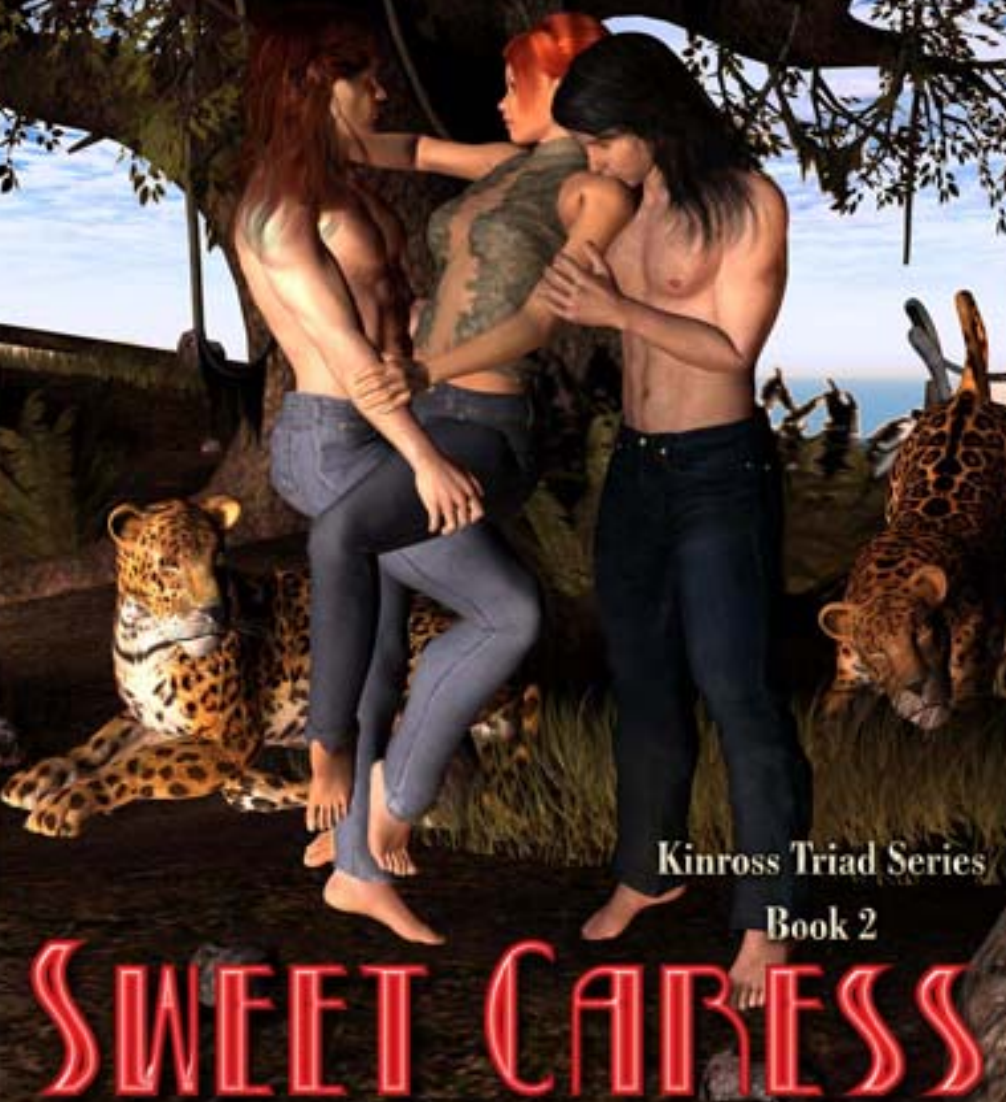


# BONNIE ROSE LEIGH TIANNA XANDER



Kinross Triad Series

Book 2

## SWEET CARESS

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Sweet Caress

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# **SWEET CARESS**

**BY**

**BONNIE ROSE LEIGH  
& TIANNA XANDER**

## DEDICATION

*To our loyal readers. You inspire us to write every time you ask us if we'll do another book together. How could we ever tell you no? For you, we'll continue to write together for as long as you ask it of us.*

*To Darleen: Thanks for your help with the medical questions. It's always nice to have a nurse in the medical field to turn to when question arise. Thanks for your help.*

*Also, to Kevin and Chris – our tu braith – our Soul Mates. Thanks for standing by us, foraging for your own meals when we're on deadline and for basically taking care of real life when the characters have us under their control. You are our hearts!*

## GLOSSARY

A am - I am  
aabody - everybody  
bairns - children  
basturt - bastard  
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 - intae  
ken - know  
kent - knew  
mither - mother  
nae not  
nye - no  
tae - to  
wadnea - wouldn't  
wis - was  
wisnae - was not  
ye - you

## CHAPTER ONE

Charity Webber walked down *Lincoln General Hospital's* long, sterile hallway, checked her watch and smiled. Nothing could ruin what was left of her shift.

The clean floors squeaked below her rubber-soled shoes as she meandered her way through her late night rounds. It was four AM and in three more hours, she'd be on vacation. Normally she wouldn't be so excited, but this year, she was going camping with her sisters. It wasn't something they did very often. They usually couldn't seem to get their schedules to mesh. Glancing up the hall toward the nurse's station, she spotted Emma Johnson.

The LPN waved her over.

"Did you need something?" Emma always needed something or someone to talk to, to share a soft drink with or just a body to stand here beside her so she wouldn't be alone. If there was one thing she'd learned since starting here, it was that Emma Johnson absolutely hated solitude.

She had her mousy brown hair pulled back in its usual bun, leaving her forehead bare. It was a bit unsettling because Emma liked to shave her brows, then draw them in with an eyebrow pencil at least three shades too dark. She also tended to draw them in with an accentuated arch that gave her the appearance of being perpetually surprised.

Charity could only hope that when she reached Emma's age that she would have the uncaring nonchalance to dress and look any way she pleased.

"Mr. Archer in room twelve just pressed his buzzer, but isn't answering." Emma frowned, drawing attention to the deep crease between her eyes. "I would have checked on him myself, but with Amy on her lunch, I couldn't leave the desk."

Of course she couldn't, Charity thought, feeling guilty for her less than generous thoughts. Someone had to stay at the desk and watch the monitors in case someone coded. Striding to the ice machine, she grabbed a Styrofoam cup, filled it with ice and water and headed toward the room. Mr. Archer had been unconscious all afternoon. He was probably thirsty. His doctor left orders stating he could have clear fluids should he wake. "That's okay. I've got it." With any luck at all, all of her patients would be home and doing fine by the time her vacation ended and she returned to work, sunburned and rested.

"There's a phlebotomist in there right now. He said something about the earlier samples being contaminated." The crease returned to the area between her eyes. "I could have sworn those results came back before Dr. Harowitz left, but I can't seem to find them."

Charity knew they'd come back. She'd put them in the chart herself. Something was wrong. She felt it in her gut. Dropping the glass, she broke into a trot, hit the door and pushed it wide.

Standing next to Jameson Archer's bed was a man of average height. His jet-black hair was a bit on the long side, almost brushing his shoulders. He wore scrubs like most of the hospital staff, but on his feet, he wore shiny leather shoes—very expensive, shiny leather shoes.

Taking in the situation at a glance, she realized the man wasn't taking blood, but had just screwed the syringe onto the line and began injecting something into Mr. Archer's IV. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" Leaning out the door, Charity screamed, "Security!" Rushing forward, she knocked the syringe out of the man's hand just after he quickly depressed the plunger, then gave him a shove. He glared at her for a moment, his expression furious, his dark eyes filled with malice just before he turned and ran from the room. Charity reached over to switch off the patient's IV and unscrewed the line from his hep-lock, then

checked his pulse and the monitors. There was a good three feet of line from the injection point to the patient's vein. She could only hope she'd gotten there in time to stop whatever had filled the syringe from getting into the man's system.

She pressed the call button to get Emma's attention again and hoped that she'd gotten here in time to stop her patient from having an adverse reaction. She reached for the syringe, intent on pulling it from the tubing when she stopped herself. Walking over to the wall, she pulled on a pair of gloves, then wrapped the syringe in their own pair. She needed to secure them for the police. She was certain she had just witnessed an attempted murder. Everyone up here knew that Mr. Archer was the District Attorney currently prosecuting a crime boss on arms trafficking, racketeering and human slavery charges. Getting him out of the way would deal the State's case a serious setback. Who knows how long it would take to get a new DA?

"Are you okay in there? Our professional vampire just ran out of here like his hair was on fire and there was a swimming pool in the parking lot calling his name."

The sound of Emma's voice assuring her the assailant was gone had Charity sighing with relief. "Get a Doctor down here. I think that man just tried to murder Mr. Archer. And call Security,

then the police," she added as almost an afterthought. They needed a security team up here to protect Mr. Archer in case the other man returned to finish the job.

Moving the IV stand away from the bed, she walked to the door and glanced up and down the hall. She needed to get the patient another IV. One that wasn't contaminated with God only knew what.

The steady beep of the heart monitors assured her that the patient was still alive and well. He still breathed on his own so there was no major brain damage. Still, she wanted to know for sure and she wanted a doctor here to check him out. She'd never lost a patient to anything but old age before and she didn't want to start losing them to something other than that now.

\* \* \* \*

Alastair McTavish closed his cell phone and tossed it onto his backpack on top of the bed. After one last glance around the motel room to make sure they hadn't forgotten anything, he went to the bathroom door and started pounding on it. "Hurry up in there, Connor. We don't have all day, ye know. I don't know how a cousin of mine can take longer than most women to shower and dress before leaving to go anywhere."

“Hold on a minute, Alastair. I slept like hell last night and I needed the hot water to work the sore muscles from sleeping on these lousy motel beds. We’d have been better off sleeping on the hard ground in our sleeping bags than the monstrosities that pass as mattresses here.”

Connor opened the bathroom door and a wall of steam billowed out in front of him just as Alastair was ready to start pounding on the door again. The man did enjoy his hot showers in the morning, preferring it to a cup of hot coffee to wake the sleep from his eyes. Alastair couldn’t understand it. He’d already raided the motel room’s two-cup supply, been to the lobby and had another cup while waiting for Connor to finish his shower. Now he was ready to get on the road.

His Alpha, and Laird of their Clan, Rory Gordon, felt certain that he and their Beta were near the area the Tree of Life had been hidden and had called in all his clansman currently here in the States to search. He wanted to get on the road this morning. As soon as they finished breakfast, they would begin making their way to the Appalachian Mountains. “Are you ready to break yer fast, Cousin Connor?”

“Aye. I’m starving something fierce this morning. Do ye think this town has anything better than fast food? I’m getting sick of eating burgers and fries since we’ve been over here. I

miss eating sit down family meals with the clan.”

Alastair shrugged. He had to admit, he was beginning to miss the family style sit down meals the clan put together as well. It wasn't the food so much as the companionship of listening to the men and women and even children sharing about their day—what few children there were anyway. Where Connor seemed to have always looked forward to those evening meals, lately he'd begun to dread them. Watching the mated triads while they sat at the table giving each other knowing glances as they communicated through their mind links, only served to remind him of what he could have if he found his mate. It was difficult knowing others had such a close bond, how they knew each other's thoughts. He'd begun to feel envious of his mated clansman and it shamed him.

He had a good job, provided much needed income to the clan by marketing their crafts to people who want authentic Scottish ales, yarns, kilts and wools and anything else their clan made to sell to outsiders. Yet, he had no one to share his successes with, no one to cuddle with when he came home, no one to make wee bairns with, no one to snuggle with during the long, cold winter nights, no one to lie in the heather with during the summer. As the years passed, the ache for more continued to grow until now it felt like a gaping wound in his soul.

He needed his *Tu braith*—his Soul Mate. For now, he'd settle for breakfast. After that, he'd see if he could at least help his Alpha find the Tree of Life. Perhaps his mate merely waited to be born. "There's a diner on the other side of the parking lot. How could you not see it—or smell it—when we came in last night, Connor?"

Connor snorted, pulling a T-shirt over his head, he tucked it into his pants before meeting Alastair's gaze. "I was tired. We'd been traveling—backpacking—for two days. I just wanted sleep. Now I want food."

Shaking his head, Alastair clipped his cell phone to his jeans, then shrugged his backpack onto one shoulder. "After I feed you, we need to see if they have a bank here in town where we can withdraw some cash. We either have to rent a car or buy a cheap one to get to where we're going. Rory and Gavin want us in the Appalachian Mountains in Virginia as soon as possible."

"What's the hurry?"

"They think they've narrowed the location of the Tree of Life to that general location. Oh, they've also met their *Tu braith* and have mated her."

Connor gasped, shock clearly written all over his face. "We've only been in the States a week. How could he and Gavin have met their Soul Mate in just a week?"

Alastair stuck his hand in his pocket while Connor finished pulling his hiking boots on. He asked himself the same question. How could something happen so quickly? And could lightning strike twice? Or five more times? Because there were six teams of Scots here from Kinross searching for the Tree of Life, six teams of men all in need of mates, all looking for love, all wanting women and bairns of their own. Whom would he have to beg and plead with and what would he have to sacrifice so that the Fates would have mercy on them all?

## CHAPTER TWO

“What was in the syringe?” Hope asked, reaching across the table to grab the sugar bowl. Pouring about a quarter of the contents of the bowl and a generous portion of creamer into her cup, she took a sip and grimaced. “How can you two drink this crap? It’s disgusting.” Regardless of what she thought about the taste, she took another sip and pulled another face. “Yech.”

Charity shook her head at her sister. “If you don’t like it, stop trying to drink it.”

Hope shrugged. “What can I say? I need the caffeine.”

How her sister usually got her caffeine was a mystery to Charity and their other sisters, Faith and Mercy. Neither of them saw her drink anything with the drug in it besides coffee and, presumably, she only drank the beverage when they did.

“So what was in the syringe, rat poison or something?” Hope set her cup down and wrapped

the fingers of both hands around it.

"No, apparently it was insulin. I guess they thought if they injected a small amount into the vein, it would kill him and be undetectable. They were right about injecting the insulin into a vein." She cleared her throat and glanced at Faith. "As you know, injecting the insulin into the vein makes the blood sugar drop too quickly and usually ends in death."

"Oh, my God," Hope released her death grip on her mug and covered her mouth with a gasp. "He would have gotten away with it, too, if you hadn't walked in on him. That DA was a lucky, lucky man."

"Except that I'm not sure, but I think the coroner would have found it in an autopsy." She frowned and stared down into her own cup of coffee. She grabbed the carton in the center of the table, put another small dash of French vanilla creamer into her cup and stirred. "I wish I knew for sure, but that's neither here nor there." Picking up her cup, she took a sip of her coffee and closed her eyes. "You make such wonderful coffee, Faith. Almost as good as Mercy's."

Faith rolled her eyes. "There you go bringing Mercy in on it again. Of course she makes great coffee. Look how much of it she had to drink during her internship." She looked around. "Where is she by the way? I wish she could come

with us. She hasn't had a vacation since she opened her practice. She's driving herself into the ground."

"She's working." Charity sighed and spread her hands on the table. "I wish she could come with us, too."

The four of them used to spend all of their vacations together while they were in college, but their older sister Mercy's drive to become a doctor had kept them apart since her internship four years ago.

"Speaking of which... Are we ready to go?" Faith raised a brow. "I know I am."

Hope nodded. "We're ready. That was the first thing I asked Charity when I got here. I figured with all of the excitement, she'd forgotten to pack or something."

Charity snorted. "I've been packed for three weeks." She waved her arm toward a stuffed duffle bag in the corner. "It's not like I wear jeans, t-shirts and hiking boots every day you know."

"Then what are we waiting for?" Hope stood and tugged her shirt down. "I think it's time we left. Mercy knows where we're going. If she can get the time off, she'll meet us up there."

"I need to get out of town," Charity said as she moved to the sink to rinse out their cups. "I have a bad feeling."

Faith groaned. "Gawd! Not another bad

feeling." She shook her finger in Charity's face. "You're not allowed to have bad feelings. Bad things happen when you have bad feelings."

"What are you talking about?" Hope said with a snort. "Horrendous things happen when she has bad feelings. It's like she can predict disasters or something."

Charity stuck her tongue out at them, strode to her bag, picked it up and slung it over her shoulder. "Shut up, you. I don't bellyache about your penchant for collecting married boyfriends."

"Hey! It's not as if I deliberately seduce married men. They tell me they're single, then their wives show up with handguns and baseball bats."

Faith's lips kicked up in a half-grin. "Makes you wonder why their husbands were playing around if they had that much excitement at home."

"And for the record," Hope added, "I don't seduce men." Her face reddened. "I haven't had sex since college." She shrugged. "What can I say? All men are dogs and I've sworn them off."

Faith bent to lift her own bag with a snort. "That's what you say. Personally, I love a good roll in the hay with the right man." She reached for the doorknob, waited for Hope to pick up her own bag, then opened the door. "In my line of work I can see that life is too short. I don't waste time with making a man prove who and what he

is. I just want one who's good in bed."

"Faith!" Hope and Charity said simultaneously.

"Don't let Mercy hear you say that. You'll get a lecture." Charity held the door for her sisters as they exited, then closed and locked the door. "She's constantly lecturing me on one thing or another about my health. She'd jump at the chance to yell at you about not practicing safe sex."

"Who says I don't practice safe sex? I practice it." Faith chuckled. "After all, they do say practice makes perfect."

"Come on, you two, I'm starving." Hope threw Charity a glare. "And since miss I-don't-like-mold-in-my-refrigerator doesn't have anything to eat at the house because she was so sure Mercy was coming along, I say the first thing we do is hit a restaurant."

"Agreed," Faith said, throwing her bag into the open trunk of her car. "Come on, you two. Throw your luggage in and let's get going."

Charity slipped the bag from her shoulder and was about to toss it into the trunk when the strap slipped from the buckle and the bag fell to the ground.

"You *still* haven't gotten a new bag?" Hope's look of disbelief would have been comical if it wasn't so damned annoying.

Charity shrugged. "It's my lucky bag." What else could she say? At least the truth was finally

out. She raised her arms. "Okay. So I have a superstition." Glancing up at the sky, she spun around in a circle. "I don't see the sky falling so can we drop it?"

When all three bent to pick up the bag, Charity heard three tinny chinks coming from the trunk of the car.

"What was that?" She frowned and looked up.

Hope shrugged off her pack and threw it up into the trunk. Grabbing Charity's, she did the same. "I'm not sure, ladies, but by the looks of it, I think we've just been shot at." Hope pointed at three neat little holes in the trunk lid.

"Get in the car, get in the car," Faith whispered frantically as she headed for the driver's door. "We have to get out of here. Stay down, Charity. They're after you."

"Like they can tell the difference between us." Charity frowned. "Why do you suppose they shot three times?" Then she grinned as something occurred to her. "Hey. See, you guys? I told you that was my lucky bag."

"Oh, my God. Can you believe her? We're being shot at and all she's worried about is proving some silly superstition." Faith shook her head. "The next thing you know, she'll be telling us she believes in werewolves or something equally as nutty." She kept her gaze in front of her as she stomped on the gas and peeled out of her

driveway. "I hope everyone's got their seatbelts on because I'm not waiting around for our shooter to figure out a way to get more clear shots of us."

"Head to the police department. They'll know what to do." Charity's bad feeling still churned in her gut. She was sure the police could keep them safe. They had to.

"To hell with the police department. Those poor guys are overworked and underpaid." She shrugged. "It's obvious that someone in the department is getting more than one paycheck, if you know what I mean." Faith wagged her brows.

That couldn't possibly mean what Charity was afraid it meant. If the police couldn't protect them, who could?

"We're heading out into the woods, just as we planned. That damned photo you picked out was not of a nice man. Harry told me the guy is a hired killer and a good one at that. He's most likely after you for screwing up his perfect kill record or something."

Charity remembered Harry. He was a tall, good-looking cop with a receding hairline and just the beginnings of a paunch that Faith dated on and off. He was nice enough, but Charity never thought he was good enough for her sister. It wasn't his looks or even his personality. He seemed like a nice enough guy. He also seemed

like the kind of man who would stray. He liked women and it showed in the way he watched them move.

Still, he was a good friend of Faith's and she wouldn't begrudge them their relationship when she knew she had no other prospects for her sister.

They sped down the road at what felt like near light speed for a subdivision. Faith took a corner almost sideways to the right, then repeated the exercise four or five more times in alternate directions before she finally straightened the vehicle out.

She glanced in the rearview mirror. "I don't think anyone is following us. I think our best chance at survival is to head out into the woods as we planned. If we're not followed, we can hide out there, call the police and hope they catch this guy before we come back. If not, we'll have no other choice but to contact the police and to at least ask for protection."

Charity hated that she ruined their vacation. If only she hadn't been the one to walk in the room. If only she hadn't seen the man and knocked the syringe out of his hand. If only they didn't all look alike. She sighed and plucked at her jeans. They were all in danger and all because of her.

"It's not because of you so just shut up." Hope looked back at her with a scowl.

What the hell? How did Hope know what she'd

been thinking?

"Don't look at me like that, you nerd. You said that aloud. If you don't want us to hear what you're saying, keep it to yourself."

"I just don't want our vacation to suck because of me."

Hope turned in her seat, reached back and covered Charity's hand. "If anything, this will be the biggest adventure of our lifetime."

"So long as it's not our last." Charity stared out the window, seeing nothing but a blur as they sped down the highway toward the mountains.

Guilt swamped her. She'd put her sisters in danger. Whatever happened, she needed to draw the danger from them, let her enemies know she was the one they wanted. Tears slid down her face as she watched the scenery speed by the windows. She reached up and dashed the tears away.

Her only hope was that the police would find the man or men before their vacation ended and they had no choice but to return to town, to work. If they didn't, all of them were in danger because she was sure the man she'd fingered would want to be certain that he'd killed the right woman and, with two identical sisters, the only way to be certain was to eliminate them all. Charity didn't like the knowledge, but it still burned deep in her gut. Closing her eyes, she prayed for the capture of the man or men behind Mr. Archer's attempted

murder. But she had little faith and, with names like theirs, that said something. They needed a miracle if they were to survive the coming shit-storm.

Turning around, she glanced back to see if she could spot someone following from a distance. The road appeared empty behind them. Faith had done a good job of losing their pursuers but Charity knew it was only a matter of time before the murderer, hit man—whatever he was—found out where they'd headed. When he found them—*if* he found them—she had to be ready to negotiate for her sisters' lives.

## CHAPTER THREE

Connor McTavish watched his cousin from the corner of his eye as he continued to shovel breakfast in his mouth as though he hadn't eaten in months rather than mere hours. He didn't know what burr had crawled up Alastair's bum since he'd taken the call from their Beta a few hours ago, but whatever had been said, had made his cousin's grim mood even darker than normal and that was saying something.

Finishing his pancakes, Connor kept one eye on the front door of the diner while Alastair surreptitiously watched the back to make sure no one who might enter would be able to surprise them no matter which direction they might approach them. He didn't know about his cousin, Alastair, but Connor's skin began to crawl, as if his beast wanted loose, something he'd never had to force control over—not since he'd reached puberty anyway.

He didn't know why his jaguar practically paced beneath his skin, or why his cousin Alastair

seemed to be having the same reaction. It was as if their felines knew danger lurked nearby and kept hyper alert to anything out of the ordinary or that might be perceivable as dangerous.

Scarfig down their meals like uncivilized heathens, he and Alastair just wanted to get out of the crowded diner where too many people sat chatting, oblivious to the danger that surrounded them. Their scents were overpowering and all too human for their taste.

Although they were expecting trouble the second they paid their bill and left the diner, they hadn't expected it to come in the form it had—triplets. Three women literally barreled into him and his cousin as they exited the diner. The women were practically identical, all with short red hair, pale as milk skin and tiny frames. Irish women like those that he hadn't seen in ages—if ever. Their only obvious difference at first glance was their scent and the slightest dissimilarity in the ladies' green eyes.

Normally he would have apologized for his clumsiness and that would have been the end of it, but his beast roared in his mind, screamed out not to let these women out of his sight. From the shocked look on his cousin's face, obviously Alastair's jaguar had just proclaimed them fair game as well and both men were suddenly less interested in getting to where they were going and

more interested in getting to know the women. Something about them—about one of them anyway—practically screamed out *tu braith*—Soul Mate to his kind. But the worst part was, not only would it take time to really identify which woman belonged to them, but all three women reeked of fear.

Something was seriously wrong and it was their duty as kin—if one woman was their mate, the other two were now sisters—to see to it that they had protection. If they were in danger, then they had just found the fiercest protectors this side of the Atlantic, next to the pride Alpha and Beta who were even now, waiting on word from them.

When Alastair suddenly began to smile, his grim mood completely gone as though it never existed, Connor began to worry that there was more afoot than he'd been made aware of when his cousin had spoken to Gavin and Rory earlier in the day. Just what he didn't know. What he did know was that he couldn't allow his mate—or her kin—to fear anyone, no matter the reason. Somehow they'd have to get the ladies to invite them to join them and discover just what they were running from and what had so much fear burning in their green eyes. "I'm so sorry for running intae you, lass. We weren't paying attention to anything around us, just plotting the quickest way to find a car rental agency or if

worse came to worse, a used car dealership.”

The one woman Connor had practically knocked to the ground still held his hand from where he'd caught her on her way to the pavement. “I'm Hope by the way, but I'm not sure about a car rental agency or dealership. From what little of the town we've seen, the bus looks like it's about the only way out of here. At least until we head toward one of the major cities another couple hours down the highway. We ditched our car a while back to make tracking us a little more difficult, but we've been regretting that decision ever since.”

Pointing over one shoulder, one of the other redheaded women—this one with slighter, softer moss-colored green eyes—pointed at the bus that stood in the parking lot, idling. “The driver gave us about thirty minutes to grab something to eat and get back on board.” She held out her hand to Alastair, quickly shook it, then held it out toward Connor. “I'm Charity by the way. You about squished Faith into the ground and Hope is the one jumping from foot to foot like she's about to wet herself... Well, she's already told you her name.” Charity rolled her eyes, then winked at her sister as she stage-whispered, “She refused to use the facilities on the bus, which is only one reason we miss our car, but that's a story for another time.” She tried to laugh Hope's comment off.

Connor could tell there were other reasons they were traveling by bus rather than their own car. He shook her hand, slightly squeezing it in his. His heart rate ratcheted up in his chest and his palms actually began to sweat. "It's a good thing we ran into her, otherwise we wouldn't have known a bus was even going to go through here anytime soon."

"And if you don't get out of my way, you're going to see a grown woman make a puddle on the floor," Hope growled.

Alastair chuckled and slid out of the way, opening the door wider for the woman as Connor backed up a step, entering the diner once again. Looking at the dark rings under the women's eyes, it was obvious they were running on little to no sleep and probably hadn't had a decent meal in days. The least they could do was see about procuring them meals while the women used the diner's facilities. "Why don't you ladies go ahead and freshen up? Since it's our fault you've been delayed, we'll order a few breakfast sandwiches and coffees for you ladies to go. We wouldn't want to be the cause of you missing the bus, especially if there is limited bus service out of this town."

Charity smiled, the first she'd probably felt free to give in quite a while. Connor could practically feel the quiet desperation riding her. Somehow, he

knew just what she was feeling and, if Alastair could sense the same thing, then Charity just might be their *tu braith* after all. That knowledge made him see her two sisters differently as well. If Charity was their mate, what were the chances that her sisters would also be Soul Mates to their Kinross Jaguar clan? Connor couldn't wait to get Alastair alone so he could find out exactly what their Alpha, Rory Gordon, and the clan's Beta, Gavin McGregor, had said to him this morning.

If he were a betting man, the meeting of these women right now had the hands of Fate written all over it. Were the women supposed to help them find the Tree of Life or were they indeed *tu braith*—Soul Mates—to some of his clan and would therefore perhaps be the first to bear the next generation of bairns to fill the keep in Kinross? He had many questions and he knew the women would be out too soon for him to get the proper answers he needed. There was time for one question though.

While moving up to the counter to order breakfast sandwiches and coffees to go for the ladies, Connor brushed Alastair's mind with his, accessing the telepathic bond they'd established years ago. *You feel it, too, right. Charity, she's the one of the three that's supposed to be ours?*

Alastair smiled, drank a sip of his own coffee after quickly paying for the whole order. *Aye, she*

*is, but until the others are claimed, they are all our responsibility. The women are running from something and since we're running to something, I suggest we try to talk the women into accompanying us. Whoever is after them is expecting women traveling alone, not a family. And if we can get to a drugstore, we should be able to make minor changes to their looks pretty quickly so we can travel as a large family. I suggest we call in Brody Gordon and Callum Jennings at least, perhaps one of the other pairs looking for the Tree that might be closest to us.*

Connor nodded, his thoughts running right alongside Alastair's. They'd been partners for many years and often thought along the same lines while discussing battle strategy. He quickly grabbed the bag of sandwiches off the counter as the women came out of the restroom.

Though they still had dark circles under their eyes, they'd done some mysterious woman thing that made their faces look fresh and ready to face the world. The most important thing to Connor's mind had to be protecting the women from whatever or whomever they ran from. That had to take top priority.

Picking up the conversation with Alastair where he'd left off, he handed Charity and the other two women their coffees. *Now that we have Charity in our sights – and her sisters – we can woo her properly, get to know the women, who they are when they're not running scared just as their mates will get*

*to know Faith and Hope if they are among us.*

When Charity grabbed for the brown bag full of sandwiches, Connor scowled and waved her off, keeping the bag from her reach. “You can have your sandwiches once you’re sitting back down on the bus with your feet up, relaxing. Just enjoy your coffee for now. Handing Charity a small bag full of creamers, sugars and stirrers, he gently pressed his hand against her back, leading her back toward the quickly filling bus. He heard Alastair’s mocking laughter in his mind, thankful for once that his cousin was being circumspect about his abilities in front of others.

*I imagine our mate and her sisters aren’t normally so meek. I doubt they make a habit of letting strangers purchase their meals for them. We will definitely have to drum intae them the proper ways to stay safe, that’s for sure,* he groused.

Connor could hear the laughter and satisfaction in his cousin’s voice, even as he and Alastair, trailed behind Charity and her sisters and followed them onto the bus leading to heaven only knew where. As the bus pulled back onto the one-lane, dirt-covered, main street, Connor couldn’t help but look at the traffic behind them. Just as he expected—they already had company following them.

## CHAPTER FOUR

***L**o you see we have company?* Alastair asked through their mind link.

*'O course I see them. What I want to know is who they are and what they want with the females.*

*It isn't any wonder our felines have made our existence nearly unbearable this morning.* Alastair scanned the bus, attempting to see if anyone on board had ill intentions toward their new charges. With the exception of one man who appeared more homeless than anything else, everyone on the bus seemed exactly what they appeared.

The man in the dirty, raggedy coat sitting only two seats away from Charity was much more than what he let on. He wasn't nearly as odorous as other people they'd met who dressed the same. It was as though he wore makeup, instead of dirt and sweat.

The man in question looked harmless enough, but something in his manner screamed that everything was not as it seemed. Alastair could barely keep his feline from bursting forth and

ravishing the man who sat so close to its mate. Everything about the man screamed assassin. Still, there was no way to prove it. If he and Connor attacked the man for no apparent reason, it would go a long way toward getting them arrested, not to mention scaring off the three girls they hoped to protect.

*I wish we'd had time to call in the others before we got intae such close confines. It wouldn't do tae hae anyone overhear one of us talking to the Alpha.* Connor leaned over, his gaze flashing to the man Alastair watched. The last thing they needed was for someone to over hear them asking the Alpha to send more shifters in to help them.

With at least two men they could see in the car and one in the bus, they were outnumbered, but not outfoxed. Unless the people in the car have friends following, they should have no trouble. No trouble at all.

*I saw him. I'm being silent here, not blind.*

Connor grunted, drawing the attention of one of the girls. "Sorry, lass. I can hardly abide the smell of the..." He paused deliberately and tipped his head toward the bus's toilet. "Facilities." He wrinkled his nose. "It smells."

Laughing, she replied, "Now you know why my sisters and I didn't want to use it."

It didn't take much thought to figure out why the three women wanted off the bus. If the man

who played at being homeless had been on board, their inner alarms would have blared, telling them of the danger. Though human, they had a sixth sense about danger. Every species on this planet did. They just chose to ignore it for so long they probably had no idea why they felt so jittery and nervous even when they should think they had nothing to fear amidst a bus full of apparent strangers.

*Why do you suppose they don't seem to fear us, Connor?*

*I'm thinking it's because they ran intae us there. Had we followed them intae the diner, their suspicions would have led them to believe we were those who followed them.* Connor shrugged, looked at the three women and sighed. *Who knows what goes on in the mind of a woman? Perhaps they just feel that we won't harm them.*

Alastair watched as the three ate their breakfast. All of them were so beautiful it was easy to see why someone would want them. There were many who called themselves businessmen, who would pay dearly for a woman like that in their home, in their bed. That they could have three, so much alike, may make these women priceless.

Still, it was a more violent emotion he felt from the *homeless* man. He may not reek of body odor and sweat, but he did reek of one thing that brought his and Connor's Jaguars to the surface,

made them snarl and fight to get free. The man reeked of death and it was his and Connor's responsibility to see that the man found it. Alastair smiled darkly. Find it he would and the man would wish he were back home sleeping safe and sound in his own bed, having little more than a hellish nightmare.

*He reeks of death. I wonder if he has killed recently or just that he's killed so often that the scent has sunk into his pores.*

Connor shifted in his seat and crossed his legs, his left ankle resting on his knee. The wooden handle of one of his hunting knives peeked out from the top of his boot. *It doesn't matter. If he makes a move on one of these women, he's a dead man.* Connor grinned. *He'll reek of death, all right, but not because he's the one a-killin'.* He turned and stared into Alastair's eyes. *Go to sleep. We'll have to keep watch on this one. I hear that sometimes people die on these damned American buses. We'll not have anything happening to Charity or one of her sisters. Not if I can help it. I'll wake you when I tire.*

Alastair nodded. His cousin could take care of one lone man while he slept, if need be. The women were safe, for the moment and, if they planned to protect them, they would have to sleep in shifts.

Damn, he wished they'd had the time to call in the other team. He glanced at his watch before

leaning his head back against the seat. It was at least three hours before the bus stopped again. He'd better make the best of any time they could manage to get alone where others couldn't hear. Perhaps one of them could call in the others at the next stop.

\* \* \* \*

Charity glanced back at the two men they'd practically plowed down in the last town. That they didn't send her internal alarm blaring was the only reason she'd trusted them. Well, that and the fact that both of them made her tummy feel funny, like a million moths flying around in there looking for light.

Strangely enough, the homeless man who sat in the seat in front and across from her made her skin crawl. It wasn't like her to judge a person by their looks so when the feeling persisted, she berated herself for her prejudice. It wasn't the poor man's fault he'd run into hard times. Who was she to judge him? Still, she couldn't manage to keep the goose bumps from covering her arms every time their gazes met. He seemed...bad. No—that wasn't the right word either. He seemed pure evil.

Closing her eyes, she tried to put her fears out of her mind and get some sleep, knowing one of her sisters would watch if she slept first. None of

them had slept well since they'd ditched Faith's car in the attempt to lose their pursuers and that had been days ago.

Several tears escaped the corner of her eyes as she sat still, wishing that she hadn't been the one to find the hitman trying to kill one of her patients. On whom else could she wish this curse? No one. It just wasn't in her to wish harm on another. Her heart wouldn't let her choose someone else to take her place on this journey into the unknown. None of her friends and co-workers deserved this. *No one* deserved this kind of existence.

They'd been running for a week when they finally decided to ditch the car. Twelve hours and nearly a thousand miles later, Charity couldn't help but think they'd made a mistake somewhere along the way.

Giving up on sleep, Charity opened her eyes and glanced at her sister, surprised to see Hope staring at her so intently. "Were you able to eat the sandwich?" Hope was almost a vegetarian. Usually, she ate fish and fowl if she ate meat. The sandwiches the men purchased for them contained ham, bacon and eggs.

Hope rubbed her stomach and grimaced. "Yes. I haven't had red meat since high school so it's not sitting particularly well at the moment."

"Technically," Faith said from across the aisle, "I think pork is considered white meat so you

shouldn't have a problem eating it."

Hope waved her hand. "If it had four legs, I don't eat it...usually. But strange times and all that." She leaned closer. "What do you think of those two guys? They seem kind of weird – taking over the way that they have." Frowning, she wrinkled her brow. "Maybe intense is the word."

Faith crossed her arms over her chest and leaned closer as though imparting a secret. "And why do they seem to act like they're our big brothers, determined to protect us from ourselves?"

Charity wasn't so sure the men planned to protect them, but she couldn't believe they were out to harm them either. "Don't talk so loud," she admonished her sisters. "The last thing we need is for the two of them to think we're attracted or something." It would be completely mortifying, especially if they turned out to be the men following them. Still, she couldn't help but sneak another glance back at the two of them. Connor and Alastair—their names fit them in an odd Scot's sort of way. With their long dark hair—Connor's rich mahogany hair, which hung to mid-back, and Alastair's black hair that swept just past his shoulders—they could have come off any Scottish Romance novel if they wore kilts instead of the faded jeans they currently sported. Charity sighed. She didn't know what it was about them,

but she could look at them all day and never grow bored.

"I don't know about you," Hope said, glancing back at the two. "But I sure am attracted. And neither of them look like axe murderers to me."

Charity sighed. Neither had the man who nearly killed the DA and look where that had landed them. "Just what do you suppose a murderer looks like, Hope?"

Hope glanced around the bus, lowered her voice and whispered, "The homeless guy over there looks like he could kill someone." She made a face. "Actually he sort of gives me the creeps. I think we should sleep in shifts until that one leaves the bus."

"We *do* need to get some sleep," Faith interjected. "Whose turn is it to stand watch first then?"

"It's my turn." Charity volunteered, knowing it wasn't really her turn, but just couldn't shake the guilt that crawled through her middle every time she looked at her sisters. She was the one who put them all in this position—the one whose last night on the job had forced her—them—to run for their lives. The least she could do was take the brunt of the workload of watching over them.

"I don't think it's your turn." Hope scowled. "You take more turns watching than Faith and I together."

"Only because I know it's my fault we're forced to run like this. Hell, we're supposed to be on vacation, not running for our lives. If I hadn't—"

Faith held out her hand and hissed, "If you hadn't caught that man trying to kill the district attorney, we would be safe, but he would be dead. What kind of trade off is that? It's not an acceptable trade and you know it." She glanced at Hope. "Hope and I would rather die with you than have you lose the charity you hold in your heart for others."

"What about your devotion and Hope's optimism and Mercy's kindness to others? Did our names define who we became or did our parents just get lucky when they named us?" Charity smiled, reached across the aisle and took Faith's hand.

"Who knows?" Hope interjected. "Maybe they just liked the name Mercy when she was born and then when we came along decided to give the rest of us similar names." She made a face. "It was wishful thinking on their part if they expected us to be virtuous as our names suggest, since I don't think any one of us have been particularly virtuous."

All three of them shrugged, then laughed. It never failed to amuse them how much they were alike, yet different in their own ways. To look at them you would think they were identical. Still,

their mother always told them all they should marry the man who could tell them apart. "Go to sleep, you two," Charity said with a smile. "I promise I'll sleep after the next stop."

The other two sighed and answered together, "Okay."

Charity watched as they closed their eyes. She squinted through the dim interior of the bus, looking for anyone, anything that appeared out of the ordinary. Nearly everyone had the window shades closed against the midday sun. Most likely to block out the heat of the sun as it beat through the windows. As her mind wandered, she couldn't help but worry about her older sister, Mercy. Was she safe? Had they warned her in time for her to stay away from the house they shared back home? She had to hope so—she had enough to worry about, trying to keep herself and her sisters safe. They were close, at least closer than most siblings. It was inevitable with one older and one younger, all of them born mere minutes apart. She'd just have to have faith that Mercy would be all right.

The low hum of the bus and the slight rocking as it traveled down the highway, relaxed Charity into a light doze. Too many days and nights without sleep had caught up to her and she felt herself drifting off. Shaking her head to dispel the sleep pressing down on her, she sat up straighter in her seat, raised her arms above her head and

stretched out the kink she was getting in her shoulders. She should wake one of the others, she knew she should, but they needed their sleep almost as much if not more than she did and this *was* all her fault. She had to stay awake—that's all there was to it.

Charity smiled as she pictured the man she ran into at the restaurant. Tall, dark, incredibly handsome and muscular. Long, lush hair, full lips, a cleft in his chin. His classic good looks were everything she'd always wanted in a man and the other was by no means a slouch either. Even fully dressed she could practically see their muscles rippling beneath their shirts and jeans. With thoughts of stripping them naked flashing behind her eyelids, she had to remind herself that she was on the run and, no matter two men's kindness, she'd just have to embrace them in her dreams because her real life had become entirely too dangerous to bring others into right now, no matter how much she might want to. Just before she drifted off to sleep, she could have sworn she heard a big cat's purr, then darkness overtook her as exhaustion of the past week finally laid claim to her.

## CHAPTER FIVE

“They’re sleeping now, Alastair. Keep watch while I call in the others.” Connor reached into his front pocket and pulled out his cell phone. “I didn’t dare call them while they were awake. The last thing I want to do is scare the lasses.” He flipped open the phone, brought up his list of contacts and dialed Brody’s number.

“Aye,” Brody’s voice came over the speaker, gruff as always. “What do ye need?”

“We’ve found our *tu braith*.” Connor was barely able to keep the excitement from his voice, but still had the presence of mind to keep the volume low. “And she has two sisters—they’re triplets. From what I overheard while they spoke on the bus, she has three sisters actually, but the oldest isn’t among them. They’re running from someone.” He lowered his voice further. “We need yer help.” He felt his tongue growing thick, his accent growing more pronounced as he passed the information on to his kin. Something about voicing the fact that they’d found their mate made it harder to contain

his brogue.

Just the thought of finding the one woman with whom they could mate, have babes with and love above all others had his body acting in ways that were alien to him. He imagined Alastair was feeling similarly uncomfortable with the new emotions and sensations coursing through him.

They needed to get to know Charity. Get her away from her sisters, at least for a little while to mount her, mate her and make her theirs. That's where the other team came in. Connor wasn't fool enough to think the girl would leave her sisters to be with them unless she knew someone protected her two precious and identical siblings. They must convince her the only way to protect them all was to split up, making their enemies separate as well. The more trails their enemy had to follow, the more likely they'd slip up somewhere and get caught. Besides, there was safety in numbers and their numbers were about to become more than her followers bargained for.

"And how does this affect me?"

Connor wanted to climb through the damned phone and strangle the other man. "It affects ye because yer the closest thing I hae to a brither, ye damned fool. Alastair and I need yer help tae protect her and her sisters," he hissed into the phone.

Brody laughed. "Just because you're now

tethered, it doesn't mean I have to be—or want to be for that matter.”

“Perhaps not, but ye'd do well to remember the way yer treating me now because I won't be as kind to ye when it's yer turn, ye ungrateful sot.”

“Hey, I hae nae been drinking!”

“Ye'll need tae when I get through with ye.” Connor could feel his temper rising. He wanted to kill his cousin for bringing out his brogue further. They wanted to try to blend in, not draw attention to themselves. Speaking like a Scottish Warrior definitely made it difficult to blend in with the locals. He'd taken a few voice lessons, but they weren't nearly enough to keep his damn fool cousin from dragging his accent out into the sunshine.

“Oh, relax. I'm just teasing ye. You're absolutely no fun now that you're shackled.” He paused. “Do you think her sisters could be mates as well? Three more mates for clan members... That would go a long way toward rebuilding the clan once we get back home, provided we find that blasted tree the witch sent us after.” The line grew silent for a few seconds. “Connor?”

“Aye.”

“Ye do believe in this tree, dinnae ye? Ye don't think that it's some dream the old woman concocted to get our hopes up or anything?”

“No, I dinnae believe she was lying. The tree is

here and we will find it.”

“I hope so,” Brody said with a sigh. “Where do ye want us to meet ye?”

\* \* \* \*

Alastair watched over the girls while Connor spoke to Brody. *Better you than me. I can't stand the ass.* Well, that wasn't quite right. He liked Brody well enough, he just didn't like that the other man found comedy in everything. Even now, he couldn't seem to take this mission with the seriousness it deserved. *One of these days, he's going tae try tae be funny with someone and they'll shut him down, quicker than spit.*

*Better him than us, I say,* Connor answered back with a smile. “We'll see ye there, cousin.”

“Is he going to contact another of the pairs?” Alastair knew Connor was aware he referred to the other men who accompanied them over from Scotland. Six pairs of men came over looking for the tree of life. One pair, the Alpha and Beta, Rory and Gavin, had found their *tu braith* and thought they'd narrowed down the location of the Tree of Life granted to those that settled in this land many years ago.

The root of the tree, brought over from Scotland years before any of them were born, was rumored to be somewhere in the Appalachian Mountains.

They thought it would be easy to find. No one told them the mountains spread through several states from the Deep South all the way to Canada. It was a lot of ground to cover—especially for only twelve men, but that had been the number the witch back home in Scotland had insisted on traveling to this forsaken country.

Connor closed his eyes and took a moment to answer. “Aye, he’s calling in a few of the others and he’s alerting the Alpha as well. He suggested we try to steer them to Virginia. That’s where the Alpha thinks the tree is hidden and where we’ll have the most protection for the women.”

Alastair frowned. “How are we going to manage that? It’s not as though they know us. They’ll not just simply do as they’re told because we’re men and only seek to protect them from harm. American women are said to be an independent lot.”

Connor shrugged one shoulder. “We’re going to have to show them they can trust us.” He glanced over at the man who sat two seats forward and across the aisle from Charity. “Perhaps someone will give us that opportunity.”

Alastair looked at the man as Connor spoke. He leaned forward in his seat and retrieved something from his boot or perhaps strapped to his leg. Almost everyone in the bus slept or sat with their eyes closed, obviously hoping for some

rest.

The man in question, sat with his back ramrod straight, his head cocked to the side as though trying to hear if everyone still slept.

*I think he's ready to make his move.* Alastair felt every muscle clench in anticipation at defending his mate and her blood kin—his kin now despite the lack of mating ceremony confirming their bond.

They weren't deaf. In fact, they had exceptional hearing. Both he and Connor heard the exchange between the three women. Charity, their mate, had witnessed a crime and now the perpetrators wished to harm her.

Connor laid a restraining hand on his arm. *Not yet. Let the man make his move. This is our opportunity to show the three they can trust us. In fact...* He smiled. *It will go a long way toward getting them to go to Virginia with us.*

*I cannae believe ye'd put our mate in danger this way.* He scowled at Connor, his accent growing thicker as the danger to their mate grew. *What's gotten intae yer head, mon?*

*Nothing's gotten into my head, but protecting our mate. Since she doesn't trust us yet, we must take the opportunities that present themselves to gain her trust. Saving her from an assailant may be the only way.*

*Be that as it may, but it doesn't mean I have to like it. And if one hair on her head comes to harm...* Alastair crossed his arms and glared straight

ahead through narrowed eyes, watching the bogus homeless man slowly stand and turn to face them.

A sliver of sunlight shone through a crack in a nearby blind just then, showcasing something glittering in the man's hand as he moved toward the three sleeping women.

*He's armed, ye daffy bastard! We cannae just sit by and wait for him to kill one of them.* Alastair was nearly beside himself—shocked that his cousin would put his mate in harm's way just to gain her trust. He would allow nothing to harm their mate. Nothing and no one. He tensed, ready to fight for his mate, but Connor's fingers tightened around his arm to stay him.

*Of course he's armed. Did ye think we'd gain the women's trust by taking down a defenseless man? They have to know we saved them from the bastard—an armed one at that.*

Just as Alastair was about to tell Connor to take a flying leap, the assassin lunged toward Faith, his arm raised, the large hunting knife he'd hidden somewhere on his person now glinting in his hand. This man held the knife as if he'd trained with hand-to-hand combat nearly all his life. The weapon was merely an extension of his arm.

Both Connor and Alastair rushed forward, their movements a blur as they tapped their powers, utilizing their preternatural speed. Their Jaguars weren't about to let harm befall the women—

especially not their woman. Connor grabbed the man, turned him around and forced the knife from his hand with a quick chop at the man's wrist. As the weapon fell uselessly to the bus floor, several male passengers started forward. The scuffle woke the three women who screamed as the knife hit the floor with a loud thunk, missing Hope's foot by mere inches.

"Oh no ye don't, ye murderous bastard," Connor growled in his ear. "Ye don't know who yer messing with. Leave the lasses alone or die. Take that message back to those ye work for."

The two male passengers closest to them stood, the low light glinting off their uniforms. Military. Jesus! Why hadn't he noticed them sooner? They should have taken the assassin down quietly, without witnesses, if possible, but Connor had only thought about impressing his mate—on gaining her trust. At this rate, they'd be spending the night in a jail cell leaving the women completely unprotected.

The two soldiers grabbed Alastair and Connor, pulling them off the seemingly defenseless man who even now cradled his wrist, before they could incapacitate him farther. "Back off, ye asses," Alastair growled, his Jaguar too close to the surface after having to protect his as of yet unclaimed mate.

The bus skidded to a stop, throwing the men

onto the floor of the bus in a tangle of arms and legs. The assailant gained his feet first, glanced at the knife too far from his reach, then abandoned it to run toward the front of the bus. Before the driver could react, the man shoved the door lever open and leapt from the vehicle.

Connor and Alastair raced after him, but couldn't catch him before he reached the car that had indeed followed them from the last stop. Had they not had witnesses, they could have used their preternatural speed again to apprehend the assailant. Instead, they were forced to watch as the assassin jumped into the car and it sped off. While they watched the taillights on the black sports car recede, the door to the bus closed and it began to move, intent on leaving them behind on the side of the road.

"Wait. Wait, dammit! We weren't the ones trying tae kill innocents!" Connor yelled as they ran after the bus, pounding on its sides.

One of the women, he wasn't sure which from the distance, stood and hurried toward the front of the bus. She whispered something into the driver's ear and the bus simply stopped. The door opened seconds later on a nearly silent whoosh.

"I—I can't thank you enough." Charity stood at the door, grabbed Alastair by the hand and dragged him back onto the bus. "You saved our lives."

"It wasn't me, ma'am," Alastair said, his accent nearly under control once again. He pointed to Connor. "'Twas Connor who grabbed him and took him to the floor, loosening the knife from his hand. And he wasn't after all of you. He was after one of your sisters."

"One of my..." Charity paused, the color draining from her face. "Did you just say one of my sisters?"

Alastair nodded. "He wasn't after you, but the one who sat across the aisle from you."

"You can tell us apart?"

"Of course I can. You're Charity. I think the one he targeted was Faith, but she and Hope are a little harder to tell apart. Why he chose her over you others, I don't know the answer."

She glanced at her two sisters, her face as pale as the t-shirt Connor wore. "Do you know what this means?"

## CHAPTER SIX

Charity couldn't believe her ears. They could tell them apart! She turned her attention back to the two men and really looked at Alastair. She wasn't disappointed. How could she be? Both of them were tall, dark, good looking with accents to die for. She couldn't have chosen between them if someone asked. Still, she'd thought she felt some sort of connection to Connor.

There was something about his eyes. Something in them made her whole body heat up as though her blood turned to lava and moved slowly through her veins.

How could she ever thank them for saving her sisters? The thing uppermost in her mind was she wondered how could she be certain he was the man her mother spoke of all those years ago—the man prophesized to be her soul's mate? And if that were true, then she'd have to face another truth as well. Alastair may not be her only lover. What if both of them were her mates?

It was strange how life brought together two

people in the strangest of times. Who would have guessed she'd meet the man who could tell her from her sisters on a wild run from danger? Or perhaps these two men would only be around to help them escape the trouble pursuing them, but any hope of a future with them was just her imagination—her lonely heart calling out for a true loving relationship?

She didn't know the answers, but she did know that while they were on the run for whoever knows how long, she'd take advantage of having Connor and Alastair with her, getting to know them as men—as potential mates. She owed it to herself. She owed it to her mother whom she'd promised on her deathbed to pursue a relationship with her *tu-braith* if she'd ever met them. Well, it was possible that today *was* that day and everything inside her screamed out in both joy and trepidation.

What would happen if she fell for these men and they had no interest in her as a woman or even worse, what if all her instincts were wrong in this case and she was trusting these men with not only her life, but that of her sisters' and they betrayed her? How would she ever survive that?

For the longest time, her mother had told her wild tales of a clan of Scotsman split in two. One stayed in Kinross, tried to grow and protect their clan there. Another left their homeland to travel to

the New World based on a wise woman's prophecies. For years, she and her sisters had called her mother foolish, even insane, when she rambled on about this mystical clan of Scottish shifters, men and women who could morph into beasts—Jaguars.

With the knowledge that these men may be who her mother had prophesized would come to her during her time of greatest need, she had to wonder if everything else her mother ever told her had been the truth as well. Their mother passed years ago, murdered by a common thug looking to mug her. Now she had no one to ask these questions of. Looking toward Connor and Alastair, their heads bent close together, whispering, she had to correct that. She had two people right in front of her who might actually be able to tell her whether her mother really had told them true for all those years? What harm would asking do but maybe make them think she was nuts? That type of reaction she could deal with—she'd seen her mother deal with it all her life. It was the unanswered questions haunting her and her sisters' all her life that she couldn't live with much longer. Now that these men might be more than men—she wasn't about to wait any longer for answers either.

After quickly glancing at Hope and Faith to make sure they were sleeping soundly, she made

her way back the few seats toward their saviors. Keeping her head bent toward them, she let out a long pent up sigh. She had to start somewhere so she might as well go for the gusto. "What you did back there... You moved like a big cat attacking prey, moved faster than anyone I'd ever seen." She looked up, met both their gazes. Connor's blue eyes were filled with determination while Alastair's brown eyes seemed filled with fear as though afraid of what she had to say. It was that expression of unease on their faces — of true fear of her reaction at what they had to say — that settled the nerves crawling up and down her spine. Charity licked her lips, then quickly pushed a lock of red hair behind her ear. Meeting each of their gazes, she lowered her voice to make sure no one could overhear their conversation. She didn't want her sisters to know about this until she had the answers she needed. All of them.

"My mother used to tell me of a Scottish Clan, split many, many years ago because of an ancient prophesy. No one spoke of why the clan separated, only that it must for its survival. One clan stayed on clan land in Kinross, the other disappeared across the ocean, never to be seen by the original clan again, carrying the future of the Kinross shifters with them."

When Alastair's chocolate brown eyes widened and Connor's turned a dark sapphire, darker than

she'd ever seen before, she knew that her mother's stories during their youth hadn't been made up to entertain her children before bed, but to tell her of a history, to prepare her for this day.

Connor reached for her hand. Clearing his throat, he looked over at Alastair as though seeking advice.

Why were they stalling? Couldn't they just tell her one way or the other? It was obvious from their reaction that what she'd told them hadn't been news to them.

"Lass, my cousin and I, along with five other teams of men, have come here from the original clan in Kinross in search of the very thing the wise woman prophesized. We're searching for our future."

Confused, Charity looked from one man to the other. "I don't think I understand."

Alastair shook his head, obviously upset with his clan mate. "It's nae wonder with Connor talking in riddles the way he always does. Apparently, when half our people left to come to America, they took part of the Taproot of our Tree of Life to plant it here so the new clan would survive and thrive. The tree we have back home on Kinross soil grows no more and our clan is dying. Bairns are no longer born and finding mates—finding our *tu braith*—has become nearly impossible."

Clearing his throat, Connor squeezed her hand, again drawing her attention back to himself. "Not until we reached your American soil that is. Our Alpha, Rory, and his Beta, Gavin, they met their *tu braith* just days ago and think they have a lead on the Tree of Life's true whereabouts. That's where we were going when we ran into you. It's where we want to take you and your kin to protect you."

Looking deep in her eyes, Connor reached up with one hand and ran his fingers through her hair while Alastair took hold of her other hand and slowly stroked her palm with his long fingers.

"We believe—no, we know—you're our *tu braith*," Alastair admitted. "And we believe that all your sisters, including your oldest, Mercy, may be the mates we were sent here to find. Our wise woman would have known we'd find more than our Taproot for the Tree of Life here—we'd find the mates to our souls as well."

Charity sat down sideways in the empty seat beside her, still facing the men, but slowly drew away from them. "So the rest of it, the part where you can shift into animals, that's true, too? My mother didn't lie to us about that?"

"Nae," Connor admitted. "She spoke true of that as well."

Alastair stretched his long legs out in front of him, clasping her thigh. "Not all of us can shift anymore because of the breeding we've done with

full humans in an attempt to fit in, yet some children are still born with the ability. It is our hope to find lost clan members and offer them sanctuary on our clan land for a sliver of the Taproot from the Tree hidden here in the states."

Shaking her head, what Charity really wanted to do was pace, but didn't dare with the bus careening down the highway at seventy-plus miles per hour. She thought much better when she could move her feet as quickly as her mind processed thoughts. "I can tell you this much, as far as I know, none of my sisters, nor my mother for that matter, have ever shifted before."

Alastair nodded, then reached forward and gently ran this thumb across her bottom lip. "But that doesn't mean that it won't ever happen either, especially now that you've met your mates. Your body will grow restless once you've scented your mates. If your sisters have mates among our people, they'll begin to feel uncomfortable, itchy, almost immediately as though something is crawling beneath their skin, begging for release."

Nodding, Connor stood and placed the blanket Hope had tossed to the floor back over her sleeping body. "Even now, Hope is reacting and I can tell you that neither of us are her mates though relatives of ours may be. For now, protecting your sisters is our job, but once they meet their mates, their men will not want

interference in their courting of your sisters."

She almost laughed at the old-fashioned term, considering not much else could even be considered funny about the situation the sisters now had found themselves. "Courting?"

"Yes, courting. Do you American woman not go on dates first to get to know your men before taking them as life-long partners?" Alastair asked, his brown eyes gleaming with mirth.

"Of course we do."

"Then you better get that notion of a long courtship out of your mind, woman," Connor growled. "The Jaguar that lives inside us will only be content with your company for a mere blink of an eye before it demands to mate with you."

Charity swallowed, fear crawled up her spine and goose bumps broke out across her flesh. "What do you mean? You want me to have sex with your cat? Are you nuts?" she whispered, afraid someone would over hear. *That* she couldn't handle on top of this piece of news.

Alastair chuckled. "No, you'll never need mate with our beast while you're still in human form, Connor, the idiot, simply means that soon your beast will grow so strong you'll not want to wait for a proper amount of dating time to pass before you crave the mating—the joining—of our bodies to yours."

Sighing, Charity relaxed against her seat back.

For a minute there, she thought she'd be sick because she didn't remember anything about bestiality in her mother's tales and that one she most definitely would have remembered no matter how many years had passed since her mother's death. "I guess we better wake my sisters up and tell them, but they're going to blow a gasket. They never put much stock in the whole soul mates business our mother tried to convince us awaited each of us. Never mind the whole shifting into Jaguars part. Whoever they end up with will definitely not find their mating easy."

"And ours?" Connor asked. "How are you going to take it?"

Alastair's brown gaze turned molten, like warmed and melted chocolate. "How will you handle taking two lovers—two mates—as your husbands? It's not something we consider taboo among our people. It's quite normal among our species."

Charity shook her head, swallowed past the solid lump now firmly lodged in her throat. "Honestly, I don't know how I'll handle it. I've never been good at relationships before and that was with one guy. I have no idea how I'll make two men happy." When she felt her cheeks heat up in a blush, she ducked her head. She almost admitted aloud she'd never been with two men at once and there was a whole busload of people

surrounding them. What was wrong with her for cripes sake?

When she saw Hope stir in her seat, Charity cleared her throat, then nodded toward Faith who still slept soundly. "We'll have to explain to them the next time we stop. We'll have to take them somewhere where you might be able to show them you speak the truth rather than just tell them. Faith especially won't just take your word for it, which is odd considering she usually has faith most things will turn out right. She has the faith for all of us, just as hope always brings us joy. A day doesn't go by where you don't feel her hand across your shoulders and know that everything will be all right, that if we just hope enough, everything will work out. My sisters are the most important thing to me. All of them."

When Hope sat up, shrugging the lap blanket they purchased at one of the stops down around her waist, she stretched her arms above her head, then ran her hands through her short red hair. She definitely had a bad case of bed head going on.

"What's upsetting you, Charity?" Frowning, she stood, took the seat across from Charity and leaned over to whisper, "I *felt* you. You woke me from a sound sleep."

Charity shook her head. Now was not the time to tell them everything she'd learned. "Just worried about Mercy, hoping she was able to get

another doctor to take her rounds and made it to grandmama's old cabin," she admitted. If her sister *didn't* survive whoever had set out to kill Mr. Archer and now them, she didn't know how she'd cope with it. She just didn't.

Meeting the gazes of both the men, she let out a small smile. At least if something did happen, she apparently wouldn't have to face it alone. How did she end up so lucky? She now had two gorgeous Scottish hunks out to protect and love her, and an honest to goodness quest while the bad guys attempted to steal and kill the princess right from underneath her guards' noses. Now she really was living an adventure. Imagine that.

She couldn't wait to tell her sisters, but first they had to find someplace off the beaten path a bit because she had no doubt her sisters' all out shocked scream—especially Faith's when it came—would send the police running. She only wondered which one of her sisters would freak first... Hope who didn't believe anything Science hadn't already proven or Faith who believed in everything paranormal except shifters. Charity couldn't wait to find out—even as the very thought wasn't a bit charitable.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Alastair sat and watched their mate with awe. He never once dreamed that she was a member of the lost ones. That she knew what they were was proof enough that the others made it to America all those years ago.

If only they could find the Tree of Life, then everything would be as it should. The tree was their hope for the future. The nutrients and magick that seeped into the ground from its root was what made their clan strong, their village thrive even during lean times. The tree alone was the only reason the clan still existed. The symbiotic relationship was more than magick, more than nutrients. It was a joining, as two souls brought together, a true merging of the Goddess and *her* children through a Tree *she* first planted millennia ago, knowing without it her children would have been lost long ago. A mating like a *tu braith* only something much, more integral to the Kinross Jaguars' very survival. The Tree of Life was their entire reason for being.

*I cannae believe she's one o' us. How many others do you think there are who split from the clan to live as humans once they arrived? Why do you supposed they split off from the clan to live outside the protection and how did they breed?*

Connor's eyes were nearly unreadable. The fact that their color grew deeper as he thought of the implications of these girls' existence was an indication that he didn't know the answers either.

*We must ask the girls what they know of their parents. Perhaps the couple bred before they moved from the clan. My only question is why would someone leave the clan, knowing their children had no way to breed without the tree's influence?*

"Why do you suppose your parents left the protection of the clan, lass?" he asked Charity though Hope had joined them. He glanced at his new sister and smiled before turning his attention back to Charity.

"Our mother always spoke of something they needed to protect. Something important that others wished to harm. She said the only way they could protect it was to treat it as any other thing. The clan must leave, spread out and only come back during certain times to nurture it before leaving it once again."

It was Hope that spoke. Her brow furrowed as she attempted to remember so long ago. "Three times a year they took us into the mountains in Virginia. We'd camp, hike and bathe in the lakes

and rivers."

"Yes," Charity agreed. "We loved going with them, hearing the stories. We met with others. Mother and Daddy called them kin. One night we would all sit around a campfire and chant, then after all of the kids went to bed, they performed some sort of strange ritual." Now it was his mate's turn to frown. "Most of them wore robes, but a few of them were naked." Roses dusted her cheeks at her confession. "Mercy and I got curious one night and snuck out to see."

"It was the Life ritual. At certain times throughout the year, we gather to pay homage to our gods and goddesses. At this time, we infuse the Earth with power. The power feeds the roots of the tree. Without the rituals, the tree will die." Alastair bowed his head, ashamed that somehow they'd forgotten all that they did for the Earth, for their tree. "It wasn't until our tree died that our healer made it clear that our refusal to keep to the old ways was what put us in the dire straits where now we find ourselves."

"Aye, the healer called our clan leader and gave him this quest. The Tree of Life lives on in your tree. We needs must find it and beg the caretaker for a piece of the taproot to take back to Kinross." Connor threaded his fingers together in his lap. "It's our only hope for survival."

Charity and Hope looked at them both as

though they'd gone looby—insane as the Americans were wont to say

“We’re tellin’ ye the truth. We hae nothing to gain from lyin’ tae ye.” Damn that accent! He’d be lucky the lasses even understood a word he said with how thick it grew at their dubious looks.

Hope glanced at her sister, waggled her brows, and tipped her head toward Faith. “We need to talk.”

It was apparent to Alastair from her manner that Hope wanted to get Charity away from them this second. She no doubt thought they were a few chips short of a fish dinner. No doubt, they had very little time to explain to their mate and her kin the truth of things before they tried to bolt and that they couldn’t allow to happen. Without either man nearby, the danger to the lasses, by whoever hunted them, increased to an unbearable level—to both of her mates. And would be unacceptable to whoever Hope and Faith turned out to be mated to as well, for Alastair had no doubt the three triplets—and their eldest, Mercy, belonged to someone in their clan. The only question remaining to his mind was which men would turn out to be the mates of his new sister kin?

All his clansman were all good, strong and faithful Scottish men to a man, especially the twelve sent here to America in search of the taproot, but as the women’s kin now, it was up to

he and Connor to ensure that the three other sisters were well taken care of and protected. Even in these modern times when the four sisters wouldn't understand their mates' need to keep them safe and healthy, he and Connor would take their duties to heart. Mercy, Hope, Faith, and especially Charity, were treasured beyond measure and cherished as the true gifts they were. The freedom and sense of independence they so prized would not be allowed much longer, of *that*, he had no doubt. Best not to tell any of them that tidbit of information yet.

*Wisest anyway*, Connor whispered through Alastair's mind. *If I've learned naught else yet of our mate's family, they are fiercely independent and won't take kindly to be given orders—even for their own safety.*

Alastair almost laughed despite the serious situation they now faced—proving to the women that everything Alastair and Connor had spoken, everything their mother had spoken of were truth, not fiction.

"He's tellin' the truth, lass." Connor spoke up, obviously noticing her distrust and the way her feet seemed to already head for her sister's seat three rows ahead.

"Yeah, right," Hope said, drawing the last word out. "And if we believe that, I suppose you have some prime farmland in south central Florida to

sell us, too.”

Connor threw him a confused glance. *What in the hell is that supposed tae mean?*

*I think it means she dinnae believe us.*

*Too damned bad.* Alastair glowered at her. *Perhaps she’ll feel differently if one of the other pairs is her mates. She’ll listen to them because she’ll find she has no other choice.* He crossed his arms, letting his new sister know that he would not argue with her over the matter. It was bad enough that his cat wanted to rub itself all over their mate. In fact, it actually itched with the need to pull Charity close and wallow in her scent. Connor needed it as well. Alastair could smell his friend’s need as surely as he could smell his mate’s arousal. *We need tae get her alone before my beast pounces on her in front of her sisters.*

*I agree but we must keep our jaguars under control until we meet with the others.* Connor checked his watch. *If my calculations are correct, we should meet them in another two hours. Let us try to keep our heads until then. If we follow our instincts with her sisters present, there’s sure to be hell to pay.*

\* \* \* \*

Connor scowled through the window at Brody Gordon and Callum Jennings. The two stood leaning against the SUV they’d obviously rented for the trip into the woods.

"We've found a campground not far from here. The sites are secluded." Brody cast his gaze over Faith and Hope, his manner changing from facetious to calculating in the blink of an eye. "I'm thinking if we split the girls up, we'll hae a better chance of eluding their pursuers." He glanced back over his shoulder toward the East. "We left Duncan and Jamie on the grounds to scout while we came here tae pick ye up."

"Oh, no, you don't." Faith stepped forward, shook her finger in Brody's face and scowled at the four men. "If you think, for one minute that you're going to separate us, you're out of your minds." She glanced at her sisters who stood silently off to the side. "Don't just stand there, you two. Say something," she snapped.

"I don't know, Faith. It seems like a sound plan to me." Hope stepped forward, her gaze locked on Brody. She licked her lips. "Besides, I think there's something the guys want to show us that might change your mind."

Faith cast a disdainful glance to the four men. "I assure you, honey, they have nothing to show me that could possibly change my mind." Turning her gaze back on her sisters, she rested her hands on her hips. "Are you two insane? We don't know these guys. They could be the very people we've been running from."

Hope stubbornly raised her chin. "If they are

then we'll die together."

"We're not here tae harm ye." Callum stepped forward and offered his hand. "Our friends, Connor and Alastair, called us to protect ye, not to harm ye."

Faith snorted. "Like that means a whole lot to me." Waving her hands toward the other two, she continued. "I don't know what they did, but they brainwashed my sisters while I slept on the bus." Crossing her arms, she leaned against the brick wall at her back. "I was lucky enough to have slept through whatever they did." She narrowed her gaze on her sisters. "Don't you look at me like that, you two. You know damned good and well you were both suspicious of these two men until they *saved* us from that man on the bus." Turning, she gave them both a scathing look. "They probably put the guy up to it to make it look like they're on our side. I'm not leaving here with them."

Connor could tell by the set of her chin that she'd made up her mind. Nothing would change it but irrefutable proof that they were the men, or at the very least from the clan of men her mother prophesied entering their lives at a critical moment. "There's no help for it, lads." He moved to the SUV, climbed in and closed the door. They'd left the window cracked a bit. He spoke loud enough for them to hear through the small

opening. "Use yer majick to keep the humans from detecting me, would ye, please?"

Callum and Brody raised their brows. "Are ye daft, mon? The girls are human." Brody spoke as he stepped forward.

"Are they?" Connor asked, raising the corner of his mouth in a half-smile. Reaching for his beast, he waited for the change—for the familiar stretching and shrinking of muscles. First, his clothing disappeared almost as quickly as the change took over. His arms and legs shortened, became more compact, his neck grew longer, his jaws stretched out until his snout pushed forward, covered with dark, spotted fur. This was the way his people hunted in times long past. They moved through the world, gliding through the forests of Pangaea, their long tails swishing and twitching as they stalked their prey.

He looked out the window, his consciousness aware of the three women who looked on with undisguised shock. Their eyes were wide as the saucers his mother filled with milk for her cats. Pacing the interior of the SUV, the beast scented his mate and gave a low snarl. It didn't like the other males standing so close to her. He raised his lip in a snarl, baring his teeth, warning the other males off his mate. It took every ounce of determination he had to change back into his human form with his unmated woman so close to

other males.

Clothing himself with a thought, he opened the door and stepped out. Faith and Hope backed away a pace. Hope reached out and gave Charity's arm a tug. Her sister ignored her, still watching Connor with an unreadable expression. Had he lost her or gained a mate? Of the three women, Charity was the most open minded and he knew if he could convince her, her sisters would follow. Looking over at Alastair, he had to force himself to remember not just his future was about to be decided, but his cousin's as well.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

**I** don't believe we actually let them bring us here." Faith glared at Charity. "And it's all your fault." She squeezed into the small bathroom the cabin offered. The three of them barely fit inside the small room without one of them having to step into the tub. Grabbing Charity's arm, she spun her around and glared into her eyes. "I don't believe you. It's not like you to think with your — your..." She waved her hand toward her sister's groin. "With your nether regions."

It was Charity's turn to glare at her sister. "At least I'm a bit more open minded about all of this. What's your problem anyway? Mother told us about the other clan. Don't tell me you don't remember her stories of our Scottish ancestors who came to America... how they weren't quite human." She pulled from Faith's hold and rested her hand on the doorknob. "I don't know how you can be so closed minded after everything mother told us."

"Warned us about, you mean."

Charity couldn't keep her shock from showing. She knew her brows rose and her eyes widened. "Why do you think they took us to the Appalachians every year? They did it to keep the tree alive, to keep others fertile so they could bear children. We'll never have children if we don't continue with the tradition, Faith. That, at least, should mean something to you." She knew that was a low blow.

She turned to Hope, hands on her hips. "And what about you? I know you love children more than life itself." Of all of them, Hope was the one who loved children most. It was the driving force behind her becoming a midwife. Her love of children led her to a career where she would help them from their mother's wombs. She was one of the best in the state, her services widely sought after by those who wished a more natural birth for their offspring.

Tugging the hem of her blouse, Charity straightened her clothes, stubbornly lifted her chin, then opened the door. "I, for one, refuse to throw this precious gift from the Fates back in their faces. I'm going out there to greet my mates whether you like it or not." She turned just outside the door, gave Faith's hand a squeeze and smiled. "I love you, too, big sister. Who knows, you might find your own two men to hold on to. Don't say you don't want it. We've all dreamed of what it

would be like to have two men. Mother's stories set our imaginations soaring, if nothing else."

Grinning, Faith mumbled, "Big sister? Ha. I'm older than her by a whole two minutes. Check my hair. Is it gray yet?"

Charity sucked in a large breath when she walked into the small kitchen. Filled nearly wall to wall with alpha males, they all stood over six feet tall. The men lounged in chairs or stood, leaning against the counters, their long legs stretched out in front of them.

If all Scotsman had these tall, dark, good looks, Faith would have a difficult time controlling her libido around them. With any luck, she may find her mates among them. Even one man was better than knowing her sister might spend her life miserable and alone.

Smiling, Charity watched as Hope gravitated toward Brody and Callum. There was an attraction there, she was sure of it. The longer she watched, the more amused she became to see her sister rubbing her arms and wringing her hands just as Alastair and Connor had predicted would happen once scenting her mates. What she found most interesting was the silence from the two new men she'd yet to be introduced to when Faith entered the room. Both of the men's eyes narrowed as they drew in a long, slow breath, then gave a deliberately, sexy grin that had her

heart bumping up a notch in reaction and she had her own men to contend with already.

Connor stepped forward and smiled. "Faith, Hope, Charity," he said, reaching for Charity's hand. "This is Duncan and Jamie MacGordon."

The two men nodded toward Hope with a smile before they each took one of Faith's hands.

"Tis truly a pleasure to meet you, ladies. I'm Duncan," the taller of the two said, his dark eyes dancing as he elbowed the other in the side. "This is my cousin, Jamie."

Jamie bowed over Faith's other arm and pressed his lips against the back of her hand. "Tis more than a pleasure, ladies." Jamie smiled.

Charity could only guess it was a smile he practiced often in the mirror because it appeared obvious to her it was designed to drive women wild for him.

"I am truly enchanted."

One of the men snorted behind her and Charity could only grin as Faith sputtered an incoherent reply as her entire body shook. Her face turned the color of their mother's prized red roses that still grew wild in their front garden.

"We've discussed your protection and we all agree it's best to keep you separated as it will also keep your assailants from attacking you enforce. The weaker they are, the better for us."

"Why are you doing this?" Faith finally found

her voice.

"Because." Jamie turned his devastating smile on them again. "We cannae do no other than protect beautiful young women. It's in our blood."

"I'll just bet it is," Faith mumbled, throwing Charity a look that said, *can you believe this?* "Are you sure you're not Irish, because it sounds like a bit of blarney to me."

"Just a wee bit o' teasing, love. Don't begrudge me a bit o' fun now." Pulling Faith closer, he turned to Brody and Callum. "You two take Hope to the cabin in the west and we'll take the south lodge." He faced Connor and shook his hand. "Good luck to ye, cousin."

Charity stood facing the door after they all filed out, leaving her completely alone for the first time with the two men that claimed they were her mates. Deep down she knew they made the right decision. These men were as close to a distant family as she could get. They would keep her sisters safe—or die trying to do so. Nothing more could be done for her sisters than was already taking place. Turning, she watched her mates—Connor and Alastair—surreptitiously as they stored the gear and food they'd bought in the last town.

Pulling herself up onto the counter, she stayed out of their way as they worked. They were very efficient. Enough so she knew they'd worked or

lived together a long time and this was no different from any other time they set up house someplace for whatever mission or vacation they planned to experience.

As she watched the pair work together, she never expected studying them to make her heart race and her blood near boil. Gooseflesh rose on her arms and legs and a strange heat spread low in her middle, traveling through her groin. After watching them for a few minutes, she decided the dishes wouldn't do themselves and slid off the counter to do them.

Charity was just putting the last dish into the dishwasher when she felt strong arms wrap around her. The whole evening had been surreal. After she watched the men unpack the groceries, she'd been shooed out of the kitchen so they could cook dinner. She wasn't used to any one—man or woman—cooking for her so the entire experience was new to her. When she saw the thickness of the arms circling her, she didn't even need to turn around to know that Connor had been the one to approach her first.

Although she'd grown up on stories of having two mates, she felt thankful the men had decided to approach her one on one for their first times. She wasn't sure how she would have handled it if they just approached her together and expected her take them both at the same time for their first

joining.

She didn't know how she knew, but she could tell that Connor had recently bathed in the pond around back. Somehow, his scent was stronger or perhaps her abilities to scent him were what had changed between them. As the men predicted, the longer they'd spent together during the day, the more the feline supposedly living inside her began to stretch and snarl out its need. She wouldn't have been surprised if she'd started to literally growl as soon her body felt so out of sorts.

But as soon as Connor's arms wrapped around her, something inside Charity seemed to calm—as though a missing piece of herself had finally been found. Hell, she even sounded insane in her own head. She could only hope the stories about mates being psychic and able to read the thoughts of their *tu braith* were one of the few facts her momma could have been mistaken about.

When Connor pulled her back and rested her against his wide chest, she almost hissed at the sensation of feeling him so close to her. She could no longer deny her mother's words, her memories. Feeling the bond between you and your *tu braith* is most definitely different than any other sexual experience in her life—not that she'd had all that many. But even she knew this would be different from any other time she'd made love to a male—and it would be making love. She knew that

without a doubt. If only Faith weren't so cynical, she could even now know what it felt like to have her Soul Mate hold her, pressing his body against hers.

Slowly, ever so slowly, he nibbled his way down the length of her neck, "Are you almost done?"

Charity closed her eyes and leaned further back against her mate, lifting her arms around his neck while she did so. She felt completely surrounded by him, cherished and adored – nothing she'd ever before felt with a man. "I am now," she admitted. "What did you have in mind?" Was that her voice gone husky with the slightest purr as she flirted with Connor? Surprised and shaken, she realized that he didn't feel like a new lover at all. She didn't feel shy with him like she'd expected to, only knew she liked this feeling of rightness permeating her very core.

When Connor slipped his hand beneath her top and slowly began to roll and pluck at her hardening nipples, she gasped. Her entire body quivered as pure fire raced from her breasts straight to her clit. She arched her back even further, moaning as his cock brushed her backside. He pinched her nipple again as he thrust his cock against her ass. Her entire body thrummed, turned on by his straightforward touch. She craved him desperately. Wanted him as she'd not

wanted another—expect perhaps for Alastair, but she'd find out about that soon enough.

She couldn't take the feel of his cock pressed against her ass another minute and turned in Connor's arms, quickly unbuttoning his shirt. She wanted to feel his flesh pressed against hers and she didn't want to wait another moment to do so. The more of his chest she uncovered, the more her hands shook. His shoulders and arms were huge, his torso massive. No wonder he always seemed to wear long sleeved shirts and jackets. His arms alone could be registered as lethal weapons, she thought, barely stopping the giggle that threatened to escape at her own joke.

While she exposed more and more of his chest, Connor began to unbutton the plaid shirt she'd put on that morning. Within minutes, she stood only in her bra and shorts while Connor wore nothing but his jeans, a faded pair of button flies. His eyes about glazed over when she lifted her breasts out of the cups of her bra and held them out to him for inspection. "Do you want a taste?" She purred, hearing the feline in her voice tempting its mate to play with her, to dominate her beast, as it needed to be dominated. Something she'd never thought she'd needed or desired in any type of sexual relationship before.

With his long thick fingers, he slowly worked the button on her shorts and slid the zipper down,

letting them fall to the floor in a puddle at his feet. "You're a naughty little minx, my heart," Connor groaned, his fingers barely grazed her pussy. "Who'd have thought you'd be going commando beneath your shorts when you got dressed this morning? If either Alastair or I had known what you weren't wearing, we would have kicked everyone out of here a lot earlier than we did."

With surprising ease, he lifted Charity onto the counter and cupped her breasts himself, taking the nearest nipple between his teeth before biting down just enough to make her squeak in surprise, but without causing any true pain. "Lass, you're the dream I've never known I'd wished for, made into flesh just for us. We've waited so long for you—too long. We'll never hurt you—you know that right?"

Charity could hear the very real concern in his voice, knew without a doubt that they'd never intentionally harm one hair on her head though they might drive her crazy in their attempts at keeping her safe. For now, that was okay. She could live with their over-protectiveness if they continued to show her, in all the little things they did for her, that she meant more to them than as just a breeding mare for their young.

They'd let her sisters stay here all day, argue with her about what they should do just so she could offer her sisters comfort when they must

have been just as desperate to get her alone as she was to be alone with them. Eventually, once all the danger had passed and they returned to Scotland where her men felt safest, she was sure she could convince them to reduce some of their restriction against her. She'd just have to be creative like her mother had warned her about all those many years ago in regards to the proper way to train your *tu braith* not to take complete control over her life. She'd just have to work real hard at remembering all those lessons told to her over a very lengthy discussion of the birds and the bees.

Not that she could remember that conversation having much to do with birds and bees. She thought back now, again almost giggling at the thought of some of the advice her mother offered for when things mattered and when it was time to pretend they mattered to get what she wanted in the long run.

Connor leaned in and took her mouth in an explosive kiss filled with passion, need and so much hunger. She met him, rejoiced in the knowledge she could make him lose control this way. His tongue mapped every ridge and tooth, covered every inch of the inside of her mouth while she did the same, pulling him closer to her so that his jean-clad erection pressed against her naked pussy.

Charity reached down for the buttons running

the length of his fly and ripped at them, wanting to feel his cock inside her—right now, deep inside her. Using her feet, she shoved the jeans down past his hips and wrapped her fingers around his thick, cock. Like her, he, too, had gone commando when getting dressed this morning. There wasn't anything sexier than undressing a man to find he wore nothing underneath his clothes.

When his blue eyes grew darker, it fueled her own desire, forcing her passion even higher than before. She wanted this man. She wanted him now. She wanted to feel the length of his hair wrap around her as he fucked her stupid right there on the kitchen counter. She wanted to look at this counter in the morning and blush at the memories, then wanted to make even more—with Connor, with Alastair, with both of them. It didn't matter so long as they made many more memories together in the years to come.

Connor didn't waste any time, just lined his pre-cum slickened cock at her gate and surged inside her dripping, wet pussy. "Are you ready for this? Ready for me?" Connor teased, his cockhead slipping just inside her, then pulling back until only an inch or so remained lodged inside her.

Charity gave him the only answer she could, leaning far enough back on the counter so that when she wrapped her legs around his hips and yanked, he had no choice but to sink to the hilt

inside her with one forceful thrust.

Getting her message loud and clear, Connor forged his way inside her pussy only to withdraw and thrust inside her again and again, yet still it wasn't enough. She needed more, needed to feel everything he could make her feel. She just knew that with him and Alastair she'd finally find that elusive something that had always been missing during her lovemaking in the past.

When he reached forward, pinched her nipples between his fingers and twisted, Charity threw her head back and moaned, long and low. And when his cock thrust deeper, faster, harder, the more she moaned. She couldn't stop herself from crying out with his every stroke. "Oh, Goddess. Yes. Harder, Goddess harder."

Charity didn't even flinch when her head hit the cabinet doors with every one of Connor's thrusts. Her body felt wound so tight and still she couldn't go over. Something prevented her from going over and this had to be one of the most explosive lovemaking sessions of her entire life. "Please, Connor. I need something...something more, please," she begged, not sure even what she had been begging for.

With a twisted grin on his face, one that should have made her wary but instead made her only hornier, Connor licked two of his fingers, then after quickly rimming the tiny rosette of her back

entrance, shoved the digits into her ass, pumping them faster and faster, matching the rhythm of his fucking. Sweaty bodies met, harsh breaths sounded out into the silent kitchen and still the two continued to fuck each other within an inch of their lives.

Nothing had ever felt like this – felt this perfect. Nothing. From now on, Charity wouldn't be able to look at the kitchen counter again without remembering the long sweaty minutes – or was it hours – she'd spent here with her mate.

Sweat ran down Connor's face and landed on her heaving chest. Charity's nipples beaded up into tight little nubs. Slowly he started to pull back out, inch by slow inch, until he slammed himself back inside her, his cockhead hitting her womb in one deep thrust. Her entire body quivered as she felt her climax approaching. She knew that when it hit, she'd be done for. Nothing would keep her conscious once he finally allowed her to come. Bracing her arms against the counter, she leaned even further back and looked straight into his amazingly deep blue eyes as he embedded himself deeper inside her aching pussy. "Please, Connor. Don't stop. Fuck me, please," she begged.

That was all it took. Between one second and the next, he'd surged so deep inside her she could practically feel him inside her throat. Leaning forward, Connor nipped her neck, biting down

where her neck and shoulder met and, just like that, it sent her over the edge. Charity's first real orgasm slammed through her, clamping down on his cock and holding onto to it like it never wanted to let it go again.

Shoving as deep as he could get, Connor groaned, spewing his wet seed deep into her pussy in long bursts of endless pleasure. Seconds later—hell, it could have been minutes—they collapsed against the kitchen counter with Charity wrapped in Connor's strong arms. After kissing the top of her head, he gave her a quick squeeze.

"Let's move this into the bedroom. I don't know about you, but I could sure use a nap," he whispered.

His sated voice was husky with sleep as they slowly came down from the best climax of Charity's entire life. She couldn't imagine how it could get better than that—she just couldn't.

## CHAPTER NINE

*At the Cabin's private swimming hole, later that afternoon...*

Charity stared at Alastair as he moved closer, obviously stalking her. She swallowed thickly and backed up a pace, unsure if she was ready for this. It wasn't difficult to figure out what he wanted. Unable to look away, she moved from him again. Reaching behind herself, she backed into a tree. She'd been out, walking along the trail that led to the swimming hole, just thinking about earlier, about her lovemaking with Connor and what would happen with her other mate now that she'd made love to Connor. And now, just like that, Alastair had hunted her down as though knowing just what was on her mind. The rough bark at her back served to remind her how hard men could be when they wanted.

The strings of her bikini top caught on a small piece of bark and pulled free. The top quickly flopped down, baring her breasts to his heated

gaze. Charity didn't reach up to cover herself. She couldn't. She could only stand before him and wait for him to come to her, to touch her, to worship her the way his gaze promised. It was almost as though even the forest wanted her to submit to him. And it would be a submission. There was no other name for it. Alastair and Connor seemed like very dominant men. At least they seemed to like *her* obedience.

She bit her lip and held it between her teeth as Alastair stepped closer still. She pressed herself even tighter against the tree. There was nowhere else to go. If she bolted, he would run her to the ground like a scared rabbit and that she didn't want. It was the air of violence constantly surrounding the two men that scared her so much, even when deep in her gut she *knew* they'd never hurt her. She wanted this, truly she did, but wasn't sure about the mechanics of it all. How would the three of them live together with no jealousy between them? Could they?

Before she knew it, he was there, in front her. Practically touching her, looming over her with an intense expression in his dark, compelling eyes. She felt the warmth from his skin, his breath.

A soft breeze stirred her hair. The cool air made her nipples pebble or perhaps it was the way he stared at her with that intense gaze. It was as though she were the only woman in the world.

Reaching up, he gently tucked her hair behind her ear, anchoring it in place so it didn't fan across her face and get into her eyes again. His touch was hot. Electric. Shivers danced up and down her spine at the slight contact. Licking her lips, she met his gaze, frightened, yet not. Eager, yet not.

Alastair tilted his head back, inhaled deeply and smiled. "I can smell your trepidation, lass. It only serves to make my beast more eager to mount ye. It smells your submission."

Goosebumps covered Charity's skin at his words. The deep timbre of his voice never failed to excite her, make her want him, need him more than she'd ever thought possible before this moment.

"It—it's been a long time—before Connor, I mean." Since nursing school, but he didn't have to know that.

"Good." The word came out almost a growl as he dipped his head and captured her lips with his.

Her stomach fluttered with anticipation, with need. The feel of his warm mouth on hers, his tongue sliding into the deep recesses of her mouth, tasting, nearly feasting on her made her head spin and her knees turn to mush. Charity was certain she would have melted into a puddle at his feet if not for the rough bark at her back digging into her flesh, keeping her mind in the here and now.

Warm hands covered her breasts, palmed her nipples. Charity groaned into his mouth just before he pulled away to press kisses down the side of her neck. When his lips closed over the tight peak of her breast, the pleasure was so raw, so intense, her head thrashed against the trunk of the tree, regardless of the bark digging into her flesh.

Reaching up, Charity thrust her fingers into his hair and held him in place. If she must submit, so must he, in his own way. Was that her voice begging him not to stop? Was it *really* her making all those mewling needy noises as he alternately suckled her breasts? She rode him when he thrust his thigh between hers, pressing her core against the warmth of his leg, reveling in the sensual pleasure the pressure brought.

Releasing her for a moment, Alastair knelt before her, removed the thong bikini bottom that barely covered her, pushed her legs wide and leaned between them. He inhaled deeply.

"I love your scent." He pressed a kiss against her thigh. "You smell sweet and spicy. Kind of like a glazed donut." He lapped at her with his tongue, then chuckled when her legs buckled and he caught her. "I had to taste you. I couldn't stop myself. I still can't."

Lifting her by her thighs, Alastair held her against the tree with her legs opened and sucked

her clit into his mouth. He alternately swirled his tongue around her erect nub and suckled her plump nether lips into his mouth. Tasting her, savoring her.

Charity felt her orgasm building. It started somewhere deep inside her, building and building until she thought she could stand no more. She squeezed her eyes tight, gritted her teeth and did her best to muffle her cries. Her world lit up in an explosion of color as she came. She would certainly have fallen had Alastair not held her aloft. She panted, coming down from the natural high of the mind-numbing climax.

Lowering her legs slowly, Alastair kept a firm grip on her until she could stand on her own. Standing, he shed his swim trunks and grinned at her shocked expression. "Don't worry, lass. It'll fit."

She licked her lips and stared at his massive shaft. "I wasn't worried about that. I'm a nurse. I know it will fit. If a baby can squeeze its way out, there's no doubt you'd find a way to squeeze in." She cocked her head to the side and grinned. "I was just wondering how you taste."

"Don't even think about it. Not today. I'd never last and I want to be inside ye. I've dreamed of this moment for a long time. I plan to lay claim to that sweet pussy today."

God, he could talk. She loved that about him.

She loved his accent, the way he called her lass. She especially loved the way he couldn't keep the accent from bleeding through when he was aroused.

Alastair lifted her in his arms. "Wrap yer legs around my waist, love." His breaths came in short bursts.

Charity knew it wasn't from excursion, but from passion he could barely keep leashed. Hell, the man just held her entire body weight over his shoulders while giving her the most intense oral orgasm of her life. Apparently, strength definitely *wasn't* an issue. Doing as he asked, she wrapped her legs around his waist and took in a deep breath as he slowly filled her. "Hoo!" She licked her lips, then pressed a kiss to the corner of his mouth. "That fills me up right good."

Charity didn't miss the masculine pride behind his grin as he began to withdraw and thrust as he held her against the tree, his arms wrapped around her to protect her from the rough bark.

Over and over, Alastair plunged and withdrew, driving her ever closer to another orgasm. He threw his head back, the cords of his neck tight as he continued his deep thrusts. He dragged his hard shaft over her sensitive nerve endings. Each time he entered and withdrew, he hit the hidden bundle of nerves Charity always knew she had but had never stimulated before. It was only a matter

of minutes before she threw her head back and screamed.

Charity felt herself clamp down on Alastair's cock, her channel gripping onto it as he surged into her with a loud groan. Warmth washed through her, ran down over her rear and she sighed. For the second time in her life, she'd had unprotected sex and she didn't regret a moment of it because deep down she expected to make a life with him—with both of them. If she were to get pregnant, the men would only love her and the baby they created that much more.

Alastair bent, picked up the scraps of cloth they wore only minutes before then scooped her up in his arms. She snuggled close, resting her head on his shoulder, reveling in the feeling of closeness as he carried her back to the cabin and tucked her into bed beside a sleeping Connor. The last thing she remembered before sleep claimed her was the mattress dipping beneath his weight and the soft kiss he pressed against the center of her forehead.

\* \* \* \*

Hours later, Connor woke from a sound sleep, knowing danger had invaded their temporary home. He could feel the distress of the animals in the woods, feel the edgy excitement emanating from the men who thought to attack while they'd

been asleep.

Reaching across Charity's sleeping body, he lightly brushed Alastair's arm to alert him to the danger quickly approaching. As he expected, Alastair woke instantly, his entire body vibrated as his jaguar sensed the coming confrontation. Quickly and quietly, the pair slid out of bed, making sure they didn't wake their mate in their hurry. Now that they'd found her, they'd allow nothing—and no one—to harm their mate—especially not some thug who thought to get rid of a witness to a potential hit his boss had ordered. Eventually, once they took care of all the hit men, the Kinross Warriors would ensure the mobster who ordered the attack on the women met with an accident of his own.

They couldn't comfortably leave America with their mates when such a dangerous man would still be around to hunt for their women at any time. Men like that didn't forget and, if he wasn't taken out, they'd all be looking over their shoulders for the rest of their lives. None of the men were willing to do that.

For the rest of their lives, they'd love their mates, raise bairns of their own and repair the damage they'd unwittingly done to their clan lands by neglecting the old ways. But first, they had some trash to take out, hopefully while their mate still slept. They didn't want to take the

chance she'd wake just as they were confronting the assassin sent for Charity and find her walking into the situation they were trying to avoid all together.

Unfortunately, that wasn't meant to be. Before Connor could tuck the blankets around his mate before she could miss the warmth of his body, she stirred, opened her eyes and looked directly at the two men who already stood dressed for battle. Expecting an argument that they planned to leave without her, he and Alastair were pleasantly surprised when she simply nodded, reached over to give them each a kiss on their lips and told them to hurry up and kick ass so they could come back to bed.

"I'll be waiting for you right here, she whispered, just as they closed the bedroom door behind them.

## CHAPTER TEN

As they locked Charity into the bedroom, Alastair couldn't help but wonder what had just happened. They may not have known their mate long, but they thought for sure she would have argued about them leaving her behind while they did battle against her enemies.

Before he could really worry on it, he heard the scraping of someone jimmying the sliding glass door open. Whoever had come after them had obviously not taken the time to learn about their enemies before attacking. They must have just assumed the women had turned to their boyfriends or relatives to keep them safe, not realizing that some very dangerous warriors were now standing guard over the women, protecting them as they would few others.

Before they made the pact with the Goddess Morrigan over a millennia ago, they were the fiercest Scots warriors ever born. Then she gifted them with traits of her most vicious animal warriors, creating a race gifted with the

ferociousness and agility of the animal and the thoughts and cunning of man. As the High Queen and Goddess of the Tuatha Dé Danann, she was a trinity Goddess known by the names of Macha, Badb and Nemhain.

All three were bloodthirsty and feared by her enemies. As Macha, she was a goddess of both war and fertility who could take the shape of a crow, creating the Tree of Life to ensure her Warriors lived on despite the dangerous lives they led. As Badb, she was the water-god whose sacred well was a source of knowledge, teaching her children strategy and patience and ancient ways to both build and destroy. And as Nemhain, she was the goddess of war and battle, teaching her warriors all they'd need to defeat their enemy. Then the old ways were lost and now her warriors only had the barest of skills remaining to fight. The Goddess also embodied the Maiden who knew innocence, the Mother who loved and protected her children and the Crone who was all knowing and wise.

When they returned to their homeland, they'd once again learn the old ways, worship their Mother Goddess as they should have all along and pray that they had done enough to save their people from complete destruction.

So as their enemies closed in, Connor and Alastair called on their other halves, their Jaguar

brethren. They had an enemy to defeat, one who'd get nowhere near Charity. Connor wouldn't even allow their intruders' scent to disturb her if they could help it.

\* \* \* \*

The Goddess Morrigan watched her Warriors from the shadows. She'd chosen well when she'd spoken to the Alpha of the Gordon clan as the wise woman. He'd sent his bravest, fiercest warriors here, the best his clan had to offer. Sure, as the Goddess of Fertility, she could have just told them where to find the Taproot and been done with it, but even she must not mess too closely with the hand of fate.

The men needed to come here, they needed to leave their clan long enough to not only bring home the precious Taproot as she'd foretold, but she needed the men to bring home their *tu braith* as well.

For so long she'd watched, languishing behind the veils of time as her people forgot more and more of the old ways, forgot the reasons for the rituals they carried out during festival times.

Now she'd nearly waited too long to bring the Alpha's attention to the matter—nearly—for even Goddesses can make mistakes. If she had delayed even a few more days in calling the Alpha's

attention to their dying Tree of Life, the precious women the men were sent here to find would have been lost to them and there would have been nothing she could have done to change things.

As the men she had chosen for Charity shifted into their other forms to take out her would-be assassins, Morrigan did something she hadn't done for many, many years. She shifted shape into that of a woman she'd been long ago, a woman who'd left her children far too early, but the Fates had decreed she interfered too much already and had ripped her from her daughter's lives. But now, with her men busy, Charity would once again meet the one who'd given birth to her, forced to abandon her long before she'd ever thought possible. Still hidden in the shadows, invisible to the naked eye, took the shape of the woman once known as Sarah Webber and slipped through the door behind, which her daughter worriedly hugged the blankets to her as she awaited word on her mates.

What does one say to a daughter who they'd been forced to leave too many years ago? How did you tell your daughter that not only is her mother not human nor a Kinross Jaguar, but their creator? And finally, how does that mother, that Goddess, tell her daughter that she's no more human than her mother or sisters, than her mates were? Mates created specifically for her daughters long before

her babies were even born.

Letting the invisibility spell fall from her body, Morrigan approached the bed, more nervous now than ever before, even when scheming as the Triple Goddess to give birth to children of her own flesh and blood. She didn't know what to expect when finally allowed show herself to her children again. She didn't expect the secret smile that flitted across Charity's lips or the open arms she held out to a woman she should have thought long ago dead to the world.

Charity's soft moss-green gaze met hers from across the room—eyes that matched her mother's perfectly—and still she held her arms open to the woman who birthed her, a woman most people in the world rightly feared. “Are you going to deny me a hug after leaving us without your guidance for so many years, mother?” Charity whispered.

Then the Goddess Morrigan—Sarah Webber—did something she'd not done in more years than she cared to remember. She wept. “How? How did you know that I hadn't died in that crash so long ago? How did you know I'd come to you?”

Charity shook her head and looked at Morrigan as if she'd lost her mind. “You of all people know that we each have our gifts. Faith—she can see what's inside a person—their strengths and weaknesses—when she isn't being stubborn. Hope can see the way things will be and does her best to

give out encouragement when it's needed most. Mercy always knows when others are in need, when they require help the most. As for me, I'm your compassion, the Charity you used to create the protector's of Humanity. Each of us has something of you in us, but none of the others are able—or willing—to believe more than they already do. When the time is right, you'll be back for each of them. Besides, Mother, we look like we're in our early to mid-twenties. I'll reach my fortieth birthday on Eostre and Mercy—she'll never admit to being near half a century old. That isn't exactly normal—or human."

Morrigan nodded and dropped her arms away from her daughter with more difficulty than she'd imagined. "So you sent your men to battle to wait for me here? As if it were no big deal that I might return?"

Charity hugged the blankets around her body more securely, then leaned against the headboard. A tiny frown marred her face. "I trust that they can take care of themselves. The ones after us are human, not a creation of the Gods. I imagine Connor and Alastair will return shortly."

Charity blushed, then looked down at her fists bunched in the blankets surrounding her. "The moment I met Connor and Alastair, I started to remember, remember things I should have no way of knowing—things I'm sure the others do not

know — at least not yet.”

Morrigan nodded. “It is not easy knowing things that have not yet come to pass. That was one ability I hoped to never pass on to any of my daughters.”

“And my men — will I outlive them, watch them grow old and wither away as we stay young and not age?”

Morrigan knew just how Charity felt, for at one time she, too, had to make a decision about whether to share a few wonderful years with a man or walk away, knowing she’d have to watch the man she loved beyond all others age and die in front of her. But that was one thing she did bargain for.

Smiling, Morrigan once more pulled her daughter into her arms. “That is one thing I can honestly say, never shall you have to live without the love of your men, nor watch them age and die while sharing only a handful of human years together. Forever is yours if that is your wish, daughter,” she whispered into Charity’s ear.

After running her hand through Charity’s tousled hair, she placed a kiss upon her forehead. “You’ll know when the time is right to tell all to your sisters. For now, keep this visit between us, between you and your mates. I hear them returning so I really must go.”

As Morrigan stood and started to fade into the

shadows, she looked at her daughter and smiled. 'If you'd like to have children of your own, daughter, tonight might be a good night to join with your men—completely. I feel magick in the air around you.'

As dawn was just rising above the tree line, Charity knew she had many hours before she could seduce her mates. She knew they wanted children—bairns—of their own and, after finally seeing her mother after so long without knowing her touch, she couldn't imagine waiting to have children of her own to hold, to cherish and to love, to teach the old ways to.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

*Moonrise, poolside...*

Charity took in a large gulp of air when the two finally turned their attention on her. She felt her panties grow moist as they stood next to each other, regarding her with their feral expressions.

They were so beautiful, so tall and muscular. Her clit pulsed with anticipation as she stood knee deep in the pool and watched them practically stalking her with their intense gazes.

Her heart raced as they moved closer and she knew it was time they made her theirs. Truly theirs. She bit her lip until she tasted a drop of blood. Her hands trembled as she reached for a nearly forgotten bottle of water near the edge. She needed a drink, something to do with her hands before she chickened out and fled outside into the woods.

Her heart stuttered as she stared at them, their hard bodies glistening from their dip in the far end of the pool. Moving away from the flat stone,

she dove beneath the cool water and swam to the middle of the pool, trying to pretend this was like any other day, but it wasn't. This was the day they formed the bond. It was the time they would become one with each other. One family, one being, one triad of lovers intent on bringing the others shared pleasure.

Lazing in the gently lapping water, Charity couldn't help but stare. They were so beautiful, her men. Both were the epitome of masculine beauty with their washboard stomachs and hard, tanned muscular flesh.

"Why do ye avoid us, lass?" Connor asked, standing on the edge of the pool, his legs braced shoulder width apart, his hands on his hips, the dark hair at the apex of his thighs doing little more than showcasing his impressive erection.

She swallowed around the lump in her throat when he took a few steps into the pool.

"Don't make me come after ye, lass. Ye won't like the punishment we'll mete out upon yer flesh."

Charity loved the way they lost control and their accents grew thicker the more they were aroused. Knowing what she could do to them was a heady aphrodisiac.

Connor turned to Alastair. "She's a tease, dinnae ye think?"

"Aye," Alastair agreed, matching Connor's

stance, his arms crossed over his powerful chest. "Ye think perhaps we should tease her a wee bit?"

"Aye, I'll say. If she doesn't step from the pool on her own." Connor grinned, his expression one of gleeful anticipation. "I think we should go in and get her."

Charity's face burned beneath their scrutiny. What would it be like to have them both at the same time, one of them at her front, the other taking her from behind? The more she watched them, the more she thought about it. The more she thought about it, the more the anticipation grew and her mind ran rampant with the idea. Charity wondered if her sisters ever really thought the stories were true and, if they did, what they would have thought of her making love to two men at once?

It would be making love, too. The realization came at the heels of deciding that she would move to the edge before her mates came in after her and tortured her with their fingers, mouths and tongues. She could see the glint in their eyes. They hoped she would disobey them. They wanted to drive her mad with desire. But she couldn't make them wait. Not anymore. Not now that she knew she loved them and wanted them above all others.

Reaching up after she got to the edge, she waited for them to pull her from the water, knowing full well how she would look with her

arms stretched over her head like some long ago virgin sacrifice.

When Alastair bent his head to her neck, Charity closed her eyes and reveled in the familiar fluttering sensation in her stomach as his mouth moved over her skin. She groaned deep in her throat when Connor turned her in his arms and his hands moved up over her stomach to cup her breasts. Her nipples hardened beneath his experienced caress and she tilted her head to the side when the short stubble of his unshaven cheek brushed her sensitive flesh. Turning her head to the side, she reached up and behind her to cup his cheek. When he glanced up, she turned her head to the side and pressed her lips to his.

A low moan escaped her throat when the rough velvet of his tongue delved deep into the recesses of her mouth. Liquid warmth pooled deep in her middle. Her thighs spread almost of their own volition, her hips thrusting forward into Alastair's questing fingers as her body's juices slid from her flesh.

"I love the way your breasts fill Connor's hands." Alastair groaned as he watched Connor fondle her. "And the way your nipples peek through his fingers as he holds them."

Charity arched forward, pressing her breasts against Connor's palms. She wanted to tell them she loved the sound of their voices. The way they

lost control and spoke with thick accents when they were aroused or upset, but she couldn't say anything. Not because Alastair nibbled her lips, but because she could barely think, barely breathe as she stood with her body aching and arching beneath their experienced hands as her knees melted like butter.

Alastair leaned forward, flicking first one nipple, then the other with the tip of his tongue. "I love the way they fill my mouth," he added just before he suckled the peak of her right breast into the warm, moist recesses of his mouth.

She thought her legs would give out, that she might collapse into a puddle at his feet when his tongue swirled around the hardened nub. Charity groaned as each caress, each flick of his tongue and each gentle tug of his teeth shot straight to her sex, making it pulse and burn with need. Liquid warmth seeped from between her legs, coating her thighs.

Long fingers delved deeper between her legs, circling her clit as she writhed and bucked against them.

Finally, after she found release, Alastair knelt at her feet, lifted her leg and placed it over his shoulder. Connor still stood at her back, the long line of his cock pressed into the crease of her ass like a promise of things to come.

Charity let out a long groan drawn from deep

inside her chest as Alastair cupped her ass in his hands, lifted her to his mouth and the rough pad of his tongue stroked over her sensitive flesh. He lapped at her body's cream, suckled her nether lips, his teeth gently grazing the responsive nub at her core. He brought her to the edge, then pulled back several times, driving her senseless with need. Nothing mattered but the now. Nothing was more important than being with her mates, feeling their lips, tongues and hands stroking her heated flesh.

Finally, after what seemed like long hours, perhaps days, Alastair's lips circled her clit and he suckled hard, finally giving her the relief she so desperately craved. Charity wrapped her legs around his shoulders, reached down, grasped his hair with her hands and screamed.

Birds flew from the trees over their heads, screaming their displeasure at her interruption. The golden rays of the late afternoon sun shone through the trees, dappling their skin and the water of the pond lapped gently at the shore. The world was beautiful, magical and her mates were no different.

Desire blurred her vision. The foliage around them became hazy, distorted as she felt the ripples of another orgasm overtaking her. Her body shuddered and she screamed as her two men took her over the edge once again.

Panting as though she'd just ran a marathon, Charity let her legs drop limply from Alastair's shoulders. Releasing his hold on her ass, he stood and pressed his mouth to hers, letting her taste her own arousal on his lips and tongue.

Lifting her in his arms as if she weighed nothing, he brought her sex level with his. "Wrap your legs around my waist, love." He licked her neck, the head of his cock positioned at the entrance to her too empty channel. "Hold on tight, my wee lass. Connor and I are about to take ye on a ride ye'll not soon forget."

Charity felt her eyes widen as Alastair lowered her over his large cock. "You seem bigger this way." Her breath came in short panting gasps. He seemed so much bigger she feared it would hurt to have them both inside her, but the time for fear had long since passed. Her body needed—no—demanded she take them both inside her today. They had no more time to assuage her fears. Her body, her entire being filled with the knowledge that this was inevitable. This most basic, primal act of love and trust was the last thing required before their bodies and minds linked with each other forever.

The pleasure of his shaft riding so deep inside her set Charity off on another mind numbing orgasm, leaving her hanging limp in his embrace, her arms loosely circling his neck.

Connor still stood behind her, suckling her neck and shoulder, his hands slowly worshipping her body. Slippery fingers slid around the slick flesh where her body met Alastair's, drawing her dripping juices from her body back to the star of her ass.

"Shh..." he whispered, laving the shell of her ear. "Relax. I know what you're thinking."

She felt him smile against her skin.

"We'll fit." He continued his exploration, his fingers sliding into her, stretching her, readying her for his possession.

She had her doubts about that, but still did her best to relax in Alastair's arms as he held her, impaled on his massive erection. Closing her eyes, she forced her body to go limp when she felt the pressure of the thick head of Connor's cock pressing against her back hole. She wanted them, wanted this, but still, it was something she'd never experienced, something she never really thought to experience until a few short days ago and her mind was filled with trepidation.

After what seemed like hours, Charity felt Connor stop, his breath coming in choppy pants. She felt the short hairs that nested his sex against her flesh and knew he was finally all the way inside her. With Alastair's cock in her channel and Connor's wedged tightly in her ass, she felt stretched to the limits, full, stuffed...and

wonderful.

Alastair reached between them, his fingers circling, rubbing over her clit just enough to keep her on the edge of another intense orgasm.

“Lean back against me now, my heart.” Connor nipped the flesh at her throat as his fingers pulled and twisted her nipples with just enough force to keep her mindless.

Leaning back, she felt Alastair withdraw before he slammed back into her. Connor groaned, then did the same. As Alastair drove into her, she felt Connor pull his hips back and withdraw. They each alternated their thrusts, one pulling out as the other drove forward, keeping her mindless.

The sensation when their cocks struck each other as one drove into her and the other pulled out kept her on the knife-edge of another orgasm. Heat built in her body, traveling up from somewhere in her toes.

Alastair leaned forward, his lips and teeth nuzzling and suckling the flesh between her breasts. She bucked wildly, needing something more from them but not knowing what it was.

They continued their intense pace, driving her higher, closer to another orgasm. Every time Alastair’s teeth grazed the flesh over her heart, she arched forward, her body involuntarily pressing closer to him. Begging him for something she knew she needed, but had no idea what it was.

Another wave washed over her, driving her even closer to the razor edge of desire. She needed something else, something...more. She just didn't know what.

"Please." Charity wasn't even sure she spoke the word aloud, but they obviously heard her plea for more.

"You belong to us," Alastair said, his eyes turning into amber cat eyes just before he sank his teeth into the soft flesh just over her heart.

"Ours!" Connor growled at the same time, his teeth sinking into her right shoulder as they both continued to ride her, driving their shafts into her body, finally making her whole.

Bolts of pure energy shot through her mind, her body...her blood. Suddenly she felt the way her body pleased them. How their coming orgasms wrapped around their balls and lightly squeezed. Tears filled her eyes when she felt their emotions for her, their love for her and the joy they felt at finally having her for a mate.

Their pleasure only served to magnify hers. They bonded together, bound by their love, their bodies and their blood. Hot seed bathed her womb and ass. Their cocks pulsed inside her as they held themselves close, their chests heaving. The two men stumbled, held her steady as her feet lowered to the ground, then sank to their knees, their heads bowed.

Joy filled her heart as she realized she felt their emotions, their love for her and she realized she hadn't made a mistake. She hadn't dreamed her mother's visit. These men and their friends would keep her sisters safe. Based on the way they acted, she was correct in assuming the other two pairs were Faith and Hope's mates.

Stumbling into the shallow end of the pool, Charity sank to her knees and thanked everything that was holy that they had found their *tu braiths* and they would finally go home.

## EPILOGUE

Charity looked at her two sisters. “Do you think there will be more of them?”

Faith snorted. “Of course there’s more of them. One of the guys saw more tracks this morning. Apparently, they found their camp and some sort logbook with a list of names they were to terminate. More are coming. It’s never going to end and we’re never going home.”

Personally, Charity wasn’t sure she wanted to. Besides, there were higher powers at work to make sure the sisters lived long and happy lives — with their men.

“Well I don’t want to go home.” Hope glanced over her shoulder at Callum and Brody. “I like just where I am.”

Faith followed Hope’s gaze and grimaced. “You would.” She sipped her coffee with a frown. “I don’t know why you and Charity bought into this crap anyway. There is no mystical tree, there is no magical connection between mates. Geeze, you two, wake up and smell the friggin’ coffee will

you?"

Covering Faith's hand with her own, Charity squeezed it and gave her a soft smile. "It's real, Faith." She felt her face heat. "I know it's real. We completed the ceremony last night and I can feel who they are, what kind of men they are and they aren't liars."

Hope rested her chin in her hands and stared into space. "Man, I want that. Do you suppose—"

"It's time to go, Hope." Brody stood next to her and held out his hand. "It's getting dark and we'd like to have you safe in the cabin before the gloaming."

Looking up at Brody, Hope smiled, then turned to her sisters. "I just love the way they talk."

"No dilly dallying now, lass. We've been known to spank a lass for her disobedience." The twinkle in his eyes left no doubt that he was teasing.

Ever the tease herself, Hope ran her fingers through her short hair, then grinned. "Promises, promises." She sauntered past Brody, her hips swinging in a blatant invitation. "I'll see you two girls tomorrow." She turned, glanced at Brody and slowly licked her lips. "I have something important to do."

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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.

Having written many novels and working on at least one more at any given time, Tianna still finds time for her family, friends and her many pets. She currently lives in Michigan with her husband, two children, three cats, two big dogs and one occasionally terrorized Netherland Dwarf bunny. Her life is anything but boring.

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Bonnie Rose Leigh has been enthralled with the written word since childhood. When she ran out of things to read, she created her own stories. Now, she is a multi-published author and lives in a small town in Upstate, New York. She spends most of her time on the computer either writing or visiting with friends. When not busy on the computer, her free time is consumed with reading. It doesn't matter what genre the book is either, though she is partial to romance novels. Her favorite after-hours hobby is sprawling in a chair with a book clutched in her hands and a cup of cocoa sitting nearby.

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 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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