

A promotional image for Tianna Xander's work 'Road to Paradise'. It features four models: three shirtless men and one woman. The man on the left has a goatee and a large tattoo on his right arm. The man in the center has a goatee and a necklace. The man on the right has a necklace. The woman in the foreground has dark curly hair and blue eyes, wearing a polka-dot top. The background is a warm, golden-brown gradient.

Tianna Xander

ROAD TO
PARADISE

The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to 5 years in federal prison and a fine of \$250,000.

Please purchase only authorized electronic editions, and do not participate in or encourage the electronic piracy of copyrighted materials. Your support of the author's rights is appreciated.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Road to Paradise
Copyright © 2009 Tianna Xander
ISBN: 978-1-55487-279-4
Cover art by Martine Jardin

All rights reserved. Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilization of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, is forbidden without the written permission of the publisher.

Published by eXtasy Books
Look for us online at:
www.extasybooks.com

ROAD TO PARADISE

BY

TIANNA SANDER

DEDICATION

To Bonnie Rose Leigh, the best friend and critique partner a woman could have. Thanks for always being there with a word or two to get me moving when I get stuck. You Rock!

CHAPTER ONE

Nicola climbed from the huge box and stretched. Even as big as it was, the container was still too small for someone of her height to stay in for too long.

It was a good thing they'd packed the air canisters in with her, just in case. The plane didn't oxygenate its cargo space. She would have died if not for the scuba tanks her brother bought for her. Sam knew though. He'd known there was a possibility she'd need the air and he snuck it—and her—into the container just before the plane took off.

Stooping low, Niki made her way out of the unloading area and managed to slide in with a crowd disembarking a commercial jet.

Doused in perfume from one of the packages in the box, wearing a platinum blonde wig over her mid-length, jet black curls and sunglasses over her famous blue eyes, she made her way to the taxi stand and got in the first available cab.

"Where to, lady?" The cab driver glanced back through his dingy rearview mirror, his gum

snapping as he chewed.

"The *Beaufort Arms* hotel." Niki wondered if Sam had beaten her here or if she had arrived first.

"Why come you ain't got no luggage?"

The early-childhood teacher in her cringed at the driver's speech and bad manners. Stifling the urge to correct the man, Niki pulled what she hoped was enough cash from her pocket and showed it to him. "That's my business. Do you plan to give me a ride or shall I get another cab?"

The cabbie mumbled something she didn't quite catch, put the car in gear and stomped on the gas.

Fifteen minutes later, Niki fought the urge to fall to her knees and kiss the ground when the vehicle finally came to a screeching halt.

"Thirty-seven fifty," the driver said around his gum before he rolled down his window and spit the disgusting wad into the street.

Niki thought the price a bit steep, but didn't say anything. She was just glad to get out of the car and away from the maniac. Handing him two twenties, she mumbled, "Keep the change," then turned to see where he'd dropped her. It wasn't the *Beaufort Arms*. It looked like an empty warehouse in the seediest part of town.

"Hey!" Niki turned just as the man sped off, leaving her alone in some inner-city hell and it

was getting dark. Cold seeped past her clothes to her skin and she wrapped her arms about her middle in an attempt to hold the heat in. *Crap! What do I do now?* Not one to wait for things to happen, Niki decided that being proactive was better than waiting around doing nothing so she began to walk.

An hour later, she turned down a brightly lit street, and sighed with relief. The sign for the *Beaufort Arms* glowed bright in the night sky about two blocks away. The large red letters were a welcome sight as she picked up her pace.

Just before she reached the hotel, three men stepped out from a dimly lit alleyway. The biggest, a frightening man who stood a full head taller than her five-foot eleven frame, grabbed her elbow and pulled her to a stop.

She wanted to scream. In fact, Niki even opened her mouth to do so, but nothing would come out. Instead, she merely stood staring at the men who'd literally accosted her on the street, unable to do anything but gape at them.

"Are you the woman who won the Miss Mason beauty pageant?" The man who spoke wore his short hair spiked. The gold earring in his right ear sparkled as he smiled down at her.

Niki bristled in spite of her conscious effort not to give herself away. Why did people think less of

a woman who used their looks or talent to get ahead in life? She never once thought of herself as having anything special in the looks department, but apparently, the judges of the *Mason* scholarship for the advancement of young women saw *something*. Niki rather liked to think it was her intelligence. Yanking her arm free of the strange man's hold, she glared up at him. "What if I am?"

God you're an idiot. You always let your temper get the best of you. She closed her eyes, knowing she'd all but admitted who she was. Well, the jig was up. They found her. Now they could make good on the threat to kill her. This was it. She was dead now. After two months of running, her pursuers finally caught up with her.

Niki wasn't stupid. She knew the horrifying phone calls she received were sick messages left by the Sabbath Slayer. Everyone in her hometown knew what the slayer was. *Mason* was just a couple of hours from Paradise where it all started.

No one knew why the slayer killed. They only knew he liked to do it slow, raping and torturing his victims by peeling strips of flesh from their bodies—presumably while the victim watched. Tears filled her eyes. She didn't want to die and she didn't want to beg for her life, but Niki knew, in the end, she would. "Please...I..."

One of her assailants held up his hand. "It's not what you think, Ms. Stone." He frowned. "You *are*

Nicola Stone, are you not?"

He drew her away from the edge of the street and into the shadow of the hotel as fear leapt in Niki's breast.

"We've come to protect you."

* * * *

Jarrold stared down at Nicola Stone. His heart pounded in his chest as his beast recognized the one woman with whom he could truly bond. Glancing at the other two men, he wondered if they felt a similar reaction, but saw nothing to indicate they felt anything akin to what he experienced.

Each of them merely stood nearby, guarding them as they glanced about searching for any type of danger.

Stepping closer, Jarrod offered his hand. "I'm Jarrod McCleod, Ms. Stone. I'm one of the enforcers of Paradise." He paused, realizing she may not know what it meant to be an enforcer. "I work for the sheriff's department in Paradise."

His beast snarled with triumph as his fingers closed around hers. He took a deep breath, felt his chest expanding as he took in her unique scent. No one smelled like this woman. Energy raced up his arm, through his body as he held her hand. Grinning, Jarrod released her hand when she

tugged, giving him a gimlet glare through lowered brows.

“Do you mind?”

Jarrold wanted to laugh when he released her hand and she wiped her palm on her jeans. His heart felt lighter than it had in years. When had the so familiar weight settled over him? He hadn’t even noticed the heaviness until this beautiful woman walked into his life. He wanted to rub himself all over her, wallow in her scent, leaving his mark so the world would know she was his. Instead, he allowed her to step back, giving her the room she needed to feel some modicum of safety.

“What do you mean protect me?” Her eyes narrowed to little slits as she continued to wipe her hand on her pants. “What makes you think I need protection?”

“We believe you’ve been targeted by a serial killer, Ms. Stone.” One of the other men, Gunter Wilson, stepped forward.

Jarrold glanced around, his shifter senses going on full alert. “I don’t think we should talk about it here. We have a watcher.”

The other two men stiffened and inhaled as they obviously reached out with their senses and attempted to assess the threat to the woman.

“One human male,” Jarrold supplied. “I can feel the animosity rolling off him. He’s gearing up for

an attack." He frowned as he assimilated the information brought to him by his beast. "I don't understand. He knows he can't take us, but he's willing to die to try to get to the girl." He shook his head and glanced around. "It doesn't make a lick of sense."

"Sam!" the girl exclaimed as she made an effort to put herself between the three enforcers and the human male. "Don't—" Nicola stopped talking, her eyes widening with shock as the man lowered his head and prepared to attack with nothing more than a broken broom handle for a weapon.

Jarrold reached out with his senses, wondering if perhaps this was one of the woman's mates or if he would have her to himself. He didn't think so. Their scents were similar almost as though... "Don't." Jarrold reached out and grabbed the other two men by the shoulder. "Scent them." Unless he was mistaken, and he rarely was, this man was a relation of Nicola Stone's. Her brother. He'd bet money on it. If the two weren't related by blood, they had mixed their blood somehow. Their scents were similar.

"Don't...don't hurt him." She ran to the new man and wrapped her arms around him. "I'm so glad to see you." She turned back to Jarrold, somehow realizing he was the one in charge here.

Jarrold felt his chest expand as he stared back into her sapphire blue eyes. He would always be

in charge where she was concerned if he had anything to say about it.

"This is my brother, Samuel Oscar Stone." She turned, keeping her arm around the other man, resting her head on his shoulder.

Great. Jarrod kept his amused chuckle to himself. *These two have to have a sense of humor if their parents were crazy enough to give their son a name that gave him the initials of SOS.* It made him wonder if the couple felt as though they needed help with the infant Samuel when he was born or if it was just a coincidence. Somehow, Jarrod didn't think so.

"We're pleased to meet you, Samuel." He looked the other man over critically, knowing if he took this woman to mate, her brother would have to agree or she would never be his. "I commend you on the courage it took to attempt to take on three opponents." Jarrod didn't add that it was the single most foolhardy thing he'd witnessed in his life. The other man had courage in abundance and that was something they prized in Paradise. Perhaps...

He put that thought away for another time and concentrated on the siblings before him. If he could get them to Paradise, he could take his time in wooing his woman. He could introduce her to his best friends. Perhaps the blood bond with them would draw her to one or both of them.

Over the years, the three men had exchanged blood regularly to help each other recover from one injury or another. Their life in the *Tudra* was never easy and they'd found themselves faced with sharing their blood or dying. Jarrod was sure that by now, their bond was almost as strong as a *truebond*. He often wondered how long they would survive if something happened to one of them.

What he'd been about to say to the other man was, perhaps, with his courage, he would be welcomed into Paradise and given the opportunity to form a blood bond with a shifter there. The blood would make him a were-being just as thoroughly as if he'd been born to it, but that was something better left for another time and place.

CHAPTER TWO

Niki stared up at the man who suddenly took possession of her arm and drew her back to him. She would have yanked it free again however, she knew her brother's control was tenuous at best while she stood between the three men. The smallest movement on her part could set him on the men and get him killed. That was the last thing she wanted.

Choosing the easy way out, she stood still, allowing the larger man to hold her in place as the four stared each other down in an age-old show of dominance. Niki wanted to roll her eyes. The glaring session lasted so long she was tempted to tell them all to see who could beat their chest the loudest and finish this. It appeared as though all of them were ready to start swinging from the trees, the brainless apes. Geeze.

The one who held her arm, the one with the earring, gave up first, then glanced toward her and smiled. "I apologize for our rudeness, ma'am.

As I said, I'm Jarrod McCleod." He gestured to the other two. "And these two men are my...assistants. Harper and Wilson." He indicated the men who still watched Sam as though he was some sort of prey.

Jarrold brought his free hand up to rub his short beard. "I think you two can calm down now. I don't think her brother intends to hurt her."

Her lungs ached as she finally let out the breath she hadn't even realized she'd been holding.

The other two visibly relaxed, their bodies losing the rigid appearance of being ready for battle. "Yes, sir," they answered at the same time, their gazes still on Sam.

Niki tried to step between them, but the hand on her arm held her in place. She glanced down at her arm, then up at the man and raised her brow. The expression did little to gain her release.

The man who twice identified himself as Jarrod McCleod just stared down at her with an amused expression. The palm of her hand just itched to slap the amusement off his face.

Fisting her hand at her side, Niki suppressed the urge. The man may be attractive and he may stir something unusual inside her that screamed she should get to know him better, but he was way too highhanded for her liking. Add to that, the fact that he was good looking and knew it, not to mention full of himself. She'd just found a man

she'd love to hate.

Never in her life had she felt more like kicking a member of the opposite sex. Nor had she felt more like sticking her tongue out at anyone in her life. The man was infuriating! Just who did he think he was, glomming onto her the way he had and not even letting her go give her brother another hug?

Tired of the crap and knowing the other two, finally leashed by the Neanderthal's orders, would do nothing unless someone instructed them, Niki yanked her arm from the vice-like hold and rushed to her brother. She needed to see he was unharmed just as much as she knew he needed the same. "I'm fine. Really," she whispered in his ear as she hugged him close. "You weren't followed, were you?"

He shook his head. "I don't think so, but we've thought that before and they always find us somehow."

"They're following your scent," Jarrod interrupted. "If you both would have gotten on a plane, they may have lost you, but as long as one of you stays on the ground, they will always follow your scent."

"Thank God we didn't both get on the plane. There was barely enough oxygen for me. We both would have died," Niki said to Sam who gave her a sharp glance that looked suspiciously like an I-told-you-so.

Niki bit her lip. If her brother wanted to rub it in, he could just join the other three men who seemed to think she didn't have enough brains to fill a thimble. She managed to get this far by herself. Crossing her arms, she glared at the lot of them. "I don't know why you men always seem to stick together even when you don't know or like each other." It was sickening how men seemed to follow each other's lead. And they said women were bad.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Sam glared at her, shifted his gaze to the men surrounding them before giving her the look that said she was the only important thing in his life. At least for now. As soon as some pretty, young thing ran into Sam, he'd most likely hightail it out of her life, leaving her to fend for herself again. It wasn't a time she looked forward to, but it was fast approaching. She could feel it. Niki was like her mother. She wasn't really psychic though she felt things. She felt danger, other's emotions and sometimes, she even felt another's intentions. That was how she'd escaped the Sabbath Slayer the first time he'd attempted to capture her. She'd felt his intent to kidnap her, enslave her and torture her while performing perverse sex acts upon her person.

She didn't know who the man was or what he looked like, she'd been at a party surrounded by

men. Most of the guests were dancing, talking, doing cocaine. Not Niki. She didn't do drugs nor did she respect anyone who did. She'd been sipping a small glass of champagne when she felt it. It wasn't anything blaring, anything she could put her finger on. The only thing Nicola knew at that first moment was, she needed to escape and fast.

Having run from the room where she'd first become aware of the feeling, Niki kept running. She ran down the stairs, through the door and from the building to her car. Something told her the man knew where she lived so she never even went back to her house. She drove from the big city to her childhood home and she'd been running ever since.

Sam hadn't watched over her since they were kids, since before they found out that their parents adopted him. When he found they had no real blood ties, it was as though he turned off his emotions and the last several years spent as brother and sister meant nothing to him. The only tie that made them remotely related was the fact that they'd cut themselves one day and became blood brother and sister after watching an old western.

Then, when she'd shown up on her parent's doorstep, dirty and bedraggled, sobbing her fears and running for her life, he'd stepped forward and

became her brother again—just as fierce and protective as he'd been when they were younger.

Niki didn't question his motives. She didn't much care about the whys of it. She only knew that without Sam's help over the last few weeks, she'd be in the slayer's clutches, probably begging for her life...or her death.

Glancing up, she tried to ignore the big man whose presence she couldn't ignore. The other two didn't bother her. They didn't so much as glance her way once Sam came into the picture. They'd been too preoccupied with making sure he wasn't the man she'd been running from these last weeks.

Jarrold on the other hand, would not ignore her. His intense green gaze seemed to bore right into hers. It was as though she had no secrets from the man. Niki knew it was a ridiculous notion, but she felt it just the same.

"What," she asked glowering at him. "Do I have dirt on my nose or something?"

Grinning, he shook his head. "No. You look fine." He released her and held his arm out, waiting for her to take it. "Shall we get off the street?" Jarrold glanced around as though not altogether sure they were alone. "I'd like to call in a few more men and split up our little group. I want your brother to take your dirty clothes and leave with Wilson and Harper while we stay in the hotel and wait for the others to join us. With luck,

they'll lead our suspect off to a lonely stretch of road where they can...arrest him."

Niki knew the last thing on his mind was arresting the monster that killed at least two women. No one knew if the slayer killed before and just hid the bodies well. They may never know. "Why take my clothes?"

"Your scent is on them. He's following your scent. Unless there's more than one, he'll have to make a choice. Stay here or leave and follow the scent that could go cold. I'm guessing someone will follow. If there's more than one we'll have managed to split them up. If not... They'll be luring the danger away because whoever it is, won't want to take the chance of losing you."

That made a certain kind of sense, Niki supposed. Except... "How are they following my scent?" Scowling, she fought the urge to lift her arm and sniff her pits. "I may not have had a bath in two days, but I don't think I smell *that* bad."

Jarrold chuckled and shook his head. "The things you think. You don't smell bad. The people in Paradise..." He paused. "...Our kind... Let's just say that we tend to have a keen sense of smell and leave it at that for now."

"Like some sort of extra sensory thing?"

"Yeah." He nodded, obviously relieved. "Something like that."

Sighing, she nodded. She'd never met others

like her and her mother, but common sense told her they had to exist. "I guess it's a sound plan, but..." She paused as she realized what was wrong with his plan. "What if *you're* the killer and you've just managed to get me away from my brother. My only protection?"

"I'm glad you thought of that. At least I know you think things through." He ran his hand through his hair. "Obviously it would be easier if we could follow that plan, but if you don't feel safe, I would understand your hesitance. Though, consider this before you make your choice." Jarrod paused, glanced at Wilson, then Harper and did no more than nod his head.

The other two men moved so fast, they were little more than a blur. Each of them had Sam by an arm they held behind his back as he struggled to get free.

"Protection or not, we could take you against your will if that was our wish. It would take little more than incapacitating your brother." He nodded again and the two released Sam.

Sam jerked himself free of his two captors and went to stand next to his sister, his arm wrapped protectively about her. "You don't have to do this, Nik. They can't tell us what to do. All you'd have to do is scream loud enough to wake the dead. They'd leave us alone soon enough."

"It is not our wish to frighten you or to take you

by force. We merely wish to protect you from the person who wishes to do you harm."

Niki sucked her lip between her teeth at Jarrod McCleod's words. He was right, they could kill her brother and take her now whether she fought them or not. Should she trust them?

"Given the choice, would you protect your brother as well as yourself? My plan protects the both of you." Jarrod added, obviously sensing she would put her brother's safety even above her own.

* * * *

Jarrold could practically see her mind work as she turned the question over in her mind, obviously asking herself if she should trust them. She looked from Jarrod to his assistants, then back to her brother.

"They have a point, Sam. We can't outrun whoever it is. No matter what we do, if he—it—finds us." She walked to the steps of the hotel and sat down. Bringing her knees to her chest, she rested her head on her arms. "Sometimes I wonder if I'm even sane anymore because I can't think of the slayer as a human. He's an animal and my mind can't see him as anything else." She looked up at him. "Does that make me crazy?" She closed her eyes and shook her head. "Don't say anything.

I already know the answer.”

Jarrold wanted nothing more than to take her in his arms and comfort her—to tell her everything would be all right. That he would *make* it all right. Instead, he stood and waited for her decision while he watched as her shoulders shook. He knew what it would be. She would think of her brother, thinking if she separated from him, that he would be safe while she drew the danger to her. She thought even if Jarrod wasn’t who he said he was, she was of the mind to let her brother go so he would remain safe...alive.

He couldn’t read her thoughts, but he felt her resignation, her certainty and her love for her brother. It wasn’t hard to figure out what she thought. It wasn’t hard at all. “We need to get to the hotel so she can change.” Jarrod glanced at Sam. “I assume you’ve brought her a change of clothes?”

Sam nodded. “Yeah. They’re in the car. I’ve got her luggage.”

Niki’s brother looked a bit belligerent and Jarrod wanted to let him know he wouldn’t allow his sister come to any harm. “What can I do to convince you that I will not harm your sister?” He shrugged. “I can think of nothing. There is no reason for you to trust us other than you know that if we wished, we could have killed you both already.”

Closing his eyes, Sam let out a long breath and shrugged. "I love her." He gave his sister a look so filled with love that Jarrod felt his throat constrict. "I haven't been the brother I should have been for a long time. I want to make it up to her."

"You can make it up to her once we get to Paradise," Jarrod said. "Once we have her back in our town, under the protection of...our people, you can make it up to her however you wish. Now is not the time." He indicated himself and the other two men. "We are trained fighters. Most of us have trained in combat and Special Forces techniques. Who better to have on your side than someone who knows how to keep her safe at all costs?" He waited for the other man to reply.

"If you can convince her to go with you, I won't put up a fight," Sam said finally, giving in to Jarrod's request.

Unsure if the man agreed because he could kick his ass or if he really felt it was the only way to keep Nicola safe, Jarrod reached out, offering his hand. "You won't regret it."

No one could keep her safer than he and his two best friends. He merely needed to call them in as soon as the others left. He wouldn't take Nicola Stone out of this hotel without Tony and Kam to back him up.

* * * *

"I don't understand why you called your friends and told them to come here." Niki felt betrayed, scared, swept away on a sea of uncertainty as she watched his expressionless face for a moment. If only he would give her some sort of sign. Some sort of clue as to how he felt. *If* he felt. The not knowing was enough to unravel her already frayed nerves.

She paced to the window and stared out through the darkness. She couldn't see much beyond the glass. In fact, Niki could see more of what went on behind her—the soft light of the lamp in the corner, the glowing screen of the muted HDTV on the dresser against the wall.

Her fingernails dug into the off-white paint on the wooden windowsill as she gripped it tight and called herself several times a fool. After all she'd been through, she should have known better than to trust a stranger. They both should have known better. "Where's Sam?" She had to know. Did they intend to kill him, too?

"Probably still on the road to Paradise. I figure that they should be almost there by now."

Sam and the others had left just before he called his friends. If that was the case and her brother was near Jarrod's hometown, then his friends were almost here as well. Apprehension gripped her tighter as she stared through the glass into the

inky darkness.

Jarrold moved up behind her. Niki didn't turn. She couldn't bear to look into his unreadable face again. It only frightened her more. His reflection in the glass was enough to see if he moved in a threatening way. Not that she'd be able to overpower him or even elude him for that matter. Still, she couldn't help but think that he didn't seem the type. He just didn't look like a murderer.

What does a murderer look like, stupid? It's not as if they have a certain look or a tattoo on their forehead indicating their intentions. She chastised herself. Niki never would have guessed a boy of nine would murder his sister over a video game, but that is exactly what happened just last week, somewhere in the South.

It was too late to change her mind now. Her brother was gone. They were very neatly separated by the men who they probably had mistakenly trusted. There was no choice but to stay here with him, at least until she could find a way to escape. Then she would do her damndest to find Sam.

"How far is Paradise from here?" Niki didn't really know where she was. Sam was the one who stuffed her on that plane and arranged to have the box carted around in that small cargo plane. For all she knew, she could be back to almost where she started. She hoped the question sounded

innocent enough. Niki had to know how much time she had to plan her escape. The last thing she needed was to arouse his suspicion.

Moving away from the window, she paced over to the chair in front of the desk, ignoring the king-sized bed. Niki remembered her reticence when they'd first entered the room. She'd even told him if he thought they were sharing it, he was out of his cotton pickin' mind. Perhaps she'd spent a little too much time in the Deep South.

"It's a few days northwest of here. You already know it's near Mason." Turning around, he pinned her with an unusual look as though he thought she should know.

"That's right. I'd forgotten," she said, careful not to meet his knowing gaze. God that was such a lie. The bad part about it was, he *knew* it was a lie as surely as she did. He had to. "I've been on the road for a while." She shrugged. "One town, one hotel, seems like another."

"They should be there soon." Moving closer, he sat on the edge of the bed and leaned back on his arms.

Niki tried not to notice how his shirt pulled tight across his upper body. The opened vee pulled at the buttons and revealed his smooth, hair-free chest. She wondered about him—wondered whether he was born in Paradise or if he was one of their more recent citizens.

Stories about Paradise always made it to Mason. Strange goings on that people never explained. How their people sensed things, smelled things, knew things they couldn't possibly know.

CHAPTER THREE

People from Paradise often shopped in Mason. It wasn't unusual to see groups of them wandering around her hometown. It was the closest urban area to Paradise that had department and electronics stores. It made sense that they would shop there. What didn't make sense was the fact that the visitors were always men and boys of various ages. Where were the women?

It was as though they didn't allow women to leave the town once they went there. It almost seemed like a correctional facility and the females were prisoners.

Niki bit her lip, deep in thought. "Will I be able to leave once I get there?" Clamping her mouth shut a few seconds too late, she almost groaned. She never should have brought it up. She may as well have just accused the man of felony kidnapping and intent on wrongfully imprisoning her. Would she *never* grow a brain?

"Of course you can leave once you get there."

Jarrold looked at her for a moment, his expressionless mask finally gone as a myriad of emotions chased across his face. Confusion, resignation, added to a healthy dose of self-deprecation. "You've heard about the old council." He sighed, sat up and ran his fingers through his hair.

"The *old* council? Why did you call it the old council?" Had things changed in Paradise over the last few years?

Jarrold leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees. "I called it the old council because the new leader and a few of the men of the town ran them off before they could do more damage." Standing, he walked toward the door, stopping in front of the other window and drew back the heavy, forest-green drapes.

Now her curiosity was piqued and if he were going to provide information, she would take as much as she could get. "What kind of damage?" Niki watched as the muscles of his back rippled and shifted beneath his shirt. She was barely aware that she'd licked her lips. Scowling at his broad back, she clamped her mouth shut and waited for him to answer.

"They thought women were property. They refused them even the most basic of human rights. They wouldn't even let them leave town to shop for fear of losing one of them. It made life

unbearable for most of us.”

Closing the drapes, he turned and looked at her with such sorrow it made her eyes burn with unshed tears. If what he said was true, if the emotions he showed her now, were real, perhaps he *was* who he said he was and she could trust him to keep her safe. The emotion she read on his face, in his eyes, looked real. It had to be. No one could fake such utter desolation. Somehow, Niki realized what he told her was true.

“After a few decades, the people grew tired of the council’s abominable treatment of the women and they began to leave. Family after family left Paradise. Boys, fresh from high school left their sweethearts, searching for a better place, a better way. They couldn’t bear to see those they loved forced to live beneath the council’s iron rule. Our people...” He paused. “Our community almost became extinct. Paradise almost became a ghost town before our generation finally said *enough is enough*.” He let out a bark of humorless laughter. “In this case, for Paradise, enough was too much.”

Niki drew her feet up onto her chair and wrapped her arms around her legs. “What did you do?” She had a feeling she knew the answer, but could tell by the faraway look in Jarrod’s eyes that this was a story he needed to tell.

“We organized ourselves, chose a new leader from one of Paradise’s original founding families

and took our town back.” He stood with his back straight, rigid, his arms at his sides, almost as though standing at attention. White knuckles from his clenched fists appeared bright, stark against his tanned skin.

How bad was their fight that this man remembered the battle with such pain, such sorrow. Would he tell her? Did she really want to know? Hell yes, she decided. After three days in this man’s company, she was damned tired of always being on guard, always looking over her shoulder, waiting for the knife to appear in her back. She was exhausted of living her life in fear, holding distrust close in her heart. “And the battle?”

“It was senseless, the young against the old, the oppressed against their oppressors. We like to think our future history will show we did the right thing—the honorable thing.” He sighed and sank into the recliner, next to the bed. “Our worst fear is that history will paint us the villains.”

“Do you still treat your women like property or are they allowed to do as they please?” She needed to know the answer to her question—needed to know that once she truly put herself in his hands that he wouldn’t abuse her trust.

“Our women have the same rights all American women have.”

He looked down at his hands, rubbing them

together as though trying to remove a stain. Blood, perhaps? Had they killed to free their women? The thought didn't distress her as much as she thought it should. "Then, I think you did the right thing." Lowering her feet to the floor, she stood and crossed the room. Stopping in front of him, she knelt next to the recliner. "I'm sure every woman in Paradise thanks you and everyone like you, for their freedom." She frowned. "Why did no one call in the authorities? Shouldn't the FBI have been involved or something? Wasn't that some sort of wrongful imprisonment?"

A knock on the door startled her. No one had knocked on that door since they'd rented the room, three days ago. She swallowed thickly, her palms beginning to sweat. His friends were here. She was sure of it.

* * * *

Anthony Petrelli stared at the woman Jarrod guarded and felt every one of the muscles in his body clench. Inhaling deeply, he fought the urge to pull her close and bury his face in her hair. He wanted to throw her down on the huge bed in the corner and thrust his cock so deep inside her, there would be no doubt in her mind to whom she belonged.

A short cap of inky curls framed her face. Eyes,

the color of the bluest sapphires, gazed back at him with a mixture of curiosity and apprehension. The slight scent of her fear made his beast go still as it waited for a chance to pounce on its prey. To take the female as his. A mate. She was a mate. Tony felt himself go stiff with surprise. It was more than that. She was his mate. Never, in his sixty-seven years, had he thought to find a woman with whom to spend the rest of his life. Yet, here she stood, staring up at him through the most beautiful blue eyes he'd ever seen and holding her hand out for him to take it.

Moving forward, he bent over the woman's hand and kissed it, giving it a slight swipe of his tongue, just a taste of what was to come. The move startled his friends. He knew they were shocked because he was as well. Kissing the backs of women's hands was something completely foreign to him.

"My pleasure," he murmured against the back of her hand. Straightening, he gazed deep into her eyes. "I look forward to getting to know you better." Moving aside, he waited for Jarrod to finish the introductions, content to stand just inside the door and stare at his future.

Was she Jarrod's mate as well and that was why he insisted that Kam and he make the drive East to meet them here? It wasn't like Jarrod to ask for any kind of help. Tony didn't want to wait

until they were alone for an answer. He needed to know now so they could plan their sensual assault on their female. Reaching out with his mind, he connected with Jarrod and Kameron. *I was never so surprised as I was to walk into this room and find my mate.*

Jarrold's relief flooded his mind. *I'd hoped she would belong to the three of us. I can't imagine sharing her with anyone else and I can't imagine our not being bound together with a truebond. I had hoped that our sharing blood over the years would make us all compatible. but I feel nothing from Kam.*

That is only because I was so stunned to find my mate sequestered with my best friend in this shabby motel room, looking like a million bucks. Kameron turned to face them, a shit-eating grin on his face. A mate. We all have a mate. Our dreams have finally come true. We will truebond with each other.

Only if the lady wishes. Tony reminded him, pasting a formidable look on his face. We will not make the same mistakes my father and his cronies made.

Tony was one of the unlucky few who found himself fighting parents or grandparents, uncles or cousins. A few of his male relatives either were on the old council or supported it.

I didn't kill my uncle, while Adam Greer killed my father to make the same dim-witted mistakes. He wasn't sure if his mother would ever forgive him for killing her brother even though she had to know what they'd done was wrong.

"Did I say something wrong?" Nicola looked sick. "I-I..." She let her words trail off.

The poor woman was obviously upset because the three of them became silent as they communicated with each other. He couldn't blame her for her apprehension. Tony reached out and grabbed her hand. Sandwiching it between both of his, he smiled down at her. "No, ma'am. You didn't say anything wrong. I was just stunned."

"Excuse me?" The words came out little more than a squeak as she attempted to retrieve her hand. "Why were you stunned?"

"Jarrod didn't tell me you were so beautiful. I walked into this room and lost myself in your remarkable loveliness." He knew he was laying it on thick, but he needed to make her feel less apprehensive. She hadn't done a damn thing wrong and he wanted to make sure she knew that.

Niki actually snorted. "Yeah, right. Like there aren't billboards with my likeness plastered all over Mason and the surrounding areas."

He grinned at her unabashedly. "Jig's up, huh?"

Laughing, she replied, "Uh, yeah."

Tony couldn't stop staring at the dimples that suddenly appeared on her cheeks, nor the small indentation in her chin. He wanted to lean down, press his lips to her succulent flesh and lave those tiny indentations with his tongue. "Well, you can't

blame a guy for trying.”

He couldn't wait to taste her lips to see if they were as soft and as inviting as they appeared. *Mine*. The word reverberated in his mind, sounding strange. All three of them said it. He felt their desire, their conviction to make her theirs as keenly as he felt his own urges. The sound of their voices together sounded peculiar as they chanted the word repeatedly like some sort of bizarre litany.

She belonged to them as surely as their mothers belonged to their fathers. Still, he knew the difference between want and force, need and imposition. He would *not* become his father.

She was theirs. They knew it beyond any doubt. Something in their shifter makeup knew the woman standing before them was their mate. Some uncontrollable, unpredictable magick chose Nicola Stone for the three of them. They would love her, worship the very ground she walked upon and mate with her. Now the only thing left for them to do was to convince her of that.

* * * *

Niki studied the three men before her. Every one of them was drop dead gorgeous. She didn't know one woman who would turn down a night out with any of them.

The man introduced to her as Anthony Petrelli made her want to squirm. The way he looked at her with his midnight dark eyes—stared at her really—made her feel like he could see straight into her mind. She knew it was a ridiculous thought.

Still, she couldn't help but stare at the two new men. Both were good looking in their own way. Anthony Petrelli had that tall, dark, bad boy look right down to the awesome-looking tattoo she could see poking out from under his short sleeve.

Kameron Barrington was a bit more conservative. With a boy next-door look that didn't fool her in the least. His large, gleaming smile reminded her more of a predator than a small town kid.

Her heart skipped a beat or two as she stood staring at the three men. Alone they were gorgeous, together they were just too much. When all put together with her in a hotel room with a huge bed looming in the background, it gave her too many ideas for her peace of mind. Together they exuded an air of danger. They looked like three men who could kill her, or kill for her. She only wished she knew which.

"I'm glad to meet you both." That wasn't a lie either. No matter if they were good or bad, the interminable waiting in this tiny room was finally over. Soon they would be on their way to Paradise

or she'd be dead. Either way, the wait was over. The need to see her brother, to be sure he was safe, was uppermost in her mind. She only hoped the others actually took him to Paradise as promised.

The two newcomers made themselves at home. *What the hell?* Was she to share this room with all three of them now? If so, for how long? Niki fought the urge to pace the length of the room. "How long will we stay here?"

The one introduced to her as Kameron answered, "Only long enough to rest so we don't fall asleep on the road. At least two of us should be alert. One to drive, the other to guard." He gave her a look that said he didn't think she had many brains, then laid down on the bed and crossed his legs.

Boy, howdy the man was full of himself. She glared at him as he draped his right arm over his eyes and almost immediately began to snore. Niki bared her teeth in a grimace. Normally nothing bothered her while she tried to sleep. Ever. However, something told her this caveman's loud snoring would drive her nuts. Hell, it was loud enough to wake the dead.

The other one, Petrelli, made himself at home in the recliner that Jarrod had vacated and also immediately fell asleep though she noted that he did it a bit quieter. "You didn't tell me we'd share a room with these two." Giving Kameron one last

glare for making himself at home on *her* bed, she stalked over to the mini fridge and grabbed a cola.

"They're here to protect you," Jarrod said, his expression guarded. "Did you expect them to get a room downstairs?"

"I don't know. I thought they'd have their own rooms at least." Geeze. Was that too much to ask? It was bad enough that she already had no privacy, but to share her room with three men who did nothing but make her imagination race and her blood boil was too damned much. She waved her arms in a wide arc. "Just look at them. They waltzed in here and made themselves at home like they own the place or something."

Taking a deep breath, Niki closed her eyes and counted to ten. It wasn't their fault her hot-guy-o-meter went nuts the minute those two gorgeous cretins walked into the room.

When she popped the top on the cola can, the sound of the seal breaking seemed loud. Putting the can to her mouth, she tipped her head back and took a long drink. She had to give her mouth something to do before she said something she knew she'd regret. Opting to keep her mouth shut seemed a prudent choice.

The prospect of seeming ungrateful and losing her protection was daunting, to say the least—if they *really* were here to protect her. If not, she may decide to give them holy hell with the hope that

they'd get tired of her crap and put her out of her misery.

Glancing around, she made a face and headed for the balcony door. With Kameron on the bed, Anthony on the recliner and Jarrod sitting in the chair at the desk reading a paper, there was nowhere to sit. Niki headed for the balcony doors and the comfy looking patio furniture she saw out there. This hotel was far from the dive the others apparently thought it was. Pushing the heavy drapes aside, she put her hand on the door latch, ready to open the door.

"Going somewhere?"

Niki turned to see Jarrod looking at her, his paper folded on the desk in front of him. "Just out to the balcony. Do you have a problem with it?" She raised her brow, then indicated the occupied furniture. "As you can see, all of the seats are taken. If you don't mind, I'd rather not share the bed with your *friend*." She stressed the word to remind him that she didn't know any of them.

"I'll go get you a chair." He stood and headed her way.

"Why can't I go outside?"

"You can," he said as he turned, walked back to the desk and grabbed his paper. "But I should sit out there with you."

He was just saying that to annoy her. She was sure of it. "What on earth for?" Niki crossed her

arms and resisted the urge to tap her toes. It wasn't like she could go anywhere for goodness sake. "Are you afraid I'll run away?"

Jarrood sighed and shook his head. "Whatever you think of us, we will not hurt you, but there are those out there who would. What if those who wish you dead managed to find a way to attack you while you are out there alone?"

Crap. He would have to put it *that* way. What could she say to that? His answer made her feel small and petty. She should be glad for their protection and now she knew that was what she had. The trust he managed to instill in her was a priceless gift for them both.

* * * *

Kameron watched them from the bed, his eyes cracked open to mere slits. He wanted to know exactly what went on here the last few days while the two were alone. It wasn't that he'd mind if they'd already made love, because he wouldn't. He just wanted to know one way or another without sounding like a jealous ass.

Now he knew. No two people who slept together would be so uptight. They would have a better rapport. Nicola Stone was a dynamo. A woman after his own heart. His little mate was a female who would take no shit while dishing it

out in spades. He loved women with backbone. They made such sweet conquests. To know that his mate was such a female had his body near to bursting at the thought.

Unless he was mistaken, Nicola Stone was just the right mixture of softness for Jarrod, smartass for Tony and strength for him. Not once had he ever dared to dream they would meet one woman who could meet all of their needs.

Damn, he was glad of his ability to put on such a convincing act. He almost believed he could convince a true psychic that he was asleep if he wanted to. Not only did his *gift* help to find interesting information, but it also saved his life and the lives of his friends a few times.

Kam continued to listen to their conversation as they left the room in favor of the warm sunshine on the balcony. Before he got accused of eavesdropping though, he'd better let Jarrod know. Reaching out with their mutual mind link, he nudged Jarrod. *Just so you know, I'm listening in to get to know our mate. Is this acceptable to you?* Gods, he hoped it was. Jarrod already had three days with her. He was anxious to get to know her as quickly as possible.

The last thing either of them needed was for the *el calor* to grip them. If the heat managed to grow within them, they would have a difficult time keeping themselves off her. It was a survival

instinct imprinted within their DNA that ensured they would mate and procreate.

At first it didn't matter. They were little better than animals, but now it made all the difference in the world. Kam knew the last thing any of them wanted was to take her with violence. Such a thing wasn't only a crime against the humanoid part of them, but a crime against nature as well. Even the thought of it left an unpleasant taste in his mouth. Kam felt Jarrod's end of the conversation lag for a moment as he felt the other man shuffle through his thoughts.

I should have known that was your fake snore.

No one can tell and you know it. That's why it works so well. Kameron smiled.

The other man just snorted through their link, then laughed out loud at something Nicola said about Taxi's and their drivers.

Damn if he didn't find himself growing even harder at the thought of her lovely laugh and sparking blue eyes directed toward him. *Shit.* He'd never been jealous before in his life. If anyone had asked, he would have sworn he didn't have a jealous cell in his body. He'd been sadly mistaken because here he lay growing more and more envious of his best friend with every passing moment.

Every second he lay on the bed daydreaming of her silky-looking hair sliding between his fingers

as he plunged his cock down her throat, made him want to rush out onto that balcony and take her like the beast that dwelled just below the surface of his strained humanity.

Kam found himself fighting his other half for the first time in his life. Usually he gave his beast full reign when it wanted. Not this time. This time, he needed to keep himself on the bed at least until he could get his non-human side back under control.

Gritting his teeth, he fisted his hands and took a deep breath. There was nothing wrong with him that time and a cold shower wouldn't fix. One thing was certain. He wouldn't be sleeping anytime soon. Sleep would evade him as surely as the heat would hunt him down like scented prey.

CHAPTER FOUR

So much for listening in, huh? Jarrod jibed from his seat outside. *Don't worry. I'll be sure to tell you as soon as something interesting happens.*

"Shit, shit, shit," he exclaimed as he stood and slammed out of the room. He'd probably woken Tony, but didn't really give a rat's ass. He sure as hell wasn't going to get a lick of sleep surrounded by Niki's scent like he was in that damned room.

He stalked down the hall to the elevator, punched the down button a bit viciously and waited for the damned car to pick him up. Well, he'd get a room for Tony and himself and leave their sweet mate alone with Jarrod for one more night. *You have this one night to get her into your bed because tomorrow night she belongs to all of us.*

Jarrold actually growled through their link. *Only if she wishes it. I'll have that promise from you and Tony tonight, old friend. The poor woman has been through enough.*

The bell for the elevator's door chimed and

Kam stepped into the tiny room with a sigh. He knew Jarrod was right and would do nothing to hurt any woman, let alone their long anticipated mate. *You have my word.* He nearly growled himself. *I'm no fucking rapist.* Jabbing the ground floor button, he crossed his arms and spread his stance, a scowl on his face.

After about a minute, the door opened on the ground floor and he stepped out of the elevator, almost plowing down a tall, skinny man in a cheap gray wool suit.

Kam fought the urge to wrinkle his nose even while trying not to take a deep breath. The man reeked of sweat, urine, fear and rancid blood. He'd probably pissed himself in a bar fight the night before. What did he care?

Shaking his head at the utter stupidity of some humans, Kam headed for the front desk to rent a room for the night.

* * * *

Tony's eyes flew open, startled awake as Kam slammed from the room. "What the hell?" Tony sat up and looked out onto the balcony. "What's his problem?" He raised his voice so Jarrod could hear him.

The other man shrugged. *Our mate's scent had him scurrying out of here like a frightened child.*

Then the el calor is already upon him. I thought we would have more time. He paused. I'd hoped we'd have more time.

He felt more than heard Jarrod's sigh. None of us have much time. According to the records, once we meet our mates, we must make them ours soon or we will go mad. Perhaps that is what happened to our fathers.

I hadn't thought of that. Why would they have waited? It was possible to claim a female in stages. To take her one at a time until they could all take her together. Why would someone wait and succumb to the madness they knew awaited them? It made no sense. Tony would kill himself before he let the el calor drive him to madness and rape and he knew his friends felt the same. Why aren't you suffering from the el calor? It was worth asking. After all Jarrod had been with Niki for over three days now. He'd had three days to have the heat grip his balls and squeeze the way he'd heard. Yet it seemed she had no effect on the other man. Was she really his mate?

Yes, she is my mate. Some take longer than others. I hear that some who have a truebond did not experience the heat with more than a very healthy attraction. Perhaps it has something to do with the amount of human blood in our genetic makeup – or our age. I am a bit older than you. Perhaps my age allows more control or longer exposure.

That could be, Tony agreed. Hell, what did he

know? He knew next to nothing of their genetic makeup. That kind of crap was left to the scientists and doctors. The last thing he wanted to know was how they were put together unless the knowledge would help him protect Nicola.

She sat out on the balcony with Jarrod, a half-smile on her face. She looked at the other man with such respect, such affection already. It made Tony's heart ache when she'd given him that look of disgust earlier. The last thing he wanted was for his mate to think he was a waste of skin.

Then perhaps you should treat her with a bit more respect. I'm sure she suspected you thought her dimwitted.

Well, hell. He didn't think her unintelligent. He'd merely been tired. Still was. *I should apologize. I didn't mean to make her feel inadequate.* Standing, he stretched and walked toward the sliding glass doors. Leaning against the frame, he looked down at Nicola as she glanced up to meet his gaze. "I think I should apologize to you, *cara*." Unsure of how she felt about the endearment, he continued before she could comment. "I didn't mean to make you feel as though I thought little of you." Tony cleared his throat. "In fact, I think you very ingenious to have eluded the slayer as long as you have. He is a formidable opponent."

Encouraged by her softened gaze, he moved closer to sit beside her at the table. "I was tired

when we arrived. We drove straight here at Jarrod's call and needed rest." He held up his hand when she would have said something. "There is no excuse. I merely beg your forgiveness for being short with you earlier." There. He could only hope his act of contrition was enough to garner her forgiveness. If not, he had no idea what else to do to obtain it.

Get on your knees, perhaps?

Fighting to keep the scowl from his face, he glanced at Jarrod and raised a brow. *I can arrange to have you join me there. I'm sure there is something in your past that she could discover that doesn't paint you in a good light. Don't test me.*

He ignored Jarrod's soft chuckle.

Jarrold refolded his paper and stood. "If you two don't mind, I'm going to go inside and take a shower." Niki started to stand and he held his hand up. "Stay out here, enjoy the sunlight and get to know Tony. He's not as bad as he seems." He glanced at Tony and grinned. "Give him another chance. He's a nice guy underneath all that gruffness."

* * * *

Nice guy, huh? Niki couldn't help but stare at the other man. *Not from where I'm sitting.* Hell, he may as well have waltzed into the room and plopped a

dunce cap on her head. As far as she was concerned, there was no excuse for his behavior.

Still... She knew what it was like to be so tired you could barely keep your eyes open. So tired your stomach ached and it felt like you would toss up what you last ate. How could she blame the man for feeling bad when she'd been in the same shape only a few short days ago? At least he didn't smell as she knew she did when she first arrived at this hotel.

Sighing, she decided she *would* give him another chance. Besides, he wasn't as bad as the other one. Kam. However, if she gave him another chance, she supposed she should give the other one another chance, too. Dammit. "Well, if we're starting over... I'd like to introduce myself. I'm Nicola Stone and I have a quick temper and tend to leap to conclusions. I've been running for a while and tend to forget that others have their own problems." She shrugged. "It's selfish, I know but..." She grinned. "You'll get used to me. If Sam can take what I've dished out over the last week or so, anyone can."

"Is Sam your brother?"

Nodding, she glanced down at her clasped hands. "Yes. He's my adopted brother." She smiled as she stared off into space. "We're blood brother and sister." Ducking her head, she admitted, "We saw a western one day and cut our

thumbs like they did in the movies and pressed them together. I don't think you can get any closer than that without being actually related." Heat suffused her face and she knew he could see her blush. His expression changed. It became more relaxed as his lips tipped up at the corners.

"You had courage even then. I don't know many little girls with the guts to cut themselves, even for something like that."

Glancing up at him, she chuckled. "I didn't. Sam cut me."

"But you let him."

"Yes, I suppose I did." Niki still couldn't look on it as an act of courage. She'd practically screamed like a banshee when he did it. It hurt like the dickens and she thought that surely she would die from the pain. She admired Sam's courage. He cut himself and pressed their thumbs together with the stoic bravery of one much older than his years. "Sam's the brave one."

He grunted, then glanced out over the railing. His body stiffened and he grabbed her arm. "Get into the room. Now!"

Niki didn't argue. These men were here to protect her and if he saw something that set his senses on alert, she wouldn't quibble over a few lost breaths of fresh air. Standing, Niki took a step toward the glass doors when a dark blur caught her attention just before it knocked her to the

floor.

Tony grunted with pain as something hit him, too. Blood spattered her face and she screamed. Not knowing whose blood only made things worse. If it was Tony's, it could only mean that he was badly injured. If not, then there was still one more...thing here that could harm her. Whatever it was that knocked her to the ground, wasn't alone. It had company and she had no idea what to do.

"Get to the room. Don't worry about me. Get inside, lock the doors and get Jarrod out of the damned shower. I'll be fine."

Doing as she was told, Niki crawled to the door, dragged herself through it after kicking the...thing from her foot and slammed it before the dark furry animal could follow her and attack again. She didn't know what it was. It was the size of a medium sized dog, but it had a tail like her gerbil. Niki shuddered and locked the door as instructed.

Standing, she spared a short glance at her aching ankle. Whatever the thing was, it clawed her good and took a good-sized chunk out of her skin. Limping to the bathroom, she pounded on the door. "Jarrod, something's attacking Tony. He needs help!"

Immediately the door swung open and Jarrod strode out wearing nothing but a towel. "Follow

me to the door and lock it behind me.” He grasped her shoulders. “And whatever you do, don’t leave this room. We don’t know if there are any in the hall.”

Shivering with fear, Niki nodded her agreement. “Okay. I’ll stay here and I won’t open the door for anyone but Kameron.” *Even if he was an overbearing jerk with delusions of grandeur.* Niki could do nothing but watch as the man she’d come to know and respect over the last few days stepped through the door into harm’s way to protect her.

She couldn’t bear to watch. In fact, she went to the bed, sat down and stared at the latch on the door. What were those things? They looked like some sort of giant rodent, but she’d never seen a rat that big in her life.

After a few moments, there was a tap on the door and she turned to look. She couldn’t help herself. She *had* to know how they fared against those...things. When she glanced through the doors, she couldn’t help but grin. Tony and Jarrod stood on the other side looking in. Tony stood behind the other man, blocking the view from below. At some point during their scuffle, Jarrod had lost his towel.

Taking advantage of the impromptu show, she took her time standing and walking over to the door. Jarrod’s muscular frame never failed to

make her heart race and her blood heat. In fact, she could feel the heat suffusing her face even as she took a slow but thorough inventory of his attributes...and he had many. Reaching the door, she couldn't help her up-close-and-personal look at his nether regions. *Whoo buddy!* After unlocking and opening the door, she looked up into his eyes, then hurriedly glanced away.

Placing his finger under her chin, Jarrod said softly, "I hope you liked what you saw, Niki."

Swallowing thickly, she tried to pull away, but he wouldn't let her.

"I'm going to see if I can find Kam," Tony said as he headed for the door. "We'll get ourselves a room, hopefully just next door here and try to get a good night's rest. You two look like you need to talk."

Niki felt her whole body flush. Heat suffused even her arms and legs. Tony was leaving them here so they could have sex. The question was, did she really want to have sex with a man she'd only known three days? She looked up into Jarrod's eyes.

Oh, yes.

CHAPTER FIVE

Jarrood looked down into her shining, sapphire eyes. His body hardened. Every muscle tensed as he stood before her wearing nothing but his skin. He wanted her to look. His cat wanted her to enjoy looking at him. It wanted to stretch and preen in front of her, rub its body all over her as he marked her as his own.

His eyes narrowed as she licked her lips. His gaze zeroing in on the tip of her tongue as it wet the curve of her bottom lip before it disappeared into her mouth. Aching with the need to pull her into his arms, he took a deep breath, determined to give her the choice. "Step back, Niki." He took a deep breath. "Step away from me because, God help me, if I touch you I won't be able to stop. If you don't move away, *I will* touch you."

Niki's cheeks filled with color at his remark and his cat snarled with pleasure. She was his, theirs, and there was no escape. She could prolong the inevitable, but she would never get away from

them. Even now he could feel the way his body's needs drove him to have her. To take her, no matter the cost.

Had he said the *el calor* hadn't affected him? He'd been wrong, so wrong. His blood fairly boiled with the need to sink himself into her moist heat and pound his way to oblivion. It took every ounce of self-control he had not to pounce on her and force her compliance. "Go. Now!" He pointed to the bathroom door. "Lock yourself in the bathroom. If you don't, I'll have you flat on your back and be between your legs before you know it."

Niki took a deep breath and then blew it out. "What if I want you between my legs?"

The blush was still there, but now Jarrod could smell her sweet heat. She wanted him. Her arousal was evident and he nearly fell to his knees to thank God that she wanted him nearly as much as he wanted her.

"I only have one question, Jarrod." She held up her hand to hold him at bay when he moved forward.

"What is it?" He ground the words out when he was sure he could no longer speak. His cat was upon him, snarling, demanding he mate. Jarrod watched, ready to pounce as she nervously licked her lips again.

"It's about Paradise and...and your people."

"What about them?" The question came out almost a growl as his beast grew closer and closer to the surface. If she didn't either get away from him or allow him to love her soon, he'd be lost in the madness and, God help him, he'd take her by force, want to or not. He could feel it building within him as he kept a tight rein on his cat.

"Do they..." Her face grew redder with each passing moment. "Do the women really have more than one husband?"

He nodded, the motion erratic as he held himself in check. "Yes. Some of them have more than one mate, but it is as they wish. No one forces it upon them." He moved forward again, stopping when she held up her hand once more.

"I'm sorry, but I have another question."

"Yes?" He took a deep breath, clenching his fists at his side.

"Do you..." she cast her gaze around the room as though something in the furnishings would help her phrase her inquiry. "Are you, Kam and Tony planning to have me as your...as your mate?"

The question distracted his beast for a moment and he was able to reach up and tuck a stray lock of hair behind her ear before clenching his fists at his side once again. "Only if it is what you wish." He took a deep breath, buying time to think of a way to ease her mind. "We all want you and we

all would take you as our wife, but if the idea is repugnant to you we would not force it, though you could not stay in Paradise where we could protect you. We would have to send you away with men who would protect you until the slayer is brought to justice."

"Why would I have to leave?"

"Your one question has turned to many, love." He smiled sadly. "You would have to leave because we must stay and we could not be around you and not have you without succumbing to the madness of *el calor*." He'd hoped he wouldn't have to explain that to her before they bonded, but she asked and he could do no other than tell her the truth. He would have no lies between them.

"*El calor*? What's that?"

A frown marred her delicate features and he wanted nothing more than to reach up and smooth it away, but he dared not touch her again. It had taken every ounce of his control just to push that lock of hair from her face. Actually, touching her smooth, flawless skin would certainly be more than he could handle. "It's what we call the mating heat. At some point in my people's distant past, someone gave it a name and it stuck." Jarrod ran his fingers through his hair, then stepped back out of her reach when she would have reached up and smoothed it down. "Don't. Don't touch me."

His chest ached as her eyes filled with tears. "It

wasn't a rejection, Niki. I...I can't touch you, you can't touch me until you know that you want to make love with me. If you touch me..." Stopping, he took a deep breath, then let it out on a sigh, knowing what he would say next would have her locking herself in the bathroom. Yet he couldn't, in good conscience, make love with her and claim her as his without telling her what they were. Warning her about what kind of men she would give her life to in Paradise. "If you touch me I won't be able to keep myself from taking you and there are things you need to know about me." He waved his arm, then turned to pace away from her to the corner of the room where her scent wasn't as strong. "There are things you need to know about us."

Jesus. He'd turned into a babbling idiot, repeating himself and unable to finish simple sentences. He couldn't think and could barely breathe. What in the hell was the matter with him? Sitting down, he lowered his head between his knees and tried to take stock of his emotions of the dubious control he had over himself. "We're not human, Niki." He heard her sudden intake of breath. She no doubt thought him certifiable now. "Before you pass judgment on my sanity, let me tell you a story."

How to begin? He didn't want to start at the beginning, explaining all that was shifter to her.

For one thing, it would take too long and he would eventually succumb to her scent. He didn't want to do that to her. He wanted her to have the choice. Was that why the other two wanted him to be the first? That would explain why neither of them seemed to resent his spending time with her.

"Eons ago there were shifters, animals that could change into any form, but were still more beast than anything else. Then there were humans." He paused. "Though they weren't human as you would think of them. At some point, the *el calor* came upon one of our kind directed at a human and they bred. Since shifters were so outnumbered, human DNA overrode most of our animal characteristics and we became more man than beast." Glancing up, he noticed she still stood where he left her, her body rigid with shock.

"You're...you're not human?" She nervously licked her lips and glanced toward the bathroom door.

He'd lost her. He could see that already and merely sat still, waiting for her to bolt to the bathroom door and lock it, separating them for all time. If she couldn't accept them, all of them, he would have to call in another team and leave her protection to others. His beast screamed out a denial. Nothing, no one could take her from them and live. No one. Not even her. Suppressing his

beast once again took all of his strength and he looked up, meeting her gaze. "You'd better run for that door when you move because I won't be able to stop myself from coming after you."

Niki swallowed and licked her lips.

His stomach clenched at the thought of pressing his mouth to hers, nibbling her soft, full lips and thrusting his tongue into her mouth to taste her sweet honey. He could only imagine how she would taste and his body raged at him to move, to capture her and force her compliance. Still, he sat there staring at her, his breath coming in short pants as he again wrestled his beast into submission.

"Animals," she whispered, unmoving.

Somehow, she'd figured out that the slightest move would have him on her, rutting like the animal he claimed he was.

"But you've never..." She paused, cast her gaze around the room as she obviously tried to think of what to say next. "If this wasn't your natural form, wouldn't you shift back in your sleep or something?"

He shook his head. "No. That's not how it works. As I said, we are more human now than shifter. Some of us are more shifter than others, and some more animal than man, but for the most part, we are men who can shift our shape into an animal form, instead of the way it used to be."

"The way it used to be?"

"The animal could shift into the human form. They were intelligent. They even learned to speak, but in the end, they were still animals pretending to be men. Now it's almost the other way around. Now we are men who shift into animals."

"I-I..."

Jarrold could see it in her eyes. She thought him mad and intended to bolt from the room. "Stay one more minute and I'll prove to you that I'm not crazy." Standing, he reached for his other half, the part of him that he knew she could never accept. In doing so he knew he would most likely lose control of the beast and he would pounce on his mate, taking her like the animal he was.

"You must run to the bathroom as I begin to shift. Run to the door and look out, but be ready to slam the door in my face and lock it. Once I become the beast, I will be unable to control its urges any longer and if I take you, I want to take you as a man, not some ravening beast."

Her eyes widened with fear and she nodded once, her body tensing for flight.

Fully immersing himself with his other half was so easy now that the *el calor* was upon him. Nothing could stop the beast from emerging. It had only been a matter of time.

The wrenching pain of his change was nothing compared to how he felt with the heat raging,

urging him to do horrible things. The insidious whisper of his heritage, the one thing left that still branded them beast was the most painful thing he'd ever experienced, yet he'd won. He'd held it back for as long as he could, even knowing the consequences of ignoring the demands of *el calor*. He would go mad if she didn't have him now.

Reaching out with his thoughts, he used the last of his will and directed his best friends. *Kill me. I am fast losing control and if she denies me, I will not be able to stop myself from taking her and I am in my animal form. You must come and stop me.*

Then with a snarl, he looked up and scented his prey. She was a beautiful woman with dark curly hair and the eyes of an angel, who still stared out the bathroom door with disbelief.

* * * *

Niki stood frozen with fear. The large jungle cat that was once her handsome roommate lowered its head and scented the air. She stood still, unable to move as the animal held her immobilized with its predatory gaze.

Her stomach clenched as she watched it slowly stalking her. Her mind raged at her to close the door, to lock it from the beast that slowly made its way toward her with such fluid grace. She knew it was stalking her and could do nothing to stop it.

She couldn't even manage to move enough to close the door and keep it out, though the thin wooden door wouldn't be much protection anyway.

When the animal blinked, she saw something that gave her pause. A reflection, a shimmer of Jarrod came through that feral gaze and she knew what she had to do to save them both.

God help her if she was wrong because the last thing she wanted was for him to rape her while still in his animal form. The thought nearly made her ill, but she found the strength to press her hand to her stomach to try to still the roiling of her last meal.

Taking a deep breath, she gathered every ounce of courage she possessed and opened the bathroom door wider. Moving slowly, she stepped out into the room and prayed she'd made the right choice.

Niki knew she had to reach Jarrod deep inside the body of the beast. Somehow, she had to save him from himself. She couldn't bear to be the person that drove this strong man to do something she knew he abhorred.

Approaching him slowly, she tried to keep her fear at bay, knowing the scent of it would only further excite the animal. Lowering herself to her knees, she reached up and began to unbutton her blouse. "Come back to me, Jarrod, please." She

wasn't above begging if that would bring him back to her. "I don't want to see you like this. I couldn't bear it if you lost your control because of me."

After three days in this man's company, she knew enough about him to know he was a gentle man. He wanted nothing more than to make things right for the women in Paradise and after what he'd told her, she couldn't allow him to sacrifice himself. Not like this. Their community needed every man it had to stave off the hordes of men who still attempted to take the town back and enslave their women.

The cat stopped, staring at her, its expression one of a stalker closing in on its prey.

Swallowing thickly, she continued to thread the buttons through their holes, exposing more and more of herself to him, hoping the man would win the battle over beast and Jarrod would return to her.

The cat moved closer, lifting its head slightly to scent the air.

Niki hoped it could scent her arousal more than it could scent her fear. She deliberately thought of the way Jarrod looked naked, thinking of the way it would feel to have him inside her, his hard thickness driving into her and carrying her to heights she'd only dreamed of before.

What would it be like to be with the three of

them? Would they each take her one at a time or would they all take her together? The thought came unbidden, alternately frightening and arousing her.

Moist heat flooded her middle and the apex of her thighs and the big cat sniffed once again. As sound somewhere between a growl and a purr came from deep within its chest. The low rumble gave Niki the courage to continue to slide the blouse from her shoulders and down her arms, leaving her open to the feral gaze of the cat before her.

Her nipples pebbled beneath the lace of her bra as the cool air from the room caressed her skin. Knowing she needed to do something to bring the man back, to prove to the beast that she wasn't scared even though she was, Niki reached up and rubbed at the hardened nubs just before reaching back to release them from their lacy prison.

Again, the cat chuffed, a sound not quite a snarl as she exposed more of herself to him. When she looked up into the beast's eyes, she could see more of Jarrod's color than the yellow of the cat's eyes.

Progress.

Reaching down, she released the button on her jeans and slowly lowered the zipper. "You can't make love to me if you're like that, Jarrod. Don't let the beast win. Come back to me. Come back to your mate." Her voice was husky, sounded

different to her ears. Was that even her talking?

The cat lowered itself to the floor and lay panting as she watched the battle in its eyes. The struggle between the man and the animal as Jarrod fought his way back from the belly of the beast.

Reaching inside her panties, Niki did something she'd never done before. She caressed herself. Her fingers slid through the moist heat of her sex as she undulated her hips and called Jarrod back to her. Tomorrow she could die of mortification. Today she had to save them both from the heat of *el calor*.

"I'm going to stand now." She kept her gaze on the cat. "I'm not going to run. I'm going to take off the rest of my clothes and lie down on the bed and wait for Jarrod, the man, not the beast, to join me." Moving slowly, Niki stood, toed her shoes off and slid the jeans and panties down her legs to the floor.

After removing the last of her clothing, she made her way slowly to the bed and lowered herself down onto the comforter and waited, praying that she'd done the right thing and she wasn't about to get raped by an animal.

She had faith in Jarrod's control. Faith that he had the strength to fight his way back from the haze of lust and heat that drove his people to madness. She only hoped it wasn't misplaced.

CHAPTER SIX

Jarrood's control slowly came back to himself as the cat crawled up onto the bed and looked at the woman who lay bare before him.

Niki stiffened, the scent of her fear mixing with the scent of her arousal as his fur brushed against her lower leg.

Reaching out with his thoughts, he contacted the others. *Our mate is a strong and brave woman, my friends. She has brought me from the madness with her words and body. I no longer need your assistance.*

We could tell, Kam replied. When we reached the room, we could feel your human side asserting itself and taking control. Fear not, had we thought you a danger to Niki we would have broken down this door and ended your life. He felt Kam smile through their link. *I'm glad it didn't come to that, old friend. We shall leave you to your privacy now. Enjoy the claiming, as you should.*

Fully back to his human self now, Jarrod knelt between her legs. He pushed her knees apart and

inhaled sharply at her sweet scent. The sight of her wet folds made his gut clench. Her nether lips glistened with the evidence of her arousal, an open invitation for his lips and tongue. Leaning forward, he slid his hands up her legs, reveling in her softness—in the feel of her silky skin beneath his roaming fingers.

Stopping, he realized he could feel her heart racing in the pulse beneath his hand. The tips of his fingers rested just below the apex of her thighs, barely skimming the thin strip of soft down that covered her mound.

Right now, he wanted to do nothing more than to breathe in her sweet scent and revel in the fact that tonight, she was his. Jarrod gazed down at her quivering flesh, committing it to memory. The graceful shape of her long legs, how delicate and small she looked, lying like some virgin sacrifice in the center of the large bed.

He wanted nothing more at this moment than to bury his face between her legs and lap up the sweet cream that glistened like dew on the plump lips of her sex. Jarrod couldn't believe how much he wanted to thrust his tongue through those folds, circle her clit, then slide it inside her channel.

Leaning forward, he nuzzled her mound. The sound of her moans was enough to keep his beast at bay while he reveled in the scent of her heat and

the heat of the *el calor* as the sensations aroused him passed a point he'd never been before.

His balls ached with the need for release and he took pleasure in the knowing that her sacrifice helped him keep control of the beast so that he, too, may know the pleasure that awaited them both.

Niki's body stiffened when he moved his mouth to her smooth, plump nether lips. He ran his tongue through her glistening folds and over her erect clit.

Her hips jerked when he suckled the small, hard bud into his mouth and flicked it with his tongue. Her thighs tightened around his head and shoulders, pinning him in place.

He raised his head a fraction of an inch. "You're so beautiful." He looked down at the exquisiteness of the most feminine part of her. Rising up on his elbows, his shoulders forced her legs further open as he used his thumbs to open her folds wider to his hungry gaze.

She lay trembling beneath him, her eyes begging for more as her teeth clamped down on her lips, waiting for him to lower his head back to her flesh. Her body's dew seeped from her channel as he watched, his mouth watering with the need to taste her again.

Jarrold groaned and, unable to control the urge any longer, leaned down once again and suckled

her erect clit into his mouth as she writhed on the bed, begging for release. This was what it was supposed to be like. *This* was why their mates must be compatible and it was probably the reason men killed for their mates. Even her pleasure brought his own bliss.

Her climax nearly triggered one in him. If not for the iron grip he had on his control, he may have come right then and there without even feeling the warmth of her channel surrounding his hard flesh.

When she stiffened on the bed, her back arching and her head thrown back, Jarrod could barely control his own need to follow her into the oblivion of his own orgasm. He desperately wanted, *needed*, to plunge his cock deep into her moist heat and give his balls the release they so desperately craved.

Panting, he crawled up her body, resting his forehead against hers and his hips between her spread thighs. "Tell me you want this, Niki." His breath came out in violent gusts as he attempted to keep himself under control. "Tell me you really want this." Reaching up, Jarrod smoothed the hair from her sweat-soaked face. "Not just because you're saving us from the beasts within us, but because this is what you really want." Lifting his head, he stared down into her fathomless blue eyes and prayed she would tell him what he so

desperately needed to hear.

"More," she said, wrapping her legs around his hips. "I need so much more, Jarrod. Please..."

"Tell me." He ground the words out between his clenched teeth. "Tell me you want *me*."

"I do." She reached up and cupped his cheek. "I've wanted you since the day we met." Grinning, she added, "Do you think I hop into bed with every man I spend a little time with?"

"Thank God!" Slowly, he eased inside her, unsure if this was her first time. He didn't wish to hurt her. He should have asked while he could, but it was too late. The only thing he could manage to do was grit his teeth and continue to push slowly inside her wet heat.

When he was halfway in, Niki wrapped her legs tightly around his waist and arched up, burying him deep into her clasp channel. It was all he could do to stay still.

Jarrod sucked in a deep breath as he stilled over her. Looking down into her eyes, he stayed unmoving, unable to do nothing but revel in the warmth of her tight embrace.

* * * *

Niki sucked in her breath. Lordy, he was huge. He filled her almost to the point of pain, but when she looked up into his eyes, she knew she was his.

Jarrold gazed at her, his eyes filled with a reverence she'd never expected to see.

Oh, she was no stranger to men who thought they needed her. Her short modeling career saw to that. The fact that her face was still plastered all over her hometown and the surrounding areas didn't help either. Still, Jarrold's look was different. Niki had time to think as he just stayed still and stared down at her for a moment.

Finally wriggling beneath him, she moved her hand from his cheek and wrapped her arms around his neck. "Kiss me." If he didn't at least do that, she didn't know if she'd be able to live with herself later. This couldn't just be awesome sex. It had to have more. More feeling, more depth of emotion than just the mechanics of it all.

When he leaned down and pressed his lips to hers, she didn't know what else to do to make him understand she needed him to make love to her, not just fuck her, as it seemed that this was. She had the man and the animal was gone, but she still needed more. She would never be able to live with herself if she thought for even one moment what she'd done meant nothing past the sex.

Niki didn't believe that. She couldn't believe it. The way he held her, looked at her, he had to feel more than just the need to procreate. He had to. His lips were warm on hers. They gently sipped at her lips at first before he suddenly groaned and

thrust his tongue between her teeth.

Slowly he began to move, the feel of his shaft sliding from her clasping flesh, raking over nerve endings and stirring sensations she thought to never feel again. After the last fiasco, she'd all but sworn off men ever since she'd called off a relationship with a man who couldn't seem to keep himself out of other women's beds. How could she sleep with a man she didn't trust?

This was different. Primal. Something she had no control over and she reveled in the knowledge that he wanted her at least as much as she wanted him. There were no lies between them. Not yet, anyway and she hoped there never was.

This man and his friends claimed to be her mates. In their lives in their town, was it acceptable for them to find another? Somehow, she doubted it. Not with the way their old council guarded their women. It made her think that she may be the one with all of the power—power over three men who may never leave her, never cheat on her and always put her needs above those of other women. At least a girl could dream.

Searing heat flashed through her body as he started to rock back and forth, his movements slow and even. She'd never wanted another man so much. The sensations he brought forth in her was something between ecstasy and pain. The heat of his shaft sliding in and out of her was

almost more than she could bear. What would it be like with the others, with all of them together? It may just kill her.

Niki didn't know how she'd survived this long without this. Without feeling his need, without all of them. She'd wanted to hold at least a part of her from him, from all of them, in case things went bad and she found herself alone again, but found she couldn't.

Her heart ached for the man-beast that Jarrod was deep inside. How would he survive if she left them? How would any of them survive? It didn't take long to realize that she needed this, needed them, as much as they needed her. Maybe more.

He rocked above her, his thick length spreading her inner folds like butter. Her body melted around his, welcoming him as they moved together, each finding the seamless rhythm that held them together with his body thrusting deep into hers.

Niki gasped as her pleasure took her higher, wound her tighter and tighter until she was sure she'd never survive this encounter. She didn't have the stamina. How would she ever satisfy three of them? Surely, she would die this night with that part of his body buried so deep inside hers as she reached ever higher for her ultimate release.

Her body trembled, pulsed around his as he

continued to thrust into her with desperate abandon. He was losing himself again. She could feel it. Only this time, it wasn't his beast that took over, but an overpowering need for relief.

Reaching down, his hands grasped her hips, holding her in place for his forceful thrusts that sent waves of pleasure through her. There was nothing, no one, in the world except the two of them. She couldn't breathe, couldn't think about anyone or anything, but the man rocking above her.

She screamed as his thick length rubbed against a bundle of nerves deep inside her channel and thrustled her over the edge into a violent release the likes of which she'd never experienced in her life. The tightening of her inner muscles during her climax brought Jarrod over the edge of his own release and he threw his head back and roared. The sound was neither human nor animal, but something in between.

Niki could feel his shaft bucking and jerking inside her as he emptied his seed close to her womb. Was this the claiming? Was this what she had to look forward to with the other two men? If so, Niki wasn't sure she was woman enough to survive it.

* * * *

"It's time to leave." Kam stood in the doorway, unable to miss the unmistakable smell of sex—even after they'd showered and changed the scent lingered in the air. He refused to give light to jealousy. Niki's night with Jarrod opened the door to all of them. It was just a matter of time before they could all claim her. He watched as she made her way around the room, making sure they left nothing behind. She was beautiful with her face flushed and the look of a woman well pleased.

There was no mistake. Jarrod had been the right choice to have her first. They all knew he had the most control. Who else could have dragged himself back from the abyss of madness? Surely not he or Tony. Neither of them had the self-control it took.

Still, Kam knew there would be discomfort. They couldn't expect her just to welcome them all into her bed with open arms the way a woman raised in Paradise would. She would need time and Kam and Tony were adamant that she would have it, regardless of their own needs. Kam smiled when she looked up at him and gave him a shy smile.

"This bag is ready to go if you don't mind taking it?"

Mind? Hell no! He'd carry all her damned bags to the ends of the Earth for one of her shy smiles that she handed out so freely. "My honor, Niki."

She blushed prettily at his words and his cock jerked with the need to sink somewhere, anywhere within her body—preferably her mouth.

He shook his head, unable to get the picture out of his mind. He could imagine the way she would look with her lips wrapped around his cock, her cheeks hollowed as she sucked him off.

Striding into the room to get her bag, he did nothing to hide the raging hard-on he had for her. Let her see it. She needed to get used to the fact that all three of them wanted her and at some point, they would all want her together. Kam watched her gaze lower to his crotch, then skitter away as her face turned red. God he loved a woman who could blush. They were just so few and far between these days.

The need to dominate her rode him hard and the *el calor* reached down and squeezed his balls tight, almost making him grimace with pain. Kam knew he could control it. As long as he had hope that she would accept him, there was no need for his beast to rage for its mate.

“Please sit with me for a minute.” Niki sat down on the bed and patted a space next to her as he turned from the door. “The others said they won’t be back for a while and I thought...” She blushed again, looking down to her lap as she nervously twisted her fingers together. “I thought

perhaps we could take this time to get to know one another."

Was she saying what he thought, what he hoped? He set the suitcase by the door and approached her slowly. "I'm not sure we should do this now. We hardly know each other."

"I didn't mean..." Her face reddened even more.

He knew one more blush from her might just send him over the edge into the madness as his need to dominate took over. Turning around, he headed back for the door and her suitcase. He needed to get out of here. Get away from her scent and get some fresh air, but...where would he go, down to the car? The other two left it so he could load it in their absence not so he could force himself on their mate.

Jesus! Jarrod should have stayed behind. He was immune to the effects of the *el calor* now that he'd had sex with her. At least he was immune for a little while. At some point they would all have to claim her together, take her blood and make her theirs. Until then, sex would only lessen the need, not take it away.

"Don't go." Niki stood and started toward him. "I don't know how you feel or what you feel, but if you're in the same condition as Jarrod was last night, you need relief."

She lowered her outstretched hand as he turned

to look at her.

“God, I must sound like some sort of wanton. No wonder you don’t want to stay in the same room with me. It’s just that...” She cast her gaze about the room as though looking for something to say. “I don’t want to see you that way, see you beat yourself up like Jarrod did afterward. I don’t know if he’ll ever forgive himself for almost going mad and I...” Pausing, she took a deep breath. “And I don’t know that I could overcome my fear again if you or Tony should lose your minds.” She smiled ruefully. “Call me crazy, but I’d rather have sex with a man I barely know than take the chance of being forced by an animal.”

Kam could only stare at her. How did they ever deserve such a brave woman as their mate? He knew what she offered went against everything her family brought her up to believe—how they’d taught her to live. The demonstration of her courage both inflamed him and humbled him. How could one human woman come to terms with such things so quickly? Was it, in truth, nothing more than self-preservation?

Standing before him, she raised her face, her tongue darting out to wet her lips. “I don’t want to rush this...this thing growing between us, but something happened last night after...” She paused. “After Jarrod and I made love.” Her face flushed with color as she continued, “Something

happened to me. I feel different, strange, like if I don't connect with all of you, somehow, something horrible will happen."

Kam wracked his brain, trying to remember what it was he'd read about the heat and dealing with humans. "It's the heat. According to our records, it only happens to human females exposed to their mates. It's not unheard of for a shifter female, but not common either." Kam reached out and tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. "You must be uncomfortable."

"Uncomfortable isn't the word for it. It hurts, Kam." Tears filled her eyes and she turned away.

"How difficult it must be for you to admit that when I know you don't like me."

"It's not that I don't like you. I think...I think you're hot. I just don't like you're damned overbearing ways."

"Then you're really not going to like me in bed." He crowded closer to her, his body raging to take her, to make her his. "I need to dominate and you won't like that." She nervously licked her lips and his beast quivered with anticipation. It wanted this, wanted her and it wanted to dominate her.

"It doesn't really matter now, does it," she asked, near hysterics. "I don't have control anymore. My body demands that I have sex with you and I can't stop the need raging in my blood

any more than Jarrod could stop his last night. I hate it. Make it stop. Please, make it stop.”

What could he do? He wanted to give her more time. Mentally, she needed more time, but her body didn’t think so. Taking her hands, he gently pushed her to a sitting position on the bed.

God he wanted her so badly he ached with it. His throat constricted as he watched the tears leak from the corners of her eyes. He knew what she went through, knew it was hard to ignore the demands of the *el calor*. Whatever it was in her genetic makeup that caused this reaction could not be denied so he had no other choice than to help her. To take her here and now, regardless of the fact that she really wasn’t mentally ready to accept them all. He wanted to scream, to lash out at someone, something for putting her through this torture. Kam knew there was nothing to do but give her body what it demanded before the heat drove her mad.

Lowering himself to his knees, he realized there was a gentleness in him, he didn’t think existed, but it was there in his trembling fingers as he unbuttoned her blouse and slowly slid it down her arms. Her dusky nipples hardened beneath his gaze and he couldn’t help himself. Leaning forward, he took first one, then the other into his mouth, laving the hard peaks through the lace of her bra. His hand slid up her leg, around her waist

to the clasp and released the garment as he continued to suckle at her breast. The scrap of lace fell as he pulled back to look into her flushed face. Her head fell back on her shoulders and she would have fallen back if not for the support of his arm. "You're sure you want this?" He couldn't help asking the question though his beast screamed in denial. *It* wanted this, wanted her, to end the torture of the *el calor*.

Swallowing, she lifted her head to look into his eyes. "Yes. I need it."

She bit her lip and he leaned forward to kiss her, his tongue darting out to lave away her pain.

"I can't stand it anymore. It's like this insidious...thing is burning through my blood, changing me, making me crazy and somehow I know having sex with you will ease it, at least for a little while."

Reaching up, Kam took her face in his hands. "Just so you know it's only a temporary reprieve. Soon, you'll need to be with Tony. Then with all three of us before the heat will leave you. Are you sure?"

Tears slid down her cheeks as she closed her eyes and nodded. "It has to stop. It just has to. The things it makes me think aren't natural. It makes me—" Her voice broke on a sob. "It makes me want to hurt people, not just myself, but others." She shook her head. "I can't live like this. It has to

stop.”

Suddenly, Niki’s body began to shake and convulse.

“I can’t make love to you like this.”

God she needed medical treatment, not sex.

She needs your body in hers. It doesn’t matter where. She merely needs the DNA released from your semen to reduce the symptoms of the heat.

It was Jarrod, always the calm in the storm.

How do you know this? Kam had to know before he would risk harming their mate.

It’s in the old texts and records kept deep in the ground beneath the alpha’s lair. Only the alpha’s family knew where to find them. When the usurper took control, he had no idea where to find the records. Even if he had, it takes live DNA to open the shaft. Adam unlocked the vault and released the records for study.

Kam reached for his majick and wished their clothing away. If he must do this, he would do it the best way he knew how. Crawling onto the bed, he lowered himself onto Niki’s body, needing the closeness, needing her to know he wasn’t a beast as he took her in her need. “Look at me, Niki.”

She opened her eyes, her gaze glazed with pain and need. “Make it stop,” she begged again as she spread herself wide. “Please make it stop.”

“I will, love.” He brushed the hair back from her sweat-soaked face. “I will.”

Moving between her legs, he reached between them and felt her readiness. Moisture soaked his

fingers. There was no need to wait, no need to do anything but plunge into her slick depths and give her relief. Flipping her over onto her stomach, he placed two pillows beneath her hips and then pressed forward, sinking his cock into her.

“Yes!” she screamed, her hips pressing back against him as he drove forward, burying himself deep into her tight sheath.

Niki began to ease almost immediately after he plunged inside her. Her breath seemed to come easier. The sound of her heartbeat slowed. Still, she arched her back, pressing into him as he surged forward, giving her everything he had as she fought to regain control of herself.

Kam’s spine tingled. His balls ached for release as he continued to push into her tight depths.

* * * *

Finally! The need and the heat began to ease as Kam thrust into her with abandon. His hands gripped her hips as she pushed back, frantically reaching for her climax. There wasn’t room to be ashamed or embarrassed as this was nature at its best...or worst. Either way it had nothing to do with what or who she was as a person.

With her hips in the air and her shoulders on the bed, her nipples rasped against the rough material of the comforter. Normally, she wouldn’t

dream of lying naked on a hotel comforter, but here she was. Two minutes ago, she'd been mindless with need, uncaring of whom or where she was.

The only thing that mattered was getting the man behind her to thrust his cock deep into her burning flesh to take away the madness and pain. She needed this unlike anything she'd ever needed before. *Why?*

Niki's thoughts were broken and scattered as Kam continued to thrust his shaft deeper and deeper. Mindless pleasure washed over her in ever-increasing waves until she'd gone mad with it. Her fingers dug into the sheets, fists clenched, her knuckles white. She whimpered when he pulled from her and leaned back on his legs. Kam's fingers slid through her wet folds before circling her back hole.

"Have you ever had a man here?"

Nodding, she replied, "Once, when I was younger." She remembered when she was younger and afraid to become pregnant and equally afraid that if she didn't allow her boyfriend certain favors, he would leave her. He ultimately left anyway. She'd been a fool. She should have waited. She should have waited for these three men.

"Then at least it won't be a shock." His hands caressed her buttocks, alternately pushing them

together and pulling them apart as his fingers kneaded her flesh.

She felt her face heat. "To tell you the truth... I kind of liked it."

"That's always nice to hear," Kam said with a chuckle.

Gathering the slick moisture from her dripping channel, he rubbed the slippery fluid over the tiny rosette of her anus. Inserting first one, then two fingers into her tight back hole, he prepared her for his invasion.

Pressing an opened mouth kiss to the small of her, back he asked, "Are you ready?"

She was more than ready. Niki was so wound up she almost pushed herself back on his cock, unable to wait.

At her jerky nod, Kam positioned the head of his hard shaft against the puckered rosette and pushed past the tight outer ring.

"Goddess, Niki, you're so tight." He groaned the words as the tip of his erection entered her anus. It sounded as though the words were ripped from his chest. His breath came in short heaving pants and a light coat of sweat glistened on his skin.

Niki didn't want to wait for him to impale her slowly. In fact, she arched her back against him, pressing his shaft deeper until he buried his cock up to his balls in her rear end. His sac slapped

against her nether lips, the soft hairs tickling her clit. Throwing her head back, Niki came as his cock throbbed and pulsed inside her.

What would it feel like when they all took her together – *if* they took her together. The sensation, the pleasure, would kill her. She was sure of it.

* * * *

“We have to get the hell out of here.” Jarrod strode past the bed, threw Kam’s clothing at him as he passed him and headed for the bathroom. “Get up and get moving.” Grabbing Niki on the way, he pulled her into his arms and kissed her roughly. “God, you smell good.” Setting her from him, he continued into the bathroom and shut the door. “Three shifters just checked in,” he called through the door, his voice muffled. “They’re all on this floor and most likely all waiting for us to go to sleep so they can get to Niki.” The sound of the toilet flushing and water running in the sink drowned out anything else he had to say until after he finished and opened the door.

Kam drew on his jeans and socks, slipped his boots on and struggled into the t-shirt he’d donned that morning. “You’re sure they’re after Niki?” The look Jarrod gave him made him feel like an idiot.

“Yes,” the other man said slowly. “They all

arrived today, they all asked about a blue-eyed woman and they are all currently on this floor." Jarrod strode to the balcony and leaned over the railing. "Tony's getting the car and some good stout rope." He turned to them, his gaze fixed on Niki. "Would you rather I carried you down or Kam?"

"C-carry?" The color leached from her face. "You can't be serious."

"As a heart attack, baby." Jarrod strode back into the room and began throwing the rest of her things into one of her suitcases. "We'll have to have these picked up. We can't risk taking them out of here. They'll know we're leaving. I'd like a bit of a head start on them."

Shit, shit, shit. How long before she'd need to mate with Tony? Did they have time to find another hotel? Did they even have enough time to get her out of this one and into a car where the two of them wouldn't have a bit of privacy? Hell, Kam couldn't imagine having to make love with her in a car for the first time or any time for that matter. She deserved better than that.

Even now, he could see the telltale trembling of her hands as she pulled her soft pink sweater on and buttoned it up the front. Each button missed its hole on the first attempt and sometimes the second.

Kam knew it wasn't nervousness. He could

already smell her heat—already sense the thick cream pooling between her legs as she dressed, covering her lush curves and alabaster skin.

His cock hardened in response. Hell, if they didn't find a safe place to hole up soon, they all may be going at it in the back of the SUV and that was the last thing he wanted. No doubt, it was the last thing any of them wanted.

Jarrold moved to the railing and peered out over the side once again. "Tony's here."

A medium sized rock attached to a rope landed on the balcony with a crack. Turning off the lights, Kam hoped it would make it more difficult to see what was going on out here without opening the sliders. The last thing they wanted or needed, for that matter, was company. He'd just totally healed from the first attack.

Niki backed away from the edge, her voice quavering as she said, "I have to go to the bathroom first."

"Hurry then," Jarrold said, eyeing the balcony. "I have no idea how long we have before they make their move."

Kam moved to the edge and looked down at Tony. *Sorry, old man, but you're going to have to wait at least until we get out of the city.*

Tony raised a brow. *I think I'll wait for a room, thank you."*

Sucking in a deep breath, Kam let it out slowly

as he broke the news to his friend. *You might not have the time. Niki is going through some strange version of the el calor. It's almost as though our touch or bodily fluids are some sort of drug she's jonesing for. By the looks of it, it won't be long before she'll need you, too.*

Tony's brows drew down in a frown. *I'm not going to fuck her in the back of the car like some teenager.*

Feeling the soft brush of Niki's fingers on his arm, Kam turned and stared down into her pensive face.

"I'm scared, Kam. Jarrod thinks I can climb down that rope," she whispered, and then gave a short hysterical giggle. "I can't even hang from a set of monkey bars without falling off after two seconds. I know I can't climb down a couple of floors on the outside of a building using a rope."

He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close. "That's the beauty of it, darlin'." He smiled. "You don't have to. All you have to do is wrap your beautiful arms and legs around Jarrod or me and we'll carry you down."

She shook her head. "I can't let you carry me. I don't weigh two pounds, you know. We'll fall to our deaths."

Kam grinned, realizing her human brain was putting human limits on them all. While it was accurate for her and human males, it wasn't

entirely accurate for Jarrod, Tony or himself. As *Leoparo* they had a distinct advantage over humans. They were faster, better, stronger. According to Paradise scientists, the jury was still out on smarter. Grinning, Kam pulled her under his shoulder and pressed a chaste kiss to her forehead. "Honey, we're a lot stronger than we look."

* * * *

Niki sucked her bottom lip into her mouth, uncertain. It was one thing to take them at their word for their differences, but it was something else to put her life on the line for it. Frowning, she looked out through the shadows lurking below. Tony stood leaning against the side of the SUV looking up and the sounds of traffic on the road a few streets over told her they hadn't slept for long and the city was still teeming with life.

Night had fallen while she'd been in the room getting her jollies with Kam and then sleeping. She glanced back down into the darkness at Tony and bit her lip. Even if they carried her, she knew climbing down from this height was a dangerous undertaking. They were on the third floor, for crying out loud. It would kill her if she fell. Niki glanced over her shoulder, tempted to run out of the room screaming and take her chances with the

mad men who followed her.

At least if the fall kills you it's a quick death.

The thought came unwanted and unbidden, reminding her that if she chose to act on the impulse to flee, the men who sought her would torture her before they finally ended her life. She watched as Jarrod wove the knotted rope around several sections of the railing.

"This nylon line will hold up to fifteen-hundred pounds. I'm not sure about the railing. Better to be safe than sorry, eh?" he asked with a wink.

"Couldn't they be watching us now?" If they were, they would know exactly what they were up to?

Jarrodd nodded. "That's why Kam is going to go out through the doorway. He's going to make enough noise to raise the dead and attract their attention to the hallway." He finished tying off the rope and dropped the slack onto the floor at his feet. "They aren't watching now. I'd know if someone were watching us. I would feel it." He shrugged. "Kam's exit should cover any noise we make." Jarrod nodded to Kam. "Ready?" At Kam's nod, he turned to Niki. "Up you go."

Niki almost squealed when Kam picked her up without warning and set her against Jarrod's back. She clamped her mouth shut just in time to keep from drawing attention.

"Wrap your legs around his waist and hold on

tight, darlin’,” he whispered in her ear, giving it a flick with his tongue before he pulled away.

After she wrapped her arms and legs tightly about Jarrod and she felt like a spider monkey, Jarrod leapt over the railing with the easy grace of a cat. It was as though she wasn’t even a weight on his back.

Niki did squeal then, but Kam was already in the room, yelling at no one and banging the luggage around.

“You want her, keep her, dammit,” he called out, his voice loud. “Good luck keeping her safe on your own, you horse’s ass!”

Jarrold had nearly reached the ground when she heard the door to their room slam and Niki knew Kam was on his way downstairs.

Gasping with relief when Jarrod’s feet finally touched the ground, Niki almost leapt from his back.

Tony caught her in his arms and held her trembling against him.

Burying her face in Tony’s neck, Niki took a deep breath, fighting the urge to run her tongue up the side of his neck. She reveled in his scent as her body reacted to his closeness. Liquid warmth pooled between her legs and her knees went weak. She needed to be with him as she did Kam only a few hours before.

Had it only been that long? She tried to check

her watch and realized it still lay on the bathroom counter where she'd left it to take a shower. She knew it couldn't have been long though. It had only been a few hours between Jarrod and Kam.

Pulling from Tony's arms, her face heated as she backed away and tried to avoid meeting his gaze. How could she want him, any of them, so soon? Hell, she'd just had sex with his friend! What was wrong with her that she could want all three of these men in less than twenty-four hours? She'd never been promiscuous before.

Closing her eyes to stem the tears that threatened to come, Niki clenched her teeth and straightened her spine. She could do this. She could be with these three men. Deep down, Niki knew she could do anything that kept her alive and her family safe.

"Toss me the keys, then get in the back and cover her. This isn't over yet. They may have a tail on Kam."

Tony tossed the keys to Jarrod and ushered Niki into the backseat of the SUV.

"Get into the cargo area. The window tinting is darker back there and it will be more difficult to see you," Jarrod said as he slid into the driver's seat.

Niki followed Tony's lead. She climbed over the back of the seat and sat down on the hard floor. Rough carpeting bit into her palms as she sat

staring though the darkness, wishing she could see Tony's face.

She was scared and desperately wished he'd hold her and tell her everything would be all right even though she knew deep down that everything would never be just all right ever again. His fingers circled her ankle loosely and she peered through the dim interior, trying to see him.

"Lay down. You'll be a smaller target if someone should shoot at us."

Niki complied quickly and rolled through the darkness until she pressed her body tightly to his.

Tony groaned at the contact and pulled her into his arms. "You don't know how good you smell, Niki," he whispered the words in her ear, then captured the lobe with his lips and suckled lightly.

Bolts of current shot through her blood. Her body rocked with the sensation of his breath on her skin and his arms wrapped tightly around her. "Not again," Niki whimpered as the need built within her once more.

"Sh..." Tony tenderly kissed her lips, brushing the hair from her face and eyes as though he could see her. "I understand what's happening to you."

Gentle hands skimmed over her back and rear, igniting a fire in her blood as waves of desire increased with each caress. The hard length of his shaft pressed against her lower belly and she moaned. Niki needed him just as she'd needed

Kam not so long ago. The overwhelming desire to climb atop him and ride his cock until he came deep within her was almost enough to drive her mad.

Tears leaked from her eyes and he licked them away. "Don't cry, baby. Neither of us thinks less of you for this. Your body, something in your DNA demands you come together with us. It's not your fault."

Perhaps it wasn't her fault, but she still couldn't shake the idea that sex should be private between two individuals not something shared in the back of some truck driving down some unknown highway. Taking a deep breath, she pulled away from him. "I can control it. You just can't touch me."

Her mind and body screamed a denial when Tony released her and moved to sit on the other side of the vehicle with a sigh. She knew exactly how he felt, but she refused to have sex in this vehicle with two other men present. Well, she'd abstain as long as she could. Even now, the urge to climb into Tony's lap and rip his clothes from his body was almost more than she could bear.

The vehicle slowed to a stop at a traffic light and Kam climbed into the front seat.

"Have a tail?" Jarrod asked, glancing in the mirror.

"Not that I could tell, but we'll still want to get

moving. There's no telling how long they'll wait to storm the room."

Jarrold hit the gas and turned right when the light turned green. "Get the map out and put the glass up in the back. I think the other two may need some privacy."

Put the glass up? The question barely popped into Niki's mind when a sheet of dark privacy glass rose behind the front seats.

"It in case we're transporting prisoners. They can't hear what we're discussing and we can't hear their threats. They also can't see us."

Was that a smile she heard in Tony's voice? Niki knew it was when she heard the rustling of clothes and realized he'd begun to undress.

"You might want to remove your clothing yourself since it's all you have at the moment. I'd hate to rip it off you and leave you with nothing to wear, but one of our shirts."

Swallowing thickly, Niki shook her head. She couldn't, wouldn't do this, until her body demanded it of her. "I can't just strip. I don't even know you. Until the need becomes unbearable and I'm myself, I can't. I won't even try."

"Then allow me."

He was on her in a heartbeat, his lips and hands everywhere. Strong fingers deftly unbuttoned each button and unzipped her fly. He tugged her jeans from her hips in one smooth motion that left

her breathless and waiting for him to press his long hard length against her again. She frowned when, after undressing her, he moved back to the other side of the SUV and waited.

It was like waiting to die. When would he pounce on her again? The suspense was killing her. Niki both wanted and dreaded it at the same time. Little fingers of need crawled through her system, heating her blood and causing her body to quake. Her nipples pebbled in the cool air, hardening as she wondered what his mouth would feel like on her flesh, what he would taste like.

Suddenly, the need to taste him overcame her, to feel his hard length driving into her mouth as she brought him to his release. Before she knew it, she was on the other side of the SUV, his hair in her hands as she pulled his head closer to hers and pressed her lips to his.

Niki felt him cup her breasts and gasped, needing him to touch her, to drive her wild with need. His tongue swept into her mouth, sliding against hers. The wet velvet, brushing against the inner recesses of her mouth made her groan.

Pulling away, she kissed her way down his chest, stopping for a moment to pay homage to his flat male nipples, before moving even further south to the springy hair at his groin.

His cock bucked when she took the head into

her mouth and laved the small slit. Niki ran her tongue up the length of the shaft, her fingers closing around the base.

Circling the head with her lips, she suckled gently as she reached down to fondle his balls. Pressing on the flesh just below his sac, she smiled when he groaned and thrust up into her mouth. Circling the ridge around the head with her tongue, she drove her mouth deep onto his shaft, repeating the motion repeatedly until she could feel Tony's body tensing all over.

"Niki, baby." His voice was hoarse. He fisted his hands in her hair for a moment, then released her. "I'm going to lose it if you don't stop."

Smiling, she kept moving her mouth over his hard length, her tongue licking the tip, pulling the minute drops of clear fluid from the slit. This was what she wanted. Finally! She was in control of something. With his hands alternately fisting and releasing her hair, Tony was helpless to do anything else but sit and accept the pleasure she gave him.

The need for release rode him hard, she could tell by his breathless pants and the groans that came from deep in his chest. This was what she wanted. This time she would control it. If her body demanded she have this man's semen, it would damn well get it where she wanted it and right now, she wanted him to come deep down her

throat.

Scoring his thighs and lower abdomen lightly with her nails, Niki took his cock deep into her mouth and hummed. She knew it would drive him over the edge, even counted on it.

Still, when he grabbed her head and held her as he came, Niki knew she was the one with all of the power. She'd brought him over the edge and even though they hadn't made love in the true sense of the word, her body began to relax.

"Apparently all I needed was a bit of your DNA." She refused to use the more crude word. Wiping his come from her mouth and chin, Niki fumbled around in the dark, searching for her clothes.

Now she could dress, and act, like a normal person, at least for a few hours. Climbing back into the backseat, she rapped on the glass and raised her brows at Kam's surprised expression.

"Need something?" Kam asked after lowering the partition.

"Not really, but it would be nice to be included in the conversation."

He didn't say anything about Tony's absence, just shrugged. "We weren't really saying much." He turned sideways in his seat. "How do you feel about driving straight through?"

Tony climbed over the back of the seat and joined her, still a bit breathless from their

encounter.

"Any complaints or suggestions, Tony?"

"Not really. I think it's probably best that we get her back to Paradise as soon as possible. The longer we delay, the more kidnapping attempts there will be."

If Kam thought Tony had other ideas, he didn't seem surprised at the answer. Pulling his phone from his pocket, Kam pressed a number, obviously on speed dial, and almost immediately began talking. "Hunter? Yeah, it's Kam. We're driving straight through. I'd appreciate it if you could arrange a safe house." He glanced over the back of his seat and smiled. "Thanks for letting me know. She'll be happy to hear that. We should be there in about two days. See you then."

Kam closed his phone and turned to look at Niki. "Your bother is in Paradise and doing fine. He's accepted a job as one of our new deputies as soon as you're there safe and sound." He grinned. "He wants to trust us, however he is holding judgment until we bring you in safe and sound."

She leaned back against the seat with a sigh. "I wish I could talk to him." It would have gone a long way toward building *her* trust in these men. She wanted to say she trusted them implicitly since she'd had sex with them all. Still, she wouldn't be the first woman to lose her heart to a man who was bad for her.

The thought gave her pause. Did she really love these three men? Maybe. They'd certainly begun to grow on her. Still, she hardly knew them. She'd love for them to give her something to build trust upon.

Kam handed her his phone. "Call him. He's at the Sheriff's office now. Talk to him to assure yourself he's okay. And assure him while you're at it."

Taking the phone, Niki smiled her thanks. The only problem she could see in their relationship was how her family would react to her having three husbands. That was one thing she wasn't looking forward to explaining to her brother or her dad.

Somehow, things would work out between them. They had to.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“Niki!” Kam turned at the excited cry and watched as Niki’s brother and an older man and woman ran down to greet her.

“I couldn’t keep them away. Once they found out I was here and you were on the way, they wouldn’t hear of staying home. They wanted to see you.”

Niki ran toward them and into the arms of the older couple.

“I never thought I’d see you again.” The woman held Niki as though she’d never let her go. “After what you told us and the things we saw on TV about that monster...” The older woman sobbed. “I was sure I’d never see my baby again.”

The older man pulled her from the woman’s embrace. “Aren’t you going to give your old man a hug?”

“Of course I was, Daddy.” Niki grinned and threw herself into his arms.

It was hard watching her with her family. Kam knew, they all knew, that these three people could take her from them and there was nothing they could do to stop it. He only hoped they didn't wish to take her anywhere.

Turning back, Niki grinned at him. "These are my parents, Steven and Margaret Stone. Mom, Daddy, I'd like you to meet the men who have saved my life, Jarrod McCleod, Kameron Barrington and Tony Petrelli."

Steven stepped forward and took their hands in turn. "I'm happy to meet you, boys. I thank God every day that you found our little girl and brought her home safe."

It never failed to amuse Kam how many times humans assumed he was younger than they were, when in fact he was a good ten years older than her father, at least. "Our pleasure, sir."

Niki's father turned to look at his daughter for a moment. "Not too much pleasure I hope."

"Daddy! My sex life is none of your business."

The look of mortification on Niki's face was almost enough to make him smile. It seemed that parents had the ability to embarrass their children no matter who they were or where they were from.

"That answers a lot, doesn't it, Margie," he added, his expression grim.

"Stevie," Margie said gently resting a hand on

her husband's arm. "Remember what we heard about Paradise. Remember what they told us. We agreed nothing mattered as long as our baby was safe. You promised."

Steven looked down at his wife and sighed. "I did, didn't I?"

"Yes you did. Besides, look at her, she's positively glowing." Mrs. Stone leaned over to whisper in Niki's ear. "Are you pregnant yet?"

"Mom! You're almost as bad as Daddy." Niki looked at her through narrowed eyes. "You look awfully happy about all of this." She glanced around, then lowered her voice, "You know about Paradise, about...everything?"

"Well, yes, dear." Her mother reached out and patted her arm. "You don't think we could stay in a town like this and not learn about their forward ways." Her mother whispered, "Besides, what woman doesn't fantasize about that at one time or another?" She wagged her brows. "Well, *are* you pregnant yet?"

"Mother!" Niki blushed and covered her face. "I don't believe you." She lowered her voice to a whisper, "Even if I was I wouldn't know it yet. It's only been a few days."

Kam didn't believe it either and, had he been human, he wouldn't have heard the exchange between mother and daughter. He frowned, wondering if her mother really knew all there was

to know about Paradise and the people who lived here.

"They told us about their multi-member relationships and how, legally, they know you can't all be married, but in Paradise you are as good as married to the men you live with." Margie turned to look them over. "Are they all attracted to you as your brother suspected?"

Niki's blush deepened to near crimson and she nodded. "Yes they all seem to be attracted. Plus, I'm attracted to them, too, Mom. I couldn't choose between them if I had to."

"It's a good thing you don't have to then, isn't it?"

"What about Daddy?" Niki threw her father a dubious glance.

"Don't you worry about him, sweetheart. I may be pushing fifty, but I can still wrap that man around my little finger."

* * * *

When her mother wrapped her arm around her and squeezed, Niki knew everything would be all right. Things would work out somehow, she would build a life here with these men and her family would still love her. Perhaps, if she could convince them to keep their mouths shut about Paradise's other secret, then they could all live

here. From what she understood, this was almost a ghost town trying to make a comeback.

Most of the storefronts stood empty and there were precious little children around. Maybe she could convince her mom and dad to sell their house in Mason and move here. If not, they were only two hours away. Once she was out of danger, it would be nothing to make the trip.

"I understand there's some sort of bonding ceremony not unlike a wedding. You have nothing to wear, do you? Do you think we can go shopping?"

Leave it to her mother to think about things like that. "I don't know. I think they want to keep me here because that psycho is hunting me."

"Surely they could take us to Mason for a few hours. Try to talk them into it tonight. It will be good practice. You have to learn to get them to give you what you want and leave them believing it was their idea."

Niki fought the urge to glance back at the guys. She knew they heard every word of their conversation. The last thing she needed was for them to believe she wanted to make them into some sort of *Stepford* clones. "I don't want to wrap them around my finger, Mom. I want them just the way they are." She paused at that, realizing it was true. The revelation couldn't have come at a better time. She knew her dad wanted to grab her

and run. What man wants to think of his daughter sleeping with three men at once?

"It's time we headed for the lodge. We have a lot of catching up to do and right now, with all the ex-rangers in residence, it's one of the safest places in town."

Niki glanced up at Jarrod and smiled. "Okay." She looked at her parents. "Are you staying at the lodge, too?" If they were, she was going to have to be extra careful with the guys because neither of her parents would let her be alone with any of them until after the bonding ceremony, regardless of what's already happened.

"We're staying with Adam Greer and his...family," her mother answered tactfully.

Niki knew Adam Greer was the leader here in Paradise and he had two mates, one male, one female. Perhaps it was a good thing her parents had been with them. It gave them a chance to see how a three-way relationship can work.

"I'll just go to the hotel with you and help you get settled." Her mother smoothed her hair back. "I think it's a good idea for your father to get to know these men." Her gaze shifted between Tony, Jarrod and Kam. "Which two are you in love with, dear?"

Niki's throat almost closed off at the question. It was bad enough her mom and dad knew she was fated to be with two of these men. What would

they say when they found out she'd be with all three? Would they be happy for her as long as she was happy? Could she be happy living with three men? Hell, most women had a hard time pleasing one man. How in the world would she ever be everything that three men needed? "It's not two of them, Mom."

Relief washed over her mother's expression at her answer. "Your father will be so happy."

"I doubt it," she murmured. How could she tell her mother she'd have to have sex with three men at the same time at least once? The three of them had told her that on the way back. In order to live as long as they did, she had to truly bond with all three. She needed to bind her life force to all of them. That way, if something should happen to one or two of them, she would still have a long life with the mate who still lived. Being only bound to only one, her life would end should he die, leaving the other two alone. "I will bind myself to all three of them." There, she'd said it!

Her mother took a deep breath and shook her head. "Your dad is going to have a fit. He nearly had a stroke when he found out about the second man." She rolled her eyes. "He's going to have a cow and two chickens over this." Her mother smiled and patted her arm again. "Don't worry about it, dear. I'll just remind him of a couple of fantasies he's told me about and he should shut

right up.”

TMI! She really didn’t need to know about any fantasies her parents had. *Eew!*

* * * *

Jarrold watched the play of emotions that ran so strong they showed on Niki’s face. He could tell she didn’t need her mother’s latest revelation. He didn’t think he’d want to hear about any of his parent’s fantasies either. Like all normal offspring, he didn’t want to think about what his parent’s did to bring about his conception. He fought a grin, knowing in fifteen or twenty years their own children would think the same. Some things never changed.

He was almost sad to see Niki’s parents leave when the sheriff picked them up after dinner. Mr. and Mrs. Stone was a colorful and loving couple. He couldn’t have chosen better given the opportunity. One day he must remember to thank them for raising the well-adjusted, caring woman she’d become.

Right now, he wanted to make good use of their time alone together. Kam and Tony were off giving a report to the sheriff’s office, leaving him with the privilege of protecting their mate. Still, protection didn’t have to come in the form of a gilded cage. “Would you care to take a walk?”

Her eyes lit with surprise and Jarrod was glad he'd suggested it. After nearly two weeks of being cooped up, first in a hotel room, then an automobile, he was sure a good stretch of the legs would help relax her. Especially when he knew she was nervous about their bonding. They'd agreed that bonding with her as soon as possible was best. Not only would they have the added benefit of connecting with her mentally, but also she would be harder to kill. Much harder to kill. Not to mention she could more easily defend herself once she was like them.

"I'd love to go for a walk."

The answering glow on her face was almost enough to make him fish for something else to keep it there. Lightning zinged through his blood when her hand made contact with his arm as he held it out. The current went straight to his dick, wrapped around his balls and squeezed them. He sucked in a deep breath, turned and led her from the main common room of the lodge and out the front door.

Darkness had fallen while they ate and the spring air was still a bit cool. Wrapping his arm about her, he used the chilled air as an excuse to hold her close. She had no need for a jacket. Like all shifters, warmth radiated from him like a furnace.

"Warm enough or should we go back and get

your jacket?" Jarrod looked down at the top of her head, covered in glossy black curls. He would give anything to bury his fingers in her hair, tilt her head back and claim her lips with his. Jarrod cleared his throat and looked ahead, concentrating on the glowing signs of the businesses reopening in Paradise.

"I'm glad to see that there are at least a few kids in town," Niki said dryly. "They even feel comfortable enough with the authorities to goof around a bit." She rested her head against his shoulder and chuckled.

"Why do you say that?" He apparently didn't see what she did and he wanted her to let him in on her private joke.

"It seems like there are a few practical jokers in town."

Following her gaze, Jarrod still couldn't figure out what she meant.

"Look," she said, pointing toward Prudence Pacher's candy store. "If that's not from a prankster, the candy shop owner has some issues."

Someone rearranged the sign above the door. Instead of reading *Try Pacher's Amazing Fudge*, as it did when he left town, the sign read *Amazing Fudge Pachers*. Jarrod almost lost it. He choked on a laugh, not knowing if the boys were watching. The last thing he wanted to do was encourage them.

Myrtle Connor already tried to have them arrested for stealing her damned ice sculptures that kept disappearing overnight during the winter. It seemed that whoever the culprit was, loved the old woman's ice creations, but had no interest in her summer log carvings. "You should have been here for Yule. They had half the town in an uproar and were banned from the diner for three months."

"Why were they banned?"

He pointed to the diner's sign. It wasn't an expensive one. On wheels, with block lettering, it sat out in front of the diner, the backlight causing the black letters to stand out. "See how the sign reads?" He grinned. "Just before Yule, one of them had the brilliant idea to change the name from *Beat the Clock Diner* to *Beat the Cock Diner*. One of them, probably Tommy, because he's the oldest, came up with the idea." He frowned thoughtfully. "Come to think of it, it could have been any one of them. They're all teenagers and no doubt all have raging hormones right about now." Walking over to a bench sitting next to the door of the candy store, he pulled it over a few feet, stood on the seat and rearranged the sign.

"What do you think you're doing up there, Jarrod McCleod?" A shrill voice asked from behind her.

"Mrs. Connor, what a wonderful surprise. I'd

like to introduce you to my mate, Nicola Stone."

She sniffed the air. "Another *truebond* mate, too, if I'm not mistaken." Mrs. Connor gave Niki a tight-lipped smile. "Nice to meet you, Miss Stone."

Niki murmured something that passed for a greeting and Myrtle turned her glare back on him.

"You should be ashamed of yourself. Fudge packers..." She paused and shook her head. "You should be setting an example for those young hoodlums. Instead, here you are, joining in their tomfoolery." The older woman crossed her arms and tapped her foot. "Put the sign back the way you found it, young man."

"I was doing just that, Mrs. Connor. I saw the Gibson boys were up to their old tricks and decided to fix it before anyone was the wiser."

Myrtle Connor just raised a thin gray brow and gave him an even dirtier look. "Blaming your indiscretions on children," she said, shaking her head. "I'm ashamed of you. Fix it now or I'll have to report you to the sheriff's department. Really," she added as she turned to walk away. "Some boys just never grow up."

"That went well, didn't it?" he asked as he finished fixing the sign and jumped down off the bench. "I'm going to have to have a talk with those boys. Playing pranks is one thing. It's something totally different when I take the blame."

"Come on, Jarrod." Niki laughed. "You said

yourself they're just kids. Let them have their fun. They'll grow up soon enough and most of the fun will be leeches from their lives."

Sitting on the bench, he pulled her into his lap. "You feel so good here, you know. I can't wait until tonight." He nuzzled her neck, feeling her blush as her body heat radiated from her.

"I can't either," she whispered, leaning down to press her lips to his.

Jarrold groaned. It was stupid. He knew it was stupid to drop his guard and return her kiss, but he did it anyway.

"Great minds think alike, old friend. This is just what we had in mind."

The familiar voice made him stiffen.

"Only our version will feel much better for us and, well, not so much for your girlfriend."

Damn, damn and damn. "What are you doing here, Dickie?"

"Don't call me that, you prick." Richard Comstock reached out, grabbed Niki by the arm and yanked her from Jarrold's lap.

Three of his friends stood, surrounding him in a loose circle, holding guns.

"You know my dad was the one who liked being called Dick. Not me."

Jarrold did remember and that was precisely why he used it. He also remembered Dickie got sloppy when he was pissed, which was why he

baited him. "Leave her alone, Dickie." Jarrod glanced at Dickie's friends and knew he could take at least two of them, but taking on four was odds he knew he'd never beat. "What do you want?" Jarrod asked, afraid he already knew the answer.

"We want your little bitch, of course." Richard pulled Niki close and licked the side of her face. "You taste sweet. Did he tell you that when he had his head buried between your thighs, you little slut?"

Fisting his hands at his sides, Jarrod reached out to Tony and Kam. *I hope you're hearing this, I've been broadcasting since this asshole showed up.*

We're on our way, Kam answered, his voice devoid of any emotion.

Jarrod knew the other two were clearing their minds, readying themselves for the kill. Emotion was a liability. They couldn't afford to feel anything while they fought. Knowing he needed to keep Richard talking...or fighting, Jarrod sat back and crossed his legs, deliberately putting himself in a less secure position. He hoped Richard hated him enough to go for it. With the other two on their way, the odds just got a lot better. One of them would keep hold of Niki while the other three fought. That evened the odds as long as none of them held a gun to Niki's head.

Shadows moved across the street and Jarrod

knew his help had arrived. Smiling, he held his arms wide. "Come on, Dickie. You know you're going to have to kill me to take my mate. Surely you're not going to let one of your lackeys do what you've wanted to do for so long. Put the gun down and fight me. Let's see which of us is better once and for all. If I win, your guys can always shoot me before I kill you. Come on, Dickie, you know you want to—Oof."

The wind was knocked out of him as Comstock attacked, knocking him off the bench. He hadn't expected the other man's quick reaction. He punched Niki in the face and she went down hard, cracking her head on the sidewalk. The sight of their mate hitting the rough cement walkway had all three of them roaring, enraged. Kam and Tony, in cat form, pounced on two of the men, going straight for a chokehold.

The fourth man rushed to grab Niki up off the side walk and held her limp body in front of his like a shield, his gun to her head. "Stop! Stop or I'll kill her."

It was easy to follow the other man's instruction. Jarrod had just broken Dickie's neck and the prick would never harm another female. Tony and Kam had also made quick work of their men.

Now their only concern was how to get their mate from the fourth man's clutches.

Tony and Kam shifted from beast to man and clothed themselves with magick.

"Let her go and you can walk away from this." It was Kam who found his voice first.

"Fuck that and fuck you. You'll kill me as soon as I let her go. Don't think I don't know that." The man backed away, taking Niki's limp body with him. "We need her. Tomorrow is the Sabbath and *He* needs a sacrifice." The stranger pressed his lips together as though he'd said something he shouldn't have.

Sacrifice? Was that what all the killings were about? A sacrifice on the Sabbath? "You know the Earth Mother doesn't condone sacrifice. You sacrifice eating chocolate, red meat or pizza. You don't sacrifice people, you idiot." Sacrificing a life to the Goddess was tantamount to taking a gift your human mother gave to you and ripping it to shreds in front of her eyes. You just didn't do it.

The man raised his arm higher, pressing the gun more firmly to Niki's head. "I swear to god, if you insult me again, I'll put a bullet in her brain. I don't give a shit about His plans for her. Any woman will do, He's said so himself." He glanced down at Niki and smiled evilly. I'm going to take her to him, but first, I'm going to fuck her brains out myself. Why should he have all the fu —"

What sounded like a firecracker going off cut his words off mid-sentence and a look of shock

crossed his face as he fell to his knees.

Kam and Tony both moved with lightning speed and caught Niki before she hit the ground again. Jarrod could only stand and stare at Niki's Mother, standing in the middle of the street, holding a still smoking pistol.

The gun dropped from her limp fingers as her knees gave out and her husband caught her.

"I couldn't let him hurt my baby!" she cried before she fell into a faint.

* * * *

"She did what?" Niki couldn't believe her ears. Her mother actually shot a man? She shook her head. "I don't believe it. I can't believe it. I just can't see my mother shooting a man."

"Believe it, sweetie." Her father stepped into the room and pressed a kiss on her forehead, carefully.

She hurt all over and her head ached. Niki could only imagine what she looked like if her dad was here treating her like some fragile flower.

"We came around the corner and she saw that guy holding a gun to your head. I don't even think she thought about what she was doing. She pulled the small pistol from her purse, aimed and fired." He shook his head. "I didn't even know she owned a damned gun, though with all of these

murders lately, I can't say I blame her." He grinned, unable to keep his pride from showing. "It was a great shot, too. The coroner said had she been in front of the creep, she would have shot him right between the eyes." He shook his head. "Darlin', your mother has some unplumbed depths."

"I guess so."

"Baby!" Her mother rushed into the room and pressed a kiss to her temple.

Niki took notice how none of them touched her sore jaw. It was just as well, since it ached so bad it made her sick to her stomach. "Can I have a mirror?" She wanted to see her injuries. Now.

"Um...I think you should wait a day or two...or perhaps ten," her mother mumbled.

Throwing the covers back, Niki swung her legs over the side of the bed and stood. The room spun around for a few seconds, but after a bit, she felt better. "Where's the bathroom?" She glanced around, suddenly having to go. She could kill two birds in the bathroom. She could use the toilet *and* get a gander at her face.

Reaching up, she gingerly felt her sore jaw and almost cried. It was huge! Easily swollen to two or three times its normal size, it must look horrible. Tears filled her eyes. "No wonder you won't give me a mirror. I look like hell." She reached up, afraid to touch her nose for fear she'd pass out

from the pain. "He broke my nose, didn't he?" She'd always thought her nose was ugly, but now it must really look like crap.

"No, baby, he didn't break your nose." Tony stepped up, wrapped his arm around her shoulder and led her through a door and into the bathroom. "You have a few bumps and bruises. That's all."

That's all? The face staring back at her from the mirror looked nothing like her. Purple and black marred her face. There were scratches on her chin and cheeks and her right eye was almost swollen shut. Turning in Tony's arms, she pressed the uninjured side of her face against his chest and cried.

Three weeks and at least as many shopping trips later, Tony, Kam, Jarrod and Niki stood before the town of Paradise and promised to cherish one another forever.

Niki stood between them, tears in her eyes at the touching gesture of her father giving her away. He didn't look horribly pleased with the fact that she'd just basically married three men, but he seemed okay with it. It was a start.

Her mother sat in front of the crowd, beaming. Niki wasn't sure if the cat-ate-the-canary smile was for the fact that her only daughter was just wed or if it was because she succeeded in keeping the four of them apart until now. Whatever it was,

she seemed genuinely happy. That was a good thing.

All three of the guys gave her scorching looks that Niki was sure she took exactly the way they'd meant her to take them. Niki suppressed a grin. If they thought they were going to take her off to mate immediately as was custom among their people, they were in for a rude awakening. Her parents had a reception planned at the lodge. Hours would pass before they'd leave them alone. Niki was sure it was a ploy to give her time to come to her senses.

Turning from Adam Greer who officiated, they all took each other's hands and bowed.

Her father stood. "Nicola's mother and I would like to invite everyone to the lodge for a reception." He gave them all a hard look. "While there, everyone can congratulate the...er happy group and toast them to a joyful and prosperous life.

ÉPILOGUE

Niki rose from the raspberry scented water and grabbed a thick warm towel from the heated rack next to the tub. Warm, raspberry flavored oil awaited her on the counter. Picking up the bottle, she poured some into her palm and massaged it into her skin, repeating the process until the tingling heat nearly drove her wild. Her nipples hardened beneath the oil as the air tickled her flesh.

Taking her time, she slowly applied the oil to every inch of skin she could reach, even taking the time to massage some of the fragrant oil onto the cheeks of her rear. She drew the line by not applying the oil to her own anus. One of the guys could do that. Her cheeks burned at the thought.

She wanted this night, maybe more than they did, but she was scared. How she'd handle three men possessing her at the same time remained to be seen. Would she chicken out or would she really have the courage to finish what they'd all

started.

Knowing what sex with three men at the same time meant, Niki took a deep breath and closed her eyes. Perhaps a bit of prayer wasn't too out of line. They believed in a goddess, not a god. Would their Great Earth Mother approve?

She gave a nervous chuckle. Of course, she would. She was the one who had made them this way, wasn't she? According to at least one of their scientists, she wouldn't have reacted to Jarrod's semen the way she had if she wasn't meant to be theirs.

Taking a deep breath, Niki released it and faced the mirror. "It's now or never. Either you go out into that room and face your men or you go running home to Mom and Daddy."

Picturing her three men was all it took to make her turn to the door and rest her hand on the knob. She knew they were all out there waiting, naked. It took every ounce of courage she had to twist the doorknob. *One...two...three*. Niki jerked the door open and stood in the entry wearing nothing but a nervous smile.

The collective intake of breath was enough to return her confidence and she walked out into the bedroom and her new life despite her reservations.

* * * *

Jarrold couldn't take his eyes off the vision standing in the doorway. Her inky curls rested on her shoulders. Full, red lips glistened in the candlelight and his cock throbbed with the need to bury itself between them. He wanted nothing more than to thrust his fingers through her fragrant hair and pull her to him. Bind her to him.

Kam sucked in a sharp breath and fisted his hands at his sides. "You're so beautiful, baby. Have we told you that today?"

Tony moved forward, took her hand and kissed it, then led her to the bed. "We can smell your fear, you know." He smiled softly. "You have nothing to fear from us."

Deep down, Jarrold believed she knew that. There was no doubt in his mind that Niki wouldn't be here with them if she didn't trust them not to hurt her. She looked between them, her apprehension evident. Her small pink tongue darted out to wet her lips and he almost groaned. Where was his control? When did he become such a horny beast that he found the mere exercise of keeping his libidinous thoughts under his command so difficult? Something within him softened when tears filled her eyes and she hung her head in despair.

"I feel like such a coward." Niki thrust a hand through her hair, causing her high, firm breasts to

raise, the nipples jutting out proudly as though begging for his lips. Her body, flushed pink in the soft light of the candles they'd used to fill the room with a mellow glow, quivered with anticipation or dread.

"You're no coward." He moved forward to pull her into his arms as Kam and Tony crowded around her, their hands skimming the supple flesh of her back and sides. Jarrod's body stiffened at the contact, nearly shaking with the need to hold her, feel her delicate frame held tight against his. He feared frightening Niki more, but someone had to make the first move.

"Besides," Kam added as he moved to press his lips against the side of her smooth throat. "Tonight is your night."

"Every night is your night," Tony said and they all nodded.

"All you ever need to do is tell us to stop and we will respect your wishes. Always."

Kam reached around from behind her and cupped her breasts, his thumbs teasing the tight, rosy tips.

Niki arched back, pressing her breasts into his hands. She closed her eyes and she no longer held her head down with shame or embarrassment. Her head was thrown back against Kam's shoulder, her face flushed with desire as the three of them worshipped her body and caressed her

supple flesh.

Groaning, Jarrod leaned down and pulled a hardened nipple into his mouth. The urge was strong, undeniable. His body demanded he take her and take her now, but his mind agreed with his other mates. This night, every night, was hers, for her pleasure, her fulfillment. He was surprised to find, deep down, he meant that. He wanted nothing more than to fill her mind with pleasure, hear her soft sighs and guttural moans as the three of them brought her over the edge of desire repeatedly. Tight fingers of lust squeezed his balls until they ached and still Jarrod wanted nothing more than to please the woman he held in his arms. His love for her, his need to make his mate happy overrode his crushing need to drive his shaft into her soft flesh until she screamed.

Jarrod laved first her left, then her right nipple, suckling them both into his mouth in turn as Kam still held them framed with his hands. The contrast of his dark skin against hers only emphasized the difference in their bodies, making her appear even more delicate.

His mind roared with the need to take her, throw her down on the bed and sink into the damp heat he knew awaited him at the apex her thighs. Torn between the desire to have his seed pouring into her womb and down her throat, Jarrod groaned again as he sank to his knees and

began to worship their mate with his mouth.

* * * *

First, Niki stiffened when Jarrod lifted her leg and pulled it over his shoulder. Shock mixed with decadent lust when she realized what he meant to do while she stood flanked by Tony and Kam. Surely, he didn't mean for her to remain standing while his mouth ate at the flesh between her legs?

Niki could feel the strength of his arms and shoulders beneath her leg as he kissed her thigh. The slight abrasion of his cheek only added to the stimulation of breath and mouth on her flesh.

Her stomach fluttered, her whole body shook as she waited for that most intimate kiss. The fear slid away with the first touch of his mouth on her nether flesh. The first slide of his velvet tongue gliding through the moist flesh made her groan.

Sandwiched between the other two men the way she was, there was no fear of falling. They wouldn't let anything harm her. Deep down, Niki knew that as well as she knew her own name. The knowledge allowed her to relax, to enjoy the heights to which Jarrod's mouth and tongue took her as he laved and suckled her clit.

Fire raced through her body, thickening her blood. It flowed through her veins like lava, burning her from the inside out. The sensation of

Jarrold's mouth on the flesh between her thighs and Kam's and Tony's on each breast was enough to quickly send her over the edge of her first orgasm. Something told her it would not be her last. As she lay panting in their arms, Niki realized this was what life had in store for her. Wave after wave of pleasure from these three men washed over her and she knew she'd made the right choice in bonding with them. They needed her almost as much as she needed them.

The oil she'd massaged into her skin in the bathroom warmed as Kam and Tony blew on each nipple. Tingling heat washed over her, beginning at her feet and traveling up over her body. She gasped when she felt warm liquid slide over her mound and into her core. Delicious heat wrapped around her mind, numbing her brain to anything but pleasure as Jarrod rubbed even more of the decadent oil into her channel and over her clit. Fire raged in her blood, on her skin and he blew against the warming oil and flicked her clit with his tongue. It was all she needed to send her over the edge again.

Looking down, she stared into Tony's dark eyes as he gazed up at her. The sight of his mouth on her flesh, suckling her nipple into his mouth was almost enough to send her over once more. Her body was limp. Draped over Jarrod the way she was and held aloft by Kam and Tony, Niki knew

she'd never stand on her own. Not now.

"Please," she gasped, as it seemed they would begin their sensual assault anew. "The bed. Take me to the bed." Niki's mind whirled with possibility, with the desire, the need to feel her men inside her. All of them. She had an idea how they would manage it and right now, she could think of nothing else but possessing them and her mates possessing her.

Gentle hands caressed her stomach and breasts as Kam lifted his head from her breast and pressed his lips to hers in a heart-stopping kiss. He fisted his hands in her hair, tilting her head to the side to give himself better access to her lips. His tongue swept inside her mouth, dueling with hers as Tony kept his mouth fastened to her breast, his fingers toying with the other.

When Kam lifted his head, she drew her tongue over her trembling lips, loving the taste of him and missing the feel of his mouth against her flesh. With all three mouths against her body once again, Niki found herself unable to speak, to think, her breath coming in short desperate pants as the three caressed her.

Jarrold pressed one last kiss to her most intimate flesh, lowered her leg from his shoulder and rose to take her mouth with his.

Niki tasted herself on his lips, the tangy flavor strange on her tongue. Still, she longed for his

taste and his scent. Suddenly, a driving need to taste each one of them filled her

Covered in oil, her body slid sinuously against theirs as they carried her to the bed and lowered her to the sheets, her head at the foot of the bed. The ridiculous thought of ruining the beautiful satin sheets with the oil flashed through her mind just before Jarrod and Tony each took a nipple into their mouths.

Kam lay on his back next to her when Jarrod moved away. She nearly whimpered at the loss, but gasped instead when Kam pulled her atop him and gazed up at her with passion-glazed eyes.

The need she saw there was a powerful aphrodisiac and she smiled, rubbing her body against his. Moving to straddle him, Niki rose up and grasped his cock, guiding it to her channel. She lowered herself slowly, moaning deep in her throat as his hard shaft filled her.

Pulling her down to his chest, Kam suckled first one, then the other nipple into his mouth. His tongue alternately scraped across the sensitive flesh as the pads of his thumbs caressed the other tight bud.

Leaning over him as she was, opened her up for Tony who moved up behind her and caressed the cheeks of her rear. Warm oil again slid over her flesh and the silky feel of his fingers, slid easily into her back hole.

Kam lay beneath her panting. He threw his head back and gasped when Tony's fingers wriggled inside her. "God, that feels good." Opening his eyes, he gazed deep into hers. "Nothing feels like this, baby." Leaning up, he briefly kissed her lips. "You're so wet, so tight. Your flesh wraps around me like a fist. I don't know how long I'll be able to last, especially after Tony works his way into your ass."

It was obvious by the way he gritted his teeth that he strained to keep his control. Niki wondered how long it would last, how long he would be able to hold out before he gave into the need for release.

"Have I told you how much I love to touch you?" Kam asked, his hands skimming over her flesh, distracting her from the fact that Tony moved up behind her and pressed the head of his cock against the tight ring of her anus.

"Have any of us told you how soft your skin is, how the tight cheeks of your perfect ass fill our hands?" He turned his attention to her breasts. "Did I tell you that you have awesome breasts, perfect globes that make our mouths water with the need to kiss them, suckle them?"

How did he know such talk would turn her on, distract her so much, she barely felt a twinge when Tony pushed past the tight ring and into her back hole? Before she knew it, Tony's cock was deep

inside her and she felt stuffed, but not uncomfortable.

Kam cupped her breasts. The pads of his thumbs scraped over her sensitive nipples as they alternately thrust and withdrew. Again and again, they each thrust into her, working out an earth shattering rhythm until they slowly came to a stop.

Niki whimpered, she needed this, needed to come. The fears, the insecurities were gone. She was safe and she had three men who cared about her, who wanted to make her happy and give her so much pleasure she just may die from it. Why had they stopped?

The reason was apparent as soon as Jarrod stepped in front of her, his cock in his hand. "Open your mouth, baby. I can't wait to slide deep into your throat. Just the thought makes me want to come."

A lone drop of clear fluid appeared on the tip. The sight suddenly reminded Niki of her need to taste him, to pull his shaft deep into her mouth and give him the same pleasure he'd so selflessly given her.

Jarrold's thick shaft bobbed before her face, heavy with need. Nervously, Niki licked her lips, her gaze glued to the drop of fluid resting on the head of his cock. Leaning forward, she lapped it up, holding back a smile at his sharp intake of

breath.

His body tightened, his muscles straining as he leaned forward to press the thick length against her lips.

Kam and Tony still waited, both of them watching as she opened her mouth and took Jarrod inside. Finally, she would be their mate in every sense of the word. Finally, she would find herself on the road to heaven as the three of them began a thrusting rhythm as old as time.

Fisting her hand at the base of Jarrod's cock, she slid her hand up and down, mimicking the motion of her mouth gliding over his flesh. Cupping his balls with her other hand, Niki merely held on for the ride as her three men took over and rode her, thrusting their hard lengths inside her, taking her over the edge once more.

Niki moaned deep in her throat as she came, causing Jarrod to follow. Thick ropes of come shot from his cock and down her throat. She swallowed convulsively as the other two men came inside her as well. She screamed around Jarrod's cock as Kam and Tony each sank their teeth into one side of her neck while Jarrod pierced the skin of her wrist.

Each of them lapped up her blood, exchanging their DNA and making her one of them. Niki came again, her body convulsing as their minds merged and the overwhelming sensation of their

combined orgasms became too much to bear and she lost consciousness.

Niki watched her men as they each went to the buffet. Each of them insisted on getting her breakfast for her. All she needed do was sit and wait for them to bring it to her. Her mother sat next to her, her plate empty. She'd waited for the men to leave so they could talk.

"Nicola..."

Uh, oh. Her mother never called her that unless she was about to get serious.

"When I...when I shot that man who wanted to kill you..." She paused to take a drink. "Your father and I saw something. Of course we were frightened and scared so we went to the sheriff." She twisted her napkin in her lap. "These people..." She glanced around the diner, then lowered her voice. "They're not human. Did you know that?"

Niki smiled, reached over and took her mother's hand. "Yes, Mom. I know that. I knew it before the ceremony. In fact, I knew it before we even reached Paradise."

"Oh." Her mother's brow smoothed a bit. "So long as you know..." Her gaze shifted around the room again. "They *are* nice...er people."

"Yes," Niki agreed. "They are. That's why I let them make me like them. They age very slowly

and I will be much harder to kill now."

"You did what?"

The people at the next table glanced curiously in their direction at her mother's outburst.

"You heard me, Mother." Niki took a sip of her water and wondered if the guys were taking so long because they knew her mother needed to talk.

"But-but," her mother sputtered. "What about my grandchildren?"

Niki set her glass down and turned to look at her mother. She hoped her mom didn't think she'd suddenly turn herself into a baby factory. Niki wanted a few years alone with her men to have some fun.

The three turned to look at her and wink, telling her they'd been eavesdropping on her thoughts as she'd suspected. Gaining long life wasn't the only perk of being like them. She was also telepathic with her mates now.

"What about your grandkids, Mom?"

Her mother bit her lip and leaned closer. "You...you won't have kittens, will you?"

"Mother!"

Just then Niki's father and her mates decided to join them and Jarrod set her parents' minds at ease.

"We have children, Mr. and Mrs. Stone, just like everyone else. We don't have kittens or litters,

though there have been the rare multiple births on occasion as with humans."

A weight seemed to leave both of their shoulders and they smiled.

"I wanted to thank you three for saving our daughter's life." Steven Stone took a sip of his coffee before continuing. "It took a lot of courage to do what you did and I wanted to thank you and to tell you that even though I know it doesn't matter, you have our blessing.

"Thank you, Mr. and Mrs. Stone. That means a lot to us. We love Niki very much and we didn't want to come between you." Jarrod sat down next to her and rested his hand on her leg with a smile.

Tears filled Niki's eyes at their declarations and gazed at her father. They loved her! "Of course it matters, Daddy. It means everything to me." Reaching across the table, she rested her hand on his. "I have the love of three good men and now, with your blessing, I have everything to make my life complete."

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.

Tianna can be reached at this email:

tiannaxander@yahoo.com

Tianna's website is located at:

<http://www.tiannaxander.com>

www.myspace.com/Tianna_xander

and her yahoo group page

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/TiannaXander/>

Sign up for Tianna's newsletter by sending an e-mail with 'newsletter' in the subject line to

TiannaX@aol.com