

King

**Tianna
Xander**

**A Stranger in
Paradise**

Wands

A Stranger in Paradise

By

Tianna Xander

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A Stranger in Paradise-King of Wands

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Dedication

To my Family: Thanks for encouraging me to dream.

Chapter One

Adam Greer, new Alpha of the Paradise clan, gazed out the ice-glazed bay window at the snow covered forest and sighed. It would take more than the shimmering ethereal beauty of the glistening snow and frost covered trees to forget his plight. His people were few and scattered over the face of the Earth. Others of his kind had been gone so long it would take an act of God to bring them all together again.

He spun around when someone knocked on the door. "Enter." It was his second and best friend, Nick Hill. "What did you find out?"

Nick sat down. His expression was grim. "Thank God for the internet. We think we've found a family. We were hoping for more. One family isn't going to make much of a difference, but it's a start."

Adam sighed. "I suppose." He moved to sit at his desk. The surface was cluttered—covered with thick files of people long gone from the clan. Birth records of missing people that went back a

hundred or more years were stored in those thick folders. The most recent document was nearly thirty-six years old. His birth record was there, along with the others who had helped bring about the *coup de tat* that changed the fate of their race. Unlike before, at least now, they had a chance at survival. The old council, dictatorial in its dealings, drove their people away. Most of the clan fought the iron rule. When they couldn't win, they left, choosing to make their own way out in the world.

He picked up an old file and tossed it to the side, onto a pile of those he'd already read. Tempted to shred them all with rage, he pushed the mess of folders onto the floor instead. "They were supposed to be safe here, damn it! The council—"

"The council was wrong. I expect most of them realize that now. They meant well in the beginning, but things got twisted somewhere along the way."

Adam shook his head, his face burned with the anger he felt pulsing through him. Even after so many months of being in charge, he still wanted to throw caution to the winds and kill those who had put his people in such a position. He clenched his fists at his sides and turned. "No. *Someone* got twisted." He shook his head with disgust. "No one is meant to breed with members of their own family. That's just disgusting."

"I agree." Nick inclined his head. "There is no reason we can't procreate with humans. Our DNA is dominant. We found that out decades ago. We can change them. There is no need to resort to incest." He sat down, mimicking Adam's usual easy manner and tossed a folder onto the recently cleared desktop. "Check it out. Tell me what you want to do."

Adam didn't waste any time. Without glancing at the thin packet, he rested his elbows on the desk. "I already know what I want to do. When can you be ready to go?"

Nick stood and leaned over the desk. "I'm already set to go. Just be sure to have a welcome home party waiting for them if we can convince them to return. It wouldn't do to have the family think they weren't missed." He picked up the file and flipped it open. "This particular group broke away from the clan two generations ago."

Adam stared down at the thin blue folder. "How in the hell did you find them after so long?"

Nick bared his teeth in an easy grin. "One of them is the author known as TJ Woodward."

"The suspense author?"

"One and the same."

Adam shook his head, a half smile on his face. "I'll be damned."

"No," Nick said. "He'll be damned if we don't find him first. I've read a few of his books. The attempts on his character's lives all follow *Tudra*

doctrine.” His expression turned grim. “I think there has already been one attempt on his life. If I were a betting man, I’d say he writes a novel every time there’s an attempt on his life. Or...” He paused. “He was trained as *Tudra* himself.”

Adam picked up the folder and read the cover page. That was the only explanation. No one escaped the assassins of the *Tudra* for long—except other *Tudra*. He and his followers should know. As former soldiers for the council, they, too, had been trained in the *Tudra* way. Only they had been smart enough to revolt. Theodore James Meyer was right to write under an assumed name, but ultimately it hadn’t done him any good. The council had found him and put a hit on his life. In their eyes, defection was punishable by death—even though it had been TJ Meyer’s grandparents that left the clan. TJ himself couldn’t have been *Tudra*, but his grandsire could have been. There was no doubt in his mind. TJ Woodward was lucky to be alive. “Give me fifteen and I’ll be ready to go.” He stood and quickly left the room. There were many matters to attend to before he left.

* * * *

Nina Bidel huddled in the bushes a few hundred feet from her home. Once again lifting her binoculars to her face, she watched the men surround the cabin. The moon was bright and the

fresh snow glowed white in the silvery light. She breathed slowly, deliberately. The last thing she wanted was for someone to get lucky and see her breath. The men approached the cabin slowly. They expected to find her inside. How did they know where she was? Every time she stopped for a short while, they knew where. They always found her no matter how obscure or remote the place.

Their heavy steps crunched loudly though the snow. The sound was noisy, nearly deafening in the pre-dawn stillness. Maybe that was a good thing. They wouldn't hear her if she accidentally sneezed or something as equally stupid.

All at once, they moved, crashing through her windows and doors. She closed her eyes, disgusted with herself. She should have left here six weeks ago. She'd planned to, but the snow made the woods so beautiful. She'd prayed for a sign to tell her whether she should stay or go. Two days before she was due to leave, an ice storm, closely followed by a blizzard, locked her to the little cabin for nine more days. It was the sign she'd so desperately wanted. She was sure it meant she could safely stay. It never crossed her mind that it meant she could die here.

The damp night leached the warmth from her body. Cold seeped up from her feet, her snow covered boots lost their waterproofing on her way home. Shivering, she pulled her coat tighter

around her. It was probably a good thing she'd skied to old Hiram's house to make sure he was okay Monday. She'd known a storm was coming and also knew he'd need a hand moving the snow to make a path to his barn so he could feed his animals. She'd been there four days. Her hearth was cold and, thankfully, her laptop was securely strapped to her back.

Nina knew she'd lose her clothes again if she left now like she must. Still, it was an acceptable loss. *Things* could be replaced. Her life could not. She barely stopped a sigh from escaping her lips when she smelled the unmistakable scent of wood burning. They were making themselves at home. She'd held out a small hope they would leave when they'd found her gone and the cabin cold and empty.

Her eyes widened and she couldn't contain her gasp of dismay when the men ran from her little cottage. Orange light grew brighter and flames flickered in the windows before the glass shattered from the intense heat. Tears tracked down her cheeks, threatening to freeze on her face. She'd loved that little cabin. *Still*, she reminded herself again, *things can be replaced*.

Using the noise of the crackling fire to cover her escape, she made her way back to Hiram's and her SUV. The angry blaze coming from her cabin was too bright and the night too dark, even with the moon and snow, for the men to see her outside the

circle of light provided by the burning cottage.

She should have known this could happen. They'd burned a few of the other places where she'd stayed. But she hadn't owned those other homes. Thank God for insurance. Now she knew she couldn't return to the home she'd shared with TJ until after those men stopped stalking her. It was filled with loving memories and she refused to let them be destroyed by a bunch of insane thugs bent on killing her.

Nina yawned and vowed she'd pull off at the nearest rest area—if she made it that far. The last sign she'd seen said it was fifty miles. With roughly thirty-five miles to go, she wasn't sure she'd make it. "Thank God," she murmured when she passed an exit sign. Two more miles and she could eat and get a room. After driving for two days straight, she needed food, a shower and lots of sleep—in that order.

Ten minutes later, she had a full tank of gas and was headed for a twenty-four hour diner. The hotel's almost empty parking lot put priority on her growling stomach. She smiled at the Christmas lights decorating the small town and wondered when they would take them down. It was already mid March. Careful not to drop her laptop in the slush, she locked the doors and hurried into the diner without her coat.

"Why aren't you wearing a coat, you silly

goose? It's freezing out there." A middle-aged woman with bright purple hair and equally bright pink lips stared at her like she'd just come from a UFO not a car. She straightened her blue and white striped uniform dress with the name Helen embroidered on the left, just over her heart. Her small, frilly white apron barely circled her large waist and ample hips. "Well it isn't any matter, now is it?" She grinned, showing off a mouth full of unnaturally large and white teeth. "It's warm in here and so is the food. Even the ice cream." She cackled at her own joke. "Come on, honey, let's sit you down over here, away from the door." She led Nina to a booth in the back and handed her a menu. "Take your time, sweetheart. I'm not going anywhere."

Nina looked around the empty diner, noting the second entrance. Just in case. At least the place was clean. She'd eaten in worse places out of necessity. The food smelled good and she could get something hot in her belly. Cold sandwiches and equally cold coffee from the convenience stores she'd stopped at for gas over the last two days had begun to wear on her.

She hoped her continuous driving gave her a good head start on her pursuers because there was no place to hide. If they caught up with her here, she may just lose her car. Then where would she be? Surrounded by tinted windows, she couldn't see outside, but she'd bet a penny she made a

great target for anyone outside. Maybe she should just get something to eat, a gallon of hot coffee to go and hit the road again. Burying her face in her hands, she tried not to cry. *What am I going to do? Where can I go? Those men don't seem like they're ever going to give up. You can't run forever, Nina. Sooner or later you're going to run out of places to hide and they're going to catch you.*

"Have you decided yet?"

Nina jumped and looked up at the smiling waitress. "Goodness, you scared me."

Helen snorted. "It wasn't like I was sneaking around, honey. You look plumb tuckered out." She flicked a glance at the hotel. "You gonna get a room?"

Nina shrugged, still undecided. "I've thought about it. I *am* tired. But I don't think I should." She tried to look out through the window again. "Maybe I should just get a burger and coffee to go."

Helen harrumphed and sat down across from her. "What are you running from, sweetheart? There isn't anything worth your life to keep you on that road when you're so beat. Just look at you. Tsk, ts. With those big dark circles under those pretty brown eyes, your hair needs a good washing, too."

"My eyes are hazel," she corrected dully.

"Hazel, brown..." Helen shrugged. "It's almost the same thing, if you ask me." She clicked her

pen and poised it over her pad. "Burger, coffee? Are you sure you wouldn't like our chicken fried steak instead?"

Nina sighed, too tired to argue with such a dominant personality. "You wouldn't happen to have a hot roast beef sandwich, would you?" It was her favorite restaurant meal. She couldn't remember the last time she'd taken the time to have one of those.

"Hot beef it is. Would you like mashed potatoes and gravy with that?" At Nina's nod, Helen stood with a grin and headed to the kitchen. "Hey, Harry, I need a moo and spuds covered with mud!"

Nina grimaced at the colorful diner jargon and hoped her muddy moo and spuds tasted better than it sounded. She was starving.

She'd just started to eat when she looked up. Her stomach clenched as she watched a group of men stride through the door. She almost sighed with relief when none of them gave her a second glance. She chanted, *there's safety in numbers, there's safety in numbers*, all the while eating as quickly as she could without drawing attention to herself.

Helen hustled over and seated the men at the tables she'd put together after they came in. She bustled around, giving them good, but impersonal service.

Nina couldn't help but steal a few covert glances at the table. The men were all hot—some

more so than others. Shivering involuntarily, she rubbed her arms as her gaze met one of the men's. Damn, he'd caught her looking! She looked away, her face heating. Her gaze drifted over the man to his left. He wasn't bad either.

Both of them were tall, dark and incredibly handsome. The thinner of the two had short hair a slightly crooked nose and a bearing about him. The others seemed to look up to him. Maybe they were some sort of traveling construction crew and he was the foreman. He was the boss. There was no doubt of that. The second man, a bit shorter and more muscular than the first, must have been his assistant. The others gave him almost as much deference as the first man. She'd noticed he'd walked with a limp when they entered, the poor thing. She hoped it wasn't permanent. Some girls would hold that against him. She licked her lips. Not her though. Too bad she didn't have any time. She might be tempted to have some fun even though she knew she shouldn't. Anyone she associated with would be in danger. She couldn't do that to someone.

She'd told Hiram that, but he wouldn't hear of it. After spending so many years alone, he didn't give a damn. She did though, and she couldn't help but worry about him. If those men knew Hiram helped her, they would kill him.

Finishing her dinner, she pushed her plate to the center of the table and sipped her coffee. It

didn't take long for Helen to hurry over and scoop the dirty dishes from the table.

"Any dessert, hon?"

"No, thank you." Nina shook her head. "I'm stuffed." And she was. After two days of small sandwiches twice a day, she was so full she might be sick. She picked up her backpack with her laptop. "I just need the bill, please."

Helen ripped a sheet off her pad and handed it to her. "I'll meet you at the register right after I see what that man wants." She said, waving to the handsome dark haired man she'd ogled. "He's a cutie pie, don't you think?"

She *did* think. It was just too damn bad she didn't have the time to get to know him better. Nina stood and made her way to the register. She didn't have to wait long. Helen hurried over to ring up her dinner on the antiquated machine. She handed Helen her credit card and waited to sign the slip.

"You stop back by for breakfast before you head out tomorrow morning. I want to see how pretty you look without those dark circles under your eyes."

Nina wanted to laugh. She'd have to stay a hell of a lot longer than just one night to lose the dark circles. It had taken months of sleepless nights to get them. She hadn't had a good night's sleep since she'd mistakenly decided to carry on with TJ's legacy. She imagined it would take at least a

week or two of regular sleep before the dark splotches started to fade.

TJ left her with seventy-four completed outlines and twenty half-completed manuscripts. She could continue to publish books under his name for the next thirty to forty years or until someone succeeded in killing her.

She knew for certain what happened to TJ now. Before, it had just been a theory. She'd bet dollars to snowballs his rock climbing accident was no accident at all. Taking a deep breath to prepare herself for the bitter cold, she stepped outside and got into her car. Too exhausted to continue driving tonight, she started the car, backed out of her parking spot and turned toward the hotel.

* * * *

Adam had watched the girl as she practically hid in the corner, up against the back wall. The reflection in the glass behind her told him her mussed auburn hair was just as short as the front would suggest. It didn't matter. He liked short hair on a woman, especially if they were just as soft inside as they looked tough outside.

This little thing, with her tired manner and eyes that looked as though they'd seen too much touched him in a way he hadn't expected. He found it hard to follow the discussion his men were having at the table, she was so exquisite.

He'd scented her apprehension, her fear, when they came in. He'd bet they all had. It was a measure of their strict training that none of them showed they even noticed her. She'd visibly relaxed when she thought none of them paid attention her. But he had all right.

Damn! If he wasn't so pressed for precious time, he'd pursue her. A little recreational sex was just what the doctor ordered. He'd loved watching her. Then she'd gone and disappointed him by eating too quickly and leaving barely ten minutes after they arrived. Still, by the way she carried herself, he'd bet she was beat. Even the dark circles under her eyes couldn't detract from her loveliness. It merely brought out his protective instincts. His cock grew hard at the mere thought of sinking into her moist heat.

Nick leaned toward him, his telepathic link clear, *Will you stop it already?*

Adam's eyes widened. *I'm sorry. I didn't realize I'd connected with you.*

Well, you did. Don't you usually connect with me when you see a prime specimen like her? Nick gave a snort of derision. *Now my cock is near to bursting with no relief in sight. It's been years since I've felt such an intense craving for a woman. I want nothing more than to seek her out, bury my head between her legs and lap up her woman's thick cream like a cub.*

Adam could only agree with that idea. It wasn't until they both saw the woman slinking through

the darkness on their way to their room that their suspicions were aroused. He held up his hand, silently stopping Nick in his tracks.

"What the hell are you —"

Quiet! Look over there, through the darkness. That's our dream kitty now. She's slinking away like a thief.

Or a runner.

Adam watched her. *She does look like a runner, now that you mention it.* He took a deep breath. *And she's scared. I can smell it.*

The sound of breaking glass from the direction she'd just come from startled them to action. *Get the others out here. Someone's after our little friend and I'd bet they're professionals.*

What makes you think that? Nick asked with a frown.

Where are they, Nick? Adam looked around, pointing out the fact that there was no sign of her attackers. Still, he and Nick knew where *she* was. While he wasn't positive he wanted to divulge everything about himself to the tasty morsel, perhaps she'd be a bit...grateful for their interference. His cock twitched at the thought of burying himself in her slick sheath.

Nick took a deep breath. *Hmm... You have a point, oh fearless leader. I don't smell them either.*

Shit! I didn't think of that. You know that can mean only one thing. It's the same reason why her attackers won't smell us.

Tudra, Nick said with disgust. *When will they*

learn the council no longer pulls their strings?

Someone still pulls their strings and I want to know who. My next question is what the hell do they want with a human female? Adam watched as the woman settled down. She huddled against the side of one of the vehicles in the parking lot, obviously hiding. Her mouth was clamped shut so tight, a muscle in her jaw ticked. *She has to be freezing. She has no coat.*

Lord, he could smell the sickly sweet scent of her fear from here. He had to get to her. Moving as quickly and quietly as he could, he crawled toward her, Nick on his heels. He pulled his other self close, holding on to it in case he needed to change in a hurry.

You don't have to risk yourself you know. Adam glanced back at his best friend, wanting to urge him back to safety.

You should know better than that, you big pain in the ass. Where you go, I follow. I'm your second and your protector. You know how that works.

He did and he didn't like it. Gritting his teeth, he moved forward again, noting the shadow that moved closer and closer to his woman. That thought almost brought him up short.

I've begun to think of her as the same, old friend. She will be ours. At least once. She's frightened and alone. He chuckled. *And she will be grateful.*

* * * *

Nick changed into his other self. Bones popped and snapped. Legs muscles compacted into powerful haunches. His face turned to a muzzle, then he tilted his head up and sniffed, using every sense as he searched for their enemy. He settled down to watch and listen, waiting for his chance. Using the efficient, compact muscles of his leopard, he pounced before Adam could put himself in harm's way. Plowing into the other big cat, he grabbed his prey by the neck when it toppled over. He clamped his jaws tight and used the claws on his hind feet to wreak havoc on the other animal's vulnerable underbelly.

The other cat screamed. He heard a vicious snarl just before another leopard jumped onto his back. It was suddenly knocked off by a larger leopard. Mentally grinning at Adam's display of power, he finished off his enemy and turned snarling, ready to do battle again.

Adam had already killed off his enemy. Without thinking, Nick made eye contact with his other prey for the evening. Lifting his snout, he sniffed the air and purred. He loved the way she smelled. Already huge green-brown eyes grew larger as he approached. Adam, the ham, already lay at her feet, panting. His pink tongue moved back and forth with each breath as he lay watching her.

Nick shifted his gaze back to the woman. Her

eyes were closed and her hands covered most of her face.

"They're real. Oh, my God. TJ was telling the truth. They're real!"

He and Adam both took the opportunity to change back to their human forms while she chanted to herself. It would be better for her sanity if she didn't continue to see their other halves.

"The others have taken care of the rest of *our friends*, Adam. Perhaps it would be best if we all hit the road again before more arrive."

Adam nodded his agreement. "Yes. You're right. I'm sure they were supposed to check in at some point. When they don't..." He shrugged.

The girl lowered her hands and looked at them. "What the hell are you guys? *Who* are you and why don't you want to kill me like the others? Not that I'm complaining, mind you." Her gaze bounced between them.

The only outward sign she gave that she was even the slightest frightened, was her trembling hands. She kept her arms tightly clasped around a backpack as though it held the keys to Fort Knox.

Adam spoke for them as was proper for the alpha. "I am Adam Greer." He reached out, put his hand on Nick's shoulder and pulled him closer. "This is my friend, Nick Hill. We are *Leoparo*."

She threw her head back and let out a small hysterical sounding giggle. "That's impossible.

Shape shifters don't exist. They can't exist. It's against the laws of nature." She took a deep breath before she continued. "Among other things. People just can't shape shift into animals. It's impossible."

Chapter Two

Nick sighed. They didn't have time for this shit. She argued her logic despite the fact that she'd already admitted TJ Woodward told her about them. It was something he shouldn't have done. Not without bringing her over into their world. How many others has he told? Was that why the *Tudra* hunted her? "Look, possible or not possible, what's the fucking difference? We have to get moving. They're bound to send reinforcements when these assholes don't check in." He pointed to the large dead bodies behind him.

Adam growled low in his throat. It was clearly a warning to take it easy on the girl. "Just wait a damn minute, Nick."

"No." He stood and shook his head. "We don't have a minute." Looking over his shoulders at the others who already stood by their vehicles, he asserted his protective rights as second. "We have to go and you know it. She may not be TJ, but she knows where to find him if he's been telling her

about us. Let's get moving." Bending, he snatched her backpack from her arms, figuring she'd follow wherever he led as long as he held it.

"Hey! Where the heck do you think you're going with that?" She stood and ran to catch up to him.

She tried to take it back and he merely smiled, holding it out of her reach. "I think I'll hold onto this for a while." He turned and raised his brow at Adam. "You coming or staying here?"

Why you sly dog. I never would have thought of that. She's coming willingly and all you had to do is take her damned pack. I wonder what's in it that's so important.

Hell if I know. Nick smiled at his own ingenuity.

* * * *

Nina wasn't sure what to do. These men didn't seem like they wanted to hurt her, still she couldn't just let them take her backpack. It had her laptop in it. And in her laptop were the transcribed manuscripts and outlines TJ left her. Those men who kept attacking her destroyed the originals when they torched the first house she'd rented.

"Get back here with that!" Her angry cries fell on deaf ears as she ran after them, forgetting about the cold that seeped into her skin. What if she told them the truth? She was afraid if they found out TJ

was dead, they would leave her to the men who tried to kill her. Still, she was scared to death of them. After all, she didn't know these men. She needed rest so badly her mind was playing tricks on her now. Seeing the big cats was nothing more than a hallucination brought on by lack of sleep. And seeing their massive erections standing at attention when they talked with her was also a hallucination. Only that one was brought on by lack of sex. "Dang it! Give me my backpack, please."

Nick spun around. "Not until you tell us where TJ Woodward is."

She couldn't do that. He'd think she was nuts if she told him. "I can't tell you where he is."

His eyes narrowed and she swallowed thickly. "You can't or you won't?"

I won't, actually. But you don't have to know that, you creep. She licked her lips. "I can't tell you."

His mouth quirked up at the corners and he looked at her with amber cat's eyes. "You're lying, sweetheart. I can smell it." He turned and started walking again, still carrying her backpack.

Shoot. TJ is dead. Nina stopped herself from telling them the bad news. What if they thought she was to blame? What if they wanted him dead, too? If that was the case, they'd gotten their wish. She berated herself for being so weak and needing to keep her promise to TJ. In order to do that, she needed that backpack.

She stared at the two men, not wanting to believe they were the huge cats that killed her stalkers. But she'd seen them change. Her eyes hadn't been closed all the way as they'd obviously thought. She'd kept them open a bit, unable to stop watching them, curious as to whether or not TJ had told her the truth. Either she was going mad from lack of sleep or they really were what TJ claimed. She wasn't sure what scenario was worse.

That they'd turned back into the two absolutely delicious men she'd seen in the restaurant was even more of a shock. Their midnight black hair shone blue-black in the light of the parking lot. They were both drop dead gorgeous and they wanted her to go with them. Part of her wanted to get to know them better—a *lot* better. But she couldn't get past the fact that they weren't human or...she was nuts. *What a choice.*

She watched them warily. Her refusal to cooperate had driven them to silence and they'd stopped walking. She shivered and Adam slipped his coat off and threw it over her shoulders. Hugging the jacket tighter about her, she reveled in the warmth and the clean crisp scent of the man.

"Where the hell is your coat?" he asked with a scowl.

"In my truck." She looked over her shoulder. "Back that way."

"Give one of my men the keys. They'll take care of it."

Nina dug them out of her pocket and handed them over without thinking. *Crap. Idiot! What did you do that for?* Now she really had no choice but to go with them.

She wondered if the bit TJ told her about telepathy was true. He never said anything to the man he threw the keys to, but the man nodded and took off back the way they'd come. She sighed. It probably was. The loveable old coot was telling her the truth all these years after all. No wonder he'd been so strong and fit at his age. What other sixty-eight year-old man went rock climbing?

"Tell us where TJ is and you can have our full protection." Nick was scowling again. He'd turned to face her and, pulling a set of keys from his pocket, pushed the button for the remote entry. The doors unlocked and the dome light came on.

"TJ is dead."

"TJ Woodward is dead?" They both said at the same time and gaped at her.

She nodded, her eyelids growing heavy. "Yes. I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but he died nearly two years ago." It hadn't taken long to convince his publishing company to let her continue his work. TJ was their best author. This way they didn't have to lose one of their best selling names.

"You're his wife?"

She shook her head and smiled sadly. "No. I'm Nina. TJ was like a father to me. He found me on the street when I ran away from my seventh foster home at sixteen. Instead of turning me back over to the authorities to go back into the system, he raised me as his own. He hired tutors to home school me until I was eighteen. Then he took me back to the state offices to get my ID so I could take the GED test. He sent me to college when I got my diploma." Tears burned her eyes. It was only a matter of time before she cried and embarrassed them all. "I loved him so much."

Tilting her head back, she looked up at the star-filled sky. "He died from injuries incurred in a rock climbing accident while I was away at school." She took a deep breath, then continued. "He left me everything, including some half written manuscripts and dozens of outlines. I could release two books a year for the next few decades and still have more." He'd also left her very well off, but they didn't need to know that.

Adam sighed and shook his head. "So much for bringing him home."

Nick nodded. "It's back to the proverbial drawing board, eh?" He looked at Nina. "What about her? We can't just let those guys kill her. I'd bet you a buck Mr. Woodward's accident was no accident."

Nina agreed. "Yeah, I think so, too—especially

considering he expected me to come home the next day."

They both looked at her as though they wondered why her homecoming should have stopped him.

She ducked her head. "I hate to fly and he knew it. He was supposed to pick me up eight hundred miles from home. He should have been on the road not scaling the face of a mountain." She held up her hand when both of their mouths opened. "Before you ask, he wouldn't have changed his mind. I'm certain. Picking me up was something he loved to do. He always had something special planned. This time he'd rented an entire off-season day at an amusement park. He knew I loved roller coasters. The charge posted to his credit card bill three weeks after his death."

God she was tired. It was the only explanation she could think of for telling these strangers her life story—TJ's life story... If only she could close her eyes for a minute, get some sleep. Right now there wasn't much she wouldn't give for a chance to get some rest—to feel secure. To be protected. She swayed on her feet and they both rushed to catch her.

"You should come with us."

"Yes," Nick agreed. "You aren't safe. Someone wants you dead. Any idea who it might be?"

"We're ready when you are, Sir." One of the other men approached Adam. His manner was

one of respect and admiration, perhaps even friendship. It wasn't one of subservience or fear. He glanced Nina's way. "The bodies have been loaded into the back of the vehicles drenched in the men's scents. We've even taken the liberty to get the lady's things." He handed Adam her coat.

"Thanks, Drew. Just wait a minute and we'll be ready to go as well." He turned back to Nina as the other man walked back to his car. "You can keep wearing my jacket if you want. Yours is cold and will only chill you."

Nina was glad. She liked the warmth and spicy scent of his coat wrapped around her. She wasn't sure what it was about these men, but she felt safe with them.

"Ma'am, do you have any idea who it might be?" Nick repeated his earlier question.

She watched as the other men, who had been loading luggage, climbed into their respective vehicles. "I have no idea who it could be. TJ had several close calls before he died. Bad car accidents, shots fired near him while walking in the woods, things like that. He was convinced the incidents were coincidental. He was so sure of the security of his identity."

She hugged the coat around her tighter, pretending she was cold when she really wanted to smell the clean scent of its owner. Her mixed emotions confused her. She shouldn't be standing here wrapped in a strange man's delicious

smelling jacket telling of TJ's death while secretly lusting after her rescuers. Tears of sorrow, regret and confusion ran down her cheeks unchecked. "I worried about his *bad luck* until I got the news of his death. I sat in my dorm, my things packed, wondering why he was late." She looked up at them both. "When I saw the report about his death on the news, I knew they hadn't all been accidents."

Nick looked around. He obviously wanted to leave. The man had a protective streak a mile wide for his boss. She bit her lip, indecisive. Did she go with them, trust them? At least these men didn't seem to want her dead. There was only one thing worse than death in her book and that was sexual assault. If they planned that, they could have overpowered her and taken her anyway. She gave them both a long look. Not that they would have to force her. After two long years of abstinence because she'd been concentrating on her degree, she wouldn't put up much of a fight.

Nick looked at his watch and cursed. "Look, Adam, we need to go—with her or without her. The ten of us can't possibly survive an all-out *Tudra* attack. We aren't prepared."

Tudra? Maybe that was why they wouldn't give up. Nina watched them both as they seemed to struggle with the need to go and the desire to protect her. She sighed. "Okay. I'll go with you." Standing, she headed for her car. A hand on her

arm brought her up short. "You can't take your car. We need it to lead them away from you. Your scent is all over it."

"I can't leave it here. Everything I own is in it." Including TJ's ashes. Not that she owned them, but she'd promised herself to try to find his ancestral home and spread his ashes over the fields in Paradise. She'd just never realized he'd been telling the truth all these years.

"Carter!" Adam barked. "I need you to drive the lady's car to a safe and secluded spot somewhere to the south. Hembeck and Dorr will follow you and give you a ride home. Be sure to keep the windows down so her scent will lure them away from us. Head East while we drive north to Paradise."

Paradise? Fear clogged her throat. She was told the *Tudra* lived and trained in Paradise. "TJ told me—"

"He told you stories only the old ones would tell." Nick interrupted her as they walked toward their truck. "Adam and his people took over the clan nearly ten years ago."

"So the *Tudra* don't rule Paradise anymore?"

"The *Tudra* never ruled. They merely served the council. Then somewhere along the way someone in the council got twisted. Some of them believed women and children were property instead of individuals. They considered them...things they could use as they pleased." Adam made a face.

"They wanted us to mate with our sisters or female cousins."

She gasped. "That's just disgusting! No wonder so many left before you and your people took over. I don't blame them. Or you."

"Can we catch up later and get the hell out of here now?" Nick urged them into the truck. "I've got a bad feeling. I hope we haven't missed anyone or taking her car in another direction isn't going to do us a damned bit of good."

"Wait! Where are my things?" She stood firm. "I'm not leaving without them."

Nick sighed, walked her to the back and opened the topper. "Your things are right here. See?"

* * * *

Adam watched as she shuffled through her meager belongings, neither of them prepared to see the small urn she pulled lovingly from a box.

"He wanted nothing more than to go home." She looked up at them, tears glistening in her eyes. "He'd never been to Paradise, but he'd always wanted to go. His grandfather always told him how peaceful and beautiful it was." She set the urn back down and wiped the tears from her face. "I promised myself I'd find the place he'd talked about so much and sprinkle his ashes on the mountain above Paradise. He said his family

owned the mountain. He used to joke that he wouldn't rest easy anywhere else."

Adam's chest felt strange, tight. It filled with an odd sensation he'd never felt before. He wanted nothing more than to pull Nina into his arms and comfort her. He didn't know why, he barely knew the woman. She stirred something strange, something primal in him that he hadn't known existed.

I feel the same way. old friend. Nick rubbed the center of his chest. *That's one of the reasons I want to get her out of here.* He reached up and pulled the topper door closed. "Can we go now? The longer we stay, the more chance there is of the Tudra catching up with us."

Adam walked her around to the passenger side of the truck and opened the door. "After you." His gaze strayed to her heart-shaped ass as she climbed into the truck and strapped herself into the middle seat. He didn't have the slightest idea how he was going to manage riding several hours with her pressed up against him. His hormones shifted into overdrive the minute he saw her. Sitting with her so close would probably kill him.

As it will me, old friend. Still we must both grin and bear it. We have to get her back to Paradise where we can protect her with our full force. The Tudra will not give up. You know that as well as I. Nick started the truck and put it in gear. *I've been thinking. I know we've never considered this for more than a night or*

two before, but what if we agreed to share her until she makes a decision between us?

Adam's eyes widened. *I'd never thought of that.* It wasn't as if his heart was involved. It wouldn't bother him a bit if she slept with them both. *I think that's a great idea.* Perhaps his interest would wane after a while. Or perhaps he'd fall head over heels in love with her. He inhaled deeply, taking in her wonderful scent.

It occurred to me that neither of us could be with her all of the time. And I don't know about you, but I wouldn't trust anyone else with her safety.

You have a point. No. I wouldn't trust anyone else. If we both react so violently to her scent, how would the others respond to it? No. I think it best if we keep the responsibility of keeping her safe to ourselves. I have no idea why thinking of you with her doesn't bother me.

Same here. But thinking of her with anyone else gets my hackles up. Nick said, keeping his gaze on the road.

I feel the same way. Adam replied as he stared out the window into the darkness. Why he felt that way was a mystery to him. Was it because he trusted Nick above all others? It still didn't explain why the thought of another man making love to her infuriated him, while thinking of Nick fucking her brains out turned him on.

* * * *

It wasn't until Nina was in the truck and

sandwiched between them that she even thought of the consequences of her actions. What if...what if they expected more out of her than she was willing to give? She couldn't give them answers. She had none. Plus, an idiot could see the two men wanted her. Both of them had a hard on since they met.

Could she choose between them? So far, they both had exhibited the same behavioral characteristics and both of them were clock-stopping gorgeous. And, while the other men had given Adam special deference like some sort of royalty, Nick didn't. The two men were friends, plain and simple.

She sighed. There was nothing simple about her situation. Why was she so attracted to them anyway? She stole a glance at Nick from the corner of her eye. Strong hands gripped the steering wheel. Muscles rippled and flexed in his tanned forearms as he turned the wheel to follow a curve in the road. Okay. So she knew why she was attracted. It didn't mean she had to do anything about it. Though she knew she would, given half a chance. With both of them! She closed her eyes. Goodness! When had she become such a floozy?

Her eyes burned and the need to sleep weighed heavily on her. Still, she couldn't bring herself to relax enough to even doze a bit. She barely knew these men. Even though they'd saved her life, she

still held a measure of reservation.

“Can’t sleep?”

She glanced up at Adam through the darkness. The lights from the dash weren’t quite bright enough to see his eyes or read his expression. “No.” She licked her lips. “I’m exhausted. Maybe I’m just too tired. I haven’t slept for two days. You’d think I would just pass out or something.” She shifted in her seat. “Maybe it’s because I’m uncomfortable.”

“Oh.” Adam moved to give her more room. He put his arm around her so her head rested on his shoulder. “Better now?”

“Um...Yes. Thank you,” she said with a soft chuckle. “But that wasn’t the kind of uncomfortable I meant.” It didn’t stop her from snuggling closer though. Apparently her body was a hussy. Maybe the rest of her should go along for the ride. And by the feel of his rock-hard body pressed against her side, it would be one heck of a ride. Twisting to her right, she snuggled closer and rested her cheek against his chest.

He inhaled sharply when she pressed her breast against his side. She closed her eyes and smiled. These two men wouldn’t hurt her. Not physically anyway. They could have raped her by now if that’s what they wanted. The bulges in their slacks never went away, yet neither of them made even one sexual advance.

She inhaled deeply, loving his scent and how

safe she felt sitting between them. He smelled of cedar, soap and...man. She fought the urge to look up at him again. He always looked down into her eyes and something told her he saw far more in her eyes than she could see in his through the darkness. Something else told her these men would keep her safe from the people trying to kill her, even at the expense of their own lives. Though she hoped it didn't come to that.

Her left arm got tired as she held her hand against her chest. She didn't want to lay it on his thigh and she thought sticking it between her legs was too suggestive. She stared out through the windshield as they sped down the highway, watching the mile markers flash by in the beam of the headlights.

* * * *

Nick stared at the highway stretched before him, occasionally peering in the rearview mirror. He could have sworn there were six cars back there a few minutes ago. Now he only saw headlights from the five vehicles that followed them back to Paradise. He knew they weren't the only travelers on the road, but he wanted to be certain of Nina's safety. He'd never been so aroused in his life and he wanted to sample a bit of what the woman sitting next to him had to offer. But that wasn't the only reason he'd protect her. Protecting her from

the *Tudra* was the right thing to do. Plus, there was something about her that made him *want* to take her in his arms and chase away all of her monsters.

There was no way in the world the *Tudra* would get to her without one hell of a fight. He and Adam had been their best assassins and well they knew it. Once they found their dead comrades, they would know they were up against a formidable enemy. He only hoped they could keep her safe. The thought of her ending up in their hands made him ill.

He glanced over at the two of them when they spoke, deciding to let them get to know each other without his interference. The less he reminded her that there were two men in the truck with her, the more she would relax. He hoped. She needed rest and he wanted to see that she got it.

The moment he caught scent of her, every muscle in his body hardened and stayed that way ever since. When he saw her sitting in that diner with her short reddish-brown hair going in every direction and those dark circles under her eyes, his protective instincts shot to the fore. She needed someone to take care of her. He and Adam were just the men to do it.

He kept one eye on the road in front of them and one on the rearview mirror. He couldn't be too careful when it came to his little she-cat and that was one little pussy he couldn't wait to lick.

Shit, Nick. Are you trying to kill me? If so, you're doing a damn good job. Here I sit with her head on my shoulder and her body pressed so close to mine and you're thinking of eating her sweet-smelling pussy. I've got a hard-on from hell over here so put a lid on it, will ya?

Sorry, oh king of kings, boss of bosses, know it all of— "

Adam glared at him over her head. Put a sock in it, Nick. You know you're my friend above all else. The only reason I made you second was because you're the only other fit to rule if something should happen to me. It wasn't because I wanted your servitude and you know it.

Nick shrugged. I know, but I can't help but give you a hard time once in a while. You make it so fun.

Adam sighed and turned to look back out the window. Nick concentrated on the road again. He'd only provoked him because he knew they both needed something to take their minds off of fucking Nina senseless before they stopped on the side of the road and ravished her.

He stared out through the windshield and tried not to think of how much he wanted to drive his hard cock into her over and over again while she screamed out her pleasure beneath him.

* * * *

Adam jerked when Nina's hand fell into his lap and closed his eyes. His cock throbbed, straining

to break free of his pants. God, he wanted nothing more than to strip her bare and lick every delectable inch of her. She smelled as sweet as an all-day sucker.

If her arm had fallen a couple of inches to the right, she'd be cupping the head of his dick in her innocent little hand. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. What the hell did he do now? If she moved her hand any closer, he might just embarrass himself.

You know we can't stop until we get to Paradise, don't you?

Why's that?

Adam sighed. *She can't be left alone in her own hotel room and neither of us will be able to keep our hands off her if we share her room. And I'll be damned if I'll let anyone else stay alone with her like that.*

And you'd leave me alone with her, knowing I want her? You really think it's a good idea to try to share her? Nick seemed surprised.

I told you it was a great idea, didn't I?

Nick glanced at him, then back at the road. *Yes you did. I just didn't know you meant it.* He sighed. *She likes you, you know. I've seen her reaction to you. Her heart races when she looks at you and I can scent her arousal even now.*

As I can scent her reaction to you. Adam sighed. *I know I'm right. We can't stop. She'd run screaming into the street if either of us attempted to touch her tonight.*

Exactly. And since they couldn't take that

chance, they would drive straight through to Paradise no matter how damned tired they were. Nina needed their protection just as the others back home did. The *Tudra* were ruthless killers. She was lucky to have escaped them so many times and for so long. Sooner or later her luck would run out.

Adam was glad they found her first. It didn't matter which one of them she ended up with or if they each went their separate ways, but he would always thank God he'd found her before she fell victim to the men stalking her. He admired her writing. He didn't think it was possible for one author's voice to seem so much like another's, but Adam hadn't been able to tell the difference between the two. He hadn't noticed a change in the style of writing from one book to another. He hadn't heard the news of the real TJ Woodward's death and he could happily continue reading the books, even knowing they were now written by a female hand. He looked forward to her next book and couldn't wait to read it. He admired her for more than her rockin' body and pretty face.

Little Nina was a woman he could fall in love, with heart and soul. That's what scared him the most. He knew her from her writing. He'd seen inside her mind, reading the books she'd released over the last two years and he liked what he saw. He respected her. That was a lethal combination especially when his best friend wanted her, too.

Chapter Three

Nina woke with a start. Her heart pounded, her entire body shaking in terror. Despair filled her mind. Something was wrong. Horribly wrong. She looked around trying to figure out what woke her. “What—what was that?” She tried to sit up, but the weight of Adam’s arm held her down.

He loosened his grip on her, looked down and smiled. “We just hit a pothole. There’s nothing to worry about.”

“Oh.” Pulling away from him, she sat up straighter and stared through the windshield. Thick fog surrounded them. She knew it was crazy, but the white mist seemed angry. Felt malevolent. Alive, even. The air inside the truck felt heavy and strange. Her lungs ached, her chest felt tight. She held a trembling hand to her heart as though the action would keep the pounding organ in her breast.

Terror gripped her tight with icy fingers. The further they drove into the seemingly

impenetrable mist, the more frightened she became. "Turn around!" She swallowed around the lump in her throat. She tried to keep the rising panic from her voice, but failed miserably.

Grabbing Adam's arm, she looked up at him. The dread she felt in her heart threatened hysterics. "Tell him to stop. Turn around. We need to leave this place. Something...something is out there. It's watching us." Nina wasn't sure why she felt that way. She didn't have a psychic bone in her body.

Adam patted her leg as Nick sped up instead of doing as she asked. The truck hurtled even faster through the unpleasant mist. "It's all right, Nina. There isn't anything or anyone out there. What you're feeling is the protective barrier around Paradise that keeps outsiders from finding us." He shifted in his seat, resting his arm behind her. "Paradise exists outside of space and time as you know it. There is a doorway along this stretch of road that will take us into the rift. It's the only way to keep our existence a secret."

"Have you never wondered why you couldn't find it?" Nick asked, his eyes still on the road. "Do you think humans would just leave us to live our lives if they knew we existed and the magick was real?"

Of course they wouldn't. Humans, especially Americans it seemed, liked to dissect what they didn't understand. She shuddered at the thought

of the men who'd risked themselves to rescue her, and now protect her, strapped to a table somewhere while someone endlessly stuck them with needles, taking piece by piece, bit by bit from them until they begged for the oblivion of death.

"Can the *Tudra* pass through the mist, too?" She hoped not. Perhaps they would allow her to stay here where she'd be safe.

Adam grunted, but it was Nick who answered her. "Unfortunately, yes." He turned to look at her, his dark eyes showing his frustration. "The veil was not designed to keep *any* shifters out. We need everyone to return. Our numbers are dwindling. If things don't change, we will soon be extinct."

"Extinct? Why?"

Adam sighed. "Almost everyone left the safety of the veil when the council and *Tudra* took over. They fought against their iron rule." He made a face. Even in the dim light from the dash, it was easy to see he'd been disgusted by their tactics.

"They were so desperate to make our species grow they made a fatal error in judgment." He shook his head. "They were criminal in their demands that we breed with family members. Cousins, siblings, they didn't care that we would further damage our gene pool. Or that it was a crime against God and nature." He ran a hand through his hair. "Women were little more than possessions to them. If they were old enough to

bleed they were old enough to breed.”

Nina gasped. “My God! Were they mad?”

Nick slammed the palm of his hand against the steering wheel. “It wasn’t as though we had no women. They’d outnumbered the males in Paradise until the council’s policies chased them away.” He barked out a laugh, but didn’t look amused. “What am I saying? The council chased nearly everyone away, not just our women. The only people left in Paradise are a few old-timers who had no place else to go and Adam’s men. Everyone else ran. I can’t say I blame them.”

When Nick grew quiet, Nina continued to stare through the windshield. The silence drew out, lengthening. She didn’t know what to say. Perhaps they didn’t know what else to say, either. After about thirty minutes, she noticed the heavy fog growing thinner and bright lights glowing through the mist.

When they finally drove through the final tendrils of the magickal vapor, she gaped at the sight below. From where they sat atop the mountain road, she could see the entire valley. Streetlights dotted the landscape, linking the roads together in them dim pre-dawn light. Large farms surrounded the small town. There was at least one cattle or milk farm. She noted that as they drove past and saw the unmistakable markings of the Hereford cows as they huddled together against the biting cold. “It’s beautiful.” She leaned

forward to get a better look.

It almost seemed unfair that these people lived here in this place so full of beauty while everyone else was stuck out in the real world. Even in the early morning light, Nina could see the snow glistening on the fields, the icicles dangling from trees and eaves, sparkling like diamonds in the light from the streets.

Her breath caught in her throat when they drove past what looked like a public park filled with intricate ice sculptures. "Apparently spring comes later here, huh?" She stared out at the large ice cartoon characters. One particular sculpture, modeled after the house it sat in front of, took her breath away.

"We *are* pretty far north here and high in the mountains. Our growing season is very short." Adam gave her a lopsided grin that made her tummy flutter and her heart race. "It leaves a *lot* of spare time for winter sports."

She could think of a few winter sports she'd like to participate in with these two men. Nina looked down at her clasped hands in her lap. What was she thinking? She never entertained having sex with men she'd just met. Heck, she rarely entertained the thought of having sex with men she *did* know. She kept her gaze down, hoping her thoughts didn't show on her face. "Uh, yeah, I imagine it would. And there aren't many indoor sports to keep you busy."

"I can think of one that would keep me busy all winter, if you were playing." Nick glanced over at her and winked when she met his gaze.

Nina felt herself blush so deep, even her toes started to burn. Was it her imagination or were *both* of these guys coming on to her? *Mercy! Two hot men flirting with you at the same time? Too bad you can't have them both.* She almost smiled at the thought. How many times had she listened to the girls in her classes talking about their sexual exploits and making it with two men at once? Just once she'd like to be that brave, that reckless. Though she didn't know why. Not once had she ever been tempted to try a ménage a trois when she was in school. Why now?

She frowned. Was it because she wasn't sure she'd live much longer? She almost breathed a sigh of relief at that thought. *That had to be it.* There was nothing like the thought of imminent demise to bring things she'd never dreamed of doing to the forefront. Perhaps this weird attraction she felt for these two men was nothing more than gratitude for saving her life and the extra unspent adrenaline from her earlier ordeal. Nothing more. At least she could hope.

* * * *

Adam sat next to her, his nose and dick twitching. It had been a grueling twenty-four hours. They

each took turns driving, stopping only when necessary. Nina had only woken once to relieve herself. He would have been worried if she hadn't told them she hadn't slept in a while.

Her alluring scent wafted up to his nose when she shifted in his arms. Damn, if the woman didn't smell good. She smelled of sunshine and sex all packed into one small, perfect-for-him package. He pressed his hand to his groin, trying to tame his unruly cock. *Shit!* How many damned hard-ons had he gotten since they met or was it just one continuous erection that wouldn't go away?

I don't know, boss, but I've been the same way. Do you think she'll run screaming into the woods if we make a move on her tonight when we get home? We could ply her with alcohol. Nick grinned at him over her head and wagged his brows.

Stop calling me boss, damn it. How many times have I told you I hate that shit? He wanted to laugh at Nick's convoluted logic, but that would have brought some unwanted, and unanswerable, questions from their beautiful passenger. Instead, he decided to make him squirm. *Would you really take advantage of an inebriated woman? I thought you had more honor than that.* He turned and looked out of the window with a grin.

Aw, hell. Don't bust me out for thinking with my dick. It's not like you haven't been doing the same thing since we met her.

Adam continued to stare out through his

window watching the familiar landmarks as they passed. He barely noticed when they pulled up outside his house. It didn't even register that they'd stopped until Ringo bounded from the porch and ran toward them, his tail in the air waving like a huge, hairy flag behind him. Opening his door, he stepped out and braced himself for the dog's welcome.

"Don't be surprised if Ringo shies away from you." He smiled up at Nina, scratching Ringo behind the ears. The dog canted his head to the right in obvious bliss. "It took forever for him to trust us after Camulus abused him mercilessly."

"Camulus was the leader of the old council." Nick walked around the truck to join them. "He has no heart that I've noticed and no conscience to speak of."

Adam and Nick watched amazed as Ringo dropped down onto all fours and ran to Nina as soon as she slid from the truck. Without pausing, he placed his paws on her shoulders and swiped her cheek with his tongue.

"Wow," Nick said with a soft whistle. "I've never seen him do that before. Not with a stranger."

"Me either," Adam said, rubbing his chin.

You don't think she could be –

No. There's no precedent for such a thing, Adam said with a slight shake of his head. We can mate and procreate with humans, but we've never been able

to truebond with them. He tilted his head, thinking. *I suppose it's not totally impossible. It can take years to find a truebond mate within the clan. Perhaps it's not impossible, but just never done before.* Adam continued to stare at Nina, wondering what it was about her that had him and the other two males in his household scrambling to get their tongues on her. He could understand his own and Nick's fascination with her. *They* were just plain horny. He looked back down at the dog, now lying on his back at her feet. Ringo, on the other hand, was another matter entirely.

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Nick watched Ringo lap at Nina's face then lie at her feet and wished he had the freedom to do the same. His body hardened to the point of pain. He could also feel Adam's discomfort through their link. He frowned. What was happening to them? This wasn't the first time they'd been attracted to the same woman. It wasn't the first time they'd decided to share either. But none of the other women affected them the way she did. What he felt was like the stories he'd heard of the *truebond*. His emotions and need seemed connected to this woman—just as they would when he met his *truebond* mate. Still, he knew that he and Adam both shouldn't feel the same way about the same woman. Yet, they did. It was totally unheard of for

two men to have the same *truebond* mate. But that still didn't make it impossible.

Maybe there were some documents or records of something similar happening in the clan. The clan history was stored here at the house. It was locked in the lower cellar. Few knew about it, which was just as well since Camulus would most likely have destroyed it. It held their connection to those who came before them and contained wisdom most never dreamed of having. He'd check once they got Nina safely inside and settled. Then he'd talk this weirdness over with Adam.

We need to get her to bed so we can talk. I've been thinking..."

About? Adam put his hand on the small of Nina's back and, if Nick knew his friend at all, gently steered her into the house.

Nick rubbed the center of his chest. *I feel strange.*

I feel kind of odd as well. Perhaps we just need some sleep. Let's make her comfortable, set our security and get to bed. "Welcome to our home. Are you hungry? Would you care for anything to eat or drink?"

Yawning, Nina shook her head. "No, thank you. I'm just tired." She looked around, her eyes wide. "I think I'd just like some rest. Is there a hotel near here where I can stay?"

Adam shook his head. "You can't go to a hotel."

Backing up a pace, Nina gave them each a wary glance. She brought her hand to her chest, her

fingers resting against the racing pulse in her neck. "Why not?"

Nick watched as she looked around the large foyer as though looking for an escape route.

Ignoring the wide stairway, she glanced around them, no doubt making a note of every door in the hall. She looked ready to run. What she failed to realize was there was no place in Paradise for her to hide. He and Adam could scent her anywhere within the veil. Any of their people could.

Adam, always the diplomatic one, appealed to her good sense. "We won't keep you here against your will if that's your worry. We merely wish to protect you. In a hotel or other boarding establishment you would be alone." He smiled and held his arms out to his sides. "Here you have us to protect you."

As arguments went, Nick wasn't sure it was a good one considering the expression on her face. Then again, what did he know about women? What he knew of the opposite sex couldn't fill the backside of a postage stamp. Which was nada, zip, zilch.

He knew enough to give them multiple, sometimes screaming, orgasms and that was the extent of his expertise. A week ago, he'd thought it sufficient. Now, looking at the lovely woman who stared up at him and Adam with those huge hazel eyes, what he knew was laughable. He was lacking in ways he'd never dreamed of before.

"Can't you post guards or something?" She paced away from them, her arms wrapped around her middle.

Adam leaned against the hall table and crossed his legs in front of him. "We could, but it wouldn't be the same. Not only do we have a state-of-the-art security system here, this house also has...other protections."

Nick knew what Adam referred to. He hoped she wouldn't force their hands, but the expression on her face told him she may not be buying it. She'd had a hard enough time accepting that they were shifters from a hidden town of paranormal beings and she'd had visual proof. How hard of a time would they have convincing her that magick would also protect her? She couldn't hear, see or smell magick. She'd never believe them. She was a major skeptic.

* * * *

Nina hugged herself. God, she hoped she wouldn't get sick. Her nerves were on edge. Getting shot at and multiple attempts on her life tended to do that sort of thing to her. So far, she'd had several near misses since TJ's death. It was only her weird sixth sense that kept her alive this long. Something inside her, something she couldn't explain, always told her when danger was near. Now that thing inside her told her that

not only had TJ told her the truth about shape shifters, he'd also not been spinning tales about their magick either. *That* was probably why they wanted to keep her here. She fought the urge to look around again, looking for evidence of the magick that, no doubt, protected this house. These two probably just didn't want to admit it to her. She couldn't blame them. She *had* only shown them the skeptic part of her.

She watched as Ringo ran off, pushing his way through a swinging door behind the large cherry-wood dining room table. It gleamed in the early sunlight coming from the East facing windows.

The house was magnificent. She'd barely kept herself from gaping when she led them into the structure. It wasn't that it was huge. TJ's house was bigger. It was just that she'd never seen so much polished oak in her life. The floors and wide arcing stairway shone brightly in the streaming sunlight. The banister, made of a darker wood with reddish brown tones, stood out against the honey oak upright rails and wainscoting.

Dainty Queen Anne chairs and sofa sat proudly displayed in a formal living room. A cherry coffee table sat on a large expensive-looking oriental rug. What looked like a hand-carved sideboard sat against the wall boasting a large vase of silk flowers. Opposite the sideboard was a fireplace surrounded by brick. The huge oak mantle sat beneath a portrait of a man, woman and child. The

man stood behind the seated woman, his hand on her shoulder. The child, a boy, stood next to her.

The house told her a story. The dining room to her right and the formal living room to her left, screamed that this was *not* the home of a thirty-something single male. A family lived here. At least they had at one time.

"Whose house is this?" She bit her bottom lip, then eased the sting away with the tip of her tongue. Her gaze darted between them. "This doesn't look like a bachelor's home, that's for sure." And it didn't. The floors and furniture practically glowed and there wasn't a speck of dust in sight.

Nick stepped forward. "It's the traditional home of the clan leader." He shot a look at Adam. "It's about time the rightful heir lived here again."

Adam stood up from his negligent pose against the hall table. "Not now, Nick. She's been through enough tonight. There's time enough for her to learn of such things." His tone brooked no argument as he took her arm and headed for the stairs. "Come on. I'll show you to your room."

She'd barely even looked at the room when they dropped her off at the door. She wanted nothing more than to take a nice long shower and relax. She opted for a bath instead when she saw the large whirlpool tub. The brass fixtures sparkled. The row of bulbs lit the bathroom almost like sunlight and she smiled at the towel warmers

that began to hum the minute she turned on the lights.

Nina shook her head in wonder at the luxurious surroundings, then headed toward the tub and turned on the taps. As the water filled the tub, her thoughts turned inward. What did Nick mean when he mentioned clan leader and rightful heir? What more weren't they telling her and was she too overwhelmed to hear it as Adam suggested? She just didn't know. For now, she'd take a long soak and do her best to think about nothing at all.

As she glanced around the bathroom once more, she couldn't help but hope some kind soul had left a bottle of bubble bath lying around. Bending down, she opened a cabinet and spotted her favorite brand. "What are the odds?" Her voice echoed off the tiled walls and she shook her head with a wry smile. After pouring a liberal amount of the bubble bath into the tub, she began to undress, anticipating the silky feel of the warm water embracing her. Nina stepped into the tub, turned on the jets and lowered herself into the steaming bubbles. "Life doesn't get any better than this." *Unless a man – or two – was here to share it with me.* Leaning her head back, she closed her eyes. Just for a minute. That's all she needed to revitalize herself – one moment of absolute peace.

* * * *

Adam and Nick patrolled the grounds. Each of them took their own area, ready to come to the other's aid should there be need.

Why are you so quiet? Nick asked through their link.

I'm spinning spells to help protect our guest. Perhaps you should do the same.

Do you really think she's in danger here? Nick reached out with his senses, trying to ferret out trouble. He doubled back to recheck and spell the first areas he'd scouted. Perhaps Adam was right in assuming the spelled house wasn't protection enough. They *were* dealing with the *Tudra* after all. He frowned, thinking of it. He wasn't sure anything could protect her enough for *his* peace of mind.

He moved over the well-manicured lawn, keeping his gaze on the thick shrubs. The bushes rustled in the slight breeze, their waxy leaves shining brightly in the silvery glow of the moon. The house loomed darkly to his left, the blue water in the pool glimmered, the small ripples shining like diamonds on the surface. He circled the greenhouse, casting spells over the perimeter of the outbuildings.

I'm not sure anything could give me such peace either, old friend, Adam returned. *Though you must exercise control over your thoughts. I should not be able to pick up on your private musings.*

Nick sighed. He knew Adam was right. He'd

grown lax over the last few months. Assuming no one was listening to your innermost thoughts could be a dangerous thing. It was, in some cases, how wars were won. He rubbed the back of his neck, then scrubbed his face with his hands, suddenly weary. *I know you're right, Adam. I've put all of us in danger by not ensuring my safeguards would hold.*

Nonsense. I didn't notice anyone else looking at you strangely. Perhaps your thoughts are so clear to me because we are so close.

Maybe. Nick shrugged, continuing with his charms. *But it doesn't make my actions—or lack of action, in this case—any less dangerous.* Quickly, he finished spinning his spells over the areas he'd previously checked and moved on to the next. The magick he used was old and strong. He layered the spells, strengthening them as he moved around the perimeter of the house. No one would get past any magick he or Adam had laid. Not without them knowing, at any rate. He would bet his life on it.

I would bet your life on it, too. Adam said with a chuckle.

Smartass!

They met back in front of the house after they finished layering the charms over the grounds and sat on the porch steps, gazing out into the darkness. Nick glanced at Adam from the corner of his eye. “Do you think they’re dumb enough to

come after her here?"

Adam blew out a deep breath and shrugged. "One thing's for certain. If they do, there's more to this than just a reckoning. If they attempt to get past the safeguards we set, knowing how dangerous it is, they want something that they think she's got. Something other than knowledge of *Tudra* practice."

"Hmmm..." Nick stared out over the darkened lawn, studying the darkest reaches of the front yard. The shadows seemed murky, almost as though they moved. He closed his eyes and shook his head. It was his imagination. They couldn't know where they'd taken her already. "I wonder what that could be," he mused aloud. There was no doubt in his mind that the *Tudra* were coming for her regardless of her new protectors. He could feel it. It was up to them to figure out why.

* * * *

Adam let the light breeze cool his overheated skin. He always got warm while spell casting. The energy flowed over him, through him. It was always warm, sometimes, like tonight, it was hot enough to work up a good sweat. He felt Nick's apprehension and knew it was not his imagination. Something was up in the magickal world and he wanted to know what it was. Even now he could feel the insidious evil stalking the

woman he'd all but laid claim to. He'd be damned if he let anyone hurt her.

He didn't remind Nick of his mind's overflow. Right now, he could sense no one close enough to read his thoughts. Why make him aware of it now? Making him self-conscious of his failing would do nothing for his self esteem. Instead, Adam closed his eyes and reached out with his senses, hoping to pinpoint where the evil resonance came from.

His mind left his body. Moving to the north, it closed in on the slimy sense of evil energy. He moved through air and space with no body to weigh him down, no corporeal form to come to harm. In such a state, he could move into his enemy's midst undetected.

Even though his spirit roamed the grounds two miles around the perimeter, he found nothing out of the ordinary. Somehow, some *thing* helped his enemies mask their presence. He could only get the sense that wherever they were, they weren't real close. Not yet.

A blood-curdling scream immediately brought him back into his body. On his feet in an instant, he bound up the stairs two at a time with Nick close on his heels. His heart beat at his chest when he thought of the horrible things Nina could be subjected to if taken by the *Tudra*. He smashed through the closed door of the bedroom, giving little thought to the fact that it was locked.

A surprised squeak met his invasion as he scanned the interior of the room. Taking a deep breath, he closed his eyes and groaned when he saw her in the tub through the bathroom door. The sweet scent of her filled the room. Her soiled clothing lay on the floor next to the tub, the bath soap she'd used mixed with the scent and caused his body to harden more.

She sat in the tub, a washcloth pulled to her generous breasts. He didn't have the heart to tell her the thing left little to their vivid imaginations. Her eyes were wide, her mouth pulled into a little *oh* of surprise that made his cock jerk. Her gaze lingered on his chest and she licked her lips. His body reacted immediately. Every muscle hardened to the point of pain. When her gaze dropped to his crotch, then darted away, his control slipped a notch as his desire ratcheted higher. He couldn't believe the effect she had on him. On the both of them.

Just the thought of her sensual movements as she entered this room earlier nearly made him squirm. He loved the way she moved. Even when nervous. The slight sway of her hips as she walked, how the thick denim of her black jeans cupped her heart-shaped ass like loving hands. Just that short glimpse was enough to give him a hard-on from hell.

She pulled the washcloth higher, drawing his attention back to the present and to the pert little

rose-colored nipple that peeked out from underneath the bottom of the cloth she held too high to protect her modesty. "Are you all right? You screamed."

"Yeah," Nick agreed stupidly from behind him. He, too, was no doubt driven nearly senseless by a million and one fantasies starring their beautiful houseguest. "We heard your scream out on the front porch. We came—" He swallowed visibly. "We came because we thought the *Tudra* had..."

Adam barely resisted the urge to reach up and smack him on the back of the head. He cleared his throat instead. "Were you sleeping in the tub and had a nightmare?" She must have. He drew his own conclusion. Goose bumps pebbled on her skin, telling him her water was cool if not altogether cold. He'd done a visual inspection of the room when they burst in. All of the windows were closed and still intact. There was nothing present, but her luggage, the furniture and sweet-smelling woman.

He inhaled deeply, taking in the delicious smell of the bubble bath. He wanted nothing more than to close his eyes and wallow in the wonderful scent. He'd never dreamed that anyone other than his sister would ever use it. The scent had never seemed so alluring before. Perhaps it was because it was mixed with her wonderful essence.

She nodded in response to his question, her hands pulling the washcloth higher to cover her

cleavage. He wanted to smile. Every fraction of an inch that she pulled the cloth higher only managed to reveal more of the creamy, rose-tipped breast below. "I dreamed some men broke into the room and tried to kidnap me." She licked her lips again, eliciting a soft groan from Nick behind him. "They said something..." She paused tilting her head, obviously confused. "They said something about my parents, which makes absolutely no sense. I don't even know much about my parents. They were killed in an auto accident when I was a child."

* * * *

Nina stared at the two men. She tried not to let her gaze drop below their waists, but it kept straying down, no matter how much she tried to control herself. It was obvious they wanted her. And, to be honest, she wanted them both as well. "I know you'll think me silly, but I've had prophetic dreams since I was little. This dream will come true if we don't do something to prevent it."

Adam moved closer. Grabbing a towel from the rack, he draped it over the edge of the tub. "We can talk about this after you've dried off and gotten dressed. We'll leave you for a few minutes while you throw something on." He turned to leave, pushing Nick through the door in front of him. "We'll be out in the hall, just call when you're

ready.”

Nina barely waited for the door to close before she jumped out of the tub and hurriedly towed herself off. She didn’t take the time to dress. She merely ran her fingers through her hair, pulled on her bathrobe and jumped into the bed. “I’m ready,” she called.

The two men came through the door and stood next to the bed. “Tells us your worries,” Adam said, shoving his hands into his pockets.

Nick strode to the window and stared out through the darkness before circling the bed. Each of them sat down on the edge, flanking her.

“We’ve taken all the precautions we can.”

They hadn’t. Not yet. She felt heat suffuse her face as the solution came to her. What would they think? Would they lose respect for her, would they even agree to what she was about to propose? It didn’t matter that she thought of it for her own safety. The fact the thought had crossed her mind before she knew of this only made her feel that much more like a loose woman. This wasn’t the first time a ménage had crossed her mind. This was merely a good reason to give in to the temptation. She wanted these two men in her bed. Her nightmare in the tub had only given her the courage to suggest the action she knew would lead up to their having an illicit night together. She had to admit that. At least to herself.

Bumps rose on her flesh at the mere thought of

having these two men loving her, fondling her. She could practically feel their warm breath on her skin. Finally, she would experience what the other girls in her dorm had always referred to as DP. She only hoped her two candidates weren't devout Christians. If they were, she was about to scandalize them both. If they weren't...hopefully, they were about to rock her world. "There is one thing you can do." She smiled softly. Her lips trembled almost as much as her hand did when she reached up to smooth her hair back.

"We've done more than you can imagine to keep you safe, Nina. Perhaps your dream will not come true." Adam placed his hand over hers in an attempt to comfort, no doubt.

She shook her head. "It will if you leave me alone in this room."

"What do you suggest then?" Nick asked. "Do you want us to put you in another room?"

Nina stared down into her lap, trying to gather the courage to initiate sex with these two men she felt such an intense attraction to. Taking a deep breath, she sat up and allowed the covers and robe to fall to her hips. "Actually I was hoping you'd stay in this room with me. If the men come, you'll be here."

She hadn't missed their sharply indrawn breaths. It was a small reaction, but a reaction just the same. Still, she wasn't sure it was enough.

Nick stared openly at Nina's bared breasts. His mouth went dry and he swallowed thickly. He clenched his fists at his sides, hardly able to believe she'd just let the sheets drop like that. He knew it was damned rude to just sit there staring at the rose-tipped mounds, but he couldn't stop himself. Hell, he was hard pressed to keep from drooling all over them.

His gut clenched as he glanced up, his brows raised, and almost smiled at Adam's expression. His leader, always one who was in control in a crisis, looked as though he'd just swallowed his tongue.

There were many things they'd both imagined doing to this beautiful woman fate and circumstances had blessed them with. But to have her suggest the very same thing was a bit surprising. His dick jumped to attention at the suggestion of course. A man would have to be dead or comatose to not have such a reaction to this beautiful woman. Just looking at her made his heart pound and his balls ache for release. What would it be like to actually sink inside her softness?

Adam cleared his throat. "What are you suggesting, Nina?" His gaze never left her exposed breasts.

Nick knew his friend well. He knew he'd allow

the woman an out. She probably figured they would be more likely to protect her if she offered herself to them. It wasn't the case. He felt a pang of guilt as he thought back to the parking lot and what he'd said about her being grateful. When had he changed? When had he begun to need her to want them as men, not only as her protectors?

"We'll stay with you if that is your wish." Adam finally reached out and pulled the robe back up over her shoulders, covering her breasts. "You don't have to bargain with your body. We will provide protection regardless."

Her face reddened as she clutched the sheet to her chest. "That—that wasn't..." she stared down into her lap. "That's not why I..." she covered her face with her hands and groaned. "I didn't mean for you to think that—"

Nick reached out and feathered his fingers through her hair. "There's no need to be embarrassed." He looked down at his crotch with a wry grin. "It's not like we feel no attraction for you. In fact," he said as he shifted and moved closer. "I think it's pretty noticeable." He leaned closer, better to take in her arousing scent. "You smell so good." He jumped when she reached down, laying her hand over his erection.

Nina turned and looked him in the eyes. "I want you." She turned back toward Adam, but not before he could see her face turn a bright red. She cleared her throat. "I want you both, if you're

willing. And not just because I want your protection. I've wanted you both since I first saw you in the restaurant earlier." She frowned. "Was it last night?"

Adam shook his head. "No. It was two nights ago. You were so exhausted you slept the whole way through."

"I slept for over twenty-four hours?"

"Yes." Nick nodded, snaring her attention for himself. "You only woke up once the entire way."

She looked up at him. "And you drove all the way here?"

Smiling, Nick shook his head. "Nope. We each took turns driving and holding you."

"I—I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable." Her face reddened as she glanced down at his crotch and gave his cock a squeeze. "I'm sure you both must have gotten tired of holding me."

They both shook their heads. "No way, lady." Adam said with a grin. "It was the most pleasant eighteen-hundred miles I've ever traveled."

She blanched. "Eighteen-hundred miles?" "Where am I?" Her gaze traveled between them.

Nick picked her hand up from his lap. He couldn't concentrate with her hand resting on his cock. "Technically, you're in northern Wyoming. But you're inside the veil. You can't be seen by anyone on the other side. Nor can you touch or be touched by anything on the other side." Nick

sighed, trying to find a way to explain their location that she would understand. "We exist in the same area as a large cattle ranch. It's mainly open spaces. For lack of a better way to explain it, since we exist on another plane of existence, we can have our town in the same place without infringing on those who own the property on the plane that you're from."

"Does that make sense?" Adam turned to look at her and took her other hand. "We want you to understand. We also want you to feel comfortable with us."

She gave a half laugh. "I'm not sure that's possible."

Chapter Four

It probably wasn't possible with their current situation. Adam sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. "I know exactly what you mean. I know what you want. I just wanted to be sure you offered because it's what *you* want. Not what you think we want as payment for protecting you."

She shook her head, then looked up at him through half closed eyes. "No. I didn't offer to get your protection. I would never barter with my body like that." She licked her lips again.

It was a gesture that Adam was beginning to realize was a nervous habit for her—that and biting her lower lip. If only she knew what the actions did to both him and Nick. Her face reddened before she continued.

"I offered because I want you—both of you—whether you choose to protect me or not." She squeezed his hand before she pulled both of them free and clasped them in her lap. Looking down at her hands, she added, "I decided that I wanted

live, to really live, at least once before I died."

Reaching down, he took her hand in his again and lifted it to his lips. "As long as you're sure, baby. I don't want you to regret this later on when it can't be undone."

"I've never been so sure of anything in my life."

He reached up with his free hand and cupped her cheek. "So long as you're sure, baby. Because what you're offering us is too tempting for us to resist for long."

Smiling, she closed her eyes and tilted her head into his palm. "Who said I wanted you to resist in the first place?"

Nick groaned behind her, then stood. "We can't stay here. It doesn't matter what room she was in that damned dream. But this bed isn't big enough for the three of us. We'll have to take her to your room."

Adam barely heard Nick as he lowered his head to hers. He didn't care whose room they were in as long as he could kiss Nina here and now. He feathered his lips over her closed eyes, down over her cheeks to the corner of her mouth, where his tongue darted out to taste her lips. Groaning, she turned her head slightly and opened for him. Wasting no time, he thrust his tongue into her mouth. He needed to taste her more than he needed to breathe.

He groaned when their tongues met. Hers was wet velvet and tasted of the bubblegum flavored

toothpaste he'd bought for his little sister. Fire spread through his veins, into his stomach and down to his loins. There wasn't anything he'd refuse this woman. Nothing in the world could compare to the way she made him feel.

Lust gripped him tightly. His gut clenched as it wrapped around his balls, giving him an erection unlike any other he'd ever had before. The sweet scent of Nina's arousal drove him wild. It was like a strong aphrodisiac, flowing through his veins. She moved closer, snuggling into his arms. Bending, he moved to lift her. He'd carry her to his room. He'd be damned if he was about to let her go so she could change her mind.

Nina wrapped her arms around his neck and moaned, pressing her body closer as he carried her from her room and into his. His lips still covered hers, his tongue thrusting into her mouth. It was a claiming. She may think this was an affair, a fling, but Adam knew the moment his lips first touched hers that he was never letting her go. Need for her hit him hard. It burned through him, caressing every intimate part of him.

By the time they reached his room, her body had softened, melting into his and he felt loathe to let her go. He groaned as he set her on the bed and pulled her arms from around his neck. Wanting nothing more than to follow her down to the bed, he straightened instead.

He looked across the bed at Nick and nodded.

They both kicked off their shoes and removed their shirts before joining Nina on the bed. He leaned down, looked into her passion glazed eyes and rested his hand on her thigh. The robe had fallen open when he laid her on the bed, revealing her high breasts and tight rose nipples. The soft red-brown down at the juncture of her thighs glistened with her body's dew. It drew him like a moth to a flame. He could smell her arousal, strong and sweet and his mouth watered. He wanted nothing more than to kneel between her legs and lap at her pretty little cunt until she screamed with ecstasy.

"You're sure this is what you want?" Adam nearly grimaced at his question. The last thing he wanted was for her to change her mind. Still, he could do no other than give her that choice. He refused to take her if it wasn't what she truly wanted. He had to know.

Nina smiled up at them. Raising both hands, she cupped each of their cheeks and nodded. "Yes. I'm sure." She spread her legs and raised her hips up off the bed in invitation. "It's been so long for me. I haven't been with anyone in a long, long time." She turned, hiding her face in his chest and murmured something he couldn't quite hear, even with his exceptional hearing. Yet it didn't matter. All that mattered was that she still wanted him. Wanted them. He wanted to shout with joy. Instead, he leaned forward and took a pert little

nipple into his mouth as Nick bent and kissed her.

She inhaled sharply, then exhaled on a long hiss as Nick's lips left hers to move lower and suck her other nipple into his mouth. She speared her fingers through their hair. He watched as she fisted her hand on the top of Nick's head as he felt her do the same on his own scalp.

Lightning shot through his blood, firing every nerve ending. It was a fire in his veins he couldn't deny. Didn't want to deny. His hand moved up her thigh, touching the soft curls at the apex of her thighs until they slid between her labia and into the slick moisture. She moaned as he circled her clit with his fingers. When she arched her hips and said his name on a soft sigh, he wanted to shout with joy that finally he had a woman in his bed that he never wanted to let go.

Her skin was like silk, her lips like rose petals. Even though she was taller than a lot of women he'd taken to bed over the years, she felt small. Dainty. Her skin was so soft and smooth she felt like a delicate flower beneath his calloused hands. Lifting his head, he pulled his mouth from her breast and blew on the glistening nipple. It grew tighter before his eyes and made his cock pulse with the desire to sink into her tight sheath.

Once more covering her lips with his, he nearly disgraced himself when she suckled his tongue into her mouth. Adam couldn't seem to get enough of her. He loved the taste of her honeyed

lips. He couldn't wait to taste her sweet-smelling cunt. He wanted nothing more than to tear off his clothes, move between her legs and slide his full length deep into her hot, wet channel.

* * * *

Nina was on fire. Her body felt more alive than it ever had before. She could feel both of their bodies pressed tight against hers. Waves of their desire swirled around her faster and faster until she couldn't tell the two of them apart. Heart beating erratically, she breathed deeply, trying to slow it down. It skipped a beat, two, then started up again just as fast as it was before. Her breathing was fast. It was like she'd run a marathon and was just now coming to its end. Her nipples grew harder. The cool air made them pebble tighter as they blew upon the moist peaks and she wanted nothing more than to feel their mouths on them once again.

Instead, Nick lowered his head, his mouth covering hers. She whimpered as Adam's fingers found the sensitive underside of her clit and circled. Her hips bucked, desperate to feel the myriad sensations she knew awaited her under their expert tutelage. Nothing in her life had ever prepared her for the raw need she experienced as these two men caressed her bare skin. The robe, nearly forgotten, lay open. It exposed her to their

heated gaze while pinning her shoulders to the bed as they lay upon it. She wanted to arch up, thrust her breasts into their faces and beg them to suckle her again. But she could do nothing. Trapped by the thick terry cloth, she was forced to await their desires as she silently begged them to give her what she needed.

"Please," she whispered, finally having the courage to speak. She didn't want to break the spell or wake from the dream. Surely this was a dream. There was no way this could truly be happening. It was unlikely that two such incredibly handsome men were here, loving her like this. Her head thrashed on the pillow as Adam's fingers continued to stroke the small bud between her legs that she was fast beginning to realize was the very core of her pleasure. At that moment, everything she was, everything she wanted to be, centered around what he did with his fingers.

Tomorrow, when she woke, she would be a whole person again. A normal person. No longer would her lusts drive her as they did tonight. For some reason, she couldn't seem to control herself around them. Her hormones raged, driving her wild every time they came near. Never before had she ever felt so wild or out of control.

Nick lowered his head, his lips hovering over her breast. The hard bud of her nipple grew tighter with anticipation. She whimpered, needing

the contact. She could think of nothing more than the hot wet rasp of his tongue as he dragged it over her quivering flesh.

"Please," she begged as Nick released her sensitized nipple and moved to kiss his way back up her chest to her shoulder. She would have arched up, following his talented mouth, if Adam hadn't been lying on the robe and trapping her shoulders against the mattress. Their faces were filled with pleasure, flushed with his desire as she alternately watched them through half-closed eyes.

"You're so beautiful," Nick said almost reverently before leaning down to press fleeting kisses against her lips. "You have no idea how long we've waited for a woman like you." *To love. To fuck. To mate.*

Nina's eyes widened at the unspoken words. She heard them in his voice like he'd said them aloud, but his lips had been pressed against the side of her neck. It was impossible. She wasn't one of them. She shouldn't be able to hear him talk in her mind.

Adam took the opportunity to thrust his fingers into her vagina and she screamed. Her climax, both potent and unexpected ripped through her as his fingers continued to stroke her clit. She bit her lip, tasting the sharp metallic flavor of her blood on her tongue. She couldn't control the fire within her anymore. Lightning zinged through her blood,

singeing her heart, her very soul and she knew then that there was no way she'd ever find the strength to leave here. Not now. Invisible threads bound her to these men just as securely as a two-inch-thick chain. No. There certainly would be no leaving Paradise.

She gazed up at her two men and smiled softly. They both looked smug. Both appeared as though filled with arrogant male satisfaction. Lifting her hands, she took advantage of the respite the two men gave her and explored their muscular chests. The tight muscles flexed beneath her fingers. Their flat nipples hardened, tightening into tiny pebbles as she scraped her fingernails over them. They groaned and flexed their hips, grinding their huge erections against her thighs.

Closing her eyes, she inhaled deeply, wanted nothing more than to take them both into her body and wring several orgasms from them. She flushed all over—could feel the blood surging to the surface of her skin. Her nipples ached with the desire to be touched licked, laved until she was mindless with passion once again. Goodness! What had come over her?

Adam lay back on the bed. Pulling her with him, he grasped her hips and lowered her over his massive erection. She bit her lip and whimpered as she dropped down and he thrust up into her. Wrapping his arms around her back, he drew her down to suckle her nipples. They both drew into

tight little buds under his ministrations. Arching her back, she pressed herself more tightly to his mouth as he drew on each nipple in turn. She circled her hips, grinding herself into his pelvis. His mouth left her breast and captured her mouth. A hoarse moan escaped her lips as he thrust upward. Lights exploded behind her eyelids, fireworks, lightning. She'd never felt anything like it in her life.

* * * *

Nick moved behind Nina as Adam held her to him, his lips pressed against hers. Before he moved, he'd grabbed the small vial of massaging lotion he knew Adam had put in the drawer beside the bed when they brought her home. His cock hardened at the sight of his best friend and his woman in such an erotic embrace. Pausing, he wondered when he'd begun to think of Nina as his woman. This wasn't the first time.

He watched as she lay atop Adam and trembled, her mind willing to do this, her body not so sure. *Damn!* He wanted this to last so much longer. He wanted to drive her wild with need. Ratchet up her desire, her lust until she couldn't stand not having them both inside her. But he was selfish. His lips kicked up in a wry grin. He and Adam both were apparently. It seemed that neither of them could wait any longer. What

unbelievable bastards they'd become. They both need this, needed her, too badly to wait another minute to claim her. He wanted his scent on her. He wanted her scent on him. Wanted to wallow in it, immerse himself in it until he couldn't scent anything but the musky smell of her sex on him. He needed to be inside her, moving with Adam as they carried her to sensual heights she'd never dreamed of. He wanted, no needed, to be close to her – to both of them.

Moving closer, he massaged the oil into her ass. Concentrating on the tight hole, he paused. "Have you ever been fucked here, love?" Closing his eyes, he prayed she had. He refused to fuck her there while Adam was in her tight little cunt if she hadn't already had someone in her ass. It would be too painful. He sighed with relief when she nodded.

"Yes." She nodded and her face turned several shades of red. "I had a boyfriend who liked to..." She left off there and he didn't push it. He'd gotten the answer he wanted. He hadn't been a eunuch since he'd grown to adulthood. He didn't expect his woman to have been abstinent. He'd never gone for the double standard.

He worked his fingers into her ass, stretching the tight little hole to make it easier on her when he finally mounted her. She moaned beneath him, grinding herself onto Adam's cock, her breath labored and irregular. After working two fingers

in and scissoring them back and forth, he knew she was ready. At least as ready as she could be for the double invasion she was about to experience.

He guided his shaft to her prepared hole and groaned when the head slipped inside. God she was tight. He'd never felt anything like it before, even when they'd shared other women. Scowling, he pushed the thought aside. He didn't want to think of other woman while he was with Nina. She was the ultimate in fantasies. All soft woman yet courageous fighter, all rolled into one.

Her muscles clamped down on him as he slid his cock out of her to plunge back in. Panting between them, her moans became one long, keening wail as they both plunged into her velvety softness. Her ass felt like a tight silken fist wrapped around his cock and he gritted his teeth in an effort to remain in control. But there was no control. Perspiration dotted his forehead as he finally conceded his defeat and drove into her with abandon as Adam had begun to do.

Leaning forward, he kissed her shoulders, her back. His tongue laved the soft skin between her shoulder blades. Just as he saw Adam bare his teeth, he was overcome with the need to mark her, to brand her as his. Adam nipped her left shoulder as Nick nipped her right. Both of them left their mark on her. She was their woman now. She carried their scent and only a man with a death

wish would dare touch her.

Dropping to her side on the bed, he pulled her back into his front and wrapped his arm around her waist. How good it felt to have her body pressed so intimately against his. And it felt right when Adam scooted closer and pressed himself to her front. Nick drifted off finally content for the first time in his life.

* * * *

Adam woke with a start. The silent blaring of his energy field sent pinpricks up and down his extremities. Someone had breached the perimeter of the house. Cursing, he jumped from the bed and began to dress. Leaning down, he reached across the bed and woke Nick. *We have company.*

Nick nodded, stood and slipped into his jeans. He reached down to wake Nina and Adam stopped him with a hand on his arm and a shake of his head.

That can wait. She needs whatever amount of sleep we can give her.

There was no sense in waking Nina until they knew the level of their threat. It could be one man or twenty. There was no use in interrupting her sleep until they knew whether or not they would have to get her to a safer place.

Looking down at her still form, something softened inside him. He felt it. What was it about

her that made him want to touch her, kiss her, care for her until the end of time? He shook his head in denial. Even though she was human, he wanted nothing more than to claim her, spend the rest of his life drowning in her touch, her scent. He sighed and shook his head. She made him forget about things. Important things. Especially the things he didn't want to remember. Like the fact that the Alpha must mate with a shifter to keep the line strong. He sighed, finally admitting to himself that he would have to give her up.

Still, it didn't stop him from staring at her. Taking a few precious minutes to watch her while she slept, to smile at the way her hair wildly framed her face and how her lashes made perfect dark crescents beneath her eyes. Reaching down, he ran his thumb lightly over her lip. She smiled softly in her sleep and unconsciously leaned into his touch. His gut clenched hotly and he scowled. Damn those men and their persistence. They could have given him a whole day with her before trying to take her away. It wouldn't have mattered though.

Looking down at her as she slept, he knew there was no way he would have let them take her. Even now, he was considering stepping down as Alpha so he could keep her. His people be damned. A part of him didn't care that she wasn't a shifter. He wanted her and that was all there was to it. Gritting his teeth, he fisted his hands at his

sides. He was Alpha. Their leader. The people would see things his way or they could damn well go back to serving the sick council. Nina was his. He glanced at Nick. No. She was theirs and he'd be damned if anyone would convince him to give her up.

How many are there, do you know? Nick asked, rounding the bed after slipping his shoes on.

Adam shook his head. *No idea. Stay away from the windows. They probably have watchers.*

Nick snorted. *Of course they do.* He shot Adam a dirty look. *What do you think I am, some sort of infant? They'll have watchers, enforcers and assassins.*

Yes. The *Tudra* didn't play when they faced real opponents. The only reason they'd taken the others out so easily outside the restaurant was because they'd thought themselves up against a lone human woman. He glanced down at Nina with admiration. A lone human woman who had managed to elude them time after time.

They're entering the house. I can feel them. Nick grabbed his arm and pushed him toward the bed. *Go. Wake her now and stay safe behind the bed. I'll take care of our visitor.*

I'm not hiding under the bed like some old woman. You may be my enforcer, Nick, but that doesn't give you the authority to order me around.

It does during a time of battle. Now get your ass over there, damn it. I don't want to have to worry about the both of you. If you're with her, I'll only have to worry about your ass. I know you'll protect hers.

Until my dying breath.

Nick grunted. *Yeah. I figured as much.*

Adam put his hand over Nina's mouth. He hated having to wake her like this. She jerked awake and the terrified expression in her eyes nearly drove him to his knees. Something tightened inside him. It made him harder somehow and he glared toward the door. That these men could put that expression in her beautiful eyes made him mad enough to kill each and every one of them.

Pressing a finger to his lips, he slowly removed his hand from her mouth and pulled her from the bed. He threw the robe over her shoulders and tied it while she wrestled her arms into the sleeves. Pulling her to the floor behind the bed, he held her down while Nick stood by the door.

A sound near the window had Nick by his side in a heartbeat, glancing though the thin lace curtains.

You can't be in two places at once, you idiot. You take Nina and the window and I'll take the door. Adam held up his hand when Nick would have objected. *We both know you've trained longer and harder since we took control. You're the stronger of us. You stay and protect the weaker of us. I'll take the door.* He almost grinned at Nick's reluctant nod. He couldn't wait for their midnight visitor to walk through that door. He had something to give their violent friend.

The sound of Nina's bedroom door slamming open had Nick and Nina diving for the floor on the far side of the bed. Before Adam moved to stand next to the door, he reached down and pressed a button on the nightstand. The room darkening shades dropped and plunged the room into total darkness. The man wouldn't be able to see more than a few inches beyond his face and the three of them would have adjusted to the darkness by the time the assassin moved on to this room. Adam grinned and moved to stand silently beside the door. Concealing his presence like the fully trained soldier he was, he waited.

He heard the crackling of a radio. "She's not here. Her scent is strong in here though. You go downstairs and see if she's in the kitchen raiding the fridge. I'll check the master bedroom."

"What about Greer?" he heard another whisper.

"I can handle Greer," the first man snorted. "I can even handle that incompetent he calls an enforcer. They aren't so tough without their friends around. I plan to prove that tonight."

Adam heard the sound of retreating footsteps just before another set headed toward his bedroom door. Bending down, he drew his knife from the concealed pocket on his lower pants leg and waited in the darkness for his prey.

Chapter Five

The radio crackled again and the man stopped just outside the door. The voice on the other end was low and garbled. Adam couldn't understand more than a word or two of what was said. "No. I sent Hanson down stairs to check the kitchen. Her scent was all over that room. She's not with Greer. Of course, she's here. At least she was. Are you sure she's one of us? She's never changed, even to protect herself and there were no cat tracks outside any of her homes." He sighed. "Yes, sir. We'll do a thorough sweep of the house and move out to the outlying homes afterward. If she's here, we'll find her – and that laptop."

Adam had little time to think of the implications of the one-sided conversation. Could she be a shifter? If so, that would solve his mate problem. Still, what proof did they have? He stiffened, readying himself for battle when the door opened on silent hinges. His muscles tightened with anticipation as the darker shadow

of the door swung inward. He figured the man would think he'd hidden behind the door. He'd been right. The soldier immediately swung to check behind it, missing the fact that Adam awaited him in plain view.

Grasping the door, Adam swung it closed and grabbed the man by the head just as the door shut. The knife slide through cloth, flesh and sinew like a hot knife through butter as the lung collapsed and the blade struck his heart. The man stiffened for a moment before sliding to the floor. Adam pulled his knife from the intruder's body and wiped the blood off on the other man's pants.

Looking up, he met the Nina's terrified gaze as she stared over the side of the bed, looking on with undisguised terror, obviously in shock.

We're going to have to stop killing men in her presence or she's never going to trust us, boss.

Adam sheathed his knife and sighed. Nick was right.

* * * *

Nina continued to stare between Adam and the man he'd just killed. He'd done it so quickly. He'd seemed so cold, so heartless, as he drove the huge knife into the other man's neck. He'd ended a life so easily, almost effortlessly. How could he be so gentle one moment and so merciless the next?

"Get her into her room and get some clothes on

her,” Adam said, looking past her to Nick. “Get her damned laptop, too. I don’t know what it is they want from it, but since they want it, let’s make sure we keep it, shall we?”

Nina bit her lip as he stared at the floor and rubbed the back of his neck. He looked tired, maybe hurt. Still, he’d looked so dangerous, so forbidding, just a moment ago. She wasn’t sure what to think. She wasn’t even sure how the man who’d been so caring, so gentle with her since they’d met, could turn into such an unfeeling killing machine. He looked at her, the expression and stance so familiar she found herself quaking with fear. *Tudra*. It was written all over him. Ingrained in him like good manners. Only this had nothing to do with superior behavior and everything to do with being one of the men who’d killed TJ.

She shook her head. Backing up, she pressed back against the cold wall and stared at him—them. She could see it now. She’d walked right into their trap. Not only had she come with them willingly, she’d even given them a few hours of pleasure. Something they could brag to their friends about. Tears slid down her face as she realized she’d finally lost the battle. The rest of TJ’s books would never see the light of day. She would never see another dawn, at least not as a free woman, and these men would get whatever secrets TJ had managed to put into his

manuscripts. She'd failed TJ. Hell, she'd never even gotten to spread his ashes over his mountain.

Her legs gave out and she slid down the wall, uncaring that they'd see this final breakdown. What did it matter? Why should she care? It was over now. The only comforting thought she had was now that it was over, she could finally stop. Finally rest.

"So, are you going to kill me now or are you going to use me a bit more first?" She tried to keep her voice from giving away her fear. She'd tried so hard to keep from being caught and, damn it, she was tired of acting brave. She was about as brave as an ostrich sticking its head in the sand.

"We have no intention of killing you."

Oh, well, that was good to hear. "How long will you keep me here?" She pulled her knees to her chest and wrapped her arms around them. "I assume there will be more sex." Thinning her lips, she tried to keep the contempt from her voice. At least they didn't want to kill her. Though there were some fates that were worse than death. Sexual servitude was one of them.

"I certainly hope so," Adam said, then crossed the room to kneel in front of her. "But we would never force you to participate." He looked up at Nick. "Go get her laptop, some clothes and...the ashes."

Quickly, she glanced up at him to see if he was serious. Why bother bringing her stuff in here?

Why go to the trouble of saving her things? They had her. Wasn't that what they wanted?

Nick frowned. "We need to leave. Her belongings can be replaced and she's fulfilled her promise to Woodward by bringing his ashes here."

"Get the damned laptop." Adam cast a glance over to the dead man. "He was talking to someone on his radio about her and that damned laptop. Go get it and grab those ashes she carries with her everywhere and some clothes while you're at it. I'll stay here with her." He looked back at Nina and frowned. "Now tell me what the hell you have on that laptop that has the *Tudra* after you."

Nina felt her eyes go wide. "I have no idea what's on there that they want unless it's the manuscripts." She bit her lip, thinking. "Though I suppose it could be something TJ put on it. Or something they think he put on it. It was his laptop first. I started using it after his death."

"Hmmm..."

It was obvious he was trying to puzzle out the reason a bunch of thugs would want her computer. Though TJ could have put something on it, he rarely touched the damn thing when he'd been alive. It had shocked her when the lawyers had given her the password for it. He'd said it was her legacy. It wasn't hers. It was his and he'd given it to her.

"What do you know of your parents?"

The change of subject shocked her. "What?" Why did he want to know of her parents? They were long dead and she'd forgotten more than she'd ever thought possible. She lifted her hand as the pain in her chest increased. She was alone again. It was something she tried not to think about.

Nick entered the room, quietly closed the door and turned to them. "We have to move. Now. There are more downstairs and they're wondering about their friend here." He kicked the dead man's foot. "We have to get her out of here. Open the damn door and let's get moving."

Open the door? He'd just closed it. Why was he crossing the room if he wanted out of here so badly? She glanced up at him, unable to censure the question from her expression.

"There's a hidden door leading to some stairs that leads down two flights and into a cave that will take us underground for a mile. The council knows it's here, but only members of the ruling house know where." Adam smiled grimly. "They will search the house, but it will take days and a lot of special equipment to find it. That will buy us enough time to get you to safety and figure out what this is all about." He reached beneath the chair beside the window, the paneled wall slid open a crack and he grasped her elbow. "Come on, let's go."

Nina tried not to think of all the strange,

creeping creatures that lived in the dark passageway as they walked through it. She was only happy that they'd thought to bring her shoes. The thought of walking though the musty cave with bare feet was enough to make her shudder.

Steps inside led them down and down, until she was fairly certain they would come out on the other side of the earth if it didn't level out soon. She followed Adam, Nick on her heels carrying her bag and the tin with TJ in it. She wasn't sure why she'd let them take her from the house, but it was most likely because they hadn't shot at her yet. Wanting to stay alive was a powerful compulsion. "When does it level out? We've been going down forever."

"Going down forever? Now there's an interesting concept." Adams voice echoed strangely in the darkness and she tried not to smile at the choking sound Nick made behind her.

"Can you guys keep your minds out of the gutter for at least a little while? We're in danger here and all you two can think about is sex." It was almost all she could think of, too. If she had to die today, she was glad that she'd succumbed to her base needs and had sex with these two gorgeous men. She only wished they weren't assassins. *You don't know that for sure. They didn't admit to it.* Nina frowned at the thought. If they weren't assassins, she was going to have a doubly hard time keeping her hands to herself.

When they finally reached the bottom, she was almost tempted to run back up. The dirt floor, walls and weak-looking overhead did nothing to make her feel better. The cave looked like it was about to collapse on top of them.

"Come on, we have a long way to go and not a long time to get there. We can only hope their time will be taken up searching the house, not the area where the cave lets out. I don't think they know where it is. But," he shrugged, "why take chances?"

Why take chances, indeed? Here she was, in a dark cave, goodness only knew where, with two men who may or may not want to hold her against her will.

* * * *

Nick held his flashlight tight. He could barely keep his mind on what they were doing with the sight of Nina's ass swaying from side to side beneath the robe she wore. The thought of the material caressing her bare skin was nearly his undoing.

"Wait a minute." He grabbed Nina's arm, pulling her to a stop. "I have your clothes. We can stop a minute to get you dressed." He looked past her to Adam and raised a brow. "Can we not?"

"It would probably be best. Who knows what awaits us on the outside? It would be best to be

ready for anything."

Nick pulled the clothes he'd stuffed in her backpack out. "Here. I hope these are okay. I don't know much about what colors you can wear together and whatnot. I only grabbed what looked the warmest because I couldn't get your coat."

No. Her coat was in the downstairs coat closet where he'd put it. He gritted his teeth. How dumb was that? When had he gone soft? Every trained warrior knew to always prepare for the unexpected. That was something he'd failed to do this night. If he'd expected the unexpected as he'd been trained, they'd all have coats, boots and cash so they wouldn't leave a trail when they ran. That was his failing. It was his job as second to keep his leader safe and he'd failed. Miserably.

"They're fine," she said with a smile. "It's hard to mess up jeans and a blouse." He blinked, amazed at how fast she'd dressed. She danced on one foot as she put a sock on. "I'm just glad you remembered my underwear and socks."

Oh, he'd remembered all right. And he'd taken great pleasure in imagining her luscious body in every undergarment he'd chosen, too. It hadn't taken long for him to realize she would look amazing in the emerald green bra and panty set he'd chosen. He was only upset that she'd wasted no time in covering them up.

"Come on," Adam said, gaining their attention. "We need to keep moving. We have no idea how

long it will take them to figure out where we've parked the other vehicle."

"He's right," Nick agreed, pushing her along the dark cave as soon as she slipped her feet into her shoes. "We must keep at least one step ahead of them."

It wasn't much longer before they reached the end of the cave. "Wait here while I check it out." Adam whispered. "I'll let you know if it's safe."

Nick grabbed him. "You can't go out there, it's not safe for you. I'll go. You stay here and guard Nina. Besides," he added when he knew Adam was about to protest. "She may be carrying the next heir. The people would never believe her. Or me for that matter. But if you told them she carried your babe, there would be no question. If something has to happen to one of us, let it be me."

"You aren't disposable either, Nick. So be careful," Adam said, his expression grim. "I've been to enough funerals lately. I refuse to go to another." Adam shook his hand in the warrior way, then embraced him. "You know you're like a brother to me."

Nina stepped up and placed a light kiss on his cheek. "Good luck."

He gave her a half grin. "What, you trust me now?"

She smiled, blushing. "Well, you seem to want to keep me safe from the others. I could only wish

the same for you.”

Safe. Now that was a novel concept. He and Adam hadn't been *safe* in years. Taking Nina by surprise, he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close for a quick kiss. “I think I'm quickly falling in love with you, woman.” He knew his voice was gruff. There was no help for it. He feared he already cared too much for this woman he barely knew.

He waited for them to take cover, then pressed the switch that released the latch on the door. It swung open silently. The shadows in the dim interior of the garage seemed to mock him as he moved quietly through the darkness. The car was still there, the layer of undisturbed dust giving testimony to the fact that no one had been in the garage in quite some time. Praying as he reached for the door handle, he breathed a sigh of relief when the dome light came on. At least the battery wasn't dead and, he thought with relief, there was a full tank of gas.

Making his way to first one window, then another, he peered outside, looking for something, anything, out of the ordinary. Not that there would be anything noticeable. The *Tudra* prided themselves on leaving no trace of their presence.

Slowly, as to not draw any attention to himself, or the garage, he opened the windows a crack and listened. The sound of night creatures filtered in. Good. It was exactly what he wanted to hear. Tree

frogs and crickets could not be fooled by stealth and wouldn't still be serenading each other if there were men outside hiding among them.

He moved to the doorway, opened it and signaled to Adam. Moving to the tool chest, he opened the combination lock and pulled out a set of keys. He grinned when he opened the packages beside it. In with the keys and a few company credit cards were several packages, each containing several thousand dollars.

"Our cash problem was just solved," he said when Adam and Nina joined him. He held up one of the packages he opened. "I'd say we have enough cash to live comfortably in South America for several years."

"Not that we will," Adam added. "We need to find a safe place and protection for Nina, then get back here and take care of our little problem. Knowing what we're up against and why, is our first priority though."

Nick could only agree with that kind of logic. The more time he spent with Nina, the more time he wanted to spend with her. Keeping her out of harm's way came part and parcel with caring for her. And he was afraid he felt more for her than was wise at this early date.

They climbed into the sedan, Adam in the driver's seat this time. They all squeezed into the front seat. He wanted Nina safe between them. He and Adam could heal quickly. She, on the other

hand, wouldn't heal as fast if someone managed to get off a lucky shot and drove a bullet into her beautiful body.

He cringed at the noise as they used the remote to open the garage door and eased the car out into the darkness. They drove slowly through Paradise as the glow of pre-dawn turned the sky pink and gold on the horizon. Dawn was fast approaching. Soon they would lose the cover of darkness and be visible to their enemies. After reaching the outskirts of town, Adam hit the gas hard and the vehicle sped up, pressing them back against the seat. They needed to leave town quick and preferably unnoticed.

A small cloak-covered figure darted out in front of the car and Adam hit the brakes with a curse. "What the hell?"

Nick tensed, prepared for anything. The *Tudra* had operatives in every facet of life. It wouldn't surprise him to find they'd begun to recruit children. He pulled the weapon he'd grabbed before they left the house from the waistband of his pants. Ignoring Nina's horrified gasp, he drew down on the approaching figure. Child or not, if the person had a weapon, he would protect his leader *and* Nina. His finger tightened on the trigger as the figure approached. His mouth dropped open when the hood of the cloak fell away and revealed an old woman.

Adam glared at Myrtle Connor as she stared up at him. Something in the old woman's gaze told him she was disappointed.

"Oh, it's you." She sighed, rested her hands on her hips and turned to look out through the darkness. "I was after those damned Gibson boys. Those goons have been terrorizing the neighborhood for the last ten years. I hoped it would stop once you took over. You would think they would grow up, for goodness sakes." She turned back toward Adam and shook her finger in his face. "You need to do something about them before they start a gang right here in Paradise. I'm tired of their pranks."

What pranks? As far as Adam knew, the three teens were normal law-abiding kids who stayed out late making more noise than they should. "They haven't broken the law since I came back, Mrs. Connor."

"Well, they did tonight, Adam Greer, and I want you to do something about it." She drew herself up to her full five-foot nothing height. "They're back to their old tricks again. Only this time they stole something and I'm pressing charges!"

Adam's fingers tightened on the wheel. The sun climbed higher in the sky. Every moment lost took them one step closer to discovery. "I'll look into it

when I return, Mrs. Connor." He glanced in the rearview mirror. "But, I really have to go now if you'll excuse me."

She stepped away from the car. "I'll hold you to that," she called after them as they pulled away. "Someone's stealing my ice sculptures and I want to know who it is!"

Adam shook his head. He hoped it wasn't the Gibson boys. He rather liked them. The three boys *were* a bit on the mischievous side, but he didn't think they would resort to theft. The problem of missing lawn decorations was becoming a nuisance. It seemed almost every week someone's sculpture went missing. Myrtle Connor made one a week as her therapy for her depression at losing her husband. She took the classes as her first form of therapy when he first took his rightful place in Paradise. Her continued therapy was making one a week for the town's folk. He only wished he knew why the damned things kept disappearing. The theft of her summer lawn decorations would be a nightmare. He was just glad that so far, whoever took them, confined their theft to the winter months.

Adam pitied the people involved if Mrs. Connor found them first. With the snit she was in, she was liable to take her chainsaw after them. She loved her winter works of art.

He hit the gas hard as they left the town's limits and headed up the mountain toward the veil.

They had to find a safe place to stay so they could get some sleep and figure this all out. He knew why the council wanted TJ. He was a shifter. They would have considered him a defector, then gave him an ultimatum—join us or die.

If Woodward's father and grandfather taught him the *Tudra* way as he suspected, he would never have given up his freedom or his ideals, even to save his life. He glanced over at Nina. Her head rested on Nick's shoulder, eyes closed, lost in the sweet oblivion of sleep. What did they want from a human woman? They could have just asked her for it. That they didn't and kept pursuing her told him they wanted something more from her. But what?

Both Nina and Nick slept as they passed through the veil. Adam was glad. He'd barely been able to stand her discomfort the first time though. That was a mystery as well. As a human, she shouldn't be able to feel the veil so strongly.

Four hours later, he pulled off to get some gas. He was beat. It was Nick's turn to drive and his turn to sit beside Nina with her head pillowed on his shoulder. He grinned at the thought before waking them both. They may as well turn this into a full-fledged pit stop. Reaching in, he gently shook Nina's shoulder. Confusion filled her expression when she opened her eyes.

"Where—where are we?"

Chapter Six

Nina looked around. They were in a gas station. That much was obvious. She shivered from the cold breeze coming in through the open driver's door. Her stomach growled when she got a whiff of something that smelled suspiciously of pizza. She hadn't eaten much in the last few days. There never seemed to be enough time. Eating was her first priority, she thought as she slid to the door. A familiar pressure in her bladder changed that thought though. *Okay, so eating is your second priority.* She sighed.

"We're in Montana somewhere northwest of Paradise." He rubbed the back of his neck. "I'm not sure how far we'll have to drive before it will be safe to get a hotel room."

Her gaze wandered down over his well-built physique as he helped her from the car. She knew her face was red. It burned like it was on fire. "Stop?" She couldn't keep herself from thinking about sex. She looked around, wanted to see

anything, but his hard body that made her crazy. "Why'd we stop?"

"I thought you'd be hungry by now, it's been several hours."

She shivered, the slight breeze coming from the open door making her doubly aware of his lack of outerwear. He needed a coat a—nice long one that hung down to his knees. Something, anything, to cover up all that male hardness.

"Come on. We'll hurry you inside so you can use the facilities and get yourself something to eat."

She slid out on the driver's side, careful not to disturb Nick. She accepted Adam's proffered hand and he helped her from the car. It didn't go unnoticed that both of the men were gentlemen. Her face burned. Okay. They were gentlemen out of the bedroom.

As soon as she was clear of the door, Adam reached past her and threw the keys in Nick's lap, startling him awake. "Come on, you slacker. It's your turn to drive."

Nick mumbled, "Kiss my ass," just before Adam closed the door.

"I swear. I'll *kick* his ass if he doesn't get up off it and take advantage of this stop." He didn't want to waste more time than necessary here. Ten minutes and three full cups of coffee later, they were back in the car and headed northwest.

After a few more hours, Nick sighed. "We need

a safe place to stop. Doesn't the clan have safe houses all over the place?" He squinted through the windshield, the soft mist in the mountains obviously made it hard to drive.

"Of course we can't stay in any of them. The old council knows where they all are."

Nick shook his head. "You're right. I should have thought of that myself."

Nina sat up, rubbed the sleep from her eyes, pushed her hair back and bit her lip. "I dreamed of a place. I think it's here in Montana. There was still lots of snow on the ground. I don't know if it really exists." She looked up at him, sure he was about to ridicule her.

Instead, he sat up straighter, giving her his full attention. "Where is it? Just name the place and we'll buy a map and see if we can find it."

"You really think it exists?"

"Why not? You have already proven your talent for prophetic dreams, in Paradise."

She stared at him for a moment, not sure what to say.

"Where is it?" Nick prompted.

"That's just it." She sighed. "I don't know where it is. I don't know anything about it other than it has a little motel, seemingly out in the middle of nowhere." She felt like crying. What the hell good were prophetic dreams if they didn't tell you everything? "It has little cabins on a lake. In my dream, the three of us went for a walk and,

when we returned to our cabin, I saw the sign. It's called *Bide a Wee*."

"That's a strange name for a motel."

"Not really." She said with a shrug. "I read somewhere that the phrase means stay a while. It's Scottish or something, I think." They pulled off the road into a truck stop. Nina's mouth watered at the thought of finally getting something to eat. She could barely remember the last time she had a real meal. It was before she met these two delicious men. It seemed so long ago, yet she knew it had been only a matter of a few short days.

"Stay a while, huh?" Adam opened his door, stepped out of the car and helped her out before he began to refuel the vehicle. She hurried toward the building, her mind on getting something warm in her belly. He turned, his hand on the door handle, when a door slammed shut behind him. It was Nick following them into the store.

"Hey, Mister!" A tall, rotund man yelled from inside in heavily accented English. "You not leave your car while you pumping gas. It is against zee policy of zee store," the attendant called from behind the counter. His great, black bushy eyebrow was drawn down in a scowl. "I think it's against zee laws, too."

Adam turned back to Nick. "Stay with the car till it's full, Nick. We can't leave it while it's filling."

Nick waved, turned and headed back the way

he came.

"We can ask the attendant here if he knows." Nina smiled at the idea. "If such a place exists in this little town, surely he'd know about it."

Adam grabbed her arm and yanked her away from the counter just as she opened her mouth to ask. "Do you have any brochures or literature on local hotels or attractions?" he asked before she could complain.

The attendant scratched his head and laughed. The action shook his big belly, drawing attention to his dirty, grease-spattered tee shirt. "What do I look like, a phone book?"

Nina grimaced. He didn't want to know what *she* thought he looked like. He looked a lot like a bath and a couple of doses of antibiotics to her. She was barely able to suppress a shudder of revulsion.

"Excuse me. My mistake." Adam spun around and pulled her with him. "Let's just grab something to eat, hit the toilets if they're clean and get the hell out of here. We'll stop at the next rest area and grab some pamphlets."

Stopping, she placed her hands on her hips and scowled. "That's just ridiculous, Adam. Why can't we just go back there and ask?"

Wrapping his arm around her, Adam whispered in her ear. "There are two reasons, sweetheart. One, he's not a phonebook, remember? And two is, if he doesn't know where

we're going, he can't tell anyone."

That made sense. "But we don't know where we're going either. How are we going to find the place if we don't ask? Heck, Adam, we don't even know if the place really exists."

He looked down at her and grinned. "It exists. There's no doubt in my mind of that. You have a wonderful gift. Do you have a wireless card in your computer?"

Nina's eyes widened. She was an idiot, plain and simple. She should have thought of that herself. It *was* her laptop. "Of course."

"Then all we have to do is find a place with an internet connection. The next good-sized town should do."

"You're a genius." She grinned. "I could kiss you for reminding me. We don't have to wait. I have a satellite connection." Taking a deep breath, she tilted her head back and squeezed her eyes closed. "Please, please tell me Nick brought everything in my bag."

Adam gave her a strange look. "I think so. Why?"

"Because my mini dish was in there." That was why she carried the thing with her everywhere she went.

Nick walked up beside them. "Did I hear my name mentioned?" he asked with a grin.

"No, you narcissistic prick." Adam gave Nick a shove and he hit the rack of candy behind him.

"Hey!" Nick laughed. "I know I heard my name mentioned."

Nina turned to him, held her hands to her mouth as if in prayer. "Please tell me you didn't take anything out of my bag when you crammed my clothes in there."

Nick snorted. "Of course not. It would have taken too much time and that thing is so big you could fit half of Delaware in there. Why?"

Jumping up and down, Nina squealed, then gave him a big hug. "We'll tell you in the car. Now let's get our stuff and get back on the road."

Fifteen minutes later, they were back on the highway. Having pulled her bag from the backseat, Adam handed it to her so she could dig her dish out and set it up.

"Hold this." She handed him her short CAT 5 cable she grabbed from the upper zippered pocket where it was stored. "Trade me and open this up," she said, handing him the dish so she could connect the cable. "Okay. Now that I have everything hooked up, we need to stop somewhere, where I'll have an unobstructed view of the southeastern sky."

Adam wrestled with the small satellite dish. The cord kept getting in the way and he scowled down at it. "I thought you said this was wireless."

"I don't believe you said that. It *is*. I'm not connected to anything, but the dish. I don't want to go totally without a connection. I'm running on

the battery and the wireless card drains a *lot* of power."

"Oh. I didn't think of that."

Nick snorted. "Of course you didn't. You're always looking for the easy way out of everything." He took his eyes off the road for a minute to look at her. "He's been that way since we were kids."

"Kiss my ass, Nick."

Nina laughed at their playful banter. It felt good to have a bit of fun. It felt like forever since she felt so comfortable with anyone. "You guys are a riot. Now pull over and be quiet so I can concentrate."

"Concentrate? The computer is the one doing all the work."

She glared at Adam sorely tempted to slap the smug look off his face. "It takes a certain amount of brain power to read this darned compass to line up the signal." She waited for Nick to bring the vehicle to a stop, then pulled out her compass to find a signal.

He held his hands up. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Don't get upset."

"You're going to have to get out and set that on the roof."

When she finally directed him to place the dish in a position where she had a signal and began to type, she almost laughed. Their expressions were priceless.

Adam shifted closer to look over her shoulder. "How many words do you type per minute?"

"About a hundred to a hundred and ten."

"Holy shit, Nina. How do you even know what keys you're hitting? Adam and I hunt and peck."

She laughed at Nick's comment. "Practice. It takes lots and lots of practice to get this fast. I *have* written several books, you know. That's several hundred thousand words." She brought up several search pages and typed in Bide a Wee motel, Bide a Wee cabins and Bide a Wee retreat and got several hits. "Bide-a-wee, a Scottish term for stay a while. A phrase said to guests or patrons when one is wanted to remain for a time." She clicked through several similar pages. "Bide a wee campground. Stop by our cabins and campground. Bide a wee and enjoy our famous Saturday night ice cream socials. Great for family reunions and vacation fun, just twenty-five miles northeast of Mariposa, Montana."

"At least we have a destination now."

She nodded, her fingers still flying over the keyboard. "I'm going to copy and paste this into a document and save it to my hard drive."

"Wait!" Adam stopped her. "Do a few other searches first. Search hotels in Reno, Los Angeles and San Francisco. We want them to think we're heading west if they've managed to hack into your system."

"I never thought of that." Nina bit her lip and

frowned. She wondered if they *had* hacked into her computer. Now that she thought of it, every time she went anywhere, she did an internet map search for it, except when she went to her cabin. She'd known how to get there without directions. Was that why it had taken the *Tudra* so long to find her the last time?

"Oh, my god." She closed her eyes and shook her head. "They've hacked into my computer. I know it."

"What makes you so sure?" Nick eyed the thing as though it would immediately jump up and bite her.

"When they burned my cabin. I should have figured it out then. I'd stayed there for months without being found. I thought I was finally rid of them." Tears streamed down her face as she thought of Hiram sitting in his house innocently tying his flies. She could never go back to see him until the *Tudra* finally gave up on her. "I went to help a neighbor during a storm." Her smile wobbled as she thought of the proud old man who had become so dear to her. "He needed to see a doctor about his arthritis. I did an internet search for doctors in the area. I got him a few names. Thank god he already knew where their offices were, otherwise I would have led the *Tudra* straight to him."

She should have been more careful, more vigilant. If she ever got out of the mess alive, she

was going to visit Hiram and make sure he was all right.

* * * *

Nick had never felt so impotent in his life. His leader, and the woman he'd begun to care about, were in danger and the news just kept getting worse. "So you're disconnected now, right? Go ahead and save that info. You said we were safe there in the dream?" Hell, he'd send her around the world if it would keep her safe.

He waited impatiently as Adam pulled the disk back into the vehicle and folded it back up. His hands tightened on the steering wheel as he pulled back onto the road. The damned council just didn't know when to leave well enough alone. Why couldn't they see that their methods just weren't working? Instead, they kept slogging along through the mire they created in Paradise. It wasn't much of a paradise when its people couldn't wait to get away.

He wondered how far they were from the place. It was too damned bad Nina couldn't use her computer to make a map. "We need to stop and get a map. We know where we're going now. We need to know how to get there." He took the next exit. "Let's stop here, get that food we never got at the last place and pick one up."

Four hours later he was turning into the driveway for the *Bide a Wee* campground. The place looked deserted. The car's headlights illuminated the trees as they passed. A few empty cabins loomed up out of the darkness, looking both sinister and cozy. He shook his head. Man, he needed a rest if a campground looked cozy.

He reached over and shook Adam's shoulder to wake him up. This sleeping in shifts shit was wearing them both out. It had been a few years since they'd had to have the discipline to sleep in six-hour shifts. Adam sat up straighter and rubbed his eyes.

"According to the pamphlet we picked up at the last rest area, they have an all night registration. Once we find it and get a cabin, we'll start searching the files on her computer and figure out what it is the council wants and get rid of it. If it doesn't exist, they can't kill her or anyone else to get to get it."

"True," Adam agreed. "If it's something we can use, we'll use it, regardless of the danger. If it will benefit the clan, my life is of little consequence."

"Your life is everything, damn it!" Nick wasn't about to let Adam sacrifice himself for him or anyone else. "You're the last of your line. You know what that means. Only you and your offspring have the power to detect those in the clan who don't truly belong."

Adam snorted. "Like that really works. My

senses didn't work that well when the council took over and tried to kill everyone in my family."

"You were a boy. We were both boys. Your senses hadn't had time to develop. If your father would have been alive..."

"But he wasn't." Adam turned to glare at him. "Everything was left to me. A ten-year-old boy shouldn't have that kind of responsibility. He shouldn't have to wonder if the person next to him is one who will protect him or stab him in the back. You have no idea how hard it was to live like that."

"Of course I do. I've been your enforcer from the day I was born. Our parents were best friends. I always knew you were the one groomed for leadership."

"And even though you were two years older than I am, you didn't mind?"

Nick shrugged. "I think I might have at first." He grinned. "Then I got to know you. You were the one. I knew the moment I saw you that you were the one who would lead our people to the best advantage after your father was gone. You and whichever heir there would be from the second house." He sighed. "It's just too damned bad all of the McWertys died in that car crash. It left all of the responsibility to you."

They stopped talking when they pulled up outside of the registration office. "We can talk about this later, after we're settled." Adam got out

of the car, grabbed a sack of cash and crammed some in his pocket. "No electronic transactions, Nick. We have to keep them guessing about where we are. At least until we figure out what it is that they want from Nina."

It didn't take long to get settled. The Campground owners were only too glad to deal in cash and get paid for a month in advance. More cash convinced them to open the camp store next door to the office, where the three bought some food and other necessities before finally retiring to their cabin.

Nick set the bags down on the counter, then went back out to the car to help with what little luggage they had. There were a few sets of clothes stored in the vehicle, mostly sweat pants and tee shirts to fit most anyone. There were also several packs of underwear in assorted sizes, both male and female. He wasn't sure whether to be glad or upset. The idea of Nina going commando was intriguing. He bit back a grin as he walked inside.

Nina was already in the kitchen putting things away and Adam made himself busy making the two double beds and pushing them together. His cock went hard at the sight of the bed. He wanted nothing more than to throw Nina down onto it and fuck her senseless. But there was still work to be done. Lots of work. "Do you mind if I take a look at your laptop?" Nick asked as he set it on the

table.

Nina shook her head. "Go right ahead. The faster we figure out what they want, the better off we'll all be."

Lifting the top, he pressed the power button and waited for it to boot up. While he waited, he pulled the cord from the bag and plugged it in, then looked around the small cabin with an appraising eye. He'd never really cared for camping, but if he could do it like this, it might just grow on him. Starting out in the most obvious documents folder, Nick began his search. It wasn't until he'd gotten to a folder named *crap* that he found anything worthwhile.

"Come look at this." Nick pushed the laptop to the left a bit and pulled a chair up for Adam to sit in. "I found this buried pretty deep. It's the sixth folder down, marked as *crap*. But when I open it, it has several other folders. That wouldn't be anything strange, but look at the folder names."

"Greer, McWerty, Hill, Williams, Harmon. What the hell?" Adam reached over to the finger pad and drew the cursor down to Greer. His eyes went wide when the file opened. "Oh, my god. My sisters are alive?" He glanced at Nick and opened the locations file. "It even tells us where they are."

"What about the McWertys? If we can get to them and get the heir on our side, we'll have your rule cemented within the clan. No one would dare

go up against the both of you. They had to go into hiding. The McWerty alpha was killed in an accident as well."

"Perhaps they weren't accidents and that's why they all disappeared." Adam opened the McWerty file. "You're not going to believe this."

"I know. I was reading with you."

They both looked up to see Nina moving in the kitchen. She was cooking something that smelled great. Whatever she made from the meager fare they'd found at the camp store, it was obvious she was a good cook.

"Nina," Adam stood and motioned her to the table. "I think you need to come over here and sit down."

Turning off the burner, she wiped her hands on one of the towels they'd purchased and joined them. "What is it?" She looked between them, her apprehension obvious. She clasped her hands together, her fingers twisting the towel she hadn't put down.

"This file tells what happened to the second ruling house of Paradise." Nick scrolled down through the file and read aloud. "Sara and William McWerty left paradise in nineteen eighty-four, taking with them their four daughters. The family, run off the road by an unidentified truck driver, rolled down an embankment and, according to records, all died. But, and this is where it gets interesting, according to the files in

your computer, Sara and William lived long enough to call their longtime friend Theodore James Meyer, also known as renowned author, TJ Woodward." He paused. "Sara and William McWerty were your biological parents."

Nina gasped and covered her mouth. "TJ knew who I was all this time and never said anything?"

Chapter Seven

Tears filled her eyes and Nick wanted nothing more than to reach out and comfort her, but he couldn't. There was so much more she needed to know. "Theodore took custody of the four girls upon the parent's death three days later. The girls, split up for their own safety, were put with several custodial families. Amenina, unable to remain with her own custodial family due to their deaths, found herself in the human custodial system until TJ was able to find her and raise her as his own." He straightened and rubbed his face. "We know where your sisters are. His wife wrote most of these files just before she died. Do you remember her, Nina?"

She shook her head. "Barely. I remember a nice lady with dark hair who tucked me in at night and read me stories. She was just a memory by the time I ran away from my seventh set of foster parents and TJ found me." Nina stood and began to pace. "My name is Amenina McWerty?"

Everything I am, everything I was, is a lie?" She sobbed into her hands. "I have sisters? I didn't know they were still alive. I remember three little girls who I always thought were my friends. They disappeared when my parents died." She sat back down. "They were my sisters..."

Nick looked at Adam. "You know what this means?"

Adam gave him a slight nod then turned to Nina. "You know what this means, don't you?" Adam repeated the question. She shook her head, her face in her hands. "It means you're one of us." He stood, went to her and knelt down beside her. "How could you not know you're a shifter?"

"I'm not a shifter. I can't shift." She glanced up at them through tear-ravaged eyes. "You have to believe me. TJ must have been mistaken. I'm not this Amenina person. I'm just Nina."

"And you're a shifter."

"No!" Standing, she ran from the cabin.

"Let her go. We're safe here, by her prediction." Adam pulled Nick back when he would have gone after her. "She has a lot to think about. And we still have to figure out what it is that they want with the laptop. At least now we know why they want her." He glanced at the door. "Keep an eye on her though, just in case."

"I'll keep an eye on her all right."

* * * *

Adam searched through the files for about five minutes before he gave up and walked from the cabin. "Keep searching the files. Let me know if you find anything. I'm going after her. This is driving me nuts." He found he couldn't stay inside at the computer when he knew Nina was outside. Her emotions must be in turmoil. It wasn't every day one found out they were a shifter.

"Go away." Nina kept walking when he approached her.

"I can't."

"Sure you can." She waved her arm. "Just turn around and go back to the cabin. I need to think."

"You need assistance, comfort and guidance. You need help dealing with this."

"I'm an orphan, Adam," she said sitting on a bench. Bringing her feet up, she wrapped her arms around her knees. "Orphans don't need anyone."

"Perhaps." He sat down beside her. "But what would you say if I told you that *I* need *you*."

Nina snorted. "You need me about as much as you need a hole in the head." She sighed and rested her head against her knees. "And you're liable to get a hole in the head if you keep trying to protect me. You might as well go home. I'm not worth saving."

He rested his hand on her shoulder. "I want to save you." He moved closer and wrapped his arm

around her. "I don't think you've noticed, but Nick and I have become quite fond of you over the last few days." He held tight when she tried to pull away. "I can't speak for Nick, but I've come to care a lot for you. If I had a choice, I'd live the rest of my life with you and Nick by my side. I know this is a bad time to voice this, but it's as good a time as any. I'd like you to be my mate—be our mate." He'd expected a lot of things. Anger, tears, acceptance... He hadn't expected her laughter though.

"I don't believe you suggested that. No." She turned an accusing gaze on him. "I'm a member of the co-ruling house. Isn't that what you said? The McWertys? You only want me because I'll cement your claim on your kingdom, or whatever it is."

"You know that's not true. I've wanted you from the moment I saw you. You can't deny that I've had a perpetual hard-on since we met. I didn't even know who you were until ten minutes ago. It's not fair to hold your lineage against me like that."

"It's not fair to live your life not knowing who or what you are either. Suck it up, Greer. Life isn't fair. I'd think you would have learned that by now."

"I have. I learned it when my parents died when I was ten. I learned it when the child my parents arranged for me to marry was killed."

She raised her head, her eyes wide. "You were

engaged?"

"Yes. When I was eight and she was two. She was the youngest, strongest daughter of her house." He paused, then stood and moved away to get out of the line of fire. "The house of McWerty."

"I'm not engaged to you!"

"No, you're not. You weren't raised here in Paradise with our expectations or ideals. You weren't even raised by shifters for most of your life. I won't hold you to your parent's promises. I will, however help you find your sisters and reunite you with them no matter what your decision is about Nick and me."

He knew the fastest way to earn her trust was to not demand anything. He'd always been relieved that his betrothed had died before she'd grown. He'd never tell her that, but Nina and her sisters had been homely children. One could only guess that they would grow up the same. He'd never dreamed that the beautiful woman next to him was Amenina McWerty until he'd read it for himself. He looked out over the forest surrounding them. Bird song filtered through the trees. The sound of squirrels and other forest life rustled through the underbrush.

Needing to protect Nina, Adam reached out with his senses. There was no danger near. Not even a bear roamed the forest beyond the clearing where they sat. Several campers sat around their

fires, swam in the nearby river and several of them sat on boats fishing. It was as safe and peaceful as she'd predicted.

"Let's go for a walk." He suppressed a grin when she stiffened. His parents had chosen well. He could never arrange a marriage for one of his children, but given a choice, he would still choose to live his life with the woman his parents picked for him all those years ago. Perhaps one of them had been psychic. Who knew? "I won't demand you keep your family's end of the marriage contract. If you don't want to marry me, it's your choice." He stood and offered her his hand. "However, I'd like you to know, I'd come to care for you long before I discovered you were the person my parents arranged for me to marry. I thought you long dead."

She pushed her hair from her face. It was an action that Adam found increasingly sexy. She couldn't know how alluring that particular habit of hers was. His gut clenched and his cock throbbed every time she did that. It made him want to throw her down on the ground and ravish her here and now. But they needed to spend some time together to get to know each other. And they needed to talk, not fuck. Finally placing her hand in his, she stood. Her gaze at her feet, she allowed him to pull her to his side. "It's beautiful here. I'm glad you dreamt of it."

"I have no control over what I dream."

"Still, the knowledge came from your mind. This will be a nice place to return to." Adam wondered how much he could buy this place for. It was a great place to go when one needed to get away. He thought twice about that. No. He wouldn't buy it. This would be their little secret. Whenever they wanted or needed to hide from the world this would be their haven. If the clan didn't own it, there would be no record for others to trace them here.

The heat of her body next to his seeped into his side. He wanted nothing more than to pull her to him and strip her bare, right here in the middle of the campground. Her intoxicating scent wafted up from her body, making his cock harden. Hearing a small waterfall in the distance, he led her there. It was far from the other campers who seemed content to stay within the cleared boundaries of the campground, at least while it was still dark. There they would have a bit of privacy where they could talk. Or do other things.

It was the other things his body hoped for. His hormones had never raged as they did now. Something about her nearness set him on edge. His life seemed to revolve around this one woman. Having her so close drove him wild. His entire body screamed for the need to sink deep into her warmth. It was like coming home.

Nina gasped when they rounded the bend to a small clearing next to the waterfall. "It's

beautiful," she said as she neared the small pond the waterfall fed. A stream rushed through the woods, most likely leading to the river.

Lush, emerald green grass surrounded the small pool and Adam watched amazed that Nina removed her shoes so quickly to luxuriate in the thick carpet. Adam followed suit. He didn't stop at taking off his shoes. He removed all of his clothing until he stood naked in the clearing, the moon shining down on him, giving just enough light for Nina to look her fill. "I'm hot. This looks like a wonderful place for a swim."

Wasting no time, he made a shallow dive into the pool. The cold water took his breath away and was just what he needed to take his mind off Nina's lithe body. His respite lasted all of six seconds. Until she stripped down to her skin and dove in as well. Adam closed his eyes. He tried. He really did.

His arms snaked around her body as she came up from under the water in front of him. With nothing between them but cold water and air, there was no stopping his over active imagination from dreaming up all sorts of possibilities. When her lips, wet and full, closed over his, all thoughts of being a gentleman took flight.

He loosened his grip on her waist, one hand moving down over the swell of her hip. His stomach clenched, knowing his fingers rested so close to the warmth of her woman's core. How

could one touch inflame him so completely? His blood pounded in his ears. His entire body felt electrified. Never in his life had he ever wanted a woman so much.

Lowering his head, he pressed his lips against hers. Her lips parted, her legs circled his hips. Nina pressed closer. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she raised herself to meet his kiss. Their tongues met, twined together as they embraced in the cool water.

He wanted nothing more than to make love to her here, now. But he didn't want to make Nick feel like a fifth wheel. Nick needed her as much as he did. Could he make love to her and go back to his best friend as though nothing happened? What if she decided she liked one lover better than two?

* * * *

Nina wanted Adam, but she felt some hesitation. She needed to let Nick know that no matter what happened between her and Adam that she felt something for him as well. But she didn't know what she felt for either of them. That she felt anything at all was strange. If she admitted to feeling like she couldn't live without either of them, they would surely think she'd gone off the deep end. *She'd* thought she'd gone off the deep end. Why should they be any different? Finally, having made up her mind, she grabbed Adam by

the hair and pulled him close. "Make love to me, Adam. Now."

He held her with ease deep in the chilly water. Even submerged in the cold depths, nothing cooled her desire. His hands moved to cup her rear. Nina arched into him, eager for the contact. Letting her hands wander over his chest, she reveled in the smooth skin beneath her fingers as they danced over his flesh. Nothing in her life prepared her for what she felt for this man. Nothing could have prepared her for what she felt for both of the men who had come to mean so much to her in such a short time.

They both seemed to know exactly what would please her. She gasped when he lowered his head and took a nipple in his mouth. Rolling it between his tongue and teeth, he licked and laved her breast, nibbling his way across her chest to the other. Nina threw her head back, swept away on a tide of pure feeling. She wanted more, needed more of this sensual loving. Her body ached, her breasts trembling with the need to have his mouth upon her flesh.

As though reading her mind, Adam moved his hands up and around her sides. Squeezing both breasts together, he licked and laved the tips simultaneously. Throwing her head back, Nina let it thrash back and forth. The combined sensations of his warm mouth and body with the cool water of the pond nearly drove her over the edge. Heat

pooled in her middle. She could feel her cream seeping from deep within to coat her pussy lips preparing her for his entry. Adam's finger slid through her wet slit, then circled the tiny bud there. She bucked against him.

"More Adam," she panted. "I need more."

One finger, then two entered her channel, stretching, preparing her for his invasion. She needed this—needed him. It felt as though life as she knew it would end now if he didn't assuage the burning need he'd aroused with the mere stroke of his fingers, his tongue. "Damn it. Are you trying to kill me?"

"No, love. I seek only to bring you pleasure."

Nina couldn't stop herself from bucking against him. Arching into his touch, she tightened her legs around him in an effort to get her point across. She needed release. Now.

Cold water lapped over her breasts tightening her already hard nipples into diamond-like nubs. Goose bumps spread over her skin. She wasn't sure if it was from the cold of the water or what Adam did to her with his hands and mouth. She tipped her head back further, bowing her back until her hair trailed in the pond. Could one die from too much pleasure? Nina was sure she was about to find out. Every inch of her skin, every nerve ending in her body burned with an intensity she never dreamed possible.

Her eyes widened when she saw Adam's teeth

lengthen into those of his other self. Still she was too carried away to care. He lowered his head to her breast, nipping her over her heart, leaving his brand on her flesh. The mark tingled, burned, sending a strange, languid warmth through her that left her feeling more aroused than she was before. How could such a thing be possible?

She wept with disappointment when he removed his fingers from her channel, leaving her empty and bereft. She needed this, needed him. She couldn't wait for him to press his thick cock deep inside her waiting flesh.

"Fuck me, Adam. Please!" she begged. Mindless with passion, she grabbed him by the hair, raised up and tried to seat herself on his hard shaft. Her body, her entire being, shook with need. Just one stroke of his hard dick inside her and she would explode. Nina knew it as certainly as she drew breath. She'd been so close to climax for so long she was convinced she would die if she couldn't come soon.

Nina screamed when Adam finally lowered her onto his hard cock. The thick shaft rubbed over every sensitive nerve ending inside her. Her orgasm hit her hard. She could feel her channel gripping, sucking at Adam's cock as he rammed it into her. The water sloshed around them. The muscles in his neck stood out and sweat beaded on his brow.

"God, Nina. You feel so good, I'm going to

come. I can't..." Adam let out one long, low growl as he released himself inside her, his shaft bucking and jerking. She felt the warmth of his come as he continued to move inside her until he was spent.

"Did you have fun?"

They both looked toward the shore and Nick like guilty children. Nina's face burned. What could they say? Was he angry?

Releasing her, Adam waded from the water, leaving Nina hiding beneath the crystal depths. He glanced back and winked at Nina as if to say everything would be all right. "Did you find anything?"

Nick nodded, his hands in his pockets. Nothing could fill them enough to hide the bulge in the front of his pants. Was he aroused or angry? Nina licked her lips, both frightened and confused. The last thing she wanted was to hurt him. She didn't want to hurt either of them.

"There were a few very interesting things in there. First off, did you know the council was led by offspring of the Omega?"

Adam stood straighter, his eyes narrowing. "The Omega was killed in a barroom brawl."

"Not before he sired a son."

"I could only wish that Camulus was an Omega, but an Omega is made, not born. You should know that, Nick. His father was a coward. Perhaps hearing of his father's many mistakes taught the son to grow some balls." He paced

away rubbing the back of his neck. "What else did you learn?"

Nick glanced at Adam. "It's about the *truebond*."

"What about it?"

"Apparently, to have a concrete *truebond*, the mates must love one another both together and separate. When the bond is complete, there will be a feeling of oneness in the triad. I think we should give that a go." He grinned. "I see you two were one step ahead of me."

Adam pulled his pants on. "I'm going to go back and check this out for myself." He held up a hand. "Not that I don't believe you, Nick." He glanced over his shoulder toward Nina. "But I thought you two might like some alone time of your own." He grinned and winked. "I'll be at the cabin. Come back when you're ready. Who knows? I might even decide to cook."

Nina felt her mouth drop open. "He can cook?" she whispered when she was sure he was out of earshot. "What does he cook, canned soup?"

"I heard that," Adam called from the woods. "Oh, ye of little faith."

Nick chuckled. "No. He only finishes what beautiful women start."

"Go to hell, you dick."

Laughing, Nina looked up at Nick who sat down and started to remove his shoes. When had she become such a wanton? Never in her life had

she ever dreamed she would be in such a situation. Two men wanted her and neither minded sharing her with the other. Did that make her some sort of slut or nymphomaniac or what? Unable to do anything but watch as Nick removed his clothes, she swallowed. Should she get out of the water or wait here for him to come to her? Her mouth went dry. She licked her lips and swam across the pond. She'd ignore him until he came to her. She couldn't and wouldn't just stand waiting for him with her legs spread like some sort of floozy.

Diving beneath the water, she let the cool water caress her overheated cheeks. Would she ever get used to having one man and then another come to her for sex? Did she want to get used to it? It wasn't normal! Abnormal or not, it didn't stop her stomach from flip-flopping when she heard Nick enter the pool. Her nipples hardened to tight peaks, her breath hitched and she felt her body's cream coat her nether lips. Even the water couldn't dispel the slickness of her pussy. She felt the heat radiate off him when he moved to stand behind her.

A strange feeling of security swept over her as he came near. The closer he got, the more intense the feeling got. She could almost feel Adam with them even as he walked through the woods back to the cabin. It was almost as though his spirit was here with them as Nick took her into his arms.

Leaning back, Nina rested her head on Nick's shoulder as he reached up to caress the swollen tips of her breasts. A bright flash caught her eye and she turned to look over the water to her right. Nothing but the lush green grass met her gaze. Another flash had her turning to the left. When Nick lowered his head to press his lips to hers, a rainbow of light surrounded them, tying them together. Adam's life force entered the pool. Even though he left them alone, it seemed his spirit was here, completing some strange bond.

Nick lifted her, entering her from behind. She gasped, writhing in front of him, churning the water as he slid in and out of her. His hips pistoned against her, pushing his thick cock deep inside. He swelled within her. She felt every ridge and vein as he stroked his thick shaft deep.

Her orgasm came slower this time. She reveled in the sensations Nick built within her. "You're so wet, so tight, Nina. I'm going to come." He whispered it in her ear like some sort of secret. It was no secret. His body gave him away. His strokes became shorter, more urgent until he sank the tips of his teeth into her shoulder and growled out his release.

A loud splash startled her. Adam swam through the water toward them. The expression on his face left little to her imagination as to why he was here. He'd been connected to them just as they'd felt the same connection to him.

Nick carried her from the water and set her on the thick carpet of grass. Nina swallowed thickly. She looked between them knowing she could never choose one over the other. She only hoped they never asked.

"I feel the bond, Nick." Adam reached out and stroked her flesh. "Why didn't you tell me we would feel each other's emotions?"

"I didn't read that far. I only knew we needed to cement the bond before the *Tudra* found us. If we're bound, they cannot take her from us. We will always know where she is."

"The bond ties us together. Links us in ways we never knew possible. It guarantees offspring. It also keeps the others alive through an emotional bond should one of us die. This was how our people used to mate until the influence of humans ended the practice."

"M-mate?" Nina looked between them. A fling with two handsome strangers was one thing. She looked between them. Did she really want this arrangement to become permanent?

Chapter Eight

Adam watched the indecision chase across Nina's face. He wanted to fold her in his arms and tell her everything would be all right—that they could return to Paradise and live out their lives in peace. He refused to lie to her and would do anything to keep her and Nick safe. Above all, he wanted to know she would stay with them, bear their children and be happy. But she'd been raised in the human world, with human values and limitations. Sure she'd given in to her curiosity about sex with two men, but could she live like this for the rest of her life? He certainly hoped she could.

The only way he knew to convince her to stay, was to show her the kind of pleasure he and Nick could give her. Though he wanted nothing more than to do just that, Adam also knew they all must return to Paradise fast. With the two ruling houses in a mated triad, the council had no claim to leadership of the clan. It was time he went home

and led his people.

"I know we're all tired, but we need to return to Paradise with this new information as soon as possible. Finding Nina's sisters and the others listed in the laptop must be our first priority. You know it's the council's first priority. They want to get to them before we do. They will attempt to get the others to side with them. It's time we got ourselves back on track. Our mission was to bring our clan together again. Perhaps we should aim to do just that." He met Nina's hazel gaze, wanting to forget everything but the invitation in her eyes. But it was too soon for her. She'd taken both of them at the same time less than two days ago, then taken them separately just a few minutes apart. He wanted to love her, not hurt her.

After helping her dress, he carried her to the cabin while Nick carried her shoes. They were the only pair she had. He didn't want them to get wet. Her intoxicating scent was nearly enough to make him break his word to himself as he held her close. Adam smiled as she snuggled deeper into his embrace and deliberately slowed his pace so he take some small advantage.

They would take one night to themselves. They deserved one night to sleep in peace and contentment before they returned to the uproar that awaited them in Paradise. He took a deep breath, savoring the sweet perfume of his mate's luscious body and followed Nick into the cabin.

Laying Nina on the bed, he tenderly brushed the hair from her face and smiled. She was everything he could ever want in a woman and more. His parents had chosen well.

"What else was there?" Nick asked as he sat down and reopened the laptop he'd pulled from the empty cooler. "Don't tell me you found nothing. I can tell when you're hiding something even if Nina can't." He kept his voice low.

Adam paced the confines of the small shack. From the table, to the bed in the corner and back to the front door, he made a slow circuit. "Just about all of the missing clansmen are listed in that thing. Their new names, locations, everything." He waved his arm toward the computer. "You realize that until we can prove our bond with Nina to the people, the council will stop at nothing to get this. Whoever holds this information has power over the people and, without support, we're all in grave danger." He glanced toward the bed and shook his head. "How in the hell did she outrun them for so long?"

"It was that sixth sense of hers. I'll bet she knows when danger is near. I wouldn't doubt that she can feel it. How else would she have escaped them the night we found her? She said she watched them burn her cabin. That meant she was close and they didn't detect her. She must also be able to cover her scent—whether she realizes it or not."

"You're probably right." Adam sat down across from Nick and glanced over at Nina sleeping so peacefully on the bed. "If only we could convince her to shift, she could prove her lineage to herself. The moment she did so, she would know that she's one of us. And once she's changed for the first time, she *will* change again. It would be only a matter of time."

"Not to change the subject, but... I'm changing the subject. We never ate. Where's the meal you said you would finish?" Nick half grinned, raising his brow. "Do you think we should wake her? She has to be hungry."

"No. If she wakes, we'll eat. I don't know about you, but I'm not hungry anyway and she needs her sleep." Adam checked his watch. "We should get some sleep as well. It's good thing we didn't buy many perishables. Since we found what we were looking for, we should head back in the morning. I think I'm just going to hit the sack."

"Figures," Nick said with a laugh. "Anything to get out of cooking, eh?"

"Fuck you, asshole."

"I knew you loved me."

Adam glared at him. "I'm going to bed. You can make yourself something to eat if you're hungry. I can't wait to lie down next to our mate."

Our mate. That had a nice ring to it. He looked at Nina once again. She lay on the bed, her hands beneath her cheeks, thick red-brown lashes

making shadowy crescents on her cheeks. Her full plum-colored lips formed a perfect pout. His stomach clenched as he thought about those lush lips wrapped around his cock. Shaking his head to clear it, he stood, removed his shoes and moved to lie down beside her. Nick took the other side of the bed and they both moved closer to Nina's sleeping body.

Do you think she'll accept us both, Adam? Nick sounded worried.

Adam wasn't. He knew she would accept them. He could feel it. He rested a hand over her stomach. *Reach out, Nick. Can you feel it?*

Nick stilled. *I can.* He grinned. *When did you find out?*

Adam rolled onto his back and folded his hands under his head. *Earlier as we walked I wrapped my arm around her and knew. I hope she'll be happy.*

Women are always happy about those kinds of things.

Adam stared at the ceiling. *I hope so.* He moved closer, loving the feel of her next to him, the length of her body pressing against his. Resting his hand on her waist, he closed his eyes. Tomorrow they would head back to paradise. It was time to put an end to the council's claim.

* * * *

They were almost back to Paradise when Nick

pulled out his phone and flipped it open.

"Who are you calling?" Adam took his gaze from the road for a second to look at him.

"I'm calling in a security team. I have a bad feeling about this." Nick watched as Adam took a deep breath, blew it out, then nodded. Pressing send, he set the phone to his ear and waited for Darren Colby, his second in command, to pick up.

"Colby. What do you want?"

Nick smiled. That was Darren, all right. Short, not so sweet and to the point. "What I want is for you to get several teams together and prepare for a siege. I want you and at least two teams to meet Adam and me twenty miles northwest of Paradise. I have a feeling we'll be coming in hot and we'll need an escort."

"Why's that?" Colby yawned.

If Nick didn't know better, he'd think the man was bored and insubordinate. But he knew Colby. The man was famous for acting bored when the situation required the utmost attention. It was his way of luring the enemy into a sense of false security.

"Let's just leave it at we have new information."

"Now that sounds mysterious."

"As it was meant to." He refused to say much over the phone. "Just do as you're ordered, you arrogant prick."

The other man chuckled. "Yes, sir, boss man."

Nick shook his head. He wasn't falling into that trap. He called Adam that for the same reason Darren Colby called *him* boss—to annoy the shit out of him, plain and simple. He hung up the phone, glanced at Adam and grinned. "We'll have at least two teams and one curious chief of security meeting us."

"I figured that. How many do you think he'll call in?"

Nick knew Darren better than all of his men save one. He felt relatively certain his assumptions would prove correct. "If I know him as well as I think I do, he'll bring them all in. Darren doesn't take chances."

Adam glanced at him, his expression grim. "Good." He glanced at Nina. "I don't want any mistakes."

What he meant was, he didn't want anything to happen to Nina. Nick glanced out the window. He didn't think the council ever wanted to kill her. If he was a betting man, he would put money on the idea that the council leader had wanted her for himself. If Camulus knew she was a surviving member of the Second ruling house, it would have given him a better claim on the seat of power in Paradise. Time would only tell what their plans had been. They had plenty of time to figure that out after they returned. His main priority was getting Adam and Nina settled and their positions within the clan assured.

It was a good thing he called Darren and his men out for protection. They picked up a tail two miles north of Paradise. The security detail stayed back, waiting for the others to make the first move. Camulus's men attacked just after the entered the mist.

Two cars came from nowhere, blocking the road in front of them. Looking back, Nick smiled darkly as two more cars blocked them from behind. "So it begins."

Camulus, dressed all in black, stepped out of a large dark maroon SUV and walked toward them. We don't want to hurt any of you, Greer. Just hand the woman and her computer to us and we'll let you live."

Adam hit the steering wheel with the flat of his palm and snarled. "Not bloody fuckin' likely, you piece of shit."

Still smiling, Nick rolled his window down and stuck his head out. "She's under our protection, Camulus. What do you want with her?"

The self-proclaimed leader of the council stepped forward, the fog swirling around him. The man looked every bit as sinister as Nick knew him to be. Camulus's full-length, black leather coat hung from his shoulders perfectly tailored to look as though the man negligently thrown it on with no thought to his appearance. The collar, raised to his ear, looked ridiculously Hollywood.

Nick supposed the man thought he looked dangerously sexy.

Nick had to hand it to the man though. From an outsider's point of view, he supposed Camulus pulled off the rich and sinister bad guy pretty well. He was sure Nina would be scared to death if she didn't have her own earpiece. She knew she had nothing to fear as Darren explained every move over the radio.

Certain the man only wanted to keep their attention off the men moving closer to their vehicle, Nick smiled to himself. They would soon have an unpleasant surprise. Darren and his men were moving in now. They spoke to him through a small earpiece they'd given them. The microphone was hidden in plain sight. Who would suspect a small MP3 player of being a transmitter?

Camulus lifted his hand, pointing at Nina. "She's human and has knowledge of our race. She should be exterminated like her father."

"Which father, Cam?" Putting the vehicle in park, Adam opened his door and stepped out. "TJ Woodward, Robert Bidel or Jackson McWerty?"

Nick's eyes narrowed when Camulus frowned and stuck his hands in his pockets. *Be careful, boss man. He could have a gun.*

Adam gave a mental snort. *The man doesn't have the guts to carry a gun. That's what he has his guards for.*

Glancing around, Nick watched as henchman

after henchman fell to the ground. *What guards? I don't see any guards.*

Remind me to buy your men a drink when we get to town. Adam said after taking a slow look around.

The only men left were Camulus's personal guard and six other men who surrounded the vehicles. They noticed the others fall and immediately attacked.

Adam shifted into his cat as Nick ripped his seatbelt off and jumped from the car. "Stay here. Roll up the windows and lock the doors." He slammed the door shut and turned into his other self. Damn, he didn't want it to go down like this.

Camulus's men didn't play fair. They pulled their guns and started shooting. They aimed wild, trying to get everyone. They hit quite a few of the men before they ran out of ammunition. Adam took a bullet in the side. Nick ignored the high-pitched scream that came from the car and charged at the nearest of Camulus's men.

Even injured the way he was, Adam took down two guards while Nick took out a few of his own. He reached out to swipe his claws across the side of a cat he didn't recognize and stopped just as it landed on another enemy who had stalked up behind him. He'd have to thank him later. He looked again and almost got raked in the side himself when he realized the other cat was a female. He glanced toward the car, something telling him who his rescuer was. Nina was no

longer there. Damn. He was going to spank her ass when this was over.

She pounced on another of Cam's guards who seemed to appear from nowhere and the council leader took the opportunity to slip away with a few of his minions. When the enemy was neutralized, she limped over to Adam and pushed at him with her snout. *You can't be dead, damn it.* She looked up at Nick, the only resemblance to Nina was the hazel eyes staring back at him as she began to change into her human form. *He can't be dead.*

Nick changed quickly. Kneeling down next to Adam, he felt for a pulse. "He isn't dead. Not yet. But if we don't get him into town and to a doctor fast, he soon will be." He picked his best friend up and placed him in the back of Camulus's SUV. "Get in," he said to Nina as he walked around to the driver's side and started the truck. "We have to move fast."

They sped into town and headed toward a huge, four story house. Coming to a screeching halt, Nick thrust the gearshift into park, jumped out and ran to the back to pull Adam out. "Run to the door and start knocking." He called as he hefted his best friend into his arms. "Get someone to the door as fast as you can."

* * * *

Nina bolted up the steps and pounded on the door. She didn't stop in between knocks, she continually hammered on the door until it was opened by a short, gray-haired old lady.

The woman's eyes widened when she saw Nick carrying Adam up the porch steps. "I'll go get the doctors. Take him into the second room on the left." She ran up the stairs, surprisingly spry for a woman her age, and Nina led Nick to the room the woman said to take Adam into.

Nick had no sooner put Adam on the gurney than two men walked in. One old, one young, they had the same look about them. Father and son perhaps?

Nina twisted her hands together as she looked around the room. The glass cases against the wall filled with medicines and instruments made her feel a bit better. It may not look like a hospital on the outside, but it looked like one on the inside. At least this room did.

"Come on, dear. Let's go have a cup of tea. There's nothing we can do here, but get in the way." The old woman put her arm around her and led her from the room. "How long have you and Adam been together?" She took a deep breath through her nose as though she scented something. "Ah," she said with a grin. "It's been a long time since *that* scent has reached my old nostrils. You have the scent of the McWertys." She took another deep breath, her grin growing wider.

"And you have a *truebond*." She clapped her hands. "You have a *truebond* with our Adam and Nick? How wonderful! The McWertys and The Greers together again." She sighed, a dreamy look in her eyes. "My mother was right. It has come to pass. She told me the *truebond* would return and with it the joining of the houses would come."

Nina couldn't help but stare at the woman, her jaw slack. "How —"

"Why, I'm an old woman, dear. We just know these things. Don't ask so many questions." The older woman led her through the dining room and into a large kitchen. Pale yellow walls made the room appear as though it was filled with sunlight when the woman turned on the lights. A large oak table and chairs sat in the center of the room. A wooden, hand-carved pie rack with a fresh stood against the wall and a basset hound lay on the floor in the corner by the door. It was cozy. "Call me Nettie, dear. I'm the old doctor's wife." She reached out to pat Nina's hand. "Don't you worry. My William has patched up far worse than that wound and pulled his patients through." She bustled to the sink, filled a teakettle and set it on the stove to heat. "Now, tell me, how to you like your tea?"

Nina stared at her. The woman was a dynamo. Bustling here and there in the kitchen, pulling a plate of sandwiches and cookies seemingly from the air, it seemed as though the woman never

tired. More than sleepy herself, she rested her chin in her hands, content just to watch.

After a surprisingly short time, Nettie sat down across from her and pushed a plate in front of her, filled with potato salad, raw broccoli and a sandwich. Nina sighed and pushed the plate away. "I—I can't eat now." The way she felt right now, she may never eat again.

She turned and glanced back toward the room where she left her two men. What if Adam didn't make it? Stomach rebelling at the thought of food, Nina felt sick. How could the woman expect her to eat when her whole life was falling apart? She didn't even want to think about how she'd changed into some form of big cat.

Refusing to think about that now, she pushed that to the back of her mind and thought about Adam and Nick and how much they'd come to mean to her in such a short time. Maybe it was the close proximity of the vehicles they kept finding themselves in. You can learn a lot about someone in a short time when you spend a good deal of time less than a foot from them. Or maybe, like Adam seemed to suggest, they belonged together as their parents intended.

"Which one are you?"

"Excuse me?" Nina looked at the old woman, wondering if she'd been rude and missed part of the conversation.

"Which one of the McWerty gals are you?"

"Oh." She sighed, picked up her fork and toyed with her potato salad. "Apparently I'm Amenina."

"Amenina?" Nettie stood and rushed around the table. "Goodness child! I delivered you. Your mama went into labor when William was out to one of the farms sewing up some young pup who tried to fly off the roof of a barn. I delivered you right in your mama's living room. You came out wailing, your arms and legs flailing like you were mad at the world." Tears glistened in her eyes and she hugged Nina close. "You look so much like your mother, I could cry." She pulled a kerchief from her pocket and swiped at her eyes. Just wait until I tell my sewing circle and the ladies in the quilting club. They'll be so happy you've come home." Her eyes widened. "Your grandparents will be ecstatic. I have to call them!"

Nina *did* cry then. For years she wondered what her real parents were like, wishing she knew someone who'd known them so she could at least get some sort of picture in her mind about them. Now it seemed, she would have a whole town full. And she had grandparents! Too preoccupied with Nettie's rampant thoughts and impulsive exclamations, she didn't notice the passage of time or when Nick stepped up behind her. Jumping when he knelt and wrapped his arms around her, she turned her head into his shoulder and sobbed. Adam was dead. That had to be the reason he'd come out here so quietly and snuck up behind her.

Why else?

"Shh, Nina." He rubbed her back. "Don't cry. I hate to see you cry." He kissed her forehead. "Besides, you'll wake Adam if you don't keep it down a bit."

Wake Adam? He was still alive? She pulled back to look into Nick's eyes. "H—he's still alive?" she asked with a sniff. She wiped her eyes with the napkin Nettie handed her earlier and picked up her cold cup of tea. She had to have something to do with her hands.

Nick nodded. "It wasn't as bad as it seemed. He's lost a lot of blood and I had to give him some of mine, but he's going to be fine. You didn't think he'd leave you so soon, did you?"

"Of course she didn't. She's just happy," Nettie snapped and dropped a plate in front of him. "Now sit down and eat. You look like a half-starved cub." She waved her hand toward Nina. "And so does your mate. You'd better start taking care of her. She's eating for three now."

Nina choked on her tea. "What?"

Five days later, Adam, Nina and Nick stood on a platform in the town hall and stared at the shifters assembled there. Adam tested the microphone before he began to speak. "We are at war." He waited for the ensuing shock and agitated response to die down, then began again. "I put that badly. As you all know, we have been

at war for the last several years. Camulus refuses to give up his position as council leader and he does not wish for the ruling house, me to be exact, to lay claim to alpha. I hereby claim my right as alpha. By my side is, my *truebond* mate and heir to the second house, Amenina McWerty."

Nina watched as her grandparents stood, walked to the front of the room and stepped up onto the platform. They each stood on one side of her, their arms wrapped around her waist. "DNA testing has proved this woman is of our blood. Footprints and fingerprints prove she is Amenina McWerty. Anyone who wishes to challenge that, challenges the entire McWerty blood line," her grandfather said, looking out over the crowd with narrowed eyes. "All of our granddaughters live and soon, they will return home." The two older McWertys stepped from the podium and Nina looked out over the crowd. There were so many people here who knew her parents, her sisters. It was hard to believe. Just as it was hard to believe she'd changed into a leopard. That was what finally convinced her she was one of them. Nothing else could have. The power she felt as she changed and her enhanced senses felt strange. It would take some getting used to. She glanced at her mates and smiled. But get used to it, she would.

Adam stepped back up to the microphone. "We will be sending men out in teams to fetch the

McWerty girls. The other three are out there somewhere. We know their new names and last known whereabouts. Are there any volunteers to bring them home?"

Sixteen men stepped forward. The man she remembered as Darren Colby was among them with his friend, Alex Minski. She was sure he would be amongst those who went. The man was determined to find his own mate. She glanced at Nick and Adam from the corner of her eyes. Even though she knew their lives would prove far from easy, she loved the idea of living the rest of hers with them. They wouldn't have it easy, she was sure. Every one of the people they would seek out would attempt to hide, to run, as she had. But they had to try to bring them all in before Camulus got to them. They had to know what it was like here in Paradise. The town was aptly named. Nina looked out over the crowd. Resting her hand over her stomach, she smiled softly. She had a family now and she would never be alone again.

Stepping up to the microphone, she looked out over the crowd and smiled. "I am Amenina Lolita McWerty and I have come home."

About the Author

Tianna Xander is an eclectic author of numerous paranormal, sci-fi, time travel, romance erotica books. Gaining inspiration for her characters and dialogue through her family and her addiction to the internet, she never fails to amaze readers with each new book she creates. As a reading junkie herself, Tianna has no problem reading whatever is available at the moment from romance novels, murder mysteries and encyclopedias to books on solar energy.

Tianna's life wouldn't be complete without a "happily ever after" of her very own. She resides in Michigan with her husband, two children, three cats, two dogs and an intimidating bunny. Never one to fail to give credit where it's due, she commends her family for their constant support. After writing many books and receiving rave reviews, her family is just as proud of her. Always full of ideas, Tianna rarely puts the pen down, so readers can look forward to many more exciting stories in the future.

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