

FIRST CARESS

The book cover features a central illustration of three people and two leopards. On the left, a blonde shirtless man in grey pants embraces a woman with dark hair wearing a white lace-trimmed crop top and blue jeans. Behind her stands a dark-haired shirtless man in blue jeans, looking towards the viewer. To the right, a leopard sits on the ground, looking up. In the upper right, another leopard is perched on a tree branch. The background is a lush jungle with a purple-tinged sky.

Kinross Triad Series
Book 1

TIANNA XANDER
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First Caress

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**FIRST CARESS
BOOK 1 KINROSS SERIES**

BY

**TIANNA XANDER &
BONNIE ROSE LEIGH**

DEDICATION

*To our readers. You asked for it, you got it.
Another series.*

GLOSSARY

A - I

A am - I am

aabody - everybody

bairns - children

cannae - can't

cannae - cannot

dee'd - died

dinnae do not

dinnae don't

fither - father

hae - have

hae nae - have not

hae nae - haven't

intae - into

ken - know

kent - knew

nae not

nye - no

tae - to

wadnea - wouldn't

wis - was

wisnae - was not

ye - you

PROLOGUE

Rory Gordon, Alpha of the clan Gordon, stared at the healer, his mouth agape. "You're not serious." If what Morag said was true, his clan had little chance of surviving another generation.

"Aye, Laird, A am."

He ignored the antiquated title as she hobbled over to the far corner of the room to tend her dried herbs.

"The tree of life is what keeps us fertile. It's been dying these last hundred years and more. A hae done ma best tae keep it alive, but..." She shrugged. "Nothing A hae done has worked. It dee'd last week." Her shaking fingers reached up to pluck several kinds of dried herbs from the drying wire strung near the ceiling. One by one, she used her mortar and pestle to crush the dried plants. She then sprinkled the powder into twelve leather pouches, added a quartz crystal and an agate to each one, then pulled the drawstring tight. "In fact, ma Laird, the tree has been in its last days for ten years. Surely ye hae nae missed the fact that our women nye longer hae bairns?"

He hadn't missed it. However, he hadn't attributed it to some mystical tree he'd never known existed before today. "Why was the tree kept a secret all of these years?"

"The tree of life can only be nurtured by one person. The healer." She turned questioning eyes to his. "Why wad anyone else need tae ken about it? If aabody knew, wadnea it give our enemies a way tae destroy us?"

"Aye, it would. Though it seems someone has done just that." Rory sighed. "Then this is the end of us, the end of our people, the clan...everything?" It couldn't be the end, there had to be a way. "How could one tree be the cause of the clan's existence?"

"It wisnae the cause, Laird. It wis the means tae procreate. We cannae breed without the elixir of life the tree's magic put intae the earth. Without the tree, we cannae breed. Without bairns, our people will surely perish."

"Then it's over then." Gods how he hated giving up without a fight. An enemy he could deal with, do battle with and conquer. This...this was totally out of his control.

"Nye, Laird. It's nae over yit." Morag gazed at him through her wizened eyes—eyes that had seen more than a thousand years—that had seen so much in her lifetime. Moving to his side, she leaned closer to whisper in his ear. "Keep this tae

yeself. If ye must tell others, be sure they can be trusted." Pausing, she glanced around before she added, "There is another tree. Nearly four hundred years ago, the clan split in two. Ye fither thought it best tae guarantee the survival of our race. They took a root from the tree and were successful in propagating it."

Hope. It burned within him like the hottest fire. "Where? Where did they go?"

"America."

"Where in America?"

"A dinnae ken, Laird. Ye fither thought it best that we kent little. The less we kent, the less we could tell our enemies in case of capture. Most think those who left were killed in battle. It wis how ye fither wanted it."

Rory paced the small confines of the healer's cottage. "How can we find them if we have no idea where they've gone?" He balled his hand into a fist, frustrated. There was nothing else to do. He would have to send people to the United States to search out his missing clansmen. Then, once found, they would have to find a way to convince them to share a root from their tree. *If* it still existed. That was a big if.

Morag, through with her healer's incantations over the twelve bags, handed him eleven. "Do nae share this information with more people than ye hae charms for, Laird. Twelve bags, twelve men."

She shrugged. "The choice is for ye."

"But you've only handed me eleven," he said looking down at the bags, their strings draping over his fingers.

"The twelfth," she replied, reaching up to place the leather cord for one around his neck, "is for ye. Ye must be one of those tae go. Only a healer or clan leader can transport the tree and A am too auld tae go."

Rory gazed deep into her eyes. "Tell me what you see, Morag. Tell me you see my return. Tell me you see my success." His heart clenched at her cheerless expression and he fought the incredible urge to beg her for the answers.

She shook her head sadly. "A cannae, Laird. In this, the future is nae written."

It was with a heavy heart that Rory went in search of the eleven men he trusted most in the world. Six teams to go to America and search the country for his lost clansmen. The question was not who would go, but *whether* they would go. It was a fantastic story. One, had he an ounce of sense, he wouldn't believe.

An hour later he sat in his office looking at his Beta, Gavin, stare at the charm he'd given him. "Wear it." The tone of voice he used made it an order and Gavin raised a dark brow before drawing the cord over his head.

"What's this about, Rory?"

Rory leveled his gaze on his second in command, then leaned forward, gesturing for the other man to do the same. "We have a quest, Gavin. An honest to God quest." He glanced around, almost seeing enemies where there was none. *Hell, man, when did you get paranoid?* "You can tell this to no one. The healer has told me our very existence depends upon something called the tree of life. This tree makes it possible for us to procreate."

Gavin snorted. "Well, if that's the case, the bloody thing isn't doing its job. There's a deplorable lack of bairns in the clan. It's begun tae worry me."

"Me, too. That's one of the reasons I went to see her." That and she'd practically summoned him. "The tree isn't failing to work, Gavin. It's dead."

The other man blanched. Rory knew just how he felt. The idea that he could never have children was more than distressing. It had nothing to do with passing on his title. Someone else would be elected Alpha or win the title through challenge. He'd just never realized how much he'd wanted children until the possibility was taken from him.

"There is another. Nearly four hundred years ago..."

After telling Gavin the story, they agreed they should take ten other men to America, telling

them they were going to search for the lost members of their clan. Six teams of two would scour the country looking for the lost clan and their Tree of Life. Rory trusted every one of them to a man, but he knew there was safety in silence. Like his father, he knew they couldn't be coerced into giving information they didn't have.

CHAPTER ONE

Jenny Owens looked up at the sky and swore under her breath. If the assholes she could see in the distance didn't stop soon, she'd have no choice but to turn back before it got too dark to follow the winding mountain trails. New to the area, she didn't want to screw up by getting lost, but she really didn't want the two men she'd been trailing for the past three hours to get away either. They were intent on some sort of map. Even new to town, she'd heard the rumors of treasure left by families escaping the south. She had no doubt that's what these men were looking for. That, she couldn't allow. This forest, this land, was special. She could feel it. She couldn't allow anyone to damage this area, especially for common greed.

With the darkening skies making it harder to follow the men in silence, she prayed they'd soon reach wherever their destination might be. She'd left small camouflaged markers tied around tree limbs as she followed them so theoretically she

could find her way out and bring the proper authorities in to bring the criminals to justice. But her curiosity, and her need to ensure no harm came to the land here, kept her going when every sane part of her mind urged her to turn back.

It's not that she wasn't an intelligent woman. She watched movies, realizing that following two men she *knew* were up to no good was a stupid move, but something inside her urged her forward despite her mental protestations. She didn't even have a weapon on her, unless one took her Swiss army knife into consideration and that would do nothing to protect her if it ever came down to it. But even knowing all that, she continued on, pushing branches and bramble out of her way as quietly as she could, while following the pair.

They seemed intent on some paper in one of the men's hands, often stopping to look down, point at the paper, then point at some tree grouping or rock formation. It had to be a map of some kind. Only their preoccupation probably kept them from noticing her following behind them. She could only hope it continued that way.

As the light around her grew dimmer, it became harder and harder to follow them, causing the distance separating them to lengthen until she could barely see them up ahead. Just as she was about to turn back, the pair seemed to disappear into thin air.

Adrenaline surged through her. Her heart raced as weary acceptance of failure turned into relief. She hadn't lost them after all. Now if she could only figure out where exactly they disappeared to.

Shrugging out of her backpack, she quickly rummaged around until she spotted the small flashlight she carried in there for emergencies. She did not want to get stuck in the dark if they'd disappeared into a tunnel or cave network. If she didn't find them within the next thirty minutes, she'd leave another discreet marker and head back down the way she'd come until she reached the trail where she'd left her ATV. She'd come back the next day, this time with law enforcement as backup.

Jenny slid the backpack onto her shoulders, adjusting it until the straps were once again comfortable. With her flashlight now clutched in her hand, she headed toward where she'd last spotted the men.

By the time she reached the location where she thought they'd disappeared, she'd changed her mind about following them a half a dozen times. In the end, her desire to keep the men from destroying the land and forest in their hunt for treasure, kept her feet moving forward when the sane thing would have been to turn back and report her suspicions to the authorities.

As she suspected, she could see a low entrance

to a cave up ahead, seemingly carved into the mountain itself. Tree limbs were carelessly hacked out of the way of the opening so that the men could enter. She shook her head, cringing at the damage. Seeing the wanton destruction, her gut clenched. What had once been pristine forest, seemingly untouched for at least a century, now held the scars of man's occupation.

Gripping her flashlight tighter, she dropped to her hands and knees and crawled through the opening. Darkness completely engulfed her. She didn't know how big the cave was or where the men had gone.

Sweat trickled down her spine as she tried to hear where they were inside the dark cave. She couldn't chance turning on the flashlight until she felt confident that she was alone. Seconds passed, then minutes and finally she could hear the sound of metal hitting rock up ahead and off somewhere to her right, then the glow of a small, green glow stick. She grimaced. The bastards would probably leave *that* behind amid their destruction. Some people just had no sense of right and wrong.

She winced as rocks beneath her knees dug into her skin. Chancing that the men were too far away to notice her small flashlight, she thumbed the switch and regretted it immediately.

"Hey, George! I see a light in the cave entrance."

Jenny heard the shuffling of feet. Were they

moving toward her or away?

"Of course you see a light, idiot. The sun doesn't set for another twenty minutes or so. It may be getting dark, but there's still enough sunlight filtering through the trees to light the cave entrance. It's dark as pitch in here."

Turning off her flashlight, Jenny slowly began to back out of the cave. She assumed it was the one called George who answered. It sounded like the other one was still heading toward her. She had to run before they caught her.

Damn! Why had she been so stupid? She knew they were in here. She also knew she could find her way back to the cave first thing tomorrow morning. She only wished she'd followed her more conservative instincts and left well enough alone. Sure it was illegal to treasure hunt in the national forest, but it wasn't her job to apprehend the people on her own.

Finally free of the darkness cloying the cave entrance, she stood and glanced around the gloom of the ever-darkening forest. She had to run, hide. She just didn't know where to go.

Turning, she headed back the way she came. Not daring to turn the flashlight back on, she stumbled through the growing darkness, hoping to find her way out of the forest as quickly as possible. Tripping over tree roots and fallen logs, she kept running as the distant sound of footsteps

followed behind her. Her backpack caught on low branches and brush. She almost ditched it – would have if she didn't have personal information in it. The last thing she needed was to go home and find those guys waiting on her doorstep with guns in their hands.

Some people got funny when it came to money. They would do things they normally wouldn't do in an effort to get what they deemed their fair share – sometimes more than their share.

Jenny ran through brush and brambles, the sound of pursuit behind her. Where could she go? What could she do? An orange flicker ahead caught her attention. Before she could think, she ran toward it, instinctively searching for help.

* * * *

Rory glanced at Gavin over the campfire and shook his head. "What makes you think it's hidden in this forest?"

"It makes sense. Hide a tree amongst others." Gavin shrugged and glanced around.

Shaking his head, Rory grabbed some twigs and branches and threw them onto the fire, then stirred the flames. "No it doesn't make sense. Something as important as the tree of life for the clan would *not* be kept unguarded. That would be just plain stupid."

Gavin stiffened and looked out into the darkness. "Did ye hear that?"

Something crashed through the undergrowth, moving quickly through the trees.

Rory stood, reached for a good-sized branch and waited for whatever it was to join them. "I told you we needed weapons, dammit," he hissed through his teeth.

"Ye cannae have weapons in a National Forest, ye ass," Gavin replied with a scowl. "Don't ye know anything about America?"

"I know a country that doesn't allow its citizens to carry protection in a forest with bears and wildcats isn't a country where I want to live." Rory scowled, preparing himself for the worst as the thrashing grew closer. It was just too damned bad he couldn't change here. There were too many variables—too many people wandering these bloody woods to risk exposing themselves and their kind by changing into their other forms. Instead, he stood brandishing a tree branch like a cricket bat and feeling like an idiot.

Gavin stood beside him, his legs bent slightly at the knees as though braced for impact by whatever headed in their direction. The sounds of crackling underbrush grew louder. Rory waited, wariness warring with curiosity. Whatever it was, it was doing nothing to try and hide its approach.

Seconds later, a woman tore through the trees,

heading straight for them. To say he was surprised was an immense understatement. She didn't slow down once she spotted them, but seemed to instead speed up as she frantically looked over her shoulder.

Rory could smell the woman's terror. When it looked like she was going to run into the fire they'd built, Gavin stepped forward and grasped the frightened woman by her upper arms.

"Are ye okay, lass?" Gavin asked.

"They're chasing me."

Rory's hand tightened around the stick in his hand. He scanned the tress behind her looking for whoever chased her. Even with his enhanced eyesight, he didn't see anyone, but that didn't mean they weren't still out there watching her. After scanning the area one more time, Rory closed his eyes and inhaled. Dragging in a lungful of air, he tried to separate the scents, but all he could smell was the woman. He barely stopped himself from groaning at the delicious fragrance. He barely heard Gavin questioning her. His entire focus now centered on the woman's luscious scent. The longer he inhaled, the more his body hungered to draw more of it into his lungs.

He could feel his jaguar pressing against his human skin, urging him to move closer to her. His beast wanted to wallow in her natural fragrance. Behind the fly of his jeans, his cock thickened,

growing harder, faster than it ever had before. Unable to help himself, he approached the woman and Gavin. Despite the stench of fear that still wafted off of her, he'd never been this enthralled with a woman's scent before.

By rights, as Alpha, he should be the one questioning her. But he couldn't seem to focus on doing such—not something that had ever happened to him in all his years as Laird and Alpha of Clan Gordon.

What is with ye man? Are ye struck mute?

Rory could feel his Beta's worry, but he didn't have an answer for Gavin's questions. He needed to focus on something beyond his fascination with her scent though. *Did she say who was chasing her?*

Gavin gave a slight nod. *Two men she suspects of treasure hunting.*

Rory's knuckle's blanched white as he tightened his hand on the tree limb. "I'm going to walk the perimeter and make sure they aren't still out there."

"We'll be here."

The woman reached out, placed her hand on his forearm. "Be careful. They could be armed," she cautioned.

Rory's gut clenched. Goose bumps pebbled across his skin. He swallowed past the lump firmly lodged in his throat. "I will. Once I'm sure the men that chased you are gone you can tell us

exactly what happened.”

The woman’s frightened gaze darted in the direction of the trees before settling on Gavin, then him. When she slowly nodded, he turned away from her and headed in the direction she’d run from. If he stayed there a minute longer, he may have pulled her into his arms and nuzzled her neck just to see if she smelled better up close. He didn’t think she’d appreciate a total stranger mauling her, not after her recent experience with her pursuers.

He easily followed her trail even in the growing darkness. Even if she hadn’t raced through the woods leaving plenty of signs of her passing, he could still smell her sweet scent and followed it easily. He shook his head, completely confused at his strange reaction to the woman.

Rory followed the trail for ten minutes before turning back. Whoever had given chase earlier was long gone now. He’d resume his search tomorrow after first light. For now, he wanted to return to camp and discover just why those men were after the woman and what she was doing in this forest all alone. Didn’t she have a man to guard and protect her? A man to see to her safety?

A low growl filled the air. His fingertips tingled as his claws started to grow. Just the thought of her belonging to another male enraged him. He wanted to rip his claws through any male who’d

ever touched her, disembowel any man who'd taken her to his bed. Rory could feel Gavin reaching out to him across their clan bond.

Is aught amiss, Rory?

Pausing in his headlong rush back to camp, Rory leaned against the nearest tree and inhaled, dragging the crisp winter air deep into his lungs. He needed to regain control. He was the Alpha of clan Gordon, not some untrained lad fresh from the schoolroom.

Shaking his head, he scanned the woods around him, cataloguing everything yet seeing nothing. *This woman has unsettled me, Gavin. There is something about her that calls to me, that calls to my beast.*

Seconds passed before Gavin replied. *Do ye think she is ye mate, Rory?*

Rory shook his head despite the fact Gavin couldn't see it. *I know not, my friend. But the thought of her belonging to another enrages my beast.*

Then ye must discover the truth for it's not just ye she'd be mating with but me as well.

Pushing away from the tree, Rory continued toward the camp. *I've not forgotten that, Gavin. I'm fully aware most of our women need two mates or more.*

Apologies, Alpha.

Rory ran his hand through his hair. *Nye, my temper is getting the better of me, I'm afraid. There is no need to apologize.* He could see the flickering flame of the campfire in the distance and picked

up his pace. *I'll be there momentarily and hopefully soon we'll have the answers we seek.*

Breaking off their connection, Rory entered their makeshift camp. His gaze unerringly settled on the woman. Gavin had spread his sleeping bag in front of the fire so she wouldn't have to sit on the cold, damp ground. Now that he knew she was safe for the moment and he wasn't drunk on her scent, he could look his fill of her.

Stopping just to her right, he stood staring for a moment. It was a wonder his mouth was closed. She was beautiful. Her brown hair was cut in a short bob. She looked up at him through large, fear-filled amber eyes that tilted up a bit at the corners, giving her an exotic look. Rory wanted nothing more than to pull her into his arms and tell her she was safe—that he would keep her safe from all harm.

The fact that he didn't know what danger stalked her, rankled. His fists clenched at his sides and he stepped closer, lowering himself onto the ground next to the sleeping bag. "Why were those men chasing you?"

She glanced down at the sleeping bag, her fingers nervously plucking at the tightly woven synthetic fabric. "I know it was stupid, but..."

CHAPTER TWO

Gavin's gut clenched when she glanced up at them and licked her lips. If she only knew how sexy that was—how much the action made him want to feel those lips wrapped around his hard cock. Would they feel as soft as they looked?

"I couldn't help it." She ran still-shaking fingers through her short hair. "I knew they were treasure hunting." Reaching out, she accepted the cup of hot coffee Rory offered her and took a sip.

"If you only knew how some of these people are, you'd know why I followed them. They dig up the grass, trees and bushes and leave them to die. Most of them don't bother to refill the holes and the ones who do try, don't have the correct training. Instead of cutting the grass in a half moon and folding it back, they dig up the grass in a circle, cutting the roots completely, then filling the hole. The grass dies because it dries out too fast. It has no connection to the soil or roots around it to keep it moist."

"So you followed them to see if they would dig up the ground?" Rory's expression was incredulous. "Have you no sense of self preservation?" *The woman is daft, Gavin. I never thought to have a daft mate. Can we throw her back and try to catch another?*

Gavin wanted to laugh at his Alpha's expression. Rory had no idea what to do with a woman who thought for herself. A woman who would take chances with her life over something as trivial as a treasure hunter killing the grass was an unknown entity. *Relax, Rory. The woman is fine. She must know at least something about what she's doing. She escaped them, did she not?*

Rory snorted, causing the woman to glance sharply in his direction. *She escaped them only by running to us. What if we were with the men she outran? She would be in worse danger than she could possibly imagine.*

The thought of the woman in any danger had Gavin almost growling with rage. That anyone would dare to touch her had him wondering what he would do if he ever came in contact with someone who would harm her.

"Look. I know what I did was stupid, but I wasn't thinking. I could only think of the damage they could do to the park, to the ecosystem as a whole. Some treasure hunters are wonderful people. They're careful about how they dig and putting things back in such a way that it doesn't

harm the environment. Others..." she shook her head. "Others don't seem to give a flying fig what they do as long as they find their gold or silver. A handful of change means more to them than protecting something as beautiful as a national forest."

"So you take it upon yourself to stop these people?" Rory's eyebrows shot into his hairline. "Are ye daft?"

Gavin hadn't wanted to punch Rory so hard in his life. *Are ye daft, ye arrogant fuck? She's an independent female. She's not likely to be taking kindly to ye calling her looby.* If his Alpha screwed up their chances with this woman, he'd personally strangle him, despite Rory being both his clan leader and closest friend.

Rory took a deep breath, bowed his head and rubbed the back of his neck. "Forgive me, Miss..."

* * * *

"Jenny. Jenny Owens." Her gaze bounced between them. "I'm training in conservation. The first thing they teach us is how to make as little impact as possible." She glanced up at the two men, wondering if all Scotsmen were as tall and as handsome as these two. They had to be from Scotland considering how thick their accents were. Judging by their looks, they were both in their mid

thirties. One was dark, the other blond. Both had hard bodies. Their muscular chests and ripped abs beneath their tight shirts left nothing to her imagination. And those accents! They were to die for. She'd often watched movies with Scotsmen in them, loving their accents, the way they pronounced certain letters. Now she had two of them giving her their undivided attention.

"So your classes teach you to run willy nilly after men you don't know, sticking your nose in their business?"

Jenny glared up at the dark one and stood. She brushed off the seat of her pants. It was more to give her something to do rather than slap the man's too-handsome face. There was no dirt on the sleeping bag the other, more gentlemanly man, had set out for her. No one had to hit her over the head. She knew when she'd worn out her welcome. "I know when I'm being ridiculed." She rested her hands on her hips. "And I don't need to take your crap. So if you don't mind, I'll just be going now." She made to walk past the blond when he grabbed her arm.

"Where ye going now, lass? No one here is makin' fun of ye. Sit down and *bide a wee*."

"Stay a while. I'm Rory," the one with dark hair said, stepping forward and offering his hand.

"And I'm Gavin." The blond grinned when she looked at the other's proffered hand like it was

filled with snakes. "If you take my hand, I promise I won't bite."

She snorted. Jenny's hand flew to her face and her eyes went wide. *I can't believe I actually snorted, for crying out loud.* She felt her face heat. "I'm sorry. That sort of noise usually isn't in my repertoire."

Gavin grinned and crossed his arms over his chest. "That's perfectly perfect. We aren't usually rude so I guess we're even." He stood staring at her, his legs spread wide like some ancient sea captain surveying the waters before him.

Jenny swallowed around the lump in her throat. How could these two men be so...so handsome, so tall...so masculine? In all her life she'd never once met a man who interested her. Now she was with two men who set her internal thermometer and barometer to unspecified, untested levels. Her thirty-year-old biological clock was suddenly ticking down like a time bomb and she found herself wanting to jump these two men and gobble them up like fine chocolate.

Instead, she stood in the middle of a deserted wood and stared them both down. She imagined her eyes were wide like a doe's in bright headlights. Something, some part of her, focused on self-preservation, wanted to run screaming from the woods. A different part of her wanted to stay and see what was in store for her – for them.

Heat pooled low in her middle. She rested her hand over her stomach, wanting to hold the sensation in, to keep the strange, euphoric feeling close. Never in her life had she felt anything similar to what these two men stirred within her and she wasn't sure she ever wanted it to end. But she didn't entirely trust this sudden feeling of desire either. Something wasn't right about it, wasn't natural. She just had to figure out what it was and how to fight it. How hard could that be?

The first step would be putting a little distance between them. Looking between the two men she silently corrected herself. *Make that a lot of distance between them.* "Look, not that you guys act like serial killers or anything, but I would prefer to head on back to my apartment."

Rory shook his head. "It's too dark out there for you to be stumbling around without proper lighting. You might hurt yourself."

Jenny didn't know whether to bash him for sounding like a male chauvinist or admit to him that perhaps it was too dark to continue down the trail tonight. She could at least admit to herself she wouldn't be in this situation at all if she'd listened to her gut and turned back the first time she'd thought to do so.

She'd already made one mistake today and she didn't want to make another, but if she went with her gut, she didn't feel like these men meant her

harm in any way and it might be better—and safer—to remain in their camp than stumble around in the dark when those men from earlier were still out there. “Fine, but cool it with the snide comments. I don’t put up with that kind of crap from anyone. I certainly won’t take it from either of you, no matter how good-looking you may be or how sexy those accents sound.”

The charming blond Scotsman, Gavin, smiled, uncrossed his arms and took a step closer to her. “Ye find our accents sexy, do ye?”

A pair of dimples flashed and her heart sped up. She’d always been a sucker for a man with dimples. She wasn’t touching that comment. Instead, she turned to Rory. “Fine, I’ll stay here until first light. Then I *am* heading back to where I left my ATV and getting off this mountain. I need to report those men to the authorities.”

She watched the men look at each other for a few seconds. They didn’t speak, but she could swear from their expressions that they looked like they were having a conversation. But that was crazy thinking. She needed to get off this mountain and into town pronto before she did something really stupid. Again.

* * * *

Gavin stared at his Alpha. He couldn’t let his

friend blow this. He wanted a chance with this woman. His beast was clawing at the surface of his mind demanding he mate with her. Standing this close to her and not touching her was nearly impossible. He wanted nothing more than to draw her into his arms and nuzzle the base of her throat where it met her shoulder so he could mark her as his mate. The urge to do so would only grow the longer he was in her presence. He didn't know how he could stand it. *Be careful what ye say. She does nae take kindly to orders.* Rory narrowed his eyes and Gavin knew his friend was close to losing his temper, something he rarely did.

I know what's at stake, Gavin. I'll try to not issue orders, but my beast is so close to the surface I can barely control the urge to mate with her. Being polite isn't exactly easy, not when she could be in danger.

Gavin nodded. *Understood.* Turning back to Jenny, he waved his hand toward his sleeping bag. "Ye can go ahead and take my sleeping bag. Rory and I will spread his out and share. There's a stream nearby where you can freshen up if you like." He could tell she was on the verge of running, despite knowing the dangers. He needed to do something to entice her to stay. Just then he heard her stomach give a loud grumble. Perfect. "We have enough stew in the pot cooking over the fire. You're more than welcome to share our meal, lass."

Jenny crossed her arms over her stomach and a pretty blush rushed up her neck and covered her cheeks.

He couldn't remember the last time he saw a woman blush. She was enchanting, this woman he was drawn to so mightily.

"Thank you. I'm embarrassed to admit, other than a couple of granola bars, I've yet to eat today. I'd intended to be in town before now."

"No harm, lass. Rory and I would be honored to share a meal with ye. Please have a seat and we'll fix ye up a bowl."

When she circled the fire and seated herself atop the sleeping bag he'd laid out for her earlier, he felt like he'd won a prize. His heart sped up and his knees actually felt a bit weak. He didn't know what to make of these strange urges and feelings coursing through him, for never before had he felt such things. He did know one thing—he couldn't let her get away from them. He'd do whatever it took to stay by her side. He just hoped that when they explained everything to her that she didn't run from them. He didn't know what he'd do if she ran—what his beast would do. He didn't want to find out.

Moving over to the pack that had their supplies, he pulled out a small metal camping bowl and a spoon and headed toward the fire and the meal they'd prepared earlier. Though they hadn't

expected company, they were big men and often made too much to eat. Tonight was one of those days. Scooping out some of the fragrant brew, he handed it to Jenny. "Here you go, lass. I hope you enjoy it."

"Thank you, Gavin. It's very kind of you and your friend to share your fire and your dinner with me."

He shook his head. "It's nothing, lass. We cannae let ye go hungry now, can we?" When she took her first bite and her eyes lit up, something eased inside him. Providing for his mate was instinctual to him. Knowing he could do this for her calmed the beat of his heart and made things inside him feel lighter.

Out of the corner of his eye, he watched Rory move to the fire and scoop up a bowl of stew for himself. Instead of sitting down by Jenny and forcing his attentions on her, he surprised him by moving to the opposite side of the fire. Immediately the muscles in Jenny's shoulders seemed to relax.

Following Rory's lead, he gathered his bowl and spoon and headed toward the stew pot. After stirring the contents in the pot a couple times, he took a couple of scoops out and filled his bowl. Even though everything inside him wanted to join her on her sleeping sack, Gavin held back and moved to the other side of the fire, beside Rory. Once seated he started to eat but he never fully

took his attention from his mate. He felt Rory's mind reach for his and opened up the link that would allow them to speak telepathically.

Now what?

Gavin shrugged. He had no idea what to do next.

CHAPTER THREE

Jenny felt herself relax as the two men settled down on the log across from her. She'd half expected at least one of them to sit next to her and assault her senses. Instead they each sat down with their meal leaving her to wonder at her ability to interest a member of the opposite sex.

She looked down after her first bite of stew and had to admit it was delicious. Jenny had no doubt this meal would be far from tasty if she had to cook this herself. Her skills definitely weren't in the kitchen. TV dinners were more her forte. So far, the only skill she could boast of was her ability to follow nefarious persons into untenable situations. She stifled a sigh at her own stupidity. Why hadn't she listened to her instincts?

Glancing across the fire, she noticed the two men seemed more interested in their dinner than her, which, if she was honest with herself, was a bit of a disappointment. She stared at a spoonful of stew for a moment before she took another bite. It *was* good. It made her wonder which one

cooked it. They were both handsome and a bit highhanded. Still, if she had to be stuck with a couple of strangers, she could have done worse.

Furtive glances at the men across from her told her they *were* as handsome as she first thought. Both had the powerful build of a professional athlete. Her opinion was further confirmed when the two finished their meals and began to remove their clothes. How could they stand this night chill in nothing but their jeans? She wouldn't complain though. Nothing attracted her more than the tanned bared chests of muscular men.

Swallowing her last bite of stew before she choked on it, Jenny felt her cheeks begin to burn. "Uh..." What could she say? *You can't undress for bed with me here?* Instead, she stood and gathered all the dishes to wash them. She didn't want to attract wild animals to their camp. After clearing her throat, she looked to the men. "Where is that stream you were talking about?"

It's about a hundred yards to the south," he said, his finger pointing behind her, "In that direction."

Jenny nodded then headed toward the stream. It took her only a few minutes to find it thanks to both her flashlight and the ever-increasing noise of the running water. After scrubbing the dishes with sand and rinsing them out, she looked around her to make sure she was alone. She didn't see anyone

and she didn't feel as if she was being watched, so she quickly removed her sweatshirt, then unbuttoned the shirt she wore beneath it, shrugged out of both it and her bra. Next came her boots and socks, followed by her jeans and finally her panties. Knowing the water was quite cool, she quickly walked into the water and knelt down so she could wash up. She would have preferred to have clean clothes to change into, but she hadn't intended on staying out all night either. With the men who'd chased her still out there, she didn't dawdle over her bath, washing up as fast as she could before stepping out of the water. Using her sweatshirt to dry herself, she threw her clothes back on. She'd already been gone nearly twenty minutes. She didn't want the men to come looking for her.

It took Jenny only a few minutes to return to camp. She placed the dishes back in the pack they belonged in then turned toward her own sleeping pallet. Only it wasn't there. Scanning the campsite she finally noticed the tent the men had set up near the tree line. Did they do that for her? It wasn't there before she'd left to wash up. Jenny fought the urge to glance back at the two men and berated herself for her sex drive going wild. Why? Why after so many years, so many acquaintances, did her libido suddenly come to life and demand she take notice of two men she couldn't have?

They weren't even American citizens if their accents were anything to go by.

It wasn't that Jenny was prejudiced. She could care less that they hadn't grown up here. In fact, she loved their wonderful Scottish accents. What scared her though, was falling for a man who wouldn't stay here with her—or at the very least—take her with him when he went back home. She couldn't stomach the idea of being abandoned. Her father abandoning her and her mother was enough for one lifetime.

Settling down inside the tent on the cold, empty sleeping bag was the hardest thing she'd ever done, which was unusual to say the least. Usually, Jenny had no problem sleeping, but she could already tell that sleep would elude her this night. This night, she could already tell, would be filled with imagining these two men next to her, warming her throughout the cool mountain night. She could almost imagine their warm, calloused hands on her skin, rubbing the taut peaks of her breasts, their fingers dancing over the slick heat between her thighs.

Stop it, Jen. She lay on her back and covered her eyes with her forearm. *You're not some senseless tramp who jumps into bed with every man she meets.* She almost laughed at that thought. Of course she wasn't. The last time she'd been with anyone was in college three years ago and what a disaster *that*

was. Sighing softly, she rolled over onto her side, facing away from the two men and closed her eyes, determined to sleep. Instead of sleep, thoughts of the two men who chased her plagued her thoughts. Did she dare go back without the authorities?

Rolling over onto her back, she glanced at the two men sleeping on the other side of the tent and wondered if they would dare go with her to that cave? If she waited to bring back the authorities, the villains could have what they wanted and reap the fruits of their illegal activities.

If only she could make it back to her ATV and her radio. She could contact her friend Alexandra. Andi would know what to do. Andi's husband had been a ranger for years before his death two summers ago. With her connections in the Department of Natural Resources, perhaps she could get someone out here faster.

After tossing and turning for what seemed like hours, Jenny sat up, pushed the hair from her eyes and crawled from the sleeping bag. She had to get down the mountain as soon as possible. With the lateness of the hour and the chill temperatures, she was sure the other two men would be either sleeping or huddled around their own campfire trying to get warm. She pulled her jacket tighter about her, zipped it up and pulled up the hood. She needed to retain all the warmth she could. Just

walking through the darkness could cause her to catch a chill in these temperatures.

Shaking her head at the sheer stupidity of her idea, and wondering if she really was just too stupid to live, she grabbed the long thick tree limb Rory had carried into the woods earilier this evening and quietly headed back the way she came.

* * * *

Rory not so gently elbowed Gavin awake. "Our little chicken has flown the coop, old friend. We should follow her for her own sake."

"Whaa..." Gavin sat up and rubbed his eyes. "Damn. I just dozed off. I'm glad ye took the first watch. I've never been one to sit up all night without at least a short nap."

Grinning, Rory pushed him off the pallet. "This I know well, old friend. That's why I always take the first watch. You have the ability to stay awake in all hours of the day and night just so long as you get at least an hour's rest at the beginning of the night. What commander wouldn't take advantage of that strength?"

Snorting, Gavin rubbed the sleep from his eyes. "I wadnea call it a strength, Rory. 'Tis more a weakness than anything else." Gavin stood and pulled a clean shirt on, followed by a jacket as

Rory did the same. "It's a bit chilly." He frowned. "Did the bonny lass wander off in nothing but the wee bit she wore last night?"

"Nothing but the light jacket she wore. The girl has no sense, Gavin. I told you so earlier."

"She has sense," Gavin stuck up for her. "She just has more love of the land than is good for one person. Ye should be able to appreciate that. As clan leader, ye should know just how important it is to love the land and all the creatures upon it. It says much for her courage that she would put the land and its inhabitants before her own safety."

"Perhaps." Rory grunted. "But it still doesn't mean I have to like it." He frowned as they followed her into the darkness. "The girl doesn't have enough sense of self preservation to fill my mother's thimble."

"But ye are attracted to her, just the same," Gavin said with a grin.

"Aye." Rory nodded. "That I am." He pointed through the darkness. "She went this way. We should follow her by scent. I don't want to get too close to her unless we have to. It would frighten her and she could run blindly through the woods and into some kind of peril." He shook his head. "Gods deliver me from foolish women."

Gavin didn't agree with Rory's lament. He liked his women with spunk. He'd much rather have a woman with a mind of her own than one

who would follow them blindly like some sheep. Rory did, too. The other man just didn't like the thought that the woman he'd finally decided to take to mate after so many years could be so headstrong and independent. Rory thought he wanted a woman who would stand by his side and say *yes sir* to every command he uttered. Gavin knew that both of them would tire of that kind of woman quickly. A woman with a mind of her own and a temper to match it would keep them both on their toes for the rest of their lives. It was how he wanted it. How they both wanted it. He was sure.

They followed her scent for about a half a mile when they both stopped and growled. Fear. They could smell it thick in the air like a fog. Fear and adrenaline from their woman permeated the woods. The trail was strong. She was close. Had she sensed them following her and went into hiding, fearing the worse?

Suddenly, the scent of males assaulted him—four males. The two that had chased her earlier plus two others. So her pursuers had friends, did they? They would soon find out the little defenseless female they terrorized had friends of her own—friends who would not take an assault on her kindly. *They have her, Rory.*

Rory grabbed the tree in front of them, the nails of his beast biting into the rough bark leaving

scars in the trunk. *They will not keep her. A low rumble sounded in his throat. We will take her from them before they can harm her. Then when we have her safe at our encampment, I will take her over my knee and spank her perfect round bottom for running off in the darkness without escort.*

Gavin smiled. *So ye think, old friend. I will leave it to our new mate to rid ye of this notion. He knew their mate would have none of Rory's highhandedness. Ye wanted a strong woman, Rory. Do not punish her for the very thing that attracts ye to her.*

The Alpha just looked at him through feral eyes and growled again. Gavin knew there was no other for them and Rory would do nothing to scare Jenny from them. His old friend merely needed to come to terms with the fact that the woman he'd chosen to take to mate would not be easily kept beneath his thumb.

* * * *

Rory couldn't believe the sheer stubbornness of their mate. Sure, he wanted her to be strong, to have a mind of her own. She'd need that when they returned to Scotland and she had to prove herself to the rest of the clan. Rory shook his head. Setting out before the sun even rose was just plain foolhardy and he'd be sure to say that to her once

they got her out of the mess she'd found herself in. He'd been serious when he told Gavin he'd take her over his knee. She needed a good paddling. Perhaps afterward, she'd be of mind to take a care for her safety. The fact that heating up her bottom with his hand made his cock hard was a nice bonus. The thought of spanking her turning him on was a surprise, though not entirely unwelcome. *We should go into their encampment as men. We don't want to frighten our mate if she sees us as jaguars. She might run and harm herself in her flight.*

Fine, but be prepared for anything. These Americans are more than likely armed.

Rory nodded. Slowing his pace, he approached their encampment. He could see the four men easily from where he stood amongst the trees. Although he could see one man holding a rifle, the other three sat by the fire, laughing and joking as they spoke of what they wanted to do to their new prize. Rory could only assume they were speaking of Jenny. Just the thought that these men had her in their grasp had his beast in an uproar. It wanted out to hunt, to take down those who would harm their mate.

He continued to scan the camp looking for their mate. She had to be frightened. Catching her scent, he turned his head and finally spotted her. They'd tied her to a tree in full view, watching her every reaction to their words. When he noticed that her

jacket was missing and her shirt was torn open, exposing her not only to their cruel gaze but to the elements, his beast went wild, fighting him for control.

It wanted to tear into the men who would harm their mate. Using their telepathic link to plan their approach, the pair separated. They'd enter the camp from two different locations, giving Jenny's attackers two moving targets rather than one. With their attention split, the kidnappers were more apt to make a mistake.

Without a sound, Rory ghosted through the underbrush, being careful not to announce his presence. He skirted around the perimeter of the camp until he was within an arm's grasp of one of her assailants. Using the darkness to hide in plain sight, Rory waited for Gavin to get into place. His gaze kept drifting to where Jenny stood tied against the tree. Though he could still smell her fear on the wind, he couldn't tell it by looking at her. She looked angry enough to kill with her bare hands as she struggled against her bonds. Her wrists were rubbed raw from the ropes tying her hands together. Another rope wrapped around her middle secured her to the tree. Red stripes marred the skin of her belly.

Rage bubbled inside him. Seeing his mate in jeopardy pushed all his instincts into hyper drive. Rory searched the darkness for Gavin. Once he

spotted him as a darker spot amongst the shadows near the trees on the other side of the camp, he waited for Gavin's signal to begin the attack. At his friend's nod, he stepped forward. Silent. Intent only on his target.

When his mark set down his rifle against a tree and started searching his pockets, Rory moved up behind him. Several inches shorter than his own six foot four, it was fairly easy to subdue the smaller man. He simply put him in a chokehold until he collapsed without a sound, unconscious, in Rory's hold.

As silent as a wraith, he moved the kidnapper so that his body was hidden behind a cluster of trees. After tucking the unconscious man out of the way, he picked up the man's rifle. It might come in handy and, if the man awoke before he managed to get the rest of the camp subdued, he wouldn't have a weapon with which to cause trouble.

Out of the corner of his eye, he watched Gavin take down his man. Noiseless. A hunter taking down his prey. With the two men out of the way, that only left the two sitting by the fire, their malicious gazes locked on Jenny, too intent with their nefarious plans to notice their friends were no longer able to provide cover. His jaguar was incensed that their mate was a prisoner, that her attackers were aroused at the sight of her tied up

and helpless. The human part of him knew that while the men stayed focused on their plans for Jenny, they weren't paying attention to the world around them. They had no idea that their numbers were already reduced by half and they were prey to a pair of hunters, merciless when the need arose.

When one of the men stood and approached Jenny, everything tightened inside him. When her kidnapper grabbed her breast and squeezed, man and beast lost it. Rory stepped into camp, in full view of Jenny and her kidnappers and tossed the gun the man had carried deep into the woods. Merging his mind with his jaguar, Rory let the magic sweep over him. His skin tingled as power pulsed inside him. Within seconds, the beast emerged and the man lay hidden inside the jaguar's mind. Screaming out his displeasure, the jaguar approached the fire where the other man sat frozen, his fists white-knuckled as he gripped the log beneath him. His hands were inches away from a gun, something the cat didn't think his prey was aware of. Far be it from him to give him time to realize it.

He couldn't see his Beta, but he could smell him coming from the tree where his mate sat terrified. They'd have to deal with her reaction seeing them turn from man to beast later. He hadn't wanted her finding out this way, not violently like this. He

didn't want to have to kill in front of her, but if they didn't surrender peacefully, he wouldn't have a choice. He couldn't allow these men to walk free where they could terrorize another the way they had his mate.

As he moved in, he noticed Gavin step out from behind Jenny's tree. With both her kidnappers focused on him, Gavin was able to slice through their mate's bonds. He only needed to hold their focus on him a few more seconds, then Gavin would have Jenny away and on her way to safety. Then he could do as he intended—take down his prey without mercy because they had no plans to be merciful with their woman.

As the male on the log tried to scramble away, Rory pounced, knocking the male over onto his back. Lunging forward, he gripped the male's head between his jaw and snapped his mouth closed, crushing the kidnapper's skull with one bite. Immediately, Rory let go and searched the area for the other male.

When he spotted his prey fleeing through the woods, Rory gave chase. It was his duty to see to the protection of all his people, and though he hadn't claimed her yet, Jenny was his—his to protect, to love and cherish, to breed with. He'd not allow a threat to her to remain. She was in good hands with Gavin until he'd taken care of this mess.

CHAPTER FOUR

The ropes around Jenny's waist loosened, then dropped to the ground. Before she could react, Gavin knelt in front of her and put his finger up to his lips to request silence. She nodded her understanding and held her hands out to him, hoping he'd take the hint and remove the ropes from around her wrists. No way could she run effectively if her hands were tied in front of her. And right now, running was looking better and better.

She'd have more time to freak out about what she'd seen *after* she got away. She needed to get away. To think. To have the nervous breakdown she could feel threatening her sanity.

Jenny knew there was no way she had just witnessed a man turn into some sort of big cat. It looked like a jaguar, if she wasn't mistaken. She had questions but now was not the time to demand answers. She could do that later. Now was the time to run for her life. There was no

doubt in her mind that she needed to get as far away from these two...men as fast as she could. Whatever they were, they weren't quite human and she didn't know how to handle what had just happened. The question was, would they let her go after what she'd seen?

Rory – if that's who it really was – pounced on one of her kidnappers and, by the looks of it, he'd crushed the man's skull. It was all she could do to keep herself from retching. The stew she'd eaten earlier sat in the bottom of her stomach like a lead weight threatening to make an appearance at her feet.

Gavin still motioned for her silence as he took her hands and led her from the camp as the big cat pursued the man who had run off into the woods. Glancing back, she saw the darker shadows of the other two on the ground in lifeless heaps. Were they dead, too, or just unconscious? Unable to resist, she followed Gavin docilely for the moment. She just needed a minute to gather her senses – to make herself understand that there was just no way she'd seen a human being turn into a jaguar in front of her eyes. The idea was ridiculous. Jaguars from Scotland. It was laughable.

Taking a deep breath, she tried to calm herself. Her inane thoughts only proved she was ready to lose it. Though she had to admit, losing her mind was infinitely better than being raped by a group

of unwashed treasure hunters. She shuddered at the thought.

"Where are you taking me?" She had to ask. They had to be angry that she'd just run out on them after they'd so gallantly saved her the first time. Then she'd thanked them by running headlong into danger again. Whatever awaited her at the campsite she'd left less than two hours ago couldn't be good.

"How was I to know they had friends and were just waiting for me to wander off? They would have gotten me had I went out to relieve myself." She stumbled and almost fell into him as he pulled her along. Her bound wrists made her balance precarious at best. The darkness didn't help either. "Will you untie me please?"

Gavin didn't say a word, he merely grunted and pulled her along beside him. She fought the urge to try to pull herself free. Something told her she wasn't going anywhere. It was just as well, she supposed. Since she was still tied up, she couldn't do much of anything on her own. Besides, knowing her luck, she'd only run full tilt into more friends of the men at the last encampment and, while her rescuers apparently weren't quite human, they at least hadn't attempted to force themselves on her.

What would she have done if they had? Her libido had been in overdrive since she'd met the

two men. *They aren't men*, she reminded herself. *They look like men*. Sometimes they looked like men. Then other times, they looked like large cats that can crush a man's skull with one chomp of their powerful jaws. At least Rory did.

Jenny cast a sidelong glance at Gavin. Was he part animal like Rory? She closed her eyes for a moment and shook her head. How ridiculous that sounded. Part animal? What the hell was he—they—whatever?

"I'm sure ye are quite shocked and would like an explanation." Gavin didn't look at her, merely kept walking and leading her away from the screams behind them.

Screams, she was sure Rory would stop forever any moment. She shivered again and her stomach felt queasy. Rory—if that...thing really was Rory—had killed a man. Probably more than one. She wouldn't be surprised to hear reports of all four of those men being found dead. Still, Jenny bit her lip in thought. It couldn't have happened to a nicer group of guys. They'd planned to rape and kill her. They'd had no care for her or even if she'd had a family who would miss her. She didn't, but that was beside the point.

She wondered briefly if she should fight Gavin. Should she really allow him to lead her through the woods like this? Jenny argued with herself. Should she follow him peacefully or fight? Remain

with him until Rory returned, or should she try to run?

Running wasn't really an option was it? After all, if these two men were part animal they could follow her scent, couldn't they? Was that how it worked? She imagined so. Her heart began to pound when they finally returned to the campsite she'd left not too long before.

What would happen when Rory returned? By the way he'd treated her before she didn't think he would take too kindly to her slipping out in the dark of night while he slept. Well, while one of them slept at least. One of them snored.

Rory seemed like the type of man who didn't suffer fools gladly and she'd been nine kinds of a fool tonight when she'd left this camp. Besides, the way he'd looked at her earlier, she wouldn't be surprised to find the man thought her a waste of skin.

* * * *

Gavin sat on a fallen log. "Have a seat." He motioned to the sleeping bag she'd slept on before. "I suppose ye will be wantin' an explanation. I know I would." He sighed, ran his fingers through his hair and glanced over her shoulder at Rory who lay in the underbrush watching.

Jenny held her hands out, waiting for him to

untie her. "I'll sit after you untie me, dammit. I'm not about to sit here trussed up like this." She raised her chin and glared at him.

Standing, he untied her, walked her around the banked fire and helped her sit on the bag before throwing a few more branches and twigs on the fire, then crossing the campsite and taking his seat from earlier.

"What—what are you?"

The fear in her was still strong. They'd hoped to bring her to safety and they had but she didn't know that. She probably thought one or both of them planned to make a meal of her. He fought back a smile. Perhaps they did, but not in the way she had in mind. He couldn't wait to nuzzle her, to stick his head between her slim thighs and lap up her thick cream like a cub. The scent of her was nearly enough to drive him wild. Even with her terror. "We aren't quite human." That was an understatement.

"Yeah. No kidding." She half-laughed. "God, I'm going crazy aren't I? I slipped over the edge some time after those men captured me." Jenny looked away and muttered, "I'm probably still back there being violated and this little sojourn down the rabbit hole is my way of coping with it." She shuddered, wrapped her arms around herself and courageously met his gaze. "What do you two plan to do with me?"

They planned to love her, but Gavin was sure *that* was not the answer she wanted to hear. That they planned to love her, care for her and haul her back to Scotland was not something she would take to so soon after their meeting. "What do ye think we plan tae do?"

Shrugging, she rubbed her hands up and down her arms. "I have no idea." Jenny frowned. "Did you really save me or am I catatonic now?"

Gavin grinned. He wanted nothing more than to pull her into his arms and tell her that everything would be all right. "Nye. Ye are not catatonic and ye are not being violated by those men. Rory and I want nothing more than tae help ye. Ye seem tae have other ideas leaving here in the dark of night," he admonished as he stood and removed his shirt.

Walking around the fire, he approached Jenny slowly. He didn't want to frighten her. Wrapping his shirt around her shoulders, he knelt down in front of her and gazed into her eyes. "We didnae plan tae hurt ye, lass." Gavin heard his brogue grow thicker as he spoke. Something about this woman made it hard to think, hard to breathe. He wanted nothing more than to sink his cock deep into her tight channel and make her his—make her theirs.

Reaching up, he brushed a stray lock of hair from her face and cupped her cheek. "We're nae

evil, lass. We're different. That's all. There is nothing about us that is so bad, so wrong that ye need tae fear us." He watched as she swallowed and nervously licked her lips.

"What – what are you?" she asked again.

"We're men, yet nae. We have a family. A clan that needs us. We've come tae America tae find others of our kind that came here years ago." He moved to sit next to her. He watched her body language to be sure he didn't make her more wary than she already was. He didn't need her bolting into the woods and stumbling across the dead bodies he knew littered the ground in a campsite not a mile from their own. *Did ye at least put out their fire now that there's no one tae watch it?* He reached across their mind link to Rory. They didn't need the forest burning down around them now that they'd finally found a woman worth taking to mate after all these years.

Of course I did, ye daffy bastard. Do ye think me daft?

Gavin almost snorted. Of course he didn't. Rory was anything but irresponsible or dumb. *How much do we tell her?*

* * * *

Rory didn't waste any time. He changed back into his human form, the magick of the change

wrapping around him as his bones popped and cracked and his muscles contorted as they changed back into those of a man. First, his body was bare, then his clothing reappeared just before he stepped within the glow of the newly fed fire. He strode to Jenny, bent and picked her up, then carried her over to the flat boulder Gavin and he had used as a table the day before.

Jenny squealed and kicked. "Put me down!"

"Oh, nye, ye little minx. I have a lesson tae to teach ye and teach ye I will." He held tightly as she squirmed in his arms and tried to wiggle free.

"Lemme go!"

Sitting down, he laid her over his lap, ass up, and swatted her rear three times in quick succession.

"Arrgh!" Jenny reared up and whacked the back of her head on his chin.

"Stop, it ye wench! Are ye trying tae kill me?" Grabbing her hands whose fingers resembled claws, he held them away from his face as she fought to gouge his eyes out. Or so he thought.

"Leave me alone!" She squealed when he tried to subdue her and twisted out of his arms. Standing, she glared at him, her chest heaving with the effort to draw breath after their tussle. "Don't you *dare* touch me again, you son of a bitch."

Rory grinned. "I think ye have my parentage a

bit mixed up, lass. My mother was a she cat, not a bitch. Though I'm sure a hound dog or two has been scratched by her claws."

"Oh!" Jenny stomped her foot. The expression on her face left little doubt as to the extent of her ire. "You're a jerk."

Rory glanced at Gavin. *Seems I managed to get her mind off her fear, old friend.*

Gavin just grinned. *Better that ye incur her ire than me, Laird.*

His friend was right. She needed to learn early which one of them was in charge and that he wouldn't take any of her nonsense. Gods he hated having to spank her even though a part of him was turned on by it. If her hard nipples were any indication, she didn't find it all bad either.

He reached out and grabbed her by the wrist and pulled her down next to him. "You had to learn there will be consequences for putting yourself in danger, Jenny. I can't allow you to keep running off in the darkness where you could get injured."

"No one tells me what to do." She pulled and twisted her wrist, trying to work herself free of his grip. "I haven't answered to anyone since I was seventeen and my parents sent me to college. I'm not about to start now. Especially not with you."

Rory could almost hear the word *freak* as she stared him down. Even so, he held her gaze. It was

something he had lots of practice at. He also had a shitload of patience. Sometimes his beast would stalk prey for hours before making a strike. If she thought he would tire of this new game she played, she would be sadly mistaken.

It didn't take long for her to look away. It was probably because of the steady, unblinking gaze of his beast. She'd awakened the alpha beast in him that insisted its mate be kept safe no matter the cost.

He'd come to terms with the fact that he knew they were meant to mate quickly. After so many years alone, the prospect of someone other than Gavin to share his life with was an enormous temptation. Never once had he ever thought of turning a human into what they were. He knew it was possible. It was even done on occasion when a Were met a mate, but it wasn't something he'd ever considered before today. Now it was all he could think of as she sat beside him with her flashing eyes and heaving chest with its hard nipples calling to him. He couldn't let that distract him though, not until things were settled between them. "I'm sure you have questions. Ask them and we'll do our best to give you the answers you seek."

CHAPTER FIVE

Jenny looked from Rory to Gavin, trying to judge the truth of Rory's words. She did have a lot of questions, she couldn't deny it. But would they really tell her the truth? Only one way to find out—ask her questions and see what they had to say. Lifting her chin, she looked back at Rory. "Gavin said you're not quite human. What did he mean?"

Rory turned his body sideways on the boulder and reached for her hand, which sat fisted in her lap. Taking it gently in his, he gave it a light squeeze and looked into her eyes. "We are more than human. We are what humans were supposed to be, but due to an illness many, many centuries ago, some shifters' DNA mutated, creating another species. Humans. We have the soul of the jaguar inside us and we can shift into our jaguar form and let it out. The jaguar is as much a part of us as our human soul. We are what you could have been had your ancestors not gotten ill and

lost their ability to shift.”

Nodding her understanding, she looked toward Gavin who still sat on the log on the other side of the fire. Hearing that humans were the ones who were mutants not the shifters, not only shocked her but gave her much to think about, but really, she had more important questions to ask right now. “Do you know what you’re doing when you’re a jaguar? Can you remember everything when you turn back?”

Gavin looked toward Rory and when the other man nodded his permission, Gavin clasped his fingers in front of him and raised his gaze to hers. “Yes, we are fully cognizant of what we do when in our other form. We remember fully and can control our actions as jaguar just as we can while human.”

Swallowing the bile that had risen in her throat, Jenny stood and walked away from the boulder. Back and forth she paced in front of the fire while she thought about what she’d just learned. How should she react knowing that Rory had killed those men, that he knew exactly what he was doing at the time. Shouldn’t she be more scared than she was? How did she know they wouldn’t hurt her? But somehow, she did know, these men didn’t intend her any harm. Perhaps that’s why she wasn’t running down the trail, screaming for help despite the dark. “What about those men?”

she turned and faced Rory. "You killed them. You can't just go around killing people. What are we going to tell the police officers who investigate this? I certainly can't tell them the truth."

Rory stood, facing her where she stood in front of the fire. "You'll tell them nothing. It will look like an animal attack. At first light, we'll pack up and head into town. We'll be nowhere near here when they discover the bodies."

Shivering despite the heat of the flames at her back, Jenny turned away, looking deep into the trees. Could she do that? Could she truly ignore the fact that men were dead—because of her—less than a mile away? Could she get past knowing that Rory had taken those lives? She just didn't know.

Her every instinct insisted that if she hadn't endangered herself, no one would have died. She was the reason those men were dead. Could she live with that? That, too, she didn't have the answers for. All she did know is that despite knowing she should be trying to escape the two Scotsmen, she couldn't force her legs to move. She wanted—no, needed—to be here with them. She just didn't know why. And how crazy did that sound? Sighing, Jenny turned back toward Rory and Gavin and shrugged. "Okay, where do you want me to sleep?"

Gavin stood, walked around the fire and took

her hand in his, then led her around the fire toward the tent they had set up near the edge of the campsite. "We'll all sleep in the tent, lass. 'Tis a tight fit, but it will be getting colder as night fades to dawn."

Rory walked up behind them, placed his hand at the small of her back and gave her a gentle push toward the tent flap. "Kick off your shoes, Jenny, while Gavin and I collect the sleeping bags. We'll join you momentarily."

Swallowing past the lump lodged in her throat, she nodded and knelt down to crawl through the tent opening. Once inside, she sat back on her haunches and sighed. How in the hell was she going to make it through the night laying so close to them? Already she wanted to jump them, despite knowing they weren't quite human and had killed without a second thought. What was wrong with her?

Before she could think on that, Gavin and Rory returned and starting spreading out the sleeping bags—one spread along the bottom of the tent, the other laying atop of it as a blanket. Taking one last deep breath, Jenny kicked off her shoes, crawled between the two sleeping bags and waited. Seconds later, the guys joined her, one at her back, the other at her front. Now she knew she was in trouble. No way would she survive the night without touching one or both of them.

What seemed like hours passed while they held her pressed between their bodies. Though they weren't touching her sexually, her body burned with desire. The feel of their arms wrapped around her nearly drove Jenny insane with need despite knowing what she did about them. Opening her eyes, she turned to Gavin, then glanced over her shoulder at Rory. She knew what she was about to do was insane, but she had to quench this inferno building inside her. "Make love to me, please."

Behind her, Rory stiffened. "Both of us, or just Gavin," he whispered.

Jenny shuddered, licked her lips. "Both of you," she whispered back, afraid to voice her wants too loud, afraid not to take this chance to live out the ultimate fantasy while she could. She wanted to be loved by two men at once, these men.

With Gavin in front of her and Rory lying pressed against her back, she felt so decadent sandwiched between them. Gavin reached for her hand and placed it against the fly of his jeans. His cock was rock hard. She could feel it pulsing against her hand despite the material covering it. She swallowed past the lump lodged in her throat.

He was huge. How would she be able to take him — them — as big as they were, especially at the same time? She knew it was possible that her body was capable of accommodating them, but it didn't

stop the thought—the fear—that together they would be too much.

Nervousness skittered down her spine. Her palms began to sweat. Swallowing her fear, she decided to take it one step at a time and let things happen naturally. After all, these two men had saved her life. She should be able to find the strength within herself to trust them enough not to hurt her.

She looked up at Gavin and nervously bit her bottom lip. “I know how this is supposed to work—in theory anyway. I’ve just never done this before.” At Rory and Gavin’s sudden stillness, she tensed, then realized the way that sounded. “I mean, I’ve had sex before, just not with two men at once,” she clarified.

“Then tonight ye shall have us both,” Gavin murmured.

Rory thrust his hips, pressing his cock against her rear again. Gavin’s shaft jerked against her hand as she boldly caressed him through his jeans. Though she wanted to let go, forget about everything, her practical mind shouted out to be cautious. “What about pregnancy?”

“Don’t ye want children to fill ye house with, lass?”

She didn’t know what to say. These men were practically strangers to her and yet here she was about to let them make love to her, together.

Perhaps without protection. Either she was crazy or stupid. Perhaps both. Gavin leaned down, pressed a kiss against her forehead, then her cheek before finally licking the seam of her lips to demand entrance.

All thoughts flew from her mind as she opened her mouth to him. Behind her, Rory tugged her shirt out of the waistband of her jeans. Before she could catch her breath, his hands were inside her shirt, moving over her breasts, pulling and plucking at her sensitive nipples from behind.

"What's your answer to Gavin's question, lass?" Rory asked her, his voice gruff and demanding despite the gentleness of his touch.

It took a moment for Jenny to realize what Rory was talking about. Pulling away from Gavin, she turned her head and met Rory's gaze. "I do, yes," she said. Gavin reached forward, turned her head toward his and looked deep into her eyes. She stammered, lost in his gaze. "I just wasn't sure about—"

Gavin didn't let her finish. Again, he leaned forward and began to kiss her, practically devouring her. Minutes, perhaps hours later, his lips left her own to trail down her throat. One of Rory's hands drifted down her side. She jerked and sucked in a deep breath as he touched a particularly sensitive spot.

He chuckled and kissed the side of her neck.

“Ticklish, wee one?”

Jenny nodded, too filled with need to speak.

“We’ll have to explore that later then, lass—after we’ve had our fill of you. I can practically taste your desire. Your cream is perfuming the air so beautifully, it’s all I can do not to take you here, now, before you’re ready for us,” Rory admitted.

Jenny groaned. She didn’t know whether to be embarrassed that he could smell her excitement, or take him at his word that he enjoyed the scent of her desire.

Gavin’s hands drifted down her torso, unbuttoning what remained of her blouse. She tilted her head, giving Rory access to her neck where he was licking and nipping. Lost in sensation, it took her a moment to realize that both men were pressed against her completely naked to her touch. That somehow she’d lost her clothes as well. “How did you—”

“We can do more than just shift into jaguars, lass. Magic runs in our veins,” Rory said as he moved his hand down her tummy, cupping her sex in the palm of his hand.

When his thumb began circling her swollen clit, she had to bite her lip to keep from screaming. Her entire body began to tremble as Gavin suckled at her breast, laving and nipping at her nipple until they too were swollen with desire.

As Rory’s fingers continue to play with her clit,

Gavin abandoned her breasts to move lower, kissing the undersides of their breasts, then her tummy. His tongue circled her bellybutton, sending heat through her body. She was burning up from the inside out. Wherever their teeth or tongues stroked, pleasure the likes of which she'd never known coursed through her.

Goose bumps pebbled across her skin as their warm breath sent shivers down her spine. Every little movement, every breath heated her body, sending her desire spiraling higher and higher. She didn't know how much more she could take of this before she couldn't control her reactions any more.

She couldn't think, even when Rory's fingers sank into her creamy pussy without warning. She didn't protest when he pulled his fingers out and started circling the tight rosebud of her ass. At first he only used one finger to ease inside, but soon she could feel him working two into her. The pleasure-pain was intense, but she didn't want him to stop—them to stop because while Rory was opening her ass, Gavin had moved down her stomach and began suckling on her swollen clit.

She could feel so much—almost too much—but before long, she was thrusting against Rory's fingers as they moved inside her. She had no idea how many fingers he had working her bottom, but she knew it wasn't enough. It would never be

enough. Not until she had them both inside her, fucking her like she needed.

As Gavin's tongue continue to lick and nibble at her pussy, she pressed back against Rory's fingers, needing that little bit of pain to ratchet up her pleasure. When Rory pulled his fingers from her anus, she groaned. Before she could think to protest, Rory rolled onto his back and pulled her on top of him. While Gavin continued lapping at her pussy, Rory nuzzled her neck and fondled her breasts, pulling on her nipples until they were standing at attention. When Gavin lightly bit her swollen clit, she whimpered. Her hips jerked, rising off Rory's hard body. She couldn't just lie still and accept Gavin's attention. She had to move, had to get closer. She had to come.

Gavin gripped her hips and held her still as he continued to lick and suck at her mound, swirling his tongue inside her pussy, feasting on her cream like it was his last meal. She was so close. Just a little more and she'd come. She knew it. Gavin must have sensed that because while he continued to eat at her pussy, he inserted a finger inside her. Her thighs clenched. Her back arched. Her clit quivered as her pussy clamped down on Gavin's finger. When he twisted his hand and rubbed a finger over her g-spot, she screamed out her release.

As her body clenched around Gavin's fingers,

Rory continued to drive her body higher and higher by nuzzling her neck and pulling on her hardened nipples. They played her body like an instrument, spiraling her desire so high she didn't know how she'd ever come back down to earth. Within minutes, she was climaxing again, her body bowing in release. She didn't know how much more she could take before going insane with need. Even though she'd just come, she needed to do so again. She needed more.

When Gavin circled her clit with his tongue and stroked his fingers deep into her needy pussy, she thrust down on them. She couldn't stay still. She had to do something. She needed more, needed them to give her more, to fill her body with their hard cocks.

Her pussy tightened around Gavin's fingers again, and she couldn't hold back her release. She screamed out their names as she came around Gavin's fingers. Her climax washed over her in waves, shuddering her pleasure as Gavin suckled her clit into his mouth and gently bit down. While the aftershocks were still rippling through her, Rory rolled her off him, placing her gently on her back, her legs spread open, exposing her to his heated gaze.

Jenny jerked as Rory took his turn lapping at her pussy. She screamed when Rory suckled on her swollen clit, swirling his tongue around the

hardened nub. He used his teeth to heighten the sensation by lightly nibbling and pulling on it. She came almost immediately, her hips jerking as her clit, hell her entire pussy, became too sensitive to stand his assault.

While Rory continued to nuzzle against her mound, Gavin's mouth trailed across her breasts. He suckled each nipple into his mouth, sending fiery bolts of pleasure straight from her nipples to her clit. Her body stiffened as the flames of pleasure licked at her skin and through her veins. As another orgasm washed over her, she couldn't help thinking that she'd never survive the night—not intact, heart and soul anyway. They were marking her body as theirs. After tonight, how could she look at another male and not compare him to Rory and Gavin? Hell, how could she even look at another male and feel desire after this night?

Before she could find her release yet again, Rory stopped, then nodded at Gavin. She didn't have time to question him because Gavin took control, pulling her atop his hard body, settling her over his cock.

"We'll take this as slow as we can, lass. We don't wish to do anything to harm ye. Perhaps 'tis a good thing ye aren't entirely untouched." He reached back and palmed the cheeks of her bottom. "Have ye ever been entered here before?"

She blushed and nodded, before burying her face in his neck so they couldn't see her embarrassment at discussing such an intimate subject. "Just once," she whispered. "It hurt though, and I didn't enjoy it very much, but that was a couple years ago."

"Then ye were with a man who cared only for his own needs and desires and not ye, lass. That's unforgivable." Fingers under her chin, he gently lifted her head to face him. "Ye will enjoy this or, from this day forward, Rory and I give ye our word that we will come to ye one at a time."

"You mean this isn't just a one night thing?"

Beside her, Rory shook his head. "Nye, lass. This is the first night of many and if you don't like everything we do to you, you have but to tell us and we'll stop. We'll not do you harm, lass. You mean too much to us already."

How could she explain to him that she wanted this, wanted them both at the same time, regardless of the pain, regardless of her fears, regardless of what giving herself to these men would mean to her future? How could she tell them she wanted them as a package deal, not just for tonight, but perhaps forever, despite what they were? Hell. What had come over her? Ever since she'd run into them, her life started spiraling out of control—her desire spiraled out of control. When had she become a raving nymphomaniac?

Jenny licked her dry lips and watched Gavin's eyes darken with lust. In that moment, she felt like the most powerful woman in the world. That she could have these two gorgeous men wanting her, needing her so badly shocked her. Why her? What was so special about her that they seemed enthralled with her?

"Why don't we allow Rory to show ye what it's like to be taken from behind by someone who cares? Then if ye like, I will join him by sinking my shaft into ye tight little pussy and we'll take ye together. How does that sound, lass?"

It sounded sinful, wrong and oh, so irresistibly decadent to her. What else could she say but yes. "It..." She cleared her throat. "It sounds like a good plan to me," she agreed. She didn't have a chance to say anything else before she felt Rory move up behind her and straddle Gavin's legs. Knowing what was coming, she tensed. She couldn't help it.

"Relax, lass, don't fight me as I enter you. I'll move very slowly. If it hurts too much just let me know and I'll stop immediately."

As Rory placed the head of his cock against the rosette of her ass, Gavin started to kiss her while caressing her breasts. Just as he promised, Rory moved slowly, entering her inch by inch, thrusting and retreating until he'd fully seated himself in her ass. Still moving slowly, he pulled out almost

all the way before gently pushing back in. She groaned at the sensation of having her ass so full.

He stopped immediately. "Did I hurt ye, lass?"

Jenny almost smiled at the anxiety in his voice and shook her head. "No. You didn't hurt me at all. It feels so good." She pushed herself up to meet Gavin's gaze, thrusting her ass against Rory's cock. "I want you both inside me."

"Ye sure, lass?" he asked, his brow furrowed, obviously ready to wait if that was what she needed.

"Yes. I'm sure." She smiled and raised herself up during one of Rory's outward strokes. "Oh, yes," she sighed as she settled herself down on Gavin's broad shaft. She slowly sank down, taking his cock deep into her pussy. She waited for Rory to enter her again, needing to feel them both inside her. "I feel so full, so stretched, but it doesn't hurt—not really. It feels different. Wonderful, but different."

Gavin sucked a nipple into his mouth, pulling on it aggressively while twisting the other into a hardened nub with his fingers. "Ye needn't do anything but enjoy the ride, Jenny," Gavin said against her chest.

He and Rory began to work a rhythm that soon had her keening their names as they repeatedly drove in and out of her, driving her higher and higher, closer to some unknown precipice.

At first they were gentle. So gentle, it nearly brought tears to her eyes. But she needed something else from them. "More," she cried. "I need something more." Her face burned with mortification. Leaning down, she kissed Gavin deeply, hoping they wouldn't notice her embarrassment at voicing her needs. She pulled away and looked Gavin in the eye. "Harder. God, you two, I'm not going to break. I need it harder...faster. Let go of that damn control I feel you holding onto so tightly. I know you won't hurt me, but I need more than this gentle claiming." And somehow she knew that's exactly what they were doing—claiming her.

Taking her at her word, they both began to thrust wildly inside her. A thin layer of sweat covered them all by the time she cried out another orgasm. Her thighs tightened to the point of pain. Her nipples grew harder and her pussy and ass clamped down on their cocks in an attempt to milk them of their seed.

"Yes!" Gavin called, sinking his teeth into her shoulder as Rory covered her back. He latched onto the side of her throat from behind and bit down. Lightning streaked through her. Somehow she could feel their pleasure at being inside her and it magnified her own. She could feel a bond forging them together, burning and searing them into one unit. In seconds, they all reached their

climax together.

Gavin's hot seed bathed her womb and she collapsed against Gavin's chest, spent and fully sated for the first time in her life.

Just as she was drifting off to sleep, she heard Rory's voice whisper into her ear, "*Mo Ghadh Bithbhuan.*" She'd have to ask him in the morning just what that meant. Tomorrow she'd have to ask them a lot of things.

CHAPTER SIX

Jenny woke to the delicious sensation of a man to her front and one to her back. Slipping silently from between them, she quietly grabbed her clothes and moved to the front of the tent where she could dress. She grimaced as she slipped on what was left of her shirt, followed quickly by the rest of her clothes.

Exiting the tent, she made her way over to a large bush and relieved herself. It was a good thing she always carried a travel pack of environmentally friendly tissues with her.

After she was finished, she buried the tissue she used and headed back to the tent. Stopping short of the campsite, she stared open mouthed at the two men hurriedly tearing down the camp.

Rory glanced back at her. "We have to get moving. It's only a matter of time before the police find those men."

Bile rose in her throat as she thought of what he'd done. It was irrevocable proof that violence

swirled just below the surface of this man's easy going smile and good looks. "I understand." She did.

He wouldn't have had to kill if she would have stayed here with them in the first place. Instead, she ran, thinking only of her attraction to them and how she needed to get away. The excuse she'd used on herself at the time was a lie.

Moving to the campfire, she dumped the remaining coffee from the night before over the coals. They didn't need to start a forest fire on top of everything else. Turning the pot upside down, she waited for it to drain completely. They could wash it later, wherever they decided to stop. She had to get back to her ATV and get the hell out of here herself. How could she explain what happened to the authorities? They'd lock her up for good if she started talking about shape shifting men and treasure hunters bent on rape and murder.

"Ye are coming with us."

Gavin moved so silently, she didn't hear him move up beside her. Either that, or she was just so wound up in her own thoughts she wasn't paying attention. "I have to get my ATV out of here." Jenny moved away from him. How would she get away? There was no way she could outrun them. If she did manage to slip away from their human halves, there was no way she could outrun the big

cats lurking just below the surface of their humanity.

“We’ll all go down the mountain, retrieve your vehicle and keep moving.” It was Rory who spoke this time. His stance and expression brooked no argument.

Jenny wanted to stick her tongue out at him. He was so sure of himself. So positive that what he said was the right thing. That what he did was the only solution. God she hated that in a man. He was just like her father. Overbearing, overprotective... She’d add oversexed, but she didn’t know that about her father and even the thought was enough to make her shudder with distaste. “Alright. I’ll cooperate.” She turned away. “For now,” she muttered under her breath.

Gavin snorted and she looked back wondering if he’d heard her. He was on his hands and knees rolling the tent into a small enough roll to stuff it into the special pocket of the backpack.

Jenny wanted to tell them both to shut up and leave her alone. One night of great sex – make that mind-blowing sex – did *not* give them the right to take over her life. Had she said she wanted to stay with them? She thought back to the previous night. God, she hoped not. The idea of staying with two men who wanted to control her was both terrifying and exhilarating.

“I can’t move on.” She put her hands on her

hips and glared at them so they would know she meant business. "I have to stay here. There's something about these woods." She spun around, closed her eyes and opened herself to the feeling. "Something about these mountains. I can feel it." When she opened her eyes, she didn't expect them both to be staring at her, their mouths agape. "What?" she asked warily.

"What do you feel?"

Rory was on her so fast she only saw a blur, then he was in front of her, his hands on her arms like he wanted to shake the information out of her. Instead, he looked down, his hands gently rubbing up and down her arms as though trying to coax it out of her.

"I don't know." She frowned, then reached up and smoothed away the furrows on her forehead with her hand. "I feel this...this presence here. An energy. It's like nothing I've ever felt before in my life. It's energizing. Invigorating. It's almost as though it fills these mountains with life."

"The tree. It has to be the tree." Gavin moved forward, his expression earnest. "Where do ye feel it, lass? Is it close by? Can ye lead us to it?"

Jenny shook her head. "I have no idea where it is. I only know I didn't want those men to find it, to exploit it as I know they would have." She didn't tell them about the cave. She didn't think the energy was down there anyway, but those

men were searching for something, possibly long ago buried treasure abandoned by fleeing southerners, and the longer it stayed hidden, the better. With luck, the damaged trees and brush that surrounded it would soon grow back and hide the small cave once more. "All I can tell you is that it's in these mountains somewhere."

All her life she'd been sensitive to the changing vibrations of the Earth and nature. It was the reason why she'd chosen to become a conservationist. She could feel the Earth's scars, its pain and sometimes, if she concentrated, she could help it heal.

How could she lead these two men to it? Her conscience wouldn't allow her to reveal her true power—not yet anyway. Instead, she merely shrugged. "I have no idea where it is, I only know it's connected to these mountains." She had little to worry about. There were hundreds of families living in these mountains just outside the boundaries of the National Park they were camping in. The Appalachian Mountains were large enough to keep them looking for a long time and the people didn't trust outsiders. They never had. It had taken her a long time to even get the locals to acknowledge her presence. They still didn't talk to her. Trust was still a long way off.

Rory turned to Gavin and tossed him a cell phone. "Call the others in. Tell them they're

searching in the wrong place and to get here pronto." Then he glanced at Jenny. "Tell them...tell them if they are lucky enough to find their *Tu braith* to finish what they must, then get here as soon as possible."

"Aye, Laird."

Gavin moved off to make the call while Rory surprised Jenny by burying their biodegradable trash and shoving the rest into a plastic bag he crammed into one of the backpacks.

Rory looked up. "What?"

"I'm surprised that you're taking care of your trash in such a proficient and Earth friendly manner."

He grinned. "How can the Earth care for you if you don't care for the land, lass?"

Smiling, Jenny finally relaxed a bit. "Why are you looking for this tree anyway?" She had to know if she could truly trust these men despite her innate attraction to them.

"Without a taproot from the tree, my clan will perish. We've had no births in many years. Our healer insists that if we bring a taproot back to her, she can nurture it so that one day we may become fertile again." Rory took her hand in his. "I want children, lass. Many bairns to fill the keep. Without that tree, not only will my dreams never happen, but so many others will never have a chance to have families of their own. It's for them we've

made this journey to your land.”

“Last night, afterward, you said something to me, something in Scots. *Mo Ghadh Bithbhuan...* What does that mean?”

Rory blushed, then looked away before turning back to meet her gaze. “It means *my love forever*.”

Not knowing what to respond to that, she asked the other question that had been in her mind since they’d made love. “And when you both bit me, what was that about?” she asked while rubbing the side of her neck where Rory’s bite still throbbed.

Gavin stepped forward and handed the cell phone back to Rory. “Ye are our *Tu braith*. It isn’t the language of the Scots, but the language of our people. It means ye are our true life’s mate. We sensed it the moment ye entered our camp. The desire ye feel, that we feel, is normal. When we meet our mate, the desire to claim her can be irresistible, hence the reason we both marked ye last night after the mating. We couldn’t nae do it. Ye are our *Tu braith*, lass, forever ours to love and cherish.”

Stunned, Jenny made her way back over to the boulder where Rory had spanked her and sat down atop it. She needed a moment to think. Clenching her hands into fists, she looked from Gavin to Rory. “You’re sure of this? There’s no way you made a mistake?”

Rory shook his head. "No, Jenny, lass. You're our mate, the one woman meant for us. We'll not give you up."

Smiling, Jenny stood and walked to where the men were standing, waiting on her reaction to Rory's declaration. She had chosen the right men so quickly after all. She wasn't crazy for giving into her body's demands after knowing them one day like she'd first thought. If two men could love the land so well, would travel across the sea to ensure their people could once again have families of their own, they would love her no less. She was sure of it. Finally she'd found someone to share her life with who could understand her love of the Earth. And finally she would have that family she always wanted—if they found that tree. "I'll help you find your tree and perhaps one day, I'll be able to give you children."

With her help, perhaps one day their clan would thrive once more.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tianna Xander is the author of several paranormal, time-travel and science fiction romance novels. She loves reading everything from romance novels, murder mysteries and encyclopedias, to handbooks on solar energy. Tianna is the first to admit she spends far too much time surfing the internet and chatting with her online friends and critique groups.

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Bonnie would love to hear from each and every one of you. Make sure you subscribe to her monthly newsletter or check out her blog as it will be updated regularly with release dates, excerpts and online appearances. And, as always, feel free to drop her an email if you have any questions, concerns or just want to chat, and she'll get back to you as soon as she can.

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