

# SINFUL HEAT

THE ENDOWED SERIES BOOK 2

TIANNA XANDER

When Maya Abernathy accepts the gift of a cruise from her best friend, the last thing she expects is a *swinger's* cruise filled with nudists and deviants having orgies in the open air. Prude that she was, she couldn't wait for the first port of call where she could disembark and get away from the revelers for at least a little while. When she finally gets her chance, she can't believe she's late and misses the boat...literally. Will she catch up with the ship and return to her unwanted vacation or is she better off with the three men willing to make her Christmas the best one she's ever had?

Franco Rigatti and his best friends, Dante De Luca and Jacob Cameron, just opened up a booming new business in the Caribbean—night swimming with the dolphins. The last thing they expected was to find a woman they couldn't read who was the perfect specimen for them to share, if they could only convince her to allow it. Can the three sexy vampires convince the stranded Maya to stay on the island with them, or will she run back to the ship screaming when she finds out what they *really* are?

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Sinful Heat

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ISBN: 978-1-55487-451-4

Cover art by Angela Waters

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# SINFUL HEAT

BY

ΤΙΑΝΝΑ ΧΑΠΘΕΡ

## DEDICATION

*To Tina, as always, for taking a chance on me – for being a friend as well as publisher and for always being there to lend a sympathetic, if not downright comedic, ear.*

*To Jay, for always being there to stroke my ego. Even though you say I deserve it, I know you're going to make my head too big. Your comments in the edits always make editing fun.*

*To Lynne, because without our midnight chats once in a while, I might lose the muse. After all, she does keep hoping off to the Caribbean and the Outer Hebrides on occasion, the wench.*

*To my readers for always asking for more and to my children who make my writing possible by leaving me alone when I bark at them like a drill sergeant.*

*Last but never least, to my husband, Kevin, for going with me on the cruise as my photographer, tour guide and, as always, my loving companion. It made this particular book possible. I love you.*

*You are all my inspiration.*

## CHAPTER ONE

*This is a freaking nightmare. Nothing in the world could be worse than this.* Maya Abernathy sat poolside, just out of the sun, baking in her khaki shorts and bikini top as dozens of scantily clad men and women frolicked before her. Well, to be honest, only some of them were scantily dressed.

The others were totally naked.

The last thing she expected was to watch so many others get their jollies while her morals, what was left of them anyway, kept her on the sidelines. Her mother would have had a heart attack if she'd known this kind of thing went on in the world.

She took another long pull on the longneck bottle in her hand then closed her eyes to block out the parade of nude dancers and, oh God, was that two people actually having sex on the side of the pool in front of everyone?

"I am so going to kill Genevieve when I get home," she groused as she took another long swig of her fourth beer of the day. Damn, she could

barely believe she'd almost swigged down a six pack already. It was only two in the afternoon on the first full day of her Christmas cruise. She couldn't imagine what had gone on last night after boarding. The wild orgy was as horrifying as it was intriguing. Heat seared her cheeks as she imagined herself a part of something like that. She refused to lie to herself. It had been tempting. After forty plus years of being a good girl, being bad looked like heaven. Especially to a woman circumstances forced into a five-year celibacy due to her age, added weight and work demands. It was probably a good thing she'd decided to have room service deliver dinner to her stateroom last night, otherwise she may have done something shocking. Like dance around naked wearing a Santa hat like she saw a few of the other women doing last night.

Maya wanted a tall glass of *sex on the beach*, but opted for the beer instead when she found out exactly which cruise Genevieve booked her on, the conniving, low rent bitch. She'd even asked for the drink her so-called *friend* suggested she try while on board. It was against her better judgment, but she'd gone ahead and asked for the *one-legged lesbian kick boxer* anyway. Of course, the bartender had never heard of it. What did she expect—especially after she'd found out just how much of a screwing Genevieve had given her? Her cheeks

burned at the memory and she thinned her lips. The drink idea was just another nail to hammer into her *friend's* proverbial coffin.

She knew she needed to relax. Hell, even *she* would admit that she needed to get laid more than the next girl, but booking her on a swinger's orgy Christmas cruise was going just a bit too far and she would be damned sure to tell her ex-best friend that as soon as she got back home and finished kicking her ass.

Scrubbing her hands over her face, Maya shook her head and tried not to notice how the early consumption of alcohol affected her shipmates. It was impossible not to notice how everyone worked themselves into pairs, triads or sometimes nothing less than what a normal person—namely her—would call an orgy.

Gazing at several sunning themselves near the pool, Maya felt a tiny pang of jealousy. She would love to lay out in the sun and get a tan, but her allergy to the sun would give her hives so she opted to sit in the shade instead. Besides, the closer she was to the pool, the closer she was to the action and she wanted no part of that.

Maya took another long drink that emptied her bottle and waved the waiter—the only other fully covered person on the deck—over to get her another beer before she lost her nerve to stay on the deck and ran screaming to her cabin.



No matter how many drinks she had, she was sure the alcohol would do nothing to numb the heavy ache that settled deep between her legs as the swingers began their wild party in earnest. What kind of freaking cruise ship was this anyway? People were actually getting-it-on on the open deck! Even the sun deck was no refuge. The entire ship was filled with drunken, horny, nudists for God's sake.

There was nothing left to do, but be the prude she so obviously was and slink back to her room while the others onboard sated their most basic of desires and screwed themselves unconscious.

It probably wouldn't be so bad if she hadn't brought her e-book reader filled with all of those erotic titles with her. Hell, she'd fully expected to get laid, had even hoped to, but she also expected a man who would at least *not* have a thousand notches in his damned bedpost for heaven's sake. The people here onboard this ship fucked like rabbits with seemingly no regard for the need of protection from STDs. Not surprisingly, having dozens of other women's leavings was something she hadn't thought to consider when Genevieve told her she'd booked her on a single's cruise.

Maya certainly didn't expect a lifelong relationship, but she *did* expect to be the only woman in the man's bed for the week. After all, she didn't think seven days or so of fidelity was

*too* much to ask.

"Come on, baby. Why don't ya party with 'ol Bruce?"

A naked, inebriated man tugged on her arm just as she reached out to pick up the new bottle of beer the waiter had delivered. It sloshed out and covered her exposed cleavage and wet her bikini top. The cold fluid caused her nipples to tighten painfully and it took every ounce of self-control not to cover her breasts from the leering man's gaze.

"Mmm, mmm, mmm. I'll lick that off for ya." He grabbed his shaft with his free hand and waved it back and forth. "See, Mr. Happy sure is glad to see ya."

*Good God! Another man who insists on naming his private parts like it's some lost puppy.* If there was anything Maya hated, it was for a man to patronize her. She'd grown miserably tired of the treatment in the first law firm she'd worked for where the men considered their paralegals prey for interoffice sex games. Her promotions never suffered because she said no so she couldn't file sexual harassment charges, but she'd never liked the way they always managed to make her feel...less than she was.

"I am *not* your baby." She practically growled the words as she looked up at him, her eyes narrowed to mere slits as she contemplated

dumping what was left of her cold beer over the man's erect cock just so she could watch it shrivel from the cold.

"Aw, come on, ya know you'll like it." He waggled his brows and tugged a bit harder.

"No. Thank you." Could she get any more plain? Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes and shook her head as she tried to pull free once again. God, she was tired of these oversexed idiots trying to get her to participate in their uninhibited sex games. "I'm really not interested." She punctuated her answer with a tug of her arm and a glare.

"Then why did ya book yourself on a swinger's cruise, you tight-assed bitch?" Bruce's fingers tightened uncomfortably on her arm as he tried to pull her off the lounge.

"Take your hands off me!" At that point, Maya decided to lose her beer over the man's crotch after all. It was a deplorable waste of good alcohol, but she couldn't take his manhandling any longer.

Bruce squealed like a little girl and let her go when she dumped the ice-cold liquid over his hard shaft. It wasn't hard for long. Maya stifled a snicker as she snatched the opportunity to jump up and run back to her stateroom. The waiter grinned and gave her a jaunty salute as she hurried by.

Lucky for her, they hit the first port the following morning. Since she'd purchased two shore excursions for the twenty-four hour stay, Maya was one of the first people off the ship. Apparently, Bruce and his Mr. Happy were still sleeping off the previous night's excesses because she hadn't seen him.

*Thank God!*

## CHAPTER TWO

“‘**H**ow many people have signed up for tonight?”

Dante De Luca glanced up from the paperwork on the desk in front of him to give his friend, Franco Rigatti, a narrow-eyed glare. “You know better than to interrupt me while I am working the figures.”

The other man gave him an unrepentant grin. “Yep. Ask me if I care.”

Sighing, Dante shuffled the papers, pulling out those for the night’s excursion. “We have ten. A full boat this time.” He shook his head. I think we would have had more if one of the ships in the harbor was not a swinger’s cruise. You know as well as I do, those people think of little more than getting their rocks off at every opportunity.”

“I also know you still need to work on those contractions. Just because we’re nearly as old as God, it doesn’t mean we have to sound and act

like it."

Heaving another sigh, Dante gave his friend the finger. "Better?"

"Not much, but a little," Franco said with a shrug. "So would you say business is picking up?"

"I would. The look he got at tomorrow night's bookings was promising. We still have the opportunity for last minute sales and we already have eighteen booked. We may have to put the third boat into service tomorrow. If we sell out the seats in all three boats we may look into having a later excursion." He smiled. "It's not as if we will lose any sleep if we have an excursion start at nine in the winter and midnight in the summer. In fact, we may think of offering some sort of late night party package for a late excursion. If we charged a bit more, we could give them all they could drink. After all, we will get the same from them."

"I knew you would put some humor in there somewhere."

"Watch it, Franco. I didn't hear a contraction in your last two sentences. You're slipping and your age is showing." Dante almost grimaced at the use of the contraction. That was just about the only thing he disliked about this century. Proper speech and proper manners seemed to have gone to the wayside.

People with low morals and lazy speech filled the world. The days of proper etiquette were gone

forever. It was too damned bad, too. Having been a gentleman all his life, it was hard to change into an uncouth modern. Old habits *did* die hard. He knew that truth more than anyone.

"Who are you sending out to pick them up?"

"Dino." Dante shuffled the papers again. "It was his turn. He loves driving and would whine like a baby if I didn't let him go."

"Brothers are a pain in the ass sometimes." Franco curled his lip. "Stop giving him preferential treatment. The little asshole needs to grow up sooner or later."

"It wasn't preferential treatment. It was self-preservation. Just because he is my brother does not mean he will not attempt to cut off important body parts if I do not treat him as I treat the others. It was his turn."

Franco waved a hand. "Whatever." He looked thoughtful for a moment. "How bad do you think he'll cry if I go along for the ride?"

Laughing, Dante replied, "He will most likely relish the opportunity to throw you over the side. Watch your back if you go."

Dante knew his brother would never attempt to throw Franco over the side, no matter how badly he may want to try. His little brother may be immature, but he wasn't stupid. The boy knew that Franco was strong enough to chew him up and spit him out. Their mama didn't raise any

dummies, as the humans were wont to say.

"If you're going, you had better get moving." Sighing, he closed his eyes and shook his head. Contractions. God, how he hated them. "I wouldn't put it past him to try to leave early just to be sure he made the trip alone." He gave Franco a smile. "He knows you like to ride along sometimes."

"Shit! He knows I have a feeling..." Franco ran from the office so fast, he was little more than a blur.

\* \* \* \*

Maya had a few precious hours to immerse herself in the local culture after her first excursion to the turtle farm. It was a good thing, too. She hadn't packed more than her e-book reader, bikini and a couple of pairs of underwear since she had nothing else in her wardrobe but business suits. Right now, she wore the only pair of shorts and t-shirt she owned. Even her bikini had seen better days. Oh, it wouldn't fall off her or anything, but it *was* a little worse for wear. It was definitely time for a new one.

How in the heck had she managed to spend the last several years buried in her work that she'd not taken the time to relax at all?

Spying a likely shop for her clothing needs,



Maya took a deep breath and entered the brightly decorated shop fully prepared for a large hit to her bank account. *What the hell. You can't take it with you.*

After almost three hours and purchasing enough clothes for a few days including a bikini, thong and one-piece bathing suits, she hurried from the shop for a bite to eat. It was nearly six o'clock and she hadn't eaten since breakfast. She had an hour to sit in a local restaurant, get something to eat, and read a few chapters on her e-book reader before it was time to change her clothes for the night swim with the dolphins.

After three chapters, a delicious chicken Caesar salad and a bottle of spring water, Maya rushed to the bathroom to change. It was almost time to catch the boat to the new aquarium. She'd never been more excited in her life. Swimming with dolphins was one of the things she most wanted to do. She'd always had some sort of affinity for the intelligent creatures. She wasn't sure what it was, but Maya had always felt that she somehow communicated with them whenever she'd seen them in aquariums. Swimming with them was a dream come true. Besides, the night excursion was perfect for her. With her allergy to the sun, she could only tolerate the rays of early morning or

late afternoon.

At first, Maya thought it was strange for someone to offer a dolphin swim after dark. However, the more she thought about it, the more it made sense for someone like her. Perhaps the owners were merely expanding their business to allow people like her the experience of a lifetime without the medical repercussions they would have had otherwise. Not to mention that all of the other night excursions were parties where her hedonistic shipmates would no doubt go on drunken sexual binges and she wanted no part of that.

Spending all of her time in her stateroom while on the open sea was one thing, but Maya was determined to make the best of her allotted shore time. The oversexed maniacs she shared a cruise ship with couldn't run around town naked and screwing in doorways. They had to at least show some modicum of decency on land.

Locking herself into the biggest stall in the bathroom, Maya peered into her bag. At first, she didn't know which to choose. With a sudden burst of courage, she decided on the thong. After all, the darkness would hide most of the imperfections of her over forty year old body. Not that she had *too* many imperfections. She knew she had a decent body for her age, though she carried a few extra pounds, but thankfully, they were mostly all in the

right places – namely her boobs and butt.

After changing into the thong bikini, Maya shrugged on the oversized – Bad to the Bone – pirate t-shirt she’d purchased and stuffed her dirty clothes into the empty bag she’d begged from the store clerk. After brushing her hair, she slid some color over her lips, then exited the bathroom, feeling weird for wearing tennis shoes when she wore so little of everything else. Hurrying into another shop, Maya bought a pair of flip-flops and slipped them on her feet before leaving the store.

In the distance, she heard the drivers for the evening excursions hawking deals for their empty seats and she ran for the docks. The last thing she wanted was to miss the boat that would take her to the aquarium for the swimming session.

Surprisingly, the night swim appeared sold out. What wasn’t surprising was that everyone, except her, must have been from the other ship tendered in the harbor. At least she assumed so because they weren’t hanging all over each other and reaching into each other’s clothing. In fact, hardly any of them even touched. Apparently, *her* shipmates decided they’d rather party. She wasn’t sure if the island had a nude beach, but Maya was sure if it did, those horny bastards would find it.

“Welcome to the Cayman Island Night Swim, ladies and gentlemen.” The driver, a tall, buff, very handsome man addressed them. She would

guess his age at mid to late twenties. A bit old for the tour guide bit, but who was she to judge?

"I am Dino, your driver," he said, holding a hand to his chest and giving a slight bow. "If you will all follow me, we shall board the boat for your ride to the dolphin swim area."

Feeling like a lemming, Maya shuffled after everyone, choosing to remain near the end of the line. The less people behind her to see her butt hanging out from below her t-shirt, the better. She shook her head. What in the hell had she been thinking when she chose to wear the damned thong? She had assumed at least a few of the women from her ship would have been there in their skimpy, almost non-existent swimming suits. She glanced around with dismay as she realized most of the women here were with their husbands and wearing one-piece racing suits.

"Those of you with purses or bags may leave them here, if you wish." Dino stopped in front of a large bank of lockers attached to the side of a building. "There is no charge for this. We merely wish to help you keep your belongings safe. Night Swim with the Dolphins provides this as a convenience for our guests. Please feel free to utilize it."

Amidst murmurs of thank you and sighs of relief, almost everyone moved forward to store their belongings. After a long day of shopping and

lugging their packages around, it seemed that Dino didn't need to repeat himself.

Maya stepped up and cleared her throat. "Excuse me, Dino." Lifting her arms, she showed him her bags. "I have a bit more to store." She felt her cheeks burn as nearly everyone turned to stare at her three bags of clothing and her oversized purse. "Will that be a problem?" God, she hoped not. She didn't want to lose this opportunity just because she needed new clothes.

"Of course not," Dino replied with a chuckle. "We at Night Swim have tried to anticipate your every need. Just use as many lockers as you need. There are plenty to go around."

Good grief and golly! If she thought he was handsome before, he was gorgeous when he laughed. Two lovely dimples appeared on his cheeks and his dark eyes gleamed with merriment. If he wasn't careful, she may just forget he was too young for her and jump his bones anyway.

*I would like that.*

Maya shook her head and turned away, disgusted with herself. Now she was imagining things, for goodness sake! She could have sworn Dino had spoken to her, but she'd been looking right at him, ogling his beautifully full and kissable lips. He'd been smiling, but he hadn't said a thing.

*Get a grip, Maya. Geez.* After storing their things, they followed Dino to a dock nearby, where they all boarded a rather large boat for their ride to the night swim.

"Okay, everyone," Dino called to get their attention. He waved his arm to indicate another man standing next to him.

Maya caught her breath. Maybe a bit older than Dino, but not by much, the man was stunning. If Dino was handsome, his friend was a god. Tall and lean, with dark hair and equally dark looking eyes, Maya actually felt her mouth go dry as she stared at the example of perfect manhood. Goodness, the man was sex on a stick. She fought the urge to fan her hand in front of her face and reminded herself he was way too young for her.

"This is Franco, one of the owners of Night Swim. Since we're still pretty new to this, we thought it best to introduce you all to the men who made this possible. The other two owners will meet us at the swim area."

"I thought they were in an aquarium," an older man stood up, obviously nervous about swimming in the ocean after dark.

Maya really couldn't blame him. She was apprehensive about that herself. How could they know there aren't any sharks around?

Dino stepped forward to answer the question no one had the courage to ask. "The area where

you will swim is very much like an aquarium. The entire swim area has been enclosed in four-inch thick plexiglass. At low tide, the glass is approximately eighteen inches above the water. At high tide, the glass is near water level, give or take a few inches. The tidal changes here are usually around one to one and a half feet."

"What about sharks?"

Maya knew that was uppermost in everyone's mind and was shocked to realize Franco had been the one who voiced the question.

"For one thing, very few sharks jump out of the water and only one is known to do it to feed. That particular breed is the Great White. As far as I know, the only breed known for such behavior is the Great White shark along the coast of Africa. Even if a shark did manage to get into the aquarium, dolphins are their natural enemies and would attack them."

Maya was impressed by the way he kept everyone informed. How he answered questions before anyone had a chance to ask them.

Franco waited for this information to sink in before he continued. "Plus, we have the added benefit of underwater lights mounted every ten feet surrounding the enclosure. The water is so clear you will see anything coming at you. We do a visual check before we allow anyone in the water." He glanced at Dino, and with a nod of his

head, the other man turned the key and the boat roared to life.

“Is everyone ready?” Franco didn’t wait for an affirmative response, he merely watched as the last person in the group sat in their seat then again nodded to Dino. “Let’s go.” After the roar of the engine died down and Dino set the throttle to maintain their speed, Franco again addressed the group. “The Night Swim area is located along a private stretch of beach. Night Swim owns the beach and you may swim ashore and use the facilities, get a drink, which is provided by Night Swim gratis, and rest along the beach. However, do not wander far from the area or you may get left behind. We must follow your ship’s schedule. We cannot return you to your ship late. It will not accept you once they pull up the boarding equipment.”

At another nod from Franco, Dino again throttled up and kept it high until they arrived at their destination. The ride was both exhilarating and frightening. She had never traveled over the water at such a high speed and to do so at night lent a feeling of danger. What if they hit something? How in the world could Dino see where they were going? Questions like that flew through her mind as they skimmed over the water’s surface.

They’d traveled quite a distance before Maya



allowed herself to look at Franco again. If she thought Dino was handsome, she had to admit that Franco was even more good looking. His dark, male beauty alone was enough to make her nipples pebble to hard points with nothing more than a look. It was enough to make her wish she hadn't worn a thong bikini as liquid heat pooled low in her middle and slid from her core to wet her inner thighs. Maya swallowed thickly as she watched him. Her body ached, it practically screamed for release just from looking at the man. What would happen, God help her, after she'd been in his presence for the several hours of the excursion?

He was tall. Oh-my-God-tall. His height was even greater than Dino's. If Dino was six feet six inches, Franco had to be six feet nine inches. Holy crap. Even with her height greater than the average woman at five feet eleven inches, the top of her head just might reach his shoulder.

Dark brown hair, the color of the finest coffee beans, hung past his shoulders drawn back with a leather thong. Equally dark eyes had scanned the group in the light from the docks. The memory of his body made her shiver. The corded muscles moving sinuously beneath his tanned skin, was almost enough to make her drool. His bare chest displayed pectoral muscles that any body builder would be proud to have. The man was so fit, he

didn't have a six pack, he had an eight pack.

Maya fanned herself then blushed when a few of the women gave her a knowing grin. After all, they were in a boat in the open air, speeding along the coastline. Air blew around them everywhere. There was no need to fan herself—at least not because of the heat.

## CHAPTER THREE

Franco waited until Dino throttled up again before he started to scan the women. He'd always had the ability to sense a pending change in his life. This feeling was the most intense so far. He could only hope the change would be the largest, most profound of his existence—like finally finding a woman he could spend the rest of his days with.

It had to be a woman. His woman. His younger brother, Angelo, just found his mate a few months ago. Angelo couldn't control Victoria, neither could his best friend and that made her the perfect woman for him and his friend, Ricardo. Neither of the men could manipulate the woman they took to mate and exchanged blood with. The relationship they had was an intriguing one. He sighed, wondering what it would be like to make love with a woman he couldn't control, one that was with him because she wanted to be with him, not

because he'd compelled her to accept him into her bed.

Sometimes he envied his younger brother and it made him feel petty. No one in his lifetime had ever truly chosen to kiss him, lie with him or simply keep him company. Would he never know the joy that accompanied the experience of unconditional love?

The first three women he connected with were easy to control. He wasn't cruel, he merely suggested their noses itched and, one at a time, they each reached up to rub their noses. The three had some lustful thoughts about Dino, but were mostly apprehensive about the swim. The fourth wasn't difficult to manipulate either. It was just difficult to ignore her carnal thoughts about him until the woman directly in front of him, a bit older than the rest, but still much younger than himself, stood, bent over and attempted to fix her sandal.

Franco sat still, eyes wide and mouth dry at the way she presented her naked ass in his face. He noted she'd had a Brazilian wax not too long ago and licked his lips before he even realized what he was doing. God, he loved thong bikinis. He'd outlaw the sale of any other kind of women's swimsuits if he could. The boat hit a particularly large wave and lurched. The woman lost her balance and fell back toward him, her arms

flailing as she fought to retain her balance.

Instinctively, Franco raised his arms and clutched her hips as she fell toward him, pressing her bottom against his face. Closing his eyes, he inhaled deeply, loving the scent of her desire. Evidence of her need coated the inside of her thighs and he wanted nothing more than to lick it off her silky skin. He may not be able to control the woman, but he could read her and, more importantly, he could smell that she was aroused. Her sex glistened with moisture. Licking his lips, he was surprised that he got a small taste of her delicate essence and he wanted more. With her pressed so close, he merely needed to stick out his tongue and he could snake it right up her dripping channel. He frowned at the thought, realizing there was no way to tell who she found attractive without invading her privacy more and if he planned to mate her, he couldn't start a relationship with angst between them. That it could be one of the people on the excursion, nearly made him growl and the urge shook him to his core. He had to know and he must find a way to control himself if the object of her desire wasn't him.

*Hell...* Now he knew what Angelo meant when he said meeting his mate had been both the most wonderful and trying of days. He both wanted to pull her into his arms and make love to her plus

take her to task for shaking up his composure the way she had.

Taking a deep breath, he decided he would invade her privacy just his once. Then after, he would do his best to stay out of her head unless it was absolutely necessary.

Lightly touching her mind, he found she was both attracted to him and mortified that she fell against him. Franco fought the urge to grin. One could not have a more personal introduction to a potential mate. He still held her hips gently as she stood swaying before him trying to regain her balance. He could feel the heat of her arousal through the front triangle of her skimpy suit. His thumbs dug into the flesh of her ass as she tried to pull away.

"Oh, God." Turning, she covered her face with her hands and peered down at him through her fingers. "I—I'm so sorry." Moving away, she reached behind her to find her seat, then dropped into it quickly.

Franco winced, feeling a bit sorry for her back. She was human. That had to hurt. Her pulse raced, pounded in his ears. It sounded like that of a scared rabbit. He could smell her embarrassment, feel the heat of her blush, even from across the boat with the sea air blowing around them. That was how acutely attuned he was to her. While not as sharp as it could have

been, it was still enough to cause her great discomfort and Franco wondered if she was as pure as she acted. Not that it would matter.

The abilities of his kind made it simple to do so many things. Like grab the woman, yank her from this boat and fly her to his private quarters on the island. He had the inexplicable urge to keep her to himself, if only for a little while. The scent of her arousal was so intoxicating Franco found it near impossible to control the urge to do just that.

A mate. Could this woman be the mate he'd longed for these last long centuries? Was the interminable wait finally over? If only he could be so lucky that this woman was his mate and she was open minded enough to consider taking three men into her bed. He would like nothing better than to share her with his best friends, to know they too had a woman to love and keep them.

The woman's babbled apology continued as he stared at her unhearing. Admittedly, her hair was a bit longer than he usually liked. The shorter styles of this era had grown on him after a while. He still liked enough hair to grab onto, but he didn't need much. She carried a few extra pounds. It looked good on her though he usually liked his women tall and svelte. She was also older than he expected. Certainly not as old as he, but still, the bloom of youth would soon fade. For a human, she appeared about forty. Though still young by

his standards, she looked older than he did and Franco had to admit that he was damned old.

Still, having waited centuries for this opportunity helped put things into perspective. He was *not* about to allow a potential mate to slip through their fingers regardless of any imperfections he may perceive. Just the fact that he couldn't control her negated any and all flaws in his eyes. Not that she had any glaring flaws, just minor ones that they would soon overcome.

Nothing could make him give up a chance at this woman. She may be a bit old for a human in this body, but she was still young enough to breed, if barely, and she was not difficult to look at. Those things alone made her priceless in his eyes. And, if she was barren, it wouldn't matter. Franco was too damned happy at the prospect of not having to spend eternity alone for it to make a difference. He didn't need an heir. That's what he had brothers for.

Sneaking another look at her near full figured body, Franco decided then and there that he could respect the lush curves and full breasts. Her hips, while not too broad, were wide enough to grab on to and accept a man between her thighs. How he longed to see her kneeling in front of him, the long line of her spine stretched out before him as he thrust deep inside her moist heat.

His erection came fast and hard. The intensity



of his desire nearly jolted him out of his seat. The boat bumped haphazardly over the rough waves, sea foam trailing behind them as they grew closer to their island. Dino steered them unerringly through the darkness toward the island they had found years ago. Having watched pirates bury their stolen gold here, they cast a spell over it using their magick, to keep it hidden from the pirates and others who would attempt to take it from them. Better to hide it than lose it or have to kill to keep it. One day, perhaps they would lift the magick that hid it from the world. Perhaps one day, his kind would no longer have to remain hidden to survive.

Franco watched as the woman turned sideways in her seat and stared out through the darkness. Spray from the wash of waves over the bow coated her face in a fine sheen. She tilted her head back, raising her face to the damp air as the boat cut through the waves, her hair billowing out behind her like a thousand silken threads.

She inhaled deeply and closed her eyes. Franco found himself wondering what she thought of him now. If she thought of him at all. Was she still upset that she'd embarrassed herself by planting her delectable pussy on his nose?

For the first time in years, Franco grinned. A woman he couldn't control had finally appeared in his life. It was refreshing to not have to wonder

if her attraction was because he wanted it or because she did. Her scent, her arousal was all hers. Nothing he could do could force her to feel something for him that wasn't natural. That was what mattered most. Knowing that if she wanted him, accepted him, it would be because she wanted to, not because he subconsciously commanded it.

Finally, he had seen his miracle...and he still didn't know her name.

\* \* \* \*

Mortified, Maya sat staring out into the darkness. The cool mist blown up from the ocean coated her cheeks, helping to cool them. What had she been thinking? She knew better than to try to stand up in a small boat. She looked around her. Not that this was really a small boat, but it was certainly no cruise ship. She was lucky she hadn't fallen over the side.

Goosebumps pebbled on her skin as she suddenly became aware of the predators swimming below the surface of the churning waves. Maya swallowed thickly. What in the world was she thinking?

Turning to sit in her seat properly, she came face to face with the man who had gotten the dubious honor of her ass in his face. Literally.

Again, Maya's cheeks heated with mortification as he smiled and winked at her, his white teeth practically glowing in the light of the three-quarter moon.

Gathering her courage, Maya tilted her chin up and held his gaze. She stared deep into his dark eyes, trying to discern the color in the darkness. His hair fell just past his shoulders, a thick thong holding it in a queue at the nape of his neck. Finally releasing his gaze, she allowed her gaze to wander. The slim side of muscular, the man exuded self-confidence, strength, power and sex appeal practically seeped from his pores.

Her womb clenched as she sat unabashedly staring. Her clit throbbed with the need for stimulation and, for once, she wished she'd brought her toys with her on the ship. She was definitely going to need them after this excursion.

Sighing, she looked away and ran a hand through her hair. Why would a guy like him want to have anything to do with her when he could have any beach bunny he chose? As much as she may want to do the funky monkey with him, he was just too damned young for her. She knew it, yet she couldn't seem to get her libido to believe it. No matter how many times she told herself she couldn't have him, that a hottie like him wouldn't want a fling with an older woman, her thoughts and her gaze kept returning to stare deep into his

black eyes.

*Come on. Get a grip why don't you?* She was disgusted that she could lust after a man a good fifteen years her junior. So immersed in her thoughts, Maya almost didn't notice when the boat slowed and finally came to a stop.

Everyone sat in near silence for a moment. The only noise came from the sea water lightly lapping the side of the boat. One of the older men stood and acted as though he wanted to say something then sat back down as Dino moved from where he stood at the wheel to stand between the rows of seats.

"This is it, ladies and gentlemen. It's time to get wet. Who wants to be the first one in the water?"

Thirty minutes ago, Maya would have been jumping at the chance. But instead of doing so now, she just sat where she was and glanced over the side and into the darkness. If that wicked hot tour guide thought she was dumb enough to jump into the water when she couldn't see anything, he was sadly mistaken.

"You said there would be lights," the older man who spoke up earlier stood and shook his fist in the air. "If this is all there is, you can be damned sure I'm telling that cruise line to give me my one-hundred and thirty dollars back. This is a rip off." His legs began to shake.

Maya wasn't sure if it was because of fright or

because he had a hard time standing without the walker he'd left behind folded up in an area specifically for that purpose.

"I'm not jumping into this water when I can't see what lurks below the surface." This came from the young woman sitting next to the man with shaky legs.

"There could be sharks there instead of dolphins," another of the group said from his seat near the bow. He'd most likely gathered courage from the other two.

Dino shook his head and sighed. "No one has a sense of adventure anymore." He glanced at Franco. "What's happened to people over the last few decades that they can't even work up a good interest for something if it's not the latest trend?"

Suddenly, the water glowed with light. Maya could see clear to the white sand on the bottom. Dark shapes moved quickly beneath the surface in the distance, growing steadily closer, making her heart race. Was it the dolphins? Maya hoped it was the dolphins coming toward them. Seeing a shark would scare her enough to stay on the boat no matter if they managed to get the water clear of them or not.

When the shapes reached an area approximately twenty feet from the boat, the dolphins, five of them, jumped into the air and did simultaneous back flips.

Oblivious to the light that surrounded them, Maya kicked off her flip-flops, ripped off her oversized shirt and jumped into the warm Caribbean water without a word. Dino said they could get right in and, not wanting to miss a minute of her time with these magnificent creatures, no one had to tell Maya twice.

Their skin felt the way she thought it would—a lot like wet rubber. She realized it when one of them bumped into her and she reached out to stroke it as it passed. Another stopped on the surface just in front and off to the left of her. He chattered at her, then lowered his mouth below the surface raised up and spit saltwater in her face. He chattered again as though laughing before moving off to torment another one of the excursionists.

Since the water was near chest deep, Maya didn't have any trouble. She wasn't wearing a life vest like the others, but who cared? It wasn't as though she couldn't swim and the dolphins couldn't take her out of their enclosure. She was sure land wasn't far away. She could smell the scent of wet earth and pine mixed with that of the seawater.

Besides, she'd always loved the water, loved to swim. She was what her mother always called a water baby. Maya spent most of her life in lakes, oceans and swimming pools. Swimming with the

dolphins was one of her lifelong dreams. She never wanted it to end.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Jared Cameron swam around the people in the group, trying to figure out which of the three women huddled together in the water piqued his interest. One of them smelled wonderful, good enough to eat, and he didn't mean their blood.

The three didn't act as though they knew each other, but they moved together, most likely for moral support, as he and the others swam around them just the same.

None of the real dolphins showed up tonight. It was the only drawback to this operation—if you were human. On the other hand, for his kind, it didn't matter so much, other than the fact that a lot of them had to take a night swim once in a while.

When he approached the water and saw that none of their *friends* deigned to make an appearance today, he called more of their kind in from the resort to take their place. It wasn't



uncommon for them to shift shape—though, he supposed it was rather uncommon for them to do it for profit.

Still, this wasn't really a profit venture. Everyone knew women loved dolphins and that most of them wanted the experience to swim with them. This was the best idea they'd had to search for mates for all of them. Any of his kind who wanted, or needed, a mate would come here. So far, seventy percent of the people who booked this excursion were under fifty and female. That made the odds of finding a mate pretty damned good in his opinion, even if they had been doing this for a few months already and none of them found more than a temporary bed partner or two.

The long body he occupied felt peculiar. This was only his third shift into this shape. The way they swam was strange to say the least. After centuries of swimming with legs, propelling himself through the water with a tail and steering with fins and body movements would take a bit of getting used to.

It didn't help that the scent in the water was driving him to distraction. Normally, he couldn't smell much of anything while in the water, but with this form, it seemed all too natural. He filed that information away. The ability may come in handy someday while tracking someone. Perhaps they would never again lose a trail because the

person had taken to water. Criminals came in every shape and size and with The Endowed, a criminal was a very dangerous prospect. For everyone involved. *One of these women smells good enough to eat*, he said through the mind link he shared with Franco and Dante.

*Just so long as you don't endanger the operation. We have plenty of sustenance here on the island. It wasn't Franco who answered first, but Dante. The last thing we need is for these people to go back with bite marks and stories of something attacking them while in the water. The local authorities would close us down in a second and we'd pay hell trying to get the permits to reopen.*

Jared would have rolled his eyes if he'd thought it possible in this form. Instead, he gave a mental sigh and continued to circle the women as he attempted to determine which of them was his target for a private swim after they returned them to port.

*She is mine. I saw her first.*

It wasn't the low growl of Franco's voice that surprised Jared, it was the fact that he'd made claim to the woman in the first place. The other man rarely showed emotion and what he just did was tantamount to standing on a rock and beating his chest.

Dante, ever the cool head, interjected before Jared could reply. *You know as well as I do, Franc,*

*that any woman who none of us can control would belong to all of us, not just one. Are you saying you want a one on one relationship with this woman?*

*I will share her if none of us can control her. Jared, why don't you give it a try. She's the older female with the full figure.*

Jared swam closer to the women and insinuated himself between them. He pushed the woman gently as the other two women moved back, laughing nervously.

"It looks like this one likes you." This came from a younger blonde. Her platinum hair practically glowed in the light from the water.

Too bad this one wasn't the woman he couldn't control, but one thought had her lifting her hand to scratch her head and he knew that the delectable morsel may be beautiful, but she would also be easily controlled and he wanted a mate with a mind of her own.

Heaving another mental sigh, he turned to the woman Franco described and concentrated on having her scratch her head as well. She merely stood, slightly bobbing on her toes and spinning to watch him as he circled her. Not one finger lifted to reach for her indiscriminate brown hair. Damn. His mate was a brunette and nothing at all like he'd imagined.

He'd imagined a tall woman with legs that never quit, long legs that would wrap around his

waist as he repeatedly drove his hard length into her moist heat. His dream mate had been blonde, with blue eyes to match the sea and a softness unmatched by any other female. She'd had a hard body, one that he could take pleasure in gazing upon as she romped on the beach with them.

This...this woman was none of those things. She was close to forty, at least, which really didn't matter, he supposed because the change would fix that. A bit overweight, she wasn't the type of woman he normally singled out for a good long fuck either. She looked more like someone's mother. He had hoped to find the woman of his dreams.

*She's hardly the woman of your nightmares either. If she is our mate, you will treat her with the reverence and respect she deserves. You will not make her feel lacking in any way.*

That was easy for Dante to say. He hadn't seen her yet. Jared gave her another critical look and moved around her. That scent he'd found so alluring, so elusive before, clung to her and made his body scream for release. His eyes may not find the woman attractive, but his nose sure as hell did. Every cell, every microbe of his being reached out to her as she stood spinning in that circle and bobbing on her toes that she had curled in the sand.

Unable to stop himself, he dove and moved his

body between her legs, lifting her from the ocean floor. Screaming, she grabbed onto his dorsal fin and held on tight as he propelled them toward the beach.

*Take her back to the boat, Jared!*

He ignored Dante's order, moving closer to the beach where he could change into his natural form, bury his face between her legs and lick the evidence of her desire from the treasure between her thighs. Nothing, no one, could stop him from having his way with her. This was his woman, his mate, and he needed her now.

The beach loomed white beneath the glowing moon. The water gently lapped the sand as the low tide waves washed the day's soil from the pristine sand. Was there a more perfect place to claim his mate? He reached shallow water and pushed her toward the shore, refusing to let her move back out to the deeper water and the boat.

Chattering at her to get onto the beach, he hoped she would think the dolphin thought her drowning and move up onto the sand, giving him the privacy he needed to change into his natural form. As a human, he could be her rescuer, her savior. However, she refused to move. In fact, she kept trying to get back to the boat.

"I need to go back. It's my ride back to my ship. I can't be stranded here." She slapped her hands onto the surface of the water. "I'm a good

swimmer, I promise.” Sighing, she checked her watch. “I’m going to miss the ride back and then what will I do?”

Jared didn’t care. At the moment, he only thought about her intoxicating scent and the fastest most reliable way to get into her pants—what there was of them. That thong should be illegal on someone so enticing.

*I thought you wanted your dream woman?* Dante’s voice was mocking, even through their mind link.

*I thought I did, too. Now, it doesn’t seem to matter.* Jared’s body didn’t care that this woman wasn’t his dream woman and he was very slowly coming to the inevitable conclusion that perhaps, his imagination wasn’t a very reliable thing when it came to choosing mates while he faced off with the woman as she continued to try to get past him.

“He won’t let you back into the water, you know. He thought you were drowning and wants to make sure you remain safe. Dolphins rescue people in the water all the time. You’re lucky you’re not battered and bruised. Some people die from injuries incurred when a dolphin tries to rescue them, but you have to admit their hearts are in the right place.”

*What are you doing here?*

## CHAPTER FIVE

Maya turned, her hand to her throat. "I—I... Where did *you* come from?" Heart racing in her chest, she couldn't help but stare at another perfect male. *What in the world did they put in the water where these guys come from?* Holy canola!

He held out his hand, not taking a step closer. "It's okay. I won't hurt you. I'm Dante. I work on the island." Shrugging, he moved back a step as the dolphin prodded her up onto the beach. "I'm the director here."

"Oh." *Very articulate, Maya.* She couldn't think, could barely breathe as she took in the man's height, muscular build and movie star good looks. She'd guess that he was just as tall as Franco...maybe taller. It was hard to tell with all the giant men running around the Caribbean. They couldn't be natives. It seemed like she would have heard of some island in the sun that boasted men nearly seven feet tall. That oddity was

definitely newsworthy. At least for every single woman under sixty in the world.

Dark hair curled around his shoulders. The color was impossible to discern in the moonlight, though it looked black. He, too, was the slim side of muscular, like Franco. She frowned, wondering why she kept comparing the two men. Maybe it was because, like Franco, he was in his mid to late twenties and *way* too young for her. Weren't they all these days? The older men wanted younger women, the younger men wanted younger women. What about all of the single and lonely middle aged women in the world?

He grinned.

Maya wanted to cry. Two men in the last few hours made her heart race and her blood nearly come to a boil. They both gave her illicit thoughts she had no business having about men almost young enough to be her children and here he was grinning at her like the proverbial little boy with his hand caught in the cookie jar. The smile was a reminder of just how old she was and why she couldn't have him. Why she couldn't have either of them. Most of all, it was a reminder why she should forget about the damned cruise and hop on the first available flight back home. She was just too damned old for this crap.

Suddenly the pressures and trials of the last few days got the better of her. Would she never be



anything more than the office spinster sent on single's or swinger's cruises by her office mates in a desperate attempt to get her laid? Would she never know what it was like to wake up to the warmth of another body pressed against her in sleep? Would she never know the unconditional love of a man who couldn't seem to get enough of her, no matter how often they made love?

One fat, traitorous tear slipped from her eye and she dashed it away with her hand. "I need to get back to the boat before it leaves without me." She grimaced at the sound of her trembling voice. The last thing she wanted was for him to feel sorry for her.

They only had two hours here. She checked her watch. "Oh, God!" Looking out over the water, she saw the boat circling the waves. They knew the dolphin had taken her, but they had no idea where. He'd first headed out to sea before turning back to the island. It was almost as though he'd intended to set a false trail. The boat and its occupants were looking for her in the wrong place.

"I'm here!" She waved her arms. "Look over here!"

"They can't hear you." Dante moved up behind her, set his warm hands on her shoulders and gently pulled her from the water's edge. "I'll get you back to the port, ma'am. I'm not sure it will be

in time to board your ship, but I will find a way to get you home. I promise."

Maya spun around, clutching her hands to her chest. "I can't stay here." *Why not? Why go back to that nightmare of a ship and put up with the likes of Bruce and his Mr. Happy?* Her inner voice prodded. She bit her lip then burst into tears. Everything she did, everywhere she went, things went wrong. Her entire vacation was little better than a nightmare on Maple Street or whatever the hell it was called.

Strong arms wrapped around her and held her close to a young, strong body. Heat radiated out from his tall, lean frame. God, how she wanted to lean into him for support, give him everything that she was for just a little while, just until she could manage to convince herself to go back to that nightmare Genevieve called a vacation. Still, she couldn't take the first step, couldn't offer what she was sure he would refuse. She wasn't strong enough to handle the rejection.

What would it be like to have this man hold her, make love to her as though she really mattered to someone, as though someone in the world found her attractive? Goodness, now she sounded like a wimp and a whiner, someone not happy with her lot in life. She *was* happy. Maya liked being a paralegal. She liked working in the office amongst her friends. She just didn't like

living and eating alone every day of her life. Was there something wrong with that?

Pressing her face against his smooth, bare chest, she rubbed her cheek against him, reveling in the feel of his arms circling her shoulders. His flat male nipple was just next to her nose, the warmth of her breath made it pebble when she shifted just enough that she managed to blow heated air over it. Unable to stop herself, Maya flicked her tongue out and tasted him. If nothing more came of this trip, she would at least be able to say she'd licked the nipple of one of the world's most beautiful men.

Dante's body shuddered and he groaned the sound coming from deep within his chest. Grabbing her face, he tilted her head back and covered her lips with his. He licked the seam of her lips until she opened for him and his tongue slid inside her mouth, brushing against hers in a wet velvet caress. There was nothing gentle about the kiss. Everything about it screamed that he wanted her, had to have her, and by damn, she had to have him as well.

Heat surrounded her until she gasped with it. Bathed in the warmth of his embrace and the intensity of his kiss, Maya lost all sense of time and space. She only knew one thing. She wanted this man like she had wanted no other and she was determined to have him regardless of the

repercussions in the morning.

\* \* \* \*

"What is your name, little one?" Dante pulled back to place feather soft kisses over her face and eyes. She was perfect. She was his. Like the others, he couldn't control her, couldn't compel her to do as he commanded. No one told him that being with a woman he couldn't control would be the strongest of aphrodisiacs. No one warned that he would lose all control, all sense of self as he held her through her tears.

His body ached with the need to sink into her welcoming heat. His flesh nearly burned with the effort to keep himself away from her until she'd done the unbelievable and licked his nipple. Nothing could have kept him from her then. The very fires of Hell couldn't have held him at bay. This was his woman, his mate and he had waited over a thousand years to feel her in his arms.

"Maya."

Her voice was breathless as he leaned down to suckle her neck.

"My name is Maya Abernathy."

Dante heard her swallow when his lips grazed her ear and he blew lightly into the perfect shell. "Such a beautiful name for a beautiful woman."

"Don't," she said, pushing away. "Don't

cheapen this with empty compliments. I know what I am, what I look like. There's no need —"

Dante held a finger over her mouth. "I never say what I don't mean. Given time, you will realize this." Again, he pressed his lips against hers, nibbling and suckling until she opened for him once more. The feel of his tongue sliding against hers was decadent. His cock ached, the seam of his swim shorts rode over the sensitive head, making his breath come in short pants. Maya's scent was heady, an aphrodisiac all its own. He wanted nothing more than to toss her to the ground, push her legs to her chest and bury his face between her thighs.

"We don't have time, Dante. We only have tonight."

Almost growling at her words, he pressed his lips against hers once again to keep such sacrilege from spilling forth from her mouth. Nothing was farther from the truth. They had the rest of their lives and, for his kind, that was nearly forever. This woman was his mate, their mate, and whether she realized it or not, she would never be free of them again.

Tugging the string that kept her top up, he watched, enthralled as her full, lush breasts tumbled from the cups. He had always loved women with a little meat on their bones. The trend of the moderns was downright dangerous and

only a fool would consider telling a woman their bodies should be hard when every male worth his salt knew a woman should be soft, a comfort to her man at the end of a hard day. He found nothing comfortable in a hard bony woman with no breasts to speak of. And no one wanted to get him started on the hated silicone.

Cupping her breast was almost enough to send him into orgasm. The lush softness of a full breast devoid of artificial enhancements was a difficult thing to find in this age of too thin women with manmade D-cups. Sometimes, most times, he missed the old days when women were women and men loved them for it.

When he tongued her soft, velvety nipple, she squirmed in his arms. Dante wanted nothing more than to keep her where she was, hold her in his arms where he knew he could keep her safe. But there were other, more pressing matters he needed to see to. One of them was what to do with Jared. He lost it. What if more than one person realized that something was wrong, something other than a missing guest?

Pulling away, he sighed. He wanted nothing more than to love this woman and have her love him in return. Instead, he stood here in the darkness staring out over the water while she panted in his arms, no doubt confused about his inability to make up his damned mind.

"You're right. We have no business doing this." She chuckled, though the sound held no mirth. "You're way too young for me."

"Your age has nothing to do with this. I don't want to take advantage of you."

"Oh." Looking away, she began to chuckle, then laugh.

Soon she was laughing so hard, Dante wondered if perhaps something happened on the way here. "Did you hit your head, or something?" His questions did little to help. In fact, it merely sent her off into another bout of laughter that bordered on the hysterical.

"Why not take advantage of me?" She gestured in the direction of the port. "Ole Bruce and Mr. Happy wanted nothing more than to take advantage of me on the way here. Any number of men *and* women have propositioned me over the last few days. People, my age, I might add. So why would I believe that you've stopped just because you don't want to take advantage of me?" She pulled the top of her bathing suit up, tied it behind her neck and crossed her arms in a defensive gesture.

She gave him one last look before turning from him to look out over the calm waters of the small inlet.

The pain in her eyes before she looked away was his undoing. *Get back to the office and put*

*yourself under house arrest, Jared. I will deal with you later.* The other man probably thought he'd forgotten he hid out in the shadows of the water. The light they managed to cast into the enclosed area was gone now. With the tourists gone, there was no need for any of them to expend the energy needed to illuminate the water. Jared chattered once to remind them he was there before moving off into the distance.

*I go only because I know what I did was wrong, not because you ordered it.*

*Whatever your reasons are, Jared, get your ass back there.* The last thing he wanted was an audience while he made love to his mate for the first time. It didn't matter that Jared knew what he was about to do. As one of the oldest, it was his right, as it was Franco's, but Franco wasn't here. "Take off your bathing suit, Maya."



## CHAPTER SIX

“‘W’ha-what did you say?”  
“Take it off before I take it off for you. If I remove it, there will be precious little of it left.”  
He cocked a brow. “Not that there is much of it to begin with.”

Maya’s stomach flip-flopped at his words. She never thought she would like someone going all dominant on her like that, but with Dante, it seemed right. “I, uh...”

“Now, Maya. I won’t ask you again.”

Reaching up with trembling fingers, Maya released the straps that held her top in place. The warm Caribbean air kissed her breasts as they spilled free of the top. Her nipples pebbled, the aching tips growing to hard points as they seemed to reach out to him.

“Now the thong.”

Was it her imagination or had his voice gotten deeper, his breath coming in short gasps as he

watched her disrobe? Licking her lips, she hooked her thumbs into the side straps and pulled the thong down, slowly revealing the small thatch at the apex of her thighs.

Dante's eyes darkened. She didn't know how she knew that, given the soft light of the three quarter moon, but she knew it, just the same. Something in him changed when she revealed the small, inch wide patch of hair her cosmetologist left behind when she got her bikini wax.

"Now come here."

Something within her urged her to run. Even in the dim light, something in Dante's eyes told her he was a predator, someone she should fear, not give herself over to, yet she couldn't stop herself, couldn't help herself from stepping closer and closer to him as he commanded. It was almost like a compulsion, this heady attraction was more than she had ever felt before. What was it about this man that made her want to do whatever he asked?

Willingly, she stepped forward. Lifting her hands to his chest, she ran her palms along the smooth expanse, down to the waistband of his swim trunks. Nothing could have stopped her from pulling the knot loose and lowering them to the ground to release the burgeoning shaft beneath.

Before she could gasp, before she could even breathe, he grabbed her, hauled her into his arms

and ravished her mouth with his. His tongue thrust inside the dark recesses of her mouth, his teeth ruthlessly grinding into the soft flesh of her lips.

He scraped his teeth along her neck and her womb clenched. Her breaths came in ragged gasps as his mouth traveled over her shoulders to her breasts. He pulled and twisted one nipple as his mouth closed over the other. Her head fell back on her shoulders as he continued to worship her with his mouth and hands.

Maya inhaled deeply. She loved the way he smelled. It was a mixture of soap, sea and man. Her entire body tightened at his intoxicating scent. Her eyelids fluttered open and she looked up at the moon. Partially hidden by the clouds, it still cast a glow over the white sand as they stood on the beach in their embrace.

What was she doing here with this man she didn't know? What kind of woman was she that she could have sex with a man she'd never met before tonight? Did she really want to continue on this path and, last of all, could she live with herself when it was all over?

"Yes, oh yes," she breathed against his hair as he reached down, his hand skimming over the sensitive skin between her legs. One finger circled her clit as she raised one leg and threw it over his hip. Yes. She could do this. She wanted this man

more than anything she'd ever wanted in her life and damn the consequences.

Her thighs quivered as his finger continued to circle the tight bud. One sharp pull of his mouth on her breast coupled with the sensation of his fingers on her most private flesh and she came. Her pulse pounded, her hips shifted, riding the air as she came onto his hand. Waves of pleasure washed through her as he continued to pleasure her with his fingers.

Reaching out, Maya attempted to grasp his shaft. She needed to feel it in her hand, the hard velvet over steel that she knew he possessed. Still, he wouldn't allow it, wouldn't let her touch him.

"I'm afraid I will lose control if you touch me, little one. I cannot guarantee that I will bring you pleasure if you insist on putting your hands on me."

She loved his old world manners and the way he wanted to ensure her pleasure, but she wanted to touch him even more, regardless of the consequences. She'd never done anything like this before in her life and she wanted to make the most of it. To imprint his perfect male body onto her memory, so when she was at home, in her empty bed, she could take out this memory and remember the feel of him. How his cock felt in her hand, in her mouth. What it felt like to truly participate in the loving of this perfect specimen of

manhood.

No one could convince her that there would ever be a second chance for this. There would be no do over. She had this one chance to make everything right, everything perfect and she was determined to do so.

When he reached down to lift her up and bring her sex down onto his shaft, she reached down, grasped the hard shaft and gave it a few strokes with her closed fist. Dante stumbled in the sand. His groan was enough to make her wonder if she'd hurt him instead of pleased him, but the look of pure rapture on his face was enough to tell her he liked what she'd done regardless of what he said before.

She gave him a smug smile and wrapped her arms around his neck. "Are you sure you don't want me to touch you?" His answer was a growl as he carried her over to a fallen palm tree. The base of the tree was hard, like cement. He bent her over it and gave her a few swats on her rear while she squealed her outrage.

"That's for disobeying me."

\* \* \* \*

Dante looked down at the succulent ass before him. He watched the long line of her spine, the way her waist cut in at just the right place. Just a

few minutes ago, he couldn't wait to sink his cock into her wet channel. Now though, now he needed to show her that he was not one to disobey. He was her mate, and as such, he was also her master. The faster she learned those truths, the better off they would all be.

Gazing down at the tight little rosette of her ass, he decided he would take her there. Besides, he needed to ready her for a multiple mating. It had been a long time since the three of them took a woman together, but he knew they would want their mate in that fashion. Nothing made them feel closer to one another the way pleasuring a woman at the same time did. He could only imagine how pleasuring their mate would make them feel, how close it would bring them when they all climaxed together.

"Stay there." He pressed his hand down on the small of her back when she would have resisted. She could get free if she chose. He merely put enough pressure on her to show her what he wanted, what he expected of her. "If you truly do not want this, you merely need say so. Otherwise, I will take your silence as acquiescence.

Kneeling down, he gave in to his desire to give her nether regions a closer inspection. Inhaling deeply, he reveled in her intoxicating scent before he leaned closer to slide his tongue over the pink flesh of her sex.

Maya moaned, her arms and legs flailing in the air as he held her in place. She didn't fight, didn't cry for him to let her go. She may not admit it outright, but she wanted this, needed this as much as he did. She needed someone to dominate her as much as he felt the need to take charge. This was his mate, what he wanted, needed in a woman and he intended to be everything she needed in a man.

Dante continued to stroke her most sensitive spot with his tongue, gliding it over her flesh, around the tight rosette of her anus and back to the wet confines of her juicy channel. Nothing could have prepared him for this, for her. The taste of her, the smell of her was more than he had ever dared hope or dream.

After she came again and when he worked her into a frenzy of lust and need, he used his fingers to stretch her anus, to ready her for the invasion of his cock. He wasn't a small man and the last thing he wanted was to hurt her. He wanted, needed this to be special for her. She needed to know that no matter where or how they chose to take her, they would always see to her pleasure before their own. First, Dante inserted one finger and then two. When he managed to get three fingers inside her back hole while she drove back against him, he knew it was time to take it to the next step.

Standing, he pulled her back, raising her hips to

his and aimed the head of his cock at her virgin hole. He didn't have to ask if she had ever taken a man here. He could tell by her reactions, by the way she gasped with surprise at the sensations he wrought from her with his fingers.

Inhaling deeply, he looked up at the palm trees swaying in the slight breeze, the almond trees with their pods dropping lazily on the ground and the sound of the iguanas scurrying through the brush looking for sustenance and thought this was the way it was meant to be. He was meant to be here with his mate, meant to be the one who would introduce her to these particular pleasures of the flesh.

Taking a deep breath and praying for control, Dante pressed the head of his cock to the tight ring of Maya's ass. "Relax, little one. Don't fight it. It will go in easier if you bear down just a bit."

He felt it when she did what he said. The head of his cock slipped past the outer ring of her ass. The hard part over, it made his entrance a bit easier as he continued to press his way inside her tight hole.

"Yes," she whispered as his hips finally pressed against her bottom.

Dante swallowed thickly. His breath came in short gusts as he rested his hips against her ass. Sweat beaded on his brow as he fought for the control to not ram inside her and tear her



innermost membranes. His hands held her hips tightly to him as he stood with his eyes closed and reveled in the feel of her heated flesh surrounding him.

He wanted nothing more than to make this good for her. To keep himself under control as he stroked his shaft deep inside her ass. Taking another deep breath, he realized something he'd missed before. Something about this woman, her scent or perhaps just her being called to him, probably called to all of them and nothing anyone could ever do would stop him from making her his.

A growl rumbled deep in his chest at the thought that she may choose to leave them. No man would ever take her from him and live, but what if she chose to leave on her own? He could never harm her and never force her to do something she found abhorrent. For the first time in his life, Dante felt fear.

\* \* \* \*

Maya couldn't believe Dante took her ass like that. All her life she refused to let men she'd lived with use that part of her. Whatever gave her the courage to let Dante do it the first night they met? What surprised her the most was that she liked it. A lot!

No one had ever had the audacity to spank her before and no man ever tried to force her to bend over any item, let alone a fallen tree just to fuck her up the ass, but this felt good. So good she found it hard not to fight his hold on her. The iron grip he had on her hips, held her in place, making it difficult to move. She wasn't sure if he held her so tight because he didn't want her to move or if it was because he had a difficult time keeping a tight rein on his control.

"Please," she whimpered, not knowing exactly what it was she wanted him to do. She knew she wanted, needed, him to do something.

When he reached down and circled her clit with his finger, she screamed. It was just what she needed to send her over the edge. Her back arched as she pushed back into him, begging him to move, to do something other than stand there behind her. When he finally lost his control, he slammed into her twice before a sharp pain at her shoulder melted away into ecstasy and she lost her grip on consciousness.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

“How long was she out before you got here?” Franco looked down at their mate. He knew his concern showed in his eyes. He knew the dangers of taking blood from a woman while in the throes of mating ecstasy. Dante could have killed her if she wasn’t really their mate. Though that didn’t seem to be a problem. She accepted him, accepted his bite. Now she slept, if fitfully, in his bed.

“About an hour. I didn’t dare run with her. I wasn’t sure what jostling her around would do in her delicate state.”

The look on Dante’s face as he carried their unconscious, naked mate into their home was something he didn’t care to ever see again. He knew the other man thought he’d killed her. He’d come close, probably, but she was no longer near death. They poured as much water and broth down her throat as they dared with her being

unconscious. Every small cup brought her closer to returning to them. Every bit of nourishment gave her more strength.

Dante ran his fingers through his hair as he paced the room. Occasionally he would stop and stare at the still form in the bed, shake his head then begin to pace anew. "I didn't know it would be like this. I didn't know it would be so hard to stop myself from taking too much."

"From what I understand, that's one of the things that identifies her as our mate. Once we have mated with her, this will no longer be a problem." Franco was very worried. There were three of them and the woman lying so still and lifeless on the bed, didn't have enough blood in her body to keep them from killing her in the throes of passion. It would no longer be an issue once they mated her. It was just getting her to that point.

"She is our *bellacara*, of that, there is no doubt." Dante continued to pace the room, his agitation evident. "You have no idea how difficult it is for me to keep from entering her mind, reading her thoughts." He sighed. "Every time I think to do so, I remember your brother and his mate. How she hated when he looked into her mind. Yet, I cannot help but think it is our right to know what she wants, what she needs. After centuries, hell, after millennia, it is hard for me to change."

His expression was as tortured as Franco felt.

"Just the fact that I find it so difficult to use contractions should tell you that much. However, I have been trying to use them. Perhaps it will become easier with time."

"I know what you mean, old friend." Striding to the armoire that hosted a plethora of items not limited to his choice of entertainment, Franco pulled out a bottle of scotch and held it up. "Want a drink?" Even if Dante refused, he needed a good belt. He knew exactly what Dante meant. He, too, had felt the almost overpowering need to read her thoughts, to know what she felt, what thoughts wandered through her beautiful head.

"I would take the whole damned bottle if I thought it would do me any good."

Franco poured him a glass and handed it to him. "Jared is working out. I think he said something about swimming two-hundred laps."

The other man just gave him a lopsided smile. "He is trying to make up for the fact that he pulled our mate from the rest of her group and dragged her to shore. It is a wonder he did not bruise her. The dolphin's nose can be a very dangerous thing."

"Yet he did what both of us wanted to do and either didn't have the courage or didn't know how to do."

"Yes," Dante agreed with a nod as he sat in on

of the chairs flanking the window and took a sip of the drink in his hand. "How do we explain to her what we are and what she is to us without scaring her to death? I have these visions of her running from us, screaming bloody murder."

"As do I," Franco said as he sat down in the unoccupied chair and stared at their mate." Shaking his head, he leaned forward, his elbows on his knees and stared at the floor. "Whatever she does, she will do it soon. She is awake."

\* \* \* \*

Maya lay still as death in the bed, a downy soft pillow beneath her head. Her heart pounded so hard she was sure the two men could hear it from across the room. What were they talking about? What the hell was a *bellacara* and how in the hell did they know she was awake?

She closed her eyes when she heard them stand. Perhaps if she kept her breathing regulated and her eyes closed they would assume she still slept soundly and leave her alone. She had to get out of here and knew, without a doubt, that she would never make it to the door with them still in the room.

As the two men approached the bed, she forced herself to relax. Her fingers, once balled into tight fists relaxed and she forced her breathing to

remain regular when she felt the overpowering need to scream and run.

“Maya.”

It was Dante. The smooth baritone slid into her mind and the now familiar heat pooled in her middle. Whenever these two talked, she felt strange, tingly. She wanted them both and that was just plain unacceptable. She wasn’t some weird cradle-robbing witch who only liked little boys. Hell, she almost felt like a pedophile lusting after guys fifteen years or so her juniors.

“Open your eyes, Maya. We know you are awake.”

Her eyelids flew open when he brushed his lips against hers. Fire rushed through her blood, making her body feel heavy with desire. Only one soft kiss left her wanting this man with a need she couldn’t explain. Even after the exhausting experience on the beach, she felt her libido kick into overtime when he brushed his mouth against hers.

“Stop that.” She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and glared at him. “You promised to get me back to my ship. She sat up, despite the spinning in her head, and threw her legs over the side in an effort to acquire at least a little dignity. She couldn’t very well fight any battles flat on her back in a strange man’s bed.

Her face burned when she looked down and

realized she was naked. "Where are my clothes?" She yanked the sheet up and did her best to wrap it around herself even though it wouldn't give up its grip on the foot of the bed. Whoever made this bed knew how to tuck in a sheet, that was for sure. She gave it another yank for good measure, then gave up with a sigh when it still wouldn't budge.

Dante grinned. "Still on the beach, I think." He tilted his head and winked. "I could go back and look if you like or you can wear one of our shirts. We may have some sweat pants around here that you could wear, though I'm sure they will be too large."

"I'm sure." She gave him a wry look. Anything either of these two men wore would be so big on her she'd need to roll them up several times just to walk in them.

She watched them warily while Franco dug in a few drawers to pull out a t-shirt and pair of sweat pants. The waist looked like it might fit because, well, she was fat, but as she thought, they were way too long.

He set them both on the bed.

She just glowered at them. "Do you mind? I would like to get dressed."

"Oh, we don't mind a bit." They both returned to their seats by the window.

Maya ground her teeth, then did her best to smile sweetly. "Do you mind leaving the room so I



can dress?" She looked at them both and batted her eyes. *I don't believe you're doing this. Batting your eyes, for goodness sake!* She bared her teeth in what she hoped at least resembled a smile. "Please?"

She had to get away from these crazies. They thought a dolphin knew what he was doing when he brought her ashore. They thought the poor thing kidnapped her. Then they said something about mating her. Hell, she wanted a good time as well as the next girl, maybe more, but she drew the line at being anyone's piece of meat. They made it sound as though she belonged to them and they would *mate* her together. Well, not in *this* lifetime. She drew the line at orgies. She frowned. Or was that a *ménage*? She felt the urge to shrug. Whatever it was called, she didn't want any part of it.

*Liar*, a little voice in the back of her mind said. A very little voice. *You know the idea intrigues you, especially with two men as gorgeous as these.*

She pressed her lips together, afraid that somehow that slutty inner voice would somehow take control of her mouth and voice its opinions out loud. Maya Abernathy was *not* that kind of girl.

*You weren't the kind of girl to have sex with perfect strangers either and look at what happened there.*

She so wanted to tell that stupid inner voice to

shut up and mind its own business. "What were you two talking about earlier?"

The silence that greeted her question was telling.

"Well?"

"We have something to tell you, *cara*," Dante answered.

She loved his accent. The soft lilt of his voice. She wasn't sure, but she thought it was Italian. She could be wrong, but wasn't Dante an Italian name or was it Greek?

That they had something to tell her was an understatement. Of that, she was sure. What could they possibly tell her that would make her run from them screaming? Were they axe murderers or something? If so, then yes, she probably would run from them screaming. Suddenly, she became very aware that she was stuck here on this island with them. If they didn't want her to leave, could she really make them release her?

"You are not a prisoner here," Franco said with a sigh.

Dante shot him a dirty look. "I thought we agreed not to do that."

"She was working herself up to a nervous breakdown. I felt we had no choice. Besides," he said with a shrug, "it will go a long way to convincing her we're telling the truth."

"Convincing her wasn't my concern. Scaring

the shit out of her was, however."

Maya watched their exchange for a moment before her temper got the best of her. "Will you two stop talking about me like I'm not here?" She gave Franco a level look. "If I'm not a prisoner, why can't I dress in private?"

"Because we are afraid you'll take the opportunity to run away and there are dangers on this island you know nothing about. We want you to remain here where you are safe. If you insist on returning to port after we explain things to you, one of us will be happy to oblige."

Moving her legs back up onto the bed, she pulled the sheet and blanket up, then tucked them under her arms. "Okay. I'm ready. Tell me what it is you're sure will have me running from you like you're a couple of loons."

Maya almost didn't believe she just said that. She was scared. Terrified, really. Whoever these guys were, they didn't intend to let her go. She could see it in their eyes. By the looks of it, both of them thought they owned her, or at the very least, they thought they had the right to tell her what to do and keeping her here against her will was one of those things.

It didn't matter how attractive she found them. It didn't matter that Dante had just given her the single best orgasm of her life. What mattered was the fact that she had the horrible feeling that when

she stepped on that boat to go to the night swim earlier, she'd lost every human right she ever had.

She swallowed thickly as the thought of sexual slavery entered her mind. She dismissed it almost immediately. Why her? There were at least three younger and prettier women on the excursion than she.

"We are called The Endowed." Dante began.

They were endowed all right, but she wasn't sure she would go around stating that fact if she were them. It sounded rather conceited.

"We are *called* The Endowed, we don't call ourselves that, though it pleases me that you think so," Franco said with a grin.

Had she just spoken aloud? She frowned as she thought back on it. "Why are you called The Endowed?" Her face heated as one obvious reason came to mind.

"Because we are immortal. We are endowed with immortality and we have the ability to endow others as well."

Clapping her hand to her mouth, she could do little else but stare at them. *Oh, God. They're crazy! They're gorgeous, but they're nuts!*

"We are not insane," Dante said with a laugh. "But I like that you think we are gorgeous."

Maya stared at them both, her mouth opened, her eyes wide. "I *know* I didn't say that out loud."

"You did not." Franco glanced at Dante.

"Reading minds is just one of our gifts. It is an easy way to prove that we are...different."

"I can *see* that you're different." Her gaze kept shifting from one to the other. The need to get up and run was nearly overpowering, but as before, she knew she had nowhere to go and, until she could figure out a way to escape, was stuck here.

"There is no need for escape. Once your initial shock is over, if you still decide you cannot abide us, then we will return you to your home."

"You'll return me to my ship."

"Your ship has already gone. It left yesterday."

Maya felt the blood drain from her face. It was a good thing she was already on a bed because she felt as though she would faint. "Oh, my God. It—it left yesterday? That means—"

Dante nodded. "I apologize. You were unconscious for an entire day. I am responsible."

Covering her face with her hands, Maya fought back tears. She couldn't have been out for a day. That orgasm may have been powerful, but there's no way any orgasm could have put her in a twenty-four hour coma. It just wasn't possible.

"Your climax was not what caused you to remain unconscious for so long, *cara*. I took too much blood from you when I bit you."

"Ohmigod, ohmigod, ohmigod!" *They're nuts. Completely and totally off their rockers! And I am stuck on an island with them.*

Tears filled her eyes as she sat with her head in her hands. What was she going to do? She had to get out of here. These two guys were crazy and they had an island full of employees. Did they all suffer from the same delusion?

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Jared stood in the doorway and watched as his best friends got everything wrong when they tried to explain who and what they were. She was a modern woman. She was going to think modern things like white slavery and kidnapping. She wouldn't think like they did and agree that she belonged with them. Women just didn't fall into a man's arms when they said they would mate or marry them these days. You would think as old as the other two were, they would be more flexible and change with the times.

"They are explaining things badly." He pushed away from the doorjamb and gave her a lopsided grin. "I'm Jared." He cleared his throat. "I'm the crazy dolphin who pushed you ashore." He held up his hand. "Before you go all wild eyed on me, just watch."

Reaching for another form, he concentrated on the dog he had when he was younger. He felt the

magick of his kind take over and immediately changed into a collie. Trotting over to her, he rested his head on her lap and gave her his best puppy dog look. *You see? We can change into any form we choose.*

He spoke to her telepathically. *Do you smoke?* With that question, a glass ashtray appeared on the floor in the dog's place. The glass rang as it hit the floor and spun in a circle before settling silently on the hardwood beneath it.

Jared changed back into his human self just in time to see her eyes roll back in her head. She'd fainted. Good. When she woke up, she would think she dreamed it all and they could break it to her again. Eventually, her mind would remain susceptible to what they had to say.

"That was smart."

"Thanks. I thought so." He returned Franco's sarcastic comment with one of his own. "She was going to run. Now when she wakes up, she will wonder if it was all a dream or not. It will give us another chance to explain what we are." He raised a brow as he looked at the other two. "Do you think you can do it without botching it up next time?" He seriously doubted it.

"Look, you asshole. We're not the ones who fucked things up to begin with." Franco grabbed the front of Jared's shirt and pushed him through the door. "What in the fuck did you think you



were doing, dragging her away from her group? You've screwed everything up. The fucking US Navy is out there looking for her. She apparently knows someone high up in her government. Either that, or they've been looking for an excuse to send a large force out here. Whatever their reasons, we're losing excursionists as we speak because of your stupid, childish stunt."

Jared wanted to swing at Franco for the insults he kept piling on, but knew the other man was right. He hadn't meant to take her away from her group. It just happened. The last thing he needed was for Franco or Dante to repeatedly rub his nose in it.

"I lost my head, okay?" He jerked free of Franco's grip. "Haven't you ever lost your head over something? Haven't either of you ever made a stupid, fucking mistake?" He pushed Franco away, balled his hands into fists and drew back. "Don't you ever grab me like that and chastise me like a child again. Until you can tell me you're perfect in every way, don't go busting my chops because I'm not."

Lowering his fists, he began to pace. "I'm not as old as you two. I've never felt this way before. I had a moment of temporary insanity out there. Hell, I didn't even want to like her at first. She's nothing like the way I envisioned our mate. Nothing."

He thrust his hand through his hair, then slammed his fist into the wall opposite the room their mate was in. "But the longer I was around her, the more her scent beckoned me, enticed me, until I could no longer control the need to be in her presence alone. Hell, I barely managed to keep myself from shifting into this form in front of all those humans back there."

Stalking toward for the stairs that would lead him to the lower level of their home, Jared threw over his shoulder, "I need to be alone. Her scent is enough to make me lose my mind again. Let me know when you've convinced her we're not all crazies, will you? Until then, I'm going to hole up in my quarters and try to control the urge to force myself on our mate."

He practically ran down the stairs, heading for his wing of the house. All of them had their own space. Three men couldn't live together without having somewhere they could call their own. At least not when all three of them were predators.

What the hell was he supposed to do now? Sit and twiddle his damned thumbs? He couldn't very well go back up there. The woman's scent was enough to make him lose his mind. Hell, he'd almost punched Franco. None of them had ever gotten so close to fighting in all the time they had been friends, then throw a woman into the mix and they were fighting like the proverbial cats and

dogs.

*Shit!* What *had* he been thinking when he pushed her to the shore. He could have harmed her. She wasn't one of their kind. He could have killed her during that little stunt while thinking with the wrong fucking head.

Slamming the door behind him, he strode through his studio to the easel that stood beneath the bright white bulbs designed to give him optimal lighting and stared at the blank canvas. If he couldn't be with his mate now, perhaps painting her would help.

Closing his eyes, he took a deep breath and sighed before reaching for the remote and turning the stereo on to some soothing Bach. It always helped calm him whenever he was upset. Didn't they always say music soothed the savage beast?

\* \* \* \*

Maya woke to the sound of a ticking clock. Slowly, she opened her eyes and gasped. It wasn't a dream. Well, at least some of it wasn't. She was in the same room as her dream—or maybe she should call it a nightmare.

Shapeshifters did not exist. They just didn't.

Sitting up, she brought her legs over the edge of the bed and stood. She was still naked, but the clothes they offered to let her borrow still sat on

the foot of the bed. At least they'd left her alone for a little while. How long of a while remained to be seen, but if she was lucky, it would be long enough for her to get dressed.

A brush sat on the bureau on the wall with the door she figured led to an en suite bathroom. Snatching up the clothes, she trotted over to the brush, picked it up and padded to the doorway with a prayer on her lips. If there was truly a God, there would be a bathroom on the other side of that door with a shower where she could at least wash the salt from her skin.

"There *is* a God," She murmured with relief as she opened the door. Striding into the bathroom, she locked the door, then set the clothes on the counter. After using the toilet, she searched the drawers, hoping to find an unused toothbrush, but no luck. Instead, she settled for wiping her teeth with a clean washcloth then headed for the shower.

She'd just stepped out of the tub when she noticed a spot on her shoulder. At first she'd thought it was a hickie. After all, Dante *had* gotten a little out of control last night when they made love.

Her face heated and she watched as the color bloomed in her cheeks, though her face appeared pale before. She frowned, hoping she wasn't coming down with something. She didn't

remember eating anything on the island.

Terror struck when she got a good look at the spot in the mirror. It wasn't a hickie. It was two small puncture wounds where her shoulder met her neck. They were just far enough apart to be from Dante's incisors.

"Oh, my God," she whispered, her blue eyes widening as she stared at herself. "He *thinks* he's a vampire and *bit* me. That son-of-a-bitch *bit* me!" Grabbing the clothes off the counter, she threw them on and hurried from the room. She had to get out of here. She *had* to find a way to get off this island. Maybe she could call someone."

She bit her thumb as she paced the room, wondering what she should do. Striding to the window, she looked out over the compound. There was no fence, nothing to keep her here. Maybe she could find someone here who would help her. If Dante and his buddies thought of themselves as vampires, wouldn't they all be in their coffins, or at least some place dark now?

If she was going to run, now was the time while the sun was high. At the very least, they should all be asleep just because of the nature of their jobs. All three of the men she'd seen last night, whether it was a dream or not, worked at the night swim. It made sense that they would all be asleep now.

Slowly, she opened the door, flinching when it creaked just a bit. When she saw no one in the

hallway, she tiptoed out of the room and down the hall to peer over the railing into the foyer below. Still no one.

It wasn't until she got outside that she decided it was strange that no one was out and about. This was a huge complex. Shouldn't someone be around?

Shrugging, she counted herself lucky and headed for the water. They had boats here. Several of them, she was sure. No one could blame her for appropriating one of them to get off this island full of loony birds.

Maya managed to find where they kept the boats by sheer dumb luck. She headed for what she assumed was the water, but it was a sheer drop off instead. When she turned to head back, she noticed a well-worn path leading into the woods. Maybe that led to the boats.

She was staring at a particularly large iguana in a tree to her left when she stumbled off the path and fell down a steep hill of sand to the shore about one hundred feet below. It was a damn good thing she landed on sugar sand and that the drop was more like a steep path than a cliff, otherwise she was sure she would have suffered at least one broken bone.

Standing, she brushed herself off and looked up. There, about fifty feet in front of her was the dock for the boats. Tied to the dock were three

lovely speedboats like the one they'd brought her here on and one huge cabin cruiser. She bit her lip. One thing was for sure. She wouldn't take that one. She'd have a hard time steering the thing.

She knew she wouldn't be lucky enough to find keys on board any of them. Anyone dumb enough to leave keys on board should be shot. She looked anyway and sighed. No keys. She sure as hell couldn't paddle her way back to the port. Even if she could figure out where it was, she knew she couldn't row her way there.

Tears burned her eyes. These people were crazy! How long did she have before they tired of playing with her and killed her? She couldn't die here. She couldn't just lay down and wait for Dante or one of his friends to kill her. And she refused to become some sort of sexual slave, no matter how ridiculous it sounded for a woman her age to even consider.

About to walk away dejected, something bright lying in the sand, caught her eye. She nearly jumped for joy when she picked it up. It was an orange floating key ring, holding a set of boat keys. Now which boat did they belong to?

Three hours later, she was getting thirsty and the sun was still high in the sky. She'd begun to worry about finding the port when she spotted a boat in the distance and sighed with relief. Thank

God. They could steer her to the port and she'd have a reason to stop and search below to see if there was any water or anything to eat onboard.

She powered down and decided to let them come to her while she searched the cabin below for something to drink. A few minutes wouldn't hurt either way. If the others were after her, it was too late now. She'd finally found help.

After running below and grabbing up two bottles of spring water and a granola bar, she waited for the smaller craft to come to her. Maya didn't notice the guns trained on her until it was too late.

"Prepare to be boarded!"

Swallowing the bile at the back of her throat, Maya did nothing but sit with her bottle in the cup holder and the half-eaten granola bar hanging limply from her fingers. Her mouth hung open as three of the most unlikely characters boarded her appropriated craft.

"Whar's your people, wench," one of the men said. He wore a filthy do-rag on his head and a patch over his left eye. If it wasn't for the fact that he obviously needed a bath and his ridiculous getup, he may have been handsome.

"Will you stop talking like that?"

"I'll be talkin' the way I wish, ya scurvy scum. I'm a pirate in the Caribbean."

Maya wanted to laugh. She probably would



have if it weren't for the very real guns pointed her way.

"We're all pirates and we're all in the Caribbean, you idiot. Stop talking like a tard, Mark." This came from another, normal-looking person. Well, normal for someone holding what appeared to be some sort of a machine gun anyway.

The *tard*, Mark, punched him. "Stop calling me a tard. I'm gonna tell Matt. He told you to stop calling me names." Mr. Pirate of the Caribbean sounded more like a recalcitrant child now than a pirate.

She sidled toward the edge of the boat, hoping they would forget she was there, at least until she could hide somewhere. Talk about jumping from the frying pan and into the fire. Maybe she should have stayed where she was. At least she'd been out of the sun and not about to have someone shoot her in the near future.

"C'mere, matey," Mark said as he grabbed her by the arm and leaned down to smell her. "She smells good, Brad. Can we keep her?"

"Of course we can't keep her. She's not a stray dog."

The third guy looked her up and down with a sneer. "I wouldn't say that. She's a bit on the tubby side and kinda old. Dog fits her perfect in my opinion."

Maya bit her lip when she really wanted to tell Mr. High and Mighty that he was no prize himself. About six feet tall, he had a potbelly, greasy hair and a beard that held what looked like remnants of his last several meals. Maybe it was the fact that they all seemed a bit inept or maybe she just lost her grip on her better judgment, she grimaced up at him. "Wash much?"

He backhanded her before she could blink.

Black spots danced before her eyes as Mark continued to hold her arm. If it wasn't for his support, Maya knew that blow would have knocked her on her backside.

Mark reached out with one huge, ham-like fist and punched tall dark and smelly hard enough to knock him over the side. "Don't you touch her! I saw her first and she's mine."

Maya stood, one arm still held in the unyielding grip of Mark's left hand. She pressed her free hand to her face gingerly. That was going to leave one hell of a bruise. She licked the blood from the corner of her mouth and fought the urge to cry. It wouldn't do her any good and would only use up precious energy she would need when she found a way to escape.

\* \* \* \*

*She's gone!* Franco notified his friends through

their common link. A sick feeling settled deep in his gut. They'd managed to scare her enough to run from them. He could have sworn she was made of sterner stuff than that. *She's not in her room. I knew one of us should have stayed with her.* He ran to Dante's office so fast he knew he was nothing more than a blur.

"Our mate isn't stupid. She still would have found a way to run if we kept her prisoner here. She's on the island somewhere. She cannot get far." Dante kept his voice low and even as though he didn't have a care in the world.

"We're missing a set of keys," Jared informed them as he entered behind Franco. "Trey just told me that the keys to the cruiser were in his pocket last night and now they're gone. They must have fallen out on the beach somewhere. And..." He paused, looking uncomfortable. "The cruiser isn't anywhere near the cay where we left it." He turned his attention to Dante. "Don't think we haven't noticed that you're finally using contractions. Good job on learning lazy speech."

Dante rested his elbows on his desk and put his face in his hands, obviously choosing to ignore Jared's remark. "How much does either of you want to bet that our mate was lucky enough to find those keys?" Looking up, he raised a dark brow, his strange, sky blue eyes glittering with disgust. "Tell Trey he'd better check his damned

pockets from now on or he'll be riding instead of driving if he ever loses another set of keys."

"We have to find her. She could be lost out there with no idea how to get anywhere." Franco wanted to find Trey and rip him a new asshole. "What was he thinking by not notifying us immediately of the loss of those keys? No doubt the asshole had been hoping to find them himself and no one would have been the wiser to his negligence." He turned to Jared with a scowl. "He knew we had our newfound mate here. How could he not have known he was missing those damned keys?"

Jared shrugged. "I don't know, but I'll bet she's onboard the boat. I've already been down to the dock and her scent is all over the place."

"Jesus." Dante hung his head for a moment. "We can find her." He bared his teeth in what could have been a grin. I took her blood last night remember? It won't take long to find her so long as she hasn't gotten far."

Franco wanted to scream. He'd never been so frustrated in his life. He paced in front of Dante's desk as the other man prepared to link himself with their mate. Clenching his fists at his sides, he fought the emergence of his incisors. Blood lust rode him hard. He wanted to find Trey and rip his throat out for his carelessness. Both sets of teeth, incisors on the top and bottom fought to emerge

from his gums. Gritting his teeth, he managed to keep them at bay by the sheer force of his will. Trey was young—too young to realize the importance of their find. He must keep reminding himself of that.

The beast in him wanted to rend and tear. That part of him that always waited just beneath the surface of his civility, the demon refused to lose its mate. He hadn't waited a millennia to find Maya, only to have her disappear before he could tell her what she meant to him—to them—just because of some pubescent male who neglected his duties.

Dante closed his eyes and reached out to Maya. Time passed in mere minutes. "She is alive."

All three of them seemed to relax a little at the news. "That is good." Franco breathed a little easier, Jared closed his eyes and sighed, no doubt offering a prayer of thanks to whatever deity he chose to worship this day.

"There is a small, seemingly uninhabited island about fifteen miles north of here. We will find her there." Dante flinched, then growled, holding a hand to his left cheek. "She is injured and she is not alone." Dante opened his eyes.

The presence of the demon in him was more pronounced than Franco had ever seen before. The other man's eyes glowed red from within. The usual orange-red caste of the predator was gone. In its place was the red of fresh blood and the fire

of the demon. All four of his incisors shot from Dante's gums and he snarled. Eyes filled with the promise of retribution gazed into Franco's.

"Our Maya is in danger. At least one of her captors abuses her."

Franco himself saw red at Dante's words.

Jared stepped up, his eyes also aglow with his demon's unholy light. "Lead the way to our mate, old friend," he addressed Dante. "I think all of us would like a word with the man or men who dares to touch our woman."

"Yes." Franco joined Jared. "Lead us to those with the death wish. He was certain her captors must wish for death, for no man would harm their mate and live.

Dante pushed his chair back and stood. With a glance at the window, the glass shattered and the frame burst from the side of the building as he moved to the opening. Iridescent scales shimmered on his skin as he changed from human form to that of a large, winged dragon. "Let's go bring our mate home."

\* \* \* \*

Maya sat in the dank, dark hole where the men put her. Mark hadn't wanted her in the hole. Of all them, he seemed like the only quasi-normal one of the bunch. He may not have a lot in the brains

department, but he at least had compassion and the need to pay off some sort of debt didn't drive him like it drove the others either.

The others, concerned with paying off Matt, whoever he was, took the boat she had appropriated and went to see if their creditor would accept it as payment. Mark stayed behind, dropping bits of food and water through the cover on the hole like she was his pet.

Maya stayed curled up along the side of the round hole, her arms wrapped around her legs. Her face hurt like the dickens where Carlos, the violent one, bitch slapped her. It felt like the whole side of her face had swelled to the size of a grapefruit. She wouldn't doubt it. She'd always bruised easily.

The further the sun climbed into the sky, the hotter it got in her little hole. It wasn't in the shade, protected from the sun. It was in a clearing and most likely specifically designed to bake the inhabitants alive. Sweat poured off her as she sat there, waiting to die. Mark meant well as he occasionally came by to give her water, but most of it landed on the ground or poured over her face as he dumped it through one of the small openings. At some point, she didn't remember when, Maya stopped wondering what kind of microbes were in the water and spent her energy just trying to catch it in her mouth so she wouldn't

die of dehydration.

After Mark's visits, she would go to the side of the hole that afforded a little shade to sit and wait for the next one, praying that the next time Mark would have found a way to get her out of here.

Blessed darkness came before the men returned. The hole didn't cool off much, but the fact that the sun wasn't beating down on her helped to flag her waning spirits. If only Dante really was a vampire with those strange and special powers they had. He could find her and rescue her. At least he'd cared to make her comfortable.

"Matt wants the woman and he'll wipe out the debt for this stash."

Maya cringed at the sound of Carlos' voice.

"And stop smoking it, Mark. We're supposed to sell it not smoke it. That's what got us all into trouble the first time. We sell the pot and use the profits to buy more. We can't get no stinkin' profits if we don't sell it."

Matt wanted her. She shuddered with disgust at the thought of what Matt may want with her. Selling women on the black market was very lucrative, or so she'd heard.

At first, she thought they were bumbling idiots. Carlos corrected her view on that. Carlos was a mean and dirty businessman. The only reason he didn't kill her was because of Mark and Mark was



Matt's cousin or something.

"Maya is mine." Mark was adamant about keeping her. "Did you tell Matt that I wanted to keep her?"

"If Matt wants you to have her, he can just give her to you after he takes her as payment."

The muffled sound of keys hitting the sand near the hole reached her ears.

"Get her out of there and get her loaded on the boat. He wants her now."

The sound of the key grating in the rusty padlock had Maya cowering in the corner. As much as she wanted out of this hot box, she wanted to meet Mark's cousin less. She stayed cowering in the darkest corner of the hole, hoping they would think she'd found a way to escape.

"She's gone!"

The sound of Mark's surprised voice made it easier to stay scrunched up in the darkness.

"She's not gone, you idiot." Carlos slapped Mark on the back of the head as he trained a flashlight on the dark corner. "She was hiding to make you think she got away." He turned shaking his head. Get the ladder and go and get her. She's obviously not coming up on her own."

"Is he really that stupid?"

She heard Carlos ask someone she assumed was Brad. There was no answer. Either Brad didn't agree with him or he just didn't want Mark

knowing he thought he was stupid as well. Mark may be a little slow, but at least he wasn't cruel.

An hour later, the men still fought over Mark's claim. The biggest and strongest of the three, Mark, stood his ground, refusing to let the others take her to Matt. "I told you, she's mine. Matt can't have her." He swung at Carlos while Brad tried to work his way behind him.

"Take the pot back. I don't wanna sell it. I wanna keep her." The more upset Mark got, the more he sounded like a child. His patch had moved from his left eye to his right.

As Maya suspected, he wasn't really blind. He was like a little kid playing at cowboys and indians. Only now, he was playing good pirate against mean, smelly drug dealers. She'd never pictured any hero as unlikely as the one defending her now.

She wanted to tell him to remove the patch because it was only a hindrance to him. It affected his depth perception and peripheral vision, but she knew it would only distract him from trying to keep the men off her.

Maya would have run if they hadn't tied her to a T-shaped pole she figured served as one end of a clothes line at one time. After all, whoever built this place would have needed some type of large animal to drag the palm logs into camp. They

looked heavy.

Every bondage fantasy she'd ever had came to mind as she thought about where she was and she immediately discarded them. This was no fantasy. It was a fucking nightmare to beat all nightmares. The last thing she wanted was for any of these reeking men to touch her sexually. She wanted to go home and bar that, she wanted Dante or Franco or even the guy who had introduced himself in her dreams. Didn't someone say his name was Jared? Any of those guys were preferable to the trio in front of her now.

She wanted her life back. She wanted the boring life of a paralegal investigating cases for her superiors. She wanted the staid, tedious and lackluster life of being always behind the scenes where hardly anyone knew what she did to help them.

Excitement was overrated. Excitement was for the damned birds. She'd had enough excitement to last a lifetime and now she just wanted to go home, put on one of her drab blue or brown suits and bury herself in her work. But even that was probably lost to her now. Everyone everywhere probably heard of her abduction by dolphins and her bosses were probably already interviewing for her replacement. They wouldn't waste their time pulling the innumerable strings they had to help her. Why would any of them waste a favor on her?

Just because a few of them claimed she worked miracles on their cases didn't mean she was irreplaceable. Mr. Halloran never failed to remind her of that fact.

Brad finally managed to sneak around Mark while Carlos kept his attention elsewhere. Pulling a small gun from his pocket, he hit Mark over the head with the stock, knocking him unconscious.

"It's about damned time you got the better of him." Carlos glared at Brad, blood trickling from the corner of his mouth.

"Me?" Brad shoved Carlos out of his face. "If you would have kept his attention better, I could have gotten around him a long time ago. Stop your bitching and get the girl to the boat before he wakes up." Brad grabbed Mark's legs and hauled him into the small hut.

Carlos grinned, pulled a knife from his belt and walked toward her. "We may have to take you to Matt alive, but he didn't say what condition you had to be in when you got there. I think I'm going to have some fun first." Dropping the flashlight, he held like a club while fighting Mark, Carlos advanced.

The light rolled until it reached the hole and disappeared, leaving her in the relative darkness of the moonlit night. He pressed himself up against her, his hips pressing against hers. She almost retched at the smell of his rancid breath in

her face. He thrust his hard cock against her and she started to cry. He was going to rape her. This may have been one of her innermost fantasies, but it had always been with a man with whom she'd had a mutual attraction.

She paused at the thought, realizing for the first time that the men in her fantasies always resembled the three men she'd run from when she got herself into this mess.

He held the knife close to her face, the blade stinging her skin. Blood trickled down her face and she cried out when he cut her, dragging the blade from her ear to her cheek, laying the skin open.

"I like it rough. I like my girls to scream." He licked the other side of her face before he switched the knife to his other hand. "Let's see how well Mark and Matt like you after I'm done with you. I wonder if they like their women with no tits?"

Squeezing her eyes shut, she couldn't help but feel the weight of the blade as Carlos moved the knife lower, the tip pressing into the underside of her right breast. She screamed again, wondering where Brad was and why he refused to help her. Didn't he know that Carlos was insane – didn't he care?

Suddenly, the pressure of the knife was gone. Carlos's body no longer squashed her against the hard pole and someone cut her bonds. She fell

sobbing into the strong arms of a man who picked her up and cradled her to his chest like a child. Her arms ached. The weight of her body pulling on her shoulder joints for over an hour made her arms burn with pain.

She sobbed into the chest of her savior, uncaring for a moment that she had no idea who held her. She only knew that whoever he was, unlike her captors, he was clean and smelled of soap and some sort of citrusy cologne.

"Sh...*bellacara*. We are here now. They shall not harm you anymore."

It was Franco. She bawled, bringing her hands up to cover her face. They'd come to rescue her. How did they find her? Maya discarded the only explanation. They weren't vampires. They had no special powers. They probably had some sort of tracking beacon on the boat and knew it stopped here for a while. "They took your boat." That beautiful boat was now with a drug dealer. "I'm sorry. I don't know where they took it. I won't blame you if you hate me."

"Do you think we are here for the boat?"

She hiccupped, wondering why she thought he sounded strange. It was probably because she was losing blood.

"What did he do to you?" Franco cursed when he obviously saw the deep cut on her cheek. "Kill him for daring to use a knife on our mate."

Even those words had little effect on her. Mate. She had mated with Dante, sort of. They'd had sex. What a glorious experience that had been. She drifted in a sea of pain and a strange listlessness stole over her. At that point, she almost didn't care if she lived or died. She just wanted to sleep and then figure out why Franco sounded so weird.

"I will take her back to the island. You two finish up here and follow me back. She has lost too much blood. We may have no choice but to mate her this night, whether she is ready or not."

"You sound so strange, Franco, so proper." She managed to open her eyes and look up.

"Do you trust me?"

Did she? She trusted him not to hurt her, at least not now. He held her so tenderly she almost wanted to cry. When he leaned down and gently licked her cheek where Carlos cut her, she expected to feel fiery pain, not the languid comforting warmth that stole over her. "Yes," she whispered, her head falling back against his arm.

"Then look into my eyes and relax."

When she did as asked, she felt a strange presence in her mind.

"You are our *bellacara* and you will sleep now."

She didn't want to sleep. She wanted to ask him why he talked so funny. Like...like a vampire, a really old vampire. Instead, she felt herself falling down into the dark abyss of sleep.

## CHAPTER NINE

Generally, as a rule, Dante didn't play with his food, but he did this time. He bared his teeth at the man he'd pulled off their mate. His kind didn't usually kill while feeding either, but this man deserved to die. He may not take the last drop of his blood, but he would see to it that the man took his last breath this night. He saw naught but the killing rage of his demon. The blinding rage overrode any kinder thoughts he may have had. No one harmed his mate and lived.

Reading the other man's mind, he found that he liked hurting women. It probably stemmed from a childhood of abuse from his mother. She'd sold him for drug money to men who liked little boys. That still didn't excuse the monster he'd become as a man. As a man, he'd had the opportunity to fight against such injustices. Instead, he himself turned to a debauched life of crime.

Dante dug through the man's memories and



found that he was the man who backhanded their mate. He intended to gouge Maya's face and body, leaving her scarred for life. Afterward, he intended to take her to a man whom he knew would kill her because she couldn't bring him riches on the sexual slave market.

Rage unlike anything he'd ever felt before rode him hard. "Check the shack. There are two more of them and I find it difficult to believe they have not heard us." He paused. "Do not harm the one wearing the pirate costume. The man is like a small child. He has defended our mate against the others while facing bodily injury himself. He may be unconscious."

After sending Jared on his mission, he turned his attention back to the one called Carlos. Carlos grinned after Jared left, no doubt under the mistaken impression that the odds were now even.

Dante controlled the demon within him, keeping the light of the bloodlust from his eyes. The man would soon discover that, despite the weapons on his person, he was outmatched and outclassed.

Baring his rotten teeth in a grin. Carlos pulled a gun from one of the pockets on the cargo pants he wore, lifted his hand and motioned for Dante to make his move.

"Let's see how strong you are up against this,

asshole." He sneered, obviously thinking his weapon gave him the upper hand.

Dante moved and he fired. The bullet hit Dante just below his heart. The searing pain did nothing but release the monster on which he'd kept such tight control.

"Now you will see just what your lifestyle has wrought." Dante let Carlos shoot him again just to make a point as he strode over to take the gun. Squeezing the weapon in his hand, he watched with satisfaction as Carlos's eyes widened with disbelief. The stock broke off the gun and the barrel bent, rendering it useless. Dante threw the gun toward the shore, knowing it would hit the water and sink below the waves.

Turning his attention back to Carlos, he watched, unfeeling, as the other man fell to his knees and crossed himself. It was a pale attempt fashioned too late to gain his sympathy.

"*Madre de dios!*" He crossed himself again. "Please don't kill me. I will do anything for you. You are a *vampiro*, are you not?" he nodded as he asked. "Make me like you and I shall do your bidding forever." He smiled. "As you have seen, I know many ways to cause pain and suffering."

"And that is why you have been sentenced to death."

Carlos's eyes widened, the whites showing around the brown irises. His brown skin took a

pallor that reminded Dante of his injured mate.

"No. No. Do not kill me, *Senor*. I only wish to serve you." He glanced toward the shack where Jared disappeared. "Like the others serve you."

"They do not serve me, evil one. They are my friends. My confidants. You have no idea what to do with power. You think power gives you the right to terrorize innocents. Your kind rapes women and children and becomes drunk on your ability to dominate. This is not how the responsible control power. My abilities give me the capability to wreak havoc on mankind, but it is my duty to see that those who usurp other's power over themselves face justice. I am justice. I am Dante Delatoro De Luca, the adjudicator for the southern hemisphere. This is your trial. I am both your judge and jury and I sentence you to death."

Dante wasted no more time. He rushed Carlos, becoming nothing more than a blur. The other man had no defense, no way to stop him as he grabbed him by the shoulders, pulled his head to the side and sank his teeth deep into Carlos's jugular. At the last minute, he pushed Carlos back and shoved him away to bleed out onto the ground.

*"Espero que su muerte le traiga una cierta apariencia de la paz. Vaya con dios."* He didn't say it just to make Carlos feel better as he died. He *did* hope the

other man's death brought him a bit of peace.

"I don't know that I would have said that." Jared shook his head. "The other is gone. He took their speedboat and disappeared. We could try to catch him, but I read his memories. While he did nothing to help our mate, he never touched her either. It would be difficult to pass judgment."

Jared toed Carlos's body and translated what Dante told him. "I hope your death brings you some semblance of peace." He shook his head. "I don't believe you said that, then told him to go with God."

"Everyone, no matter how evil, deserves some form of last rites." Dante shrugged. "Come. We must return to our mate."

\* \* \* \*

Jared jerked his thumb toward the shack. "What about Mark? He did help her. He tried to keep her safe even though he thinks she belongs to him. I think we can convince him otherwise though." He grinned, showing his teeth. "It seems a shame to leave him here to starve to death."

Dante sighed and shook his head. "Go get him and we'll take him back to the island with us. Perhaps we can find something for him to do there. It would be a crime to leave him here to die when his only transgression was choosing his

friends poorly. As far as his relative goes," he said with a shrug. "None of us can choose the family into which we are born."

Jared knew Dante would think that way. Dante always did the honorable thing. Rarely did his demon ever prevail when making decisions. When Jared followed Brad into the shack, he knew the other man was gone, leaving Mark unconscious on the floor. He followed the scent to the shore and smelled the exhaust of the old boat they used. After making his way back to the hut, he sifted through Mark's memories and decided he liked the childlike male. Perhaps they could fix him, and if not, at least they could care for him better than his friends or his cousin, Matt, the drug lord who controlled his every movement.

In Jared's mind, there were no worse crimes than abusing women or children and Mark was nothing more than a big child. He barely knew right from wrong, no thanks to his cousin. His mother, gentle soul that she was, had been his only source of education. The poor man probably didn't remember that it was his cousin, the man he looked up to, who took Mark's mother from his life. Matt, needing money to finance his climb up the drug business ladder, sold Mark's mother into slavery, leaving her young son to fend for himself amongst the drug lord's compound.

Matt was another on a growing list of offenders

Jared planned to bring to Dante for judgment. He just had to find him. Mark was just regaining consciousness when Jared reentered the little hovel the three *pirates* called home.

He looked up rubbing his head. "What happened?"

"Brad hit you over the head with something, then dragged you in here."

Mark's amber eyes widened. "My Maya!" Then he growled. "Carlos better not have hurt my Maya." Glaring at Jared through narrowed eyes, he said, "You better not have hurt my Maya either." With that, he stomped from the cabin and stopped dead at the sight of Carlos's body lying prone on the ground. "Carlos was bad."

"And Mark is good." Jared laid a hand on his arm. "Would you like to go see Maya?"

Mark nodded. "My Maya."

Jared shook his head. "She is our Maya. She is your friend and my mate. She has four men to protect her now." He grinned down into Mark's innocent eyes. "Would you like to see something cool?"

Grinning, Mark practically jumped up and down. "Like a real pirate?"

"Cooler than that," Jared said as he changed back into his dragon. The sun would rise again soon and the dragon's body was the form that protected them from the sun's damaging rays the

best.

Mark looked on with undisguised glee. "That is cool! Can you teach me how to do that?"

*Maybe one day. Climb on my back if you want to come with me. We need to go to Maya to make sure she is okay.*

"Our Maya."

"Yes, Mark. Our Maya."

\* \* \* \*

The first thing Maya noticed when she woke was the pain was gone. Her face should have ached with one side bruised, the other side flayed open like a filleted fish. Her throat hurt though. It burned from thirst and there was a strange metallic taste in her mouth.

Rolling over, she gasped as she met the gazes of the three different men she'd prayed would come to her rescue. Was it all a dream? Had she dreamed everything from her time with Dante on the beach until now?

Reaching up, she felt her cheeks. They were smooth. Smoother than they should be, really. Her face felt firmer than it had a few short days ago as well. She frowned, wondering what happened and why she couldn't decide if what she remembered was really memories or just the remnants of a bad dream.

"We had no choice but to bring you over without your consent. You were near death," Dante spoke first. "As the adjudicator of the southern hemisphere, it was up to me to make the decision. Your condition is my doing. If you have a grievance about your current state, the blame is solely mine."

"I don't understand." She glanced up, wrinkling her brow. She almost felt like Dorothy must have when waking up to find her aunt and uncle staring down at her after her trip over the rainbow.

"You are like us now," Franco added.

Jared, if that was really his name, stared at her as though she'd lost something important along the way. Like her mind.

"She's in shock. She doesn't understand. Maybe the change," he paused and circled his finger near his head, "did something to her."

"I'm not crazy." She glared at him. "At least, I don't think I am. It's entirely possible, at least from my perspective, that you guys are the crazies." Clutching the sheet to her chest, she tilted her head to the side as she tried to make sense of what was going on. "I'm not real sure how I got here."

"It wasn't a dream." Dante moved forward, sat on the bed and took her hands in his. "None of it was a dream." He grinned lopsidedly. "Or a



nightmare.”

Raising his hand, he trailed his fingers down over an invisible line that followed where Carlos had cut her last night.

“It really happened and the sooner you can come to grips with that, the better off you will be.”

Swallowing thickly, she stared up at the three men. “Why are you all looking at me like that?” Jared stepped forward. The look of awe on his face was the same expression she’d seen on the faces of countless men watching a supermodel or an exceptionally beautiful star. *Why* were they looking at her like she was the most beautiful woman in the world?

“You are one of us, now. One of The Endowed.”

Heat rushed to her face as she thought of how well endowed Dante really was. How well endowed all of them were as evidenced by the impressive bulge in the front of their jeans. She pressed her hands to her face. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“We are not human,” Franco said from the foot of the bed. “We are what you would call vampires. Our people came into existence eons ago when beings from two higher planes of existence met here and begat offspring. We are their offspring. They came here from their dimension where there was no emotion, found

love and procreated through their *aberrant* behavior."

"There aren't many of us and we have few mates."

"You mean women, don't you?"

Dante shook his head. "I mean mates. Even our women have a difficult time finding the right people to spend the rest of their lives with."

"So what you're saying is that your people are nearly extinct." Maya bit her lip, trying hard to understand. She should be afraid of them, terrified even, but she wasn't. Somehow, she knew that they wouldn't harm her. Perhaps it was the fact that they saved her from certain death. It seemed so melodramatic even though she lived it and knew it was true.

What they told her about their people stretched the boundaries of all that was believable. Yet, she couldn't deny they had some sort of weird special powers that helped them find her in the middle of nowhere. Reaching up, she touched the side of her neck where the puncture wounds were the morning before. They were gone. She frowned. "I could have sworn..."

"You aren't remembering things wrong, *bellacara*. You did have wounds before." Jared cleared his throat. "You were near death when we found you. After your night with Dante coupled with your wounds, you lost too much blood. You

would have died if we hadn't changed you." He smiled, his eyes glowing with pleasure. "And boy, have you changed."

Maya actually felt the blood drain from her face. "What are you saying?" She glanced at each of them in turn. "How did you change me? What have you done?" She grimaced as she realized what the strange metallic taste in her mouth was. "I can't do this." Her eyes filled with tears, blurring her vision. "I can't survive on blood. I can accept it in you, but..." she shook her head. "I could never..." She gagged at the thought of drinking another's blood. Lifting her hand to her mouth, she pressed the backs of her fingers against her lips. "You should have let me die." She gave them each an accusing glare. "What gave you the right to do this?"

"You are our mate," Jared said earnestly. "Our *bellacara*. The beautiful love who we cannot control, a woman we hoped...could accept us as we are." He hung his head. "If you refused to become like us, you could not accept us or our ways, then we would have to let you go." He jerked his thumb toward the other two. "I'm young compared to them. I'm only two hundred. They have been looking for someone like you for millennia. Did you think once we found you we wouldn't do anything to keep you with us, including saving your life? We will understand if

you hate us now, but we couldn't just watch you die. Not when we knew we could save you. Please give your new life a chance. Give us a chance."

Swallowing hard, she glanced at the three gorgeous men who wanted her in their lives and felt the heat rush to her face. "You said I was all of your um...*bellacara*. What does that mean exactly?"

They all grinned. "It means exactly what you think it means. You are compatible for all three of us. We are willing to share you with each other if you are willing to share yourself with us." Dante lifted her hand and placed an opened mouth kiss to her palm. "Just think, *cara*, you will have three men devoted to your needs, your pleasure. How many women can say that?"

"Besides," Jared added, "Dante and Franco are rich. You could have everything you've ever wanted."

"All I've ever wanted was a man to spend my life with and to bear his children." She looked down to her blanket-covered lap. "I'm too old for that now."

"Not by our standards. You cannot look at things in the way you are used to. To our people, you are very young. You have many years left in which you can procreate." Dante stood and walked to the window, stuck his hands in his pockets and looked out through the darkness.

"There are disadvantages. You can only go out into the sun in certain forms." He held his arms out. "This form is our weakest. The coat of a wolf can protect you in the bright sun, but it will still burn your skin if you stay outside too long. Our strongest form is that of the dragon. Its scales are nearly impenetrable by anything, including bullets and certain types of explosives."

Maya's head spun. "Certain forms. You can...you can change forms?"

"Of course we can. I was the dolphin who took you from your group and stranded you here." Jared bowed his head. "I have no excuse. I can only say your scent in the water drove me close to madness. I couldn't control the need to take you, to have you. I wasn't supposed to do that." He glanced at the others. "Dante and Franco wanted to let you return to the port with the group."

"Then Dante showed up and threw a wrench in it? He just *happened* to be on the shore. Wasn't he there, waiting for you to bring me to him so he could seduce me?"

"No." Jared shook his head. "It wasn't like that."

"Right." Crossing her arms, she glared at them, glad to have something to concentrate on besides the metallic taste in her mouth she knew was the remaining taste of their blood. "You tell me you've waited centuries for someone like me, then you

expect me to believe you were just going to let me walk away?"

It wasn't as though she wouldn't have wanted to go back to her life, to normalcy, but she didn't believe for a second that they would have just let her walk away. Not after coming for her after she stole their boat. Hell, none of them even asked her about it. It was as though her taking off with their property was of no consequence. If she was that important to them, there was no way they would have let her just walk away and back to her life without a fight. Both Dante and Franco avoided her gaze.

"We planned to take you from the port. We didn't want someone thinking you'd disappeared on the excursion. It would have caused an investigation and too many unanswerable questions."

They both turned to glare at Jared.

"But the best laid plans and all that," Franco added with a shrug.

Putting her hands to her head, she sighed. "Do you think you can leave me alone for a little while? I need...I need some time to come to grips with this."

The men glanced at each other and with a small nod, headed for the door. "We will leave you to your rest for now," Franco said as he ushered the others out. "Think about what we have told you.

Take a long look at yourself and see what our gift to you has wrought before you make any decisions.”

## CHAPTER TEN

Dante paced his office, unable to sleep. Franco joined him not long after he took up residence in his chair, staring into space. Jared, ever the optimist, took to swimming laps in the saltwater pool in the center courtyard.

"What if she can't accept it?" Franco stood staring out the window at the full moon. "It is Yule today. Christmas will be in a few days, then she will have to return to her people. She will lose her job, not that she will find returning to work an easy task. She will crave blood and fear being near others."

"Do you think I do not know what we have wrought? Would you rather she died from blood loss last night?" He scrubbed his face with his hands. "I wanted to woo her, to court her as she deserves. I had no intention of taking over her life like this. She is our *bellacara*, our woman, but I would not force her into that position." Turning,



he punched the wall behind him, leaving a gaping hole in the plaster. "She deserves a choice. We took that from her."

"Jared took that from her."

Dante turned to Franco, not bothering to hide the self-hatred he felt from his friend. "We could have returned her that night. We had no right to keep her here. I had no right to take her on that beach knowing I would take her blood, knowing it would take hours for her to recover." He paced the room, pushing chairs and end tables out of the way. "We should have returned her to her ship at the first opportunity. Instead, we kept her here, held her against her will until she ran and put herself into danger. What happened to her is our fault. Then we make it worse by changing her without her consent. Who would blame her for hating us?" He turned to look at Franco. "Would you?"

"No," Franco said with a sigh. "I wouldn't blame her. None of us would. We simply must hope that she can see it in her heart to forgive us for our mistakes."

"I hope she is easier on us than I am," Jared said as he entered the room, flopped down on one of the richly upholstered chairs and laced his fingers behind his head.

"Get out of that. You're all wet, you ignorant fuck." Dante didn't usually care what Jared did as

long as he refrained from tearing things up. If Jared realized how difficult it was to get things replaced, he would be more careful where he put his wet ass.

"I didn't mean to fuck things up, guys. I guess I just don't have the control you two do." Vacating the chair, he crossed over and sat in one of the wood chairs that flanked the game table in the corner.

Dante and Franco just looked at each other and rolled their eyes.

"You have never had the control of someone centuries younger than you." Franco slapped Jared on the back of the head. "It's one of the reasons we keep you around. Your lack of control keeps things interesting. We'd just hoped that you would be able to keep hold of your faculties long enough to court her."

"You mean date."

"Whatever. She is a lady, not one of your damned hookers. She deserves to have us court her the way all ladies want to be courted."

"Women are women. They all like the same thing. Buy them a few drinks and tell them they're cute and they'll do whatever you want."

Dante glanced at Franco. "You know, he is lucky he is not mortal. If he were human, he would have died of some disease by now."

\* \* \* \*

Maya didn't want to get out of the bed. The men had left her alone the way she asked and she'd lain in the bed for over an hour, alternately crying and thinking. She wanted what they represented, but she wasn't used to the idea of living with three men or drinking blood.

What kind of woman had a relationship with three men at the same time? What would her sisters think when—no—if, they found out? She wasn't sure she would have the courage to tell them. They were just as straight laced as she had always been.

Wait a minute. What was she thinking? Mentally, she was already making a life with these guys and trying to figure out a way to explain her new lifestyle to her sisters.

How could she explain them to each other? How could she ever manage to convince her sisters those three men wanted her? That she was happy with them, knowing what she looked like? She knew what she was. She was thirty pounds overweight and though she was tall, it still gave her paunches where men didn't like them. Men like the three she'd just met didn't go for women like her. They didn't fall in love with a woman's mind or her personality. Men in general went for looks first. She learned that lesson the hard way a

long time ago.

Tossing the blankets back, she threw her legs over the edge of the bed and stopped cold. After staring down at her legs for a moment, she rubbed her eyes, then took another look.

Those weren't her legs. She hadn't had legs that looked like that in at least fifteen years. She'd never had a lot of cellulite, but she had a little and it was gone. All of it. Reaching down, she ran her hands over her hips and stomach. Standing, she felt her rear and it was firm. As firm as it had been when she was eighteen. Maybe firmer.

Racing to the bathroom, she looked in the mirror and gasped. She was no longer overweight. In fact, she didn't even look her age anymore. She looked about the same age as the men, somewhere between twenty-five and thirty-five and while she was firm, she still had an abundance of curves. Still what others would call plus-sized, she now appeared to be around a size eighteen instead of a twenty-two.

Maybe she could have kids now. That was something she had given up hope on years ago. Maya knew when she reached thirty-five that the odds of finding and marrying a man were slim. Her biological clock ticked away the months, weeks and days until it seemed that she felt every minute that brought her closer to losing the ability to have children.

Continuing to stare into the mirror, Maya watched as tears slid down her face. It seemed strange to look at herself and see a much younger version of herself staring back.

She smiled as the realization struck. The men didn't know this would happen. That was why they all stared at her as though awestruck. Maya couldn't help the warm feeling in her middle when she thought about how all three of those gorgeous men, chose her for their mate, thinking they were binding themselves to a frumpy forty year old. All of them got a pleasant surprise with her turning and hers was the most pleasant of all. A knock at the door startled her out of her musings. Throwing on the bathrobe to cover her nudity, she hurried to see who it was.

"Hi." Franco grinned. "I can tell by your still awed expression that you've finally seen your gifts."

Smiling, she opened the door wider, inviting him in. "I don't believe it. I'm young again and thinner than I think I've ever been in my life. And I think I look better, too. Changing me did something to my complexion and my looks. I...I'm—"

"You're beautiful." Franco grasped her shoulders. "You have always been beautiful. You will not convince me otherwise," he added, raising a brow when she would have protested.

"Thank you." The words came out breathless. The way he looked at her made her nervous. He stared at her with eyes dark and sexy as sin. His thumbs made tiny circles over her collarbone and she shivered, goosebumps covering her arms.

Staring up into his eyes, she found it hard to believe they couldn't control her. She felt mesmerized by him. Maybe it was just the chemistry between them or maybe, deep down, she just wanted this. After all, how many women could boast to having three lovers at the same time? Not that she had three yet. So far, only Dante showed real interest until today.

"Tell me to leave if you do not want me to make love to you because that is exactly what I am about to do."

Franco moved closer, crowding her so that she moved closer to the bed. It took less than a minute for her to decide. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she gave him a Mona Lisa smile. "I want you more than I can say." Heat seared her cheeks. "I only hope that none of you think less of me for taking you up on this offer, but I can't seem to choose between you and I think I could come to like having three men doting on me."

"We don't hope you *like* us, *bellacara*, we hope you will soon come to love us."

She hoped she could, too. Sleeping with them because of chemistry was one thing, but she

couldn't continue to stay here if she didn't develop some sort of feelings for them. She would feel too much like she was prostituting herself for a home.

Home. The thought of her home back in Virginia held little appeal for her now. She wanted this, wanted these men. She only hoped that she could manage to care for them because she would never be able to live with herself if they fell for her while she used them.

It was okay for now. They all knew they used each other for pleasure. She needed to learn of her new lifestyle and they were obligated to teach her. Afterward, she needed to know that she stayed because she loved them. Not because they were convenient and sexy as all get out. Maya stretched herself up on her toes when Franco bent his head to capture her lips with his.

Franco pulled back to shower little kisses over her cheeks and eyes. "Are you sure? Decide now while I can still stop."

Nodding, Maya thrust her fingers through his hair and pulled his lips back to hers. "I'm very sure."

*Thank you, cara, you have no idea how long I have waited for this moment. How long I have dreamed of your arms freely holding me, your lips pressed against mine because of your will and not my own.*

Maya curled her toes. Goodness, the man could

kiss. And he could talk. He knew exactly what to say to take away her misgivings and keep her right where they both wanted her to be—in his arms.

His lips were firm, experienced, as they slid over her own. Nothing she'd ever experienced before could have ever prepared her for the two men she'd kissed since coming here. She could only guess that Jared would be similar. None of them were alike, yet both Dante and Franco knew what to do to make her melt with just a word, just a touch of their lips.

"Before you decide, you must know that there may come a time when we will want to take you together. Does that frighten you?" he whispered the words against her temple.

It was almost as though he didn't want her to hear for fear that she would deny them. Moist heat pooled low in her groin. Her body's cream slid from her channel to coat her thighs at the thought. Never in her life had she considered such a thing until now. Even while aboard that crazy cruise ship with its swinging hedonists, Maya had never considered making love with more than one man at a time.

"It frightens me, but I know you won't hurt me." Where had that trust come from? Had she just agreed to a threesome or even a foursome with them? Fear and desire fought for supremacy



inside her. Soon, the thoughts were forgotten as Franco laved her ear and suckled the lobe into his mouth.

Her breath came in short pants the tingling in her middle fanned out to her limbs and her blood became thick, moving slowly through her veins like molten lava.

\* \* \* \*

Franco picked her up and carried her the rest of the way to the bed and placed her on top of the smooth satin comforter. Leaning down, he kissed her neck. Inhaling deeply, he closed his eyes as her scent, her very essence tore through his mind and body. She threw her head back as he nuzzled her throat and nibbled on the sensitive flesh.

When she lifted her head, their gazes locked and she smiled a slow, sexy smile that would have brought him to his knees had he been standing. He wanted this woman. He needed her with every breath in his body and, given time, he was sure he would love her above all others. He already adored the way she smiled, her bravery and the way she never thought she was beautiful though she turned heads everywhere she went, even before her transformation.

With a low growl, he parted the robe to reveal her smooth skin beneath. He wanted to kiss every

succulent inch of her from her forehead to her feet. He had found her beautiful before the transformation. She was still beautiful. Even more-so now. Her soft, creamy skin glowed like ripe peaches against his tanned flesh. Her high, full breasts invited him to knead them, to suckle them while she writhed beneath him as he brought her to ecstasy.

"The door," she said on a groan as he lowered her to the bed and knelt, placing his hips between her milky thighs.

Using his telekinetic powers, he slammed the door and turned the lock to ensure their privacy.

Giggling softly, she rested her hands against his chest, her delicate, feminine fingers softly circling his flat, male nipples.

Bringing his lips to hers, he slipped his tongue into her mouth, swallowing her soft moan. Her fingernails dug into the muscles of his chest as she fisted her hands while he tugged on one turgid nipple with his thumb and forefinger.

She mewled as he nibbled her lips and throat and thrust her hands into his hair to guide his head to a better angle. Thrusting his tongue into her mouth, Franco groaned when she frantically sucked at his tongue. His cock bucked and jumped beneath the material of his trousers, the torturous pleasure-pain nearly driving him out of his mind.

This woman was his *bellacara*, mate, wife, lover

and friend. She was beautiful, soft, warm and perfect for them. She was made for them, to be their mate and he would spend the rest of his life thanking whatever higher being decreed they deserved someone like her in their lives.

His body ached for her. It burned for her and her alone. Now that he'd met her and held her in his arms, no other woman would ever do. If she denied him now, he would welcome death tomorrow for no other woman could ever take her place.

Maya made him feel like no other woman had before her. He revered her, worshipped the ground she walked on and would always put her needs above his own.

Franco could smell her desire. He scented her sweet cream as it slid sinuously from her channel and coated her thighs. He slid his fingers over her wet sex and her hips bucked as she arched her back, thrusting her breasts up in a blatant invitation.

\* \* \* \*

Desire and want ripped through Maya as he expertly thrummed her clit. Opening her legs wider, she felt as though she would expire on the spot if he stopped circling the hardened nub with his fingers and suckling on her breast.

Her breasts felt swollen, her nipples hard as tempered steel, her sex wet and empty. She waited impatiently for Franco to fill it, to fill her with his hard cock. His large hand left her wet cleft and she moaned with frustration. Thrusting her hips into the air, she made her disappointment known.

"I can't tell you how badly I want this, want you," Franco said against her breast. "I want nothing more than to drive my cock deep inside your wet heat. I know you're tight. I know Dante took your ass the other night. Tonight, I intend to take your tight, wet pussy." His hand returned to cup her sex, his fingers slipping inside the moist heat to tease her mercilessly.

Maya's breath caught in her throat as he leaned down to gently bite her nipple. Again, thrusting her fingers into his hair, she held him to her as she rolled her hips against his strong fingers. "Please," she gasped. Needing him inside her. She felt her orgasm building and needed to feel his hard length stroking the depths of her empty channel.

"Not yet, *cara*," he whispered against her breast. "I have plans for you yet." Franco moved down her quivering body.

As every slow inch brought him closer to moving between her thighs, Maya trembled. No matter how she anticipated it, nothing could have prepared her for the sensation of his mouth on her nether flesh. The feel on his tongue circling her clit

nearly sent her over the edge. She bucked beneath him, her hips rising from the bed as Franco continued to suckle and lave her clit until an orgasm tore through her with the force of a hurricane and she collapsed on the bed, her thighs once gripped tightly around his head, lying limp and open against the sheets. When Franco continued to eat at her, Maya concentrated on the feel of his wet velvet tongue as it stroked over her sensitive flesh. Another climax made itself known. It washed through her body like waves in the ocean. She felt it climbing, filling her, until it exploded in a conflagration of feeling, ripping her apart bit by bit, then stacking her back together. The same yet somehow different.

Before she could breathe, before she could move, Franco kissed his way slowly up her body until his hips came level with hers. She blinked and his clothing disappeared. The shock of it should have been too much, but all she could think of was the decadent slide of his bare skin pressed against hers. The sensation of his large cock against her wet channel made her gasp. It had been a long time and he was very large.

Inch by slow inch, he pressed his way deep inside her, his cock stretching her channel until she was sure she would burst. How would she ever manage to take two or three of them at once? She wasn't sure it was possible, but would try. She

wanted to try to make a life with these men. She felt Franco's loneliness, his despair at the thought of never finding a mate and she wanted to bring him, bring all of them, relief.

\* \* \* \*

Franco could have feasted between her legs forever. With the way she tasted, the way she responded to every stroke of his tongue, he could spend a lifetime between her spread thighs and never get enough.

Every time she thrust her hips into the air, every time she ground her sex into his teeth, begging for more stimulus, made him ache, his cock growing harder with every passing moment. Every stroke of his hard cock into her wet, tight channel drove him closer to his own climax even as he drove her toward a third orgasm.

"Wrap your legs around my waist, *cara*." He gritted his teeth as she complied. The motion shifting her hips drove him deeper into her wet sex. He wanted nothing better than to drive into her as hard as he could, to slam himself balls deep into her.

"Fuck me," she whispered against his chest, her tongue laving his left nipple.

If that's what she wanted, that was what she would get. Franco lost all pretence of control at

her whispered words. He thrust into her as hard as he could, the head of his cock bumping her cervix. Now that she was of their kind, he needn't worry about being gentle. He need only worry about bringing her pleasure. Her nails scored his back and he continued to thrust. She gritted her teeth and squeezed her eyes shut just before a scream tore from her throat.

Franco lowered his head, sinking his teeth into the curve of her exposed throat. He needed the taste of her filling him as he filled her womb with his seed. The tight walls of her channel clamped down on his cock, squeezing and milking until his climax overtook him and he came into her, his come jetting into the dark recesses of her feminine heat.

Franco held himself as still as he could while he came. The overwhelming need to plant his seed deep into her flesh drove him to hold her hips in the air as he poured his love, his entire essence deep inside her. Something ancient, something primal, demanded he hold her beneath him as his come spilled out of his cock and deep into her womb.

After, he collapsed. Careful not to land on his mate, he pulled her close in his arms and slept.

\* \* \* \*

Maya wasn't sure what to think when she woke and found Jared in the bed, nuzzling her breast. At first she thought it was Franco, but the shorter hair gave him away.

Opening her eyes, she looked up into his sea green eyes. She didn't say anything – wasn't even sure if she could. When she looked deep into his eyes, she saw something she didn't think she would ever see.

He was afraid she would reject him. It was there in his eyes and in his thoughts if she cared to read into them more deeply. He wanted her *and* he wanted her to want him. For some reason, he was afraid she would reject him and accept the others.

Could she do that to him? Sure, it was his fault she was here and she should probably hate him for it, but how would she have acted in the same situation? Even though he was younger than Dante and Franco, he was still over two hundred years old. She didn't know how she knew that, maybe they'd mentioned it and she forgot.

Whatever the case, she had to wonder how she would feel after two-hundred years of loneliness. Hell, she was practically a basket case after a few years. A few hundred years would certainly drive her over the edge.

Smiling softly, she feathered her fingers through his hair and pulled his head down to her breast. Her mother always told her, *you never run*



*out of love, your heart merely gets larger.  
I sure hope Mom was right.*

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

“There is an armed craft on its way to the island,” Antoine informed Franco as he approached the boat dock. “Trey spotted it from the lookout.”

“Fuck! Does he have any idea who it is?”

Antoine shook his head. “No, but your new friend Mark seems to think it’s his cousin.”

“Hell. Has anyone informed Dante?” He needed to get to Maya and get her hidden in the bolt hole. The last thing they needed was for the depraved piece of shit Mark called cousin to get his greasy hands on her.

“Not yet. I’ll go tell him. If you’re going to hide your mate, she’s in the pool. She said something about wanting to swim a few laps.”

“Another thing she has in common with Jared,” Franco said with a grin. “Go. Notify Dante. We must prepare and we won’t have much time.”

Franco found Maya right where Antoine said he would find her. He didn't expect otherwise. Antoine had been one of the most faithful of their employees since he'd taken him under his wing last summer. The man would most likely be dead if his sister had gotten her way, but instead, his sister was dead and he was free to live the life of one of The Endowed instead of the life of a rogue as his sister and sire chose. "Come, *cara*," he said gently. "Danger approaches and I would remove you from its influence."

"What's the matter?" She reached up, her fingers smoothing the frown on his face as he pulled her from the pool.

"Mark's cousin approaches. He can only want a few things. One is his cousin to whom he is welcome, provided Mark wishes to leave with him. The other is you."

She gasped, holding a hand to her mouth. "You don't think he came all this way for me, do you? How would he know I was here?"

"There are few islands on the water and even fewer with no towns. It would have been a matter of simple deductive reasoning. We normally shield the island with magick, but with the excursions, it was difficult to explain where we took everyone. Your disappearance didn't help either, so we have since gone public with our location. It probably didn't take much for Mark's

cousin to figure out you are the missing woman everyone looks for." He grabbed her towel and thrust it into her hands. "Come. We must see that you are safe before he arrives."

"Wait a minute. I don't want to stir up trouble, but if he's after me, he needs to know that I won't go with him willingly."

"I'm sure he knows that already, love." Taking her by the arm, he began to lead her away.

"Now just wait a damned minute. You said I was like you now. What danger is there? I mean, well, am I really immortal or not?"

He nodded. "You are. But you are also vulnerable against their weapons. They can incapacitate you and take you prisoner." He raised a brow. "I don't think I need to tell you what you would endure if that happened."

"Uh, no. You don't. But I still don't want to be locked away somewhere safe while you are fighting my battles. What if I stay with you, or Dante, or Jared?" She batted her eyelashes.

Franco shook his head. "I just know I'm going to regret this, but come on." He held out his hand and waited for her to don the borrowed sweats and t-shirt over her wet swimsuit.

"Come. We must hurry. Dante and Jared will have my head on a platter if I don't keep you safe. I think the safest place for you is with all of us."

"Maya!" Mark rushed to her and gave her a bear hug. "My Maya." He touched her cheek. "Is your cheek all better?" He hung his head. "I didn't keep you safe."

She laid a hand on his arm. "It wasn't your job to keep me safe, Mark. Besides, it was two against one. The odds were against you."

"Not this time." He looked around at the men surrounding them. "This time they're the ones outnumbered."

Franco clapped Mark on the shoulder. "Are you going to be able to stand up to your cousin?"

"Matt is mean," he said with a nod. "My Brothers, Luke and John, are nicer, but they don't live here. Matt brought me here to hide me from them." He frowned. "I don't know why. I miss them. Matt was always mean to us."

Dante caught Franco's expression and raised a brow. "Matthew, Mark, Luke and John?"

"Strange way to name cousins."

"Yes it is." Dante glanced over his shoulder and out the window. "They are here." He gave Franco a long look. "Why is our mate not in the bolt hole?"

Maya stepped forward, her hands on her hips, and gave Dante a narrow eyed look. "Because the little woman doesn't let others put themselves in danger on her behalf while she hides somewhere safe."

Dante just sighed and shook his head. "Did I say I wanted a mate with a mind of her own? If I did, just shoot me."

Everyone laughed at that. They all knew every one of them wanted a mate with a mind of her own, one they couldn't control. They also knew that it meant they couldn't force her obedience at times like this, but it was a small thing. As one of The Endowed, she was very difficult to kill and as long as they were linked, they would always be able to find her, no matter where she was.

\* \* \* \*

Maya followed the men down to the beach. None of them were armed and she started to worry. If the others saw that they weren't armed, would they open fire and gun them all down or would they take a more diplomatic tack and try to negotiate with them first?

"Hand over the woman. She belongs to me." A very tall, very big man who looked a lot like Mark boomed through a megaphone.

Tilting her head, Maya stared at the equipment they had and knew these men meant business.

"The woman is ours," Dante stepped forward, the breeze off the water blowing his shoulder length dark hair. "I claimed her days before your men found her and she belongs to me."

"She was given in payment for merchandise and she is mine." Matt's face began to turn red. He turned, said something to one of his men and all the guns on the ship turned their way.

"You don't want to do that." Franco and Jared stepped forward. There are more men here than you see with their weapons trained on you as we speak. You have no chance to take her by force." He grinned. "Though you are welcome to challenge any man here for her possession."

Matt jumped from his boat, waded through the knee-deep water, stopped a foot from Mark and pointed. "Then I choose him." He grinned at Mark. "I'm going to fight you for the girl. Mark, are you willing to die for her?"

Mark stood straight, glared into Matt's eyes and replied, "She is nicer to me than you have ever been, Matt."

Matt stepped back. "Why does he sound normal?" He glared at Dante and Franco. "Training him to talk properly still doesn't make him smart."

Mark moved forward and grabbed Matt by the shirtfront. "No, but their special treatment has. You see, Matt, I know what you are now just as you will know what I am. I don't want to kill you, but I will." He smiled and showed Matt his newly acquired gift as his teeth elongated and slipped from his gums. "These men know the meaning of

the word power and they shared it with me to heal me because, unlike you, *I am good inside.*" Mark stared into Matt's face for a moment and his eyes widened. "I can even read your thoughts, *cousin,*" he whispered just loud enough for Matt and those of The Endowed to hear. "Now leave here, brother. I don't want to kill you for her, but I will and unfortunately, I may just enjoy the snack."

Matt scrambled away when Mark let him go. "Stay away from Luke and John," Mark called after him. "I'm going to see them tonight and give them the same gift so they'll be safe from you, too."

"Mama's boy," Matt spit back with a sneer. "All three of you were mama's boys. Mom catered to all of you, her three little angels."

"We *were* angels compared to you. We did nothing to deserve your hatred. I did nothing to cause you to purposely drop me on my head and damage my brain either. Just as Luke and John did nothing to you when you burned their hands—one right, one left. Was it just so you could make us less perfect in your eyes or less in Mother's eyes? You had to know she would coddle us even more because of what you had done."

"I didn't expect her to send me to a foster home."

Mark shook his head. "Let's see, get rid of one bad apple or the rest of the bushel? It doesn't take



a rocket scientist to make that decision, Matt. Our mother named us Matthew, Mark, Luke and John because she wanted all of us to be good men." Mark shook his head and sighed. "She should have named you Lucifer, the betrayer."

"I did it to mark you, you idiot. I did it so I could tell you three apart. You don't know what it's like to have three perfect, identical brothers, all of them vying for the attention of your mother."

"No I don't. I also don't feel a bit sorry for you. You had her all to yourself for seven years. We have never had her to ourselves and thanks to you, we will never have the opportunity. You sold her. You sold her into slavery and now we may never know where she is or even if she's still alive."

Franco watched the exchange, wondering how long Mark could control his bloodlust before he lost it and attacked Matt. He marveled at the other man's control and thanked everything good that they decided to try to help him by giving him the gift of immortality. Their blood healed his brain. It took a while, but every minute that passed, the other man's mind grew stronger. As Mark stood glaring at his brother, Franco felt more and more power emanating from the man. Soon he would be at full strength, though even now, Matt didn't have a chance at winning a fight with his little brother.

"Leave, Matt. Never come back or I *will* kill you, with pleasure."

Matt backed up, turned and waded back to his boat. "This isn't the last you'll see of me. I'll be back and I'll be back with people who can kill you. You're monsters. All of you are monsters."

Mark bowed his head as his brother's boat sped away. "No, Matt. You're the monster. We're just different."

Franco watched as Maya went to the other man, wrapped her arm around his waist and squeezed. "It's okay, Mark. You have a new family now and if the others agree, perhaps they will bring your other brothers here and do the same for them that they did for you."

Mark looked down and smiled. "That's why you were my Maya. You were always nice to me."

"I was your Maya?" she asked with a small smile.

Mark glanced up at Dante, then Jared before turning his gaze to Franco. "I was merely a temporary guardian. You belong to them now." He pulled away and gave her a gentle shove in their direction. "I have things I have to do and I need to ask my sires about protecting Luke and John from Matt." He nodded toward her men. "And I think they want to talk to you." Turning, he walked toward Antoine and Trey as they headed back to the compound, the three of them

making plans for their trip to see Mark's brothers.

\* \* \* \*

Maya watched Mark disappear into the trees and brush, and then turned to her men, an eyebrow raised in question.

Dante shrugged. "Why not? As long as they are good men, we have no problem with it. We can't change someone who isn't a sentinel. If you're human and not a sentinel, you will heal faster and our blood will change you for a short while, but it will never make a full human one of us."

"A sentinel?"

"That is a person who is a descendant of the offspring of one of The Endowed and a human. They are not fully immortal. They age and die, usually at a slower rate until the blood is thinned by procreation with full humans."

"Oh." Maya wasn't sure she would ever understand the intricacies of their race. And they *were* another race. She refused to think of them as another species, like some sort of animal.

Dante held out his arm. "I think it is time we went up to the house." The look he gave her could have set the palm trees on fire.

Taking his arm, she nervously licked her lips. "Okay. I need a shower anyway." Reaching down, she readjusted her shorts with a grimace. "The

saltwater from the pool is drying and starting to chafe."

"I know just the thing," Franco interjected. "Have we ever shown you the hot tub? It's just what the doctor ordered."

"Ha! You wish you were a doctor."

"Actually," Jared said with a grin, "He is a doctor. "He received his medical degree from one of the country's oldest and most prestigious medical schools."

Maya's mouth dropped open. "You're pulling my leg."

"Nope. He's been a doctor since..." He glanced at Dante. "When was that?"

"Since eighteen sixty-two. He had some misguided idea that he could help save lives during the Civil War if it broke out so he enrolled in school and became a doctor to help. Of course he never really practiced medicine. He just used his degree to get close to patients to give them his blood." He gave Franco a dirty look. "The idiot almost bled himself dry."

"Shut up and let's go climb into the hot tub. I have some...interesting ideas."

"Hmm..." Dante waggled his brows. "I like it when Franco gets interesting ideas."

Maya wasn't sure whether she should be scared or excited. One thing was sure though, anticipation was a bitch.

The hot tub was in a huge room on the ground floor. A Christmas tree sat in the corner with brightly wrapped gifts beneath it. The colorful ornaments sparkled, the bright lights on the tree glittered merrily, reflected in the glass decorations. As the only holiday embellishment in the house, it looked out of place. It was almost as though they threw it together in a hurry.

Shaking her head at the ridiculous thought, she turned her attention to the massive hot tub. About ten feet in diameter, it steamed and bubbled merrily as they approached it. The scent of clean water wafted up from the heated depths and she wondered what use a houseful of men had for something like this. She was the only woman around. Unless they once made a habit of bringing women home, the tub would be merely therapeutic. *What a waste.*

"Why does the Christmas tree look so out of place?" she asked as she spun around, taking everything in. A pool table sat in one corner, an air hockey table in the other. The tub sat on a raised platform in the center of the room where they could see the large screen of a home theater against the outside wall.

The tree, placed strategically in front of one of the glass sliding doors, kept beckoning her. Usually, holiday trees didn't interest her. For some reason, this one did. Maybe it was because it was

Christmas Eve and she missed the decorations of the holiday. Here, deep in the Caribbean, they still celebrated the holiday, but it seemed muted somehow from the way she was used to it in the big city with all its commercialism. Here it seemed to mean something more than how much money merchants could put in their pockets.

"Do you like it?"

She glanced at Jared whose expression was telling. "Did you guys put this up for me?" It brought tears to her eyes when they nodded.

"We thought you would like it. At least we hoped you would."

Dante's answer was something she suspected, but hadn't really thought true. Why would they go to such lengths for her when they barely knew her?

"Because you are our mate, our *bellacara*." Franco stepped forward, his expression so earnest it washed the doubt and disbelief from her mind. "We have waited centuries for someone like you."

"I...I just don't know what to say." No one outside her family had ever gone to the lengths these three had for her. They knew she wouldn't want Mark hurt so they didn't harm him. In fact, they helped him. What woman could turn down three such caring men? She couldn't. Even though she still felt a bit slutty, sleeping with all of them, she knew it was something normal for them, that

they wouldn't think less of her for doing so. Her sisters may be another story all together, but that was a bridge she would cross when she came to it.

"Say you will stay, that you will be our *bellacara*."

It was getting easier and easier to say yes to Dante's request. Taking a deep breath, she took another long look around the room, noted the holiday decorations that they'd taken the time and effort to purchase and put up in the short time she'd been here. Where they got the things was a mystery she didn't care to have solved. It was the thought that counted and it showed her how much she meant to them, how much her happiness meant to them. It was more than she could say about a lot of human men. "Yes. I think I would love to stay and be your mate."

"You won't regret it," they all said at once.

"Look," Franco said as he pointed up. "Mistletoe."

Maya's face began to heat as she realized the time had come to consummate their relationship and her men were going to make sure this was a Christmas she would remember for many years to come.

\* \* \* \*

Franco pulled Maya beneath the mistletoe and

stared deep into her amazing indigo eyes fringed by thick, auburn lashes. It was surprising that she had come to mean so much to them in such a short time. Touching her mind with his, he felt her growing affection for them all. She had even fallen a little in love with each of them, but it still felt too new and wrong for her to face it.

It was hard to believe how beautiful she was. Even before her transformation. He thanked all that was good that she had booked the excursion and came to the island. Even though it had been only a matter of days since they'd met, he could no longer imagine what life would be like without her in it. In fact, he didn't want to imagine it.

"You won't regret it," he whispered as he leaned down to capture her lips with his. Tracing the seam of her lips with his tongue, she opened for him. He reveled in her taste as his tongue swept inside the warm, honeyed depths of her perfect mouth. Her response was heady, jolting him like a bolt of white-hot lightning that raced straight to his cock.

It set his blood on fire. Heat flowed slowly through his body, straight to his raging hard on as his head spun, filling him with a need and thirst he was certain was impossible to quench.

He wanted her, needed her with an intensity he'd never felt before. Impatient, Dante pulled her from his embrace to devour her mouth in much



the same way. Watching his best friend kiss his mate was the hottest, most arousing thing Franco had ever seen in his life. Nothing could compare to the sensations washing through him as Dante, then Jared, pressed their lips against hers, their hands caressing her hips and thighs as he watched.

Pulling his cock from the tight confines of his jeans, he slid his hand up and down the long shaft, imagining what it would be like to have her lips on him, her hands cupping his sac as he drove into her hot, perfect little mouth.

Pushing his pants down his thighs, he kicked off his shoes and tore his shirt off before, growling, "Let's get in the pool. I can't wait to have our mate between us."

What he really couldn't wait for was seeing their mate's lovely body. He'd never thought of her as anything but perfect, but this younger form aroused him as never before. Most likely because it struck a chord deep inside him that screamed *mate*. She could and, with the will of whatever gods they chose to revere, would carry his children one day – their children.

Stripping their mate was the only gift he needed. He felt Dante and Jared's agreement. They removed the clothing she wore slowly, like unwrapping a present for that was exactly what she was. A gift. A precious gift for which none of

them felt worthy, but all of them felt fortunate to have received.

Each of them kissed and laved every inch of creamy skin they exposed to the cool air. They worshipped the curve of her throat, the swell of each breast as they slowly peeled back the borrowed shirt she wore. The oversized sweat pants slid easily down her hips and thighs. The small thatch of hair at the apex of her thighs drew his attention. His gaze arrowed to her sex, as it glistened in the dim glow of the flashing Christmas tree lights.

Licking his lips, he could smell her arousal, could almost imagine her taste as he watched his two best friends fondle and suckle her breasts as she stood limply between them, unable to do anything but gasp and clutch them to her as they continued to worship her body.

Kneeling down, Franco moved between her legs. Spreading them apart, he lifted her left leg, resting her thigh over his shoulder, and took a deep appreciative breath. Gods, she smelled wonderful, like honey and spice. Resting his forehead against Maya's pelvic bone, he took a moment to savor her scent. Flicking his tongue, he delved into the honeyed warmth of her sex, reveling in the taste like a chef sampling decadent pastries. Everything about her was breathtaking, decadent, a wonderful gift given to them by

whatever being ruled the cosmos. Franco smiled when Maya cried out, her body growing stiff as he continued to lave her nether flesh while Dante and Jared suckled and tweaked her magnificent breasts.

\* \* \* \*

"It...feels so good," Maya gasped the words, almost unable to speak, to breathe. She'd never once considered doing something like this before and now she couldn't figure out why. What could be so wrong about something that felt so good...so right?

With Dante on one side, Jared on the other and Franco on his knees, practically worshipping her sex with his mouth, how could anything feel wrong? She gasped as Franco suckled her clit into his mouth, then bit down gently. Dante suckled her neck, his left hand squeezing and twisting her nipple while the fingers of his right hand slid deep inside her dripping channel and stroked a bundle of nerves that made her scream. Jared suckled her right breast, his hands moving sensuously over her skin, driving her wild with a wanton need that should have embarrassed her. They filled her with a sinful heat that should have felt wrong, but only served to arouse her more instead.

Opening her eyes, she looked toward the

Christmas tree they set up just for her. Off to the right, she could see their reflections in the glass of the sliding door. God, how erotic, how utterly decadent this seemed. Never in her life had she ever been so attuned to the wants and needs of her body. Never had she been so self-involved, self-indulgent as she was today.

The sight of Franco between her legs, eating at her most sensitive flesh, the three of them locked together in such a wanton display, drove her over the edge and she screamed out her first climax of the night. She knew it was her first because it seemed that none of them intended to stop their sex play. If anything, their ministrations became more intense, more pronounced.

"Come for us again, *bellacara*," Dante whispered against her neck.

"Yes, love, come for us again," Jared added as Franco suckled harder on her clit, then began to hum.

Maya's body began to shake, to quiver as another orgasm built. Riding on the cusp of another release, she felt her body stiffen, her back arch and her other foot leave the ground as she wrapped both legs around Franco's shoulders and squeezed her thighs tight about his head.

Ecstasy rolled over her in waves. Pure white light burst behind her eyes as Dante buried his teeth in her neck. Jared, still suckling her breast,

sank his incisors into the soft swell of her breast and Franco's needle sharp teeth punctured her loins. Fire, white-hot heat swept through her, burning her from the inside out as she came. Connected, they all shared her pleasure, then returned it threefold. Her pleasure spiraled out of control and she screamed, her lungs burning and her heart racing so fast she was sure it would burst.

Lying limp in their arms, Maya wanted to groan when Dante and Jared pressed themselves against her. Dante's hard cock rubbed against the small of her back and Jared's pressed against her hip. The feel of their shafts rubbing her sensitive skin through the rough fabric of their jeans seemed so wicked. The sight of them still clothed while only she and Franco were naked was so sinful. Yet it all still felt so right.

Dropping her head back against Dante's wide shoulder, she watched through hooded eyes as her men continued to pleasure her. Blinking, Maya couldn't believe when their clothes just disappeared. One moment, they stood clothed, the next, they were just as naked as the day they were born.

Nothing could have prepared her for the sight of all that beautifully naked male flesh, especially when it was pressed against her, making her feel so wanton, so sinful as they rubbed their hard,

muscled bodies against her bare skin. Reaching down and behind, she grasped Dante's cock with one hand, while reaching out and took Jared's hard shaft in the other.

Franco moved from between her thighs, the evidence of her climax glistening on his face. Standing before her, he leaned down and covered her lips with his. The tangy taste of her own desire filled her mouth as his tongue swept inside, its wet velvet caress brushing against her own.

"If we don't get her into the water now, we never will," Dante said as he continued to lave the spot where he'd bitten her.

Maya shook her head. "Not the water. By the tree. Since we are each other's gifts, we should be near the tree."

Bending, Franco lifted her into his arms and carried her the short distance to the tree. Dante and Jared followed them across the room, Jared lying on his back on the floor when they reached the tree.

"Straddle me, love, and slide my cock inside you."

Franco gently set her down and she lowered herself over Jared's hard shaft. "You feel so big like this," she groaned as the cheeks of her ass finally rested on his upper thighs. "I feel so full." Her cheeks began to burn as she thought about how full she would feel in a few minutes when

Franco or Dante slid their cock up her ass.

Closing her eyes, she prayed she could handle it. That she could take them all at once. She knew it was something they wanted to do. Hell, it may be something they needed to do and she didn't want to be the one to say no. She wondered if she wanted this almost as much as they did.

"Lean forward," Dante whispered as he pressed gently on her back.

Jared reached up, his fingers grasping her nipples and twisting them until she groaned with need. Every caress, every pull of his fingers on her breasts made darts of pleasure arrow down to her loins. Thick, liquid heat pooled in her middle as his fingers continued to work their magic on her flesh.

Franco moved out of sight for a moment, then returned to hand Dante something he'd gotten from near the tub. Warm liquid slid over her anus as Dante poured a lubricant over her and worked it into her back hole. Franco moved before her and kneeling down, pressed his hard cock toward her face.

"Will you suck it?"

Again, tears burned her eyes as he thought to ask instead of demand. Nodding, she leaned forward and took him into her mouth while Dante forged forward, lodging the head of his cock into her ass.

Reaching up, Maya cupped Franco's sac and lightly squeezed. Jared, moving his hands to her hips, thrust himself deeply into her and she groaned. The vibrations in her throat made Franco growl, his hands fisting in her hair as her mouth moved over his hard shaft.

\* \* \* \*

Jared's eyes practically crossed as Dante finally seated himself into Maya's tight ass. He gritted his teeth, doing his best to hold on. He wanted to get in more than a few strokes before he came, but wasn't sure how long he could hold out. The feel of her silky skin beneath the rough pads of his fingers and her tight sheathe gripping him like a wet velvet fist had him so close to the edge he was almost afraid to breathe, let alone move.

When Dante pulled out and drove back in again, he heard himself let out a long, low groan that almost drowned out that of their mate. She looked so sexy with her long hair spilling over her shoulders, her hands grasping Franco's cock and balls with her mouth wrapped so lovingly around the other man's shaft. He couldn't believe she was theirs, that they didn't have to compel her to make love to one of them, not to mention all three of them together.

Her willing surrender tasted sweeter than any



other substance in the world. The taste of her blood was like honey, the soft sighs of her pleasure the strongest aphrodisiac he could imagine.

Nothing could compare to this. Not once in his existence had he ever met a woman who made love to him because she really wanted to. He'd compelled all of them. It was second nature for their kind to subconsciously reach out and *speak* mentally with their prey. Whether it was for blood, sex or both, their unconscious ability ensured their kind's survival.

Once again, his teeth burst forth, forcing themselves from his gums, urging him to take sustenance while he took his pleasure. Again, it was a survival mechanism. To avoid damaging their prey, they needed only to make sure they didn't feed while in the throes of sexual gratification when feeding from one who was not their mate, otherwise they may harm them. If their prey felt nothing but orgasmic pleasure, there were no repercussions when they fed—a win-win situation for everyone.

Dante continued to thrust in and out of Maya's ass, his balls slapping against Jared's. Not once in his life had he ever felt anything like this. The scent of their mate in his nostrils, combined with the sensation of her silky skin brushing against his, had his heart pounding out a rapid beat that

would have killed a human. Lucky for them, they were a bit more resilient.

The feel of Dante's cock, sliding against his own through the thin membrane, drove him closer and closer to his release. Gritting his teeth, Jared prayed he could last, he needed to last longer for Maya as well as the others. This time they would take her blood as they came together. The ritual would lock them together for eternity and they would finally have the mate bond between them.

\* \* \* \*

As Franco watched his mates fuck Maya's pussy and ass, he took his pleasure in her hot, perfect little mouth. He knew their mate would turn out to be wonderful at whatever she decided to do and, so far, she was fantastic at everything.

Her mouth slid expertly over his cock, her tongue flicking and caressing every vein, every sensitive nerve ending around his glans. Every time she pulled back, her tongue, darted up over the head of his cock, the tip sliding sinuously around the head until it dipped into the small opening. Every time she stuck the tip of her tongue into the slit, he groaned, his fingers tightening in her hair. He would give anything, do anything, to be able to live inside the warm, wet cavern of her mouth.

Her hands were almost as wonderful as her mouth. Delicate fingers gently gripped his balls and squeezed, ratcheting up his need, his desire to come deep in her throat. Her other hand wrapped around him, her fingers gently squeezing his ass, her nails biting into his flesh.

When she reached between his cheeks and snuck a finger up his ass, Franco threw his head back and growled with the need to spend himself deep inside her expert mouth.

Soon, the familiar warmth crawled up his spine. His balls drew tight against his body and his stomach clenched with the effort to maintain his control. Desire and want coalesced into one and his entire body stiffened with the need to climax in his mate's mouth.

\* \* \* \*

Dante kept his eyes shut. The last thing he needed was to see his friends fucking their mate. He was already too close to the edge. He wanted it to last at least a little while longer.

The feel of her tight ass milking his cock was enough to drive him over the edge as it was. He was already grasping the last threads of his control, practically hanging on to the edge by his fingernails. Add the feel of Jared's shaft rubbing against his through a thin membrane to the

sensation of Maya's strong, inner muscles gripping his cock like a silken vise, and he was ready to come.

Sweat poured down his face as he concentrated on holding on for at least another few minutes. Nothing could have prepared him for Maya's climax and the feel of her muscles clamping down on him as she screamed.

Clenching his teeth, he did everything in his power to hold on a little longer. One more. They needed to wring one more orgasm from their mate as they all sank their teeth deep into her succulent flesh. Afterward, she would take their blood within her again, strengthening herself and their bond. Only then would they be truly mated. Only then would they belong to each other.

Opening his eyes, Dante met first Franco's gaze, then Jared's. They each nodded, signaling they were prepared for the final mating act and the blood exchange. Each of them wore a similar pained expression that Dante was certain he wore himself.

Nothing could have prepared him for this. He'd never made love to a woman they hadn't compelled and the knowledge of her complete surrender was an aphrodisiac of its own.

As he bent toward Maya to bury his teeth into the smooth, silky flesh of her shoulder, Dante thanked every deity he could think of for the gift

they received tonight.

With a low groan, Dante leaned down and laved the smooth skin of the back of Maya's right shoulder while Franco bent toward her left buttock. Jared, continued to suckle her breast as they prepared to finally become one with their mate.

\* \* \* \*

Maya stiffened up again as she felt the inevitable approach of another climax. Her three men knew just what to do to keep bringing her over the edge of certain ecstasy. Not once in her lifetime had she ever climaxed as many times in a week, let alone one night.

The deep thrusts of Dante and Jared rubbed every nerve ending inside her. The feel of their mouths on her skin excited her, filled her with a sense of expectancy she couldn't explain.

Each of them pressed hot, erotic kisses to her flesh. Jared's lips caressed her breast, Dante, where her shoulder met her neck, and Franco, the rise of her buttock near her hip. All of them knew exactly what to do, where to put their mouths and how hard to drive themselves inside her to give her ultimate pleasure.

Franco came into her mouth, hot ropes of semen jetting down her throat as his mouth

worked at her hip. Dante and Jared followed closely, the warmth of their seed exploding inside her as they, too, kept their mouths on her flesh, drinking in her life's essence as the combined ecstasy they felt filled her mind.

Throwing her head back, Maya screamed and convulsed in their embrace. Heat, white-hot, washed over her in waves, seared her as she climaxed. Her blood boiled in her veins and her heart stopped for a moment when her entire being seemed to burst into a million tiny pieces, then immediately clung together, making her whole again.

Nothing prepared her for what happened. Sinking her teeth into all of them in turn, she saw everything, felt everything, their wants, needs and desires. Her men's need to have her with them for eternity, the desire to make her whole, to live a full, rich life together and she felt the tiny spark of a new life inside her. Not a child, but a new her, someone she didn't know, a woman confident in herself and afraid of nothing, save hurting her men. There was a new presence inside her, a being not unlike herself yet, not entirely human.

"You feel your other half. It is the part of you that gives you magick, the ability to change and do other things that will, no doubt, give you countless hours of amusement."

The sound of Jared's lazy drawl flowed over

her like warm butter and she shivered at the sensations it evoked. Overwhelming joy rushed over her as she realized just how much these men cared for her already. The knowledge that they would never cheat on her, never leave her for a younger woman, gave her a feeling of contentment she didn't know was possible.

"I feel all of you. My men. The reason for my life." She gave them all a drowsy smile. "Every day I will thank everything that is holy that my friend Genevieve booked me on that nightmare of a cruise. If she hadn't, I would never have met you and missed out on the best Christmas present of my life."

"Then we should thank her." Dante wagged his brows. "Perhaps we should bring her down here on a cruise of her own. Who knows, perhaps she has a mate or three hanging out around here, just waiting for her to show up."

## EPÍLOGUE

Maya held the phone close to her ear as she talked to her best friend. “I still don’t believe the firm called in favors like that—for me of all people.” How many times had Mr. Halloran told her she was easily replaced?

“Mr. Halloran insisted. He said you were the best assistant he’d ever had and the least he could do was to call in some favors owed to him by a few powerful senators.” Genevieve chuckled. “I didn’t believe it either. He finally admitted that you’d grown on him after all these years. He’s happy you’re okay, but pissed that he lost his best assistant.”

“He’ll get over it.” Maya cleared her throat. “Have you put in for your vacation yet?”

“I told you already. I’m not going to let you book me on a cruise. I know better than to let a vindictive woman such as yourself book my vacation after what I did to you.” She laughed.



"Besides, my heart was in the right place. I was trying to get you laid. You said you needed a good piece of ass, though I'm not sure there's such a thing as a bad piece of ass."

Maybe she had, but it didn't give her best friend the right to book her on a holiday cruise that would practically embarrass her to death. "Oh, come on, Genevieve. I didn't book you on the same kind of cruise you booked me on. Yours is a real cruise with a reputable cruise line."

"Yours is a real cruise with a reputable cruise line."

"I don't know. I think you're mad at me and just want a little payback."

Maya laughed. "Payback for what, for talking me into the cruise of a lifetime, causing me to meet someone who makes me happier than I've ever been? Come on. It'll be fun and we've even given them a credit card you can sign on for drinks and extras."

"Wow, he must be loaded."

"Why don't you come find out? No tricks, no revenge. I swear."

"Well...okay," Genevieve agreed reluctantly. "When do I leave?"

"Is May too soon?"

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

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

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