



TIANNA
XANDER

TROUBLE IN
PARADISE

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TROUBLE IN PARADISE

BY

TIANNA SANDER

DEDICATION

*To Jean and Vickie. This one's for you. Thank you so
very much.*

TRADEMARKS ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of the following products mentioned in this work of fiction:

Ipod: Apple Corporation

Hummer – H-1: General Motors Corporation

CHAPTER ONE

Penny dropped the grease-covered wrench, pulled the sound deadening headphones from her ears and brushed her arm across her forehead. She hated silence. Her keen hearing drove her nuts sometimes as people drove or walked past the garage and she heard the buzz of their conversations. The headphones blocked all that out. A person could stand next to her and scream and she wouldn't hear anything while wearing the padded speakers sealed over her ears.

Music from her Ipod still blared through the small speakers as she set the headphones on her tool cart. Looking up at the underside of the sedan, she checked to be sure that the bolts for the transmission oil pan were in place before walking to the lift controls and lowering the car.

Damn that old woman anyway. If she dared try to do her own maintenance again, she'd wash her hands of her. Penny sighed, stalked to the shelf along the wall and grabbed the gallon jug of automatic transmission fluid. If Myrtle Connor put oil in her transmission one more time, she

would scream—right before she told the old softy her transmission was screwed. Penny wasn't altogether sure it wasn't screwed already. Only time would tell. She had already drained the oily mess, flushed the transmission with her specialized equipment and changed the filter. Now it was time to replace the fluid.

First, she had to pee. She set the jug on the floor next to the car and headed for the office, noticing the sun just peeking over the horizon. She checked her watch. "Damn." She'd worked all night again and didn't even tell Carla, her counter help, to have a good evening before she left. She'd apologize now. The other woman was a dynamo and was most likely already perched on the chair behind her desk working on the books.

"Carla," she called as she entered the building. "It's getting warm in here again. I think we should turn the heat down." She frowned. It should be chilly in here. Carla usually turned it down before she left in the evening, unless she'd left it on because she knew Penny was still in the garage. "I really need to get a life. Working all night in the garage just isn't normal." Reaching up, she rubbed the back of her wrist across her forehead where it itched. "What I really need is a man."

Penny frowned at the silence. She'd expected the other woman to step from the silent shadows of the inner office and agree with her assessment.

"Carla?" She sighed as the phone rang. The other woman must have gone to get breakfast or something. With just the two of them here, they took turns buying their midday meals. Carla must have decided to provide breakfast since Penny spent the night here. Penny was sure it wasn't the other woman's turn to buy. Turning, she headed for the front of the shop to see if her employee left a note.

Penny stopped just inside the door to the front office. A strange coppery scent reached her nostrils and she frowned. It almost smelled like... She rounded the corner of the counter and gasped.

Blood was everywhere. It covered Carla where she'd been cut, which pretty much looked like all over. Bile rose to the back of Penny's throat as she stared at her friend and employee lying on the floor in a puddle of blood, her skin literally peeled from her body.

Penny backed away, raising her trembling hand to cover her mouth. The shrill ringing of the phone brought her lost senses back. The phone calls. Whoever had been calling her over the last few weeks had done this. She didn't know how she knew it, she just did. Ignoring the phone, she backed out of the room, the voice from the calls winging through her mind. *One day in the second month, you will discover your destiny.*

She'd originally thought it was some fruitcake

who thought himself her secret admirer. Penny had been sure she'd meet the man on Valentine's Day. She hadn't realized the destiny he was referring to meant her death. Did the fact that it was Groundhog Day have anything to do with it? Something niggled at the back of her mind. Something she'd read in the newspaper about the pagans and something called Imbolc.

Glancing outside, she saw she was alone and hit the street at a dead run. Her house was only two blocks from the shop. Pulling her cell phone from her pocket, she pressed the number *two* and held it down until it connected. The phone rang twice.

"Hello."

"Mom? Get Randy's things together and something for you. Do it fast. I'll be there to pack my own things. Just throw a few changes of clothes for each of you in a bag. We'll buy anything else we need."

"What on earth for?"

If her mother didn't want to go, she would have one hell of a time convincing her. She'd rather not have to explain this over the phone, but time was of the essence and she was still a good five minutes from the house. Slowing down, she talked as she walked, all the while looking over her shoulder and scanning her surroundings. Just to be safe.

"Someone came in to the garage and murdered Carla. I don't know who it was, I only know whoever did it thought she was me. At least I think they did. Get some stuff packed or we're leaving without it. I can't afford to stay long enough for whoever it was to figure out they killed the wrong woman."

"Oh, my God."

Penny heard the sound of glass breaking.

"Hurry to the house. I'll have everything ready when you get here." Her mother hung up the phone. Or perhaps she dropped it. Penny wasn't sure which.

Her mother was waiting at the door holding Randy with one hand and a suitcase in the other. The suitcase was rather large with bits of clothing stuck through the seam, a testament that she'd packed in a hurry.

Penny didn't even go into the house. She walked straight to her huge four-wheel drive instead. Clothes for her could wait. "Get in."

She took Randy from her mother and put him in the car seat in the back. Her mother walked around to the passenger side, tossed the suitcase into the backseat and climbed into the truck.

"Someone has been in your room. Your clothes were strewn all over the floor and they were shredded. There was nothing left to pack for you," her mother said as soon as Penny slid into the seat

next to her. "Someone was in the house while Randy and I were sleeping. Thank God you weren't home." She glanced out through the windshield, her body shaking with shock. "Where are we going?"

"I don't know." Sighing, Penny started the vehicle, put it in reverse, then turned to look at her mother. "All I know is we can't stay here." Penny braked the large vehicle and took one last long look at her home—the only home she'd ever really known—and said goodbye to the little white house with the flowers in the window boxes and the swing on the front porch.

Her mother had moved them from place to place during her childhood. It was only after Penny had gotten her mechanic's license that they'd finally settled here in this small town so close to where her mother's troubles all began. The day her mother told her they didn't have to run anymore, Penny decided to put down roots. Lots of them. She didn't want her son growing up in the same way she had. There was a lot to recommend the need for stability in a child's life.

There *was* one thing she needed to do before they left the state. Backing out of her driveway, she turned her truck toward Paradise and Myrtle Connor's home. She had to tell the sweet old woman her car was ready other than it needed transmission fluid put in it. She'd give the woman

the keys to the shop so she could pick her car up. Penny was certain someone would have locked it up by then. Picking up her cell phone, she dialed emergency services.

"Greater Mason area nine-one-one. How may I be of assistance?"

The deep voice on the other end did nothing to make Penny feel better. Nothing at all. The only thing that could make her feel safe was getting away from here—as far and as fast as she could. "There's been a murder at Sawyer's Garage on the corner of Fourth and Division." As soon as she gave her statement, she glanced in her rearview mirror to see if anyone followed her, then hung up the phone and threw it into the center console.

"Why did you hang up?"

"We don't need anyone able to find us. The phone has GPS." She stopped at a red light, and remembering they could still track her if the phone was on, grabbed her cell and turned it off. "They can follow the signal if it's still on."

"Oh." Her mother bit her lip, then turned to look out the window. "You—you didn't..." Her mother let the words trail off, obviously unable to finish her question.

"No, Mom. I didn't kill her." Penny shuddered as she remembered the gruesome scene on the office floor. She couldn't get the memory out of her mind—Carla's twisted and bloody body with

the strips of skin hanging from the lampshade, the back of the chair and the small piles of flesh on the floor by the body. "Someone peeled her like a grape." She glanced over at her mother as the light turned green and took her foot from the brake. "Like Samantha. Do you really think me capable of that?"

It kind of hurt that her mother even had to ask, though she knew why she did. Penny did have a temper and wasn't afraid to let it show when someone pissed her off. It didn't help when she did get mad, she had the penchant to become violent. It was a part of her nature she'd inherited from her father. Something her mother refused to talk about. She seemed to have a harder time controlling herself now that her sister was dead. Perhaps Samantha had been some sort of ground for her. Who knew?

She knew what Paradise was. She knew the type of people—if you could call them that—who lived there. She also knew her twin had gone off, gotten herself turned by her lover, then subsequently gotten killed there just before Christmas. *And* she'd been killed in much the same manner as Carla had been. The same person killed Samantha. She'd bet her garage on it.

Now she needed to get to Paradise, drop off Myrtle's damned keys and hit the road. She only hoped she didn't pick up a tail when she went to

see Mrs. Connor. Advertising to the murderer that he'd killed the wrong woman was the last thing she needed to do.

* * * *

"Sheriff Hunter?"

Derek recognized the rough voice on the speakerphone. It was the sheriff of Mason. The small town was a few hours from Paradise and the place they figured the next victim lived. They also believed it was the next place where the so-called Sabbat Slayer would strike. He'd gone and met with him a few times, trying to convince the man that the owner of his town's garage was in danger, but the fool wouldn't listen. In fact, the man forbade any of Paradise's law enforcement to contact or try to protect the woman. What a coincidence that he decided to call on Imbolc, the very day Sheriff Hunter told him the murderer would strike.

The sheriff of Paradise, Merrick Hunter, sat up straighter in his seat. "Yes?"

There was a long pause before the man spoke again. "It's Samuel Trumble. I'm calling about Ms. Sawyer."

Derek sat in the chair in front of the Sheriff's desk during the next pause where the idiot sheriff of Mason cleared his throat. Crossing his legs, he

rested his forearms on the arms of the chair and waited for the man to continue. He half expected the jerk off to tell them the woman was dead.

"She's missing and the woman who works behind the counter of her service station has been found murdered...rather brutally." Sheriff Trumble sighed.

Derek could hear the sound of paper shuffling in the background before he spoke again.

"We found what appears to be the other half of your playing card at the scene of the crime along with a paper that has a rather strange poem written on it. I think perhaps you and one of your boys should come take a look at it to see if it's a match. I'm assuming it is. The fact that the murderer left half a playing card as his calling card wasn't released to the public." He paused. "Oh, there's one more thing."

"What's that, Sheriff," Derek asked, finally speaking up. He wanted to know what kind of danger to expect. It pissed him off that another woman was dead. What kind of sick bastard would stalk one woman and kill another when he couldn't get to the first?

"Whoever committed this murder thinks they've murdered Penny Sawyer. That tells me he hasn't been watching her. If he had, he would have been able to tell the difference between the two women."

"This is one sick puppy we're dealing with," Merrick said, then looked up to meet Derek's gaze. The sheriff mouthed the words, *Get moving*, and pointed toward the door as he picked up a pen to take notes. "Can you fax me a copy of that paper and the card?"

Sheriff Hunter knew better than to ask for the evidence itself and Derek was sure, it wouldn't leave the other sheriff's office anyway.

"I'll have one of my deputies get it to you right away."

"Thank you." Merrick shifted in his seat and met Derek's gaze. "I'm sending one of my guys over right now. He should be there in a few hours."

Derek left the office and went in search of his partner. They'd done many covert ops together when they were in the military. Now that they'd decided to settle here in Paradise, they didn't have to hide the fact they were just a bit different from the next guy. Derek became a deputy and Draven, always mechanically inclined, took over the previously defunct city garage.

Draven would want to go. Perhaps they could find this Ms. Sawyer and bring her to Paradise. Here they could protect her and, after all, Draven needed someone to help him with the repair of the town's official vehicles. Such an arrangement could work beneficially for all of them. Derek

entered the garage through the large rollup door. "I'm on my way out to Mason. Wanna join me?"

Draven glanced at him from beneath the sheriff's SUV, dropped the wrench he'd been using and wiped his hands on a pink, oil-stained shop rag. "It's started, huh?"

Nodding, Derek shoved his hands in his pockets and stepped beneath the vehicle to look up. He wasn't sure what he was looking at. He was more of a Put-gas-in-it-and-if-it-ran-great kind of guy. All he really saw when he looked at the underbelly of a vehicle was dirt, grease and oil pans. That much, he knew. Though if you asked him to take a bomb apart and put it back together, you'd have found yourself a master. "Yeah. It's started all right. We're not sure, but we think our murderer killed the wrong woman again. Either there's something we've been missing or our killer is more incompetent than we first imagined."

"I don't really think he's killed the wrong person. I'm thinking he meant to kill Samantha Miller, then targeted her sister, though I have no idea why."

"The faster we get to Mason to see the scene of the crime, the faster we'll have an idea what happened." Derek moved toward the door.

Shaking his head, Draven glanced back up at the sheriff's vehicle. "You're not going anywhere in this thing. The clutch is shot. I'll have to replace

it and I need parts for that. You know there isn't another vehicle that can make it through these roads right now." He shook his head again, this time disgusted. "Even the plow trucks need repairs and maintenance. Unless they have a four-wheel drive, no one is going anywhere outside of Paradise for at least a week." Then he glanced out at the knee-deep snow outside. "Maybe not even then. It *would* take a four-wheel drive and someone who knew how to use it. I told you we should have bought that H-1." Draven threw him a dirty look.

They'd looked at the vehicle repeatedly over the last few months, but had no reason to buy it before today. Being snowed in usually wasn't a problem. "Okay, so we'll buy one as soon as we can get to Mason. Bitching about it now isn't going to make any damned difference."

* * * *

The sun would be up soon. Penny glanced over her shoulder, wondering if she would make it back to her mother and Randy alive. She had to make it back before whoever followed her targeted them. If she could hang on for a few more minutes, the sun would rise and the...thing stalking her would be gone. She never felt it watching her during the day.

She wasn't sure why the person, animal...whatever, never made itself known during the daylight hours. She only knew they had to travel practically twenty-four seven to keep the...thing from catching up to them.

Reaching into her pocket, she palmed the extra set of keys, feeling guilty for not dropping them off at Myrtle Connor's before she ran. The further she'd driven on that first day, the more certain she became that whatever it was only came out during the hours when the sun didn't shine. After all, the *creature* murdered both her sister and Carla while it was dark.

It still didn't keep the thing from her trail though. She could almost feel it breathing down her neck. She bit her lip in thought. What if she turned around? Would it expect that? Maybe, just maybe, if she turned back around and headed toward Paradise, she could drop off the keys *and* lose the thing stalking her.

The cold seeped through her clothes, making her shiver. There was nothing like hiding in the woods, hoping to make it back to a cabin that wasn't very warm, but still warmer than the outside. What was she going to do? Randy couldn't take the cold much longer and the firewood she'd managed to find around the cabin got harder to find every day. They'd been able to stay three precious days in the deserted cabin. If it

took the person stalking her that long to find them after three days of running, maybe they could lose him if they stayed on the run for a week or two.

Penny dropped the precious armload of firewood she'd collected when she felt the presence of another following her through the thick woods. She wasn't sure how she knew something was out there, she just did. With the things she'd heard about Paradise and what used to go on there, she could believe it was some monster stalking her. But why?

It didn't feel the same as the other. In fact, it didn't feel evil at all, but it still followed her, dogging her trail like some bloodhound on the hunt. She took a deep breath and tried to still her hammering heart. Penny almost sighed with relief when she saw the familiar oak. At some point in the distant past, lightning struck the large misshapen tree and split it down the middle. Strange looking bark grew over the scars. The low crotch of the giant tree invited her to climb it, to use it to get away from her stalker.

She eyed it wistfully. She couldn't hide from the thing that followed her through the woods. It always knew where she was somehow. Her only chance was to make it back to the cabin where she could lock herself behind the closed door and hope the coming light of day would buy her the time to run again. She sighed when she thought of

running. After six days, she wanted nothing more than to go home.

"Is there no more wood?" her mother asked as she entered the cabin and began throwing clothes into their suitcase.

"The wood won't last another day and I'm being hunted. I can feel it." She turned to her mother, knowing what she must say and knowing her mother wouldn't agree. She had to make her agree.

"It wants me, Mom." She continued though her mother had already begun to shake her head, "I'll leave you and Randy someplace safe and lead him away from you two." She sighed at her mother's expression. "Don't look at me like that, Mom. You know it's the only way. What if the man catches up to us? What if he decides to kill us all? You know we can't let him hurt Randy."

Sighing, her mother nodded. "I don't like it, but I think you're right."

Penny could practically see the gears of her mother's mind spinning as she tried to work out a way to keep her daughter from sacrificing herself to save her son. If there *was* another way, she would grab it and hold on tight.

"Why in the world are we going back?" Penny's mother looked at her aghast when she took the expressway toward Paradise. "You can't possibly

be thinking straight." Her mother laid a hand on Penny's arm. "Think. The murderer wants you to go back." She put her hand over her mouth and stifled a sob. "I can't lose another daughter, Penny. I just can't."

She should have known her mother would never let her sacrifice herself for them. She sighed. "I have to go back, Mom. For one thing, Myrtle Connor has only one set of keys to that car of hers and she can't afford to get another set made." She stared at the road in front of her. The white lines between lanes seemed to blur together as she sped down the highway. "And I have to go back. I feel it." Something called to her. Something told her it was right to go back. She rested a hand over her heart. "Here. Something tells me this is the right thing to do. Paradise is a smaller town than Mason. Maybe if I go to the sheriff there, he'll believe that the killer is after me. At the least, maybe I can get you and Randy some protection." Penny glanced back at her son through the rearview mirror. "He needs to be safe, Mom. He deserves stability. We can't run for the rest of our lives and something tells me the people in Paradise will help."

They just have to.

* * * *

"What makes you think we'll find her at Mrs. Connor's?"

Derek turned to Draven and sighed. "Because she has the woman's keys. Sure, we were able to tow the car here, but Mrs. Connor refuses to have more keys made. I didn't know the damned things could cost so much. Who ever heard of one fucking key costing someone over a hundred dollars?"

Draven threw him a sardonic smile. "It's called progress, boy'o. Technology. The keys for the cars today contain microchips to keep them from being stolen."

Derek snorted. "*Right.*" He drew the word out. "Then why are we getting reports about stolen vehicles all over the country? That was the reason we decided against the H-1 if you'll recall. We didn't want the damned thing stolen."

Draven shrugged. "There's a difference between the old ignitions and the new. At least the new systems keep joyriding teenagers from stealing the vehicles. The only thing a new car owner has to worry about is the professional thieves." Draven shrugged, then rolled his shoulders in an obvious attempt to release tension in his muscles. "Six of one and all that crap." He stared at Derek for a minute. "You never did say why you thought she'd risk coming to Paradise."

"Easy. She'll think about the key and the old

woman on a fixed income and her conscience will get the best of her.”

“Hmmm... That makes a certain sense, I suppose.”

Yeah, a certain female illogical sense. Derek had had plenty of experience dealing with the illogical female mind. He’d grown up with two sisters and a maiden aunt to guide his way. If he knew anything about women, it was that nothing mattered as long as it made sense to them. What scared Derek was that the idea made some sort of weird sense to *him*. She would bring Myrtle Connor her car keys. He was certain of it. They need do nothing but stay in the woods and wait. “Why didn’t Myrtle ask you to fix her car?”

Shrugging, Draven shifted in his seat. “She’d added the oil to her transmission fluid there and didn’t want to risk driving it back. Besides, she’d taken her car to Ms. Sawyer’s garage in Mason for repairs for the last few years while the garages in Paradise were defunct...and I run the city garage. I have all I can handle with the town’s vehicles right now. Myrtle probably knows that.”

Derek was certain it would only be a matter of hours before Ms. Sawyer arrived, but found it was mere minutes. It was a good thing he’d decided to come here when he did or they would have missed her. He sat still, waiting as she moved quietly through the woods. The girl moved

stealthily for a human. Even the leaves on the bushes barely made noise as she passed. It made him wonder how long she'd been running and exactly who she was running from.

Draven and his partner stuck to their plan and stayed hidden until she came out into the open since they didn't want to scare her back into the woods where she could hurt herself. They couldn't lose her now. Now that they had her scent, she could never disappear into the woods and slip away. Draven's body hardened and his stomach clenched as her scent filled his lungs. His breath caught as she finally emerged from the woods. She was beautiful. When her long brown hair caught on a bush as she passed, she turned and yanked it free. Even that motion made little noise. Tall and slim, she must be at least five foot ten inches tall. He liked tall women. He hated having to bend in half just to kiss a date. Not that he'd had many dates since he joined the Army. His line of work just wasn't conducive to relationships. Now that he and Derek had settled here in Paradise, there weren't many single women to date. It was a depressing situation.

Move, Draven whispered through their mind link when she was halfway between the woods and Mrs. Connor's home. The two men slipped from their hiding places and closed off the return path to the woods.

"Penny Sawyer?" Derek regretted her instant fear and the terror he scented as she slowly turned to face them.

"Who's asking?"

He had to hand it to her. If he couldn't scent her fear, he never would have known how frightened she was. One tough cookie. She presented that visual as she faced two men she didn't know in her uncertain world.

* * * *

"H-how did you find me?" Penny glanced around furtively. She had to find a way to escape these two. One or both of them must be the murderer. Otherwise, what did they want from her?

She swallowed thickly and fought the urge to shake her head. They were gorgeous! It was just too bad they were probably murderers, otherwise she just may go for one of them. She gave them another slow perusal. Maybe she'd take them both on. She wasn't stupid. She knew what went on in Paradise. Their women had two husbands, sometimes more. It had been nothing more than a tall tale until about ten or twelve months ago. Now, rumors had it the mayor, or whatever he was, had two mates, one male and the other, female. She'd often wondered what it would be like to be in the mayor's wife's shoes. Penny

would be lying to herself if she didn't at least admit that.

The taller of the two men stepped forward and she stepped back. She wouldn't say he was any more intimidating than his friend, but she would say he was more...something. Large maybe? Dark hair curled around his collar. Wide shoulders tapered down to a broad chest and narrow waist. He rolled up the sleeves of his white button down shirt—even in the cold weather. It was freezing out here and neither of these two men even wore jackets. The rolled up sleeves revealed powerful forearms dusted with hair black as pitch. The large bulge in the front of his pants did little to keep her from staring. She backed up another few steps when she realized they'd taken advantage of her inspection by moving closer—too close if she could see the color of the hair on his arms.

Her mouth went dry at the thought that they were miles from anywhere but Myrtle Connor's home. Why had she been so stupid? It wasn't as though she didn't know it was dangerous or even that she had a death wish. She'd merely thought of poor Mrs. Connor on her fixed income having to buy another key to her car. The new programmable keys were expensive.

Mrs. Connor told Penny she'd lost her other set in the woods the last time she went in search of dead wood to make her chainsaw sculptures.

Penny almost smiled at that thought. She could barely wrap her mind around the idea that little Myrtle Connor wielded a chainsaw to sculpt wood in the summer and ice in the winter as therapy for the loss of her husband.

Still, she couldn't, in good conscience, leave the poor dear without a key to her car. After dropping off the keys, she'd give the old sweetheart a big hug before she walked out of the woman's life forever.

"Are you Penny Sawyer?" the taller one asked again.

Glowering at the two men wouldn't get her anywhere. Instead, she schooled her features into a bland, bored expression, cocked her right hip out and rested her hands on her hips. She wanted to give the impression of having nothing to worry about so she gave them a half smile as she surveyed any and all available escape routes. "Now that depends on who's askin', big boy." She raised her brow and tightened her shoulder blades, drawing the men's attention to her breasts. "If it's you, I could be persuaded to be anyone you want." Penny turned in a circle, moving closer to Mrs. Connor's house. With luck, she could get to it, around it and into the woods before they even realized she'd managed to get away.

The taller one narrowed his eyes. "Are you saying you're Penny Sawyer?"

She put her hands behind her back and gave them each a coy look. "I'm not admitting to anything of the sort." *At least not until I figure out what it is you two want with me.*

"I'm Derek McDonough," the blond said as he stepped closer. The taller dark one just stood still, almost as if waiting to pounce.

It was the dark-haired one that Penny didn't trust. He may be the epitome of tall, dark and handsome, but he had an air of danger about him the other one didn't seem to have.

He offered his hand. "We've been looking everywhere for you. You're in danger."

Penny's heart raced. They must be the murderers and they were here to use her fear against her. Why else would they be looking for her? She found herself stepping back again.

The one who called himself Derek moved closer again.

Would they ever stop this game of cat and mouse?

"I'm one of the deputies of Paradise and our sheriff thinks it best if we put you in protective custody."

It felt as though her pounding heart leapt into her throat at his words. "Pro-protective custody?" She took a deep breath, this time holding her ground. *What about Randy, what about Mom?* She fought the urge to glance toward the woods and

the truck just in case these two really weren't from the sheriff's office. She didn't want to give away her family's position. How could she find out if they *were* who they said they were? Even if the one called Derek was a deputy, it didn't mean he wasn't a crazed psychopath.

"Can I..." she frantically searched for a means of escape. "Can I see your ID?" She raised her chin when she realized either she was finally safe or she was dead. Until she knew one way or the other, she refused to give her family away. God, how she wished she could trust someone—anyone. She didn't think for one minute that she had enough experience to escape her sister's fate on her own.

The flash of Deputy McDonough's badge did little to make her feel better. What finally convinced her that she was among friends was little, scrappy Myrtle Connor stomping down her front porch steps, reaching up and grabbing the deputy's ear.

"Don't you be scaring Penny now." She scowled at the two men, then turned her attention on tall, dark and scary. "Stop scowling, Draven. You look like an axe murderer. No wonder she's frightened out of her wits."

"We're not scaring her."

"Not intentionally anyway," the deputy added.

Mrs. Connor snorted. "Anyone with a brain

would be scared half out of their wits facing the two of you." She glanced at Penny and smiled. "And I know this here girl has a lot more than half a brain."

Derek McDonough looked at Mrs. Connor and now he was the one who scowled. "I don't know why you'd say that."

Myrtle finally released his ear and he stood up straight. "Because, as my dear late Willy used to say, *you can take a soldier out of the Army, but you can't take the soldier out of the man.*"

The deputy sighed. "You can if the man's heart wasn't in it in the first place."

Mrs. Connor glared up at the deputy through narrowed eyes. "Don't you dare tell me you didn't like your job, mister. The only reason you aren't doing it now is because you found a position just like it here in town." She poked him in the chest. "You're a good man and a good deputy...well...except for finding out which town prankster is stealing my ice sculptures." She pursed her lips. "I'll tell you one thing for sure. Whoever it is stealing my sculptures will be a damn sight better off if *you* catch him." She balled her fingers into a fist and punched Derek in the chest. "Find out who's making off with my sculptures, boy. Your reputation and that of the Sheriff's Department depends on it."

The old woman surprised the younger when

she turned and glowered at Penny. "It's about damned time you brought me my key. I've wanted to go into town for days." She glared at the dark-haired man she called Draven, hitching her thumb in his direction. "Dingle dork here wouldn't make me a new one."

"What?" The man in question stepped forward. "You were the one who said —"

"Don't argue with an old woman, Draven. You can't win," Myrtle interrupted with a sniff. "Respect your elders, I always say." She turned a gimlet-eyed glare on Derek. "And what are you laughing at?"

Derek held his hands out. "Nothing, Ma'am."

"That's what I thought." The old woman turned back to Penny and held her hand out. "Where's my key? I want to make it to *Hanson's Market* before they close. Draven was nice enough to make sure you changed the fluid. Though he said it was empty when he found it." She flushed. "Next time I'm near a garage and need service, I'll ask them for help." Closing her mouth, she inhaled deeply. "Ah...another *Truebond*." Leaning closer, she whispered in Penny's ear. "You could do a lot worse than these two." Then she inhaled again. "Strange." Mrs. Connor pulled back to look deep into Penny's eyes and grinned. "You lucky girl. Three is *your* number. There is another."

CHAPTER TWO

Penny sat between the two men in the front seat of her truck. She hadn't introduced them to her mother or Randy in the back. They merely glanced at the two, raised a brow and climbed in after her. She figured if Myrtle Connor thought they were the good guys, she could do no less. Besides, she desperately needed someone to trust. She thought back to what the older woman said in her front yard. What did the old woman mean? That these two men would be her husbands along with a third?

Her face burned at the thought. What would her mother think? Would she accept the fact that her baby girl was the wife of three different men? Could she live that way if her mother didn't approve? Thinking of having two husbands had been thinking far enough outside the box. Three was unthinkable...wasn't it?

The questions swirled through her mind as they headed into the heart of town. Penny cringed as

they passed the derelict vehicles behind the city garage fence. How could anyone allow their vehicles to go into such disrepair let alone a town? They needed these vehicles to plow and repair the roads. Not to mention the police vehicles that she could return to service. She was sure she could get at least two of the four she'd seen running just using parts from the others.

Randy began to fuss in the back and her mother jostled his car seat.

"Your brother?" Derek asked, taking his gaze off the road to glance at her.

"No." She glanced back at the two in the backseat and wondered if her answer would determine the interest these two men would have in her. "Randy is my son."

"Your son?" they both said at the same time.

Draven's demeanor changed, his muscles tightened.

She could actually feel his displeasure and it made her mad. What did either of them have to say about the way she lived her life before they met? Hell, they hadn't even asked her out. Still, she could feel the tension her announcement created. It was thick in the air like a fog. "Yes," she paused, wondering just how much about Randy's dad they needed to know. "His father was a firefighter. He volunteered to go to California during one of their wildfires and died before the

baby was born. He's named after his father."

Penny thought it best to let them know now. She was aware of some of the customs of Paradise. Her mother used to tell her and her sister stories about what she'd learned of the town while she worked there twenty years ago. Penny knew that if these two men wanted her, the thought of her being with another man would either drive them off or make them want to confront the other man in her life. It was best to let them know Randy's dad was out of the picture upfront to avoid any unforeseen issues.

"I'm sorry to hear that."

What was it about these two men that made her want to just roll over and let them take over her life? She was an independent career woman. A business owner. She wasn't some little lost flower they picked up off the street. Stopping to think, Penny realized she was just that. They had rescued her, regardless of the circumstances. Still, it didn't make her some weak woman who would do what they wanted when they wanted. When should she tell them how she felt? She didn't want to wait too long, but they hadn't even made a pass for cripe's sake. What should she do?

"Where are you taking us?"

Penny almost gasped her relief that her mother was able to voice the question uppermost in her mind. She'd been rendered practically speechless

the moment she turned over the keys to her truck without so much as a twitch.

Derek answered the question as he kept his gaze on the road. "We're taking you to Paradise. The sheriff wants you in protective custody, which means that you'll be staying with at least two people he deems trustworthy enough to keep you safe."

The hair on the back of Penny's neck tingled at the thought that it would be these two men. They passed the police station with its lone patrol car out front and pulled into a parking spot. *Well, this is it. The sheriff will find me a safe place to stay.* She pushed her hair from her face as she followed Draven out the passenger side door. The only question that remained was whether he would find her something to keep her busy. Otherwise, she'd go out of her mind with boredom.

They entered an office with *Merrick Hunter* painted on the door. The Sheriff was just as tall as Draven and as dark in coloring. They were so close in looks she'd think they were brothers if they didn't have different last names.

"Welcome to Paradise, Ms. Sawyer." Sheriff Hunter sat back in his chair and steepled his fingers in front of his chin. "I'm sorry we had to meet under such...trying circumstances." He shifted in his seat, then stood to offer her his hand as though realizing he'd been less than

gentlemanly.

Taking his hand in hers, Penny gave him a shaky smile. She hadn't missed the photo on the man's desk. It was the sheriff with a woman and another man. His mates? That is what they were called here, wasn't it? "Thank you, Sheriff." She glanced up at Derek. "I don't know what I would have done, where I would have gone if your deputy hadn't found me. I—"

Sheriff Hunter held up his free hand. "There's no need for that. You needed protection against one of our own and we felt the need to provide."

* * * *

"One of your own?" Penny dropped Merrick's hand as though it was full of maggots.

Draven would have laughed if he hadn't smelled the fear suddenly rising within her. What was it about this woman that brought forth every protective instinct he had? And her scent! He fought the urge to close his eyes and take a deep breath. She smelled like nothing he'd ever scented before. Shaking his head, Draven stepped forward and addressed the sheriff. "I think she'd be safest with Derek and me. She shares interests with me where she could remain occupied." He grinned at the sudden thought. "She could work in the city garage with me. No one would dare make an

attempt on her life so long as she was with me." He ignored Derek's sharp look. "That should take care of everything."

"Not everything." Merrick obviously didn't agree. "There is still her mother and son to consider."

"They would be with me," Derek added, stepping forward.

"Hmm..." The sheriff's gaze flicked over Penny, then the two men. "Perhaps that would be enough protection, but Adam thinks Ms. Sawyer should have a larger force covering her. He wants to send over a few men and I agreed to accommodate them." He raised a brow. "After all, he is our Al—ah..." Merrick stumbled over his words for a minute. "He is our leader."

"Whatever you say, boss," Draven spoke up, obviously irked that they would have so many people about. If he felt like him, the other man wanted an opportunity to get Penny alone. She affected them both in ways no woman ever had before her.

It didn't matter how many men the Alpha set to protect this woman. As far as Draven was concerned, no one would get past either of them. They hadn't trained in Special Forces for years to allow themselves to be bested by some psycho amateur. It wouldn't matter that they planned to discover why she affected them so strongly.

"Wipe the damned scowl off your face, Nimick. No one is insulting your ability to protect her. We just don't want to take any chances with her life."

How could they argue with that? If it turned out that she *was* their mate, which he suspected more and more as their time with her passed, they would die to protect her. Then again, so would the others who had no such tie, he admitted to himself. They must accept the help, if only for Penny's safety.

I don't want the others near her.

* * * *

Derek could feel the anger rolling off his old friend and he frowned. Mate or not, she should not have this effect on Draven. He started telepathically chatting with him. *What's the matter, old friend? It's not like you to be so possessive of a female you've just met. And what's up with that growl?* Derek ran his fingers through his hair. *We've been here too long. You're beginning to act like one of them.*

Well I've never been attracted to a woman in mortal danger before either.

Neither of them wanted to think about how Penny would react to the Paradise men. Women flocked to the shifters like sheep. It was almost as though they had some strange magnetism.

They do." Draven snorted, obviously reading his mind. *It's called animal magnetism, he added sardonically. The only thing we poor Army dopes have going for us in the fact we're all telepathic.*

And relatively immune to the effects of the cold.

Stop reading my mind, dammit. When I want you to comment on my thoughts, I'll send them to you. Stop being nosey.

The others in the room continued their conversations. Randy, the little tornado, ran about the room, picking up this and shaking that.

Don't you think it's strange that we all carry those traits? Aren't you even a bit curious about who or what our ancestors were?

It doesn't matter. We have other business now. Pay attention to the sheriff.

Derek turned his attention back to Merrick just as the other man said, "That settles the matter," then picked up his phone.

Damn! What did we miss?

I didn't miss anything. Penny agreed to the larger protection detail. I'd say by the flush on her lovely face, she wants as many people between her and us as possible.

Derek grimaced. That was just great. How in the hell would they ever seduce her now? Hell, he hadn't even been in the woman's company for an hour. Already his entire body ached with the need to hold her, to sink his cock so deep inside her neither of them would know where he ended and

she began.

Merrick dialed the phone and set the receiver to his ear. "Adam, this is Hunter." He said after a short moment of silence, "Send the men you offered over to the lodge. The lady has expressed her desire for added security for herself and her family." There was a short pause. "Yes, sir. She has her son and mother with her." Cradling the phone between his shoulder and ear, he picked up a pen and made a note on his desk blotter. "Yes, sir. I'll see to it."

The sheriff set the receiver back in its cradle and looked up. "Take Ms. Sawyer and her family to the lodge and see them comfortable." He glanced at Draven. "Tomorrow Ms. Sawyer might like to see your garage." Merrick shifted his gaze to Penny. "You don't have to work with Draven, but it will help pass the time. Otherwise, your days will be filled with watching soap operas and gossiping with the other guests at the lodge."

Bringing his hands up, Merrick ticked a few points off on his fingers. "No skiing, tobogganing, snowmobiling. No walks and no trips to the store." He gave Penny a level look. "The only thing you do is go from the lodge to the garage and back. And you won't be doing any of it alone."

* * * *

Penny balled her hands into fists at her sides. She was half-tempted to ask the overbearing jerk if she'd be allowed to go to the toilet alone, but she didn't want to give the man any ideas. Instead, she stood in front of his desk with a fake smile on her face and nodded away her freedom.

Hell, she may as well be in prison. Apparently, things worked differently in this town. The murderers ran around as free as the mountain lions in these woods while the innocents remained cowering in gilded cages, just out of reach.

She wanted to cry – to scream to the world the unfairness of it all. What she did instead was nod, bow her head to stare at the toes of her worn steel-toed boots and say, "Thank you for your help, sir." She said this because she had nowhere else to go and ultimately, no choice at all. She would have walked through the door and left Paradise if she thought she had a chance in hell of eluding the murderer. She would grab her son and her mother and run from this office like her ass was on fire if she thought for even a minute that she could outrun whoever hunted her.

Why? Why her? Why Samantha and Carla? What compelled someone to kill, to target them as though they didn't matter? Was it something they did, something they said? It couldn't have anything to do with how they looked. She and

Samantha looked very little like each other since Samantha had started bleaching her hair and Penny had hers cut. It had to be something else. But what?

A knock on the door brought her back to her senses and she looked up just in time to see another very tall man enter the room. Penny could do little but stare as her internal alarm began to blare.

Sheriff Hunter stood and leaned over his desk to shake the other's hand. "Thanks for coming, Darren." He turned to Penny and her mother. "Ms. Sawyer, Mrs. Williams, I'd like you to meet Darren Colby. He's Adam's chief of security and third in line of power here in Paradise." He glanced back to the newcomer before he sat back down and leaned back in his chair. "He and his men will keep you safe." Merrick waved his hand toward Derek and Draven. "Along with your friends here, of course."

The blood rushed to her face. She could actually feel herself blushing. It crawled up her face, the blood flooding her cheeks made them burn as hot as the sun on blacktop. Holy God. Did everyone know she was attracted to those two? Did she put out some sort of weird pheromone that screamed, *I want to be a part of a double D sandwich?* If so, what would they think of her when they figured out she was attracted to this new man as well?

She glanced into the outer office at the newcomer through lowered lashes and tried not to stare. Holy Hannah! The man was to die for. Dark wavy hair brushed his broad shoulders. His pale yellow t-shirt looked two sizes too small. It probably was. Randy used to wear his that way to show off his buff physique and get women's attention. If that was this man's intention, it sure worked. Penny couldn't take her eyes off him. Her inspection barely made it past his beautiful silver eyes to his exceptional pecs and down to his, obviously rock hard stomach when she heard someone clear their throat and she jumped guiltily.

Mortified, Penny glanced up at Darren's face and almost died on the spot when she saw the knowing grin that split his gorgeous face. Heaven help her. He even had dimples and a small scar that ran from the corner of his mouth to the bottom of his jawbone. He wasn't as perfect as she'd first thought and the scar made him even more irresistible. If any of these three men she found herself attracted to made one move to get her into bed, she'd be naked and on her back in a second.

Darren's grin got wider and he winked. "Are you ready to go, ma'am?"

Penny could do little more than nod. Turning, she took her coat from Derek and put it on before

helping her mother zip Randy back into his thick snowsuit.

Afterward, Draven helped her mother with her coat. He even zipped it for her when her trembling hands wouldn't cooperate.

"Thank you," her mom said with a smile.

Randy wouldn't allow his grandmother to pick him up. "No. No! I wok," he cried as he toddled toward the door.

"Hey, there little buddy," Derek said as he stepped in front of the child. Scooping him up over his head, he grinned up at the boy. "Where do you think you're going?"

The boy squealed and pointed to the door. "Side. Pway snow."

"You want to go play in the snow, huh?" Derek glanced at Merrick. "You know we aren't going to be able to keep him inside all of the time. He'll be impossible after a while." He shifted the boy onto his hip when Randy began to struggle.

The toddler didn't like that either. He had his snowsuit on and he was determined to make the best of it. Leaning back, he reached for the door and screeched, "Side, side!"

Merrick shook his head and sighed. "Use your best judgment. Don't go far from backup and always be aware of your surroundings. I'll talk to Adam about his orders." He said all this over Randy's continued bellows. "Now get going

before the boy breaks something.” He glanced meaningfully at the way Randy had himself bent backward over Derek’s arm.

Penny almost laughed aloud when she heard her mother mutter, “Yeah, like an eardrum.”

CHAPTER THREE

Darren could do nothing but stare at the woman as she watched her mother and son leave the room. He swallowed around the lump that formed in his suddenly dry throat. There was something about her scent... His entire body tightened, went on alert at his first inhalation when he entered this room. What the hell was going on here?

Long, glossy brown hair fell past her waist. Beautiful amber eyes gazed into his for a moment before enchanting splotches of pink covered her cheeks and she looked away. Good. At least she wasn't immune to him. Was this his intended mate? After over sixty years alone, had he finally found the one woman who could satisfy his shifter hunger and the need for meaningful sex—not to mention the need to see his seed growing within a fertile womb.

A tingling sensation shot down his spine. He knew that feeling. His cock wanted a bit of happy time. It didn't care that he was on a job and

standing in the middle of the Sheriff's office.

His body hardened and his cock stirred with anticipation. Closing his eyes, he thought of the photos he'd been studying of the crime scene taken at Yule and the others at the woman's garage in Mason. The images of the sickening murders helped dispel the appearance of the unwanted erection he'd been certain was about to literally pop up and embarrass him.

"What do you think, Darren?"

His eyes snapped open at Merrick's question. "Think of what, sir? I was just...thinking." He ignored the knowing look on Merrick's face.

"We were wondering if you thought it would be too dangerous for Ms. Sawyer's son to go outside and play in the snow." The sheriff leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms. "We don't want the boy to become a target. And being the chief of security here in Paradise, we're seeking your input."

Darren took a deep breath, intending to answer the question intelligently, but when the woman's scent bombarded his senses, he could barely think for a minute, let alone say anything remotely intelligent about security. "I...uh...I..." He fisted his hands and swallowed. "I think it would be fine for the boy or the woman's mother to go out. They should have escorts of course, but there is no reason to keep them inside." He glanced at the

toddler who was still fighting Derek's hold on him. "Especially when he's so adamant. The boy could hurt himself if he isn't allowed to expel some of that energy."

Merrick nodded and waved his hand to Derek and the woman he assumed was the other woman's mother. "Take Randy outside and let him play in the snow. Go with them, Draven, and grab Hollister for extra protection on the way out." He said all this over the continued screams of the toddler.

Blessed quiet settled over the office after they left, taking the child with them and Darren sighed with relief. His ears, more sensitive than any human's, were ringing and his head pounded. He felt sorry for the other men. He knew Draven and Derek's hearing was much more acute than the average human. It was one of the reasons Adam, their Alpha, had decided to welcome them into the fold here in Paradise. He'd bet last year's wages that they had shifter blood in their veins, no matter how diluted.

Turning back to the woman, he waited for Merrick to introduce them. He knew who she was of course. Penny Sawyer, owner and operator of one of the garages in Mason. She was the same woman who Myrtle Connor sang the praises of for the last year. Hell, maybe he should have taken the old woman up on her offer for a ride into the

next town over.

Merrick stood and walked around his desk.

Darren knew his approach was a courtesy the sheriff gave few people. Usually he sat in his chair and kept the desk between him and any visitors he might have. Whether it was a precaution or a sign of his aloofness, Darren had no idea. Sometimes he wondered if the position of Sheriff hadn't gone to the other man's head. He'd lived with humans for quite a while. It wouldn't be a surprise to find he'd begun to think like them.

"Ms. Sawyer, I'd like you to meet Adam Greer's chief of security, Darren Colby. We called Darren and his team in to give you the best possible protection we could provide. Nothing will get past them. Just don't allow yourself to be left alone at any time and the threat to you will be minor."

Darren held out his hand, waiting for her to put her fingers in his. Gods, he didn't realize how much he'd wanted to touch her before now. He almost groaned when their skin finally made contact. "Ms. Sawyer." He bent over and brushed his lips over the back of her hand. "I wish we could have met under better circumstances."

"I...er, yes...I mean I do, too." She blushed again. Pulling her hand from his, she backed herself against the far wall.

His beast roared in triumph that she realized he was a danger to her. Oh, he wasn't a danger to her

life, only her virtue and perhaps her freedom. She was his now and no one would take her from him and live. Backing up, he leaned against the windowsill behind him. Darren wasn't sure what it was about his people that made it so they knew their mates almost instantly. It definitely wasn't a human characteristic.

After all look at how Merrick and his mates almost ended up alone because of her reluctance and their ignorance of the shifter way. The sheriff, his friend, Matt Stewart, and their mate, Gemma Alexander, had been high school sweethearts. It wasn't until the old council was overthrown that any of the younger shifters knew nature designed them to have two or more mates. The triad wasted too many years fighting what nature intended. The men spent too many years away from home and their woman because the council deemed females too abundant and too easily obtained to share.

He wrestled his beast into submission and waited for his orders. He knew what the sheriff had in mind. He only hoped he would survive it. The other two men were her mates as well. He could smell it. Even their scents appealed to him now that he'd met this woman. Their scents may draw him, but he didn't think he could ever be sexually attracted to males. How they would work out the sharing of her body, he was interested to

know.

"I think it's time we went to the lodge," he said, checking his watch. "If I'm not mistaken, Gemma will be serving lunch in a few minutes. She always makes more than she needs in case she has new arrivals...and I'm starved." He pushed away from the window. "If you'll excuse us, Sheriff?" He cocked a brow, practically daring Merrick to say something to the contrary.

The other man grinned. He nodded to the lady and walked her to the door. "It was a pleasure to meet you and your family, ma'am. I only hope my own child is as intelligent and precocious as your son." He ushered her out, leaving Darren to follow.

Darren shook his head. "Of all the things, Colby. Just when Triads are finally welcomed back you have to outdo everyone by having a...what...a quartet?" He shook his head with a sigh. "Jesus, man. What are you getting yourself into?"

* * * *

Penny glanced around the suite. At first glance, it seemed huge, but she realized it wasn't big at all, considering four of them would share it. It had two rooms. One with a bed, the other a sitting room with a table and two chairs, a recliner and a

sofa bed. A small writing desk sat in the corner with stationery, pens and a phone sitting on the top.

Blue and soft rose carpeting covered the floor in both rooms. A huge, king-sized bed dominated the bedroom. Dusky rose throw pillows and comforter decorated the beautiful hand-carved work of art. Penny couldn't help but run her fingers over the smooth scrollwork adorned with frolicking leopard cubs.

Careful to keep her back to the men lest they see her discomfort, Penny strode around the foot of the bed. After she passed the gorgeous matching dresser and armoire, she glanced into the bathroom. "Can I..." She cleared her throat, suddenly nervous. She knew the men wouldn't leave the suite. In fact, she wasn't sure she wanted them to. She just didn't want them to watch her while she bathed. Stripping in front of three men she didn't know just wasn't an option. "Can I take a bath in private or must I have a chaperone in here as well?" She tried to keep the sarcasm from her voice, but didn't think she was very successful.

"Since this room is on the third floor..." Darren paused to look her over. "...and the bathroom window is too small for even you to fit through, I think you're safe enough." He pushed the bathroom door open wider and glanced around

the immaculate and obviously empty room as he set her backpack on the rug just inside the door. "Enjoy your bath, ma'am. As you know, your mother and son are in the suite across the hall. When you're ready to visit, let us know and we'll bring them over."

"I don't understand. He's my son. Why can't he stay here with us?" She crossed her arms and paced away from the man. He was just too darned close for her peace of mind.

"Because," Derek replied, stepping up beside the other man in a silent show of support. "The murderer will most likely leave them alone if you aren't together. Didn't your mother say she thought he'd been in your home?"

Penny nodded slowly. Somewhere deep inside, she knew they were right. She just wasn't sure she could sleep in the same room with the three of them and not want to be the center of a quadruple decker sex sandwich. "My mother said someone had cut all of my clothes to ribbons." She'd forgotten her mother shared that information with the sheriff.

Derek stepped forward, throwing his lot in with the other two men. "And they left without harming either of them. That much is obvious."

Sighing, Penny returned to the bathroom door. "Okay. I can see your point though it doesn't mean I have to like it. We'll stay in separate

rooms. I want Randy to have just as much protection as I do."

"Agreed," the three men said at once.

Penny stepped into the other room and rested her hand on the knob. "If you three will excuse me, I'd really like a bath." It had been at least three days since she'd had a real bath. Washing in tepid water just didn't compare.

* * * *

Six days later.

Penny was a hairsbreadth away from going bonkers. If she'd hoped that even one of these men would make a pass at her she was sadly mistaken. All three of them were gentlemen, dammit. Even though the four of them shared this suite, they all insisted she take the bed. The bed seemed huge with just her in it. Hell, she wasn't altogether sure the damned thing didn't have its own area code for crying out loud.

She spent every day wondering if the killer would strike. After the last six days of fighting the urge to jump each of the men she shared the room with and have wild monkey sex with them, she was exhausted. Her nerves were on edge to the point that every move the men made, made her jump. If she didn't find a way to divest herself of

some of her pent up energy, she may throw a tantrum large enough to rival one of Randy's.

"Would you *please* sit down?" She barked the words at Derek as he stood to look out the window for the tenth time in as many minutes. Their over protectiveness was enough to drive her nuts. Hell, she appreciated the fact that they were here to protect her and she loved the way they moved as well as the next girl, but enough was enough, dammit!

Instead of following her instructions, as a smart man would have done, Derek merely turned and cocked a sandy brow at her in question.

Penny shot to her feet and began to pace. "I'm going crazy sitting in here doing nothing." Turning to Draven, she waved her arms like a crazy person, hoping to get her point across. "Whatever happened to letting me help in your garage?"

"We decided against it. We can't protect you as well there."

"Just like when you decided I couldn't go outside and play with my son? Whose choice was that? Did I have any say in the matter?" She glared at them all in turn. "I think not."

At least they all had the grace to look guilty at that last remark.

Closing her eyes, Penny sighed. "Look, you're all smart men. Think about this. Whoever this guy

is, he likes to kill his victims up close and personal. Have you forgotten that I've seen what he does? My sister and one of my best friends were killed by this sick bastard."

Penny felt bile rise in the back of her throat and fought to keep her dinner down at the memory of finding Carla lying in a pool of her own blood. They'd never let her out of this room if she showed such a girly weakness like throwing up. Taking a deep breath, she managed to keep her stomach under control and continued.

"I can't say I like his handiwork, but my guess is he'll want me pretty much the same way." She shook her head. "He's not going to sit up in the hills a mile away and take a potshot at me and end it that quickly. I'm thinking it's a safe bet to assume he likes his victims to die a slow, horribly painful death—probably screaming and begging for their lives. Now," she paused. "Are you saying you can't take this guy? Because if the three of you together can't manage to keep me safe, I want new bodyguards." Stopping there, Penny looked up at Draven and sucked her bottom lip between her teeth.

Draven stood staring at her for a moment, a muscle ticking in his cheek. After about a minute, he sighed and turned to the other two men. "We're going to the garage tomorrow, Derek. Arrange for an escort."

Biting her lip, Penny was careful to keep the smile from her face as she turned and left the room. Her first victory over these three men felt sweet. Very sweet indeed.

* * * *

Darren watched the sexy sway of her ass as she left the room. Damn if she wasn't a fine looking woman—and she was his. Well, theirs, he thought with a sigh.

Long chestnut hair fell well past her waist. He'd grown accustomed to her watching him over the last few days, her huge amber eyes were filled with trust—or perhaps it was hope that they would find the killer before the murderer extinguished her life.

He couldn't allow her outburst to change his mind about her safety. If she wanted to go to the garage, then he'd have to find a way to protect her. Her happiness as well as her safety must be a priority. How could she trust them, spend her life with them, if they weren't willing to give a little as well? Still, he'd take the little vixen over his knee and paddle her sweet ass if she sassed him the way she just did Draven. The sucker.

Keeping his seat on the sofa, he watched as the other two men moved to the table for their nightly game of cards. He assumed they played to take

their minds off the woman in the other room. That was their usual routine. When Penny went to take her bath, then go to bed, the three of them found something to do to occupy their time—and their minds. Derek and Draven played cards and, well, he usually played with himself.

When Darren knew Penny was well into her bath, he would sneak into the bedroom and wallow in her scent as he jerked off. Full shifters were extremely sexual people. Once they scented their mates, they had a difficult time controlling their urges. It wasn't impossible and they never cheated on a mate, but the arrival of the one woman destined to be theirs made life nearly unbearable until they came together.

Their mates also felt the heat that built between them with their close proximity. Even humans couldn't resist the pheromones a *leoparo* exuded. Maybe he should say especially humans.

That Penny held out against exposure to him for so long said much about her self-control. And, if the other two were part shifter as he thought, that she'd held out against all three was nearly impossible to believe.

After waiting ten minutes, he snuck into the bedroom, released his burgeoning cock from his jeans and lay down on the bed. Pulling the pillow over his face, he inhaled deeply, savoring her scent. Gods what he wouldn't give to have his

cock buried deep down her throat while she looked up at him with those beautiful golden eyes.

Reaching down, he closed his fist around the base of his shaft and began his nightly fantasy. Up then down. Up then down. He moved his hand rhythmically over his shaft. Darren slid his other hand down over the hard ridges of his stomach, past the springy hair that surrounded his cock and fondled his balls.

With the pillow over his face and Penny's scent filling his lungs, it was easy to imagine the warmth of her mouth closing around the head of his cock, her tongue licking the pearl-like drop of moisture from the tip. His right hand moved faster as he envisioned her mouth sliding up and down the length of his shaft. The familiar tingling crept down his spine and wrapped itself around his balls. Just a few more seconds and he would –

“Oh, my God! What in the hell do you think you're doing?”

CHAPTER FOUR

Draven and Derek jumped up at the sound of Penny's screech. It sounded more like outrage than fear, but any outburst was cause for investigation.

"Where's Colby?" Derek looked around, obviously confused.

"How the hell should I know?" Draven snorted. "I don't have the Colby watch."

"Apparently one of us should have," Derek replied just before they burst through the door.

Penny stood just outside the open bathroom door, her skin still pink from the heat of her bath. With a huge towel wrapped around her head and wearing the large bathrobe the lodge provided, she looked tiny. Her mouth stood open in a surprised *oh* and her eyes were wide as his mother's tea plates.

It was when he followed her wide-eyed gaze that his own mouth fell open in shock.

Darren was on the bed on his back, his not-so-

hard cock in his right hand. Panting, he held his left arm across his eyes in either embarrassment or frustration.

Draven wasn't sure which. He wanted to laugh at the absurdity of their situation. A year ago, neither he nor Derek ever contemplated sharing a woman permanently. Now here they were, staying in a hotel room with the woman they both wanted to share their lives with and a man who, if his actions were any indication, was so attracted to Penny he couldn't control his base urges.

"Let's just stay calm, everyone." Derek moved into the center of the room, wanting to keep Darren from shifting and wreaking havoc on the room or their flesh.

Darren stood up and tucked himself back into his jeans with shaking fingers. "I'll go." He sighed and shook his head. "I can't stay here anymore. I think the *el calor* is upon me. I won't be safe to be around until..." He glanced at Penny and stopped, a growl rumbling in his chest. "I'll leave and send someone else to help you with this matter."

"Where do you think you're going?" Penny stepped forward, obviously unwilling to be ignored. "And what is *el calor*?"

Draven moved farther into the room before he answered. He didn't want their little bird to fly away when he told her what that was. "It's the

heat." He paused, carefully watching her expression. "The mating heat."

Her brow furrowed. "Mating heat?"

Darren stopped in front of the door, still facing outward. He kept his back to them all.

Draven wasn't sure if it was from embarrassment or if the other man just couldn't bear to turn and face Penny's censure.

"Things are different here in Paradise." He ran a hand through his already disheveled hair. "We all aren't what we seem."

"I already knew that," Penny said with a snort. "I don't know exactly what goes on here, but I do know that all of you aren't quite..." she paused and bit her lip before continuing. "That you're not quite human."

Not quite human. That was something that Draven himself wondered at times. He'd never questioned his humanity before last spring. Before then he'd gone through life happily believing he was human. Hell, even the blood tests he'd had hadn't told anyone any different. However, since coming to Paradise and meeting the people here, he realized that for some reason blood tests couldn't tell the difference between a shifter and a human. He'd never discovered the whys of it.

Still facing the door, Darren explained. "I am full *leoparo*. There aren't many of us left. The old council decided to change our way of life as they

tried to make us stronger. Instead, it made us weaker as the people left Paradise and scattered among the human population. Most of them are still in hiding. I can't believe that many of them have told anyone what they are. When they breed with someone who is not their mate or when they do not bring their mate over by completing the mating ritual, their children lose something."

Draven stood still, listening to the story he'd already heard at least a dozen times, but not wanting to interrupt. Darren was close to the edge of his control. Draven could sense it.

"Their children aren't quite human, but they also aren't quite *leoparo*. They live in some in between state. Sometimes they are aware of their differences from the humans around them, sometimes they are not."

"What has this got to do with you masturbating on my bed?" The anger was gone from Penny's face now. Her expression was wary. She stood near the bathroom door, her arms crossed beneath her breasts, the position pushing the creamy globes up to the vee in the opening of the robe.

Darren finally turned.

The bleak expression on his face had Draven feeling sorry for the poor bastard.

"Because you are my mate and every minute in your presence is driving me mad. The *el calor* is upon me every minute of every day. If I don't

leave, sooner or later I'm going to pounce on you and take you whether you want me to or not." Then he glanced at Draven and Derek and sighed. "And I can't take you if you can't accept us all. I am a man of honor and I will not take you only for myself when I know others need the solace of your body just as much as I do."

"All of you?" Penny squeaked. Color rushed to her face and she nervously licked her lips as she looked them all over slowly as though actually contemplating it. "At the same time?"

"It doesn't have to be at the same time. Though, if you want to be brought over and Derek and Draven want to be brought fully over, we would have to all make love together at least once."

Draven was surprised that she'd taken this so well. She hadn't run from the room screaming...yet and she was still standing. Barely.

* * * *

Derek ran to Penny as she moved to clutch the bathroom door. His thought was to catch her if she fell.

She stopped him with a glare and one hand held out in front of her. "Don't touch me!"

Well, damn. So much for a happily ever after. He sighed. "I was only going to catch you if you fell, darlin'. I did not intend on falling on you in a

mating frenzy. Darren is the shifter. Draven and I just live here."

"But you're part shifter, aren't you?" She looked up at him through narrowed eyes.

"We think so, yes," he said with a nod. "But that doesn't mean we feel the *el calor*. If we do, it's a very diluted version of it." He glanced back at Darren who still remained in the room watching Penny with a bit of hope in his eyes. The other man clenched his fists at his sides and a muscle quivered in his cheek. It was most likely from trying to control the urge to jump on his female and rut like a mindless beast. At least that's what he'd heard happened to a male during the *el calor*. Hell, he half felt that way himself.

Derek stood mere inches from her. He was so close he could smell the soap she'd used in her bath. His body hardened at the thought that she wore nothing beneath the robe. Not one more scrap of cloth stood between them and the heaven her body could offer. Still, he stood his ground knowing one wrong move could scare her away forever.

"What happens if I say no?"

His heart nearly dropped from his chest at her words. "Then we will still protect you with our lives until the murderer is brought to justice." He grinned at her look of surprise. "No, Penny. Our protection doesn't depend on your sleeping with

us."

She took a deep breath. "Then I'll do it."

"What?" all three of them asked at the same time.

"You heard me." She moved to the dresser and leaned back against it.

Derek was sure she did it for the support, but the way she leaned her hips against the low top of the bureau with her long legs crossed in front of her, her hands on either side of her hips, her shoulders back, the vee of the robe opened to reveal more of the swell of her creamy breasts. It was all he could do to stand still. Right now *she* called all the shots. "Ah...er...one at a time or all of us together?" Her face turned a darker shade of red at his question. He hadn't wanted to remind her of the decision she'd just made, but someone had to do it. They had to know up front what she expected.

"Why don't we play it by ear?" She glanced at the other two men. "Hell, you guys, I've never done anything like this before."

Her blush deepened even more and Derek wondered just how red their woman could get. "

"I'll admit to fantasizing about it a bit. But I've really never given the matter *serious* consideration."

"Consider it now, baby," Darren said as he took off his shirt and headed for her. "Because I'm

going to give you the ride of your life.”

* * * *

Penny squeaked as Darren approached her. Her first thought was to bolt into the bathroom and close the door. Instead, she took in a huge gulp of air and stood her ground. A knot of fear formed in her belly. Not fear of the man, but apprehension about what was to come.

God he was big. Somehow she’d never realized how big he was over the last week in their company. They were all big—larger than her husband had ever been. She gazed up at the expanse of bare chest in front of her and tried to speak. She couldn’t. It was as though someone had tied her tongue in a knot. There was barely enough time to close her eyes and sway forward as his face loomed closer and his mouth covered hers.

Pulling back, he growled against her lips. “From this night forward, you belong to us.”

She wanted to argue she didn’t belong to anyone. Her body rebelled and instead, she found her head nodding as she leaned up on her toes and pressed her lips to his once again.

Her mind reeled at the thought of what she was about to do. How could she surrender herself to three men? What would they do? Would it hurt?

Too many questions swirled around inside her head and she almost chickened out. She even lifted her hands to his chest to push him away, to tell him she'd changed her mind, but something stopped her. Something primeval inside her wanted this, wanted them and it wasn't about to let her step away.

Nothing in her life felt like the warm press of his lips on hers. His tantalizing scent teased her, made promises of the pleasure there was to come. How she ever survived without this man before she never knew.

How long had it been since she felt the warmth of a man's arms, his kiss, the promise of passion? Her body came to life. Her breasts swelled, her nipples hardened into tight peaks, begging to be touched. Her clit pulsed with anticipation and need.

She touched his tongue with hers, swallowing his moan as she whimpered into his mouth. She could feel the edges of her robe open before he slowly drew it from her shoulders.

"You're so beautiful," Draven whispered on her left, his lips nibbling the crook of her neck.

Three sets of hands skimmed over her skin, her body. Warmth pooled between her legs and thick moisture slid down her thighs.

"We want only to please you." The voice was Darren's. He lifted her in his arms and carried her

to the bed. "I...we...all of us will stop if that is your wish but," he set her on the bed gently. "We hope you won't change your mind." He grinned. "In fact, we're all prepared to make sure you don't want to change your mind." He nodded to the other two and they moved forward, each moving to lie on either side of her.

A shiver of fear, of anticipation, slid down her spine as she watched them approach. She shifted her gaze between them, watching, as they grew closer. They looked like great jungle cats scenting prey and she little more than a frightened rabbit far from its hole.

Leaning down, Derek and Draven each took an already hard nipple in their mouths and suckled strongly.

Closing her eyes, she moaned. The sound came from somewhere deep inside her. She fisted her fingers in their hair, wondering how anything could feel so wonderful.

So preoccupied with the other two, she couldn't concentrate on anything but the sensations winging through her body with their mouths on her flesh. She didn't even feel Darren between her legs until she felt the touch of his tongue on her slick flesh.

One long slow lick over her nether flesh made her fully aware of his presence and his intentions. She moved to draw her legs together. She knew

she couldn't come like this. She'd never come like that.

Darren wouldn't let her close her legs. Stronger than she was, he merely held her open to his heated gaze and kept kissing, licking and nuzzling her. She panted beneath the three men. Knowing they would drive her mad and she would never find release. She never had. Why would this time be any different? Still, it would feel good while it lasted, no matter how frustrated it would leave her in the end.

She jumped when he swiped his tongue over her erect clit then began to suckle while Draven and Derek still feasted at her breasts. They held her down as she writhed between them, unable to think or do anything but concentrate on the way they made her feel. The pleasure they gave her was so intense, it filled her up, grew inside her until she felt as though she would burst.

At that moment, she wanted them all. She wanted them to touch her, to keep giving her pleasure. She wanted them to do so many things at once she couldn't think of any one thing she just wanted more.

"Please." She whimpered, her head thrashing on the pillow beneath it. "I...I need..." She wasn't sure what she wanted, what she needed. She only knew she didn't want them to stop.

"Shh..." Derek whispered against her ear, his

breath sending darts of pleasure through her body from her nipples straight to the erect and throbbing bud between her legs.

Darren stopped sucking her clit and she almost cried with frustration. Perhaps this time she would have come—would finally have found relief from someone other than herself, her own hand. Instead, he plunged his tongue deep inside her, licking the cream from her vagina. She groaned again, needing something more. It wasn't until Derek reached down and thrummed her clit that she realized exactly what it was she needed.

It was then that she finally came. Penny screamed as wave after wave of pleasure washed over her. Darren's tongue remained inside her, lapping up her body's juices as she came repeatedly beneath their ministrations. She panted, begged for release and they gave it to her. For the first time in her life, she found release in another's arms.

Draven leaned over and kissed her while she came, capturing her screams in his mouth. His tongue thrust into her mouth, twining around hers as they both fought to climb inside one another.

A myriad of sensations ripped through her body as they continued to massage her erogenous zones with their knowing fingers. Tingling moved between her lips, breasts and nether regions. Even her toes began to tingle and burn as the rush of

another orgasm overtook her. She stiffened, tightened her entire body, arched up off the bed strung tight as a bow and she screamed through another intense release.

Darren was on her before she knew it. Before she could even catch her breath. His mouth covered hers, his tongue thrusting inside so she could taste the evidence of her orgasm on his lips.

Penny nearly gasped when they stood and disrobed. All three of them were every bit as big below the waist as they were above. She swallowed thickly. Part of her feared what was to come. Another part of her rejoiced in the fact that she found these three men.

Darren's dark hair brushed his shoulders. Shivering, she remembered how the silky strands brushed her thighs as he rested between her legs. His gaze, like molten silver, burned over her flesh, tightening her nipples and leaving goose bumps on her skin.

Broad shoulders gave way to a muscular chest lightly dusted with downy black hair. Her fingers itched to touch it, to know if it was as soft as it looked. His body, sculpted by years of hard work and exercise was perfection. His impressive chest tapered down to a ridged stomach. The muscles quivering beneath her gaze. An angry looking scar ran from his right hip to the hairline of his pubic region. It didn't detract from his appeal at all. If

anything, it made him look even more exciting...dangerous. It was when she *really* looked at his cock that she began to feel trepidation.

Apprehension filled her breast as she stared at the large shaft. Thick and long, she knew it would give great pleasure, but coupled with one of the others... Penny wasn't sure she could stand the pain of them taking her together. There was no doubt that they would fit. The question was how much would it hurt?

"Don't worry, love." Darren lowered himself beside her as the other two men gave her an impromptu striptease. "We won't hurt you." He leaned down, took a nipple in his mouth and suckled gently. "You merely need to tell us you want us to stop and we will."

She heard him, even believed him, but it didn't stop her body from shaking as the other two disrobed. Derek and Draven were beautiful as well. Their bodies, similar in size, assaulted her senses. Derek, tall and blond gazed down at her with his chocolate brown eyes. His smooth chest was unmarred as was Draven's.

Her mouth went dry as they reached for their zippers. Each moved slowly, almost in slow motion as they slid the metal band down. Their cocks sprang free the moment they lowered their flies and her eyes widened with shock. What had

she gotten herself into?

Darren moved over her, his hips thrust between hers, his cock pressing against her nether lips, begging entrance. "Don't back down now, love. We won't hurt you. We don't have to take you all at once now." He smiled. "Besides, you'll like it. Didn't you like what's happened all ready?"

With all three of them pleasuring her, she could barely think, let alone wonder how much things would hurt—or care how much it would hurt for that matter. A glance to the others showed her they had finished discarding their clothes. The knowledge gave her goose bumps.

"Are you sure you want to continue?" he asked the question against her lips. His teeth, nibbling and biting their way across her chin and neck.

How could she say no? How could she deny the pleasure she knew they would each give the other? She knew she could stop his suffering, if only for a while, and he could give her the same. She suffered as well. Every day she spent with these three men, she wanted them each more. It was shock that had her shouting with surprise when she'd come from her bath to find Darren half-naked on her bed.

Pure selfishness made her agree to their proposition. She trusted them when they said they would still protect her if she'd said no. They were nothing if not men of their word. But she'd

wanted this. Wanted them and Penny knew if she said no now, the offer may never be made again. She was no one's fool.

Penny felt a surge of pride as Darren panted above her. He held himself rigid, waiting for her answer. It was empowering to know that she could make these men react this way. Make them want her so much that they panted with need.

Sweat beaded on his brow, covered him in a light sheen that made him slide easily against her. The light dusting of hair on his chest brushed against her nipples as she looked up into his silver eyes.

"Yes." She reached up and allowed her fingers to caress the scar on his cheek. "I want you, Darren." She looked to her left at Draven, then her right to Derek. "I want you all."

* * * *

Darren could hardly believe his good fortune. He groaned with a mixture of ecstasy and relief as he finally slid his cock into her tight sheath. He needed this. He needed her more than he would ever admit. At least to another male.

The warmth of her inner flesh surrounded him like wet silk and he almost lost himself inside her. Closing his eyes, he fought for control. It didn't help that he could see the other two men with his

peripheral vision lying on either side of her jerking off. Watching their hands moving rhythmically over their hard shafts was nearly enough to send him over the edge.

Gods, what was happening to him? Another man yanking his own chain had never once turned him on in the past. Looking down, he concentrated on staring into Penny's beautiful amber eyes. She stared up at him, her gaze filled with such pleasure he couldn't stop himself from thrusting his cock deeper inside her. Gods she felt good. Her tight channel closed around his cock, milking him as he repeatedly thrust and withdrew.

It was when she wrapped her legs around his waist, hooked her ankles at the small of his back and met each thrust that he finally lost his control and began to pound into her with abandon. Everything within him focused on the need to feel her tight sheath surrounding his cock, milking the seed from his body.

She arched into him as she came, dragging her nails over his back and scoring his ass as she screamed another climax.

His chest expanded, filling with some strange sense of being, a feeling of belonging with Penny, with these other men and he knew in his heart that no one would ever separate them and live.

CHAPTER FIVE

Derek looked over Penny's sweat-soaked body. She still lay beneath Darren panting. Her eyes were closed, her face flushed, a sheen of moisture on her cherry red lips.

He wanted nothing more than to cover her himself. To thrust his already hard cock into her tight channel and fuck her until they passed out. After six days of living in the same room with this woman, he was about to lose his mind with the need to plunge into her slick depths.

No. He changed his mind. He wanted her ass. When Darren moved off her to head to the bathroom, he rolled over. Reaching beneath her, he grabbed her ass. "Have you ever taken a man here?"

"No," Penny said with a shake of her head. Her gaze flicked to Draven. "I suppose you two want to take me together." She gave a nervous laugh. "I have to tell you, I have never done this before." Her breath caught and she closed her eyes as

Draven rested his hand on her mound, his fingers delving into her wet slit.

"Yes," Draven answered as he leaned down to flick her nipple with his tongue.

She squirmed between them.

"I don't want you down here." He patted her mound. "I plan to fuck you between your perfect red lips."

She groaned when Draven drew her nipple into his mouth while his hand continued to explore between her legs.

"Do you have any lubricant?"

"I have some in the nightstand." Her face reddened at his raised brow. "I'm allergic to most lotions. Oils designed to...well, you know, they're usually hypoallergenic."

That was true enough, but he was finding he liked to make her squirm. He liked everything about her. The last week spent in her company only served to make him feel more for her than he thought wise until she agreed to accept them all. Taking them as mates was another question he'd deal with later. Sitting up, he opened the drawer of the stand next to the bed. "I don't—"

"It's in the one on the other side."

"Oh." He glanced at Draven and, not wanting to disturb the other man's feast at Penny's breast or her pleasure, he walked around the bed to fetch the oil himself. "Strawberry flavored, huh?" He

grinned. "I love strawberries. One day I just might cover you in it and lick it off. But for now," he paused and rolled her on her side. "I want to tunnel my cock right up your tight little virgin ass."

Darren exited the bathroom and took a seat on the chair next to the window to watch and jerk off. Derek could only be glad the other man didn't insist on having her again. He didn't know how much longer he could wait to sink into her moist heat.

Rolling her to her side, he shifted his gaze to the long line of her back and then her ass. Derek poured some of the oil onto his fingers and worked one into her back hole. "God, you're tight. It's going to take a few minutes to stretch you. I don't want it to hurt."

Penny groaned as he worked another finger into her ass. Draven still suckled her nipples, his fingers buried between her legs. She undulated her hips, her head thrown back as he and Draven pleased her. It didn't take long for her to come with Derek's fingers working her ass and Draven fingering her clit. It wasn't long before she screamed out another orgasm.

After Derek managed to squeeze a third finger into her virgin hole, he pulled his fingers free and coated his shaft with the slick oil. He wanted this to be as painless for her as possible. They needed

to prepare her for a double penetration in the future. Derek nearly died from pleasure as the tip of his cock slipped past the tight ring of her ass. Moving slowly, he worked himself in, all the way to his balls.

After her orgasm, Draven moved up to her head, placing his cock in front of her face. "Suck it." The other man's need for dominance came to the surface. His face was tight with the need to climax. He buried his fingers in her hair and moved his hips forward, waiting for her touch. "Please, Penny." In an instant, the dominant male was gone, reduced to asking, begging, for what he wanted.

Smiling her triumph, Penny reached out and ran her fingers up his leg. Ignoring his burgeoning erection, she rubbed her face on his inner thighs.

Derek couldn't believe what a turn-on it was to watch as she moved her lips over the other man's legs, working closer to his sac. It wasn't until she had Draven panting with need, his knuckles white from the strain of holding back, and the muscles of his legs quivering that she finally opened her mouth and pulled one of his balls into her mouth.

Derek's cock bucked at the sight. Pulling out of her exquisitely tight back hole, he thrust back in, barely able to control the need to fuck her ass deep and hard. Watching her with Draven was the sexiest thing he'd ever witnessed in his life. The

woman he wanted as his own, the woman he realized he wanted to spend the rest of his life with, pleased his best friend and he found it the most erotic thing he'd ever seen.

He wanted nothing more than to bury his cock deep inside this woman and fuck her until she screamed. Whatever it was that took control of him, of them, since they met Penny Sawyer, had him in its thrall and held him greedily with a tight fist. Like the tight fist of her ass squeezing and milking his cock until he wanted to do nothing more than come.

It didn't take long. She was too tight, too much of a virgin to keep him from losing himself so quickly. Derek let go with a groan. The sight of Penny's lips finally closing over the head of Draven's cock shattering his control.

* * * *

Penny kissed her way up each side of Draven's shaft while Derek slid in and out of her ass. She didn't know how much more she could stand. The pleasure-pain was so intense she wanted to share it with her two men—her three men. Darren sat on the chair across the room, his hand sliding easily up and down his shaft.

His fist pumped faster each moment she watched, his hooded gaze taking in the scene

before him. Did it turn him on to watch Draven and Derek loving her as much as it aroused her to have him watch?

Turning her attention back to Draven's thick shaft, she followed the drop of pearly liquid that started to run down the length with her tongue. He was unlike anything she'd ever tasted before. Clean and spicy, not bitter in the least.

The sound of his guttural groan as he cupped her head with his hands had her sucking harder, taking him deeper. She wanted nothing more than to send him over the edge.

Derek's shaft still fucked in and out of her bottom, the sensation, though new, was something Penny knew she wanted to experience again. He reached around, sliding his fingers through her wet folds to circle her clit, driving her need higher.

After the first initial shock of pain when he first breached her virgin ass, there was nothing but overwhelming, unrelenting pleasure. He pumped his cock into her while thrumming her clit and she could feel another orgasm building, drawing ever closer. She would come again soon and she wanted to take her two men with her. The desire to take them with her, to make sure they experienced the ultimate pleasure they'd already given her became an all-encompassing need.

It was strange how she'd come to care about these three men so quickly. Strange how, at this

moment, she wanted nothing more than to please them. All of them.

With Derek's fingers sliding over the hard bud of her clit, his cock sliding in and out of her channel, Penny knew it was only a matter of moments before she came. The now familiar burning began deep inside her, making her hot all over. The added stimulation of Draven's fingers tightening in her hair and Darren across the room with his head thrown back, pleasuring himself was too much for Penny to bear. Her muscles stiffened, clamped down onto Derek's cock as she came, her muffled cries taking her men with her.

Penny collapsed on the bed with a tired smile. Her three men. She liked that thought.

Penny woke the following morning and stretched. Grimacing, she sat up. Muscles she never realized she had woke with complaints. Still, she thought with a smile as she crawled from the bed and headed to the bathroom, she wouldn't trade last night for anything in the world.

Frowning as she noticed the guys were gone, she finished her shower in record time to see where they went. She was starving and nothing would keep her from the kitchen and food.

Over the last week, the men at least gave her the run of the lodge. With the added security force watching the old ski lodge from the outside and

her three men inside, there was no way an attacker could get to her without their knowledge.

After her shower, she dressed and headed down the stairs, still frowning that there were no men inside. Usually Gemma and one of her males was lurking about, waiting to be sure she didn't need anything. It was strange to find herself alone like this. Since she was starving, she continued toward the kitchen hoping to see someone along the way.

There was a note on the kitchen counter.

Penny, we didn't want to wake you, the men outside apprehended the suspect this morning and the new council has decided to render the verdict for his punishment as soon as possible. Stay here and we'll be back as quickly as we can.

An immense sense of relief filled her chest at the knowledge that the person responsible for her sister's death was finally off the streets. He couldn't hurt the people she cared about anymore.

After she ate, she wandered around the lodge waiting for news. She would go to the hearing or whatever, herself only she had no idea where it was held. Besides, after a week of locked-up in this building, she was ready to go outside and have some fun.

Grabbing her coat from the hook just inside the mudroom door, she opened the door, stepped out onto the porch and took a deep breath. Freedom,

she'd never known how sweet the smell was before.

"I wondered how long it would take you to come out here."

Hand to her throat, Penny spun around, her eyes wide. "You scared me," she said with a laugh, nervous. "They couldn't stand the thought of leaving me here without protection, huh?"

Nothing about the man should have set off any of her internal alarms. He looked much like all the other men she'd seen here in Paradise. In his mid thirties, he had dark hair, was good-looking and had a nice build...but something about his too dark eyes made her nervous.

The man smiled and moved to lean against the rail. He crossed his arms over his chest and stretched out his jean-clad legs. "Apparently not. It's just a good thing for me that those they left behind weren't experienced warriors."

Penny took another deep breath, her blood turning to ice. The same scent she'd smelled almost two weeks ago in her garage assaulted her nostrils. Blood. She smelled blood and lots of it. Taking a step back toward the door, she gauged the distance, wondering if she could get back into the building before the man caught her. It wasn't to be. Just as her fingers closed around the knob, he grabbed her and jerked her from the door.

"Oh, no you don't. My boss wants to see you

and what the Rat wants the Rat gets.”

He pulled her to his side, stuck a piece of tape over her mouth, dragged her from the porch and into the woods behind the lodge.

“By the time they realize they don’t have the Rat, we’ll be long gone. The three of us will be sequestered somewhere where he’ll feel comfortable entertaining you until our private party during the Spring Equinox. He does love keeping you girls entertained.”

Penny shuddered at the thought of *the Rat’s* idea of entertainment. The Spring Equinox wasn’t for another four weeks or so. Tears ran from her eyes and down her face. The sick bastard would have four weeks to strip the skin slowly from her body and four weeks to rape her repeatedly while he waited for the perfect time to kill her.

Sagging to the ground, she could only hope to slow the man down long enough for help to arrive. Her men would find her. They had to. She only had to devise a way to leave a trail, to let them know she hadn’t gone willingly. Not that she would ever leave her son behind if she decided to run.

“Get up, damn you.” The man kicked her in the thigh.

Pain shot through her leg. She could only moan with the tape covering her mouth.

“I said get up!” Another kick followed, his hand

fisting in her hair. He pulled, trying to get her to her feet. "Get up. They have to see that you walked away...that you left them on your own. If I drag you..." He scowled as he realized her intent and backhanded her across the face.

Black spots danced before her eyes and Penny stumbled, struggling to remain conscious. If she passed out, she wouldn't have any idea where to run if the opportunity presented itself. She had to stay alert.

Reaching down, the man ripped the tape from her mouth. "I don't need this on you now. No one can hear you scream out here and I want to see your lips swell as I knock your fucking teeth out."

Her mind filled with both fear and triumph. She could walk away with him now, but nothing would convince her men she'd gone willingly. Spitting the blood out onto the snow, she stared at him defiantly. "I'm not going to walk. You can damn well carry me."

Another sharp slap brought a stronger taste of blood. This time it ran down her chin and onto her coat. Spots danced before her eyes once again and the cloying darkness of oblivion attempted to lure into a painless sleep. Penny's mind was racing, torn between the need to remain alert and succumbing to the dark promise of a pain-free stupor. She'd driven the man to give her the evidence she would need to prove to her men that

she hadn't left willingly along with buying a bit of time. Maybe she should stop provoking him now before he knocked her out.

With Darren's shifter ability, he would be able to follow the scent of her blood now that he had it. As long as this flunky didn't put her in a closed vehicle, there was no way they could lose them now.

"Walk. Now!" He raised his hand again.

Not wanting to take another painful slap for fear of losing consciousness, Penny grabbed a tissue from her pocket and wiped the blood from her chin as she began to walk. The man didn't notice when she discarded it at their feet a few minutes later.

Trudging along beside the man, she prayed the others would return quickly. She didn't want to die and the thought of her son growing up without either of his natural parents hurt her more than she ever could have imagined.

* * * *

"She's gone!" Draven ran from their room and down the stairs. "She's not in the room." He watched Derek and Darren as the news sank in.

Darren recovered quickly and stood. "I knew we shouldn't have left her here alone. The guy we caught skulking around outside last night was a

decoy. There are more of them."

"What the hell is it then, some sort of damned cult?" Derek stood and headed for the kitchen. We have to pick up her scent. It's going to be hard with all this snow on the ground. He glanced back at Darren. "We'll need all of your friends. Some to stay here and watch the boy and others to help follow any trail they may have left."

Darren bolted out the door, his cell phone to his ear. "Get the men and get to the lodge." He paused as someone spoke on the other end. "Send someone over to the sheriff's office before it's too late. The prisoner needs questioning. I need at least five men here yesterday. They've taken my mate."

Closing his cell phone with a snap, Darren stuck it back in his pocket. He threw his head back and took a deep breath through his nose. "I can't smell a thing in this form. My beast can follow a scent much better." He immediately began to change form. Bone popped and cracked, muscles and sinew stretched and reshaped and fur sprouted along his skin. In mere seconds, he'd gone from man to leopard.

Derek leaned over to whisper in Draven's ear, "Man that never gets old."

Draven could do nothing but stand and stare. It was the first time he'd ever seen any of them shift. The fact that he'd seen it with his own eyes made

him believe what he'd considered impossible a little over a year before and taken on faith for the last eleven months.

Glancing back, the leopard snarled at the two men, its tail twitching with aggravation.

"I think he wants us to get moving," Draven said out of the side of his mouth. "I sure hope he can control his predatory side in that form."

"He can control it. It's that predatory side that's going to help us find our woman." Derek set out behind the cat as it headed toward the back of the lodge.

"Footprints. Three large sets, one small." Draven glanced around. "Didn't we leave Parker and Gray out here?"

"Yeah we did."

Derek said from behind a bush. "I just found Parker. Someone slit his throat. He's still warm so they can't have been gone long. I don't see Gray anywhere."

The leopard didn't stand around waiting as he followed the footprints into the woods.

The hair on Draven's arms stood on end when the scream of a big cat rent the air. "That's Darren."

The blood drained from Derek's face as he turned and ran toward the scream.

"Blood." The word sounded strange.

Draven gaped at Darren who had half-changed

back into a human. He still had fur and the ears of a leopard, but his face was half man, half beast. Yellow cat's eyes gleamed back at him.

"Her blood."

He glanced down at the blood soaked tissue at his feet, then looked out over the tracks.

"He...made...her...bleed. He...dies," Darren spoke the words slowly.

They sounded weird, like a recording played back in slow motion. After he spoke, he turned fully into the cat again and headed out over the snow, following the tracks leading up the side of the mountain.

CHAPTER SIX

Darren followed Penny's scent for over a mile before he spotted them. The hair on his back stood on end as he watched the man backhand her and she fell to the ground on the shore of a lake. A snowmobile sat about ten feet away, the trail that led across the lake a long ribbon in the snow stretched out behind it.

If he got her to the snowmobile, they'd never catch them. He could run fast as a cat, but he couldn't run *that* fast.

When the man looked up and saw Darren and the other two plowing downhill after him, he threw Penny over his shoulder and headed for the snowmobile. Setting Penny on the machine before him, he climbed on, started the sled and steered it out onto the lake.

"Shit! The ice on that lake is rotten. I heard a weather report earlier, along with warnings to stay off the ice. He's going to get them both killed."

Darren put on a burst of speed at Derek's words, but still couldn't catch the sled as it sped over the ice headed for the deepest, most dangerous part of the lake. He couldn't lose her now. He couldn't bear the thought of having finally found a mate only to lose her to some sick bastard's idea of fun.

The cold air hurt his lungs, but still he ran after the snowmobile as it sped across the ice. The high-pitched whine of the engines at full speed stopped, the man having to let go of the throttle as Penny pushed at him and threw herself off the sled and onto the thin ice.

Loud cracking sounds filled the air as the ice, unable to take the pressure, gave way and the snowmobile disappeared below the surface. The icy waters of the lake sucked the vehicle down along with its rider.

Penny began to sit up and Darren's heart leapt to his throat. She'd go under if she wasn't careful. The ice was thin and already weak from the abuse of the snowmobile crossing twice over its weakest point.

Changing back to his human form, he dressed himself with his magick, immediately lay down and called out. "Lay down. Spread your weight over a larger area or the ice will collapse beneath you." Gods, he was torn between hugging her for her bravery and throwing her over his knees and

spanking her for risking herself like that. The only thing that kept him from *really* losing his temper was the knowledge that if she hadn't fought her way off that machine and fallen onto the rotten ice, she would be at the bottom of the lake with her kidnapper. "Stay where you are. Stop trying to move." He cursed as she rolled over, her hands stretched out over her head.

"I'm trying to get closer to the shore."

"Well stop before you fall into the icy waters. Are you *trying* to kill yourself?"

A flash of disbelief, then anger crossed her face. "Screw you, you creep. I'm just trying to get myself to safety. I don't see you doing anything but laying there."

Darren took in a deep breath and sighed. His mate was wonderfully hardheaded and brave. Then he grinned. He would have her no other way. "The others are on their way to get help. They saw us go down. It's only a matter of time before they get back here with a rescue team. Just lay still so they have someone to rescue." Turning his head, he looked at her and raised a brow. "Are you hard of hearing, woman?"

"No, *man*, I'm cold. I want to get closer and share some of that shifter heat Myrtle Connor says you guys are famous for."

"I think she was referring to what goes on in the bedroom. Now stay still." Curse that Connor

woman and her flapping lips. Now she had him thinking how nice it would be to hold her, to know that if they were to die they would do so in each other's arms. "Be careful." He growled and held out his hand.

"I knew I'd convince you." She was breathless from her efforts now.

Her quick breaths only served to remind him how beautiful she was when she lay panting beneath him. How sexy it was to watch her with the other two and how much he wanted the opportunity to sink into her wet heat once again.

Damn, Colby. There's a time and a place for things like that and this is neither. He ran his other hand over his face, trying not to think of how she felt in his arms and telling his cock to behave itself when she did finally make it into his arms.

Gods he was a weak fool. He knew the chances of the ice giving way grew greater as she approached him, but he couldn't bring himself to move away and he couldn't command her to stay where she was. She was too headstrong to listen. If he were smart, he would begin rolling from her as she rolled forward, but he couldn't. The lure of her scent and her heat in his arms was too much to ignore. He would take her into his arms, gather his magick about them and hope the ice held.

It wasn't until Penny reached his side that he realized how much he wanted her there. The scent

of her hair, the warmth of her lips on his skin and the feel of her breath against the side of his neck was more than he could bear.

"I know it's only been a week but..."

She paused and he reached around her dragging her closer. "But what?"

"I think I love you." She blushed. "I know it sounds crazy and I know you're only drawn to me because of pheromones or something, but I really think I've fallen in love with all three of you." Her brow furrowed. "Does that even make sense?"

Darren swallowed thickly and his eyes began to burn. Damn. He was *not* going to cry like a damned baby just because a woman professed her love for him. "It doesn't sound crazy at all. I've been in love with you since the first time you put your foot down and insisted you spend time with Randy outside while he played." Lifting his head, he leaned over and kissed her temple. "The way your eyes flashed, you thrust your finger into my ribs showing no fear of me, the way your chest heaved drawing my attention to your perfect breasts..." He sighed as the memory took him back that day when he realized he wanted no other woman.

"That's sweet." She grinned at him, the nervousness gone.

"I'm not sweet. I'm a male of my kind who recognizes courage in the woman he would take

to mate." A sound from the shore drew his attention and he decided it was time they stopped speaking of such things before the other men got here. He'd never hear the end of it. "Look. It seems our rescuers have arrived."

* * * *

Valentines Day. It was a good day for a wedding. Penny looked out over the pristine landscape. The snow and ice storm that just blew through wiped out all evidence that someone had kidnapped her and forced her up the side of the mountain. They still didn't know who the murderer was, only that he liked his lackeys to call him the Rat.

She was safe now. From what the others gathered from the message the Rat left at the scene of his last crime, he only murdered unmarried women. What else they had in common was still a mystery.

He would continue to kill, of that there was no doubt. One woman on each Sabbath. One life taken every time the wheel of life eased them past another ritual holiday.

They had only a few weeks to try to determine who his next victim would be and save her. If they could only find her in time. Still, if they did, he would probably just turn his sights on another. Sighing, she dropped the sheer lace curtain and

turned back to face the interior of the room.

The bed sat waiting for when her men returned, when they would all repeat what they had the night before. Only this time, this time she would face the change. They would form the *truebond* and none of them would ever be alone again.

The door opened and Darren entered. "Are you ready?"

Penny nodded. Raising her arms, she turned around in a slow circle. "I've had my bath and I'm wearing the gown you bought for me." Heat filled her face at the thought of him and the others shopping for the things she wore. A white lace trimmed dress, the scrap of cream lace that was her thong underwear, cream lace bustier and garter belt with silk stockings. If she hadn't already guessed what they had in mind for after the ceremony she would have known the moment she put on the clothes they'd purchased.

"Did you talk to my mother?" When Draven followed him into the room and whistled, she scowled, her hands on her hips. "You all know you aren't supposed to see me before the wedding. It's bad luck."

"That's just an old wives tale." Derek peered around the corner, his eyes widening with admiration. "Did Draven and I tell you how much we love you today?"

Draven nuzzled her ear at her nod.

"Wonderful. We can't have you forget. You're so beautiful. You look good enough to eat."

"She is good enough to eat," Darren said with a growl. "Let's get this over with. So we can get back here so I *can* eat her." Turning back to Penny, he smiled and held out his arm. "Yes we talked to your mother. She is just as happy as you are. If it will keep you alive and safe from harm and gives her the chance for more grandchildren, she's all for it."

Penny let out the breath she didn't realize she'd been holding. "That's a relief." Accepting Darren's arm, she looked up and grinned. "The sooner we get going, the sooner we get through the reception and get back up here. These last two weeks without having you three near me has just about driven me mad."

To think just a few days before, she'd been going mad having them with her. It's strange how quickly things change.

Penny sat on the sofa, nervous. Just before the ceremony, her mother dropped the bomb that her father had been a shifter from Paradise. He told her after she got pregnant, hoping that the fact he didn't form a blood bond with her would keep her safe from the old council and keep her human. It had worked...mostly. She had no shifter power other than her exceptional hearing.

She jumped when her mates entered the room. Heat suffused her face at their expressions, a nervous knot forming in her stomach. This was it. Their wedding night. They no longer stayed at the lodge, they were in Darren's home and her mother was nowhere around.

"Are you ready to scream, mate?" Darren smiled as he took off his shirt.

Penny licked her lips as he exposed his muscular chest, her mouth going dry as the other two followed Darren's lead and began to undress as well. Heat pooled in her middle and a rush of moisture coated her almost nonexistent panties. Her clit pulsed at the sight of her men stripping down before her and the thought that in just a short while they would have her on the bed screaming. At least that's what they promised her and she believed them. Just the thought of the things they promised to do had her panting, her stomach fluttering with anticipation.

The three dropped their shirts at their feet, each reaching for the fastening of their slacks. In one smooth motion, the slacks slid down their thighs, revealing three extremely well hung men who had all gone commando, their cocks all standing at attention. She fought the urge to fan herself. Had they planned this? Did they know how much this would turn her on or did they just get lucky?

"Look, you two. Her nipples are so hard I can

see them straining through her dress," Darren said as he stepped out of the black linen puddle at his feet. He turned to them and grinned. "I think she can't wait."

He was right. She couldn't wait. Every minute they stood before her with their erections staring her in the face made her want them more. She wasn't sure what it was. If something in their chemistry made her susceptible to their mating heat now that she was legally bound to them or if she unconsciously surrendered to the heat because she loved them. It didn't matter. All that mattered was that they were naked and soon she would be as well. She shivered with anticipation.

Just the thought of what was to come filled her with need and a feeling of anticipation and apprehension. She knew how this worked in theory but she'd never done anything like this before in her life.

Raising a trembling hand, she pushed the hair away from her face and gave them all a level look. These were her mates. They would never hurt her...not intentionally anyway. She could do this. She had to do this. For them. Her mates deserved to have the full power of their shifter heritage just as she deserved, truly to be her father's daughter. She owed that much to the unknown man who had given her life and died protecting her mother from those who would have harmed them both.

She licked lips that had gone suddenly dry and waited for her men to come to her, make love to her. Her entire body quivered with anticipation, goose bumps pebbled on her skin. The moisture from between her legs escaped the dubious confines of her panties and wet her thighs. She couldn't wait. "Are you going to stand there and stare at me all night or are we going to have hot monkey sex in that decadent bedroom behind me?"

Derek grinned. "Hot monkey sex, huh?"

"I vote for the sex," Draven chimed in, moving in to scoop her up in his arms. "I think you're wearing too many clothes."

Penny nuzzled his neck, her tongue trailing along his jawbone until he shivered, showing her he wasn't as unaffected as he made it appear. She smiled, glad to know that she could make them just as hot and bothered as they made her.

Draven pressed his mouth to her ear, the warmth of his breath causing shivers of delight to dance down her spine. "You're so beautiful. You looked like a fairy princess when we said our vows. It was all I could do to keep my hands off you."

Another rush of liquid warmth filled her channel at his words and he chuckled.

"I...we...can all smell your arousal. Did you know that? Were you aware that the scent of your

cream makes us need you all the more?"

When they reached the bed, Draven set her on her feet with the men surrounding her. They crowded around her, each nuzzling her neck, caressing and whispering in her ears. It was all very surreal to have them encircling her like this, each of them gently removing her clothing until she wore nothing but the underwear that made her blush.

Derek thumbed her bare nipples as her breasts swelled over the top of the corset that wasn't designed to cover them.

Draven leaned down and kissed her, his hands fisting in her hair, the slight pain sending darts of pleasure straight to her womb.

Darren, behind her, slid his hand around, sinking his fingers into her wet slit. She widened her stance to give him better access and groaned when he leaned down and suckled the side of her neck.

It wasn't until Derek and Draven each took a nipple in their mouths and began to suck and nibble that her knees gave out and she found herself supported by her mates.

Derek knelt down before her and ripped the thong panties from her hips, his thumbs going to her nether lips, spreading them open with his thumbs while Darren's fingers still worked her clit. "God, you're beautiful."

When Darren's fingers moved around her ass to thrust into her empty channel, Derek lifted her up, threw her legs over his shoulders and gave her one long slow lick up the center of her slit.

Penny whimpered. She needed this. She needed them to do exactly what they planned. She felt her channel spasm around Darren's fingers as Derek's tongue circled her sensitive clit. Her hips bucked and her legs tightened on Derek's shoulders, pressing his face further between her legs.

"Please," she begged. "Don't stop." She'd never felt such intense pleasure in her life. All of them had their hands and their mouths on her flesh and nothing mattered but the way they made her feel.

When the tingling began, she knew she wasn't far from orgasm, that soon she would be screaming just as they promised. With Draven suckling and pulling on her diamond hard nipples, Darren alternately suckling her neck and lavaging her ear, it was too much to bear with Derek's tongue expertly flicking over and circling her clit. When he pulled the hard bud into his mouth and began to suck, she finally exploded. Lights actually flashed behind her closed eyelids and she screamed so loud her throat ached.

Derek pulled his face from between her legs with one last, long, slow lick and smiled. "I don't think you need these anymore." He reached down and slipped the white sandals from her feet.

It felt good to lose the three-inch heels even though she wasn't standing. She couldn't be sure she hadn't dug the long heels into Derek's back as he ate at her nether flesh and brought her to the most intense orgasm she ever had...well so far.

Draven lay back on the bed with his head toward the far side. Reaching up, he took her hand and pulled her down on top of him.

She rubbed herself over his hard body like a cat. Licking and biting at his nipples, she treated him to the same gentle loving he'd given her just a few minutes before. Straddling him, she took his hard cock in her hand, let it slip into her sheath and they both groaned. Draven's hips jerked, driving him deeper. She felt the tip of his cock touch her womb. Cream slid down the length of his shaft lubricating him so that he slid in and out of her with ease.

Derek moved around the bed, got on his knees and kissed her, then laved and nibbled on her ear as she felt Darren move behind her. His thighs pressed against her buttocks as he straddled Draven's legs. She stiffened with apprehension when she felt his finger penetrate her anal ring.

"It's okay, baby. I won't hurt you. Not intentionally. If you feel something you don't like, you merely have to tell us."

Relaxing at his words, she opened herself more to Derek's kiss. She knew what would come next

from this male. He would want her to suck his cock and she couldn't wait. She wanted nothing more than to take him into her mouth and make him come while her other two males took her to the stars and beyond.

Penny stiffened when she felt Darren's fingers probing her back hole. She knew what to expect. In fact, she wanted it. It still didn't detract from the apprehension the idea gave her. What would it feel like? How much would it hurt? The questions still didn't scare her enough to tell them to stop. She wriggled on Draven's cock, working Darren's fingers deeper into her ass.

Derek stood, his cock bobbing in front of her face. Gathering her hair in his hands, he pulled gently, guiding his cock to her lips. Closing her eyes, she moaned, knowing how the vibrations of her throat would drive him wild. Pulling back, she licked around the head tasting the drop of fluid that oozed from the tip and savoring the musky masculine flavor.

"Are you ready for me to fuck your ass now, baby?" Darren asked from behind her. "Do you have any idea how hot it is to watch you sucking Derek's cock?"

Darren's words slid over her like warm butter. The praise he so lavishly heaped on her made her feel cherished, wanted, like a precious pearl beyond price. She did want this and...she did

want them. She couldn't wait for Darren to slide his cock deep in her ass and complete the *truebond*. All three of them loving her together and all four of them taking each others' blood into their bodies. After the ritual, it would be complete and they would be true shifters. No longer would they wonder at their differences but revel in them.

It wasn't long before the head of Darren's cock replaced his fingers at the entrance to her back hole. Penny fought to lean back onto Darren's shaft as he began to push the broad head of his cock into her ass. The feeling of fullness was nearly too much to bear. The thought that the thin membrane between her vagina and her ass only separated Draven and Darren's cocks made her heart race. Could they feel one another?

The thoughts quickly left her mind when she felt her orgasm building. She reached up and fondled Derek's sac as he pistoned his cock in and out of her mouth.

Darren bit her first. In the throes of his own orgasm, he leaned down and bit her shoulder, his saliva working into her body, changing her. He then leaned down, grabbed Draven's arm and lifted the other man's wrist to his mouth. Biting down, he shared his saliva and part of his DNA with him.

Derek was next, offering his arm to Darren. He didn't so much as wince when Darren bit down,

the latter's bite triggering his own orgasm. The four of them came together, their orgasms ripping through them, her mates' seed poured into her body as they all bit each other – each taking a little of the others into themselves until they were all one.

ÉPILOGUE

Darren sat staring at his mate as she sucked her bottom lip into her mouth while she concentrated.

"I think he wants to be stopped." Penny frowned over the copy of the note the murderer left at the scene of Carla's murder.

When a major Sabbat passes, it will stir fear in the masses.

Spring has sprung and the May Queen arrives bringing with her, a woman with sapphires in her eyes.

Sighing, she set the photocopy down. "Okay so we know we have until Beltaine since that's the next major Sabbat. We also know he's targeted someone with blue eyes. A single girl with blue eyes." She frowned, deep in thought. "That could be any one of a million or more people."

"Wait a minute." Darren moved to stare at the note. "Doesn't that new billboard on the highway have a picture of a model, saying something about buying sapphires to match her eyes?"

Derek nodded. "It could be her...but who is she and where do we find her?"

"Hell if I know," Draven grouched and sat down with a cup of coffee.

"We have to find out. Even if it's a dead end, we need to try to contact her at least. She could be in danger." Darren looked out over the snow-covered mountain and sighed. Would this ever get easier?

Draven's skin shimmered into scales and he grimaced. "Sorry. I try not to do that at the table." He brushed a few of the scales onto the floor.

Penny grinned. "At least we know your mother was a dragon."

"Apparently, since dear old dad wasn't anything more than a drill sergeant," Draven agreed with a grunt. He glanced at Darren. "How long before we gain control of our shifter powers?"

Darren grinned at them all as they sat around the table in varying states of being. Their shifter's heritage came to the fore after the *truebond*. The only problem with that was he couldn't take them anywhere like this. "It could be a while. Months even. For all practical purposes you're all going through puberty."

"Jesus." Derek rolled his eyes, looking disgusted. "I barely survived that the *first* time around."

"I, for one, think it's neat," Penny said, reaching up to pat her nose, which looked more like the muzzle of a big cat.

"Back to the woman," Darren said, returning to study the note. "She's a local model, isn't she?"

Draven shook his head. "I don't think so. I think she won a contest or something."

Darren sighed and shook his head. "I hate having to send men out on jobs I know little to nothing about, but it can't be helped. It takes a special kind of shifter to handle a situation like this." He pulled his cell phone from his pocket and flipped it open. "And luckily, I know just who to call."

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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