

Eyes of the Leopard: Discovery

Isabella Jordan

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Chapter 1

Nicole Stewart watched in fascination as the black leopard paced restlessly in his cage, his glossy coat shining in the sun. The magnificent creature was several feet in length, moving gracefully on long sinewy limbs that ended with enormous paws. He was obviously agitated. Perhaps it was the crowd that gathered about his cage or having to adjust to an unfamiliar environment. Nicole could feel his tension, could see it in the tight bunching of muscle beneath fur.

Yes, he'd make a wonderful subject for a painting, she decided.

As she maneuvered through the scattered crowd of visitors to get a closer look, she caught the black leopard's attention. Large slanted eyes the color of amber riveted on her.

The leopard's pacing ceased as he moved toward her with slow deliberate steps, stalking her. Nicole's entire body was on alert as she stared back at the large cat. Fear rooting her to the spot as he intently sniffed the air, trying to catch her scent.

It's me, Nicole realized with wonder and fear. I'm the reason he's so upset.

Heat, intense and pulsing, washed over her body in waves, bathing her face. The large animal's tangy smell nearly overpowered her as he resumed his pacing. Only now his body brushed against the bars of his cage as he moved back and forth. Sweat broke out on her forehead when the animal stopped again to glare at her. His ears flattened against his head and his large mouth stretched open in an evil hiss, revealing a mouthful of sharp teeth. Nicole's heart lurched in her chest.

"Misha!" A tall, dark-haired man in the traditional khaki uniform the zookeepers wore stepped before her, his voice guttural as he admonished the leopard in a foreign tongue.

Nicole hardly noticed as she backed away from the cage on legs that barely had the strength to support her. Under the other visitors' curious stares, she made her way to a painted wooden bench several feet away from the leopard's cage and sat down. Feverish heat continued to ravish her body, and her head began to pound mercilessly.

"You are all right?" A deep male voice penetrated the strange buzzing in her head.

Weakly lifting her hand to shield her eyes from the noon sun overhead, she glanced up into the most beautiful green eyes she'd ever seen. Emerald green eyes rimmed with golden flecks. She didn't recognize the keeper, the man who'd put himself between her and the leopard, and she visited the zoo at least once a week to sketch. She'd remember a man as handsome as he.

He was tall and beautifully muscled with wide shoulders and slim hips. His black hair, cut neatly, was longer in the front, sweeping boyishly across his forehead. The same shade of black heavily fringed those incredible eyes with thick, glossy lashes. A faded white scar marred his tanned complexion, running from a point just under his left eye across his cheek. His lips were full and sensual above a hard line of jaw and an unyielding chin.

Everything about him from the hard planes of his handsome face to the confident stance of his perfectly proportioned body set her nerves on edge, made her restless.

"I don't feel well," she admitted as he joined her on the bench, his large muscular body moving with ease.

"Would you like some water?" His voice sounded muted in her head.

At Nicole's nod, he pulled an old-fashioned canteen from the belt at his waist. Removing the top, he handed it to her, regarding her speculatively. His intense gaze never wavered as she took several sips of cool water, taking deep breaths in between. The water did nothing to squelch the strange heat. Rather, it seemed to intensify as he continued to watch her with those intense green eyes.

"You dropped this." He spoke with a heavy accent. He held out the sketchbook she'd brought with her and placed it on the bench between them.

"Thank you," she mumbled. She hadn't realized she had dropped it. How could she, when she felt as if she were on fire inside? Heat coursed through her body like a river of hot lava. The pounding in her head continued relentlessly and she felt so... sensitive. Her fingers tingled -- everything tingled. Nicole felt like jumping out of her skin. The white cotton shirt and faded denim jeans she wore were obscenely glued to her body by sweat, her tightened nipples hard little points that her bra couldn't conceal.

Still forced to look up at him, though he now sat by her side, Nicole returned the canteen to him. "I drank most of it," she explained apologetically.

"Are you an artist?" His voice was deep and soothing, but somehow it did nothing to calm her -- to bring her to her senses.

"I'm an amateur," she managed.

He smiled, an easy flash of white that messed with her insides, making her squirm in her seat. Nicole's breasts felt heavy, her nipples began to ache and heat pooled low in her belly. "Are you any good?"

Nicole would have blushed had it been possible. His words were not meant as a double entendre. He was asking about her artistic talent.

At least she thought so. But there was a playful glint in his eye that made her wonder. He picked up her sketchbook and began to browse through the pages where she'd sketched dozens of animals from the zoo. He lingered on the sketches of the larger animals -- the bears, the elephants, the tigers. His strong fingers lightly traced the tiger's outline. He had large hands roughened by hard work and a number of white scars littered his skin. Incredible hands that oddly made her panties damp just imagining his touch on her body.

"Well, I'm no Picasso," she replied in an unsteady voice. "As you can tell, I visit the zoo quite a bit."

His eyes were warm as they moved over her face. "These are good. You've captured the spirit of each animal in your drawings. Their personalities shine through."

Nicole smiled weakly. "Thank you. I like to think that I 'capture' them as you put it. I know a lot of people come to the zoo to see the animals because they haven't seen

them before, or it's a fashionably educational way to spend an hour, but they don't see them for what they really are. Each animal is unique, has a personality every bit as defined as yours or mine."

He grinned. "They do. You are very perceptive."

Closing her book, he handed it back to her. His gaze slowly moved over her as she accepted it from him.

"Your eyes are the color of the Baltic Sea. They are beautiful." His voice was pitched low, his expression serious. "We all see the world a little differently, have different perceptions. It would be something to see the world through your eyes. Your drawings suggest you look at the world and see it for its possibilities. Aside from that, you are quite talented."

"If I were so talented I wouldn't be working in a video store." She said it half-jokingly, but she was pleased by his words nonetheless. She couldn't put her finger on why. "Thank you, though. I've been looking forward to sketching the leopard since I heard it was coming."

He cast a sidelong glance toward the leopard's cage. Following his gaze she saw that the crowd around the cage had mostly dispersed. The leopard watched them from the back of his cage where it was well shaded, dipping his large rear paws into the concrete pool of water built for his use.

Nicole stared longingly at that pool as the heat continued to course through her body, centering on the softening apex at the top of her thighs.

"You can find better subjects than this leopard." The keeper's eyes flashed with an unreadable emotion as they returned to her. "He's a nasty character."

"You're new at this zoo as well," she pointed out.

"We were a package deal." His Slavic accent and smooth deep voice were an intoxicating combination. His sensual mouth curved into a lazy half-smile. "We've been together for several years, Misha and I. I am the only one who understands him, who can control him."

"Misha," she repeated. "Is that a Russian name?"

"Yes." He leaned a little closer to her, his long muscular thigh brushing hers. "It is the Russian diminutive of Mikhail."

"Are you Russian?"

His scent was so appealing, the subtle smell of man combined with something animal. His close proximity, the way those deep green eyes roamed over her face and body made the delicate ache grow between her thighs. How would it feel, she wondered, to have this exotic stranger slip his tongue between the folds of her pussy? To fuck her until she was senseless? Nicole didn't miss the erection that strained the front of his khaki shorts...

"I'm Serbian," he answered her question, offering the very hand that brought so many forbidden images in her mind. "Vitali Kerensky."

"Nicole Stewart." She shook the hand he offered. Tingling heat raced up her arm at his simple touch. Her skin was enjoying the way his large, callused hand captured hers. She had to wonder how those hands would feel against her skin, the rough pads of his fingers teasing her nipples into hard peaks, tantalizing her clit, stroking her slick inner walls...

Vitali's voice broke into her thoughts, speaking in a foreign tongue to another man in a keeper's uniform who'd stopped before the leopard's cage and stood eyeing them curiously. His resemblance to the man she sat with was strong, his body just as beautifully proportioned and his hair the same dark silk, but loosely curled. His face was a bit more youthful in appearance than Vitali's, his eyes a warm brown instead of intense gold and green.

Nodding toward them, the other man started in the direction of the zoo's entrance. His gaze moved slowly, flagrantly over her body as he walked away, creating icy-hot tingles that spread out from between her thighs.

His ass looks so tight, so firm, she thought as she admired the way he filled out his khaki shorts. She wondered how it would feel beneath her hands as he pumped in and out of her. His tight muscles flexing as he drove into her again and again...

What was the matter with her? First the scene in front of the leopard's cage and now vivid sexual fantasies about the new keepers at the zoo?

"I'm sorry." Nicole grabbed her sketchbook and jumped from the bench. "I need to get back." And that was the truth. If she stayed a moment longer, particularly with Vitali Kerensky, she was afraid of what might happen.

"Back to where?" he asked, his sexy Russian accent falling pleasantly on her ears.

When she stood, the pounding in her head nearly brought her to her knees. A drop of sweat rolled down her back and between her shoulder blades.

"Work." She couldn't keep the nervous tremor from her voice.

"Where's work? The video store?" His gaze flicked to her sketchpad and back. "What about your sketch?"

"Maybe another time." Now *her* voice sounded muted. She had to leave quickly, before she tore off her clothes and begged him to take her in front of everyone at the zoo.

Vitali caught her arm in a loose hold as she tried to make her way around him. His golden-green eyes searched hers. His touch was excruciating in her current state because her body *craved* it. Her sexual need for him was stronger than anything she'd ever experienced before. That he was sexy as hell she couldn't deny. But her reaction to him was beyond her control and overpowering.

"Come back this evening." The command in his sultry, low voice was unmistakable.

"I really can't, I --"

"Come back after the zoo closes," he said, unrelenting. "You will have your opportunity to sketch the leopard after all of the day's visitors are gone."

Nicole yanked her arm from his grip. Vitali made no move to stop her and if he were surprised by her action, he did a good job of hiding it.

Before he could say or do another thing, she turned and sped as fast as she could out of the zoo.

* * *

Nicole caught Sherry's eye as she dashed into the video store, her sketchpad tucked in one hand and the box containing her lunch in the other. Her friend shook her head as she finished checking out a DVD for a customer, letting her know the boss hadn't gotten back yet. And that was a fine thing, considering she was supposed to have returned from lunch forty-five minutes earlier.

She still felt sick. The heat she'd experienced over Vitali had finally subsided since she'd fled the zoo, but it was replaced with a fierce hunger. Her stomach growled as if she hadn't eaten in days. And that was very odd because Nicole ate well. Not that it did her a lot of good because she could never add any weight to her slender frame.

She hoped she'd have enough time to choke down her burger before her boss Woody got back. She struggled to open the box with shaking hands, the pounding in her head clouding her vision.

"Girl, you're lucky you got back before Woody," Sherry announced as she joined her in the stock room. "He's in a pissy mood today."

"R-really?" Nicole tried to sound normal but there was a tremble in her voice. "He hasn't heard from Debby?" No surprise there, since Woody was a complete asshole even to Debby, his fiancée.

"Nah." Sherry idly checked her immaculately airbrushed finger nails. A frown crossed her pretty cocoa features. "And he ain't gonna hear from her. If he'd treated my mama like that I wouldn't fool with his ass either."

Sherry's voice was fuzzy in her head. She didn't want to be rude to her friend. All she wanted to do was eat her lunch, and have a couple of minutes to get herself together...

"Damn, girl!" Sherry startled her once she'd managed to open the Styrofoam box. "Since when are you eating raw meat? Since when are you eating *any* meat?"

Nicole wished she knew. She'd been a vegetarian for as long as she could remember.

She could barely remember even ordering the rare hamburger nestled in the box along with a shiny bag of potato chips and a brownie wrapped in plastic. She only

knew that she needed it, *craved* it. The smell of the greasy meat set her taste buds on fire, had her mouth watering like that of a person who'd not eaten for days.

"I don't know." Nicole yanked the bun from the top of the burger and tried to snatch up the patty. The meat was red and fell apart in a juicy mess in her fingers. Like a starving woman, she stuffed morsels of meat into her mouth, oblivious to the astonished expression her friend wore. The bloody meat tasted so good, so wonderful...

"Nic, you all right?" Sherry asked after a moment.

Finally, it was fading. The terrible headache was easing up. The heat was lessening.

"Who's watching the front?" Woody poked his head into the room. "You guys gonna work or hide back here and talk all day?"

"I've got it," Sherry snapped back at him, tossing her beaded braids over her shoulder as she pulled the door open wider. "Talk to you later, Nic."

Talk they would. Sherry would never drop it until she got an explanation for Nicole's meat-eating frenzy. Problem was Nicole had no idea what to tell her. How could she explain, when she didn't understand herself?

Woody wasn't through either. "Nic, wasn't your lunch over an hour ago?"

Nicole nodded with her mouth full. It was the only answer she could offer as she continued to shovel food into her mouth. Euphoria overtook repulsion as she crammed more of the foreign meat into her mouth. It was so good...

"Then what the hell are you doing back here eating?" he demanded. "Get your ass out there." Woody pointed toward the storefront with a meaty hand.

She swallowed hard and nodded. Warmth lingered in her body, not completely banished, and her hands still shook. Scooping up the last bit of beef, she chewed quickly, stuffing it in her mouth as soon as space was available.

Nicole scrambled to gather up her sketchbook and the box, wanting to escape his company. Still feeling undone by her experience at the zoo, she really wasn't in the mood for customer service or Sherry's questions either, but she realized that she didn't

have a choice. She'd just closed up the box and was about to walk away when a photo on the newspaper's front page caught her eye.

The black leopard.

The fever returned in an instant, flooding her face with heat as she sank into the single plastic chair at the table and skimmed the article on the new addition to the Central Park Zoo. The leopard recently arrived from another zoo in Wisconsin. Two keepers came with him, Vitali and Ilia Kerensky. Vitali was quoted in several places in the article, obviously an expert on the breed and its origin, and its care.

Nicole pressed her thighs together, her panties becoming moist again. Just thinking of the man she'd met earlier triggered so many feelings in her body. Strange feelings...

Come back this evening.

The memory of his touch on her arm, the timbre of his voice at that moment was burned in her mind. His eyes had been green -- ringed in fire as he'd gazed at her with such... desire? Longing?

Yeah, right.

Nicole was a skinny little nobody and she knew it. Men who looked like Vitali Kerensky rarely glanced at her. It wasn't that she was ugly. There was just nothing special about her really. Some women had nice figures and others had beautiful faces. The lucky ones had both. All of them could easily attract a man. But Nicole didn't have much of a figure to speak of, just long thin limbs. Her face was pretty she supposed, but nothing to write home about.

The most gorgeous man she'd ever seen had looked at her as if he were fascinated with her. Her mind just couldn't get around that. He'd told -- no, commanded her -- to come back to the zoo. So she could sketch? That's what he'd said. But in a small corner of her heart she knew there was more to it than that.

Nicole took a deep breath, the sound of blood rushing in her ears.

She was afraid. Shouldn't she be? Nicole didn't know this man. Why did he want to see her again so urgently? He could have the worst intentions, she realized.

What about the fever and the terrible cravings? Just a coincidence? Hadn't she begun to feel ill when she'd encountered the leopard? Sherry was always chiding her about catching some exotic disease from so many visits to the zoo. Nicole didn't know about exotic diseases, but what she'd experienced came on pretty damned fast.

If it wasn't a sickness, what was it?

Nicole buried her face in her hands. She didn't know what to think and for her, that was an odd experience. Nicole knew nothing of her natural parents. Her adopted parents had provided for her, but they didn't want a child for the right reasons. Emotionally she'd always been isolated. All she'd ever had to rely on was herself and in her twenty-two years she'd developed a good head on her shoulders.

Or so she thought.

Perhaps the day's events were fate's way of throwing it in her face, telling her that she didn't have all the answers.

Think! she reminded herself.

One thing she was certain of. Her visit to the zoo had triggered her sickness or whatever this was. If she didn't go back there for a while, perhaps it would go away. It wasn't exactly what she wanted. She really enjoyed her visits to the zoo, her time there to sketch.

And if she were completely honest, there was another reason, a tall one with golden-green eyes and a dark, dangerous appeal that made her want to run back to the zoo.

Too bad.

That decided, she wiped at the sweat on her forehead and rose from the chair, snatching up her sketchbook as she headed out of the stock room.

* * *

Several hours later Nicole gazed out the window of her small apartment. The full moon rose high above the city and she was miserable.

The fever had returned with a vengeance and whatever she did she couldn't sate the hunger that threatened to overwhelm her. She'd thrown up everything she'd tried

to eat in her apartment. Desperate, she'd ventured out to a local butcher shop and returned with a pair of thick steaks. Somehow, she'd managed to overcome her repulsion to eating meat and consumed both steaks, raw. It didn't hold the gnawing in her stomach for long.

The shaking had begun an hour before. The restlessness gnawed at her, ate away any ability she had to sit still. She paced the floor of her living room, stopping only to rest at the clear glass balcony door. Nothing helped.

Nothing offered respite. Squeezing her eyes closed, she pressed her fevered forehead against the door's cool glass.

And then she heard it. A fierce growling.

The leopard?

Was she insane? She couldn't have heard the leopard! The zoo was several blocks away. It was impossible. It was --

It was.

Nicole didn't fully understand, until she stood on the street hailing a cab, just how powerful that fierce growl was. It called to her and she was completely unable to resist. Her keys were clutched tightly in her hand, her sandals on her feet. She climbed into the cab that stopped before her, wondering if she'd locked her apartment...

"Where to?" The cab driver's voice barely pierced the veil of the spell she was under.

"Central Park Zoo," she directed, squeezing her thighs together against the throbbing that had resumed at her core, the moisture that gathered. She was going to him now, the man who'd arrived with the leopard. *Vitali*. She needed him...

"Zoo's closed by now." Dark eyes studied her curiously in the taxi's rear view mirror.

"I know," Nicole answered absently.

She never saw the driver shrug as he put the cab into gear and pulled back out into traffic. No, Nicole was lost in a torrent of devastating sensations. The beating of her heart quickened in her chest and her breath came fast. The unexplainable longing made

her breasts feel heavy, made the hard tips tingle. It was all she could do to resist the urge to bury her hands between her thighs, to touch herself and ease the terrible ache.

In reality, the city's buildings and sights passed by quickly, but to Nicole it seemed an eternity. Sweat glued the gray tank top to her body. The rough denim of her jeans chafed her obscenely as she squirmed on the cab's cheap vinyl seat.

Finally, the cab came to a stop and the driver barked something at her. She couldn't hear him above the roaring in her head. She was panting like a woman who'd just run a marathon. It was a struggle to muster a response with her tongue thick in her mouth and her heart racing.

"What?" she managed to say as the throb between her legs increased ten-fold.

"Fourteen-fifty," he repeated louder.

Nicole's eyes darted to the twenty dollar bill that thrust at the driver through his window. "Keep the change." The accented voice, deep and low, came from the direction of the front of the taxi.

The passenger door opened slowly and as Nicole watched in fear and fascination, Vitali Kerensky lowered his dark head into the cab, pinning her with his stare, so intense it took what little breath she had left. He held out his hand to her. "I've been waiting for you." His words were slow and precise.

Nicole's heart raced as she studied his hand. The minute she took it she instinctively knew that she would be his. Her body quivered in anticipation even as the shadow of fear crept into her heart.

Placing her hand in his, and knowing that in doing so she surrendered herself to his will and the overwhelming ache that had to be fulfilled, she climbed out of the back of the cab.

Chapter 2

Nicole didn't notice the cab pull away. Instead, she stood trembling, in fear and something she couldn't name, as she gazed up into his dark green eyes. She could feel the heat of his skin, smell his excitement, a rich, musky scent, though she stood a few feet away. His large hands were clenched at his sides, the tension in his body evident in the rock-hard display of heavily muscled arms and legs.

Whatever had her in its clutches had affected him too. Vitali was struggling with a myriad of powerful emotions. She could feel it. His desperation was like a living thing.

"Do you know why you are here?" he demanded, his gaze never wavering.

Nicole swallowed hard. She didn't understand anything that had been happening since she'd first encountered him.

"No." Even as Nicole's heart raced, the sensitive flesh between her legs heated and softened. The fact that she shouldn't have been there, that she put herself at great risk by meeting this beautiful stranger, only heightened her excitement.

In a flash, he captured her wrist in his powerful grip and fairly dragged her through the zoo entrance, never stopping to lock the gate behind them. He didn't pause at all.

Now she was afraid. The empty path with animal cages along each side was normally a source of comfort to her. The trail's sandy stones raced by under her feet as he pulled her along. The zoo's residents screeched and cried as if they shared her awareness that something was about to happen.

And then they reached the leopard.

The leopard lunged at the bars, growling and hissing fiercely as they approached. Heat throbbed in Nicole's chest and her stomach clenched into a tight knot as finally Vitali's pace slowed.

But he didn't stop.

To Nicole's amazement, he growled back at the leopard, a deep fierce sound that a human shouldn't be able to produce. There was a preternatural quality to his menacing growl that made her heart lurch. When one of the leopard's paws snaked through the bars to swipe at them, her survival instincts took over. She began to yank her arm away from him, tugging fiercely, trying in vain to free herself from Vitali's grip and flee.

"Nicole, stop." His voice was rough. "Do not fear me."

"Let me go!" she shouted, hoping someone would hear.

She fought him with all she had, but he was so much bigger, so much stronger. Finally, despite her struggles and cries, he came at her with his shoulder lowered. Before she knew what happened, he threw her over his shoulder and began to run away from the leopard.

Nicole was jostled and bounced as he ran, pounding her fists on his back in vain. Whatever he meant to do to her, he likely would. After all, she'd come to him. What had she been thinking? How could she have abandoned reason for lust?

The strong fingers that slid up the back of her thigh were a sharp reminder of *why* she'd returned to the zoo. The simple pressure he applied to her flesh beneath the denim flooded her with excruciating pleasure, making her stop fighting him. Nicole wanted those fingers in her jeans, in her panties, and the thought had her soaking wet by the time he reached a small building and ducked through the doorway to carry her inside.

He lowered her to the neat wooden surface of a huge desk in the center of the office, the harsh rasp of his breathing the only sound in the room. Vitali watched her from the shadows as he closed the blinds of one window and then another. Nicole watched him, awed by his power and beauty, as he locked the door and secured the

deadbolt. Her mind scrambled to think of a way to get around him, to get through that door to escape.

But did she really want to get away? When he turned those golden-green eyes back on her, the flames engulfed her body once more. Her nipples tightened painfully, and her pussy was wet with need. She wanted him, this stranger, with a savage hunger she couldn't explain.

And he meant to have her, she realized. Vitali slowly moved toward her, stalking her. Her heart raced in her chest, the fear piquing her desire to a nearly unbearable level.

"Nicole," his voice was rough, low, "do not be afraid. I know you do not understand now, but believe me when I say that I would never hurt you. Trust me. I will explain all later."

"What do you want from me?" Nicole backed away from him, scooting toward the center of the desk.

Vitali's smile was small and tight. "I want *you*. I want you to know that my hunger for you goes beyond necessity, Nicole. It's your eyes. There are so many secrets there, so much feeling... They make me want to know everything about you." Lowering his head between her thighs, he inhaled deeply. "You want me too. Your body is weeping for me. I can smell your juices."

His large hand lightly clasped her slim ankle and she yanked it away as if his touch burned her. "You are frightened, but you need not be." His voice was a seductive purr as his thighs pressed against the edge of the desk. Vitali planted his hands on the shiny surface, surrounding her body. "You don't understand what is happening within you. Why you burn, why you crave red meat. I can help you. We can help each other."

How did he know what she was experiencing? Nicole's heart pounded so loudly she was certain he could hear it. "Did you d-do something to me?" she whispered, watching his hand slide across the desk and snake up between her thighs. His fingers lightly stroked her through the rough denim, as warmth and pleasure raced through

her body. She couldn't bring herself to fight him, to move. Instead, she opened her thighs wider, welcoming his touch.

"No, but I am going to." His eyes darkening as he watched her come undone. Nicole moaned as the pressure of his touch increased, her body burning to have him inside her.

"Shall I stop, Nicole?"

Stop? Hell no! "No, please."

"Then you will give yourself to me?"

"Yes!" Nicole cried out as his fingers relentlessly traced circles around her well-protected clit. His touch was a firm, maddening pressure through the denim of her jeans with sharp jolts of pleasure-pain as his fingers brushed the hard seam of her pants. Slowly he teased her until she came hard, her wetness soaking through the denim as she lowered herself to the desk. Curling on her side Nicole cried out as the pleasurable spasms rocked her body.

In a flash, Vitali was over her, rolling her onto her back. His rough hands darted under her top, sliding into the cups of her bra. His eyes glittered in the darkness as they gazed into hers, while his fingers teased her nipples into hard little nubs. Vitali's lower body pressed itself between her thighs, the hot hard length of his cock nudging insistently against her wet core. She wanted more, wanted to open herself to him completely. Nicole pressed herself wantonly against him.

"I've been waiting so long for you, Nicole," he whispered as he lowered his mouth to hers. His tongue entered her mouth for a thorough tasting.

Nicole returned his kiss, broke from it only to allow him to pull the tank top over her head. He tasted so good, all male and something wild. His fingers on her body were exquisite torture as they ripped off her bra, skimming her length, plucking at the fastenings of her jeans.

Grasping her thighs, he pulled her flat on the hard, wooden desk, so that her ass was at its edge and he stood between her legs. Nicole wrapped her legs around his slim

hips wanting him to fuck her right now. His devastating smile led her to believe he knew what she was thinking.

"Yes, I am going to fuck you, Nicole." Vitali was not gentle as he yanked the tight jeans over her hips and down her legs. "I'm going to fuck you with my tongue, with my cock. I'm going to have you in every way imaginable."

The strength in his voice made her melt, from desire as much as fear. Nicole knew a deep thrill of excitement as she thought about what they were about to do, and her body trembled in need under his smoldering gaze.

He clutched the front of her panties in his tanned hand and she held her breath, waiting for him to rip them off her. To Nicole's surprise, he gently pulled at the satiny fabric, delicately teasing her pussy with soft yanks toward her body.

"Such nice little panties." A corner of his sensuous mouth curved up into a half-smile. "I love to taste a woman through her panties. I love the anticipation she feels, wanting me to pull them down her body so I can taste all of her with my mouth. Wanting me inside her."

Nicole grasped his head, pulling him, even as he knelt, pressing his mouth between her thighs. She spread her legs wide, her fingers capturing the cool silky locks of his hair as his lips and tongue worked their way under the crotch of her panties. The tip of his tongue lightly traced the closed seam of her pussy lips before sliding into the heat and wetness.

Nicole nearly came off the desk at Vitali's claim to her pussy. She writhed and gasped as his tongue slid up to her clit, circling it slowly before he began to worry the tight little bud with quick little licks. For long moments with his nose buried in her curls, his tongue probed her sensitive folds. He explored her slowly, discovering her dips and swells before centering on her sensitive nub. Vitali sucked her clit firmly into his mouth, tantalizing the sensitive bead with the tip of his tongue, a steady devastating rhythm that had her digging her nails into his scalp.

Her eyelids drifted downward, lowering but not closing at the sight of his long tongue lapping back and forth. She cried out, a growl of frustration as she began to

shake, her knees jerking uncontrollably. He slid a finger into her tight wet passage. When she screamed out her orgasm, the animals in the zoo responded to her scream. She could hear their calls vaguely in the distance.

Vitali never ceased in his work. Just as she was coming down from one orgasm, his finger slid out and he began to tongue fuck her cunt with wet, deliberate thrusts that had her scrambling on the desk to reach him.

Nicole barely heard the quiet rip, as he tore off her panties, over their harsh breathing. She struggled to sit up, but Vitali took advantage of her posture rolling her on her stomach, her lower body hanging off the desk. When she tried to lift herself on her elbows, he pushed her back down. His hand stung as he slapped her ass and muttered something in his own language.

She felt his hot breath on the sensitive flesh of her pussy, as he spread her firm ass cheeks and continued where he left off, his tongue darting in and out of her greedy passage. His tongue was stiff, marvelously quick in its rhythm, as she came again, her cries ringing out in the dim office.

"Fuck me!" Nicole begged, craving his cock in her cunt like she wanted nothing else. "You promised..." she gasped.

"So I did." His breath came hard between words. She felt him free himself of his khaki shorts. The head of his cock felt enormous as it slid between her folds, teasing her pussy. Finally he entered her ready passage, his cock stretching her deliciously as he gripped her thighs in his hands and pulled them wide. Nicole cried out as he slowly slid all the way into her, touching her core.

He gave her only a moment to adjust to his considerable size before he began deliberately thrusting in and out of her, the push and pull of his hot silken flesh driving her to madness. Her slick inner walls gripped him as her fingers clutched the edge of the desk, her knuckles white as he relentlessly stroked himself into her again and again.

Climax came up on her fast and Vitali sensed it, quickening his pace. Impossibly, his cock widened within her, stretching her pussy as he pumped faster and faster.

Nicole screamed as she came, the strong quiver of orgasm catching her and shaking her until everything went black.

* * *

Nicole stretched luxuriously as she awoke. The room was cool, as was her skin and that was something, considering how strange the illness made her feel after she encountered Vitali at the zoo.

Vitali!

Bolting upright in bed, she frantically searched her unfamiliar surroundings, dimly lit by the night sky beyond the windows. She was dressed again, except for her panties. The scene in the office where Vitali had given her the fuck of her life ran through her mind.

Nicole spied Vitali watching her from where he sat on the edge of the bed. The dark shadow of his beard and the disarray of those silky, black locks gave him a decidedly dangerous look.

"Where am I?" she asked as his hand slid up the bed to gently caress her calf.

"My apartment." His golden-green eyes were clouded with concern as they moved over her. "Are you all right?"

Nicole ran a hand through her short hair, meeting his intent gaze. Aside from the delicate soreness between her thighs, she felt relatively normal. Gone was the heat, the strange hunger.

"I'm fine now," she admitted. "But I wasn't before... What was wrong with me? You know what it was, don't you?"

He nodded as he rose. His long, hard body filled out the expensive robe he wore. It was the color of red wine and offered a tantalizing glimpse of the smooth planes of his muscular chest.

Now the heat returned, less intense, lingering about her breasts, her pussy. Her mouth went dry and her juices began to flow.

Vitali chuckled, a deep throaty sound, as he glanced at her over his shoulder from the doorway. "We will get to *that*. Come, we have much to talk about."

Warmth flooded Nicole's face. He could read her so easily, yet he didn't know her at all. It was strange, but then so was her meeting and fucking a complete stranger -- even if it was the best sex she'd ever had.

There was something else going on. She needed to find out what it was. That something definitely involved her and while she hoped it would explain the strange changes she'd been experiencing, she couldn't shake the fear of how that knowledge might impact the rest of her existence.

Nicole followed him out of the spacious bedroom into the hallway, her bare feet sinking into the luxurious carpeting of an enormous living room. The furniture was large and plush, a cream color that matched the carpeting. A huge plasma screen television dominated one wall, with organized stacks of movies and music on disc surrounding it. Nicole stepped closer to eyeball the titles and was surprised to find the music was mostly classical and soft rock. They weren't movies, but travel guides on DVD, in alphabetical order, finishing out the entertainment center's compartments.

"Would you like some wine?"

His voice broke into her thoughts, startling her. He watched her from where he stood by the small bar at the edge of the living room, looking way too tempting in his red robe. The thin material did nothing to hide the sleek lines of his muscular body or the sizeable bulge at his groin. It was hard to be reasonable when the memory of how his hard body felt wrapped around her, how his cock felt in her pussy, was so fresh.

His cock jerked under the robe as she gazed at it.

Nicole shook her head. "I don't handle alcohol well. Never have."

Vitali nodded before heading into a large kitchen.

That's when the large painting on the wall by the kitchen's entrance caught her eye. The painting was medieval in style, depicting a great king at its center, surrounded by knights busy slaughtering strange looking black creatures. The figures were human in form for the most part, but with tiny animal ears on the tops of their heads and long tails that reminded her of cats.

Yes, that was it. They looked like people in cat costumes. The knights pierced their slim bodies with spears as common people watched the scene around them in fear.

With her finger, Nicole lightly traced the head of a child in the painting who cowered behind his mother, watching the carnage. The details and colors were rich, even though the painting had to have been hundreds of years old. The scene was depicted by the artist with a conviction that impressed Nicole.

"It is very old," Vitali explained, as he pressed a glass of ice water into her hand. "It is a painting of King John."

"From England?" Nicole asked.

"Serbia," Vitali corrected. "It pertains to an old legend about the village I come from."

The intensity in his eyes caught her off guard when her gaze met his.

"What is the legend?" She wanted to know, *needed* to know.

He motioned toward the couch as he took a sip of his wine and she took a seat. The soft cushions enhanced her growing state of arousal. It dipped under his weight as he joined her. She wanted so badly to know what was going on, but she felt restless again. How could she sit still when he was only inches away? She could smell his unique scent. Feel his warmth. Her thighs clenched tightly, a muscle in her pussy twitching as his gaze met hers.

"The story that's been told from one generation to the next is that our village was once a peaceful and happy place, long ago, before an evil tribe of barbarians invaded our lands and enslaved our people."

As if he were as restless as she felt, Vitali rose from the couch and moved to the window to stare out at the night sky. He took another sip from his glass. The dark red wine reminded her of blood. The headache was slowly coming back. Tension crept into her face and around her eyes.

"It was a dark time for our people," he continued. "They killed our men, raped our women. They worshipped deamons and made our people practice their faith or

suffer.” Vitali took a sip from his wineglass, his expression grim. His gaze briefly met hers, his eyes haunted.

“And suffer they did.” He glanced at the painting, his fingers tightening on the stem of his wineglass until his knuckles turned white. “Death was considered mercy to these villains, so to defy them was to experience unimaginable pain at their hands while you lived on and on.”

Although he gazed out the window, Nicole could see how seriously Vitali took the story he told her. She could feel the tension in his body, the tight bunching of every muscle, every sinew. Apprehension took the edge off the desire that had flared in her again. She dreaded what he might say next.

“Finally, a man with the will to lead a rebellion freed our people, driving the dark ones from our lands.”

“King John?” she asked, setting her water glass on the end table next to her.

“Yes. But while he freed his people from their captors, he could not free them entirely from the evil that had befallen them. Some still worshipped the darkness. Others hid their children from the king’s armies in fear.” Vitali’s expression was grim. “It would have been better if they had died.”

His comment unsettled Nicole. “The children?” she asked.

“All of them.” The colors in Vitali’s eyes darkened and blended as they fastened on her. “Do you see the creatures in that painting?”

The intensity of his gaze, and the way his lips tightened into a thin line, had Nicole squirming in uneasy anticipation. “Yes.”

“Those creatures were a result of their barbarian rituals, born of our women. A gift, they called it, from the darkness.” An emotion she couldn’t identify crossed Vitali’s features, vanishing in an instant as he turned his gaze to the painting. “It was, in reality, a curse spat up from hell. And that curse carries on to this day.”

Nicole’s heart began thumping in her chest as her eyes scanned the room for the door. Vitali was the most handsome, desirable man she’d ever met. The pleasure she’d experienced at his hands had been incredible, but the more she listened to his story

about barbarians and curses, the more she wondered if she was crazy for almost buying into it.

The moment she spotted the door, Vitali stepped into her line of vision, forcing her to meet his gaze. "The original creatures they created from the rituals went mad, forcing them to flee the village for the wilderness. It was the children who resulted from the mating of those creatures with the women of our village who survived, Nicole. They were human, but not human. Doomed to live a nightmare that had no end."

"They looked like that?" Nicole motioned to the painting with her thumb.

"That is an artist's rendering." Vitali shook his head. "It is meant to represent the creatures in their nonhuman state. In truth, it is not like that at all."

The curse carries on to this day? Not like that at all?

Dear God, he really believed the story he told her. Maybe Vitali *was* crazy!

Frightened now as he stepped closer, Nicole scrambled to her feet. "Vitali, I'm sorry. I should go." She tried to edge around him, but again he was faster. He caught her upper arms in his hands, his wineglass falling soundlessly to the floor. The wine formed a crimson stain on the carpet's creamy perfection as his breath pelted her face.

"Look at me!" he demanded. His golden-green eyes bored into hers as she trembled in his clutches. "You wanted to know what happened to you when you saw Mikhail today, when you met me --"

She cut him off, her voice shaky. "So the leopard..."

"Nicole, listen to me!" Vitali's eyes were wild in his passion to have her believe his tale of wrongdoing. "Don't you want to know what happened to you today at the zoo?"

God, help me! Mikhail is a leopard, the cat-like creatures in the painting... Does Vitali think HE'S a leopard too?

"The story of those creatures is vital to me because I am one of their descendants. I am only half human, Nicole. I can only mate with my own kind. If I choose to ignore that, I become something else. I --"

Struggling wildly, Nicole yanked away, kicking at him, trying desperately to free herself. Her breath came fast and the fever -- along with the pounding in her head -- returned with a vengeance. "Let me go!" she yelled over the roar in her ears.

Managing to break free from his grasp, she ran for the door. Vitali caught up to her easily, slamming the door shut above her head just as she'd managed to open it. Nicole spun to face him and shoved him backwards with all of her strength. One of her hands caught his robe as she pulled away from him, ripping long strips out of the fine fabric.

In horror, Nicole held up her hand to reveal long thick claws at the ends of her fingers where her fingernails were supposed to be. The thick grayish claws ending in razor sharp points felt like press-on nails from hell. The determination faded from Vitali's face as her heart raced. She panted as if she had just run a mile.

"You are one of their descendants, too, Nicole."

As if in a nightmare, Vitali held out his hand to her as he took a step closer. Jerking her hand back, Nicole held her ground. She opened her mouth to tell him that she thought he was a nut, but an evil hiss escaped her lips. The sound horrified her.

With a strength she didn't know she possessed, she turned and ripped the doorknob out of the door, flinging it wide open to escape into a large hallway. Running, as she never had in her life, she fled into the night.

Chapter 3

Vitali's heart raced as he ran out onto the sidewalk, buttoning the long coat as he went. He'd called Ilia to help him before he'd sprinted out of his apartment. They had to find Nicole and there was not a minute to lose.

The evening had not gone as he'd planned at all. It had not been his intention to scare her but he'd done exactly that, and she'd run away from him, but not before he'd learned the truth about her. The demon blood coursed through her veins. There were many women he'd encountered who'd had traces of the curse, who lived without ever knowing. Some had just enough so that he could fuck them and go on with no transformation at all, though they were few and far between.

He'd fully believed Nicole to be one of those and he'd been ecstatic to find one so beautiful and intelligent, one he could take freely. And he'd known when she'd displayed symptoms of the curse that he'd have to explain to her why and quickly.

He never imagined her blood was as strong as his. God, the shock!

She was so vulnerable right now. His eyes scanned the night as he sniffed the air, trying to determine which direction she'd gone. Picking up a trace of her scent, he took off, his fear for her spurring him on. The panic in her beautiful blue eyes haunted him as his feet pounded the pavement, taking him in the direction of Central Park.

Vitali had so many unanswered questions preying on his mind as he ran. The woman he'd made love to earlier had not been a virgin. How was it that she had been able to love at least one other man and not transform? How could she not have known?

Vitali had just reached the park, her scent stronger now, when her shrill scream ripped open the night's silence. He flew in that direction. Terror and rage dominated him as the change came on. His incisors lengthened by the time he reached the clearing

where he spotted her. Nicole was surrounded by a gang of young hoodlums, and his claws readied themselves as his limbs began to quiver.

He would have allowed the change and not fought it if he hadn't spotted the shadow of his brother Ilia behind the tree they had backed Nicole against. Ilia had changed already, his sleek, black leopard's body hidden from all eyes but Vitali's. He'd had no choice. At least ten young men closed in on Nicole. Ilia's chances of defending her were greater in his demon form.

A single tear glistened on her cheek in the dim light of a nearby lamp and Vitali's mind was made up. She'd already been through so much in such a short period of time. He could comfort her better in his human form. With all of his strength, he battled against the signals coursing through his body. Concealed behind the bushes, he struggled to listen to the scene above the roaring in his head, waiting for the best moment for to strike.

"Might as well get those clothes off," a gangly white boy with a missing tooth jeered as he moved closer to her, a switchblade held casually in his hand. "We're all gonna fuck you."

Nicole's eyes moved wildly from one to the other of the street thugs. All traces of the change sparked in her earlier had vanished. Vitali knew it was because her terror was so great. Something shifted in his chest when her delicate fingers tried to clutch the bark of the tree at her back. He went insane over the helpless way her feet shifted beneath her. Vitali wanted to tear them limb from limb, to cradle her in his arms and keep her safe, but he had to get his body under control first. He couldn't do that with his emotions running wild.

"Come on, bitch, strip!" another red haired punk yelled. "We want some pussy!"

When the punk got close enough to rip at her tank top, Vitali snapped. Leaping over the bushes, fangs bared, Vitali pounced on him. The smug expression on the boy's face faded, replaced by terror as Vitali snatched him up by his filthy smelling clothes, digging his claws into the boy's chest.

"You want some pussy? I have some for you," Vitali sneered.

Ilia sprang from behind the tree just as the boy with the missing tooth swiped at Vitali with the switchblade. Ilia growled fiercely as the blade sliced through his front leg, then set about mauling the terrified young man with enormous paws, while his counterparts screamed obscenities and fled.

Vitali shook the red haired one beneath him, digging his claws in deeper. "Still want pussy?" he asked while Ilia's prey screamed nearby.

When the boy shook his head violently, Vitali tossed him away like a rag doll and watched as he stood clumsily before speeding off. Vitali ran to Nicole who watched the scene, apparently paralyzed by her fear. He took her in his arms protectively, careful not to nick her with his claws.

"You are all right?" he whispered into her short dark hair.

"No." Her voice was a broken sound before the sobs came on and she burrowed against his chest, her tears soaking his shirt.

Ilia watched them over the body of the torn and bloody youth, his eyes glowing gold. Vitali knew Ilia needed the kill in order to return to human form. Vitali nodded. There was really no other choice.

They would have to decide quickly what to do with the body. While he didn't think anyone would miss the detestable young man, the police wouldn't miss the animal DNA in their investigation and that could put them all at risk. Vitali put himself between Ilia who quietly finished the punk and Nicole who still clung, crying in his chest.

"Is th-that Mikhail?" she asked against his chest.

Vitali sighed, keeping a watchful eye out as Ilia began to change back, removing the long coat he wore to give his brother.

"No, he is Ilia," Vitali answered. "He is my brother."

Nicole sagged against him, unconscious.

* * *

Nicole awoke some time later in Vitali's apartment, in the bedroom where she'd awakened after their first interlude in the office. The dim light of morning had just

begun to filter in through the curtains and Vitali's arm tightened about her, curling himself around her naked body.

He was naked too. The coarse hair of his thighs tickled the soft flesh at the back of her own, while his smooth, hard cock pulsed suggestively against her ass. The slow, steady cadence of his breathing told her that he was asleep and that was a fine thing because she needed to get her mind around the events of the last twenty-four hours.

The first thing she did was to check her hands. Finding smooth, flat fingernails at the ends of her fingers took some of the edge off her panic.

"Did I dream it then?" Nicole spoke out loud, just to make sure she could speak. Just thinking about the horrifying sound that came out of her mouth the night before made her shudder.

"No, Nicole, it was no dream." Vitali's voice was scratchy from sleep.

Vitali sat up in the bed, the covers sliding down to reveal his beautifully muscled torso. His eyes were golden-green slits in the darkened room as they fastened on her. "I am sorry I frightened you, Nicole."

Nicole squeezed her eyes shut. The nightmare she'd walked into wasn't dissipating. Horrible images flashed through her mind of her own hand with claws, of the leopard he claimed was his brother mauling the young man in the park. Granted that young man and his friends had been intent on doing her great harm, but the scene had been so horrific.

"So I am..." She didn't know how to ask the question.

"You are of my kind," Vitali said simply.

He cupped her face in his large hand. Her eyes flew open to see if he still had claws. The image of his fangs, and the tufts of black fur about his neck and face, still lingered in her mind. Flinching away from his touch, she struggled to sit up.

"Nicole, I --"

"No." She held out a hand to stop him. "I want to know some things. How and when does *that* happen? When you change... into..."

"A leopard?" Vitali blew out a breath. "When we are in danger or when we have sex with those not of our blood."

Nicole knew a spark of hope. "Wait a minute. I've had sex before and I'd be willing to bet the odds on him being what you are were slim to none."

"What *we* are," he pointed out. "Only one? Who was he?"

She'd have been indignant at this line of questioning had it been any other situation. Pushing away his hand as he reached toward her breast, she met his gaze squarely.

"He was a guy I dated for a while in high school," Nicole explained. She couldn't even bring to mind what he looked like, particularly with Vitali's fingers snaking up her inner thigh. She caught them in a firm grasp before they reached their destination, which was as warm and wet as the tropics, despite everything that had happened. Her body's reaction to him, regardless of her emotional state, was beyond reason. "It was only once and I didn't enjoy it."

Vitali frowned and stopped his exploration of her for a moment. "What happened after you made love to him?"

"I must have fallen asleep. It was in my parents' basement. When I woke up, he was gone. Doesn't sound like he enjoyed it either, huh?"

"Did you ever see him again?"

"No. Like I said it was only once --"

"I don't mean what happened in a sexual way." Vitali's expression was eerily still and serious. "Did you ever *physically* see him after that?"

"No. Why?" Nicole frowned, sensing something ominous was coming.

"Nicole, you realize that Ilia killed that man in the park last night?"

She swallowed hard. She just knew she wasn't going to like what he had to say. "Yes."

"A kill is the only way we can return to our human form once we have changed."

"I didn't *kill* him. I woke up exactly where I was when we..." Nicole gasped as the implications of his words sank in. "Wouldn't I have been covered in blood? Surely there would have been some evidence, some..."

The puzzled look on his face didn't immediately diminish. He ran a hand through his dark hair and nodded. "That was some time ago, so perhaps you're right. But normally those who can transform as you obviously can are not able to mate with others. That's curious."

Without further preamble, Vitali leaned forward and captured her mouth with his own in a kiss that had her toes curling. His tongue explored her mouth, his teeth nipping and teasing at her lower lip. Pressing her down onto the mattress with his body, his slim hips insinuated themselves between her thighs. Nicole writhed beneath him, unable to help herself as his hands sought her breasts. Sliding beneath his body, her wet cunt encountered his hot silken shaft as she tried in earnest to impale herself on it.

"Not yet, pretty one." His grin was decidedly wicked as he reached over and yanked open the drawer of his bedside table. The long red scarf caught her eye as he captured her wrists and hauled her body up the bed. Vitali neatly bound her to the brass headboard in seconds. Her gaze flew to his in growing alarm.

Strong fingers slid over her lips in a gentle caress. "Trust me."

His eyes darkened as they roamed over her body bound to his bed. She squirmed uncomfortably under his gaze, wishing her breasts were larger, that she had more flesh on her thin frame.

His tanned hands contrasted sharply with her white skin as they skimmed down her length. As if he could read her thoughts, his glossy-clear fingernails lightly raked her breasts and her hips as they slid down her body.

"You are so beautiful, Nicole," he whispered, his accent stronger. "Perfect and neat."

She felt beautiful as his mouth lowered to close over one of her nipples, teasing it with slow, lazy lashes of his tongue. It tightened to a hard point in his mouth and had

the other nipple aching in protest. He treated it to the same sensual torture as she wrapped her legs around his body and rubbed her wet pussy against him.

With a growl, he nipped at the tight bud with his teeth as his hand slid down her belly to sink into her wetness. First one finger entered her tight wet passage and then another. His touch was focused, precise. Vitali's fingers moved inside her with a steady, tantalizing rhythm. Nicole pumped her hips to take them deeper. His thumb began to massage her pulsing clit until she was nearly senseless, but he stopped when she was ready to come.

Vitali's weight lifted from her and he gazed down at her playfully as he tasted her juices on his fingers. "You taste good. I want more."

Nicole groaned at his words, a low sound of wanting that echoed pleasurably through her entire being.

She pleaded with her body, nerves tingling as she rubbed her wet curls against his hard, ready cock. "I want you to fill me." He groaned, but resisted her efforts.

"I think I can accommodate us both." His expression became predatory as he again reached into the bedside table's drawer, this time to pull out an enormous black vibrator. It's quiet hum filled the room as he lowered it to her clit, teasing the center of her pleasure with the gently vibrating toy.

Nicole's hips shot off the bed, seeking the toy's vibration as her orgasm again approached. Vitali's eyes glittered green in the beam of early sunlight streaming through the window. She screamed when he slid the vibrator into her pussy, her slick inner walls convulsing around it as her climax took her. The exquisite currents of pleasure raced through her body.

Vitali moved it tantalizingly in and out of her a few times to heighten her pleasure before he moved down the bed. Pressing her thighs open, he lowered his mouth to her sensitive cunt. He held her open and immobile as his tongue traced the swollen flesh, then down to her wet entrance where the vibrator drove her mad, lapping at her juices as she cried out and ground against his mouth. When the tip of his

tongue found her clit she screamed again as she came hard, struggling against him in her pleasure, yet wanting more.

So much more...

Easing the vibrator from her pussy, he pulled her thighs high and wide with his hands as he sat between her legs. His cock drove into her until he was buried to the hilt. The hard, silken length of him moved slowly, luxuriously within her as her pussy walls clenched around him. The hard planes of his handsome face seemed carved in granite, and sweat beaded his forehead as he fucked her, nearly bringing her to another orgasm before he pulled out.

Nicole cried out in frustration when he rolled her onto her stomach, twisting her bonds. She watched him over her shoulder as he pulled a tube from the drawer in his nightstand, applying the clear gel to the tight ring of her anus. Using the vibrator again, he slid it back into her, the heat of his body making her quiver, as he hovered over her from behind. Planting an open-mouthed kiss on her shoulder, his tongue danced delightfully across her skin. The slick, engorged head of his cock pushed past her ass cheeks to rub seductively against her anus.

Fear and anticipation had adrenaline coursing through Nicole. Anal sex was something she'd never thought to experience, let alone enjoy. He stretched her uncomfortably when he first pushed the head of his cock in, but as he slowly, painstakingly slid into her ass, she made an effort to relax, trying to enjoy the new set of sensations of having both her cunt and her ass filled.

"Am I hurting you?" His voice was a gentle whisper.

Nicole shook her head. Her pussy clamped down on the vibrator and Vitali slowly began to move in her ass.

"Do you like this?"

"I think so." Her voice sounded harsh as he continued the slow movement. Her body wanted fast and hard.

His hand snaked under her, his fingers searching through her curls to find her swollen clit and she nearly threw him off, dizzy with lust, a wonderful, sweet hunger.

He teased her clit with his finger while he held her trapped between him and the bed, gently fucking her ass as she whimpered and gasped. Vitali was relentless, pleasuring her until she came. Only when her body went limp from exhaustion did he allow himself release, spurting his seed into her as he groaned.

Vitali gently pulled out the vibrator and untied her wrists before rolling away to collapse by her side on the bed. He pulled her into his arms, her head resting against his damp chest and his heart pounded in her ear.

"Nicole, you are astounding," he whispered. "This is so good. *We* are so good together. It can always be this way. You don't have to be touched by the ugliness in your blood. Not as long as we are together."

Together? Always?

Part of her found those words unsettling. The other part knew joy at those words. "Vitali?"

"Hmm?"

"You said that you -- we -- could only mate with our own kind." Nicole's finger traced lazy circles around his tight nipple. "There can't be many like us out there, I know. And I don't mind if that's why you want me because --"

Vitali pressed a finger to her lips to halt her words. Rolling until he rose above her, he gazed down into her eyes and her heart raced in her chest at the look of gentle possessiveness he wore.

"Nicole, when I found you in the zoo I had no idea how strong your blood was. I knew you *had* the demon blood, and in time you will learn to recognize it in others too." Vitali smoothed her damp bangs back from her forehead. "There are more people than you think who have traces of the blood in their veins. Some have just enough of it that we can have sex with them and not change."

"Really?"

Vitali nodded. "I knew I wanted you anyway, Nicole, even if you were perfectly human. Never doubt that."

The conviction in his words was mirrored in his eyes. He pressed his lips to her forehead, to her cheek.

"But if I hadn't been the way I am," Nicole thought out loud, "would you... I mean, you would have to..."

"I would change into the leopard, into my demon form, each time we made love," he explained. "Then it would be necessary for me to kill to return to my human form."

"To kill humans?"

"Not necessarily." Vitali grinned, smoothing her forehead with his thumb. "It would have been worth it for you."

Vitali took her lips in a gentle kiss before rolling onto his side to stretch out beside her. He threw an arm possessively across her body, as he closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep.

How strong and protective he was, she thought. And how intoxicating to be with someone who made her feel safe and unsettled all at the same time.

She still had a hard time believing his incredible story, even though she'd seen physical evidence to support it. But in a small corner of her heart, she felt elated, at home in the arms of the beautiful man who held her.

Chapter 4

The leopard's menacing growl drew Nicole's attention as she reached its cage, intent on sketching him after all. The zoo was closed and she stood alone before the leopard's cage under the darkening sky. The large cat's amber eyes locked with hers, driving a spike of fear into her.

Mikhail. Was he like them? Vitali had not said, but she remembered their conversation the day she met him. The dislike in Vitali's eyes when he'd called the leopard a nasty character would have been difficult to miss.

If Mikhail was like them, why did Vitali keep him in a cage trapped in his leopard form? Had he done something terrible then? Was it Vitali's way of punishing him for some wrong?

Without warning, the leopard lunged at the bars, growling furiously and swinging his paws wildly in her direction. Nicole jumped in her fright, pencils and papers from her sketchbook scattering like leaves on the pavement.

The leopard watched her as she bent and began warily gathering her belongings. She could have sworn she could read triumph in the leopard's amber eyes.

"Let me help you."

Though his accent was very similar, the male voice did not belong to Vitali. Nicole glanced up at the handsome face of the other keeper Vitali had spoken to the day she'd met him. His penetrating dark eyes moved over her face as he smiled. That flash of white sent sparks of excitement coursing through her body.

The white bandage across his heavily muscled forearm caught her eye and she remembered the night in the park when one of those thugs had sliced into the leopard's front leg as he sprang from the bushes to defend her.

Vitali had told her the leopard was his brother Ilia.

"Are you okay?" Nicole nodded toward his wound.

Ilia's gaze flicked to the bandage and quickly back to her. "It is nothing." His voice was more youthful than his brother's, but pleasant to her ears. His accent was stronger than Vitali's.

"Th-thank you for that and for helping me clean this up," she muttered as they knelt together to gather the scattered papers. "The leopard startled me."

Nicole didn't miss the hostile glare he shot in the direction of the leopard.

Following his gaze, she saw the leopard watching the newcomer, his ears flattened to his head and his mouth opened to reveal gleaming white teeth, sharp as razors. He growled and again threw himself at the cage's bars and the man at her side jumped to his feet and began to admonish the leopard in his own tongue.

"Ilia!" Vitali's command knifed through the commotion.

The man standing above her with his fists clenched at his sides slowly turned his head toward Vitali. Nicole shuddered, sensing his hostility as she stood.

Vitali spoke forcefully to Ilia in their native tongue before turning his attention to the leopard. When he spoke to Mikhail his voice was low, his words deliberate. The two glared at one another and the leopard positioned himself on his haunches as if preparing to fight. The muscles of Vitali's powerful arms and legs were taut and ready - as if he would reach into the cage and tear the leopard apart at any moment.

"Is he like... us?" she asked Ilia.

The fury in Ilia's dark eyes was unmistakable. "He is."

"Why do you keep him in there?"

"Ask Vitali." Ilia's voice was bitter. "I wanted him *dead*."

Nicole watched Ilia stalk off in the direction of the storage sheds as Vitali shot her a quick glance over his shoulder.

"Let's go."

Scrambling to pick up the last two pencils she'd dropped, she decided she liked that idea. The tension between Vitali and Mikhail reached out to her with cold fingers, making her nervous. She would ask Vitali about it later.

Vitali turned his back on Mikhail after a long moment and took her arm, guiding her toward the zoo's entrance.

* * *

"How are you feeling, Nic?" Sherry's gaze raked her from head to toe. "You still eating raw meat?"

Nicole was nearly an hour late to work, but she knew that wasn't the only reason her friend was worried. How the hell could she explain yesterday? "Not for breakfast." She tried to sound lighthearted, but failed miserably.

"Woody thinks you're pregnant." Sherry returned her attention to the newspaper spread out on the counter before her. "I told him to mind his own damned business."

That *did* make Nicole laugh. She tucked her purse and her sketchbook under the counter. As terrifying as pregnancy had always seemed, it was nothing compared to what she'd dealt with in the last twenty-four hours.

Vitali had walked her to work and the fact that she could walk at all was nothing short of a miracle. The delicate soreness she felt between her thighs was a pleasant reminder of Vitali's lovemaking, and a painful reminder of the not so pleasant things she'd learned and still wasn't sure she believed.

"What's going on in the world?" she asked Sherry, trying to get her mind off what had happened in just one night.

"Says on the front page they found a body early this morning in the shallow part of the river."

Nicole had just started organizing returns from the night before, but Sherry's words stopped her cold.

"Apparently he was just a gang-banger, been in trouble with the law," Sherry went on. "But it says here he was ripped up by an animal. Says his throat was ripped out."

Oh God, oh God! The nightmare vision of the leopard tearing the thug who meant to rape her apart flashed unwanted in her mind. They'd run tests, she knew. She'd

watched too many crime dramas about forensic science not to know that. Very soon they'd have a very good idea exactly what type of animal had killed him. And that would lead them to the zoo.

"Sherry, I... I have to leave," Nicole hauled the strap of her purse up on her shoulder. She didn't give a damn about the sketchbook at the moment. "I'm sorry."

Her friend's eyes filled with worry as she watched Nicole backing toward the door. "You are sick, aren't you?"

Nicole nodded and waved to her friend before running out the door. Despite the curious glances of onlookers, she didn't stop running until she reached the zoo, speeding through the front gate and down the stone path until she reached the building where Vitali had first made love to her.

"They found the body." His back was to her as she made her way toward the desk.

"I know," Vitali answered from behind her.

Startled, Nicole glanced over her shoulder at Vitali before glancing back at the man in the chair who turned to face them. Ilia stood, every bit as tall as Vitali, and shoved his hands into the pockets of his khaki shorts as he moved around the desk to join them.

"You've met my brother." Vitali's deep voice was close to her ear. She felt the heat of his large body behind her. Being caught between the two gorgeous men, no matter how casually, was nearly unbearable. Her thighs quivered as she looked up into Ilia's dark eyes.

Vitali pressed himself hard against her back now, the heat and hard length of his cock nudging at her from behind, straining through their clothes. Moisture flooded her panties and she wet her lips with her tongue. Ilia's eyes flashed at the movement.

"I have," she said. "Thank you again for everything." What was becoming of her and her life? She was thanking someone for *killing* for her.

"You are welcome." Ilia's gaze moved over her face. "I would do anything to protect you."

Nicole didn't know what to say to that. Ilia looked nervous as he took a step back.

Vitali cleared his throat behind her, the warmth of his body leaving hers as he walked to the window and stared out at the sunny day. "We must act quickly." His voice was grim.

Ilia muttered to his brother in their native tongue, but Vitali shook his head, sticking with English for Nicole's benefit. "It doesn't matter how they discovered the body. The point is that we weren't careful enough and they did. We didn't weight the body down well enough before we dumped it in the river." Folding his arms across the wide expanse of his chest, Vitali looked at his brother and Nicole in turns. "It will not take them long to ascertain that it was a leopard who killed that thug in the park. And they will be looking for a leopard."

Ilia nodded, pointing in the direction of the leopard's cage. "There's a leopard. Let them have him."

Nicole knew he meant Mikhail. "They'll kill him!"

"Nyet!" Vitali held up a hand to silence them.

"After everything that bastard has done to our family? You would let him live?" Ilia demanded.

Vitali glared at him. "*He* did not kill that man."

But Ilia did.

Blowing out a frustrated breath, Ilia stalked back around the large wooden desk and dropped back into the chair behind it, clearly agitated.

"What will you do about Mikhail?" Nicole asked in the silence that followed.

"Free him," Vitali said simply.

Ilia began speaking furiously in his own language and angry color seeped into Vitali's face. Vitali responded in kind, glaring at his brother who leapt from the chair and stormed out of the office. The door's violent slam had Nicole jumping where she stood.

Wrapping her arms about herself, she stared at Vitali and noted the tension in his stance. He gazed out the window watching his brother walk away.

"Mikhail and I, as you might have guessed, have some history. We were once closer than brothers. A better friend I could not have had. But I could also have no greater enemy than Mikhail."

"What happened between you?"

"There are those among us, Nicole, who have no respect for life, human or otherwise, and Mikhail is one of those. He wasn't always that way." Vitali shook his head. "Something happened between us, Nicole. He hurt someone dear to me. Our sister Nadia, Ilia's twin. Mikhail brutally beat her and raped her when he claimed once to love her. I saw Mikhail change after that to an angry, aggressive, depraved creature. He stopped trying to find someone he could be with and retain his human form. He slept with human females whenever he wanted. After he transformed he killed them for pleasure to change back."

"Why did he do that to your sister? She was like us right? Couldn't she have fought him?"

"Mikhail believed she betrayed him." Vitali's expression was grim. "And yes, she is like us and I'm certain she did fight him. But just as in humans, the female is weaker, more vulnerable. The demon blood does not make her his equal."

His gaze fixed on Nicole as stepped closer, forcing her to look up at him. His strong hands clasped her upper arms lightly. "Ilia and I must leave tonight. We'll gather only the belongings we need and be gone."

Nicole's heart lurched at his words. "You're leaving me?"

His seductive smile made her shiver in anticipation. "I don't want to. There is no reason for you to be implicated in any of this. I couldn't live with that. It is your choice. You may stay... or come with me."

He *wanted* her to come with him. It was in the possessive way his hands stroked the flesh of her arms, the way those amazing eyes moved over her face. Nicole couldn't deny the elation she felt knowing that.

If she stayed, what did she have really? Aside from a lonely existence made up of her video store job and her DVD player?

If she went with Vitali and his brother, she would have someone to love, someone to share her life with. And unimaginable pleasure...

"You will come then?" his soft voice broke into her thoughts.

Nicole nodded hesitantly.

Vitali crushed her in his arms until her ribs compressed and she held onto him as he pushed her back against the office wall. His eyes were dark as they stared down into hers.

Movement outside the window caught her eye, Ilia carrying buckets of water. The tension in his muscular body was hard to miss, even from a distance.

"I must ask you something. Are you attracted to my brother, Nicole?" he asked gently.

Nicole felt her face warm under his intense gaze, knowing she'd been caught ogling his brother. "No, of course not. He's attractive but --"

Vitali sank down onto his heels before her. In a single smooth motion, he yanked up her red mini skirt, revealing her lacy white panties. She could feel the heat of his breath on her through the thin material.

"Are you attracted to my brother?" he repeated.

What was she supposed to say? Her mind scrambled for a believable answer. When she hesitated, he clutched the front of her panties in his hand and ripped them from her body. Hooking one of her long legs over his shoulder, he dove for her pussy with his mouth. Nicole couldn't help it, she thrust her hips at him. She didn't care that anyone could look in the window or walk right in.

His tongue immediately slid between her pussy lips, zeroing in on her clit. He worried the little nub over and over as she clutched at his hair, biting her lip to keep from crying out.

The torturous pleasure paused after a long moment.

"Answer me, Nicole." His voice was a seductive purr. "Are you attracted to my brother?"

Nicole gasped as his tongue began to dart in and out of her passage. He stopped and asked the question again and again, just as she was about to reach her release, only to deny her when she wouldn't answer. When his long, rough finger slid into her soaking pussy as his tongue teased her throbbing clit, finally she could take no more.

"Are you attracted to Ilia, Nicole?" he asked gruffly, stopping.

"Yes," she sobbed.

Vitali rose to his feet, furiously yanking at his shorts to free himself. Nicole just had time to wrap her legs around his waist when he impaled her with his throbbing cock and she came long and hard, the convulsions shaking her relentlessly. But Vitali was far from done. Cupping her ass in his hands, he lifted her higher until he had mounted her against the wall, her feet no longer touching the floor. He established a steady relentless rhythm with his cock, fucking her until she threw her head back and groaned, the orgasm rising in tantalizingly slow motion, teasing until she thought she couldn't possibly take it any more. Then it washed over her in sweet waves that had her trembling.

"You must always be honest with me, Nicole." His voice was rough. The slick, hot friction of his cock inside her soon became too much to bear. "You must promise me."

"I promise," she managed to gasp. She was ready to come again and Vitali sensed it. He drove harder, faster. Nicole cried out, unable to help herself, as another orgasm overtook her. Her inner walls convulsed around him as he continued to thrust up into her quivering sheath. Finally, his arms tightened about her. His release, passionate and hot, filled her.

Nicole collapsed against Vitali, her gaze falling on the sunny window across from them. Ilia didn't move away in time to prevent her from knowing that he'd watched them.

* * *

Back at her apartment Vitali helped her pack a few things while she showered and changed. He assured her they would have someone box up all that was hers and have it sent to them once they were settled. Vitali only laughed when she asked how they would make a living. She took it as a good sign.

A few hours later they joined Ilia in Vitali's apartment. Nicole watched the brothers as they sized each other up. *Please don't let them fight.* To her surprise, they embraced, instead. Vitali patted Ilia's back with affection. "We will leave then and free Mikhail before we go."

The pained look on Ilia's face told her that he wasn't happy about the idea at all, but he nodded. When their attention turned to her, Nicole dropped her gaze, uncomfortable. Ilia had definitely watched Vitali fuck her. For all she knew he had heard Vitali make her admit she found his brother attractive.

Vitali's fingers gently slid under her chin, tilting her face up, forcing her to meet his gaze. "What is wrong?"

Nicole swallowed hard, her eyes meeting Ilia's.

Vitali leaned close to his brother, speaking to him in their language. Ilia cast Nicole a sidelong glance before he walked slowly from the room.

"Nicole --"

"He was watching us, Vitali, today in the office," she interrupted him.

"I know..."

Nicole stared at him in disbelief. "You knew? And that didn't --"

His fingers pressed against her lips to halt her words. "You desire him. He desires you."

"What?" Nicole couldn't believe what she was hearing. "Vitali, I think I'm in love with..." Somehow she managed to stop herself before she said "you," but it did little good. It sounded crazy hearing it out loud, but there was no other way to describe how she felt. He searched her face for a long moment and she held her breath, afraid of what his reaction would be.

The gentle smile that formed on his lips was the best answer he could have given her. He pressed his mouth to hers in a gentle kiss, savoring her, cherishing her. His arms closed around her body and she clung to him as heat began pooling low in her belly, between her thighs. "Finish what you were going to say," he demanded.

"I think I'm falling in love with you."

Vitali pulled her against him, cradling her against his chest in a fierce embrace. The heat of his breath made her shiver in the warm room as he whispered in her ear. "I love you too, pretty one. From the moment I first saw you I loved you." He pulled back, his hands holding her steady as their eyes met. "It seems so natural to be with you. It is easy to forget that you don't understand our ways."

"What ways?" she asked.

"You are mine, Nicole. All three of us, you, myself, and Ilia understand this." Nicole lifted a hand to his handsome cheek as he continued. "I do not feel threatened by your attraction to Ilia or by his attraction to you. It is that way with our kind. We can only mate with our own and it is not unheard of for us to share our mates, Nicole, where there is trust, of course."

She knew in an instant what he was asking. Outrage was her first reaction, that he would even think of sharing her with Ilia, but outrage quickly gave way to other things. Sympathy, generosity -- lust. Vitali came from a place where this was completely acceptable, she thought as the sensitive flesh between her legs quivered. Vitali, in the short time she'd known him, had more than fulfilled any desire she'd ever had. But he and his equally virile, attractive brother tending to her desires? What woman could turn that down? Ilia wanted her, she could read it in everything about him when he was near.

Slowly it began to make sense to her. Until he found another like them, she was the only woman Ilia could have if Vitali allowed it. And hadn't Ilia risked his life for her right along with Vitali? Moisture began to flow between her thighs just thinking about it as she gazed up into Vitali's face, but her reality had been stretched pretty thin over the last couple of days.

Nicole shook her head. "It may be that way with *our* kind, but I am new to this, you know. I don't come from a place where it's okay to have sex with the guy you think you love and his brother at the same time -- so that none of you turn into killer cats!"

She tried to pull away from him but he held her in the circle of his arms easily.

"Those are the ideas of others," Vitali said slowly. "If you believe in your heart it is wrong, then that is the way it will be. I would never make you do something you don't want to do, Nicole. I love you. I would never want to extinguish the innocence I see in you."

Nicole scoffed. "Me? Innocent? After the last couple of days?"

Vitali chuckled. "I don't mean that in a sexual way. What I meant was that you see the world as a good place, you have hope that good things will happen."

"And you don't?"

"Nyet." Vitali's eyes locked with hers. "I see a place filled with danger, monsters."

"And you think I can change that for you?"

He shook his head, his eyes moving over her face. "You can't change me." His accent became heavier than normal. "But you make me very happy."

Vitali pressed his lips to hers, taking her mouth with a soft, devastating kiss. "Nothing has to happen with Ilia, Nicole."

"I know, it's just that..."

"You want to, don't you?"

Nicole couldn't meet his searching gaze any more than she could deny the growing ache between her thighs. Hell yeah, she wanted to!

His smile made her wonder if he really *could* read her thoughts. Vitali captured her face in his hands and treated her to another slow, tantalizing kiss. Scooping her up in his arms, he carried her to his bedroom, leaving the door open as he gently laid her in the center of his bed.

Vitali stretched out next to her, matching his length to hers. He kissed her gently. His hand slid from the short locks of her hair and down. He smoothed his palm over

her breast. Her nipple tightened, straining under her bra for his touch. All too happy to oblige, his hand darted under her top, into her bra. She moaned into his mouth as his fingers teased her breast.

At her feet, the bed dipped under Ilia's weight as he joined them. His eyes, the color of obsidian, gazed over her body. Vitali's lips burned a path across her cheek to her ear as Ilia's fingers tentatively smoothed over her knee, his touch unbearably light.

"Do not be afraid," Vitali whispered in her ear.

Vitali pulled the thin white top up over her head before returning his teasing mouth to the sensitive column of her throat. His lips and tongue sampled her flesh, moving further down until they reached the border of her bra. Easily he nudged his way into the small cup, his lips and tongue finding her aching nipple. She writhed under the soft, wet lash of his tongue and the steady gaze of his brother, whose fingers moved ever so slowly up the sensitive skin of her inner thigh.

Vitali's mouth teased her other breast as he reached under her to unhook her bra, blocking her view of Ilia as his head dipped toward her. Ilia's mouth and tongue teased the inside of her knee as Vitali laved her nipple. She thought she'd expire on the spot from the experience of having both men tasting her flesh, their hands on her body. And they'd only just begun.

Ilia's mouth traveled slowly up the inside of her thigh. The sharp intake of her breath drew Vitali's gaze. He nipped at her lower lip as Ilia pulled her skirt and panties down her body.

"Relax," Vitali whispered, as Ilia's fingers gently spread her open. Ilia's heated breath pelted her just before his tongue slid from her opening to her clit, lingering there, laving the swollen little nub. A sharp wave of pleasure washed over her sex as Ilia tasted her, teased her.

Vitali took her mouth in a searing kiss and her hands sank into his hair as Ilia tongued her pussy. Vitali's tongue began a bold exploration of her mouth as his brother's dipped into her entrance. Nicole moaned into Vitali's mouth.

Nicole cried out as Ilia brought to her orgasm with his fingers and his mouth. Vitali broke the kiss so Ilia could watch her come over her dark curls. His mouth closed over her nipple, devastating the hard tip with quick, wet lashes of his tongue as his brother continued his ministrations. Together they brought her to another delirious high. The realization that she was having sex with these two beautiful men thrilled her almost as much as what they did to her.

Ilia pulled himself up on the bed, unbuttoning his shirt to reveal a faint sprinkling of hair across his heavily muscled chest. He unfastened his shorts, but remained partially clothed as he lifted her legs in his strong hands and spread her wide. Nicole gasped as Ilia's hard, ready cock slid into her body, filling her. Vitali watched her with darkened eyes, growling as he removed his own clothes.

Vitali's cock stood out hard and proud as he moved up the bed. Nicole couldn't resist catching the shiny drop of pre-cum with her tongue as Ilia slid in and out of her in a determined rhythm. Vitali growled and took his cock in his hand, feeding it to her as she took him in her mouth greedily. Nicole swirled her tongue all around Vitali's shaft, his balls brushing her chin as her mouth slid back and forth over him. The cheeks of his ass tightened under her hands, his hand curling in her hair as she pleased him. Nicole slowed down, taking him back into her throat as far as she could, drawing a moan from him.

He muttered something in Russian and abruptly pulled himself out of her mouth. Vitali nudged his brother's shoulder with his hand and Ilia nodded, his breathing harsh and labored as he rolled onto the bed, taking Nicole with him. Nicole was draped over Ilia with his cock still fully inside her as Vitali knelt over them from behind her. She was slick with desire, growing more wet as she anticipated what Vitali was about to do.

Vitali reached for the tube in the nightstand as Ilia pushed up into her with slow, deep thrusts. Slick with the gel, Vitali pushed into her ass, just as he had the first time, and Nicole was stretched just as pleasurably. Stroke after stroke they plunged into her

until Vitali filled her completely. Her breasts hovered over Ilia's mouth and he reached up to suckle them. She marveled at the feeling of being filled by them both.

"You like this, don't you?" Vitali asked from behind her, leaning forward to trace the inner shell of her ear with his tongue.

She was beyond words. They took turns pushing into her until they developed a delicious rhythm, Ilia tonguing her nipples and Vitali teasing her shoulders and her ears with his mouth. She lost track of how often she came, their stamina was so incredible. When she didn't think she could possibly take anymore, Ilia's cock widened, stretching her inner walls as Vitali had done that first time and impossibly, another climax began to build.

Vitali leaned back up to sting the cheek of her bottom with his palm as they continued to thrust within her, startling her at first. But Vitali's spanking quickly heightened her enjoyment, the bit of pain contrasting with the exquisite waves of sensation until she screamed out her release, long and loud. Both of them pumped her harder and faster until they each came, groaning and growling into the room's silence.

Nicole's hands slipped on the damp skin of Ilia's chest as she tried to lift her weight from him. Vitali pulled her back against his body and collapsed with her on the bed by Ilia's side. His breath fanned her damp flesh as she closed her eyes, exhausted.

"Rest for now, my love," he whispered close to her ear as he held her safe in his arms.

Nicole snuggled back against him, thinking it a wonderful idea. The sound of Ilia's light snoring told them he'd already drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 5

The light of the full moon penetrated the darkness hours later and Nicole pulled herself from Vitali's arms to head off for the kitchen. She found his red robe on the back of the bedroom door and pulled it on as she made her way into the hallway. Her stomach growled and with little wonder, she mused, considering her interlude with Vitali and his brother earlier.

Stumbling through the darkness in the unfamiliar apartment, she finally located the kitchen and, more importantly, the refrigerator. Squinting in its light, she surveyed the contents, grinning when she spotted a deli bag of roast beef right on the top shelf.

She'd just snatched up the bag when a shadow passed behind her. "Vitali?"

"No," a deep voice answered.

Somehow, she didn't think it belonged to Ilia.

Nicole jumped as the kitchen light snapped on revealing an enormous man. He wore a rich gray suit and his hair was streaked with gold. His eyes, a dark amber, pierced hers. His features were beautiful but in a harsh, cruel way and his expression was one of amusement as his gaze raked over her.

Pulling the torn robe more tightly around her body didn't help much. Nicole still felt totally naked under this strange man's gaze. "Who are you?" she asked, trying to keep him from seeing that she was trembling. "I think you'd better leave."

"Or what? You'll scream? That could be interesting."

"Touch a single hair on her head and I will rip you apart, Misha." Vitali's voice was low as he stepped between the man and Nicole. Ilia stopped at his side, still buttoning his shirt as he glared at the intruder.

"So what was the plan, Vitali?" Mikhail spoke in heavily accented English. He picked a piece of lint from the fine gray suit he wore. "To slip out into the night and leave me to pay for your stupidity?"

"That was *my* plan!" Ilia sneered.

Vitali's voice was calm, steady, as he held out an arm to keep his brother from charging Mikhail. "How did you get here?"

Mikhail's laughter was rich and deep. "Did you think I would wait there like a sacrificial lamb until they put me to sleep? I ripped off the arm of that scrawny little shit who feeds the animals each day. He was too stupid to live. It was a mercy killing."

Nicole watched Ilia's face color, but Vitali showed no emotion at all.

"And you are here because..." Vitali held out his palm to invite an answer.

Mikhail's gaze shifted to Nicole and his smile sent cold chills down her spine. "I would think that would be obvious, Vitali. To kill you and to take her. I'm the only one in the room who hasn't had her after all."

"She has nothing to do with us, Misha." Vitali took a step toward the man she now knew to be his enemy. "Neither does Ilia."

"That is beside the point." Mikhail waved away the barely concealed threat. "I *will* take her after I kill you both. Perhaps I'll do her here first, so she can see your dead bodies while I fuck her."

Ilia yelled at him in Russian, lunging at him before Vitali could stop him. Mikhail struggled with him for only a moment, before hurling his large body into the living room as if he weighed nothing at all. Ilia's body smashed the enormous television screen on impact. He struggled to his feet as Mikhail's cruel, amber eyes turned on Vitali.

Nicole knew real fear in that moment. Would they be able to stop Mikhail? Ilia was no small man. That Mikhail was able to dispatch him so easily told Nicole he was very powerful. Vitali didn't look afraid. He stood motionless as Mikhail stalked about him in a half circle, his amber eyes glowing.

"Did you honestly think you could keep me caged forever, Vitali?" Mikhail moved closer. "Did you not realize that eventually I would find an opportunity to free myself and make you pay?"

"You cannot hurt me any more than you already have, Misha." Vitali's tone was flat.

Mikhail's amber eyes flashed at Nicole. "Your sister still lives, Vitali. I think I could hurt you much more now."

Vitali's hands fisted at his side and Nicole watched as the thumbnail on one hand drew outward, elongated. When he straightened his hands, his fingers ended in razor sharp claws.

Nicole didn't realize she was moving backward until she felt the refrigerator's cold steel at her back. Ilia watched her from behind. Mikhail was poised for action.

Vitali and Mikhail sprang into motion in the same instant as Vitali knocked him to the floor, slicing through the fine white shirt Mikhail wore with his claws. Mikhail sank his fangs into Vitali's muscled arm. Vitali's cry of pain was the scream of a leopard.

Watching in horror as they struggled on the floor, Nicole didn't notice Ilia until he was in front of her, protectively shielding her with his body.

"You're not going to help him?"

"He'd never forgive me."

Clinging to Ilia's arm, she watched as Mikhail's claws sliced into Vitali's thigh. Taking advantage of Vitali's pain, Mikhail rolled until he was above his foe, catching Vitali's throat in his clawed hand. Vitali went still as Mikhail watched him.

Nicole's heart was in her throat as she clung to Ilia, feeling his muscles bunch beneath her grip. Mikhail would rip Vitali's throat out.

Mikhail's triumphant laughter rang through the room. "This is too easy, Vitali. Did you spend all of your energy on that skinny little toy?"

"Pride be damned," Ilia roared, as he dove for them.

He broke Mikhail's concentration long enough for Vitali to make his move. His open hand connected with Mikhail's face and he shoved him backwards with a single, powerful thrust. His claws caught in Mikhail's skin and three neat slices began to bleed, marring the perfection of his beautiful face. In his fury, Mikhail swept Ilia to the side and began to change before their eyes, his body splitting the seams of his suit as he transformed. Inky black fur erupted through his skin and his eyes were amber flames, as he bared his teeth, glaring at Vitali.

In seconds, Mikhail was the enormous leopard again. Nicole knew the same terror she'd known that day at the zoo as he peered around Vitali to hiss at her. With a great leap, his feline body flew between Vitali and Ilia. He landed on the linoleum floor at her feet, his teeth bared.

Vitali's golden-green eyes were dark with fury as they met hers. The leopard took a step closer. She could retreat no further. Desperately she glanced around, spotting a set of knives on the counter to her left. Knowing the leopard would strike at any second, she lunged for the knives, drawing the largest one from the wooden holder. In the very instant Mikhail sprang up toward her throat, she brought the knife down in a smooth arc, sinking it into his ribs. Mikhail's scream echoed through the apartment as she shoved with all her might and he fell back to the floor.

The sound of police sirens outside drew their attention to the window, where flashing red and white lights lit up the night. Ilia sprinted toward the bedroom. Vitali reached Nicole in an instant and pulled her into his arms.

Nicole stretched up to kiss him. Relief washed through her body as she poured all the love she felt for him into her kiss, holding onto him and never intending to let him go.

Vitali pulled her around Mikhail who writhed frantically, trying to reach the knife with his teeth to extract it, his blood staining the floor at their feet. Clutching her wrist, Vitali pulled her out of the kitchen and toward the door. Ilia was on their heels with most of their bags.

Casting one last glance over his shoulder as they fled out of the apartment, Vitali said, "Goodbye, Misha. I leave you to your fate."

Nicole held the thin red robe to her body with her free hand. She struggled to keep up with the long-legged strides of Vitali and his brother as the three of them made their way out of the building and down a dark, narrow alley.

"Where are we going?" Nicole whispered as they reached a street corner. Ilia hailed them a cab.

Vitali's expression was stilled and serious. "To our sister. If Mikhail should live through this night..."

Nicole nodded her understanding. She didn't know exactly how or why Mikhail had hurt their sister, but she knew they had to protect her.

The yellow taxi's brakes squealed as it came to a halt in front of them. Ilia climbed in first with their things. She and Vitali joined him in the back seat.

"Where to?" the driver barked.

"LaGuardia." Vitali draped his arm across the top of the seat behind her and Nicole snuggled up against him, her body still trembling.

"I'll keep you safe, pretty one," Vitali whispered into her hair as the taxi lurched into motion, taking them to the airport, leaving the wail of the police sirens behind them.

Isabella Jordan

By day Isabella is an instructor at a university in her native Virginia. By night she writes erotic tales and fantasies -- and eats chocolate! In her spare time she enjoys life. While Isabella enjoys spending quiet time with her family and reading, she also enjoys bungee jumping, hiking, walking in the rain, rock 'n' roll, and volunteering at her local women's shelter.