cameron took it, set it aside, pulled her into his arms, and held her until the fire burned low. There was so much that needed to be said, so much she had to tell him, but she was scared that he would be angry when he heard the truth, afraid that he’d turn his back on her and walk away.

He was the only thing she had left, and if she only got a few precious days with him, it would be worth it, even if it was going to cost her dearly. She let out a long sigh and looked up at him, trying to find the words to tell him who she really was and what she was doing on the island. She’d been so wrong about him, so wrong about that gut feeling she’d had the first time she saw him. She understood that now. Steve had been right, she’d completely misinterpreted her feelings.

“Cameron, I think I’m ready to talk now,” she finally said. “I want to go first. There’s something I need to tell you, and I know that you’re not going to be happy, but before we go any further, I want you to know the truth. I would appreciate it if you would remember that I was just trying to do my job; it wasn’t anything personal, or at least I didn’t think it was...”

He looked over at her. “Who are you, Kennedy?” he asked. “I hope I haven’t fallen for a woman who doesn’t exist.”

“Most of what I’ve told you is true. I did grow up in a small town just outside of Milwaukee, but I left when I went to college and never moved back,” she said, then let out a long sigh. “I didn’t win the trip here on a game show. I made that up with a little help from my boss at the newspaper I work for. I came here to do a story on you, Cameron. I was so sure that you were up to something illegal in your lab, and I thought I was going to uncover something big.”

He was silent for a long time. “And you did,” he said, then looked over at her. “A story about dragon shifters would really sell papers.”

“I would never do that to you,” she said, shocked and stung. “Do you really think that little of me? ”

“You’ve told a lot of lies since we met, Kennedy,” he said. “Can you blame me?”

“I told you I was just doing my job,” she said, her heart sinking. “And after...well, we started getting closer I never lied to you, everything I told you was the truth.”

“What about us?” he asked. “Were you faking that?”

She shook her head, “My attraction to you is what got me in this trouble to begin with,” she said, then looked over at him. “I saw you at a fundraiser I was covering for

the paper, and I got that tingly feeling I always get when a good story falls in my lap. I was curious about you so I did some research, and let's just say I read a lot of things wrong. As soon as I met you, I knew it, but I had put my entire career on the line for this story, I couldn't just give up."

"Why didn't you just talk to me?" he asked. "It would have made everything so much easier."

"In my experience, the bad guys don't usually give themselves away," she said, shrugging her shoulders. "What exactly are you doing in that locked room behind the lab?"



### CHAPTER 12

\*\*\*CAMERON\*\*\*

Cameron burst out laughing, “Oh, sweetheart, you don’t give up, do you?” he asked, then gave her a quick kiss. “That’s a long and complicated story, maybe you should rest a while before we talk about it.”

“Oh, Cameron, I’m sorry, I get carried away. I just can’t help myself sometimes,” she said. “You don’t have to tell me, I’ve already snooped on you enough.”

“And I forgive you,” he said, unable to resist giving her another kiss. “But this is something we have to talk about, it affects us both, at least I hope it does. I would feel better if you rested for a while first though, it doesn’t look like the rain is going to quit for a while, so we have plenty of time.”

“Only if you’ll lie down with me,” Kennedy said. “I need to be near you right now.”

After putting a few more logs on the fire, he gathered her into his arms and lay down with Kennedy, a feeling of peace finally settling over him. She was asleep in only a few seconds, her breath warm on his chest, and he closed his eyes, wondering if he was crazy to even be considering throwing everything away for a woman. Kennedy sighed in her sleep, and a wave of protectiveness rolled over him. He pulled her just a little closer, the answer clear to him.

He'd never felt this way about anyone in his life, never understood what it meant to truly love someone, but it had all become so clear as they stood there facing the tiger.

His life would be empty without Kennedy. She'd woken something inside him, something that would never be silenced again and he would be forever grateful. No matter what it cost, he was going to be with her; nothing else mattered, not the pack, not his family. The dragon inside him had made that clear over and over, but he'd been too stubborn to listen.

He was listening now; the message had been delivered, and he wasn't going to ignore it this time. He'd learned his lesson the hard way with the tiger. Just thinking how close the animal had come to Kennedy made his protective instincts come to life, and he wasn't about to chance another encounter like that one. He couldn't help but wonder where the animal had come from. Matt had made it clear that there were no big animals on the island; it was strange and unexplainable.

When he realized that there was only one explanation, although not a very logical one, he found himself looking around the cave as a shiver ran through him. The island could not have made a tiger appear. It wasn't possible, things don't just materialize out of thin air, but deep down he knew the truth. Closing his eyes with a sigh, he wondered how he was ever going to admit to Max that he might have been wrong. His friend would never let him live it down.

The only alternative was to lie to him, and Cameron wasn't about to do that. He'd just have to take the I told you so's and hope that his friend would forget how stubborn he'd been. That was really the least of his worries. Now that he was committed to keeping Kennedy in his life, there were going to be bigger challenges, larger problems to solve, and a life to plan together.

Aware that he was getting ahead of himself, as Kennedy hadn't even fully accepted him and his abilities yet, he closed his eyes again. Instead of thinking about the future, he needed to enjoy this moment. He'd waited so long to hold Kennedy in his arms, he was ruining it with his incessant worrying. He fell asleep listening to her even breathing and slept soundly for the first time since she'd jumped onto the boat

on the way to the island, a smile on his face.

Kennedy was the first one to stir, and he opened his eyes to find her leaning on one hand, looking down at him. “You snore,” she said, then sat up all the way and looked outside. “It’s still raining. I guess we’re stuck here for a while longer.”

Unable to resist, he sat up and pulled her into his arms. “Are you feeling better?” he asked. “Maybe we should eat something.”

Kennedy’s stomach began to growl. “I guess that’s your answer,” she said, putting her hand over her stomach. “It has been a long time since lunch.”

“Let’s see what we’ve got to eat,” he said, pulling both backpacks over to them. “I finished all my lunch, but I think you said something about emergency supplies.”

“Still think I overdid it?” she asked. “Or would you like to admit now that I’m a genius?”

“I don’t know about a genius, that might be pushing it,” he said, grinning at her. “Let’s see what you brought first. I bet it’s some of those nasty energy bars or something.”

“You’re close,” she said, pulling out a dehydrated meal in a silver package. “But we’ll have a hot meal, and Matt threw in a couple of desserts, so we can indulge our sweet tooth.”

“Spaghetti and meatballs, sounds delightful,” he said, then read the package. “It says all we need is hot water.”

“You can make them work with cold water too, it just takes a long time, and it’s a bit disgusting,” Kennedy said. “That’s why I made sure we had that little water pot.”

“I’ll build up the fire and heat some water,” he said. “I don’t think I want to try the cold-water version, thank you very much.”

“I’ll do it, I need to stretch my legs,” Kennedy said. “And it’s my turn to take care of you.”

“I like the sound of that,” he said, grinning at her. “What exactly did you have in mind?”

Kennedy gasped, a blush spread across her cheeks, and she jumped to her feet, then remembered that she wasn’t wearing any shorts. Tugging the sweatshirt down, her cheeks even pinker, she looked over at him. “Don’t you dare say a word,” she said. “I don’t suppose my shorts are dry yet?”

“Nope,” he said, still grinning. “And I’m sure glad.”

\*\*\*Kennedy\*\*\*

Kennedy scooped the last bite of spaghetti out of the bottom of the bag, shoved it into her mouth, chewed as quickly as she could, and then swallowed it with a groan of disgust. “Well, that was edible, but that’s about all I can say,” she said, shoving the spoon in the bag and closing it. “

“It will keep us alive, but that’s about it,” Cameron said, setting his bag next to hers. “I don’t know about that chocolate cake. My sweet tooth might be just fine without it.”

“Let’s save it for later, I’m not up to that experiment yet,” she said, wrinkling her nose. “Do you think it’s ever going to stop raining? It’s going to be dark soon, and if it doesn’t we may have to spend the night here.”

“Hmmm...that brings a few interesting ideas to mind,” he said, scooting closer to her. “You’re going to need someone to keep you warm. ”

“Oh yeah, and I suppose you’re volunteering for the position,” she said. “I’ll need to see your resume, Mr. Sullivan.”

“As a matter of fact, there are several positions I would like to apply for,” he said, wiggling his eyebrows at her. “You on your back would be the first one.”

Kennedy gasped. The playful look in her eyes was replaced by desire, and he had to force himself not to pull her into his arms. “Cameron, tell me about this shifter thing,” she said, her eyes locked on his. “How does it work?”

Taking a deep breath, he let it out slowly. “I’ve been avoiding this conversation,” he said. “I’m afraid that it’s going to ruin everything between us.”

“Why?” Kennedy asked. “I’ve already seen what you can do. I’ll admit that it scared me at first; I mean, you did turn into a dragon after all, but when I realized that it was you, the fear disappeared.”

“That’s not the problem, I wish it was that simple,” he said, taking her hand. “This thing between us, Kennedy, is forbidden by my clan. I’m not allowed to be with a regular human, and I have to keep the bloodline clean for my future children.”

Kennedy was silent for a few seconds. “Are you some kind of royalty or something?” she finally asked. “Are you going to get in trouble for breaking rules? What can they do to you?”

Cameron reached up and covered her lips with his finger. “I can see why you’re such a good reporter,” he said, smiling at her. “But how about asking me one question at a time.”

“Sorry,” she said. “I get...”

“Carried away,” he finished for her, then gave her a kiss. “I’m not royalty, at least not the way you’re thinking. My father is the leader of the clan, and as his first-born son, I’m supposed to be his successor. He also expects me to take over the family business, marry the right woman, and have a couple of kids to keep the family line going.”

A wave of disappointment washed over Kennedy. Cameron wasn’t a free man, he was destined for another woman. “Oh, I see,” she said, scooting away from him again. “That’s a lot of responsibility.”

“I don’t want any of it. I never have, I never will, and now that I’ve met you, I want it even less,” he said. “That secret room in my lab is there because I’m trying to prove that our ability to shift isn’t magical or mystical, it’s simply a difference in our genetic code. If I can just prove that all the old legends and stories aren’t true, maybe I can convince my father that I’m not the right one for the clan. My brother is the one who should be taking over. He’s far better suited for the job. I would hate every second of it, and I don’t want to marry someone I don’t love. I always hoped someday I would be free to find the love of my life, but I guess it didn’t quite work out that way. I found you, but I’m not free to love you.”

“What would happen if you didn’t do what your father wants?” she asked. “What can he do to you?”

“He could banish me from the clan, cut me off from all my friends and family,” he said. “I would be completely on my own. It’s the worst punishment there is in the clan, but I think you might be worth it, Kennedy. I’ve spent my entire life trying to avoid falling in love, but here we are, and I don’t know if I can go back, I don’t know if I can let you go. It might be too late for that.”

“Maybe you’ve just been waiting for me,” she said, not willing to give him up without a fight. “This thing between us feels so right, I can’t believe that it’s wrong, no matter what your clan says.”

“I’m not giving up on us, if that’s what you’re thinking,” he said, his voice suddenly full of determination. “I’m going to figure this out. I’ll stay in the lab twenty-four hours a day if I have to, but I’m not giving you up.”

“I don’t want to give you up either, especially not to another woman,” she said, then got to her feet. “You belong to me, Cameron, we’re supposed to be together. I don’t know how I know that, but I do, and I don’t want to wait any longer for you to claim me.”

Pulling the sweatshirt over her head only took a couple of seconds, but Cameron was already on his feet trying to stop her. “Kennedy, don’t...” he started to say, but the sweatshirt was already drifting to the floor of the cave, leaving her standing by the fire in only her bra and panties, and his words died away in an appreciative sigh.

### CHAPTER 13

\*\*\*CAMERON\*\*\*

Cameron kept his feet firmly planted, knew that to move even an inch would be his undoing. “Kennedy, you don’t know what you’re saying, you don’t know what that means,” he ground out between clenched teeth, the dragon inside him now fully awake and responding to her words. “Shifters bond for life when they find their perfect mate, claiming you would mean that you’d belong to me forever. That would be a dangerous thing to do, the future is so...”

“I know exactly what I’m asking,” she said, cutting him off, then took a couple of steps toward him, hands on her hips. “I’ve never felt this way about anyone, Cameron. You make me feel things I didn’t think were possible, and I’m not just going to walk away from that. If all we have are these few days then I’ll find a way to live with it, but not before I put up one hell of a fight, and this is round one. I want you, Cameron, more than I’ve ever wanted anything. Unless you can tell me that you don’t want me just as much, this is happening.”

The spark of determination in her eyes and the stubborn tilt of her chin was what finally pushed him over the edge, and he reached for her as warmth spread through him. “It doesn’t sound like I have much choice,” he said, groaning with pleasure when his hands touched her bare skin and her breasts flattened against his chest. “I know how stubborn you are when you want something. I just hope you don’t get carried away like you always do.”

“Oh, I’m counting on it,” she said, wrapping her arms around his neck. “And this



time, I'm taking you with me."

When she stretched up on her toes and kissed him, the passion between them exploded in a cascade of pleasure. All his doubts fled and he knew that this was right, that Kennedy would always be the only woman for him. Power surged through him as the dragon rejoiced deep inside him and he deepened the kiss, thrilled by the sigh that escaped from Kennedy's chest. His hands were finally free to roam, and they slid over her half-naked body until he was hard and throbbing with need, the urge to take her right then almost overwhelming.

Gently breaking the kiss, he stepped back, took a second to find some control, then slowly walked around behind her, unhooked her bra, slid the straps over her shoulders, and let it fall to the floor. Pushing the riot of blonde curls out of the way, he kissed the back of her neck, his hands slowly sliding up from her hips over her ribs to capture her plump breasts in his hands. Kennedy groaned and leaned back against him, her nipples hardening against his palms, and the throbbing need was back, but he had it firmly under control this time.

He teased the dusky peaks with his thumb and finger until they were hard and Kennedy was squirming in his arms, then he quickly twisted her around and sucked one into his mouth. Kennedy gasped, then began to moan softly in the back of her throat as he feasted on her breasts, her fingers digging into his shoulders. When he pulled away, she teetered on her feet, then opened her eyes to look up at him before reaching for the buttons on his shirt.

With trembling fingers, she slipped the buttons free, then ran her hands over his chest before shoving it off his shoulders. Beginning to tremble as much as she was when she began unbuttoning his shorts, he sucked in a deep breath, trying not to lose control, but feeling it beginning to slip again. When her hands closed around his swollen manhood, he gasped as pleasure flooded his system, and for just a few minutes he let himself float there, just enjoying the sensations thundering through

him.

When the pressure began to build to a dangerous level, he grabbed her hands and kissed each palm before putting them by her side. Hooking his fingers into her panties, he slid them slowly down her legs, then kissed his way back up, enjoying her gasp of shock and pleasure. Back on his feet, he took her hand and led her over to the blanket, then pushed her down onto her back and covered her body with his, groaning when their naked flesh touched for the first time.

Finding her mouth again, he slid his hand down her stomach between her legs and gently pushed them apart, anticipation making his heart begin to pound. After stroking the inside of the thighs until she lifted her hips to him, he slipped his finger between her folds, growling when he found her hot and wet. This time, when the need to bury himself deep inside her roared back to life, he knew that he wouldn't be able to resist for much longer, but wanted Kennedy as desperate as he was before he gave in.

Breaking the kiss, he stroked her with his finger, watching her face as pleasure slowly consumed her, his body responding when she tumbled over the edge with his name on her lips. When she opened pleasure-filled eyes to look up at him, he slipped between her legs, no longer able to deny his own gratification, but hesitated before he took her, knowing that there would be no turning back once he did.

"Please, Cameon, don't make me wait. I need you now," Kennedy purred, spreading her legs farther for him. "Take me now, I want to be yours forever."

Her words penetrated deeply into his soul, speaking to something deep inside him, and he felt it happening, knowing that the bond between them was growing stronger. A surge of warmth filled him, intensifying the driving instinct to claim what belonged to him. The dragon came as close to the surface as it could without bursting out, and he gave into all of it.

Grabbing Kennedy by the hips, he drove himself into her with one hard thrust of his powerful muscles, filling her completely and satisfying the need for a few seconds. Pleasure rushed through him, more intense than he thought possible, and for a moment he stayed where he was, reveling in the sensation of finally being joined to the woman that he loved. But the need was soon back, and he drove himself into Kennedy again, her cries of pleasure only adding fuel to the fire that was suddenly burning inside him.

He buried himself inside her over and over, her body accepting him each time, her muscles tightening around him until they were both desperate for release. When his climax finally came, he took Kennedy with him and her cries of pleasure only intensified his own, her body clamping tightly around his making the sensation go on and on until drained, he collapsed on top of her.

They lay there, both still trembling, their breath coming in short gasps as they slowly came back down to Earth, Cameron's power still filling the cave with a pulsing energy that slowly soaked into the rocks around them. On the other side of the mountain, through layers and layers of rock, the power reappeared, seeping out of the walls of another cave and making the crystal hidden there begin to glow.

\*\*\*Kennedy\*\*\*

Kennedy lay with her back to Cameron, his body pressed up against hers, watching the rain falling outside the cave, still floating on a cloud of happiness. "I don't think we're going anywhere tonight," she said. "I hope they don't start worrying about us. I'd feel terrible if Max sent out a search party in this weather. We don't really need rescuing."

"Matt knows that you came prepared, right?" he asked, a hint of jealousy in his voice. "As much time as you spent with him, he should know."

“Cameron Sullivan, are you the jealous type?” she asked, looking over her shoulder at him. “Is that what all that stuff was about with that guy on the beach?”

“It came as a bit of a surprise to me, too,” he said. “I’ve never had anyone to be jealous about. I’ll try to work on it, but I’m not making any promises; it’s not all me.”

“What does that mean?” she asked, turning around to face him. Then, she opened her mouth to ask another question but shut it again.

“Thank you,” he said, giving her a quick kiss. “It’s the dragon, he operates more on instinct than anything else, so when he’s awake, I have to control him. He really likes you, by the way; he seems to think that you’re perfect for us. He’s been driving me crazy since we met.”

“Oh, really, I guess that’s good,” she said. “Is he happy now?”

“Sound asleep,” he said. “It’s just the two of us.”

Kennedy laughed. “This may take some getting used to,” she said, shaking her head. “I have about a million questions, but I don’t know which one to ask first. ”

“Well, as long as you ask one at a time, I promise to answer as many of them as I can,” he said. “We’re really not that much different than regular people, we just have a dragon living inside of us.”

She was silent for a second, trying to decide what was most important, finally settling on the one thing that mattered to her the most. “Tell me about the clan,” she said. “How does that work?”

“Most shifters belong to a clan, it’s a way for us to have support in a world that doesn’t know we exist,” he said. “Most families have been part of their clans for

generations, we're very committed to the clan, and the rules that our ancestors set down to keep us safe. Leadership in the clan has always passed down from father to son, which is something a lot of us would like to see change, especially me."

"So, you don't have any choice?" she asked. "You couldn't just say no thank you?"

"It would be a huge insult to the clan and to my father, and would create a huge scandal," he said. "I've tried to talk to him, but he won't listen. He's determined to force me to bend to his will, it's a power thing with him. In two months, he expects me to pick a woman to marry and get on with it."

"You can't take over without getting married?" she asked. "And it has to be to another shifter?"

"That was two," he said, holding up his fingers. "Not exactly. Women don't shift, so we don't call them that, but I am supposed to choose from the women of the clan. It's really just a way for a few families to keep control of the clan. They use the reasoning that it keeps the bloodlines pure, but that's not why they do it. It's all about power and whose hands it ends up in."

"Wow, this would make a good story," she said, shaking her head. "It's almost as good as the royals over in England."

"You say that now, but Kennedy, this is serious," he said, sitting up. "We're not supposed to be together, and I have no idea what to do. I'm not giving you up, but this could get really tricky."

"I know, I'm sorry, I shouldn't have been joking about it," she said. "Too bad we can't fake a pedigree for me, pretend I'm from another clan or something. How would they know since women don't shift? I suppose there might be a risk if our kids weren't shifters, but by then, it would be too late."

“Not all boys become shifters,” Cameron said, a little hope in his voice. “It might work, but when did we decide to have kids?”

She felt herself blushing. “I guess I was getting ahead of myself again,” she said. “Don’t freak out. I was just trying to come up with something to help.”

“Oh, I’m not freaking out. In fact, I think it’s a wonderful idea,” he said, pulling her into his arms. “We should start working on that right now.”

“Now, hold on,” she said, her voice quavering a bit when his hand found her breast. “I was talking about the future.”

“Hmm...me too,” Cameron said, nuzzling her neck, his hand sliding down her body. “At least nine months from now.”

“Cameron, that’s not funny,” she said, trying to push him away. “We have to talk about this some more.”

“You brought it up, I’m just running with the idea,” he said, spreading her legs apart and finding her pleasure button with his finger. “But I can stop any time you want me to so we can discuss this more.”

The pleasure was already beginning to build deep in her loins, and she was sure that she’d die if he stopped. “I think maybe we can save that conversation for later,” she said, barely able to form the words. “But you’re going to pay for this, mister. ”

“I’ll be looking forward to it,” Cameron said, sliding between her legs, then deep inside her. “You belong to me now, Kennedy. You’re mine until the end of time.”

### CHAPTER 14

\*\*\*CAMERON\*\*\*

Cameron woke with a start from a sound sleep, opened his eyes, and looked around the cave, disoriented for a second, then remembered where he was. Kennedy was sleeping on her side, her back pressed up against him. The rain had stopped outside, but he knew that wasn't what had woken him. He lay there listening to the silence for a long time, his senses telling him that something wasn't right, but the feeling slowly faded a few minutes later. Discarding the idea of going outside to check on the noise, he snuggled back up to Kennedy, closed his eyes, and drifted instantly back to sleep.

A few minutes later, a shadow drifted silently across the opening of the cave, then disappeared into the trees, but this time Cameron slept through it. When the man was far enough away from the cave, he broke into a run, determined to get back to the boat he'd stashed in a cove. He'd just captured the story of a lifetime, and he had pictures to prove it. He was going to be a very rich man.

The fact that he had Kennedy Fisher to thank for it rankled just a bit, but he wasn't done with her. The story would be only the first step. He had a score to settle with the little bitch. No one, especially a woman, got the scoop on him. She had to pay for what she'd done. But first, the world was going to get a good look at the monsters that lived right alongside them, and he was going to be the man to deliver the message.

The jungle was a shimmering spectacle of light when they came out of the cave the next morning. Drops of water covered everything, refracting the sunlight and giving

them a show as they walked away from the cave. "I'll never forget this place," Kennedy said, taking his hand. "This will always be our special place."

"Anywhere you are is my special place," he said, grinning at her. "You can take that any way you want to, by the way."

Kennedy gasped, getting his joke, "Cameron, you're terrible," she said. "But on the other hand, that was very sweet."

He laughed. "Come on, we'd better get back to the village and clear things up with Max," he said. "He's probably worried sick that you did something to me."

"Well, I did," she said, wiggling her eyebrows at him. "I turned you into a sex maniac."

"Hey now, I wouldn't go that far," he said. "I just want you...all the time."

"Behave yourself, mister," Kennedy warned, stepping away from him. "I know that look. We're not doing that out here in the open, so just forget it."

"Oh, come on, the bushes will hide us," he said, taking her hand and trying to pull her off the trail. "It will only take a few minutes."

"I was just kidding about the sex maniac thing," she said, but let him lead her off the trail into the privacy of the dense greenery. "You can't be serious."

"I've never been more serious about anything in my life, Kennedy," he said, pulling her into his arms. "You've been telling me to have more fun for days. Where's your sense of adventure?"

"I didn't mean..." Kennedy started to protest, but his hands were already busy with



the button on her shorts, and the words died away with a sigh.

When they finally emerged from the jungle quite a while later, Kennedy's cheeks were flushed, and she had a satisfied smile on her face. "Now we can go back to the village," he said, grinning at her. "Unless you want to explore the jungle some more."

Kennedy just shook her head at him. "Incorrigible, that's what you are," she said. "I created a monster."

"But I'm your monster, so you only have yourself to blame," he said, taking her hand. "And now you're stuck with me."

"I can think of worse things," she said, smiling at him. "I hope Max understands why I did what I did. I don't want him to be mad at me; you're one of his best friends."

"He'll understand," he said. "You haven't really done anything wrong, other than telling a few lies."

"I hope that you're right," she said, looking up at him. "I can't believe how wrong I got everything. I can't believe I thought you were a bad guy. Looking back at it now, I see that it seems so silly."

"But it brought us together," he said, smiling down at her. "Max is going to give the island all the credit, you know that, right?"

Kennedy was silent for a second, "Where do you think that tiger came from?" she asked. "I've been thinking about it, and I can't think of a logical explanation. Tigers aren't native to these islands, and they're not even close. So how did one get here?"

"I wish I had a good answer to that question. I was completely convinced that all this talk about the island influencing people's lives was just that, talk. I made that very

clear when I got here,” he said, then shook his head. “Now, as much as I hate to admit it, I’m not so sure. Between the stories I’ve heard and our little encounter with the tiger, it’s getting harder to deny that it might be true.”

“It’s made me a believer, that’s for sure, that tiger was real, not our imagination and if you hadn’t shifted, it would have killed us both,” she said, then hesitated for a second. “Cameron, I think I should tell you that I was going to do a story about the island too. It was my editor’s idea at first, but when it looked like I might have been wrong about you, it started to sound like a good idea to me, too.”

“You said was,” he said, studying her. “Are you still planning to do the story?”

Kennedy shook her head. “Besides the fact that I’m personally involved, it’s not really my kind of story,” she said, then took his hand, making him feel the warmth of their love. “What’s happened to us since we came to the island is private, Cameron. I’m not about to share it with the entire world.”

“It’s going to be hard enough to tell Max; he’s going to be saying I told you so for the rest of our lives,” he said with a groan, then looked over at her and grinned. “I’m going to need lots of sympathy.”

“You’ve got that look in your eye again,” she said. “Behave yourself. I’ll give you plenty of sympathy when you deserve it.”

He laughed. “You drive a hard bargain, sweetheart,” he said, then looked up to see Max striding toward them, a mixture of anger and worry on his face. “But get ready for that sympathy. Here comes Max and he doesn’t look happy.”

\*\*\*Kennedy\*\* \*

Kennedy’s stomach did a summersault. Max had every right to be angry with her, and

he might not be as forgiving as Cameron. “What the hell have you two been doing?” Max asked when they were close enough, then looked at their joined hands and let out a groan. “I should have known, but did you really have to block out the entire mountain with that storm? Do you have any idea how hard that was to explain to the rest of the people on the island? I’ve been doing damage control since it started yesterday afternoon. I was just glad to see it was gone when I woke up this morning, not that I slept that much...”

“Hold on,” Cameron said, interrupting Max’s tirade. “It was a storm, Max. We don’t control the weather. I’m sorry we didn’t come back sooner, but it rained most of the night, so we came back as soon as we could.”

Max let out a huff. “The only place it rained was up on the mountain where you were,” he said. “Look around you. Does it look like it rained here all night?”

They both looked around and then at each other. “No, but you can’t blame us,” Cameron said. “Besides, even if it was our fault, I don’t know how we could have stopped it. By the way, there’s a slim possibility that there’s a tiger loose on the island.”

Max’s mouth popped open, and he stared at them in shock. “Cameron, that wasn’t the way to tell him,” she said, elbowing him in the ribs. “Now he’s even more upset, and I still haven’t told him the truth about why I’m here.”

“A tiger...on the island. This can’t be happening. I don’t know how much more of this I can take,” Max said, then looked at the two of them. “My cabin, right now. We’re going to get to the bottom of this and fast. Do I really need to send someone out to look for a tiger?”

“It looked real enough yesterday,” Cameron said, a sheepish look on his face. “I might have been wrong about the island. There might be something to what you’ve

been telling me.”

“You think,” Max said, rolling his eyes. “Let’s go. I’ve got to call Mateo, he’s the only one I can trust with this. If there’s a tiger roaming around the island, he’ll be able to find it.”

“Okay, start talking,” Max said before the front door to his cabin was even closed. “Tell me about the tiger first. We’ll get to the rest later.”

“Do you think we could at least sit down,” Cameron said. “We just hiked five miles.”

“Talk while you sit,” Max said, leading them back to the kitchen. “What the hell happened up there?”

“We stopped for lunch about half a mile from the cliff. We were almost done eating when a tiger came strolling out from the jungle,” he said. “It was clearly thinking we were dinner, so I sent Kennedy for help, but of course, she didn’t listen and came back. I finally had to shift to chase it off. The storm started not long after that. We found our way to a cave and waited it out, and now here we are.”

Max studied them for a second. “I have a feeling there are a few details you left out, not that I want to hear them,” he said, holding up his hands. “I just need to know if you two are together now, because it sure would be nice if this was the end of it.”

Cameron looked over at her, then back at Max. “We’re as together as we can be,” he said. “I’ve got a lot of stuff to work out, but I’m not giving Kennedy up even if I have to cause a big scandal. You should know that right now. You know what my father expects, Max. This is going to be a fight, but I don’t see what that has to do with the island or you.”

“Oh, it will, just you wait and see,” Max said, then looked over at Kennedy. “Now,

do you want to tell me who you really are?"

Suddenly on the spot, her stomach clenched with nerves. "First, I just want to say that I'm sorry I lied to you, but as I explained to Cameron, I was trying to do my job," she said, then let out a long sigh. "Now, it's all a bit embarrassing, but I'm a reporter. I saw Cameron at a fundraiser, and well...I think I mistook attraction for the feeling I always get when I'm onto a good story. My editor and I cooked up the game show thing so I could come to the island and get close to him. Now I'm pretty sure I'm going to get fired when Steve finds out there's no story."

"She thought I was doing something illegal in the lab," Cameron said, shaking his head. "I told her the truth. She knows everything."

"I see," Max said, studying her. "I hope we can trust you, Kennedy. You know secrets few regular humans know. It would be devastating if the world found out about shifters; it would be the end of our way of life."

"I would never betray Cameron; I care too much about him," she said, looking Max directly in the eye. "It's probably going to cost me my job, but that's a small price to pay for what I've gained since I came here, and I'm not going to risk any of it for a newspaper story. It wouldn't be worth it."

Max sat back in his chair and let out a long sigh. "This island is giving me grey hair," he finally said. "I have a feeling this isn't over, so you two better hope this thing between you is strong enough to weather what's coming."

His words sent a shiver of apprehension through her, but she kept the smile on her face. There were still a lot of obstacles in their way, and she knew that there were some big choices in their future. Their love was so new, so fragile, she couldn't help but remind herself it might not be enough to get them through what was coming. Happily ever after rarely happened, especially not when everyone in Cameron's life

except Max would be against their love.

As if sensing where her thoughts had gone, Cameron took her hand under the table. “We’re going to fight to be together. I’m willing to give everything up for Kennedy if that’s what it takes,” he said. “I hope it doesn’t come to that, but if it does, I hope you’ll be in our corner.”

“We’ll all be there for you if it comes down to that,” Max said. “The eight of us are family, and we’ll support you to the end.”

“Good, because I think we’re going to need it,” Cameron said. “Now, if you’re done grilling us, I think we’d both like to go take a nap. We didn’t get much sleep last night.”

“Cameron,” she hissed, feeling her cheeks turning pink. “That was too much information.”

“I agree,” Max said, then shooed them away with his hand. “Go on, you two, I have to make a phone call and listen to Mateo tell me I told you so a million times before he goes to look for a tiger that he won’t find. I don’t know why I opened this resort in the first place.”

### CHAPTER 15

\*\*\*CAMERON\*\*\*

Cameron woke with the first rays of sunlight but didn't move. Kennedy was curled up next to him, and he didn't want to disturb her yet. He'd laid awake for several hours the night before, desperately searching once again for something that would allow him to step away from leading the clan without disgracing both himself and his family. He'd finally fallen into a fitful sleep full of disturbing dreams, then woken a couple of hours later, shaken and even more worried than he'd been before.

Forcing himself not to think about losing her, he let his mind drift back to the cave and the time they spent there, reliving every moment. Then it hit him. He held his breath, thinking about it for a second, then let out a little whoop of excitement, the possibility bringing with it a ray of hope. Finally able to fall asleep, he'd fallen into a deep slumber and awoken to the birds singing in the trees and the sun shining in through the window.

Easing himself out of bed, he went to the kitchen and started a pot of coffee, then looked through the refrigerator for something to make for breakfast. After pulling out eggs, cheese, butter, and milk, he started cooking, hoping to surprise Kennedy with breakfast in bed, then see where things led. He knew that he was a bit like a kid with a new toy and he should probably control himself, but just thinking about Kennedy in the next room sent waves of desire rushing through him.

When he finally carried the tray into the bedroom, he nearly dropped it when she opened sleepy eyes and looked at him from across the room. "Well, good morning,

sleepy head,” he said. “You look so appetizing. I don’t think I even want to bother with breakfast, but I thought you might need your strength.”

Kennedy sat up in bed and pushed her hair away from her face. “Food first,” she said, grinning at him. “Sex afterward, but there better be some coffee on that tray if you think that you’re going to get lucky.”

“Only the finest the island can grow,” he said, then looked down at the cup on the tray. “Maybe it’s the coffee; maybe that’s what makes people fall in love.”

Kennedy laughed. “Then wouldn’t everyone on the island be falling in love?” she asked. “Now, wouldn’t that be something? Max would really have some grey hairs!”

It was mid-morning before they got out of bed and got dressed. “I have to call Steve, and I’m not looking forward to it,” Kennedy said. “He’s going to fire me for sure, and I don’t blame him. He’s going to be in a lot of trouble for authorizing this trip for nothing.”

“I’m sorry, Kennedy,” he said, pulling her into his arms. “I wish there was something I could do, a way to make this all okay.”

She looked up at him. “You do just by being here,” she said, resting her head against his chest and soaking up his warmth. “But this is something I have to do alone.”

“Well then, I’ll give you some privacy,” he said. “I want to check in with the lab anyway. There’s something I thought about last night, something that might help us.”

“What is it?” Kennedy asked, her eyes filling with hope.

“It’s not the whole answer, but it could smooth the way for us to be together,” he said. “But I don’t want to say anything until I know for sure.”



Kennedy gave him a dirty look. “You know how much I hate secrets,” she said. “Don’t make me wait too long.”

“I’ll be back later this afternoon. I’ll fill you in then, I promise,” he said. “I need to run my idea by my assistant first. He’s almost as smart as I am. If it’ll work, he’ll know.”

He left Kennedy sitting in front of her computer, her phone in her hand, a nervous look on her face, and wondered if he should stay, but she shooed him out after blowing him a kiss. Max was in his office staring at his computer screen when he walked into the clubhouse. A look of fury was on his face, and he almost turned around to leave, but his friend saw him.

“You’d better come take a look at this,” he said, a hard edge to his voice Cameron had only heard a few times before. “I don’t know which one of us is the bigger fool.”

A bad feeling in his stomach, he walked around behind the desk, then staggered back a step when he saw a full-color picture of him in his dragon form filling the screen. “What the hell?” he asked. “Where did that come from?”

“That’s just the beginning,” Max said, sliding out of his chair. “You’d better sit down and read this.”

Heart hammering in his chest, betrayal already leaving a bad taste in his mouth, he slumped down in the chair and read the article that came with the picture. When he was finished, he looked up at Max, feeling more devastated than he had ever been in his life. “It was all a lie,” he said. “She promised she wouldn’t write the story. She looked you in the eye and promised that she’d never tell anyone. How could we both have been so wrong?”

“I don’t know, I was so sure that she was being genuine last night,” Max said,

shaking his head. “I’m good at reading people, I always have been. That’s why I was so good at making money, but I didn’t see this coming, Cameron.”

“Neither did I,” he said, scrolling back up to the top of the article. “Wait, Max, this isn’t Kennedy’s byline; according to this, some guy named Walter Brighton wrote it.”

“Maybe they were working together,” Max suggested. “How else could she have gotten that photo? She couldn’t have taken it herself, you would have noticed.”

“That might explain it, but it doesn’t feel right,” he said, pushing the chair back from the desk. “Kennedy cares about me. I know she does. She wouldn’t have done this, I’m going to go talk to her.”

“Just be careful, she could be a very good liar, and she already knows too much about us,” Max warned. “I know you think you love her, but don’t let that get in the way of good sense.”

“I hope we’re both wrong about this, but I’ll be careful. I can’t afford not to be,” he said. “Will you print me out a copy of that article? I’m going to need it when I confront Kennedy.”

\*\*\*Kennedy\*\*\*

“Kennedy, that better have been a joke,” Steve said, his voice devoid of emotion. “I know I did not just hear you tell me that there’s not a story, I did not hear you tell me that all the money we spent is wasted, and I definitely didn’t hear you tell me that it’s because you got emotionally involved, whatever that means.”

“I’m sorry, Steve, I never meant for this to happen,” she said. “I know you went out on a limb for me; I know I screwed up, and I wish there was a way to fix it, but I read it all wrong. Cameron isn’t a bad guy; he’s just what he looks like: a boring scientist

who works with DNA all day.”

“And the other story?” Steve asked. “Don’t tell me that story is dead too.”

“That’s where things get complicated, and my involvement becomes a problem,” she said, hoping Steve wouldn’t push the issue, knowing she couldn’t reveal the island’s secrets. “I’ll understand if you want to fire me. It might help save your job, and I’ll pay back everything it cost to send me here, then the paper won’t be out any money. It might not be so bad, just blame it all on me, tell them I’ve lost my edge, that I’m washed up... I’ll be okay, Steve. I always land on my feet.”

There was a long silence on the line, then Steve let out a long sigh. “Kennedy, I’ve known you a long time. This doesn’t sound like you at all,” he said. “What the hell is going on there? Is this Cameron guy really this important to you? We’re talking about your job, your life, here. Are you really willing to throw it all away for a man?”

“Steve, I know this is hard for you to understand, but something happened here that changed my life,” she said. “I can’t jeopardize it for a story, even one as good as this one. Besides, I’m personally involved; my credibility is shot all to hell. I wish you weren’t the one who has to pay for my mistake, but if it’s any consolation, I’ve never been happier in my life.”

“Wow, this guy must be special,” Steve said, then hesitated. “I just hope he’s not...well...another Cliff.”

“He is special, Steve, more special than you could ever imagine,” she said. “I am really sorry about this. You’ve always been there for me, and I feel like I’m letting you down. ”

“Because you are,” he said. But I forgive you. I’ve been married for forty years this spring, and my wife comes first in my life. I know what love feels like, and if you’ve

found the real thing, then I'm happy for you."

"Thanks, Steve," she said. "Keep in touch."

She disconnected the call, then turned off the satellite connection before deleting it from her computer, trying not to panic that she was suddenly unemployed. There had been no choice, though, she reminded herself. Even if she wasn't in love with Cameron, she couldn't have written a story that didn't exist. He wasn't doing anything illegal in the lab; he was just trying to find a way to extricate himself from the weight of his family obligations.

Feeling a little better, she shut down her computer and looked up at the clock, disappointed when she saw that it would still be hours before Cameron came back. Before she could decide what to do with the time, the front door swung open, and he came storming in, his face full of anger.

"Cameron, what's wrong?" she asked, turning to face him. "What happened?"

"I'm hoping you can tell me," he said, shoving a piece of paper in her face and then slamming it down on the desk. "Was it all just a bunch of lies? That's what I really want to know. Did you fake all of that just so you could get a story?"

Shocked, it took her a second to look down at the paper he'd put on her desk, but her heart sank instantly when she saw the full-color picture at the top of the page. She gasped, then picked the paper up and stared at the picture for a long time before quickly reading the article underneath. Heart hammering in her chest, she looked up at Cameron, not sure if she was angry or heartbroken that he would believe that she'd do something like that.

"You can't honestly believe I did this," she said. "It's not my byline. It's that slime, Walter Brighton. He and I have been enemies for years. He thinks I ruined his career.

I got to a story he was working on before he did, and it cost him his job. He's been after me since then. He must have followed me here... oh, no, this means he was there that night spying on us. He must have seen everything. This is all my fault."

"You're not working with guy?" Cameron asked, studying her carefully. "I want to believe you, Kennedy, I really do."

"I know that I've lied to you before, but Cameron, I would never work with that slime ball," she said. "He works for one of the sleaziest newspapers in the business. That's definitely not my style, and I promise you that no reputable newspaper is going to pick up this story. It will make a stir for a few days, then go away when there's an alien sighting or a cow born with two heads. I promise you, I know the newspaper business."

"And if it doesn't?" he asked, still glaring at her. "This could be a major problem, Kennedy. If shifters are ever exposed, it will be the end of us."

"We'll figure something out. I've never let Walter get the better of me, and I'm not about to start now," she said, pushing away the heartache that threatened to overtake her. "We just have to come up with a plausible explanation for that picture. We could say it was a balloon or a kite or something like that. Then it would just be our word against his. We might even be able to humiliate him in the process. He deserves it after spying on us like that."

Cameron studied her silently for a few seconds; then all the tension drained out of his body, and a look of relief spread across his face. "I knew you didn't do it. I'm sorry I was so tough on you, but I had to make sure that you weren't lying," he said, then pulled her to her feet and into his arms. "Now, let's talk about that idea of yours some more."

"Hold on a second, you didn't really think I did it?" she asked, scowling up at him.

“That’s terrible, Cameron, you could have just asked me, you didn’t have to...”

He cut her off with his mouth, and when they finally came up for air, she wasn’t mad anymore; in fact, she was feeling very generous. “I did ask you,” he said, grinning at her. “Now, how are we going to show this Walter character that he’s messing with the wrong people?”

### CHAPTER 16

\*\*\*CAMERON\*\*\*

Cameron followed Kennedy up the steps to Max's front door, keeping her hand firmly grasped in his, aware of how nervous she was but proud that she wanted to fight her own battle. After taking a deep breath, she reached up and knocked, then stepped back to wait until Max opened the door, her foot anxiously tapping a rhythm on the porch. He gave her hand a squeeze, then smiled at her when she looked over at him, hoping Max would listen to what she had to say.

"Well, here we are again," Max said when he opened the door. "I guess you've come to explain yourself again."

"I didn't write this, and I'm insulted that you think I would," Kennedy said, shoving the paper into Max's chest. "I was completely honest with you the last time I was here. You would have saved yourself a bunch of trouble if you'd come to me instead of inventing your own version of the truth and getting yourself all worked up and angry with me."

It was hard not to laugh when he saw Max's look, but he held it in, knowing it would only make things worse. "Now hold on a second," Max sputtered. "How do you explain that picture and the story, then?"

"Do you see this?" Kennedy asked, tearing the paper out of his hand. "This is called a byline, and I don't see my name here, do you? I didn't write this story, I wasn't working with this slime ball. He must have followed me onto the island and must

have been following us that day. He's done it before. I just didn't think he'd go this far."

Max's eyes widened. "You know this guy?" he asked. "You really think he followed you?"

"I told you, Max, she wasn't involved," he said over Kennedy's shoulder. "They've got history. If you'll let us in, I'm sure Kennedy would be happy to explain it."

Max let out a long sigh and stepped back to let them in. "I think this island is making me paranoid," he said. "I'm sorry, Kennedy. I didn't want to believe it either, but..."

"It's okay, Max. I'm sorry I brought Walter to the island," she said. "I had no idea he was following me. I wonder how he got here. I mean, it was really hard for me to get here on such short notice."

"We've had a few issues with people sneaking on the island. There's just too much coastline and too many places to land a small boat," he said. "Mateo and I have been going round and round about more security, and he's finally agreed to let Harrison come on board and help us out."

"Harrison is one of us," he explained to Kennedy when she looked over at him. "He was a Navy seal; now he owns his own private security business and he's good at what he does."

"Well, that explains how he got here. I'm just sorry it happened," she said, then looked over at Max. "How much attention has the story gotten?"

"A lot more than I would like. A couple of other papers have picked it up, and it's all over the internet," he said. "Who is this guy anyway?"



Kennedy swore under her breath. “He’s a low-class reporter who works for one of the sleaziest papers in the country, the kind you pick up at the checkout in the grocery store,” she said. “I didn’t think anyone would take him seriously.”

“Well, they are, and we’ve got a problem,” Max said. “Since this popped up, I’ve had so many requests for reservations I had to shut down the phones and my computer almost crashed. If I don’t find a way to get this mess out of the news, I’m going to have a major problem on my hands. I’ve already got half the staff down in the bay turning boats away. If it gets any worse, they won’t be able to keep people off the island.”

“I might have an idea if you’re willing to listen to me,” Kennedy said. “I know this is all my fault, but I really do think my idea will work.”

“I’m willing to listen to any ideas you might have at this point,” Max said. “You’d better come in, I’ll put on some coffee.”

“We just need to give a plausible explanation for that picture,” Kennedy said, following Max through the cabin. We could say it was a balloon, or a kite, or something like that. I haven’t really worked out all the details.”

Max was silent as he put together a pot of coffee, then turned to face them. “Sit,” he ordered, then joined them. “So, basically, we counter the story with a statement of our own claiming that it was...a kite. Do you really think all those crazy people out there are going to believe that?”

“I thought about that too, and no, I don’t think it would get rid of all of them,” she said. “That’s where my plan gets a little tricky. We need to produce this thing, the kite or balloon or whatever. I’m not sure how we could pull that off before this thing really gets traction. It would take some very skilled people, and we’d need to be ready tomorrow.”

“I see where you’re going with this,” Max said. We make this thing, then reveal it tomorrow. Mystery solved, everyone goes away.”

“Exactly, but I don’t know if we can pull it off,” Kennedy said. “It’s going to have to look realistic and be able to fly.”

“Well, we’re not alone on the island,” Max said, getting to his feet. “There are some very talented people around here who love the island, and I’m sure they’ll be willing to help, but we don’t have any time to waste.”

Before he could move, there was a knock on the front door, then Keith’s voice echoed through the house. “Max, are you here?” he called. “We’ve got an update for you from the other side of the island.”

“Perfect, here comes our engineer and our builder,” Max said, a look of relief on his face. “I knew keeping them on the island would pay off eventually.”

\*\*\*Kennedy\*\*\*

Kennedy could see that Stella recognized her as soon as she walked into the room and knew that she was going to have to make another apology, even though she really hadn’t lied to the other woman. “You must be Kennedy,” the man with her said. “I’m Keith. I understand you and my wife have already met.”

“Yes, we met the night of the crab boil. It’s nice to meet you,” she said, then looked over at Stella. “Hello again.”

“Hi, Kennedy. I see that your little problem worked out just fine,” she said, smiling at her and instantly putting her at ease. “We need to put aside some time for some girl talk. I’m starved for female company, it’s a kind of thin around here.”

“I would like that,” she said. “But first, I think we need your help with something, well...it’s my mess we’re trying to clean up, but it affects everyone...”

“Of course we’ll help,” Stella said without hesitation. “This island is our home. As crazy and unpredictable as it is, we love this place and wouldn’t want to see anything spoil it.”

“But first, we need to talk about how we’re going to protect the island,” Keith said. “The boats have all left for the night, but you know they’ll all be back in the morning. I don’t know how long we can keep this up.”

“Kennedy has an idea how we can put a stop to the whole thing, but it’s going to take some doing,” Cameron said. “I don’t know about you all, but I’m starving. Let’s put together some dinner while we talk about it.”

An hour later, after many discussions, Stella spending some time jotting ideas down on paper and then running the numbers, as she called it, they sat down to a meal on the patio overlooking the ocean. No one spoke as they filled their plates. The weight of what they were trying to accomplish had exhausted them all, but when their plates had been filled, Stella looked at them all, a smile on her face.

“It’s got to be a hot air balloon, and I think I figured out how we can do it, and we’ve got everything we need right here on the island,” she said. “The only trick is going to be getting Marie to part with some of that fabric in her back room, and we all know how attached she is to it.”

“Leave that to me,” Max said. “Marie is one of us. She’ll want to help.”

“We’re going to need more than just the fabric,” Stella said. “We’re going to need her to take over sewing the balloon; it’s going to be a huge job. She won’t be able to do it alone.”

“Don’t let her hear you saying that,” Max said. “She’ll never let you in the shop again. ”

“So, this is really happening?” she asked. “We’re going to build a hot air balloon that looks like Cameron?”

“No, we’re going to build a hot air balloon that looks like the picture in the newspaper article,” Stella said, a grin slowly spreading across her face. “Then we’re going to launch it tomorrow afternoon in front of everyone on the island. That should put an end to all the wild stories and bring peace back to the island.”

“Okay, you all dig in. We’ve got a lot of work to do and not much time to do it in,” Max said. “Stella, you and Keith are going to be in charge of building the balloon and the burner, Cameron, you’ve got the science background, so use it where it will help most. Kennedy, I’m putting you in charge of public relations. We need to get something out there right now, get this out to the public so everyone knows by tomorrow morning.”

“Max, I’ve never done anything like this before, I’m a newspaper reporter,” she said. “I don’t know the first thing about putting a press release together or how to get it out there. Don’t you have someone who does this stuff for you?”

“I’ve never needed one. I don’t need to advertise the island to fill it up,” Max said, shrugging his shoulders. “You’re a writer, Kennedy. Just do what you do best, and you’ll be fine.”

“He’s right,” Cameron said. “You’re the perfect person to do this, and it was your idea, sweetheart. There’s no one who can handle the publicity better than you.”

“I feel like I’ve already screwed up so much,” she said. “I don’t want to blow this.”

“You won’t,” Cameron said. “Just think about Walter Brighton. You don’t want to let him win.”

“No, I want to humiliate him,” she said, feeling the old spark coming back. “And I don’t want all of you exposed either. I just need to get over myself and move on.”

“We all make mistakes,” Stella said. “It’s how you handle that mistake afterward that counts.”

“Thank you for reminding me,” she said, smiling at her new friend. “It’s easy to forget that sometimes. I’ll get started as soon as we’re finished eating and everything is cleaned up. I’m going to need my computer. I think I’ve got some software on there that should be helpful.”

“We’ll go get it after dinner,” Cameron said. “I’m sure Max won’t mind if you work in his office.”

“I can get it on my own. You have other things you need to do,” she said. “I’m a big girl; I can walk to my cabin alone.”

“How about I take her to get the computer?” Max interrupted. “I need to sweet-talk Marie into helping us, and it might be easier if the brains behind this idea were with me.”

Cameron relaxed. “That’s fine,” he said. “I just don’t want you out there on your own right now.”

She sighed. “I don’t think Walter is going to try to hurt me, Cameron,” she said. “He’s a royal pain, but I don’t think he’s violent.”

“I’m not taking any chances. You mean too much to me,” he said. “Now, be a good

girl and go with Max.”

“You’re going to pay for that later,” she leaned up and whispered in his ear. “You’ll never call me a good girl again.”

“I’m looking forward to it,” he said, grinning at her, then slapped her on the butt. “Now, off you go. Max is waiting.”

### CHAPTER 17

\*\*\*CAMERON\*\*\*

Cameron longed for nothing more than a hot shower and a comfortable bed as he made his way to the village. He'd been working for hours with Keith and Stella building the burner for the balloon. He wasn't used to hard physical labor, and his muscles were aching, but he wanted to check on the balloon's progress before he called it a night. The village was deserted, a strange sight, but a light burned brightly behind the blinds of the little clothing shop.

He slipped through the unlocked door, followed the sound of sewing machines into the back room, and then froze for a second when he saw the older woman bent over a whirring needle. She looked up a second later, a big smile spread across her face, and she got to her feet, crossed the room, and then gave him a big hug before pulling back and looking at him.

"Cameron Sullivan, what took you so long to come see me?" Marie asked. "You've been here almost a week and nothing. I've spent more time with your woman than I have with you."

"I'm sorry, Marie," he said. "Max didn't tell me that it was you he was talking about earlier tonight. I had no idea you were on the island. I would have been here sooner if I'd known. You're like family to me, I don't know what we all would have done if you hadn't been there to take care of us."

"You boys ran me ragged, but I loved every minute of it. I was lost when you all

grew up, but now I have this wonderful place. Max made all my dreams come true,” she said, then looked across the room. “I like her, Cameron. She’s sweet and smart. She brought us coffee and sweets.”

He looked over at the couch pushed up against one wall where Kennedy was sound asleep, a blanket draped over her. “She’s had a couple of crazy days,” he said, warmth spreading through him as he watched her sleeping. “How long has she been here?”

“She showed up about half an hour ago; she looked so tired I told her she should rest, and she fell asleep almost instantly,” Marie said, then looked up at him. “You’ve found the one. I can see it in your eyes.”

“I love her more than anything in the world. I think we’ve bonded,” he said, then looked over at the older woman who had been a part of his life for as long as he could remember. “I don’t know what I’m going to do. I want to spend the rest of my life with her, but it might be impossible, not with the clan and my father breathing down my neck to do the right thing.”

Marie looked over at Kennedy, then back at him, and sighed. “Your father, well, he can be stubborn. Everyone in the clan knows that you’re not the right man for the job, but they’re all too afraid to say anything,” she said. “I can’t tell you what to do, Cameron, but if Kennedy is the one, if you’re bonding with her, it might be time to do more than talk.”

“I’m trying. I’ve been working on finding a solution for years, I’ve spent hours in the lab, and I’m close to what I’m looking for,” he said. “If that doesn’t work, I’ll give it all up officially, but I really hope I don’t have to do that.”

Marie shook her head. “Cameron, science will not solve your problem. The clan doesn’t care about science,” she said. “Is that the only solution that you can think of?”



A smart man like you, there must be something else you could do.”

“Well, I did come up with another angle to explore in the lab, but that...” Marie cut him off.

“Not science, Cameron,” she said, giving him a thump like she used to when he was being especially dense. “Try thinking with your heart and not your head for a change.”

He looked over at Kennedy, still sound asleep. “Please don’t hit me again,” he said, wincing. “But I still don’t understand.”

“I swear you men can’t see what’s right in front of your face, and you’re the worst of them all,” Marie said. “Marry the girl, put a ring on her finger, and make her yours; once it’s done, there’s nothing your father can do about it.”

“Marie, I’m the heir. I can’t marry a human,” he said. “The clan would...”

“What?” she asked, interrupting him again. “This wouldn’t be the first time this has happened. Look at our history, it’s there, and if you’re really bonded to Kennedy, the clan will accept her.”

Hope surged through him, and he swept Marie up into his arms. “You just solved half of my problem,” he said, grinning at her. “If I have Kennedy, leading the clan might not be that bad.”

Marie studied him for a second. “Cameron, you should know it won’t be as easy as it sounds. Kennedy will have to pass a test before they believe that you’re bonded,” she said. “The two of you will have to face the council and your father. It won’t be easy. The bond will be the only thing that brings you through. I hope it’s truly there.”

“Marie, have you ever been in love?” he asked, surprised that he didn’t know.

She nodded her head. “Yes, once,” she said. “He was killed right before we were supposed to get married. I still miss him and love him today. I came to work for Max’s parents right after that. I knew that I’d never be able to love anyone again, that I would spend my life alone.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry, Marie, I didn’t know,” he said. “I shouldn’t have asked.”

“It’s okay, I think I understand why you did,” she said. “Marry her, Cameron, as quickly as you can.”

\*\*\*Kennedy\*\*\*

“Kennedy, sweetheart, it’s time to go home,” Cameron called, but sleep was holding onto her so tightly she couldn’t open her eyes. “Come on, sweetheart, you’ll be a lot more comfortable in bed with me.”

That caught her attention, and she opened her eyes to find Cameron smiling down at her. “I thought that might work,” he said. “Now, how about we head home? It’s been a long day.”

“What time is it?” she asked, sitting up. “How long have I been asleep?”

“Marie said you showed up about half an hour ago,” he said, helping her sit up. “How did your night go?”

“I wrote a press release and started on the article we’ll put out tomorrow explaining everything,” she said. “Then I spent several hours sending the press release to anyone I could think of. I even sent it to Steve, hoping he’d give me a tiny spot somewhere. I’ve hit every site on the internet I can think of. Hopefully, someone will pick it up,

but I wouldn't count on it; I'm not very good at the video thing."

"Then we've both earned a few hours of sleep," he said, helping her to her feet. "The blower is ready to go, and from the looks of things around here, Marie has the balloon under control. It was nice of you to bring them coffee; she seems to really like you."

"She's a sweet lady. She really loves you and the rest of the guys. She told me all about helping raise you all," she said, a little smile on her face. "She told me a lot of stories about all the trouble you used to get into."

"She's exaggerating," he said, rolling his eyes. "I was a good kid."

"Don't listen to him," Marie said, walking up to them. "He was the worst of them all, always doing those experiments, always blowing something up."

"That only happened once," Cameron said, a guilty look on his face. "But I cleaned it all up."

Marie just shook her head, then looked over at her. "This is for you," she said, shoving a garment bag into her hands. "I knew that it was yours the first time I saw you in the village, I just didn't know that you were Cameron's, but now it makes sense. You're going to need it soon, but for now, hang it in your closet and forget about it."

She didn't know what to say at first, a bit confused by what the older woman had just said, but she smiled at her. "Thank you, Marie. This is very sweet," she said. "I'm sure that it's beautiful. I hope I have a chance to wear it soon."

"Oh, you will, I feel sure of it," Marie said, then looked over at Cameron. "Take her home, son. She needs her rest, it will be an exciting day tomorrow."

“I think that’s an excellent idea,” Cameron said, taking the garment bag out of her hands. “I’ll carry this for you.”

The village was dark when they came out of the shop, but the moon was shining brightly as they made their way to her cabin. “I hope this works,” she said, interrupting the silence between them. “Does it bother you that there’s going to be an almost exact replica of you floating in the air for everyone to see tomorrow? I didn’t really think about it until Marie showed me the balloon. It might seem strange. I mean, you don’t exactly show that side of yourself to the world.”

“It might be a little strange, but to be honest with you, I’ve had other things on my mind,” he said, shrugging his shoulders. “This is a really good idea, Kennedy. If I’m a bit uncomfortable, that’s a small price to pay to keep our secrets.”

She looked over at him. “When you’re unhappy, so am I,” she said. “Is that normal?”

“It’s the bond,” he said. “When either of us feel strong emotions, the other can feel it sometimes.”

“Okay, I just wanted to check,” she said. “It’s a strange feeling, but I’m sure we’ll get used to it.”

“Are you having second thoughts about us?” he asked, pulling her to a stop, a chill racing through him. “Because we should talk about it if you are.”

“Of course not,” she said, wrapping her arms around him. “This is where I want to be, with you. I have no idea what I’m going to do with the rest of my life, but what I do know is that we belong together. I can’t imagine my life without you in it.”

He wrapped his arms around her, and warmth spread through her. “You make me feel warm all over,” she said, burying her face in his chest. “And you smell like home.”

“You smell like wildflowers and cinnamon tonight,” he said, burying his face in her hair and taking a deep breath. “Now let’s go home, I should never have doubted you. I think I’m just tired.”

When they got back to the cabin, they climbed into bed, curled up together, and fell asleep as soon as their heads hit the pillows, exhaustion dragging them both into a deep sleep. Kennedy was the first one to surface the next morning when someone began banging on the door. She stumbled out of bed, dragged on her robe, and left the bedroom.

“What’s wrong?” she asked when she opened the door, not bothering to tie the sash, expecting it to be Max instead of the stranger standing on her porch. After letting out a little cry of surprise, she quickly tied her robe shut, feeling her cheeks turning pink. “I’m sorry...I wasn’t expecting...can I help you?”

“Kennedy, who is it?” Cameron called from the other room. “Get rid of them so we can go back to sleep.”

“Not going to happen, big brother,” the man called. “Get your sorry butt out here right now before I have to come get you. I didn’t travel all this way to let you sleep the morning away.”

### CHAPTER 18

\*\*\*CAMERON\*\*\*

Cameron flew into the living room, pulling on his pajama pants as he went, then stopped when he saw his brother standing in the doorway. “Well, damn, it really is true,” Zach said. “You’ve finally gone over to the other side. I knew it was going to happen someday. Is this her?”

He rushed across the room and put his arm around Kennedy. “Yes, this is Kennedy,” he said, preparing himself for a battle with his brother. “And before you start in on me, what are you doing here?”

“Max called me. He thought you might need some support,” Zach said, shrugging his shoulders. “Dad’s going to blow a gasket when he sees that picture of you. I thought I’d come and see if I could run a little interference. I know we haven’t always seen eye to eye in the past, but I’ve grown up since then.”

Shocked, he could only stare at his brother. They’d never been close, never had the kind of relationship brothers should have had. “Cameron, invite your brother in,” Kennedy said, elbowing him in the ribs. “He came to help, isn’t that nice?”

“Sorry, come in,” he said, holding the door open. “I’m just so surprised to see you, I don’t know what to say.”

“Dad’s wrong, Cameron, wrong to try and force you into a position you don’t want to be in,” Zach said. “I’m not taking his side anymore. I never should have. I just

wanted his approval so badly, and I blamed you when I didn't get it."

"I think I'll go make some coffee and give you two some privacy," Kennedy said, giving him a kiss on the cheek. "I'll be in the kitchen if you need me."

When Kennedy was gone, he gestured to one of the chairs by the empty fireplace, then sat in the one opposite his brother. "Did you really mean what you said?" he asked. "You've always been so squarely on Dad's side, it's hard to believe..."

"The last couple of years have really opened my eyes. Dad is so determined that it can only be his first-born son who leads the clan he's tearing it apart," he said. "Dad won't listen to anyone, not even me. If something doesn't change soon, the council is going to declare him unfit and remove him."

"That would devastate him," he said. "But that's not going to make me change my mind. You should be the one leading the clan. You've been Dad's shadow since you were a kid. You know the clan, and they respect you."

"I'm glad to hear you say that. I always wondered if you thought I was up to the job," Zach admitted. "I've been training for this my entire life. I just never thought the day would come when it might actually happen."

"Well, it hasn't happened yet," he said. "We'll have to appeal to the council. I'll have to relinquish my right to lead, and they might not accept it. This isn't something that's done very often."

"We'll figure it out," Zach said, a light in his eyes Cameron had never seen before. "I've got the council's backing. We just need Dad to give in, and this stunt you just pulled might just do it."

"It wasn't a stunt, you idiot, we were attacked by a tiger," he said. "I had to shift to

save Kennedy.”

“I figured that was the way things were after Max filled me in,” Zach said, pulling a velvet-covered box out of his pocket. “I thought you might want this.”

He opened the box, a wave of emotion washing over him, “Grandma’s ring,” he finally said, then looked up at his brother. “Thank you, Zach, I don’t know how you knew, but this is perfect.”

“Does she know yet?” Zach asked, looking into the kitchen. “If not, you might want to put that away.”

“I haven’t asked her yet, but I’m going to this morning,” he said. “I’m going to marry her today down at the beach right before we launch the balloon.”

“Wow, you’re not messing around,” Zach said. “Are you sure, Cameron? That might be rushing things.”

“It was Marie’s idea,” he said. “You remember her, don’t you?”

“Marie is here?” Zach asked. “How could I forget her? But the clan will never allow it.”

“Marie says it’s happened before. She says it’s in our history. If we’re bonded, the clan has to accept her,” he said. “We’ll have to pass some kind of a test in front of the council, but if we pass, we can be together.”

“Well, if you’re really supposed to be together, that shouldn’t be a problem then,” Zach said. “What exactly is this test?”

“That’s the problem, I don’t know, it’s buried somewhere in our history,” he said. “I



don't suppose you know someone who's an expert in this stuff?"

"There are a few people I can think of, but it would take time," Zach said. "And I don't think we have enough of that. "

"Too bad we don't have the library here," he said. "I'm sure we could find what we needed between the two of us."

Zach opened his mouth, but before he could say anything, the air in the cabin began to crackle. There was a loud cracking sound followed by several thuds in the kitchen. "Kennedy," he said, jumping to his feet and running to the kitchen, his brother right behind him.

She stood by the table, a stack of plates in her hands, staring at something in front of her. "Are you okay?" he asked. What was that noise?"

"Are those yours?" she asked. "I was trying to set the table when they just appeared out of thin air. Maybe you could get them out of the way. They look kind of old."

"What the hell? Where did those come from?" Zach asked, taking a few steps toward the table. "These are the books that we need..."

He laughed, then walked over and picked up the books off the table. "Make yourself useful and take this into the other room," he said, handing them to Zach. "Welcome to Heart of the Ocean, little brother. That was nothing, you should have seen the tiger the island sent after us."

\*\*\*Kennedy\*\*\*

Kennedy plunged her hands into the soapy water, listening to the two men behind her as they flipped through the ancient texts spread out on the table, a little smile on her

face, more contented than she'd been in a long time. As she worked, there were gasps of excitement followed by groans of disappointment, and a few muttered conversations, but the two were working as a team, and she could see how happy it made Cameron.

When she was finished, she turned to the two men. "I'm all finished here. I think I'll go take a shower," she said, drying her hands on a towel. "Are you having any luck?"

"Some, but we've still got a long way to go," Zach said. "Thank you for breakfast. You should have let us clean up, you cooked."

"Don't worry about it. It was no big deal, and you two are a little bit busy," she said, smiling at Zach. "You can cook next time."

"That's a deal," Zach said. "I'm quite talented with a barbeque grill; we'll do dinner sometime."

"I'm going to work a bit longer on this while you're getting ready, then I need to hit the shower myself," Cameron said, getting to his feet and pulling her into his arms. "It's going to be a busy day. Let's take a walk on the beach before we go to Max's. I want some time alone with you."

"That's sweet, Cameron," she said, giving him a quick kiss. "But do you really think we should?"

"No one will miss us if we steal a few minutes to ourselves," he said, his eyes full of warmth. "And there's something really important that I want to talk to you about alone."

"Hey, no fair. You know I can't resist a secret," she said, giving him a dirty look. "You just said that so I'd agree to go with you."

“Maybe, maybe not,” he said, grinning at her. “You’ll just have to come with me to find out.”

There was a little chuckle behind them, and she turned to look over at Zach. “You stay out of this,” she said, but she was smiling at him. “He might have won this round, but I’ll get even.”

Zach studied her for a second. “I don’t doubt that for a second,” he said. “You’re an amazing woman, Kennedy, and my brother is lucky to have you. I’m really happy for you two. ”

“Thank you. I’m glad you and Cameron worked out your differences. Having you on our side makes all the difference,” she said. “Now I think I’ll go take that shower.”

“I’m going to hang out for a while longer, then go find a place to crash for a couple of hours,” Zach said. “I’ll see you down at the beach later.”

When she came out of the bedroom a little later, Zach and the books were gone, Cameron was stretched out on the couch, sound asleep, and she thought about just letting him sleep. But a second later, he stirred and opened his eyes. A smile spread across his face, he sat up and then patted the space next to him on the couch.

“You look beautiful today, but then again, you look beautiful every day,” he said, putting his arm around her. “I like waking up and having the first thing I see is your face.”

“Are you buttering me up for a reason?” she asked, feeling a blush warming her cheeks. “Not that I don’t like the compliments, I just...”

He silenced her with a kiss that made it clear what he was thinking, then pulled away from her. “You drive me crazy, but we don’t have time for that right now. I need a

shower, and then we're going for that walk."

While Cameron was in the shower, she logged onto the internet using the code Max had given her, her heart beginning to pound when she saw the response to her press release. They were going to have an audience later that day, a much bigger one than she'd anticipated, and hoped that Max and the rest of the staff were prepared. She might have found a way to explain the picture, but it would bring a lot more attention to the island in the process.

Cameron came out of the bedroom a few minutes later. "I think we'd better skip that walk on the beach and go find Max right away," she said. "The island is going to be overrun with people. My press release seems to have generated a lot of attention. Walter is having a fit, making statements anywhere he can that what he saw was real. If this doesn't work..."

"It's going to work," Cameron said, pulling her to her feet, and then into his arms. "And Max already knows about the press release. He called Harrison yesterday and he got here this morning with a bunch of his men. The island is as safe as it can be."

She buried her face in his chest, inhaling the clean scent of soap and his own unique scent. A wave of comfort washed over her, and she let out a long sigh. "I can't stop thinking that this is all my fault," she said. "We wouldn't have to do all this if Walter hadn't followed me to the island."

"You can't blame yourself. You couldn't have known he was here. Max didn't even know," Cameron said. "I don't want to hear another word about whose fault this is. You came up with a solution, which is way more important. Besides, something good has already come out of this. I found you, and I wouldn't change that for anything in the world."

"You're right, I know you are," she said, taking a deep breath and letting it out again.

“Let’s go take that walk, I think I could use some quiet time before this all begins.”

### CHAPTER 19

\*\*\*CAMERON\*\*\*

Cameron helped Kennedy down the ladder from the cabin's porch, then took her hand and led her down to the beach, hoping they could find some privacy. The sand was deserted when they stepped out of the trees, but further down by the marina, he could see a lot of activity and at least ten boats bobbing out in the water. Leading Kennedy the other way, he gave himself a few minutes to let the sound of the waves and the fresh salty breeze relax him.

“Marie and I had a long talk while you were sleeping last night,” he said. “She brought up some interesting things about the clan that I didn’t know, and it got me to thinking about us.”

Kennedy looked over at him, her face full of apprehension. “Don’t tell me that you’ve changed your mind,” she said. “I thought your brother coming here was a good thing.”

“It was, I couldn’t be happier that he’s here,” he said, then pulled her closer. “I haven’t changed my mind, but she and I did talk about us. In fact, that’s all we talked about. She was pretty blunt about the fact that science wasn’t going to help me. She thinks history is the key to not only us being together but Zach taking over the clan instead of me.”

“That’s why all those books suddenly appeared this morning,” Kennedy said, shaking her head. “I don’t know why you were being so secretive about it.”

“I had to figure out a few things before I shared all of this with you,” he said. “I wanted to make sure that we could find what we needed because this is going to be a big decision for you, and I know how much you like to be informed.”

She studied him for a second. “Cameron, you lost me somewhere,” she finally said, shaking her head. “What are you trying to say?”

He reached into his pocket and pulled out the ring. “I want you to marry me, Kennedy,” he said. “I want to spend the rest of my life with you, and I don’t want to wait. I want to do it right now, today.”

“You want to get married today?” Kennedy asked, a look of shock on her face. “I was thinking that we would...maybe...someday...”

“I know this is sudden, I know you weren’t expecting it so soon, but Marie pointed out that I was thinking with the wrong part of my body,” he said, then laughed at the look on Kennedy’s face. “She meant I needed to start thinking with my heart instead of my head. Once we’re married, there’s nothing the clan or my father can do about it. We’re bonded, Kennedy, and that trumps everything else. And as it turns out, up until a few generations ago, regular humans were accepted into the clan as long as they were bonded to their mate.”

“This is real, you’re not kidding?” she asked, hope in her eyes. “We could really be together officially, and the clan couldn’t punish you?”

“This is no joke, but there is one thing I haven’t told you about,” he said. “We’ll have to pass a test to prove that we’re bonded. Zach and I haven’t been able to figure out what it is yet, and that information might be lost to time. The council might have to decide what the test is, and I have no idea what they might think is a good test. I know how much you hate surprises, but Zach is still trying to figure it out.”

Kennedy was silent for a second, then she looked up at him, a smile slowly spreading across her face. “It doesn’t matter, I’ll marry you, I’ll take the test. I’d walk across hot coals if it meant we could be together,” she said, throwing herself into his arms. “We belong together, I know it, you know it, even the island knows it. We’ll pass that test, and then we’ll never have to worry about being separated again.”

With trembling hands, he slid the ring onto her finger, laughing when he noticed that she was shaking as much as he was. “It fits perfectly. I should have known that it would,” he said, smiling at her. “This ring was my grandmother’s. She gave it to me right before she died. She told me to save it until I found the perfect woman for me and not to let tradition stand in the way of my happiness. I think she knew then that you were in my future. She was special that way, she could see things before they happened, and she knew that you were out there waiting for me.”

“Oh, Cameron, do you really think so?” she asked, tears in her eyes. “Do you think she would have approved of me?”

“She would have adored you, the two of you are a lot alike,” he said. “She was smart and tough, she never let my grandfather bully her, and she usually got her way.”

“I don’t always get my way,” Kennedy said, pretending to be insulted. “But I am tough and smart.”

He laughed. “And I wouldn’t want you any other way,” he said, then kissed her until the heat between threatened to sweep them away. “Now, I think we have a wedding to plan.”

“The dress,” Kennedy said, her eyes widening. “That’s why Marie gave me the dress. She knew that you were going to propose.”

“It was kind of her idea,” he said, shrugging his shoulders. “She’s dressed every bride



on this island. I believe you make number four or is it five, I've lost track."

"What about the ring?" she asked. "How did you get the ring?"

"My brother brought it with him. After he talked to Max, he decided I might need it," he said. "It all just came together perfectly, Kennedy, I think it was meant to be."

"Like us," she said, smiling up at him. "Let's not make a huge fuss about the wedding. Let's just do it quietly. I don't want everyone on the island there for our special day."

"It's already been arranged, a small wedding with just a few special people, then a quick lunch afterward to celebrate," he said. "Max can perform the ceremony, Stella can be your maid of honor, and Zach will be my best man..."

\*\*\*Kennedy\*\*\*

"Oh, Kennedy, you look beautiful, that dress is perfect," Stella said, walking up behind her and carefully placing the ring of flowers in her hair. "This is going to be a lovely wedding. Just wait until you see what the staff has done with the gazebo and they went all out with the food for lunch. We're so lucky to have such giving people in our lives."

"I can see why you love living here, it's like one big family," she said. "I won't want to leave next week when it's time to go home."

"I'm going to hate to see you go, we've barely gotten to know one another," Stella said. "Promise that you'll come back to visit. We have an extra bedroom in our cabin, and Keith is already talking about adding another one and a second bathroom. "

"I'd love to see your cabin, I never made it over there," she said. "Maybe when this is

all over, we can have that coffee we talked about.”

“I’m going to hold you to that,” Stella said, giving her a hug. “Welcome to the family, Kennedy. We’re a crazy bunch, but I think you’ll fit right in.”

“Are you two going to stand around gabbing, or are we going to a wedding?” Marie interrupted from the doorway, then gasped when Kennedy turned around. “Absolutely perfect. Every eye will be on you today, just as it should be. Now come along, Cameron is waiting for you.”

She followed Marie down the hallway and out the back door of the community center, then paused when she saw Montgomery waiting for her, a big smile on his face. “Thank you for coming,” she said. “I know it was a lot to ask, but you’re the first one who popped into my head.”

“It will be my pleasure to give you away,” Montgomery said, bowing to her and then taking her arm. It will be good practice for when my daughter gets married. She and my wife came over from the Big Island for the day. I’ll introduce you later.”

“I’d like that,” she said, smiling at him. “I think I’m ready if you are.”

But she wasn’t as ready as she thought she was. Her knees buckled when she saw Cameron standing with Max at the end of the aisle. It wasn’t doubt or fear that overwhelmed her, but a feeling of love so intense it made her dizzy, and she understood as clearly as she ever had the power of the bond between them. An instant later, her body filled with warmth when Cameron’s eyes met hers across the distance separating them, and only one thought filled her mind.

He was hers and would be for the rest of their lives. They would forever be joined by the love they shared and the bond it had created; nothing could tear them apart. Strengthened by this knowledge, she walked confidently up to Cameron, gave

Montgomery a kiss on the cheek, and then let him take her hands as they turned to face Max, who looked very handsome in a black suit.

The words of the ceremony washed over her, the feel of Cameron's big hands wrapped around hers warmed her from the inside as no one else could, and when the moment came she was ready. In front of the small gathering of people, she pledged her love to the man she'd always dreamed of but never imagined was real, then listened as he spoke the same words, tears streaming down her cheeks. Before he kissed her, Cameron reached up and brushed them away with his thumbs, his eyes sparkling with moisture.

Lunch flew by in a storm of good food, well wishes, and congratulations that left her slightly breathless by the time Cameron finally led her away from the gazebo. "We did it," he said, lifting her up and spinning her around when they were out of sight. This time, when his mouth came down on hers, his kiss was demanding, igniting the passion between them.

When they finally pulled apart, chests heaving, Cameron groaned. "I don't know if I can wait until tonight, but I don't want our first time as a married couple to be a quicky in the bathroom," he said. "We'd better go get changed and get down to the beach before we don't make it there at all. Tonight seems like a long time away from now."

"What's wrong with a quicky in the bathroom?" she asked. "I can't get this dress off by myself, you know. I can't reach the zipper. If something happens, it wouldn't be our fault."

Cameron swept her into his arms and started for the door to the community center. "Where did you leave your clothes?" he demanded. "There had better be a lock on that door."

When they finally emerged from the dressing room, they found everyone waiting for them in the lobby, and she felt her cheeks turning pink. “Kennedy’s zipper got stuck,” Cameron said, but the grin on his face said it all, and she wanted to disappear into the floor. “Let’s go get this hot air balloon thing over with. I’ve got a honeymoon to go on.”

“We’ve been waiting forever, that must have been one stubborn zipper,” Zach said, slapping his brother on the back as he walked by. “I’m sure Marie could have helped with that.”

“Can we please stop talking about my zipper?” she asked, her face flaming with embarrassment. “We have other things to worry about.”

“Kennedy’s right,” Max said, getting to his feet, a look of amusement on his face. “We’ve got an audience out there waiting for a show. We’d better not let them down.”

### CHAPTER 20

\*\*\*CAMERON\*\*\*

One end of the hot air balloon resting on his shoulder, Cameron followed Max down to the beach, trying to ignore the crowd that had gathered and the boats that bobbed off the shore. “For someone who had no idea what they were doing, you certainly got everyone’s attention,” he said to Kennedy, who was walking next to him. “I wonder if Walter is on one of those boats?”

“Oh, he’s out there. He posted something about us perpetuating a hoax, and he swears that the dragon he saw was real, I didn’t think he knew what that word meant,” Kennedy said, an evil glint in her eyes. “He’s so sure of himself, he’s not going to back down, and he deserves everything he gets. Maybe this will end this thing between us once and for all.”

“Remind me not to get on your bad side,” he said, grinning at her. “You’re vicious when you’re angry.”

“You could never get on my bad side,” she said. “You have no idea what this man has put me through. He’s almost as bad as my last boyfriend.”

“Ex-boyfriend, you mean,” Cameron said, unable to hide the flare of jealousy. “You never mentioned him. ”

“He’s not worth mentioning; he stole my byline and then got me fired from the paper where we were both working,” she said. “I used to have really lousy taste in men.”

“Used to?” Cameron asked.

“Well, you’re definitely not a loser,” she said, then shrugged her shoulders. “Maybe I ended up with the wrong guy every time because I had to wait to find you.”

“Are there any more ex-boyfriends I should know about?” he asked, trying to keep his voice light. “Just so there aren’t any surprises.”

“I just married you, Cameron,” she said, looking at him. There’s no one for me but you, and there never will be.”

“Good, I just wanted to make sure,” he said, grinning at her. “You’re everything to me, Kennedy.”

“Will you two knock that off,” Max growled. “You’re starting to gross me out. Save it for the council.”

“I have something special planned for us later,” he said, then looked over his shoulder at Max. “It was Max’s idea.”

“Oh, God, don’t remind me,” Max said, a scowl on his face. “All this love crap is making me sick, it makes perfectly normal men act like...well, I don’t know, but it’s never going to happen to me, no matter what this island thinks. Now, can we just get on with this balloon thing? I’d like all these people to get away from my island.”

Stella, Keith, Montgomery, and Mateo were already on the beach setting up the basket and the blower that would fill the balloon with hot air and send it soaring into the sky. Harrison waved to them from his post, keeping the crowd back, and Marie was already shouting orders at them as they set the canvas-wrapped bundle down on the sand and then began to unwrap it. A few minutes later, the balloon was spread out on the sand, the emerald, brown, and gold fabric shimmering in the sunlight, and he

stood staring down at it for a second, a weird feeling in his stomach .

“I think we’re ready to start,” Kennedy said, taking his hand and giving it a squeeze. “Are you ready?”

He nodded. “You were right, it is a little strange,” he said, then shrugged. “I’m as ready as I’ll ever be.”

Keith made everyone back away from the burner. There was a loud pop, and then the sound of hot air rushed through the blower. They all looked at each other and sighed with relief when the balloon began to fill with air. Then, they took their places on the guide ropes, watching as the dragon slowly came to life. There was a gasp from the crowd on the beach, then excited conversation and cheering from the people on the boats off shore, and Cameron looked over at her and grinned.

“Do you want to go for a ride?” he asked. “It seems only fitting.”

“Really?” Kennedy asked. “Will it hold us?”

“There’s only one way to find out,” he said, grinning at her. “Are you up for a little adventure?”

“With you by my side, I’m up for anything,” she said. “Let’s do this.”

He lifted Kennedy into the basket, climbed in after her, gave everyone the thumbs up, and then pulled the trigger on the blower. The balloon lifted in the air, then began to float out toward the ocean, but down below, Max and the others pulled on the rope bringing them back. They stayed up in the air for a long time, giving everyone enough time to take lots of video and pictures, then slowly began to make their descent, landing with a thump back on the beach.

A cheer went up around them, and he jumped out of the basket. He was exhilarated by the ride and a little repulsed by the image of himself floating in the air for everyone to see. He helped Kennedy out of the basket, relieved to see Keith stepping up behind them to take control of the balloon so they could make their escape, but before they could move, Walter Brighton came staggering out of the trees.

“This is all wrong, this is not what I saw, this is not what’s in the pictures. I saw him, he turned into a dragon, it wasn’t a balloon, it was real, it chased off the tiger, this is all a hoax,” he screamed, staggering toward them and pointing at Cameron, but then he turned his attention to Kennedy. “And you, you little bitch, I won’t let you do this to me again. This was the story of a lifetime. You aren’t going to take it away from me, not again.”

Walter paused for a second, and he thought his rant was over, but his hand dropped to his side, then came back up, the glint of metal in the sun nearly blinding him. Harrison was already on the move, but he could see that he wasn’t going to make it in time, so he stepped in front of Kennedy. A split second later, the report of a gun shot ran out over the beach; he felt a burning sting in his shoulder, and the beach erupted into screams, but Kennedy was safely behind him, which was all that mattered to him.

\*\*\*Kennedy\*\*\*

Kennedy heard the gunshot, felt a spray of something warm on her chest, and looked down, surprised for a second to find herself covered in blood. It took her a second to decide that since nothing hurt, she hadn’t been shot, then she realized where the blood had come from. Trying not to panic when she saw the growing red stain on Cameron’s shoulder, she gently put her hand on his back, her brain screaming at her that he’d been shot.

He staggered for a second before dropping to the ground with a thud and rolling onto



his back. “Oh, no, Cameron,” she cried, crumpling onto the sand next to him. “Oh, please don’t be dead, you can’t be, I just found you. ”

Hands fluttering over the wounded shoulder, she looked up to see Walter being carted off in handcuffs, his face a bloody mess. “Please help, someone help,” she cried. “Cameron needs a doctor, he’s been shot.”

There was a commotion around her, but all she could see was the man she loved lying on the ground, his face slowly turning white as blood poured out of the wound. Tearing off her shirt, she stuffed it up against the gaping hole in his shoulder, then pressed as hard as she could. Cameron let out a groan of pain and opened his eyes, but they fluttered closed again only a second later.

“Hey there,” a woman said, kneeling next to her. “I’m Dr. Hernandez. Let’s see what we’ve got here.”

“It’s bleeding really bad, I’m scared to let go,” she said, shaking her head. “He’s already lost a lot of blood.”

“It will be okay, Kennedy. Let the doctor look,” Stella said, crouching next to her and wrapping a jacket around her shoulders. “I promise he’ll be okay; he just needs some time.”

She looked over at Stella, trying to suck air into her lungs. “He was protecting me,” she said, starting to sob. “He can’t die. I never even told him that I love him.”

“Stop crying, sweetheart,” Cameron said, his voice hoarse. “I’m not dead yet. Let the doctor look at me.”

“Oh, Cameron, you’re alive,” she gasped, pulling her hands back. “I thought I was going to lose you. I thought you were going to die.”

“It’s going to take a lot more than a bullet to take me down,” he said, reaching up and taking her hand. “You can’t get rid of me that easily. I probably should have warned you about that.”

“There now, that doesn’t look so bad,” the doctor said, leaning back so she could see. “The bullet went all the way through, and the bleeding has almost stopped. This should heal nicely. Do you think you can get up? I’d like to get you over to the infirmary.”

She could only stare at the wound, which had already begun to heal. “But...but...” she stammered, then shook her head and looked down at Cameron.

“We’re fast healers, I’m sorry, I should have told you,” he said. “I should be fine in a couple of hours.”

Relief poured through her, followed by a wave of anger. “You big jerk, don’t you think that was something I should have known?” she said, glaring at him. “I think you and I had better have a long talk. What else have you been hiding?”

“I’ll tell you everything you want to know, as long as you promise not to cry again,” he said, then hesitated. “Oh, and by the way, I love you too.”

“You heard that?” she asked, wanting to punch him. “Why didn’t you say something sooner?”

“Because you didn’t give me the chance,” he said. “I’m going to say it again. I love you, Kennedy, I love you with all my heart.”

“I love you too, Cameron,” she said, throwing herself on top of him. “Please don’t ever scare me like that again. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

He wrapped his good arm around her. "I'm not going anywhere for a long time," he said. "You're stuck with me whether you like it or not."

"We should really get him over to the infirmary," the doctor interrupted. "I want to get that wound cleaned up and have a better look at it."

"I'm sorry," she said, pulling herself off of Cameron. "I got carried away."

Cameron laughed. "She does that a lot," he said, slowly sitting up. "I think I can walk if someone can help me up off the ground."

Kennedy got to her feet, but just as she reached for Cameron, a voice broke through the nervous chatter around them. "What's going on around here? Where is my son?" a woman demanded, pushing her way through the crowd. "Get out of my way all of you. Do you know who I am?"

The crowd parted to reveal an older woman dressed in a designer suit, a man trailing behind her, a stormy look on his face. "Can't someone do something about all this sand?" she demanded as her heels sank into the ground. Then she saw Cameron lying on the ground.

Cameron groaned. "Just what we need," he whispered, slowly getting to his feet with her help. "Those are my parents."

"Your parents," she repeated, a sick feeling in her stomach. "They don't look very nice."

"I'm sorry, Kennedy, they're not. I didn't want you to meet them this way," he said. "Just let me do the talking. It will be okay."

"I demand to know what's going on around here!" Cameron's mother screeched, then

she saw her son. “You’re bleeding. He’s bleeding, someone get a doctor, we need a doctor.”

“I’m a doctor, and your son is going to be just fine,” Dr. Hernandez said, cutting off whatever else the woman was going to say. “We’re moving up to the infirmary right now, if you could please step out of the way.”

### CHAPTER 21

\*\*\*CAMERON\*\*\*

Cameron thought that the worst of the pain was over, but as soon as Dr. Hernandez began poking around, his shoulder began to feel like it was on fire. “It will be just a few more minutes. We have to make sure this is nice and clean. We don’t want any nasty scars now do we?” she asked, making him growl. “I know, it hurts, that’s just your body healing. The worst will be over soon.”

Kennedy was sitting next to him, his good hand gripped tightly in hers, tears rolling down her cheeks, her face white with worry. He wanted to reassure her but kept his jaws tightly closed, afraid he would scream from the pain if he opened his mouth. He felt something soft and warm covering the wound, then the doctor carefully rolled him onto his back. The pain began to ease and he could breathe normally again. Sucking air slowly into his lungs, his shoulder still throbbing, he lay with his eyes closed, exhaustion settling over him like a warm blanket.

“He’ll need to sleep now,” he heard Dr. Hernandez say, but he couldn’t make his eyes open. Then everything went dark as he finally let himself sink into the oblivion of sleep .

When he woke several hours later, Kennedy was curled up in the chair next to him, her hand limp in his. He shifted in bed just enough so that he could study her as she slept. Her eyes popped open a second later, and she sat up so fast she nearly tumbled to the floor, but he grabbed her at the last second and pulled her into the bed with him.

“Cameron, you’re hurt. You shouldn’t be moving around so much,” she said, slightly breathless. “You’re going to tear it open again.”

“I’m perfectly fine. Take the bandages off and see for yourself,” he said, then grinned at her. “And then I’ll show you how fine I am.”

Kennedy gasped when she felt his erection through the thin sheet. “Cameron, you’re in the hospital, I can’t believe you want to...”

Before she could finish, his mother burst through the door, his father right behind her, and he froze, cursing himself for forgetting they were on the island. When his mother saw them, she stumbled to a stop, her mouth hanging open, but his father pushed her aside, nearly knocking her over. He stood staring at the two of them long enough for his mother to recover. She stomped over to the bed, reached out, and tried to grab Kennedy’s arm.

“What are you doing in that bed? Get out at once; someone could have seen you,” his mother screeched. “What is going on in here? Why is the nurse in bed with you? Have you lost your mind?”

“Back off, Mother, she’s not the nurse; she’s my wife,” he said, batting her hands away. “We were married earlier today, so if I want to have her in my bed, there’s nothing you can do about it.”

His mother gasped, then stumbled back a couple of steps. “Oh no, no, no, no,” she chanted, then collapsed into a chair. “This can’t be happening. I have it all arranged. It was going to be the wedding of the season.”

His father’s face had turned a shade of red he’d rarely seen. His jaw was clenched so tightly that he could see the muscles trembling. He unconsciously pushed Kennedy behind him and braced himself for the explosion. It took longer than he thought,

giving him enough time to calm down, but when his father opened his mouth and began to yell, he was sure it could be heard through the entire building.

He let his father go off for a while, his arm securely wrapped around Kennedy, then decided it was time to interrupt him. “We’re bonded, we’re married,” he said, his voice completely calm. “There’s nothing you can do about it.”

“Bonded,” his father snorted, “that’s just a bunch of crap, there’s no such thing. The clan will never stand for this. You’ve broken one of our most sacred rules; regular humans are forbidden.”

“Are you sure about that?” he asked. “Because I have it on good authority that’s not true.”

“My authority is the only one that counts,” his father shouted. “Or have you forgotten who rules this clan? I make the rules and decisions for this clan, and I say that regular humans are forbidden. Get rid of her, I don’t care how you do it, but no one is to know about this insanity of yours. You’re going marry within the clan, just like you’re supposed to.”

“And if I refuse?” he asked, making his mother gasp. “If I tell you that I plan to stay married to Kennedy and spend the rest of my life with her, what will you do?”

“Don’t push me, boy,” his father growled. “I’ll get rid of her myself if I have to.”

“You touch one hair on Kennedy’s head, and it will be the last thing you ever do,” he growled. “She’s my mate and I will protect her, even if it means killing you.”

His mother gasped again, then staggered to her feet as his father slowly raised his hand and pointed at him. “You are no son of mine. I renounce you,” he screamed. “I banish you from the clan. You’re dead to all of us now.”

Just then, his brother slipped into the room. “What’s all this shouting?” he asked. “What’s going on in here?”

“Oh, hey, Zach,” he said, flashing his brother a smile. “Dad was just disowning me and banishing me from the clan. He doesn’t seem to agree with some of the decisions I’ve made lately.”

“Well, now, that is a problem, isn’t it?” Zach asked. “Guess we’re going to have to call for an emergency meeting of the council.”

“We don’t need the council. I make the decisions for this clan, and I will not have my son humiliate me,” his father barked. “He’s finished, and that’s final.”

“Sorry, Pops, that’s not the way it works,” Zach said, shaking his head. “Only the council can make that decision.”

“Then call them, make them come all this way. I guess you don’t care if this family is humiliated,” his father screamed. “They’ll side with me. They know who holds all the power in this clan.”

His father stormed out of the room, his mother right on his heels. “Well, that was fun,” he said, then looked down at Kennedy. “Are you all right?”

She nodded. “I think so,” she said. “He was really mad. What if this doesn’t work? What if you really do get banished?”

“Don’t worry, that’s not going to happen, we have history on our side,” he said, pulling her a little closer. “We’ll get through this, Kennedy, I promise, you just have to trust me.”

“I do, I trust you more than anyone,” she said, then took a deep breath. “Okay, what’s



next?”

\*\*\*Kennedy\*\*\*

Kennedy held on tightly to Cameron’s hand as they walked up to the gazebo, more nervous than she’d ever been in her life, the feeling that her entire future rested on the next few minutes washing over her. “It’s going to be fine,” Cameron said. “Just try to relax. I promise it won’t be as bad as what you’re imagining. These aren’t horrible people, even if my parents did make it seem that way.”

“What do you think the test will be?” she asked. “I hate not knowing what they’re going to expect.”

Cameron smiled at her. “I know, sweetheart, that inquisitive mind is one of the things about you that makes you irresistible to me,” he said. “But you’re just going to have to rein it in for now. The council won’t make it anything too difficult.”

The gazebo looked nothing like it had only a few days before. Instead of the arch of flowers, there was a long table with eight chairs, an older man seated in each, Cameron’s father in the middle. The rows of chairs weren’t decorated with bows and ribbons. Instead, a somber crowd filled them, whispering when they saw them walking up the steps. Trying not to let anyone see how nervous she was and taking deep breaths to keep herself moving, she let Cameron guide her to a chair in the front row.

A hush fell over the crowd as soon as they were seated, then a man on the far end of the table got to his feet. “The council has agreed that since this matter directly affects our leader, I will guide the proceedings today in his place,” he said. “Let’s begin at once. We have all traveled a great distance.”

“That’s Sampson Meyers. He’s always been very fair,” Cameron leaned over and

whispered. "He'll be on our side when he hears our evidence."

"Would the accused please stand," Sampson said, gesturing to Cameron. "Cameron Sullivan, you have been charged with crimes against the clan. Your father claims that you have broken clan tradition by marrying a regular human and refusing to take on your rightful role as the clan's new leader. He further claims that you have turned your back on the clan, bringing disgrace to us all, and has urged us to banish you for the rest of your life. Are you prepared to answer to these charges?"

"Yes sir, I am," Cameron said, his voice strong and sure. "I have done nothing more than what thousands of our ancestors have done over the last few centuries. I have bonded with a regular human and would ask that the council grant her membership in the clan as my mate."

There were mutters of surprise behind them. A couple of the council members leaned over and whispered to each other, then Cameron's father jumped to his feet. "It is forbidden and against our traditions. We must keep our blood clean and pure," he thundered. "It is written in our history. We must not turn our backs on what has gotten us through centuries of living with the constant threat of exposure."

"For once I agree with my father," Cameron said, then looked over at Zach, hovering a few rows back. "But it appears that he and I are talking about two very different histories, his recent, my ancient."

Zach brought the ancient books to the front of the room, then reverently set them on the table before nodding to Cameron. "I'll take over for now if you'll permit me," he said, then waited until Sampson nodded at him. "Contained in these books is our ancient history, the very foundation of what binds our clan together. I believe we can all agree on that."

He paused for effect, then continued. "Some may look at some of the stories in this

book as simply entertaining love stories, but what they would have missed is that some of the most important unions in our history were between a shifter and a regular human,” he said. “Our ancestors believed that the bond between mates was more important than bloodlines; they knew that it was important to bring new blood into the clan, and they were stronger for it. What my brother has done is only what our ancestors would have done. He’s found his perfect mate and bonded with her, and that bond is going to make him a great and powerful leader of the clan.”

“They’re lying, they’re making this up, it doesn’t say that in those books,” Cameron’s father screamed, jumping to his feet again. “There’s no such thing as a bond, that’s just...”

“Silence, that is enough,” Sampson cut him off. “I would like to see those books, young man.”

Zach carefully gathered up the books and carried them over to Sampson. “I’ve marked the pages that you’ll want,” he said, then slowly backed away.

“The council will consider the matter and return with an answer,” Sampson said, rising to his feet and gathering up the books. “No one is to leave while we’re gone.”

When they were gone, Cameron sat back down next to her, took her hand, and pulled it into his lap, then looked up at his father, who was glaring at them. He stared at him, his face completely blank until his father jumped out of his chair and began to pace back and forth behind the table. The council was back only a few minutes later, all with smiles on their faces, and she let out a sigh of relief. It was going to be okay, she could feel it deep inside.

### CHAPTER 22

\*\*\*CAMERON\*\*\*

“Cameron Sullivan and Kennedy Fisher, please come forward and face the council,” Sampson called as he walked into the room. “You have presented compelling evidence that our view of the world has begun to shrink over the last few generations. We’ve lost our way as a clan and we are indebted to you for bringing this to our attention. Accordingly, Cameron, your marriage to Kennedy will be sanctioned by the council if, as per tradition, you can prove the bond between you is real and substantial.”

Cameron gave Kennedy’s hand a squeeze. “We are prepared for any test of our love and our bond you require,” he said. “We only wish to be together.”

Sampson looked over at Kennedy. “And you, my dear, are you prepared for this test?” he asked. “You haven’t spoken a word since these proceedings started.”

“I only wished to show the proper respect. I know that I’m an outsider here, but I wish very much to be accepted as Cameron’s mate,” she said. “I love him more than I thought was possible. Life without him would be empty, but I’m prepared to prove it to you and the rest of the clan.”

“Very well, that is more than I needed to hear,” Sampson said, a look of amusement on his face. “The council has agreed that the most simple and straightforward test of the bond between Cameron and Kennedy is to bring forth the creature inside of him. You will be required to shift and stay that way for a long enough period of time that

we can see Kennedy truly accepts what you are and what you can do.”

All the tension drained from Kennedy’s body, and a sigh of relief hissed out of her lungs. She looked up at him, her eyes full of determination. “I told you,” he whispered. “No big deal, right?”

“Right?” she whispered back. “Let’s do this.”

He stepped back from her, ignoring the excited conversation around them, concentrated only on his love for Kennedy, then let his power surge until, body tingling, he became the dragon. Kennedy gasped. For a moment he thought she was going to step away from him, but then she smiled and walked over to him, her eyes slowly filling with desire as she ran her hands over his muscular chest. He tipped his head down to her, and she ran her fingers over the soft feathers on his face, a look of wonder on her face, then stretched up and softly kissed him.

“You’re even more incredible than I remembered,” she said, stroking his face again. “You won’t ever have to hide this side of you from me. I love the dragon just as much as I love the man.”

A low growl came from deep in his chest, desire to match what he saw in Kennedy’s eyes spread through him, and all he could think about was getting her alone. “Easy, sweetheart, this isn’t the time or the place for that,” she said, stepping back from him, making the people watching them laugh. “You’d better rein that dragon of yours in before he embarrasses us both.”

The room filled with laughter again. “I think we’ve seen enough,” Sampson called. The council is satisfied that Cameron and Kennedy's bond is real and strong. We declare the marriage true and valid, and we accept Kennedy as a new member of the clan.”

“This cannot be happening,” his father shouted. “I challenge the validity of the marriage; the clan customs weren’t followed, and the marriage is not valid.”

There was a brief silence, then Max stood up. “I can attest to the validity of the marriage,” he said. I performed the ceremony myself, following all clan tradition. I have witnesses who will swear to this. Our leaders' claim is false and was anticipated.”

Excited conversation spread through the room, but it was cut off by his father. Getting to his feet, he stomped over to Max. “You saw the union consummated?” he asked, an evil smile on his face, then turned to them. Clan law and tradition require that the marriage be consummated in front of the clan. Until this is done, the marriage is invalid in the eyes of the clan.”

Kennedy gasped and looked over at him. “That tradition hasn’t been followed for a long time,” he said, shaking his head. “The marriage is valid.”

“Neither has the practice of shifters marrying regular humans, but you seemed happy to resurrect that one,” his father snarled at him. “This is no different.”

There was complete silence in the gazebo. Kennedy’s face was filled with shock, but it was quickly replaced by determination. “We’ll do it,” she said, her voice shaking a bit. I want to spend my life with Cameron. If you require a voyeuristic display to prove it, then I’ll do it.”

He turned to Kennedy. “You don’t have to do this; they can’t make us. It’s too much,” he said, then looked over at his father. “When did you become such a monster? When did you lose all touch with reality? We’re not going to do this. ”

“Then the marriage is invalid,” his father sneered at him. “When are you going to learn that I always win?”

“Not this time,” Kennedy said, shaking her head, then looked up at him. “It’s a small price to pay, Cameron. I’m willing to pay it.”

He searched Kennedy’s face, saw only love and determination in her eyes, and knew that he had no choice but to give in. “I only have one condition,” he said. “My father can’t be there.”

\*\*\*Kennedy\*\*\*

Kennedy watched the trail in front of her, afraid that she’d trip in the darkness and make a fool of herself. Then, she realized that was the least of her problems. She was about to have sex in front of a bunch of men, a thought that made her feel a bit nauseous, but she was willing to do it for a lifetime of happiness with Cameron. It wasn’t difficult to see that he was a bit upset by the way things had gone, but Max had done his best to make it easier on both of them, choosing a location that would offer them as much privacy as possible.

She was surprised when the trail disappeared beneath her feet and looked up to find that they’d entered a small clearing with a beautiful waterfall. There was a sparkling pool beneath the falls, its banks covered with mossy rocks, and for a moment, she imagined sinking into its cool depths. Bringing herself back to the moment, she looked over at Cameron, who was staring at the waterfall, a confused look on his face.

Wondering why Max had chosen such a beautiful location for her humiliation, she turned to look over at him. “Trust me, this will be fine,” he said. “The island will take care of you, I promise. ”

“I think we would all be happy to have this highly uncomfortable...situation over with quickly,” Sampson said, clearing his throat nervously. “This brings none of us joy. We’ll give you the proper space to...well...get on with it.”

Cameron took her hand and walked over to the pool, then pulled her into his arms and looked down at her. "It's not too late to change your mind," he said. "We don't have to do this."

"It is too late, Cameron. We agreed, and we can't go back on our word," she said. "We'll just pretend they're not there."

"We don't have to take off our clothes," he said, smiling down at her. "I already know what you look like naked."

She laughed, easing some of the tension, and then Cameron lowered his mouth to hers and kissed her until the passion between them flared to life. He devoured her mouth, his kiss more possessive than it had ever been, and she felt herself being swept away, the world around them slowly melting away. As his hands began to roam over her body, she forgot about everything but his touch and the warmth slowly spreading through her as a tight knot of pleasure began to build deep inside her.

When Cameron broke the kiss, he pressed his forehead against hers, his breath coming in short gasps. "God, I want you so much, I don't care that they're watching," he said. "Let's find someplace a little more private if we can. No one said we had to be right out in the open."

He lifted her into his arms and then looked around, but before he could move, the wind started to blow, the trees started to quake, and there was a low rumbling from below their feet. A second later, the ground started to shake; then plants began to spring, fully grown from the soil of the clearing, creating a wall between them and the watchful eyes of the council. There were exclamations of both shock and surprise from the council, Max's laughter rang out over all of it as they were completely surrounded by a cocoon of foliage.

Cameron looked down at her. "Now where were we?" he asked, grinning at her. "I



think the island is giving us some privacy. Let's make use of it."

"My thoughts exactly," she said, reaching for the buttons on his shirt, a grin on her face as she shoved it off. "But I tell you, being married to you is a lot of work, the things I have to do for you."

"Oh, you poor thing," Cameron said, reaching out and capturing her nipples between his fingers and thumb, making her gasp. "I wouldn't want to make you work too hard."

"Hmm...I'm tougher than I look," she said, moaning when his hand found its way between her legs. "Besides, there's nothing wrong with hard work."

He rubbed her between the legs until she could feel moisture making her panties wet, then stripped off her clothes one piece at a time before reaching between her legs and plunging his finger deep inside her. She cried out, forgetting that the council was only a few feet away, already lost to the pleasure coursing through her. She clung to Cameron's shoulders, afraid her legs wouldn't hold her.

"God, you're incredible, you're hot and slick," Cameron groaned. "I want to bury myself inside you right now. I want you trembling under me; I want you crying out my name."

Gently lowering her to the ground, he stood over her for a second, then quickly stripped off his shorts. "Spread your legs for me, sweetheart," he said, his eyes roaming over her body. "Do it now. I want to see you, all of you."

Heart pounding, she spread her legs, feeling more exposed than she ever had before, but the look in Cameron's eyes melted her uneasiness. He growled low in his throat, then slowly sank to his knees between her legs, his eyes never leaving hers. Anticipation began to thunder through her, but nothing could have prepared her for

the moment he scooped his hands under her butt, lifted her hips to his face, and slid his tongue over her swollen nib.

Pleasure ripped through her as he lavished her with attention, his tongue driving her higher and higher, his growls of pleasure as she began to soar only intensifying the sensations. When she finally tumbled over the edge, her fingers twisted in his hair, her body trembling, Cameron lapped at her until she lay spent and panting, an empty feeling deep inside her. The sensation continued to grow as she lay there; the need to feel him deep inside her slowly became all she could think about, and she shifted under him.

“Please, Cameron, I need you inside me,” she panted, wiggling her hips. “Please, I need you now.”

This time, the growl that came from deep in his chest made the bushes around them quake as power filled the little space. Grabbing her by the hips, he flipped her onto her stomach, then pulled her up onto her hands and knees, then, with a shove of his knees, spread her legs apart. His fingers digging into the soft flesh of her hips, he snuggled himself right up to her throbbing opening, then froze, making her whimper with need.

“You belong to me, Kennedy,” he said, then with one powerful thrust of his hips, he drove himself into her, filling her fully and deeply. “Until the end of time, I claim you body and soul. You are mine and mine only.”

She climaxed almost instantly, a slow-building orgasm that began to consume her as Cameron buried himself inside her over and over again, and their souls began to twine together in a dance as old as time. When Cameron finally tumbled over the edge, power surged through the little space again, this time as he emptied himself inside her, and sparks of light began to float up into the sky, floating higher and higher before blinking out in a final flash of light.

Cameron collapsed on top of her, then fell onto his side, still deeply buried inside her, and they lay there under the stars, the jungle protecting them until their bodies cooled. “I love you, Kennedy,” Cameron said, nuzzling her neck. “If there weren’t people waiting for us, I would do that all over again.”

“I love you too, Cameron,” she said, looking over her shoulder at him. “But I think that’s going to have to wait. We should get dressed.”

They helped each other get dressed, taking their time, in no hurry to let the world intrude on their happiness again. They finally stood hand in hand, facing the council as the growth around them slowly sank into the ground. Her cheeks began to flame when she looked around and realized that it wasn’t just the council standing on the other side of the vegetation; everyone was there.

Her first instinct was to hide her face in Cameron’s chest, but a cheer went up from the crowd, and she froze. “We all saw the sign. We saw the lights in the sky,” Sampson said, stepping forward. “The universe has blessed your union, and the clan welcomes our new leader.”

She looked up at Cameron. “I think it’s okay, sweetheart, I think this is where you belong,” she said. “You’ll make an excellent leader, and I’ll be right there by your side every step of the way.”

He looked down at her. “I love you, Kennedy,” he said. “With you by my side, I can do anything.”

“I love you too, Cameron,” she said. “Now, I think you should greet your clan.”

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 7:28 am*

Harrison stood on the top dock watching the third boat of the day slide into the slip.

The captain threw a line to the young man waiting for them, and the boat was quickly secured.

He'd only been on the island for a couple of weeks, but he still hadn't given up the habit of coming down to check out the new guests, not after what Max had been through over the last few months.

Watching a woman get out of the boat, he quickly went over her information in his head.

Juillet Cox, school teacher, here on vacation alone.

Deciding she wasn't much of interest, he started to turn away, but then she looked over at him with a pair of green eyes that took his breath away, and he froze.

A wave of desire so powerful it was like a punch in the gut hit him, and he staggered back a couple of steps, suddenly on his guard.

There was nothing that he loved more than a beautiful woman, and he'd certainly sampled his share since his first kiss when he was ten, but this woman did something totally unexpected to him.

Backing away from her, he finally managed to tear his gaze away, then took the coward's way out and walked away from the marina.

He didn't stop until he got to his office in the community center, quietly closed the door, and then sank into the chair behind his desk, his heart still pounding.

It couldn't be happening to him, he couldn't be falling prey to the island's magic.

He was above all that, a man who didn't need a woman in his life, no matter how alluring she was.