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THREE DOG NIGHT

Triple Trouble 3

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MENAGE AMOUR



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DEDICATION

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Triple Trouble 3

TYMBER DALTON

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Prologue

Ancient Blood Oaths

On one of the moor's harshest, coldest nights, winds whipped embers from the large bonfire and sent them spinning into the air until they were lost in the darkness. The group of mostly men gathered around the fire. Behind them, their respective packs stood ready, hands on swords, prepared for battle if necessary.

Rodolfo and Eiselman studied each other in the flickering light. Eiselman broke the uneasy silence. "Have ye decided on the dowry?"

Rodolfo nodded. "A blood oath. Ye will give to us the first female pup born of an Alpha male from your line. When she comes of age, of course."

Eiselman paled. His eyes searched out Ysimel's face. She stood behind Rodolfo, firmly sandwiched between two of her other brothers.

Rodolfo shifted position, blocking Eiselman's view of her. "Ye are Beta. I know this. I do not care what Alpha male is her sire, but ye will hand over the first Alpha male's girl pup born to your line, be it granddaughter or whatnot."

"Can I talk with Ysimel?"

“She has already agreed. That is the only reason I am presenting the offer to ye.” He curled his lip in a sneer. “My sister, marrying a Beta. I never thought I would see the day. Ye owe that your throat is still intact to her love for ye and begging for mercy for your worthless hide.” He spit in the dirt at Eiselman’s feet.

Eiselman didn’t flinch. “What if we do not have one in our family?”

“Your line is bound to the oath. Then one way or another, ye will get one, will ye not? Otherwise, we will take it out in blood. I do not care if it takes one or one hundred generations.” He spit again. “Frankly, I do not think your line is capable of producing an Alpha male.” He sneered again. “Maybe some of my sister’s Alpha blood will win out. Or some Alpha male will marry into it.”

Eiselman despised Rodolfo and would rather kill him and take Ysimel from them by force. She was willing to be with him even though her brothers despised him, but that would bring about yet another needless war. Goddess knew there’d been plenty of bloodletting over the ages.

“Fine.”

Rodolfo grinned, but his expression held no humor. “Bring her over.”

The other two brothers hustled their sister closer to the fire. Rodolfo drew his dirk and grabbed his sister’s hand. “This is your last chance to back out,” he told her. “Ye will be bound to the oath as well.”

“I know,” she softly replied.

“Are ye sure ye want...this? A *Beta*?” He practically spit the word.

She nodded, her eyes never straying from Eiselman. “I love him. He is my One.”

He sliced her palm, then his. He looked at Eiselman. “Well?”

Eiselman took the knife and sliced open his palm.

“Ye two first,” Rodolfo said.

Eiselman took her hand, laced his fingers through hers and looked into her green eyes. "I swear upon the Goddess," he pledged, wishing nothing more than to take Ysimel away to his camp and make love to her all night long.

"Now me." Rodolfo held out his hand.

Eiselman gripped the other shifter's hand, forcing himself not to wince when Rodolfo squeezed hard.

"Swear the oath, Beta," Rodolfo growled. "First female pup born to an Alpha male of your line will be turned over to our clan upon her coming of age. This binds your line by blood and marriage and all their heirs to our oath, regardless of how long it takes. This oath will live until fulfilled, binding upon us and our heirs, or until one of our lines dies out completely." He laughed. "It wouldn't surprise me if your line dies out first. In exchange, ye may take my sister as your mate." He grinned. "Or should I say, she will take ye?"

"I swear."

Rodolfo released Eiselman, then quickly wiped his hand and the dirk on Eiselman's cape. "Ye are all witnesses," Rodolfo announced to the gathered crowd. "A blood oath, sworn this night." He sneered at his sister. "Claim your mate, Alpha bitch."

She threw herself at Eiselman, kissing him, not caring about the others around them. He scooped her into his arms and carried her away from the fire, toward his tent. Inside, he dropped her onto the pile of furs, threw his cape to the floor, and knelt over her. She grabbed him and flipped him onto his back, shoved his kilt aside as she knelt over him.

"Ye are finally mine," she growled.

His stiff cock throbbed, almost painfully, at the sound of her voice. There was nothing gentle or tender in her actions as she impaled herself upon him, ripping through her maidenhead and unleashing a primal scream from her throat. His hands found her waist, trying to slow her movements, but she was caught in her mating rage.

He gave up and lay back, waiting, feeling his release climb. It startled him when she stopped and pulled him into a sitting position, jerked his tunic neck and bared his shoulder. Her hips rocked against him faster, harder, relentless. This was not how his Clan did things, but no matter, he was Beta and knew she would claim him in her way.

He didn't care.

He wrapped his arms around her soft body and tipped his head to the side, baring his throat and neck to her. Hot lips pressed against his flesh, her tongue flicking and tasting. She worked her way down his neck to his shoulder.

As his climax rapidly approached, she growled in the back of her throat, slamming her hips against him. Then her teeth pressed against his shoulder.

"*Mate. My mate.*" He heard her thought as clearly as if she'd spoken. Outside the tent rumbled the responding growls of kin as they also heard her.

"*Submit,*" she mentally ordered.

"Yes!" he gasped.

When she bit down, marking him, he screamed in agony and pleasure as his release ripped through him. He felt her primal growl as her own climax finally caught up, her slick muscles milking another unexpected orgasm from him. A moment later they collapsed onto the furs as she tenderly licked his shoulder.

When she shivered in his arms, he fumbled around and found his cape, pulled it over them, and held her tighter as they drifted to sleep together.

By morning, Rodolfo and his pack had left. Eiselman protectively curled around his mate, gently nipping her shoulder, trying to awaken her. She finally did and turned in his arms, smiling.

"Good morning, husband."

He nuzzled her nose. "Good morning, wife." He rolled on top of her, this time in control. When his cock stiffened, he plunged inside her and held still, savoring the feel of her hot flesh around his. He

dipped his head to her breasts and sucked a nipple into his mouth. She let out a pleased hiss as he tormented the prized piece of flesh into a tight peak, then repeated the action on the other side.

She wrapped her legs around his waist. “Ye said there is a bed awaiting me at our home?”

He laughed. “Yes. I think we will be wearing it out.” A little sadness flitted across her face. “What troubles you?”

Her renewed smile looked forced. “Nothing. Not anymore, now that I am with you.”

Eiselman stroked her cheek. “I am sorry about your family.”

She shook her head. “It does not matter. If they do not want me around because of my husband, it is their loss, not ours.” She pulled him tightly against her and kissed him. “Now make love to me, husband. Mark me as yours.”

* * * *

Ysimel turned, startled, when the door opened. Her hand protectively flew to her swelling belly.

At first, sunlight streaming through the door behind the man kept his face in shadow, until he stepped inside.

“Theadin,” she growled. “What do you want?”

He shrugged. “Rodolfo sent me.” He closed the door and walked further into the room, looking around with obvious disdain. “Sister, you disappoint me.”

“You came all this way to tell me that? You can leave.”

“No, I came to tell you—”

The door flew open and her two sons ran in. “Mother, we saw—” The older one, Danford, pulled up at the sight of the visitor. He grabbed his little brother and gathered him close.

“Danford, Garson, this is your Uncle Theadin.”

“Hello,” the boys echoed, still looking wide-eyed.

Theadin’s gaze narrowed, then he smiled as he turned to her.

“Well, regardless, sister, that one—” he pointed at her belly, “is safe. Obviously one of the next generations will have to fulfill your blood oath.”

“Get out!”

He sat at the table. “Oh, before I have my say? I think not.” He looked at her. “You are a widow with a pup on the way and two mouths to feed. These two are Betas. I have no reason to suspect that one will turn out any differently, male or female.” He shook his head. “You could have been claimed as a pack leader’s wife, and to settle for a Beta, tsk! Such a disappointment you are.” He picked at his fingernails. “Rodolfo told me to extend an invitation to you. As sister, you can rejoin our pack.”

“Be honest. He wants me back to keep an eye on his oath.”

“Of course. Would you expect any less?” He eyed her. “He could pair you to a new mate. Said he would be willing to release you from your oath if you take a mate of his choosing. You know as well as I you shall need one.” His face darkened. “Or are you so willing to throw your life away for the pup of a Beta?”

“Tell him he can jump off the Dover cliffs and let the sea take him!”

Theadin shrugged. “I would not expect any less than that from you, either.” He stood and pushed past the two boys. At the door, he turned. “Your blood oath still matters, sister. Remember that. You and your heirs will be held accountable.”

When he was gone the two boys raced to their mother’s side and huddled around her as she started crying. Word had spread quickly amongst the packs. Her sweet Eiselman was in his grave less than a full turn of the moon before her vulture brothers tried to pick the bones. She should have had eons with her mate, and to have him killed while on a hunt...

She hugged her sons to her. They were too young to truly understand. She would have to explain to them. Sooner rather than later. She already felt her soul slowly dying without her mate by her

side.

“I do not like him, Mother,” Danford said. He was twelve and not quite a man yet. He’d tried to take over for his father as man of the house in all the ways he could.

“Me either,” echoed Garson. Only ten, but already she could see the strength within him.

She kissed them and wiped her face. She prayed the pup within her would be a Beta male or a girl, not an Alpha male. She would not live to fulfill the shameful duty of handing over a girl to her brother. That horrible task would fall to her sons or their heirs. She knew Rodolfo had already arranged a potential match for the unborn girl to another Clan, if and when the day should come.

Ysimel shivered. “Let us prepare dinner, boys. Forget about him. He does not matter.”

* * * *

Danford sat at the table and rubbed his forehead. He’d prayed this day wouldn’t come.

Thank the Goddess Mother had long since passed.

His son and daughter sat before him. Irony of ironies, an Alpha daughter, and a Beta son. “Kathleen, I explained the blood oath to you years ago. You understand what this means, what you’re asking me to approve of, do you not?”

She nodded. “Yes, Father. I do.”

“Marston, you also realize that if I pass before you, you are responsible for upholding the oath if she does not? Enforcing it in her line or in yours, whichever comes first. Instructing our heirs and making sure they swear to it.”

He nodded. “Yes, Father.”

Danford leaned back and looked at his wife. She remained quiet, a full human who preferred to stay out of pack business. She knew of the oath, of course, because he’d had to explain it to her before he

marked her.

He was well aware of the young man waiting outside his front door, probably nervously pacing. There were two options, to allow the union or to kill the man. The latter would mean killing his daughter in the process, because she would fight to save her love, of that he had no doubt.

Danford wasn't even sure he had the strength to overpower her. She was a strong, fierce Alpha who had already rebuffed two Alpha male suitors who had thought her their One. He'd heard rumors of wagers amongst his cousins, betting no man could ever tame or claim her.

"Call him in," Danford quietly ordered.

His wife went to bring him. Oswald Pardie wasn't the most handsome of men. Yet he had a strong back and, from all reports, an honorable heart. According to his daughter, he was her One. Pardie had not reacted in that way to her, but he loved her enough to allow her to claim him without a fight.

Alpha and Alpha.

Danford looked at Oswald once he was seated. "Has my daughter told you of our blood oath to Rodolfo Abernathy?"

The young man nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Are you prepared to swear to it? To take your own blood oath to this family to uphold it?"

He laced his fingers through Kathleen's. "Yes, sir. I am."

"You are an Alpha male. If you have a daughter, or if an Alpha male in your line has a daughter, she will have to be turned over when she comes of age if she is the first born to fulfill the oath. She would have to be made aware of that from an early age, could not be allowed to mate with anyone else, could not be mated or marked by another before she is handed over."

He nodded. "Yes, sir."

Danford grew angry. "You're willing to possibly sacrifice a child over love?"

Oswald's gaze never wavered. "You were, sir. When you married your wife."

After a long, tense moment, the older man laughed. "That is very true." He sighed. "Wife, bring me my dirk."

She fetched the knife and placed it on the table in front of her husband. He picked it up, sliced his palm, then his daughter's. He handed the knife to Oswald. "Do it."

He sliced his own palm and took her hand, pressed their flesh together. "I swear upon the Goddess to uphold the oath."

Danford reached across the table. Oswald gripped his hand. "Do you swear to uphold our family's blood oath to Rodolfo Abernathy's clan?" Danford asked.

Oswald nodded. "I swear upon the Goddess to uphold the oath."

Danford released his hand and took the towel his wife offered him. He wiped the blood away. "Then I give my blessings to your union." Kathleen broadly smiled and kissed Oswald. "However," he said, making the two young lovers pause, "hear me well. Regardless of how I love you, if you have the first girl, and there is breath in my body, I will be forced to uphold the oath. As will your brother, if you do not voluntarily submit. I realize over three centuries have passed, but it makes it no less valid."

"Yes, Father," Kathleen said. "We understand."

He sighed and waved them out. "Go. Take your celebration to the guest house."

The couple raced out of the kitchen, slamming the front door behind them a moment later.

Danford looked at his wife, then his son. "Let us pray for all male pups."

* * * *

Kathleen and Oswald held their third child, their baby boy Liam, and anxiously waited for their Clan's Seer to make her decree. Their

two older sons were both Beta, much to their relief. Grown and on their own already. The original oath was now over four centuries old. Neither son had found a mate yet, and unless they themselves produced an Alpha son, yet another generation would pass without worrying about the oath.

They had not expected this child, had thought they'd been very careful. Over seventy years into their marriage and thirty years since their last pup, they'd grown complacent.

And now...

The Seer smiled at them. "Congratulations! You are very lucky indeed. You finally have an Alpha son to carry on your line."

Kathleen tightly cradled her baby boy, sobbing against her husband as he held her.

Later, out in the carriage, she whispered, "We have to move. Quickly. We cannot let Marston know."

He grimly nodded. "We will. We'll pack and catch the train in the morning." He snapped the reins, urging the horses forward. Unfortunately, Marston was waiting for them at their home, sitting under the elm tree in their front yard.

"There you are," he said with a smile. "What did the Seer proclaim?"

Kathleen shoved her way past her brother and into the house. Marston turned to Oswald, his false cheer now gone. "You swore," he growled. "You swore the oath. I will uphold it if you do not."

"Get out of my face, Beta." He held little but contempt for his brother-in-law.

Marston grabbed his arm. "The Abernathys still consider this oath their top debt needing repayment. It is not in the back of their mind. You will pay."

Oswald shook free. "If you were more of a man, you could fulfill the oath yourself." He looked his brother-in-law up and down. "But it is impossible for you to produce children, isn't it? Not unless one of your male whores shits one out his ass—"

Marston swung. Oswald curled his lips, baring his teeth. “That’s what I was hoping for.” Snarling, he leapt on the other man. When Kathleen reappeared a moment later without the baby, she screamed at them to stop. She snatched the bucket off its hook on the porch, scooped water from the horse trough and slung it at the men. It startled them enough so she could get between them and pull her husband back.

“Stop it! Both of you!” She shoved her brother away. “Get out of here! I will uphold the oath, but we’re still a long way away from that, aren’t we? You aren’t taking my Liam, you would have to take his daughter if he ever has one. So get out of here before I rip your throat out myself! Go slink back to your buddies the Abernathys, and to Hell with you.”

Marston stood and wiped blood off his mouth. “Don’t think I will forget this, sister,” he growled.

She curled her lip, baring her teeth. “You are not my brother anymore. We may share blood, but you are dead to me.”

Marston knew he couldn’t beat his Alpha sister in a fight, especially with her husband right there. He turned and headed to his horse and took off at a full gallop down the dirt road.

She checked Oswald for wounds. “I guess moving is no longer an option.”

He held her, stroked her hair. “No, my love. Not anymore.”

Chapter 1

Present Day: Arcadia, Florida

Aindreas Lyall looked up from his breakfast. “You take her into town,” he said to his youngest brother, Cailean. “Get her whatever she needs.” He smiled and winked at Elain. “And wants.” In the week since their return from Virginia, Elain had let Ain off the hook. She wasn’t making him speak with his old Scottish brogue anymore.

Except when she was really in the mood to hear it.

“But I want to take her shopping,” middle brother Brodey whined. “Why can’t I take her shopping? You said I could take her shopping when I wanted to.”

“She needs work clothes,” Cail patiently explained as he poured himself a cup of coffee. “If you take her shopping you’d bring her home looking like a cowgirl stripper.”

Elain Pardie giggled, but stayed out of the discussion between the triplet brothers—who also happened to be her mates.

Brodey glared at Cail. “And that’s a problem...why?”

She kissed Brodey. “Sweetie, they have a point.” She stared into his sexy green eyes. “You can take me shopping for something else later in the week if you want. Okay?”

He looked close to pouting. He pulled her into his arms and glared at Ain. “Fine.”

Ain rolled his grey eyes, but he smiled at Elain. “Do *you* mind if Cail takes you today instead of Brodey?”

She pulled Brodey’s arms tighter around her. “I don’t mind.” She shivered as Brodey kissed the nape of her neck. She might end up

back in bed with him if he kept that up.

She felt Brodey rumble low in the back of his throat, expressing his displeasure. She gently slapped his arm. “Stop. Behave yourself. You can spoil me on a different day.”

His low growl almost immediately transformed into amused laughter.

The Alpha triplets had proven to her beyond a shadow of a doubt that they meant every word they’d said when they swore to love, cherish, and spoil her rotten. All three men were handsome, nearly identical in appearance, with jet black hair untouched by grey. They looked thirty, not two hundred and thirty-eight. Lean, hard muscles, and bodies to die for. The eldest triplet, Prime Alpha Aindreas, had piercing grey eyes and the job of laying down the law. He was quickly learning to temper his heavy-handed edicts with a little discretion. Beta Alpha Brodey, with his sexy green eyes and playful ways, always kept Elain busy.

Especially if she made the mistake of bending over in front of him.

Gamma Alpha Cailean’s sweet brown eyes helped Elain read his emotions. He was her thoughtful man, the one Aindreas usually turned to when he needed advice. Only fifteen minutes in age separated Ain from Cail.

While she could only legally marry one of the shape-shifters—Ain, because he was the oldest and the Prime—she was mated to all three of them. Their One.

And what a happy One she was, despite their rocky start. God, barely a month ago!

Ain glared at Brodey. He’d heard his brother’s growl. “You want to take this outside? Or are you gonna back down?”

Elain tightly gripped Brodey’s arms, refusing to let go of him. “You guys aren’t going to get into it this morning, are you?” She tipped her head back to look at Brodey. “Please?” She threw in a little pouty lip for good measure.

Brodey laughed again and hugged her tight. “Oh, Goddess, no. I’m fine.” He turned to Ain. “Sorry.”

Ain nodded and returned to his breakfast. “Thank you.”

Elain breathed a silent sigh of relief. It wasn’t unusual for the Alpha shape-shifter brothers to settle quarrels amongst themselves with their fists. She understood that was part of who they were, but she didn’t like it.

The men had assured her she didn’t have to work if she didn’t want to. At first she’d rebelled against the idea of quitting her hard-earned job at the TV station. She’d worked her ass off to be a reporter. Then they’d almost lost Ain the week before, after he realized how miserable he’d made her by making her quit her job. Elain had run off to Spokane to spend time with her mom. Ain shifted, ran off and tried to get himself hit and killed by a car to break his bond with Elain, so she could be happy with his brothers.

Fortunately, his plan didn’t work. He ended up injured and in the county animal control shelter. As a hurricane bore down on Arcadia, Ain and other animals in the shelter were shipped to a shelter in Virginia. That’s where Elain finally tracked him down and rescued him before he was euthanized. As a result of that fiasco, both Ain and Elain readjusted their thinking. Elain grudgingly realized the men were right, that being a TV reporter wasn’t exactly the best profession when trying to conceal a relationship with triplet shape-shifters. And she felt miserable when she wasn’t around them.

Once she’d tracked Ain’s sorry shifted ass down at the shelter in Roanoke, Elain made a deal with him that she’d give the men six months to do things their way. At the end of the six months, if she still wanted to go back to work, preferably at a low-profile job, she could.

In the meantime, she was going stir crazy. She asked the men to teach her the cattle ranch operations.

Ironically, Ain hesitated to do that at first, worried she might get hurt. When Brodey and Cail took Elain’s side, he relented.

Hence the shopping trip.

“When are we leaving?” Brodey continued nuzzling the back of her neck. She hadn’t gotten dressed yet, still wore her bath robe, and needed a shower.

Cail sipped his coffee. “Probably after Brodey gets done jumping you,” he said with a smirk. Ain and Cail had already showered and dressed. Brodey had left their shared bed first to eat breakfast.

Now Elain realized that was probably his plan the entire time.

Brodey rumbled against the back of her neck again, but this time she recognized the sound as his, “Please fuck me,” growl. Brodey was her playful—albeit perpetually horny—puppy.

She felt his stiff cock poke against her butt through his shorts as he ground his hips into her. “Please?” he whispered.

Ain laughed. “It’s your call, babe. I can order him out to work.”

Brodey softly whined against her neck, making her laugh again. “No, don’t do that,” she said. She turned and draped her arms around Brodey’s neck. “All right, you big baby. I’ll take a shower with—” She let out a scream as he threw her over his shoulder and ran for the master bedroom.

Cal and Ain laughed. “Bring her up to the main barn when you finish with her,” Cail called out. “And don’t take all day, dammit.”

Brodey slammed the bedroom door behind them and dropped her onto the bed.

“A little warning next time,” she scolded.

He pounced, kissing her and silencing her protests. Who was she kidding? She loved having them lusting after her like this. She’d never felt as sexy as she had since getting together with the brothers.

Brodey worked his way south, down her neck, his lips and tongue teasing and tasting, stirring pleasant pulsations deep in her core. He pulled her robe open and kissed his way between her breasts. “You know I can’t help myself with you. You always smell so damn good. I can’t keep my hands off you.”

She tangled her fingers in his hair. He kept his a little longer than his brothers, just this side of shaggy. “How do I smell to you?”

“Clean, sweet. Like a mountain in spring.”

“So what you’re saying is that I smell like fabric softener?”

He froze, then laughed and lifted his head. “Um, I’ve never wanted to fuck a bottle of fabric softener, babe.”

“I should hope not.”

He nuzzled her left breast, his hot, moist mouth teasing her nipple into a hard peak and setting her insides on fire. He gently nipped, just enough to send shockwaves straight to her sex and make her gasp and wiggle her hips against him. One of his knees was perfectly positioned between her legs, and she ground against him.

“Mmm!” He lifted his head. “That’s my girl.” He pressed his leg a little more firmly against her as he switched to her other breast and repeated the sweet torment.

Elain closed her eyes and wiggled her hips. She’d be lying if she said she didn’t enjoy this, having three hunky guys at her beck and call for the rest of her now extremely long life, thanks to being mated to them.

“I thought you wanted to take a shower?” she asked, still wiggling her hips.

“We will. Eventually.” He worked his way lower. She moaned in protest when he moved his leg so he could kiss her belly.

He chuckled and lifted his head. “What’s the matter?”

Elain glared at him. “You know damn well what.”

“I’ll take care of you. Don’t worry.”

She knew he would, too. He worked his way south, grabbing the waistband of her panties in his teeth and tugging them down. She giggled. “Don’t rip them like you did the last pair. I’m running out.”

He waggled his eyebrows at her as he released her panties, then slipped his fingers under the elastic to slide them down her hips. “Maybe that’s my plan. Did you think of that?”

“I’m gonna need a chastity belt around you.”

He tossed her panties onto the floor. “I’d shift and chew through the fucking thing. Nothing can keep me away from you.” He dropped

his head to her mound and slowly laved her clit with his tongue.

Elain closed her eyes and twined her fingers in his hair again, then tightly gripped it with her fist. He was always sweet and tender, if not energetic, with her. By contrast, he loved for her to manhandle him. The rougher, the better.

He growled, low, expressing his pleasure. In return, he slowly fucked her with his talented tongue, going deep, then withdrawing to circle her clit. He repeated that pattern for a few minutes, tasting and teasing her, until she gasped with need.

Brodey lifted his head. "Tell me what you want," he whispered.

"Don't tease me!"

He kissed her clit, flicked it with his tongue, blew warm air over her flesh. "Have I ever teased you, babe?"

One eye popped open and glared at him. He laughed. "Okay." He lowered his mouth to her again, and this time he worked at her clit with his tongue, flicking it. When he knew she was on the edge, he grabbed the sensitive nub of flesh with his lips and gently sucked.

She screamed as she came, yanking on his hair and clamping his head between her thighs, refusing to let him stop until she'd finished coming. After Elain finally went limp on the bed and her grip on him relaxed, he rested his chin on her tummy and looked at her.

"You okay?"

"Oh, yeah. Sooo okay."

He sat up and shimmied out of his shorts, exposing his rigid member. Trite and clichéd, but she loved the sight of her men's cocks. All three were well-endowed. Not monstrous, but possessing the exact length and girth to fill her to sexy perfection.

He knelt between her legs and lifted her feet to his shoulders. He kissed one ankle, then the other. "In the mood for a wild ride?"

She grinned. "Saddle up, cowboy."

"Yee haw!" He plunged his cock into her, leaning forward enough to press her thighs against her body. "Gonna fuck you deep and hard, baby."

She gripped his arms and held on. It hadn't taken her long to figure out Brodey's techniques. Hard and fast, or soft and playful. Not much in between because he wasn't a complicated man. This morning he was in the mood for hard and fast. She stared into his eyes as he fucked his cock as deeply into her as he could.

Knowing she was the only woman in the world he'd ever make love to for the rest of their lives flipped her heart on end.

She reached up and fisted his hair again, pulled him even closer. "Fuck me hard, baby. Give me that sweet cock."

He closed his eyes, grunting, his thrusts even faster than before. She sucked his earlobe between her lips and bit down, hard.

He let out a howl of pleasure and pain as he came. Then he collapsed on top of her, breathless, panting. Elain wiggled her legs free and wrapped them around his waist, keeping him trapped inside her.

She also still had a tight grip on his hair.

"Want seconds, baby?" she purred. She licked the side of his neck, down to his shoulder, where she playfully nipped him.

Inside her, she felt his cock twitch. He had the fastest recovery time of the brothers, her perpetual horn dog.

"Don't tease me," he murmured, still a little drunk from his explosion.

She rolled her hips against him. "I'm not teasing." She kissed his shoulder before biting him again.

He groaned, deep, nearly a growl, but his cock immediately stiffened inside her. "Fuck," he whispered, his hips slowly rocking against hers. "What you do to me...Jesus, babe!"

"Show me."

He kept his face pressed against her neck as he worked his hips against hers, taking his time, enjoying himself. "You think you can give me another one?" he mumbled.

"No, you enjoy yourself."

"Mmm..." He took his time as he worked his way toward another

release.

Elain loved the feel of any of them inside her, especially when they were all together and the other men were holding or touching her. That thought stirred her own need after a few minutes. “Maybe I’ve changed my mind,” she whispered in his ear.

He stopped. “What?”

“I do want seconds.”

He rolled onto his back without losing contact with her. “Sit up, babe.”

She did, slipping her robe off her shoulders and dropping it to the bed. He used his thumb to stroke her clit. “Look at me.” Elain opened her eyes and fell into Brodey’s sexy green gaze. “Come for me.”

His cock hit different areas inside her from this angle. She rocked her hips, feeling him stroking her inside as well as out. She caressed his firm chest with her hands, gently raking her nails over the light dusting of dark fuzz across his chest. With his free hand, he reached up and tweaked one nipple, gently pinching it between his fingers, alternating back and forth between them. Every tug on her breasts set off a pulsation of fire in her sex, pushing her closer to the edge.

When he used two fingers to roll her clit she exploded, her muscles contracting and squeezing his cock. He wasted no time, grabbed her hips and thrust hard.

“Fuck, yes!” he groaned. She collapsed on top of him, spent, their bodies slick with sweat. He cradled her in his arms, stroked his fingers along her spine. “You have no idea how much I love you,” he mumbled.

She kissed his chin. “Yeah, I think I do.”

Elain was drifting to sleep when he rolled them onto their sides. “I hate to disturb you, sweetheart, but we need to get up. Ain and Cail are waiting.”

She wiggled her hips against him. “Five more minutes,” she mumbled. “You owe me.”

He snickered. “Okay.”

What seemed like thirty seconds later, he gently nudged her. “Honey, we really need to get up.”

“You promised me five minutes.”

“Um, yeah, about that. It’s been an hour.”

She started to protest, then sat up, startled. She looked at the clock. “Oh, shit!” Elain jumped off him and bolted for the shower. “You were supposed to give me five minutes!”

She heard him get up and follow her to the bathroom. “You were comfortable. I fell asleep, too.”

With the shower warming, she turned and smacked him on the shoulder as he reached for his electric shaver. “You get to explain to them. I’m not getting in trouble with Ain for you.”

He pulled her tightly against him and kissed her. Never failing, the feel of his lips against hers melted her faster than ice cream in a microwave.

“Calm down, it’s okay. They won’t mind.” He released her and when she turned, he patted her on the ass. “I’ll be right in.”

* * * *

The men owned the Triple L cattle ranch, a three thousand-acre spread outside of Arcadia, Florida. They weren’t a dairy or meat-producing operation. They specially bred and produced award-winning, high-end quality breed stock they shipped around the country.

Cail made a big show of rolling his eyes and holding up his arm to point at his watch when Brodey and Elain drove up to the main barn thirty minutes later.

Before Elain even got out of the truck she pointed at Brodey and sent a thought to Cail. “*It’s all his fault!*” While she could mentally “talk” to all three men like that, she seemed to have the strongest link with Cail in that way.

Cail smiled and playfully shook his head. “*Of course it is.*”

Ain walked out of the barn to greet them, one eyebrow arched. “Ahem.”

Brodey’s face reddened. “Sorry. I fell asleep.”

“Uh huh. Just for that, you get to check pregnant cows today.”

Brodey made an ick face. “Grrreeaat.”

Elain snickered. “Make sure you wash your hands before you come in for lunch.”

“Ha ha ha.” Brodey kissed her one last time. “Oh well. It was worth it.”

Cail bundled her into his truck, and they drove out the north gate to Arcadia. The DeSoto County ranch was the perfect location for the three shape-shifter men to have as much privacy as they wanted. Because of the remote location, it was also frequently used by other local shifters for Ceremonies and other “official” shifter business.

Elain loved Arcadia. It was a small, old Florida town just far enough from the coast to keep the crowds out—unless it was rodeo time—but big enough to provide convenience. Cail pulled in to a large farm supply store. Elain owned a couple pairs of jeans and sneakers, but the men wanted her in boots and to have everything else she’d need for ranch work.

Two hours and one scorching hot credit card later, Cail carried several large bags full of her new work gear out to his truck. Elain started to follow him when she spotted a stock trailer hooked to a truck parked in the lot. Inside stood two horses, a piebald and an Appaloosa.

Elain walked over to the trailer, where the piebald had its nose stuck out the side. “They’re gorgeous.” Movement across the street caught her eye. She glanced over. In front of a cafe she saw an older man standing there, intently staring in her direction. He didn’t look like a local, dressed not in jeans and a work shirt, but in what appeared to be tailored wool slacks and a dress coat.

No one local would be caught dressing like that in August in Florida.

Cail realized Elain wasn't behind him and followed her to the trailer. As he stepped beside her, she glanced at him, then back across the street.

The man was gone. She shook off the creeping wave of gooseflesh threatening to sweep over her.

Cail reached out. The horse sniffed, then nuzzled him.

"I thought horses hated werewolves," she quipped.

"Shifters. And that movie was pure crap."

"I love James Spader though."

Cail snorted. "Poser," he grumbled under his breath.

Elain smiled. "That's cute. You're jealous. I'd expect that from Ain or Brodey." She pet the horse one last time, stroked its velvety muzzle. "Can you teach me how to ride?"

"I would, if we had horses."

"What do you mean, if?" She admitted she didn't know much about the ranch but she assumed they had horses stashed somewhere.

He shrugged. "We used to. Years ago. We haven't gotten more, we bought quad ATVs and run them. We don't have rugged terrain to deal with like in the mountains. Horses aren't necessary."

"Oh." She felt a pang of disappointment as she looked back at the horses.

He opened the truck door, held it for her as she climbed in. "Would you like Daddy to buy you a pony, little girl?" He playfully smiled.

She liked seeing this side of him. Usually he acted quiet and reserved. "You're a ballbuster."

"You didn't answer my question."

"You mean it? You'll buy me a horse?"

He leaned in and kissed her. "Babe, I'd buy out half of Ocala's Thoroughbred breeding stock if it'd make you happy."

* * * *

They drove back to the ranch where Ain and Brodey met them at the house for lunch. “Did you have fun shopping?” Ain asked.

She dodged Brodey’s attempt to hook an arm around her waist and pull her closer. If he got his hands on her for too long, she’d end up back in bed with him. “Cail said we got everything I’ll need for a while.” She set out sandwich fixings for the men, then glared at Brodey. “Did you wash your hands?”

He held them up. “See, Mom? All clean.”

She swatted him on the shoulder while he grinned. “Just for that, smart ass, you can run to Venice with me tomorrow to get more of my stuff.” She’d taken her time bringing her things over from her house. She didn’t want to sell it in case her mom decided to move back to Florida. Ain had already paid off the mortgage for her from their considerable funds. Her mom could live there, if she wanted. Elain hoped her mom would opt to stay there when she flew back to Florida for the wedding.

Close, but not too close.

“A chance to be alone with my Princess? I’m at your beck and call,” Brodey assured her with a sweeping, melodramatic bow.

“At least you’re good for something,” Cail snarked.

Elain glared at him. “Why are you always picking on him?”

“It’s okay, babe,” Brodey assured her. “I’m used to it. He’s just jealous because he’s the baby.”

Cail ignored him. “We all have our place,” he explained. “I’m the smart one, Ain’s Prime Alpha.”

“Well, what does that make me?” Brodey protested.

“Curly,” Ain quipped with a playful smirk.

“I was going to say Shemp,” Cail said, “but okay. That works, too.”

Elain rolled her eyes and hugged Brodey. “Don’t worry. I love you.”

He wrapped his arms around her and glared at his brothers. “I’m the brawn, that’s what you’ve always said. How many times have I

pulled your asses out of the fire?”

Cail and Ain exchanged a look and laughed again. Ain shook his head. “Yeah, and how many times have we had to pull *your* ass out of the fire?”

Brodey nuzzled her neck. “Want to come back to the barns with me and start learning stuff?”

“Let me go change clothes.” She glanced at him, a slightly ill look on her face. “I don’t have to go feeling up pregnant cows, do I?”

He laughed. “No, doll. I won’t make you do anything gross like that.”

“Good.”

He playfully swatted her on the ass as she passed him.

After lunch, Cail walked to his office. Ain followed him a moment later.

“We need to get all the paperwork handled for her, too,” he told Cail.

Cail nodded and pointed to a stack of papers. “Already on it. She gave me all her vitals and stuff the other day. I’m getting the forms ready for Katherine.” Their long-time attorney was also a fellow shifter, a cousin, and understood the delicacy of the situation. Elain would legally marry Ain, even though all three men would wear wedding rings.

Ain started to reach for one of the forms, Elain’s birth certificate, then stopped with his fingers touching the corner of the paper. “Do you think we should look into finding her birth family for her?”

Cail sat back, frowning. “Why?”

Ain shrugged but didn’t tease the paper out of the pile. “Just wondering.” Elain’s birth mother, knowing she was dying, had given custody of Elain to her best friend, Carla. Elain was only a baby at the time.

Elain’s father had taken off after finding out her mom was pregnant with a girl.

“You don’t ‘just wonder’ about something like that.” Cail turned

as Elain walked in and kissed Ain, then him.

“Want me to fix dinner tonight, boys?” she asked.

Ain smiled and pulled her in for another kiss while Brodey watched from the doorway. “Naw, we’ll take you out tonight. Anywhere you want to go.”

After Brodey and Elain left for the barns, Cail returned to the topic at hand. “You don’t ‘just wonder.’ What’s going on?”

“Probably nothing.”

Cail crossed his arms. “Brother, don’t hold back. You might be Prime, but you have no right to keep shit from me.”

“I talked to Jocko the day after we got back from Virginia.”

“You mean the day after she went batshit and pushed our buttons and ran us ragged chasing her.”

Ain glared at him.

“And?” Cail prompted.

“I was curious.”

Cail’s brown eyes darkened. “Ain,” he growled, “cut the bullshit.”

“I wondered if there was possibly more to it. To her past. There’s no way she could be from a shifter family and not know it. The telepathy, how she acted Alpha the other night by running from us and goading us to chase her, all of that’s just some sort of coincidence or a reaction to being mated to three Alphas. It has to be.”

Cail reached over and picked up her birth certificate. He studied it. “Well, she is adopted. Anything’s possible.”

Ain leaned back in his chair. “That’s my point. No shifter family would let a shifter or even a half-shifter child be adopted out to just anyone. Jocko said there was a shifter named Liam Pardie who used to live in the Tampa area. He was apparently mixed up with the mob or something and disappeared over twenty-five years ago. Guy was one of the Abernathys. If Elain’s adopted, that’s just a coincidence, because Pardie would be her adopted name—what?”

Cail’s face had gone pale. “What did you say the guy’s name was?”

Ain reached for the paper and pulled it from his brother's hand.

Father—Liam Pardie. Her mother's name, Maureen Alexander, sounded vaguely familiar.

"Shit," Ain growled as he stared at the paper. "Okay, that's a coincidence," he insisted despite the tight knot forming in his gut. "Liam's a common name. Besides, Elain grew up in Spokane, right?"

Cail shook his head again. "No. Her adopted mom's from there. Elain was born and raised in Tampa."

Ain looked at the paper. Place of birth—Tampa Community Hospital.

The men sat in silence for a moment. This had to be a coincidence. A freaky, hit-twice-by-lightning, missed-it-by-that-much coincidence.

Had to be.

"Ain," Cail softly said, "what does this mean?"

Ain vigorously shook his head. "It means jack shit." He looked at his brother. "It also means you *do not say anything* about this to Elain or Brodey."

"What the fuck? You're edicting me to keep my mouth shut?"

"Until I can find out exactly what this means." He looked at the piece of paper again. "If—and that's a huge if—she's related to the Abernathys—"

"Oh, fuck!" Cail breathed. "Those guys are assholes! They're sick, crazy bastards."

"Exactly. I don't want to stir up any trouble if there's really none to stir up. That's why I want to keep this between you and me for now." He laid the paperwork on Cail's desk. "The sooner we can change her name to Lyall, the better. They've never had a beef with us in the past. I certainly don't want to draw their attention now."

Ain strode from the room, his head spinning. The Abernathys were dying out, most of the shifters born into their Clan weren't Alphas anymore. If you dared marry into or out of their Clan without their approval, even in modern times, it was as good as starting a war.

He started to call Jocko, then hung up. Jocko would keep his mouth shut, but if he started asking around to get more information for Ain, it could bring attention to their Clan that they didn't want or need.

Ain stared out the front windows. They'd owned the ranch for over fifty years. Maybe it was time to sell out and move back to Maine, to the Clan compound up there, where there was safety in numbers.

Where the Clan could help protect Elain if the Abernathys came calling, because there was no way in hell he would ever let anyone hurt or take away their mate.

Chapter 2

Brodey and Elain left for Venice the next morning. She'd had to dodge his playful groping in the shower, but managed to keep him focused and on task. They stopped to buy boxes and packing tape, then spent the morning gathering up the books and other items she wanted to move to the ranch. He wouldn't let her carry anything, making all the trips to tote things out to the truck.

By lunch time, Elain had mostly filled the back of Brodey's truck with boxes of clothes and books. There were still a lot of things for her to get, but they could wait.

"I'll buy you lunch before we go home, babe. How's that?"

"Okay."

"Applebee's?"

She grinned. "Looking to relive history?"

He waggled his eyebrows at her. "Maybe."

Elain couldn't help but smile during the short drive to the restaurant. Just days after first meeting them, Cail and Brodey had showed up at the TV station to take her to lunch. Later, the men enjoyed a little dessert of their own in the parking lot, with Elain as their treat.

Her panties still dampened at the memory.

The hostess seated them. Elain was studying the selection when she caught Brodey's playful gleam across the top of his menu.

"What I want isn't on the menu," he whispered.

Elain reddened, but smiled. "You're reading my thoughts again, aren't you?"

He laughed and put down his menu. "No. I don't have to read

your mind to know you were thinking about that afternoon.” He reached across the table and took her hand. “And now you’re ours forever.”

She started to reply when their waitress walked up. “Hi, I’m Kimberlie, and I’ll be your—Brodey!”

He dropped Elain’s hand as shock washed across his face. “Um, hey, Kimmie. Long time, no see.” He sat back in the booth. Elain finally pulled her hand back. “How you been?”

The waitress smiled and slid into the booth next to Brodey without casting Elain a glance. “Good. I’m doing good. A whole lot better now that I’ve run into you.”

Brodey finally seemed to remember his mate sitting across the table. “Um, Kimberlie, this is Elain.”

Elain bristled at his lack of further elaboration until she realized that if this woman knew Brodey well enough to immediately tell him apart from his brothers, he would have to fudge the truth a little around non-shifters. She was, after all, supposed to be marrying Ain. “Pleased to meet you,” Elain mumbled.

Kimberlie gave Elain a quick up and down glance, then returned her attention to Brodey. “Same here. Hey, listen, I’m glad I ran into you. Are you doing anything this weekend, honey?” She put on a seductive smile that Elain wanted to smack off her face. “My brothers said you’re still single.”

He anxiously glanced at Elain, then back to the waitress. “Um, yeah, about that, no—I mean, yes, we’ve got plans. I’m sorry.”

“How about next weekend?”

“Um, really, that wouldn’t be good for me either. Maybe some other time.”

Elain fought the seething wave of rage rolling through her. She felt and caught the growl in the back of her throat before she let it loose.

She also fought the urge to curl her lips in a snarl.

What the fuck is wrong with me? Elain tried to let reason and

rationality take over. “I’ll have iced tea,” she forced through firmly clenched teeth.

Kimberlie nodded, but didn’t look her way. “Sure, I’ll get it for you. So what’ll you have, handsome? And when *can* we get together?”

Elain grabbed the edge of the booth seat with both hands and let up only when she realized her fingers had punched through the vinyl. Apparently enhanced strength was among her new talents.

“Um, you know Kimmie, this really isn’t a good time for me,” Brodey stammered, briefly glancing in Elain’s direction. “I’m sorry. Nothing personal.”

Kimmie sighed. “Oh, okay.” She reached over and pecked Brodey on the nose. “You want your usual?”

He nodded.

Trying to keep up appearances...trying to keep up appearances. Elain knew if she was “officially” marrying Ain that it would look weird for the other brothers to introduce her to normal humans as their wife or fiancée as well. She’d met a few other shifters so far, and among them revealing the truth was okay and no big deal.

This was the first time Elain had to deal with a situation like this.

When Kimberlie scooped out of the booth and left, Elain took a couple of deep breaths to calm her nerves.

Brodey appeared more than nervous—he looked positively ill. “You okay, babe?” he asked.

She nodded. “Yeah.”

He leaned in. “Hey, I’m sorry about that. I didn’t know she was working here, didn’t even know she was back in town. She caught me by surprise. We can leave if you want, seriously.”

She’d take the magnanimous and mature approach. “No. It’s okay. I understand. You have to make it look normal to people who don’t know the truth.”

Brodey smiled, obviously relieved by her calm reaction. “Yeah.”

Kimberlie returned with their drinks. “Ready to order?”

They ordered. Elain decided to push the envelope. “So, how long have you known Brodey?”

Elain felt Brodey’s stomach drop from across the table. The girl, who barely looked old enough to serve liquor, grinned. “Oh, what? Forty years? My parents moved to Arcadia a little after they did. We’ve known each other forever. I just moved back into town a week ago. I was gone for a couple of years.” She trailed her finger down Brodey’s arm. “After this guy broke my heart a few years back.”

Brodey blushed deep crimson.

Elain’s emotions flashed back over to rage. Somehow, she kept her voice calm. “Oh?”

“Yeah.” Kimberlie sighed. “Your stupid brother and his bullshit rules.” She smacked Brodey’s shoulder. “I do plan on marrying you, Brodey Lyall. I heard Ain’s tyin’ the knot. I’m gonna make him see reason and let you marry me. You’re not getting rid of me so easily this time.” She winked at Elain. “I’ve been after him for years. This one is way too good in bed for me to let him go again. Nobody’s ever compared to him.” She ran her fingers through his hair before turning and walking off.

That sealed it. Brodey officially looked like he wanted to crawl under the table and die.

Elain studied him for a long moment before quietly speaking. “She’s a shifter?”

He frantically shook his head. “Not one of us. She’s from a shifter family, but a totally different line. Their Alphas don’t have Ones like ours do. They’re feline shifters.”

Another few long, deep breaths. Did she really want to have a screaming match with Brodey in a crowded restaurant about why the fuck he didn’t tell the woman the truth about who she was?

And about things like feline shifters?

Elain studied the restaurant decor. She looked out the window and watched cars rolling by on U.S. 41. She studied other patrons, the dessert menu on the table, and finally looked at Brodey. “I need the

truck keys. I have to get my purse.”

“I’ll go get it for you,” he hastily offered.

“No, I’ll get it.” Elain’s calm, even tone must have cowed Brodey, because he immediately passed the keys over.

Kimberlie reappeared with their food, and she couldn’t just put it on the table and leave them the fuck alone. She had to sit next to Brodey for a minute and talk with him.

“So, when can I see you again, handsome? I’m dying to get together with you, you know.”

He reddened and looked desperate. “You know...um, it’s not a good time right now.”

Elain forced a smile. “I’ll be back in a minute. I’ll leave you two alone to talk.”

She walked out to the truck, which couldn’t be seen from their table, and got in. When Elain’s cell phone rang five minutes later, she was already a few miles from the restaurant, heading toward Arcadia. She ended the call and sent it straight to voice mail without even looking to see who called.

Fucker!

That was the nicest thing she could think to call him. Considering how pissed she was, the last place she needed to be sitting was within strangling distance of Brodey.

He could get a ride home from *Kimmie*.

She turned her phone off.

When she pulled up to the front door of the ranch house an hour later, she backed close to the porch and dropped the tailgate.

Ain and Cail walked out. Ain looked...

Well, Primely pissed. “*Where* have you been?”

“Venice. With Brodey. Went to my house to get stuff, you know that. Then he took me to lunch.” She grabbed a box to take it in, but Cail took it from her and set it back on the tailgate.

“What happened, honey?” Cail asked. “Why’d you leave Brodey?” He shot Ain a warning look.

She forced another smile. “Oh, I left him chatting with some fucking waitress he used to date, Kimberlie. You remember her, right? Apparently she’s a real fucking hot pussy—literally—and Brodey didn’t have the balls to tell her you guys are my mates! And guess what? She’s bound and determined to marry him.”

That did it. Stating it out loud blasted the last of her self-control. She sat on the tailgate and sobbed.

Ain ignored her bout of swearing as both men stepped close and hugged her.

“Honey,” Cail softly said, “Brodey is a bonehead. Why do you think we call him that? He doesn’t always think fast on his feet. In fact, he rarely thinks fast on his feet, which is why he’s so prone to getting into trouble.”

“I mean,” she wailed, “I could understand it if she was a human! That wouldn’t have bothered me, because I know we have to be careful with who knows. But then he tells me she’s not even fucking normal, that she’s a shifter and knows what y’all are. When she outright said she’s out to marry him, he didn’t even bother to tell her who I am! Argh!”

Ain let out a sigh and pulled Elain to him, resting his chin on the top of her head as he stroked her back. “You stay here with her,” he told Cail, “and I’ll go get Brodey.” His tone dropped, nearly growly. “I’ll have a little chat with him on the way home.”

“Punch his fucking lights out!” she sobbed. Jesus, the crazy mood swings were back. She thought they’d stopped after the night she and Ain returned from Virginia. Nope, now she felt like she could rip Brodey’s head off and shit down his neck, even though rationally she knew she shouldn’t be feeling like this.

At least, not this violently angry.

Cail laughed. “Damn, girl. You must really be mad at him.”

Ain kissed her and handed her over to Cail. “I’ll be back in a while.” He gently grabbed her chin and made her look at him. “Watch. Your. Mouth.” Ain didn’t like her swearing.

She started to argue with him, then stopped. It wasn't worth it. She was already pissed at one brother. "I'm sorry."

He kissed her again. "I know you're upset, baby. It's okay, I'll let it go." His voice deepened again. "I'll take it out on Brodey's hide instead. He's the reason you're feeling like this."

* * * *

Ain found Brodey sitting on a bench outside the restaurant. Brodey wouldn't meet Ain's angry gaze as he climbed into the passenger side of the truck. Ain pulled around the restaurant and parked in the shopping center lot behind the building.

After a few minutes of silence, Ain growled at him. "Well?"

"Well what?"

"Want to explain what the fuck happened?"

Brodey blushed and explained. When he finished his story, Ain shook his head and swore. "What the *hell* were you thinking?" he asked. "Why didn't you tell Kimberlie up front what's going on and who Elain was?"

He shrugged. "I...just couldn't. I couldn't break it to her. Not like that."

Ain looked out the window and took a moment to compose himself. "I'm sorry. I know it was shitty of us to make you get rid of her, but you knew as well as I did it never would have worked with her. Cail and I didn't even like her."

Brodey nodded while he picked at his fingernails.

Ain tried again. "She's a feline shifter. If I hadn't made you break up with her, she would have spent years scuttling our attempts to find someone else. They don't have Ones, they don't understand that concept. You know that."

Brodey nodded again.

Ain swore. "Jesus, Brod, we've got Elain now! You love her! You're the one who tracked her down, for Christ's sake!"

"I know," he softly said.

Ain closed his eyes. "I know you loved Kimberlie. I'm sorry. But dammit, you're not the only one who's had to walk away from someone you loved because she wasn't our One, and you damn well know it."

Brodey nodded. "I know." He looked out the passenger window and refused to talk anymore.

Ain started the truck and headed for home. Near Nocatee, Brodey looked at him. "How upset is she?" he quietly asked.

"Very. She asked me to pound your fucking ass, if that tells you anything. You'll have to make it up to her. I'm not getting in the middle of this."

"Dammit." He took a deep breath. "I'll explain it to her."

"No, you won't. Not like that."

Brodey struck out, slammed his fist into the dash. "What the fuck do you want from me, goddammit? You tell me I need to make it up to her, but I can't tell her the fucking truth? I can't lie to her, you know that!"

Ain slammed on the brakes and pulled off the road. "Yeah, let's see how that conversation goes. 'Hey, Elain, sorry about what happened, but she's the chick I was desperately in love with a couple of years before we met you because she was my One. The only reason I'm shackled up with you instead of her is because Cail and Ain hated her.' Be sure to tell me how that goes, because I don't want to be anywhere near your ass when she goes off. I damn sure don't want her heart broken like that."

Brodey swore and punched the dash again. "Fuck!"

"Exactly." He leaned in close. "Do you *really* want to be the one who tells her she wasn't the first choice for any of us? All that matters is she *is* our One, now, and she's ours forever. The past doesn't matter anymore. Right?"

Brodey leaned back and closed his eyes. "Right."

"Please don't make me edict you about this. She knows there were

women in our past. Hell, before she was born. There's no reason to rub her face in it. She's the only woman who matters now. She's ours. All ours. The last and only woman we'll ever love."

At home, Elain made a point of going out of her way to ignore Brodey. One time when he tried to grab her arm and make her look at him, she viciously pulled away from him. Ain thought he caught the sound of a growl in her throat.

Ain immediately stepped in, blocking Brodey's path as he tried to follow her to the bedroom where she slammed the door.

"Don't," Ain whispered. "Let her be."

"How am I supposed to apologize to her if she won't stand still long enough to let me!"

"You should have thought about that before you hurt her feelings. Leave her alone for now. Give her some time to calm down."

That night, she fell asleep on the sofa in Cail's office while he was working on the computer. After consulting with Ain, the two men decided it was best to let her sleep there, and they draped a light blanket over her.

Brodey wanted to carry her to bed.

"Leave her alone, Brod," Cail warned. "When she cools off, she'll talk to you. She needs time to process this shit."

Brodey walked out the back door. When Cail went to check on him a few minutes later, he discovered Brodey had shifted and taken off for a night run. Cail brought his brother's clothes inside and looked at Ain. "Let's hope he doesn't decide to get himself hit by a car like someone I know."

"Fuck you," Ain said, his tone light. "I learned my lesson. It's time he learns his."

Ain and Cail prepared for bed. Brodey would return after he had time to cool off. Cail undressed and slid under the covers. "Was it my imagination, or did she growl at Brodey earlier?"

Ain stretched out on his back and laced his fingers behind his head. "It wasn't your imagination."

Cail's silence told Ain his brother was thinking. "A lot of pieces fit into place if she's from a shifter line," Cail eventually said.

"I know."

Another long silence. Cail rolled to his side, facing Ain. "She acted like Mary the other night, when she goaded us into chasing her." Their cousin Mary was an Alpha shifter who'd put up a helluva good fight at her Ceremony. Despite that, her mate had prevailed, and she'd been happily mated to the guy for several decades now. The night that Elain and Ain returned from Virginia, Elain had accidentally triggered Ain's Alpha instinct to make her submit, leading to her goading Brodey and Cail into chasing her too.

Later, she'd admitted something instinctive in her had taken over, and she knew her need had been only temporarily sated.

"I know," Ain said.

Cail studied his brother's face. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"Probably."

"We need to get up to Maine, take her to Lacey." Their Clan's Seer was an old, grizzled woman, rumored to be well past nine hundred years old. When shifters in their Clan had pups, they took them to the Seer so she could tell them if they were Alpha or not, or even if they were a shifter at all. She could also tell if there was latent shifter blood in Elain, or if her strange behavior was due to her mating to three Alphas.

Ain rolled onto his side, away from Cail. "We'll do that after the wedding. Let's get through that craziness first."

"Maybe you're right. Maybe we do need to track down her birth family."

"I think I'd rather hear what Lacey has to say first."

Chapter 3

The next morning Elain still felt pissed at Brodey over the whole, “Oops, sorry I didn’t introduce you as my wife to my ex-girlfriend, honey,” incident. Worse, her deep urge to be chased was rearing its ugly head again. Part of her wanted to run Brodey through the wringer for what he did and make him chase her.

Part of her didn’t want him having the satisfaction of the reward awaiting him at the end of the hunt.

Part of her wanted to chase him down and hurt him in the not-so-fun kind of way.

She thought Ain might be easiest to goad into a chase, but considering how upset he’d been after the first one when he lost control of his instincts, she was hesitant to do that to him. She didn’t want to hurt his feelings or cause him guilt.

But the itch deep inside her had been growing by the day. The urge to run and be chased.

Cail sat at his desk, working on bookkeeping for the ranch. When she walked in he turned from his desk and pulled her into his lap. “Why the frowny face?”

She snuggled against him. “I can feel it again.”

She didn’t have to explain. He held her tighter, stroked her arm. “You want me to chase you.”

“Please?”

He sighed. “We need the others.”

“I’m still mad at Brod.”

He laughed. “What’s he have to do to get back in your good graces?”

“I don’t know. I wouldn’t tell you if I did, because you’d tell him.”

He kissed her. “Fair enough. But I won’t do this without the others to make sure you don’t get hurt.” He glanced at the time. “They’ll be back in a bit. We’ll do it before dinner, okay? Closer to dark?”

“Okay.” Her gut stirred, excited. Anticipation.

Need.

He made her look at him. “The only reason I’m doing this is because you want me to,” he quietly said. “I don’t like chasing you. I don’t like taking a risk with your safety. I damn sure don’t like making you submit to me like that.”

“You said you wouldn’t hurt me.”

“Not intentionally. What if you fall or something?”

She kissed him hard. “I love you for doing this.”

He stroked her cheek. “Love you, too. Now let me finish this, because I have a feeling if you’re anything like the other night, you’ll run me ragged.”

She walked over to some of her boxes of books and started sorting through them. The men had brought a new bookcase into Cail’s large office for her. As she started unpacking and loading books into the empty shelves, two old books at the far bottom corner of the other bookshelf caught her eye. The long window curtains nearly concealed them.

They looked very old, judging by the bindings. When she opened them, she found they were journals full of handwritten notes, poems, and stories spanning many decades.

One in particular caught her eye.

Lonely heart filled with chilly wind

as cold as a moor’s winter night.

Looking to love for the light,

warmth seldom felt outside the fight...

“This is beautiful, Cail.”

“Hmm? What?”

She held up the journal laying open in her lap. “This. It’s absolutely beautiful.”

“Oh, heck, I hadn’t seen those in years. Where were they?”

“On the very bottom shelf, behind the curtains.” She left the other journal on the floor, stood, and walked over to him as she flipped through it. “You should try to get these published.”

“Me?”

She gently nudged him. “Yeah, you. They’re wonderful. Do you still write?” She noticed the odd look on his face. “What?”

He sat back in his chair. “Sweetie, I didn’t write that. Those are Brodey’s.”

* * * *

Ain didn’t like the idea of Elain being chased, but agreed with Cail that it was necessary to prevent her from getting out of control. Brodey acted upset and sulky that she wouldn’t let him chase her. She was barely speaking to him. Ain refused to get between them, knowing Brodey had to find a way to make amends after his own earlier stint in the doghouse with her.

Elain changed into shorts and sneakers. It felt weird sitting on the back patio in the deepening gloom and stretching as if for a track meet, like in her high school days. Still, deep inside her something longed to be free, to run.

To be chased.

To hunt.

The men gathered on the patio. Cail had also changed into shorts and sneakers, but left his shirt off. He didn’t look happy. Frankly, none of the men looked happy.

“Are you sure about this?” Ain asked her.

She nodded.

“Stay on the property. Stay away from the outer fence lines. There’s more than enough woods to stick to.” He looked at Cail. “Okay. It’s your show.”

She stood. “How do you want to do this?” Now that they really were doing it, she had no clue what to do to recreate the mood and tension of the night that triggered her response...or theirs.

He shrugged. “I’m not feeling it, babe.”

“I’ll do it!” Brodey offered with a hopeful smile.

She glared at him. “Fuck you! I’m still mad at you, asshole.” Even though some of her previous rage had dissipated after the discovery of the journals, Elain wasn’t ready to kiss and make up with him. Yet.

She remained angry at him on principle.

His smile faded. “Aw, come on, babe! I said I’m sorry!”

“Can’t you edict him into shutting up?” she growled at Ain.

He smiled. “No, but I can edict you into making up with him.”

“You wouldn’t!”

“No, I wouldn’t. It wouldn’t be any more fair than me edicting him to shut his pie hole until you decide to forgive him.” He glared at Brodey.

“Should I take a head start or what?” she asked Cail.

“I guess. I mean, I don’t know.”

“Okay.” She set off toward the woods at the back of the property, but before she even left the yard she stopped and returned, dejected.

“What’s wrong?” Ain asked.

“I’m not feeling it either.”

Ain rolled his eyes. “I thought you said you wanted this.”

“I *do* want it! That’s the problem. The need is there, I just don’t know how to make it feel like the other night. The way this feels, we might as well be jogging together.”

Cail took a deep breath. “Wouldn’t matter,” he softly said. “I could outrun you anyway. I’m a lot faster than you.”

She almost didn’t hear his comment. “What?”

“I said, I could outrun you.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“You, slower. Me, faster.”

She started to get irritated, then deflated as she realized what he was trying to do. “I’m sorry. That’s not working.”

“Shit.” He looked at Ain. “I can’t bring myself to really get into it with her. I don’t want to fight with her.”

“I’ll do it!” Brodey offered again, ever helpful.

“Shut up, Brodey!” the other three ordered.

Brodey sat, dejected, on one of the patio lounges.

Cail paced, thinking. No one interrupted him. After a moment, he kicked off his sneakers and removed his shorts. Now totally naked, he turned to her. “Let’s try this,” he quietly said.

She let out a harsh laugh. “No offense sweetie, but that happens after the chase.”

He looked at her. “I’m going to count,” he said in the same soft, steady tone, “then I’m going to shift. If I catch you while I’m still shifted, maybe I’m fucking you like that. Shifted.”

“Like *hell* you are!” she protested.

“One.”

Elain felt alarm creep up her spine. “Cail! You guys promised you’d never make me do it—”

“Two.”

“Ain! Come on, tell him he can’t do that!”

“Three.”

Ain studied his brother before turning to Elain. “You’d better run, baby girl.”

Gasping with alarm she took off, her heart racing before her feet even reached full speed. It didn’t hit her until she entered the woods that she didn’t know how long Cail would count before he shifted.

That spurred her on faster.

* * * *

Ain turned to Cail as they watched Elain scamper across the property and disappear into the woods. “You wouldn’t really do that to her, would you? I notice you said maybe.”

He smiled. “Hell, no. I had to say it like that because we can’t lie to her. But it scared her, didn’t it?”

Ain laughed. “Yeah. That was smart. You and your fucking loopholes. You really chasing her shifted?”

“In a minute. Been wanting a run.” He stretched his arms and shoulders, rolling and flexing his neck as a series of light cracks and pops sounded from his spine.

Brodey looked glum. “So what am I supposed to do?”

Ain pointed to the house. “Inside, get dinner ready. While you’re cooking maybe you can figure out a way to make it up to her, you stupid fuck.”

“Look who’s talking, Mister Oh-I’m-Gonna-Get-Myself-Hit-By-a-Car-While-a-Hurricane’s-Coming.”

Ain pointed.

Brodey stood and stomped into the house, slamming the back door behind him.

Ain rubbed his face with his hands. “I’m kicking myself in the ass for the way things spiraled out of control with Elain that night.” He shook his head. “I never dreamed she might be from a shifter family. By the time all this other shit started, you know as well as I do there was no way for us to tell if she is a shifter or not because she’s our mate. That feeling takes over all. We’re too tuned to her now.”

Cail stretched. “I know. I thought the same thing. How were we supposed to know?” He twisted, loosening his muscles. “Lacey will be able to tell for sure. She’s the best Seer there ever was.” He indicated Ain’s watch. “How long you think it’s been?”

Ain glanced at his watch. He’d left his jeans on but was barefoot. “Maybe two minutes. Do you want me to run shotgun?” He still couldn’t get the possibility out of his mind that maybe she was more shifter than he thought. He worried about letting her too far out of his

sight if her hormones, and maybe instincts as well, got out of control.

“Naw. I’ll let her think I’m really going to do it. Doesn’t matter what mood I’m in, it’s hers that matters. I have to admit catching her will be fun.” He grinned. “We might be a while.”

“If you’re lucky.”

Cail shifted into his wolf form. Then he threw back his head and let out a loud, long howl. Shifted, he looked like a huge, black wolf-like dog with soft brown eyes.

Ain laughed. “Show off.”

Cail’s tongue lolled from his mouth as he slowly loped across the yard at an easy pace toward the woods.

* * * *

The first burst of adrenaline had almost worn off as Elain’s mind tried to reason with her that Cail wouldn’t go back on his promise and force her to do something she didn’t want to do. The men had promised they would never force her to have sex with them while they were shifted, and they’d never force her to have anal sex with them again.

The anal sex she was willing to negotiate, because despite the circumstances of their marking Ceremony, where she was so horny she could barely see straight and she’d taken on all three brothers at once in front of the Council, she wouldn’t mind having a glass of wine and a shot at recreating that scene.

Then she heard Cail’s howl.

With a squeak of alarm she poured on more speed, blindly heading through the dark woods, trying to stay on the path. Deadfalls left by the hurricane earlier in the month slowed her down. As she ran she felt something instinctive take over. Her fear slowly dissolved, replaced by anticipation, desire, and eagerness.

He *would* fuck her, regardless. Man or wolf.

She was ashamed to realize maybe she wouldn’t put up too much

of a fuss after all if he decided to fuck her while he was still shifted.

Holy crap, what's wrong with me?

But he was her mate. He wasn't a dog or a wolf. He was still Cail, regardless of how he looked, man or beast.

Elain ran.

She sent her mind out to find him, felt his thoughts. *"Going to fuck you good and hard, baby. Just keep running, really get me in the mood."*

It spurred her on faster.

She broke through the woods into one of the pastures. A hundred yards away grew another thick stand of pinewoods. She raced toward it across the open ground, then heard Cail howl again behind her, closer than before. Elain fought the urge to look behind her, knowing in every horror movie she'd ever seen that's when the heroine tripped, fell, and got caught by the evil guy. Except that Cail wasn't some evil zombie axe-murdering motherfucker with a hockey mask, chainsaw, and personality disorder. He was her sweet Cail.

Still a couple of yards from the trees, she aimed for a path and couldn't help but cast a glance back when she heard yet another howl, even closer than before.

Then her breath exploded out of her as the world painfully went black.

* * * *

Cail broke clear of the woods just in time to see Elain look behind her and run smack into a cypress tree at the edge of the woods.

He shifted back mid-stride, his heart pounding in fear as she crumpled to the ground. "Shit!" He raced to her side and knelt over her, carefully checking her pulse and breathing, then patted her on the cheek when she moaned.

"Sweetie, honey? Wake up. You okay?"

"Ohhhhh..."

“Elain. Open your eyes, baby. Come on, wake up.”

They finally opened and she looked around, confused. “What happened?”

Relieved, he helped her sit up. “Mean old tree jumped out of nowhere and attacked you.”

She started to touch her forehead, where a goose egg had already started forming near her temple. “Son of a bitch, that hurt.”

“I imagine it did.” She tried to stand but he wouldn’t let her. “No, why don’t you sit here and let me run back to the house and get a truck? I don’t think you should be up and walking.”

“I’m okay.” He helped her to her feet but didn’t let go of her. She wouldn’t let him carry her. Thankfully it was almost fully dark, not that there was anyone to see Cail walking around stark naked. He led her away from the woods to the closest truck track, and they followed it back to the house. Ain, sitting on the patio, stood at their approach. When he realized something was wrong he ran over to help.

“What happened?”

Elain felt embarrassed, sore as hell, and worse, she still had the creeping craving trying to take hold inside her. “I’m a freaking dumbass, that’s what’s wrong.”

“She looked behind her and ran into a tree,” Cail explained. “Damn near knocked herself out.”

Elain didn’t miss Ain’s amused snort. He scooped her into his arms despite her protests and carried her into the house while Cail grabbed his clothes from the patio.

Brodey stuck his head out from the kitchen. “That was fast.”

“Shut up,” Ain growled on his way to the bedroom. “Make up an ice pack and bring it into the bedroom. *Now.*”

Brodey raced to do it.

“I’m okay,” she insisted. “I can walk.”

He carefully laid her on their bed and snapped on the bedside lamp so he could examine her head. “Maybe I should call an ambulance—”

“No! Ain, I’m okay.”

“Lie *still*,” he growled.

She frowned, but complied. “You said you weren’t going to edict me for non-shifter stuff.”

He checked her temple. She had a noticeable bump, bruising, and a minor scrape, but nothing major from the looks of it. “I’m sorry,” he apologized, helping her sit up. “You wouldn’t hold still so I could look at it.”

She couldn’t stay mad at him. It surprised her that he was the tough guy, and yet she would let him kiss her anger away while she kept sweet Brodey in the doghouse.

Brodey raced in, ice pack in hand. “What happened? Is she okay?”

Ain took the ice pack and gently pressed it to her forehead. “Baby, would you *please* lie down for a while?”

She smiled. “Was that so hard?” She let him gently lower her to the bed again.

“What happened?” Brodey asked again.

“She ran into a tree,” Cail explained as he walked through the door and shouldered past his brother. “She okay?” he asked Ain.

“Are you ignoring me?” Brodey asked her.

“Yes!” all three of them shouted.

He turned around and stormed out of the bedroom, slamming the door behind him.

Ain stood to go after him but she caught his arm. “No, please? Just sit here with me.”

His angry face softened as he carefully sat beside her.

Cail stretched out on her other side. “I’m so sorry, honey.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” she assured him. She looked at Ain. “It was *not* his fault, okay? I knew better than to look behind me while I was running and I did it anyway.” She winced as she adjusted the ice pack on her forehead. “I was trying to see how far behind me he was.”

“So we’re back to square one, huh?” Ain asked.

“Yeah.” She lifted one leg and wiggled her foot. “Can someone

please help me with these?”

Cail removed her shoes and rubbed her feet for her.

Ain leaned in and kissed her. “I’ll go see how Bonehead’s doing with dinner.”

Cail kissed her and followed Ain out of the bedroom, quietly shutting the door behind him. He pulled Ain into his office and closed the door. “Okay,” he whispered, “a shifter would *not* run into a fucking tree. I think we’re making too big a deal out of this.”

Ain tried not to laugh, exhaustion and accumulated worry bubbling to the surface. He’d thought the same thing. As much as he hated seeing her in pain, shifters were instinctively light on their feet, agile, and not prone to slamming face first into large inanimate objects. “I know. We’ll just let things settle. It’ll be okay.”

Cail nodded. Ain followed him to the kitchen where Brodey had dinner ready. Ain immediately prepared a plate and took it and a glass of iced tea to their bedroom before Brodey could do it.

“Here you go, babe.”

She carefully sat up and put the ice pack on the bedside table. “I feel like a moron.”

“You’re not a moron. Stop that.”

“Are you going to eat?”

“In a minute.”

She studied him while she ate. “What?”

“Are you going to kiss and make up with Brodey any time soon, or do I need to order him to sleep in one of the guest rooms?”

Elain focused on her food. “No, don’t do that,” she grumbled. “I’ll do it eventually.”

He leaned in and kissed her forehead. “He feels horrible.”

“Good.”

Ain smiled. “That’s my girl.”

She picked at her dinner. Brodey was a gifted cook, perhaps even better than his brothers, even though for breakfast he rarely fixed anything but cereal. “Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“Why do you and Cail treat Brodey like he’s an idiot?”

Ain sat back, stunned. “We don’t do that.”

“Yeah, you do. You pick on him and make fun of him.”

His brow furrowed. “What’s going on?”

“I found his old journals in the office and read through them. He’s a really good writer. Very talented.”

“We never said he wasn’t. Do you really think Cail and I don’t give him enough credit?”

She nodded.

“You haven’t lived with him for two hundred and thirty-eight years like we have. Baby, think of what you went through the other day. How he chased you at the Highland Games and rode home with you in the news truck after he shifted. That’s just off the top of my head. He’s constantly doing shit without thinking first. He doesn’t think fast when it comes to some stuff. I’ll be the first to admit he’s artistically talented. And in a fight I definitely want him on my side. But he’s a bonehead. Even you can’t deny he’s dumber than a box of rocks in some ways.” He leaned in and kissed her. “Eat and rest. I’ll check on you in a few.”

After he left she thought about what he’d said. Yes, Brodey wasn’t the brightest bulb in some ways, but he was also the one who tracked her down when she fled to Spokane. He was very instinctive, a mix of Ain’s intensity and Cail’s methodical brain.

She finished eating and set her plate on the bedside table before drifting to sleep.

Chapter 4

Ain wouldn't budge on Elain seeing a doctor. The next morning, Brodey was already gone when she got up. She vowed she would talk to him that night and settle things once and for all. She still felt pissed off at him over what he did, but even more she hated feeling like this. Cail drove her into Arcadia, to a walk-in clinic open on Sundays. There, the doctor confirmed Elain's assertions that she was fine, with no serious or lasting damage to anything other than her pride.

"Are you happy now?" she asked Cail as he held the truck door for her.

"Yes." They had to go pick up some supplies, then he took her to a small local restaurant for lunch.

At first she felt a little nervous. He held her hand as they walked inside and found a booth. "Is this wise?" she asked.

"It's okay. We're regulars here."

The waitress took their orders and brought their drinks. Cail smiled and leaned over the table. "Close your eyes," he said softly, "and let your mind drift. What do you feel?"

"Huh?"

"Just do it."

Elain closed her eyes and tried. She heard the other patrons, the clatter of dishes in the back, the soft clink of silverware against plates. The rattle of ice in glasses. And...

Her eyes popped open. "What is that?" Soft, whispery thoughts she couldn't grasp hold of.

His eyes playfully crinkled. "There are five other shifters in here right now. By the time we finish eating, I want you to identify all of

them.” He leaned back and sipped his tea.

She tried to look around without being obvious. When the waitress returned a few minutes later with their food, she thought slammed home to Elain and she almost spoke out loud. “*She’s a shifter?*” she mentally asked Cail.

He nodded as he reached for the ketchup. When the waitress left, he leaned in close. “One down, four to go. You should be able to do this, as powerful as you are.” Focusing wasn’t her strong point. She still had a long way to go in mastering her new abilities.

Elain tried to eat and focus at the same time. The waitress had a different sounding heartbeat, as well as an almost invisible aura of sorts. Elain could hear her in a different way as she moved around the dining room. Then, as the waitress leaned in to speak to another customer, Elain focused on finding the second shifter.

“The man she’s talking to now,” she whispered.

He nodded. “Very good. There’s also a different kind of smell you’ll learn to associate with shifters. Well, wolf shifters of our Clan, anyway. Different Clans have different scents. Sometimes that’s the fastest way to identify one up close, but in a place like this and as new as you are, it’ll be hard for you to do that.”

“What about me?”

“What about you?”

“That I’m your mate. Do other shifters know?”

Cail smiled. “Believe me, they can’t miss it.” He took another sip of tea. “Especially the men.” He winked. “You might as well have a big blinking neon sign over your head that says ‘back the fuck off, asshole.’”

She laughed. “Territorial much?”

His low, soft growl stirred desires deep within her. “About you, absolutely.”

Elain tried to pull her mind out from between her legs and focus on the task at hand. As she munched on her food she picked out the other three shifters in just a few minutes. Cail grinned. “Good job,

sweetie. Ain's gonna shit a brick. That's fantastic!"

Elain felt a little flush of pride. "So what do I do when I meet a shifter in public?"

"You don't do anything other than treat them like anyone else. But you need to know how to identify them."

"Why?" The shadow of a frown crossed his face and she pressed for answers. "Why, Cail?"

He shrugged. "You should always know who's who, that's all. Hurry up and finish so we can get home."

She knew there was more. She also knew unless she pulled out the heavy guns, he wouldn't willingly tell her. She'd have to wait him out on that point. "What about other kinds of shifters? Like Kimberlie." Elain had to force the woman's name through her lips.

Cail's gaze focused out the window. "Don't worry about that for now, sweetheart." Another question he apparently didn't want to answer.

"How many kinds of shifters are there?"

"Lots. Wolves and canines are the most common. Felines. Dragons. Lots of things."

"Whoa!" She dropped her voice when a few nearby patrons looked at her. "Dragons?" she hissed.

He smiled. "We haven't had time to really sit you down and teach you everything. We're trying to not overwhelm you. Or get on your shit list." He winked.

The bell on the door tinkled as another customer entered and took a seat. As Cail waved for their check, Elain had the distinct feeling she was being watched. Cail settled their tab and slid from the booth, holding his hand out to her. When she fell into step beside him, she glanced around.

An older man sat at a table in the far corner. He was dressed in a crisp, pressed long-sleeved dress shirt and a sweater vest. He looked vaguely familiar, but Elain didn't have time to contemplate that as Cail ushered her through the door and to the truck. It hit her a few

miles from home that he looked like the man she'd seen outside the farm supply store the day of her shopping trip with Cail, but Arcadia was a small town.

If she could just shake the creepy-crawlies she felt as his scowling eyes seemed to bore into her.

“Why are you guys so worried about other shifters?”

She watched Cail's body language subtly change as he drove. His shoulders tensed. “We're not really worried.”

“You can't lie to me.”

“I'm not lying to you.”

“Then quit finding loopholes and playing semantic games with me.”

At the next light he turned to her. “I'm not playing semantic games. In our kind, as you will learn, it always pays to know who is who and where they are if they are near you and your pack.”

“Or near your mate?”

He waggled his eyebrows at her. “Especially. I can be pretty territorial when I need to be, you know.”

“You're not as intense as Ain or Brodey.”

“I'm Gamma Alpha. It's not in my nature.” His eyes darkened. “If anyone tried to hurt you, or tried to hit on you, make no mistake I would take matters into my own hands just as viciously as my brothers.”

The light changed, and so did Cail's mood. He smiled as he let his foot off the brake. “You've got three guys to protect you and keep you safe. Not to mention the whole pack protecting and looking out for you. You haven't even met the rest of the Clan yet.”

“I don't know if that makes me feel safer or penned in.”

He slipped his fingers through hers. “You know we won't hold you back. We already talked about that.”

“I don't need a babysitter or a body guard. I already gave up a lot by agreeing to the six-month trial stay-at-home gig.”

“I know. We appreciate that more than you'll ever know, believe

me. Can you trust us?"

"I guess I have to, don't I?"

She fell silent for the rest of the drive, her mind flashing back to the stranger in the restaurant. She had no doubt if she mentioned him, it would set her men on edge that someone had made her nervous.

Sometimes, silence was golden.

* * * *

The next afternoon, Ain was out in the pasture working on a well pump when his cell rang. Jocko.

"Well, boyo, how's things in Florida?" Over a hundred years of living in the States hadn't diluted Jocko's thick Scottish brogue.

Ain kept his tone guarded. "Doing well. We'll probably be up there later this summer or early fall, after the wedding. We'd like to have a Clan recognition for all of us."

"Great news then." Jocko went uncomfortably silent.

"What's wrong?"

"I don't want to worry you."

"Any conversation opened with that line is bound to worry me. Spill it."

"It's probably a tragic coincidence. However, considering what we talked about before, I thought I should let you know. Remember I mentioned Liam Pardie's brothers?"

A tight, cold ball gripped the base of Ain's spine. "Yeah?"

"Beta shifters, both of them with mates. It's a shame, and again, it's probably just a coincidence."

"Jocko, please."

"Well, Asolo Pardie's mate was murdered two days ago. The one living out in Montana."

Ain closed his eyes. "Murdered?"

Jocko cleared his throat. "Yeah." His voice softened. "If I didn't know any better, son, I'd say it was a statement, but it has to be a

coincidence.”

“Why?”

“She was decapitated. They have no clues as to the killer’s identity so far.”

That was the Abernathy shifter equivalent of the mob executing a snitch—or sending a warning. “How many other people know about Elain?”

“Outside our Clan? None that I know of. The only reason I know is because Mark called me after your Ceremony, since he’s head of the pack coalition down there. I haven’t told anyone else any specifics about our earlier private conversation, if that’s the question.”

“That’s the question.”

“I had to speak with a couple of people in hypotheticals, and I did ask about Pardie’s brothers. The people I talked to, no way they could connect the dots back to you and your new mate.”

“Thanks, Jocko.” Ain hung up his cell, returned it to his pocket and took a deep breath.

Ain had two options. The first, to believe he and his brothers had somehow managed to not only find a woman who was part Alpha shifter, but part Abernathy and had no idea of her true lineage. The second, to believe that it was all a huge coincidence.

He called Jocko back. “Hey, one more thing.”

“Sure, son. What?”

“Does the name Maureen Alexander ring a bell?”

“Ayuh. She’s a distant cousin of yours through your mother.” Ain could picture Jocko scratching his beard as he sifted through his wealth of Clan genealogical knowledge. “Your mother’s paternal grandmother and Maureen’s maternal great-grandmother were sisters. I’m pretty sure.”

Ain didn’t want to ask, but heard himself saying the words anyway. “Where is she today?”

“Oh, I don’t know. She was an Alpha, believe it or not. No mate last I heard. She sort of dropped out of contact about thirty years ago

or so. Last I remember, someone said she was out in Washington State or Oregon or something. Why?”

“No reason.” Ain swallowed hard to clear the lump in his throat. “I saw her name in some of Mom’s old paperwork the other day and couldn’t remember who she was. Thanks.” He hung up again and stared at his phone.

Cail was working in his office. Ain surprised his brother when he walked in. Elain had driven into Arcadia for groceries and Brodey was out running errands. “Do you have her mom’s death certificate?”

“Huh?”

“Elain’s birth mother. Do you have a copy of the death certificate?”

“Okay, back up. You’re going to have to talk to me.”

Ain paced the office and ran a hand through his black hair. “Don’t make me edict you to keep this quiet.”

“No problem. Now tell me.”

He related his conversation with Jocko, then his suspicions.

Cail looked stunned. “Holy fuck.”

“Right. I need to know how she died. Didn’t Elain say she got sick and died? If she really was the same woman, an Alpha shifter, how is that possible? How would it be possible an Alpha male would ever leave his mate? Especially if she was carrying his pup? I need to disprove this connection.”

Cail didn’t meet Ain’s heated gaze. He rolled a pen back and forth across his desk. “Female shifters can get sick and die. You know that. Any shifter can. It’s unusual, sure, but it happens. Mom died. And if the guy was murdered by the mob or died...” He didn’t continue.

“Mom was killed in the accident with Dad,” Ain argued. “Different issue.”

“Let’s work on the assumption this is as it appears. Elain’s birth mother just had a baby. Her mate had left for whatever reason. The longer her mate is gone, the weaker she gets, especially after giving birth. If he’s not there for her...” Cail shook his head. “It usually

doesn't happen, obviously, but I heard about it once from Lacey when we were younger. She was telling stories around the fire at a Gathering, and it was mostly girls there. She was warning them to keep their mates close before and after birthing because the women can get 'heart-sick.'"

"Heart-sick?"

"Yeah. That's what she called it." He shrugged and looked at Ain. "I was too busy trying to get laid that night, so I didn't pay attention. She warned the girls that they had to keep their mates close when they were pregnant. That some Alpha female shifter from the Abernathy Clan, Ysimel, she died that way. Her mate had been killed on a hunt while she was pregnant, and the baby wasn't even two years old when Ysimel finally died."

"That's stupid. It's an old wives' tale."

Cail snorted. "Yeah, so are shape-shifters."

Ain rolled his eyes and heavily sat. "She's never shifted. She had no idea what we were when we met her. No clue. There's got to be another explanation."

"I'm all ears." The men fell silent.

"That theory would require Elain's mom be a shifter, too," Ain eventually said.

Cail nodded.

Ain threw his head back and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Fuck. You're not helping me disprove this, you know."

"It is what it is, Ain. Two plus two isn't adding up to seven no matter how hard you try to change the math."

They sat in silence for a minute. "All right. We definitely don't tell Brodey, because he can't keep his mouth shut. If I edict him it'll just make him pissed at me and will make him feel bad he has to keep a secret from Elain. We just watch and wait and see what happens. I bet in a few weeks we find out there's a more innocent explanation."

Cail nodded, but studied his hands. "You don't sound like you're very convinced of that."

Ain stood. "I'm not." He stopped at the door. "Pardie disappeared about the same time Mom and Dad died."

"What? What the fuck are you saying?"

Ain turned and dropped his voice even lower. "You know damn well the wreck and their deaths were no fucking 'accident.' They tell us they need to talk to us about something very important, that they need our help immediately, then they're dead the next day? You know what they did, what they were. It probably put them at risk."

"Fuck!" Cail looked stunned. "You think Pardie killed them?"

"I don't know what to think!" Ain scrubbed his face with his hands. "I don't know anything anymore. What was so fucking important they had to come see us and couldn't tell us on the phone?"

"They never involved us in their work before."

"With damn good reason." Ain only knew their parents had affiliations with other Clans, helping keep tabs on the few bad apples, like the Abernathys. On occasion, they would bring a guest to the ranch for a day or two. Guests who were almost always women who looked terrified and rarely said more than two words to anyone during their short stays.

Ain's parents had been part of an intricate underground railroad of sorts, helping people and shifters who needed to disappear get away from whatever—or whoever—they were running from. The subject had never been discussed outright among his parents and their children, but Ain knew from his position on the Council that it's exactly who they were and what they did.

The fewer people who knew the details, the safer it was for all involved.

Perhaps those secrets were what led to the death of his parents.

Chapter 5

Later that afternoon, Elain was preparing dinner when Brodey walked in the front door and paused in the kitchen doorway. “Babe, can I show you something?”

“What?” She didn’t turn. She’d planned on talking to him alone that night after dinner, after she’d managed to overcome the worst of her still simmering anger.

“Please?”

With a put-upon sigh, she threw down the dish towel and followed him to the front door.

“Close your eyes.”

“Brodey.”

“Please?”

He looked so sad and hopeful that she did.

He opened the door, then stepped behind her and covered her eyes for good measure. Gently guiding her down the steps and across the front yard, she realized she heard something.

He bent close and whispered in her ear, “Okay. Now, I know I hurt your feelings, and I know you have every right to be pissed at me. Please, babe. I love you. This is killing me. Maybe this will help you not be so mad at me.”

He uncovered her eyes.

The stock trailer was hitched to the back of Brodey’s truck. Inside stood two horses, a bay and a palomino.

Elain’s eyes teared up as she turned and threw her arms around his neck. “Thank you!”

He buried his face in her hair. “I’m not trying to bribe you. Well,

okay, I am. I know I've got a lot of sucking up to do." He tipped her face to his. "I'm sorry, babe. I'm a fucking dumbass, and I'm so sorry. Please tell me you'll think about forgiving me."

Elain sobbed against him. She loved him too much to stay mad at him. "I forgive you, but you need to come up with a better cover story for next time."

He laughed, hugging her hard and lifting her off her feet to spin her around. "Honey, I'll shout it from the roof tops that you're my girl if it means you'll forgive me."

* * * *

Brodey put the horses in the corral behind the equipment barn near the house. After dinner, the other two men stayed inside while Brodey took Elain out and showed her the basics. Mina, the bay, was a six-year-old quarter horse mare. The palomino, Coot, was a ten-year-old gelding. She learned how to groom, saddle, and bridle the horses. Then he helped her into the bay's saddle and, with one hand on the reins, he led her around the corral for several minutes until she felt comfortable riding on her own.

Elain's beautiful smile made Brodey's heart ache in a good way. After busting Ain's balls for being an asshole and causing her to run away to Spokane before the hurricane hit, he'd gone and basically done the same thing, hurt her.

Never again.

She carefully guided the horse over to him. "When can we go riding for real?"

"We've got an hour before dark. We can take a short slow ride around the house, but I don't want to go too far." He opened the gate and led the mare out, then he climbed into the gelding's saddle. "Just walking. I don't want you trying anything faster than that for now." He frowned. "I need to get you a riding helmet. Mark said Mina is a gentle girl, but any horse can spook and throw you."

“Will you teach me how to work the cattle?”

“Eventually. Not until I know you’re steady in the saddle. She’s trained to cut, but you would end up on your ass on the ground and Ain and Cail would draw straws for the pleasure of killing me.”

“No, I’m sure Ain would Prime edict Cail into letting him.”

They spent thirty minutes following the fence line around the house at a slow, leisurely pace. When they returned to the barn, Brodey spent more time teaching her how to care for the horses. After they finished and turned the horses out into the corral, Elain threw her arms around Brodey and pressed her cheek against his firm chest.

“Thank you!”

He closed his eyes and buried his face in her hair. “I’m forgiven?”

“Uh huh!” She looked up at him. “I hope Cail isn’t upset you bought them for me.”

Brodey smiled. “Whose idea do you think it was?” He kissed her. “Besides, it would have been me buying them anyway. He knows jack shit about horses other than riding. He’s all book sense, not bloodlines.” Brodey nuzzled her with his nose. “I handle managing the stock and breeding.”

She laughed. “Typecasting.”

He playfully swatted her ass. “Watch it, baby girl.” But he smiled.

His naturally spicy scent, vaguely reminding her of cinnamon and nutmeg, had mixed with horse scent and saddle soap. She deeply inhaled, loving it. “I’m sorry I left you at the restaurant.”

“No, don’t apologize. I deserved it.” He was about to say something else when she felt his cell phone vibrate in his shirt pocket.

She stepped back so he could answer it, but he pulled her close again. “No, I’ll let it go to voicemail.”

“Don’t be silly.” She reached into his pocket before he could stop her.

The Caller ID read Kimmie.

Elain felt a flash of rage, followed by an immediate pang of guilt over her jealousy after he’d worked so hard for her forgiveness. She

started to return it to his pocket when he took it from her and looked at it.

His face hardened and he hit the end button, sending it straight to voicemail. “Babe—”

“Shh.” She stood on tiptoe and kissed him, pressing her body against his. She felt his firm, growing bulge against her tummy in response. “I love you. You love me. And I trust you.” Hell, he’d just spent the past few hours making up for it after days of misery for them both.

He shoved the phone into his pocket and scooped her into his arms. His voice sounded thick with need and emotion. “Forever, babe. I promise.”

“Why don’t we go make up for some lost time?”

His green eyes darkened as a smile curled his lips. “A little bareback riding?”

She ran her fingers through his hair. “Buck me, baby.”

He laughed and carried her back to the house. “You are too much, girl.”

Ain and Cail must have sensed Elain needed the time alone with Brodey. She thought he’d jump her immediately, but he surprised her by wanting to take a shower first. Alone with her, he held her close as he gently soaped her body.

Elain closed her eyes and enjoyed every second of his tender touch. His fingers slipped across her flesh, caressing and teasing. After she rinsed the soap off he pressed her against the wall and knelt before her.

“I’m going to make it up to you, babe. I swear.”

She knotted her fingers in his hair. “You already have.”

He leaned in. She closed her eyes as his warm tongue flicked across her clit. Elain wondered when he’d scoop her into his arms and cart her off to bed, but he didn’t. Instead, he gently spread her legs further apart as his tongue pushed deep inside her.

Brodey’s skilled tongue gently fucked her, sliding in and out and

circling her swollen clit, teasing and exploring.

She grasped his hair with her other hand too, hanging on to him for balance as she felt her climb start. She'd missed having Brodey in their bed. Hell, she'd missed them all making love to her over the past couple of days.

He sensed her growing need. Two thick fingers replaced his tongue. He slowly stroked them deep inside her as he flicked her clit with his tongue. As her passion took over and her body unhinged, Elain didn't bother trying to contain her cries as he made her climax and kept her coming with relentless attention from his tongue.

When her legs weakened, trembling, he caught her. She rested her head on his chest.

"Was that good, baby?"

She weakly nodded. Of course it was good. It was fucking great and he damn well knew it.

He kissed her forehead before turning off the shower and carrying her into the bathroom. There he toweled her dry, kissing every square inch of her body as he did.

Elain knew he was hard and in serious need of relief but when she tried to brush her fingers along his stiff cock, he twisted his hips away from her. "No, this is your time, baby. Not mine."

He scooped her into his arms and gently laid her on their bed. "Roll over, sweetie."

"What?"

"Just do it."

She did, resting her head on her arms. If he wanted to do something else and fast, he'd better get his tail back in there or she'd fall asleep on him. She felt the bed dip a moment later as he knelt over her, straddling her legs.

He spread something cool and wet on her back. "Lotion," he explained in answer to her unasked question. He worked his talented fingers along her upper arms and shoulders, drawing content moans from her as he loosened her tight muscles.

As he worked his way down her body, she thought he might start fondling her, but he didn't. His hands firmly swept over the curves of her ass, massaging her tender muscles, then down the backs of her thighs.

"Ohhhh, Brod. That's sooo good."

He chuckled. "It's supposed to feel good."

Elain didn't want to fall asleep, but she feared she was rapidly heading in that direction. "Don't you want to do something?"

"Only if you're in the mood for it after I finish. I don't want you to feel sore tomorrow after riding."

"We didn't...oh. You mean the horses."

He chuckled again. "Yeah, babe. The horses."

She heard the bedroom door open. "All clear?" Ain asked.

"Yeah, but I hope you guys weren't expecting aerobics tonight," Brodey snarked.

Cail walked in. "That's okay. At least you two have made up."

Elain let out another content moan as Brodey found and worked on a tight muscle in her thigh.

She heard the shower start and at some point knew she'd drifted. The feel of the mattress dipping beside her awoke her. She was cuddled against Brodey, his arm draped around her waist. Ain had slipped into bed next to her.

He kissed her. "Goodnight, sleepy head."

She wasn't aware of anything else until a little after dawn the next morning. At some point, she'd rolled over so she was snuggled against Ain. When she opened her eyes, she realized she was staring into Cail's sleeping face.

Elain lifted her head and found Brodey gone. Cail's eyes opened. "What's wrong?"

"Where'd he go?"

"To the barns," Ain spoke behind her. "He volunteered to head out and get the day started without me." He feathered his lips along the nape of her neck. "I think he still feels a little guilty."

Well, that made her feel bad. "I told him I forgave him."

"Not about that," Cail clarified, a playful smile teasing his delicious lips. "He put you to sleep before we had a chance to play last night."

Come to think of it, that warm, stiff object rubbing her butt was Ain's cock. She wiggled against him, teasing him. He wrapped his arm tightly around her and ground his hips into her ass.

"You tease me like that babe, and you're gonna get fucked."

"Promise?"

Cail laughed. "Oooh, she's wide awake now."

Ain rolled her onto her back. "Good thing, too." He kissed her deeply, taking her breath away. Cail sat up and took one of her nipples into his mouth, teasing and nibbling on it until it tightly peaked between his lips. His hand skimmed up her tummy to her other breast, where his fingers performed a similar feat to that neglected piece of flesh.

Every movement, every delicious suck and bite, sent pulsations of electric need from her core straight between her legs. Her men knew how to make her instantly wet.

Cail lifted his head. "You want more, baby?"

She couldn't speak. Ain wouldn't relinquish her mouth, his tongue sweeping across hers, possessing her, deliciously splitting her focus between the two men. Elain mumbled something she hoped Cail understood meant *hell yeah!*

The brown-eyed brother slowly kissed his way down her body, his lips and tongue exploring and tasting and teasing her. When he knelt between her legs he blew a warm breath across her sensitive clit, pulling another moan from her.

Ain lifted his head and stared into her eyes. She understood the expression "drowning in someone's eyes" because that's the way she always felt when she looked into Ain's grey gaze. Drowning in the best possible way.

Do things his way? At this moment, any other possibility seemed

ludicrous. She'd do anything for him. Everything. For Brodey and Cail, too.

"I love you," she whispered.

He smiled, which softened his gaze even more. "Do you have any idea how much we all love you? How much I love you?"

Elain had a sudden flash, or premonition, or daydream, or whatever you wanted to call it, of her pregnant and spoiled rotten by her three men. Part of her wanted to make that come true right then, wanted desperately, almost more than breathing even, to be their mate in every way. Every intimate part of her body throbbed with deep, aching need.

As quickly as the feeling arrived, it left. There was plenty of time for children, all the time in the world.

She was about to say something else when Cail lowered his mouth to her flesh and swiped his tongue along her clit. Steamrolled by the sensation, her eyes closed as her back arched, trying to press her mound even more firmly against him.

"That's it, baby," Ain encouraged. "Give it to us."

Conscious thought eluded her. All she cared about was Cail's hot, wet tongue tracing patterns across her skin. Just when she thought she would explode he backed off, forcing her to follow his leisurely pace.

Elain squirmed in their arms. "Please...please."

"Please what, baby?" Ain teased. "Tell us what you want." One of his hands dropped to her breasts, gently pinching first one nipple, then the other, alternating in a maddening rhythm not quite enough to push her over the edge.

"Please make me come!"

From somewhere down below, Cail chuckled. His efforts grew more vigorous until he sucked her clit between his lips and triggered her climax.

Ain held her as she trembled in his arms, her orgasm bouncing from one end of her body to the other, seeming to go on forever. Just when she thought she'd finished, Cail would change something and

another wave would crash over her, rendering her helpless.

When she couldn't take any more she shook her head back and forth. "Okay...okay."

Ain kissed her as Cail sat up. "Was that her crying uncle?" Cail asked.

He laughed. "I think so." Cail moved out of the way as Ain sat up and changed positions. "Roll over, baby."

She did, not caring what they did to her, still basking in her post-climactic bliss. He pulled her to her knees and then his cock pressed for entrance.

Elain thrust backward, impaling herself. "Is that what you wanted?" she gasped.

He laughed as he gripped her hips. "Yeah, and you know it."

She looked up into Cail's smiling face and wagged a come hither finger at him.

"What?"

She grinned. "Unless you've got something better to do."

He scrambled into position in front of her. Elain closed her eyes and went down on him, thoroughly enjoying the feeling of their cocks possessing her on both ends.

Cail sucked in a long, deep breath. "Jesus, babe, that's great." He gathered her hair and carefully held it aside for her.

Why had she resisted staying home with these three hunks? Job? What job? What job was better than spending her days being catered to by three hunky rich men who were totally devoted to her?

Cail's fingers fisted in her hair as his hips kept tempo with her. Every thrust Ain made pushed her onto Cail's cock. She loved the taste of her men. As her tongue laved Cail's stiff shaft, exploring and teasing, she knew he was growing closer—even faster than she thought—when she was rewarded with the salty tang of his pre-come.

Ain's movements picked up speed and force, his hands splayed across her hips. As quickly as her other vision had flashed through her mind, another one appeared. Her with all three of her men, only this

time repeating their marking Ceremony here in their bed, with her fully in charge. Ain in her ass, Cail sliding deep inside her pussy, and her lips wrapped around Brodey's cock.

With that thought her world exploded with a muffled scream as an unexpected orgasm crashed into her. Not as powerful as the first one, but enough she sucked Cail's cock deep into her throat so her tongue was licking his sac.

"Holy crap!" he grunted, unable to hold back as she swallowed every drop he pumped out.

The sight triggered Ain's release and he slammed into her with a final thrust that left him gasping for breath.

When they tumbled to the bed a moment later, Cail caught his breath first. "Jesus, sweetie, you okay?"

She nodded as she wiggled her body against Ain. She didn't open her eyes. "That was great!"

Cail pushed in close. Ain snuggled her against him and started to say, "We didn't hurt—"

"I'm fine," she assured him. "Believe me, that was..." She sighed. "That was great."

"You feel like a shower, or do you want to stay in bed for a while?"

Actually, truth be told, she felt like she wanted to fuck Brodey's brains out.

Needed to.

"Let's hit the shower."

Twenty minutes later they were done, and she dodged the men's playful advances as she dressed. They left before she did, taking one of the work trucks to head for the barns. Elain knew Brodey would want a snack and took a moment to fix him one before heading out in another truck.

Halfway to the barns, she stopped and put the truck into park. Now was as good a time as any to practice.

Sending her mind out, she searched for Brodey and sensed he was

in the northwest pasture. That's where she located him twenty minutes later where he worked, mending a fence.

She noticed how his nose wrinkled, testing the air as she approached. "Shower, hmm?" he said. He wore a playful, knowing smile.

Elain handed him a paper lunch sack. "How would you have preferred I show up?"

He slipped his arms around her. She couldn't miss his hard bulge. "Naked and smelling like I'd just fucked you."

"You escaped too early. I would have been happy to oblige."

Amused crinkles appeared in the corners of his eyes. "You'd have shown up out here naked?"

"Maybe not naked, but well-fucked, at least."

Laughing, he lifted her off her feet and spun her around. "We good, baby girl?"

She tangled her fingers in his scruffy hair. The slightly shaggy look worked for him in a way it wouldn't have for the other two. "Oh, yeah. We're good." She glanced around and verified they were totally alone. When he set her down on her feet, she sank to her knees in front of him. "We're real good."

He helped her unfasten his jeans. No underwear to fuss with, she didn't bother suppressing her own happy moan as she sucked his growing cock into her mouth.

The feel of his hands on the back of her head only served to fire her own need. Eagerly, not bothering to watch her teeth, she worked her lips and tongue over his silken skin.

Brodey's eyes dropped closed, a low, satisfied growl rumbling through his body as she mixed just a nip of pain with a whole lot of pleasure. A few minutes later his hips rocked against her, harder, demanding.

"I'm close, babe," he growled.

She dug her fingers into his ass as well as she could through his jeans and took him even deeper. She wanted it, craved it.

Needed it.

Her mate.

Hers.

Not bothering to suppress her own growl, she raked her teeth along his shaft, triggering his explosion. As his fingers dug into her scalp he roughly fucked his cock between her lips, wordless snarls of pleasure melting her insides like hot lava.

As soon as he'd finished, he released her and sank to his knees. Gathering her into his arms, he collapsed onto the grass with her, stroking her back through her shirt.

She listened to the sound of his heart through his own shirt, as it raced, then eventually slowed. They'd warned her that wanting to be with them would sometimes feel like a physical need. If that wasn't what need felt like, she didn't know what did.

"You okay?" he asked. She didn't miss his anxious undertone.

Elain giggled. "I'm fine. Are you okay? I didn't hurt you, did I?"

"Not in a bad way." He rolled her onto her back so he could look into her eyes. "Want me to do anything for you?"

She kissed him. "I can wait until tonight." She'd had every intention of having Brodey take her right there, but something about satisfying him like that temporarily quenched her erotic thirst for a while.

Besides, she knew she could always hunt him down for a nooner later if she wanted.

Chapter 6

Life settled back into some semblance of normal around the ranch. A few days later, on Thursday evening, they headed into Arcadia for dinner and groceries. Elain rode in the passenger seat of Ain's truck, Brodey and Cail in the back seat. Ain started to ask her something when her cell phone rang.

Ain frowned at her groan. "What's wrong?"

"It's my mom."

"Tell her I said hi," Brodey quipped. He'd tracked Elain to Spokane and pretended to be Ain while there so her mom wouldn't get suspicious.

Elain shot him a warning glare as she answered the call. "Hi, Mom."

"How's my baby?"

"I'm doing fine."

"Is that man treating you okay? He behaving himself?"

She caught Ain's gaze and winked. "Everything's straightened out, Mom. It's fine."

"So did he make you quit your job after all?"

She knew with their sensitive hearing that the men could listen to the conversation even though she didn't have it on speaker phone. "I decided to take a leave of absence. After the hurricane hit, I realized there's a few things in life more important than a job." Ain reached over, laced his fingers through hers, and gently squeezed.

Carla let out a motherly sigh of disappointment. "You loved that job."

"Yeah, I know, but I love Ain even more, Mom." She still had to

fight to remember to speak in the singular when talking about her men and only mention Ain, not Brodey and Cail, too. “I’m enjoying this. I’m giving it six months. If I want to go back to work, I will.”

Doubt seeped into her mother’s tone. “He’s okay with that?”

“He suggested it. Honestly? I’m enjoying being a kept woman.”

At that, Brodey snickered from the back seat. Cail whacked him on the shoulder to shut him up.

She managed to get her mom off the phone after a few minutes. Ain glanced over at her. “You miss her, don’t you?”

“Duh.” She noted his arched eyebrow. “Well, you have to admit that was a pretty stupid question, Mr. Prime.”

He squeezed her hand as he smiled. “You’re right. When is she flying out?”

Elain was nervous about that. “A week before the wedding. She knows I’m living at the ranch, but I think she’s planning on staying with us. She didn’t like the idea of being in Venice without me.” The wedding date was set for six weeks from that Saturday.

Brodey snorted in the back seat. “There goes naked pool time.”

“There goes naked anything, honey,” she shot back. “Not to mention you two will have to move into separate bedrooms.”

“You can’t keep our dogs out of the master bedroom,” Cail said in mock horror. “It’ll break their hearts if they can’t sleep with you!”

She laughed. Trying to sneak around not just with triplets, but triplet shape-shifters, would tax her patience for the duration of her mom’s visit. Originally, Elain had wanted a huge, formal wedding. Nearly losing Ain had helped her reorganize her priorities a little. Not being able to publicly declare her love and marry all three men dampened her enthusiasm. She would privately slip Brodey and Cail’s wedding bands onto their right hands before the wedding. Later, once they’d all returned from their honeymoon and her mom was gone, Elain would move them to their rightful place on their left hands.

The local shifters attending the wedding knew the truth, that it wasn’t just Ain who Elain loved. For the sake of preserving the

charade and their own peace and safety, they would stay quiet and help maintain the illusion.

They ate dinner at a local steakhouse the men hadn't taken Elain to before. They were seated in a corner booth with Elain sandwiched between Brodey and Ain. At first she felt a little self-conscious, wondering if every eye in the joint was on her.

Ain leaned in close and nuzzled her behind her ear. "No one's watching, honey. We're not humping you in the middle of the room."

She'd been taking a sip of iced tea and had to struggle not to spray it across the table as she laughed.

Brodey whacked her on the back as she coughed and choked. "You all right?"

She nodded and managed to swallow the tea. "Yeah, I'll live." She shoved Ain. "That was mean."

His grey eyes twinkled. "No, that wasn't mean." He stroked her chin with his fingers and mentally spoke to her. "*Mean would be describing in great detail how badly I want to fuck you right now, and telling you every little thing I'm planning on doing to you later tonight.*"

Elain realized she'd stopped breathing and deeply inhaled. "Yeah," she whispered. "That would be mean."

Cail watched with amusement. "Quit torturing her, Ain."

Ain kissed her on her forehead. "Later," he whispered.

They had a good dinner. She ate way too much but consoled herself that between the walk through the grocery store and the extracurricular activities the men would keep her busy with later, she would easily burn the calories.

She nudged Ain. "Scuse me, I need to use the restroom."

He slid out so she could exit the booth. The large restaurant was split into several sections, creating an almost maze-like setup. She finally asked for directions to the restrooms and got pointed in the right direction.

Situated through a set of batwing doors and down a long corridor,

she started walking toward the restroom when she felt more than heard a man enter the corridor behind her.

Elain's body instinctively tensed in a way she didn't understand.

Forcing herself not to run, she kept her steps even as she walked down the hallway.

The man closed in.

Stupid! Do you really want to be cornered in a bathroom? she thought.

Old photographs and other memorabilia lined the walls. She stopped in front of one picture and stared at it as if interested.

Out of the corner of her eye, she watched a man, not too much older than herself from the looks of him, walk toward her. Tall, beefy, with dark brown hair, he looked vaguely familiar.

Elain lost the battle to not look at his face as he drew close. His green eyes pulled her in, a different shade than Brodey's but every bit as intense.

Her heart raced.

His face broke into a friendly smile, suddenly calming her. "Interesting picture, isn't it?"

She nodded, unable to speak under the force of his gaze. *Why the hell does he look so damn familiar?*

He pointed to one of the men in the photo, a group of cattlemen standing in front of an old building in downtown Arcadia, taken in the 1940s. "He was the one Ain bought the property from."

Her eyes widened. "You know Ain?" This knowledge relaxed her a little, although her heart still tripped in her chest. She tried to remember what Cail had taught her, and she realized her pulse and mind were racing too fast for her to even attempt to concentrate. But the vague whiff of a familiar scent soothed her.

He nodded. "I know of him, and his brothers." His eyes traveled up and down her body, though not in a sexual way, more like as if memorizing her. She realized he had some sort of accent although he hadn't spoken enough for her recognize it.

“I’m Elain.” *Now why the hell did I say that?* She couldn’t get over how he made her feel. Nervous, but in a safe way.

He nodded. “I know.” Another smile, albeit this one looked sad. “You look just like your mother.”

She was about to ask him how the hell he could possibly know that when from the kitchen there was a loud crash and swearing as someone dropped what sounded like a whole tray full of dishes.

Elain instinctively turned to the kitchen doorway, toward the noise. When she looked back, the man was gone.

Suppressing a shiver, she hurried into the bathroom. She couldn’t wait to tell her men about the encounter. As she walked back to the table another thought struck her. What *would* she tell them, exactly? She took the long way through the restaurant and didn’t spot the man again.

How would that conversation go? *Hey guys, this mysterious stranger just said hi to me, said he knows who you are, and that I look like my mom.*

Like that wouldn’t have Ain and the others wiggling out and going all mondo protective over her.

It wasn’t a creepy vibe like she got from the older dude she’d spotted in town, either. Ain slid out of the booth so she could take her seat.

“What’s wrong, sweetie?” Cail asked.

She shook her head. “I think I ate too much.”

All three men looked a little suspicious, but didn’t press her for more details.

Putting the incident behind her, they stopped by Publix for groceries. Ain pushed the cart while she consulted her list, and Brodey and Cail went in search of items she wanted.

She was bent over the meat case, looking at the roasts, when a tingling feeling at the base of her spine caught her attention. She raised her gaze. In the mirrored back wall of the meat case she caught the reflection of an older man standing at the end of one of the aisles.

He appeared to be looking at her.

Elain took a deep breath. He was definitely the older guy from the restaurant the other day, and from outside the farm supply store. The dark, creepy intensity in his gaze officially unsettled her. He wasn't at all comforting like the other stranger in the steakhouse.

Ain walked over. "I could slaughter and butcher out a cow in the time it takes you to pick a roast, babe," he teased.

She started to tell him about the guy when she turned around.

He was gone.

Ain frowned. "What's wrong? What's going on?"

She cast her gaze over the store, didn't see him.

"Nothing." She shook her head, selected two roasts, and threw them into the cart. "Nothing. I'm just tired. Let's find Brodey and Cail and get going. We've got everything on the list."

She kept an eye out for the creepy old guy but didn't see him again as they checked out and left the store.

Chapter 7

The next morning, Elain was sitting at the kitchen table and going through her wedding checklists when the front doorbell rang. In the middle of a Friday morning, her boys were all out on the other side of the property taking care of the cattle ranch operations.

The young man standing on the front porch looked like he was in his mid-twenties. He had dark brown hair and ice-blue eyes with a nice body under his jeans, work shirt, and work boots.

Remembering her previous night's encounters, she instinctively took a quick mental and literal sniff.

Shifter.

He nervously smiled. "Hi. Is Aindreas in?"

Elain wouldn't claim to be an expert in shape-shifting shit yet, but with the security of being on her home turf, so to speak, she remembered Cail's lessons. She sent her mind out, letting her instincts guide her. While this young man was nervous, anxious, and some might say freaked out, he didn't appear dangerous.

"He's working. I'm Elain."

He nodded. "Micaiah Donovan. Everyone calls me Micah."

The name sounded familiar. Then she remembered he was one of the Lyall cousins and had been invited to the wedding, as a matter of fact. "Come on in." She led him to the kitchen and offered him a glass of iced tea.

"Thanks." He sat at the table, glanced at her bridal magazines and lists and blushed.

Elain set a glass of tea in front of him and reached for the phone. She couldn't stand it any longer. She felt like she would crawl out of

her own skin just from how jumpy he was. “What’s wrong, Micah?”

He blushed again and looked down. “I’m...I’ve got...oh boy.” He closed his eyes. When he next spoke, his voice sounded low. “I’ve got a problem. A bad problem. A *big* problem.”

She sat across from him. Reaching out, she touched his hand, feeling badly for him. “Do you want to talk about it?” A wave of desperate sadness from him washed over her.

He looked up, his eyes full of tears. He shook his head. “I don’t know how to talk about this. It’s...it’s really, *really* bad.”

Talking to him like this felt right on an instinctive level. “Start at the beginning.”

He took a deep breath. “I live up in Tampa. I’ve got a contracting business up there, right?” He closed his eyes, squeezed them tightly shut. “I think I’ve found my One.”

“That’s great!”

He vigorously shook his head, his voice small and tight. “No. No, it’s not. It’s fucking awful.”

“Why? Is...” Elain sighed. “Is she already taken?” Their Clan’s Code of the Ancients declared that even if a shifter found their One, if that One was already married to someone else, they were off-limits. A fact that had led to some early confusion for Ain when he first met Elain and saw her wearing her grandmother’s wedding rings. It took Brodey and Cail doing a little snooping behind Ain’s back for them to learn that she’d worn them to keep from getting hit on.

He shook his head again and bitterly laughed. “No, *that* wouldn’t be a problem. That would be the *least* of my problems.”

Now she was confused. “Micah, what’s going on?”

He took another deep breath. “We hired a new construction foreman last week. I didn’t meet him until two days ago. And he’s my One.”

She studied him. “Oh. So...you’re gay.”

He shook his head. “No. I’m *not* gay. *That’s* the problem. I’m pretty sure this guy isn’t either.”

“But...” The ramifications sank in. “You’re straight, and you’ve pinged on this other straight guy as your One?” Alpha shifters in their Clan needed to find their One mate, as Elain had found out. For Alphas, once they’d met their One, they suffered an instinctive, unquenchable need for them until they were mated and marked with them for life. Once an Alpha shifter met their One, they couldn’t love anyone else. Even if their One was already taken.

He nodded. “It’s a major fucking problem.”

She sat back, stunned.

He continued. Now that he’d admitted it to someone, the words spilled out. “I mean, dammit, I’m *not* gay! I’ve never thought about doing a guy. It’s like I met him and I wanted to jump him right there. I’ve been dating this girl, nice girl. Knew she wasn’t my One, but we have fun in bed, right? So I immediately get in my truck and drive to her house and usually seeing her gives me a boner like you wouldn’t believe. I couldn’t even make myself want to kiss her.”

He dropped his head onto his arms on the table. “I can’t get this guy out of my head. I went back to talk to him, made up shit about the job site and... Fuck!”

He raised his head. Tears ran down his face. “I tried to be casual too, right? He said he was going out last night with a girl, I wanted to find out who and rip her fucking head off! I mean...I’m *not* gay!”

Elain somehow battled the overwhelming laughter threatening to bubble out of her. She shoved it deep inside her. This poor guy obviously felt distraught.

But it was pretty funny.

“Let me see if I can get Ain to answer his phone.” She tried and reached his voicemail. Ditto Brodey and Cail. She suspected they were in the northeast corner of the property but wasn’t sure.

He finally took a sip of tea. “I’m a wreck, man. What the hell am I gonna do?”

“Let’s go find them.” She grabbed a set of truck keys and led him out back.

Elain drove while Micah slumped in his seat and morosely stared out the window. She sent her mind out, trying to find the men. She knew the way to the main barns and headed that way. Halfway there she felt them and turned down another dirt track. Twenty minutes later, she spotted their work truck in the distance.

Ain turned as she drove up. She wondered where Cail and Brodey were until she spotted them running, shifted, out in the field, trying to move cattle from one pasture to another.

“What’s going on?” Ain asked as he walked over and kissed her, slipping his arm around her waist. His piercing grey eyes fixed on Micah. “What’s wrong?” He shook hands with his cousin.

Micah still looked miserable. “I’ve got a problem.” They walked over to the other truck. Elain sat on the tailgate. She noticed Brodey and Cail’s clothes in the truck bed.

“Well, spit it out,” Ain said.

The two jet black wolves had finished moving the cattle. One—Brodey, she instinctively sensed—shifted long enough to close the gate behind them, then shifted back to wolf form and ran to join them.

Cail reached them first and shifted back. “Hey, Micah.” He leaned in and kissed Elain. “What’s going on?” He reached inside the truck bed for his clothes and started pulling them on.

Brodey ran up and nearly knocked Elain over when he shifted mid-stride and grabbed her, kissing her. “Babe! What’s up?” He turned and slapped Micah on the arm. “Hey, dude.”

Brodey’s green eyes crawled over his cousin. Elain suspected he felt a twinge jealous about Micah being that close to her.

Elain handed Brodey his clothes.

“Micah was about to tell us about his problem,” Ain said.

Poor Micah. He reddened, dropped his gaze, then told his story.

Elain hoped the brothers would have advice for their cousin. When Micah finished his story, the other men burst out laughing.

Elain felt pissed for Micah. She jumped off the tailgate and stood next to him. “That’s not funny, assholes!”

Ain glared. “What did I tell you about your mouth, babe?”

“I don’t care! He’s got a problem, comes to you for help, and you three are acting like jerks!” She wouldn’t mention she’d had to battle her own laughter over his plight.

Brodey shook his head, still laughing. “Dude! You are *so* screwed. You must have really taken a major crap on the Goddess for her to do this to you!”

Cail at least tried to stop laughing. His amused smirk betrayed him. “This is a new one. Never heard of anything like this before.”

Ain still glared at Elain over her swearing and talking back to him. “When you find the One, that’s it, Micah. You know that.”

“But I’m not gay!”

Ain shrugged. “I don’t know what you want me to tell you.”

“Isn’t there some sort of loophole? You’re on the Council. Can’t you find a way around this, to break that connection?”

“There is no way to break the connection. Once a single shifter finds their One, that’s it. It’s not like us where all three had to agree. I mean, you can fight the attraction, fire him or move or something, but there’s no way to break the connection once you meet your One. Unless you kill yourself. Or the guy. Even then that might backfire because you already feel connected to him.”

Micah looked horrified. “No! I...No! I could never do that! I...I...” He looked down. “Fuck!” he screamed.

“You love him,” Elain said.

Micah nodded. “I’m. Not. Gay!”

Brodey snorted. “I guess you are now, dude.”

Elain punched him in the shoulder. It was like using a flyswatter against a redwood tree. “Stop it! That’s not funny!”

Brodey glared at her, making her pause.

Ain growled. “You settle down *now*, baby.”

Elain shot him the stink eye but fell quiet. *Fucking Prime edicts.*

Cail ran a hand through his hair. “There’s a Council meeting here on Sunday. Full moon. You can bring him here for a marking

Ceremony.” The large ranch was frequently used as a meeting place for other local shifters due to its privacy.

“I’m. Not. Gay!” Micah protested again.

“Dude,” Brodey said, “It. Doesn’t. Matter. If he’s your One, that’s it. Either that or learn to live with not having anyone.”

“Fuck!” Micah kicked at a rock and walked a short distance away. He looked up at the sky and howled in anger. “FUCK!”

* * * *

Elain was going to drive Micah back to the house, but Ain took the keys from her and tossed his to Brodey. “I’ll take him. You ride with them.”

From the edge in his voice, she suspected she would get a spanking later for talking back to him in front of someone. It would be worth it. If she could contain her laughter, the three brothers, who were over two hundred and thirty years old compared to her twenty-seven, should be able to hold it in for a few minutes.

She slid into the other truck and sat between Brodey and Cail. They followed Ain and Micah back to the house.

Cail patted her on the thigh. “You know you can’t do that, sweetie.”

She knew he meant her outburst. “I don’t care. You guys were so mean.”

“You can’t lie to me. You wanted to laugh too, didn’t you?”

She sighed. “Yeah. But I managed not to.”

Brodey threw an arm around her shoulders. “Honey, this is weirdness personified, even for shifters, but it’s far from the weirdest you’ll ever see with us, believe me. You cannot talk back to Ain like that in front of another shifter. It’s different when it’s the three of us alone. Thank the Goddess Micah is way too upset to probably even realize what you did, or Ain would have hauled off and spanked you right then.”

“I don’t care.”

Cail found her hand and threaded his fingers through hers. “You will the first time he spansks you in public for talking back to him in front of another shifter.”

“He wouldn’t!”

“He would, don’t doubt it. He’s Prime Alpha. It doesn’t mean you can’t disagree with him, but how you present yourself in front of others is a reflection upon him. Us, too. If it looks like we can’t keep our mate in line, it’s not good.”

“What, do the shifter etiquette police send you a wimp citation?”

Brodey snorted. “No, nothing like that.” He glanced at her. “Honey, we’re not the only Clan out there. We told you that.” He turned back to the dirt track as his jaw clenched. “There are Clans out there who wouldn’t hesitate to get down and dirty if they thought there was someone weak they could take out. An Alpha. Or in our case, triplet Alphas.”

Cail scolded him. “Brodey!”

He shrugged. “She needs to learn this sooner or later.”

“Shit like that doesn’t happen anymore, hasn’t for decades. You should wait for Ain to tell her this stuff.”

“You know as well as I do there’s been rumblings.” He stopped the truck. Ahead of them, Ain and Micah continued on toward the house. “Baby, we didn’t want to scare you. It’s only been a few weeks now, and I know this is some pretty trippy shit to begin with. Goddess knows we’ve heaped a ton of crap on you already.”

He looked past her at Cail. “I’m not saying we have anything to worry about. We’ve always kept a low profile, kept to ourselves and within the Clan, didn’t go pissing in anyone else’s backyard, if you get my drift. Our Clan doesn’t like trouble. We don’t want to rule the world. There are shifters out there with some pretty big chips on their shoulders who disagree with our live-and-let-live philosophy.”

He stroked her chin. “You cannot go around, even in safe company like Micah, pushing Ain’s buttons. Or either of us, for that

matter. Make no mistake, if you're with one of us and give us lip in front of another shifter, especially one not of our Clan, we're just as likely to correct you as Ain is. We're bound by Prime edict. He's probably going to make me correct you for that little dust-up back there, for acting up with me like you did."

"Back up." She was still stuck on the other news. "Are you saying there's some sort of freaky secret shape-shifter war going on?"

"Not a war," Cail said. "More of a...skirmish."

"That sounds like bullshit to me," she said. "Is that why you started working with me on that other stuff? How to tell who's who?"

Cail dropped his gaze and took a long moment to answer. "We don't know for sure if our parents' death was really an accident or not."

"What?" They'd died twenty-five years or so earlier in a car accident, Ain had told her.

Brodey took over again. "It was a good day, good road. There was no reason for them to wreck. Our father was a good driver." He paused before continuing. "He'd told us the day before that they needed to talk to us about something, needed our help. He didn't want to get into it on the phone. Next thing we know, they're dead. They were on their way here to see us. They lived up in Tampa."

"How do you know it wasn't an accident?"

Cail looked out the passenger window. "There was a paint scrape on the car that they could never explain. It hadn't been there the week before when we saw them. Our father was a stickler for that kind of stuff, would have gotten it fixed immediately."

Elain pondered the implication. "You think someone ran them off the road?"

The brothers nodded. "Accidentally or on purpose," Brodey said. "Florida Highway Patrol couldn't prove it either way, labeled it an accident, and closed the case. Remember, they didn't have CSI forensics and that kind of stuff like they do now, sweetie."

"But why would anyone want to deliberately hurt them? Maybe it

was just a drunk driver or someone without insurance or something and they ran away.”

“Because their skulls were crushed,” Cail softly answered before turning back to her. “FHP said it happened in the accident. There’s no way it could have. From the way they wrecked, they should have walked away.”

Brodey remained silent. Elain tried to digest that information. “But...there’s no proof it was deliberately done?”

“No,” Cail said. “Only our three gut instincts that someone ran them off the road and then immediately beat their brains in before they could escape the wreckage.”

Chapter 8

On Sunday, Elain felt vaguely sick to her stomach all day. She was bound by Ain's Prime edict to go along with the plan, but it didn't help assuage her guilt.

"I don't like this any more than you do," Ain had quietly explained that morning when they were alone in bed after Brodey and Cail went to take care of their ranch duties. "This is why I was so adamant I didn't want to force you when we found you."

"He's going to rape him tonight, basically." The thought, and the fact that she was now compelled to go along with it, disgusted her.

"No." Ain tried to compose his thoughts. "It's not the same," he finally said. "Yes, at first the guy will probably be unwilling. Once the Ceremony starts and he feels the connection the way that Micah does, he'll submit."

"The guy will fight him."

Ain grimly nodded. "Probably. At first."

"Then it's rape."

"Did we rape you?" he quietly asked.

"No, but I sure as shit didn't want to do what we did in front of those freaking mutts." She still resented the way their Ceremony had gone.

"You willingly submitted, didn't you? I mean yes, it was different for you because you'd already felt the connection, had already mated with us, already knew what we were. Unless Micah's managed to get into the guy's pants by now, he'll probably need to physically overpower him."

She snorted in disgust. "And you guys will help him do that,

won't you?"

Ain shook his head. "No. That's forbidden. A shifter must be able to control their mate. The Code of the Ancients decrees that. If a shifter can't claim their mate, then they don't deserve one."

"It's rape."

Ain rolled onto his back and stared at the ceiling. "Micah won't hurt him. He loves him. He would die to protect him."

"What if he's wrong? What if he's going after this poor guy and he's not his One?"

"We never mistake our One. It's never happened. It's a feeling from the bottom of your soul, unlike any other. We all felt it with you. We'd had false alarms before, where one of us thought maybe a girl was the One. When we met you, it was different than anything we'd ever felt before."

"That's what I'm talking about! What if this is a false alarm?"

"It was different with us, babe. We needed a One for all of us, the same One. The false alarms were probably women right for one of us. A single shifter, one without a twin, immediately knows it. There is no other feeling like it."

She froze. "So I wasn't really the first choice for any of you?"

He swore and rolled over. "You were our *only* choice. The only one right for all of us. The perfect One for all of us."

Elain thought about Kimberlie. "How many women did you fall in love with before me?"

He didn't want to answer. "Let's not talk about this right now. Please?" He rolled onto his back and stared at the ceiling.

It wasn't an edict. As badly as she felt, she didn't want to make herself feel any worse.

But she wouldn't forget. She would demand an explanation later. "This guy will be terrified when this happens."

"Yes, he will," Ain quietly agreed. "Unfortunately, there's no way around it. If it's any consolation, that won't last long. Once Micah marks him, it will bind them and—"

“And then what? Happily ever after? ‘Oh, sorry, I know you’re straight, but let me fuck you up the ass, make you my mate, and then we’ll go play house regardless of how you feel about it.’”

Ain rolled to face her again, his face clouded. “Is that what you feel?” he quietly asked. “Is that how you feel about us?”

“No! I...” He had her. “I love you,” she said. “I love all three of you.”

He persisted, the same, quiet, serious tone. “Do you feel like we forced you? Are you unhappy with us?”

No, she wasn’t unhappy. She loved all three of them and thought she was the luckiest damn woman on the face of the planet. Three hunky guys who only had eyes for her, who weren’t jealous of each other, and she didn’t have to share them with anyone, ever.

“No, I’m not unhappy with you guys.”

He kissed her hand and leveled his gaze at her.

Uh oh, Prime edict look.

“You will *not* interfere tonight. I want you to see the Ceremony, only because you need to understand. You need to see that when it’s over, it’s okay. It’s only a few minutes then, trust me, they will both be happy.”

“Why can’t Micah just walk away from the guy? Let him have his life?”

“He’s not strong enough to do that. Neither were we. Neither were you.”

* * * *

Micah and Jim arrived around four. Micah’s excuse was that Ain and the brothers wanted to build a new barn and asked for his input. Micah made Jim the project supervisor, wanted him to see the property, and that they’d spend the night after having a barbecue.

Elain nervously smiled as she shook Jim’s hand and resisted the urge to think “lamb to the slaughter” over and over again. He stood

maybe three or four inches taller than Micah's five-eleven, with soft brown eyes, short dark blonde hair and a construction worker's tan.

Part of her wondered if Micah would be able to overpower the guy.

Part of her hoped he couldn't.

Elain focused on preparing dinner. Normally the guys shared kitchen duties with her. Today she insisted they leave her alone because it gave her something to do to keep her busy and keep her mind off what would happen when the Council gathered at midnight.

They ate around seven. It didn't escape Elain's notice that Micah made sure Jim always had a fresh beer in his hand even though he never finished his own. She also studied how Micah looked at him.

Nervously.

Lovingly.

There was no mistaking the growing desire and passion in Micah's face.

It didn't make her feel any better.

They gathered on the back porch around the fire pit a little after eleven-thirty. Jim's cheeks looked flushed from the beer. Elain noticed her boys had grown relatively quiet. Brodey and Cail let Ain do most of the talking with Micah and Jim.

Using the excuse of showing him a demonstration with the dogs, Brodey and Cail quietly stood and walked ahead to the barn. She knew there they would shift.

Ain motioned to her. He took her hand as they slowly followed Micah and Jim to the barn. Jim was animated, good-natured, the beer in his system in full control. When Jim stumbled on the path, Micah immediately reached out to steady him.

Elain's heart thumped as she felt conflicted over how tenderly and protective Micah acted with him.

Jim seemed caught in Micah's blue gaze for a moment. "Thanks, man."

"Yeah."

Ain gently squeezed her hand and sent her a thought. “*See? It’s already starting. It’ll be okay.*”

She nodded but didn’t reply.

They walked through the barn to the corral out back where they’d brought the flock of sheep used for herding demos. Brodey had moved the horses to the main barn for the night.

Brodey and Cail, already shifted and ready to go, stood outside the gate. Brodey looked at her and winked.

It didn’t settle her mind or stomach at all.

Ain conducted the demonstration. Jim seemed entranced as he leaned against the fence and watched the dogs working the sheep at Ain’s command. Micah slowly edged closer to Jim, talking with him.

Too nervous to join them, Elain stayed by the barn doorway, leaning against it for strength. At ten minutes to midnight, Elain sensed strange mental whispers in the woods near the house.

The Council.

At least eight members would be there tonight, in addition to the brothers.

She shivered despite the warm night.

Ain obviously sensed them too. He finished the demonstration and called Brodey and Cail out of the corral. They all returned to the barn where Micah sat on a hay bale. Jim, still oblivious, sat on another, and they continued talking about the herding demonstration.

Elain leaned against the wall, in the shadows, trying to quiet her heart. A cold nose nudged her hand. She looked down into a set of brown eyes.

Cail.

“*It’s okay, sweetie,*” he mentally told her.

She nodded.

Ain excused himself for a moment, claiming he needed to check the water in the sheep pen. He stepped back and walked over to stand next to her.

Micah continued talking to Jim, obviously nervous now. He

kicked off his shoes and rubbed his feet like he had an itch. She noticed he wasn't wearing socks.

Ain stepped behind her and wrapped his arms tightly around her as he pressed his lips to the top of her head. *"It's okay."*

She didn't respond.

She felt the other Council members enter the barn from the back and quietly take their places.

Knowing he was out of time, Micah stood. "We need to talk." He stripped off his shirt.

Jim was more than drunk. He looked up from the hay bale and tried to focus on Micah. "What?"

Micah fished something out of the pocket of his jeans and dropped it to the floor. Elain realized it was a small bottle of lube. Then he dropped his jeans and stepped out of them. He wasn't wearing underwear. Elain also realized maybe being well-hung was a shifter trait, because even though he stood a few inches shorter than her men, he was just as well-endowed.

Now Jim sensed trouble. When he tried to stand, Micah reached out, putting a staying hand on Jim's chest. "Stay there. Please." His voice had changed, dropped lower in pitch and timbre.

Alpha. Even Elain recognized it.

Jim froze.

Micah stepped back and shifted. In wolf form he was golden brown with black markings on his face and along his back.

He shifted back.

Jim's jaw gaped.

"I need to tell you something you're not going to believe."

"Fuck!"

"Please, just hear me out. This is hard enough for me to begin with—"

"What the *fuck*?"

Jim tried to stand again, but he was too shocked and too drunk. Micah put his hand out and pushed him back to the hay bale.

“I’m a shape-shifter. And I’m going to owe you a huge explanation and apology tomorrow. Believe me, this isn’t any easier for me than it is for you.”

“What are you talking about?”

Micah drew himself up, stood straight. Alpha posture. “I need you to submit.”

“What?”

Elain glanced at the Council. They sat, quietly watching the events. Apparently Jim hadn’t noticed them yet.

“I…” Micah swore under his breath. “You’re my mate.”

That seemed to break through Jim’s alcohol-induced haze. “Whoa! I’m not gay, dude!” He scrabbled backwards across the bale.

“Neither am I. Apparently the Goddess has a really warped sense of humor. You’re my One, my mate.”

“Fuck that!” Jim stumbled to his feet.

Micah grabbed him, tackled him. He rolled Jim over, face-up under him, and kissed him.

Jim’s struggles weakened for a moment.

Ain nuzzled Elain’s cheek. *“He’s trying to get as much contact with him as possible before he marks and mates him. To take some of the fight out of him.”*

Elain wanted to go to Jim, help him, cry out to him but she couldn’t. Not with Ain’s Prime edict keeping her firmly and quietly at his side.

Brodey and Cail shifted back and stood flanking Ain and Elain. Trying to comfort her, they reached out and touched her arms.

Then Jim fought back, struggling, trying to push Micah off him. For a moment Elain thought Jim might get away, but Micah grabbed him and pinned him to the floor, his hand around his throat.

“Submit!” Micah growled.

It took a little of the fight out of Jim. Long enough for Micah to unfasten Jim’s jeans and yank them down his legs.

That got Jim fighting again. He started struggling, screaming,

pleading.

Micah grabbed him by the throat again and leaned in, kissed him.

Jim had been clawing at Micah's arm. As Micah kissed him, his struggles weakened, ceased.

And, she noticed, his cock started inflating.

Micah sat up but didn't remove his hand from Jim's throat. "Submit," he hoarsely ordered.

"Please, don't do this!" Jim begged.

Micah leaned in again, kissed him long and hard. Elain realized she had been holding her breath.

After a few minutes, it was obvious Jim was responding to Micah. Instead of trying to push him away, he was trying to pull him closer.

Micah flipped him onto his stomach. Jim immediately tried to get up, but Micah shifted and grabbed the scruff of his neck in his mouth and growled.

Elain wanted to throw up, wanted to take her eyes from the scene and couldn't. She knew what that growl meant.

Submit.

The other shifters growled in response.

Now Jim froze, apparently realizing they weren't alone. He sobbed but quit fighting.

Micah gently pushed Jim's head down, leaving his ass in the air and vulnerable. He growled again.

The other shifters chuffed.

Micah stood over Jim, looked at the gathered Council and growled.

They growled in response.

He was claiming his mate.

Jim tried to sit up, but Micah grabbed him by the scruff of the neck again and forced him down. This time he didn't let go until the sobbing man finally quit resisting.

Micah quickly shifted back and grabbed the bottle of lube from the floor. Almost faster than she could follow the movement, he

yanked Jim's shoes and jeans all the way off him. Jim tried to fight, but Micah pinned him to the floor beneath him. The sound of fabric ripping, then Micah pulled Jim's shirt free and threw it out of his way.

Ain tightened his grip on Elain. *"It's almost over."*

She wanted to cry, sob, yet was frozen in place.

Jim tried to scrabble away from Micah. The shifter hooked one arm around the frightened man's waist and pulled him back, then reached around him with the other. Their backs were turned to Elain and the Lyall men. As Jim's screams and pleadings suddenly ceased, she realized what Micah must be doing.

He'd fisted the other man's cock.

Micah whispered something to Jim, though she couldn't hear what. Jim was still crying but something had changed—he'd quit fighting.

Micah stopped what he was doing, slicked himself with lube, then nudged forward.

Jim started struggling again. He screamed, begging, pleading. "No...please...no...don't do this..."

Micah stopped, reached around him, and Jim's struggles ceased again. He held Jim with his arm around his waist, whispering to him in a low voice she couldn't hear. In a few minutes, she watched as Jim's hips bucked against Micah and he started moaning. Definitely didn't sound like he was in pain. Micah leaned in again and whispered something. After a long moment, Jim nodded.

Micah pulled Jim to his knees, sitting up against his chest, as the other man cried. Micah's free hand gripped Jim's throat.

"Submit."

Jim nodded.

Elain heard Micah say, "I'm sorry," before he slid home inside the other man. Then Micah nuzzled Jim's right shoulder and bit down, hard.

The Council shifters chuffed.

Jim screamed again, but this time the tone sounded unmistakably

different.

“Oh, God! YES!”

Micah let go of Jim’s throat and dropped his hand again, presumably to the other man’s cock.

Now Jim’s screams were absolutely of a more passionate type.

“Fuck, yes! Oh God, please don’t stop!”

She watched the muscles roll in Micah’s back as he stroked his mate’s cock. As soon as Jim climaxed, Micah pushed him to the floor, grabbed his hips, and took a few deep strokes inside him. Then he collapsed on top of him, spent, both men panting.

The shifters chuffed and filed out.

Done.

Ain gently guided Elain out the back door, followed by Cail and Brodey. The other two men grabbed their clothes from where they’d hid them and quickly dressed.

Elain started crying. Ain pulled her to him and let her sob against his shoulder. The other two brothers crowded close, also trying to comfort her.

From inside the barn they heard Jim’s ragged voice.

“Yes! Oh, fuck yes!”

Ain let out an amused snort. “They’ll be busy for a while.”

“That’s horrible!” Elain sobbed.

“Remember how you felt when these two bozos had fun with you in the parking lot after your first lunch together?”

She nodded.

“Well, even though they’re officially mated, and Jim’s marked now, he’s still going to feel like that for a little while. I’d be willing to bet they go at it all night like a couple of rabid bunnies.”

Brodey snickered. “Glad we put them in the guest rooms at the far end of the house.”

Ain led her back to the house. They’d just walked into the kitchen when the front door opened and slammed shut again. Micah, still naked, his eyes looking wild, ran into the kitchen. “Do you have more

lube?”

Brodey laughed. “Dude, there’s a whole big bottle in your bathroom.”

Elain realized Jim was standing, also naked, in the living room. He looked a little...well, stunned, for starters. Happy, from the confused smile on his face. And horny, from the way his cock stood straight out.

Micah ran back to him. Jim grabbed his hand and practically dragged Micah down the hall. A guest room door slammed shut seconds later.

The men laughed.

Elain did not see what was so funny. “How can you guys laugh after seeing that?” she cried.

Cail pulled her into his arms. “Babe,” he gently said, “what did *you* just see?”

She sniffled. “It’s still horrible! It doesn’t matter how it ends, it’s horrible!”

“It’s how it happens. A shifter always knows their One. Jim is Micah’s One. When they get this out of their systems and can have a coherent and fully dressed conversation again, I’m sure Jim will tell you he’s okay.”

“He raped him!”

“It’s not the same,” Brodey insisted.

She broke free from them, stomped to their bedroom and slammed the door behind her. Elain fully expected Ain to storm after her for that temper tantrum. Twenty minutes later, she was still sitting, alone, in their bedroom.

It was growing close to one by this time. Elain knew she was nowhere near being able to go to sleep. She changed into a bathing suit and quietly walked out to the back porch through the bedroom sliding glass door. The hot tub was ready to go and she sank into it, trying to erase the sound of Jim’s futile pleadings from her memory.

Yes, she’d willingly submitted, albeit nervously. She’d been so

fucking horny she didn't think she had a choice and would have done anything to make the feeling go away. Not that it was a bad choice either.

But poor Jim...

Elain knew she must have dozed when she heard the back door open and close, followed by happy, giggling male voices.

Jim and Micah.

Two splashes as they jumped into the pool.

She slid lower into the hot tub and moved to look over the edge. Because of a large planter, they couldn't easily see her although she could watch them.

They ended up at the deep end of the pool. Jim swam up to Micah and passionately kissed him.

Her heart raced. She felt a little guilty spying on them, but if she got out and walked back to the bedroom they'd see her. If she got out and went to the living room, she'd have to face her men.

"How long does this last," Jim hoarsely asked Micah.

"What? Feeling this horny?"

"Yeah. I feel like I could fuck you all night and spend all day tomorrow with your cock up my ass."

Elain hoped she didn't gasp too loudly.

"We'll start settling down in a couple of days," Micah said as he wrapped his arms around the other man. "Some semblance of normal."

"I'm not gay."

Micah laughed. "Neither am I. But we're stuck together, like it or not."

Jim kissed him again. "I like it."

"Me too."

They made their way back to the shallow end of the pool. Jim stood, bent over the edge and wiggled his hips at Micah. "On second thought, maybe I want your cock up my ass right now."

"Damn straight." Micah had brought a bottle of lube out and

grabbed it from the edge of the pool. When he sank his stiff cock inside the other man, both moaned.

Elain was vaguely aware of one of her men slipping out through the living room door and joining her in the hot tub.

Cail.

He wrapped his arms around her. "See?" he whispered.

"I don't believe it."

He gently nipped the back of her neck and brushed his fingers against her nipples. "You don't have to believe it. They feel it, you can see for yourself. They get their happily ever after."

In the pool, Micah folded himself around Jim, his hips slowly stroking his cock inside his lover.

"Fuck me," Jim begged.

Micah stroked the other man's back. "For the rest of our lives, buddy."

Cail pulled her into his lap. She realized he was naked when his stiff erection poked her in the ass.

She turned to straddle him and closed her eyes as he held her close. "*Is he really okay?*" she thought to him.

"*Yeah.*" Cail slipped the straps of her bathing suit off her shoulders. "*Ain already told Micah they were welcome to hang out here for a few days or weeks if they wanted to while they get it out of their system.*"

Elain tried to close out the sound of the eager grunts and moans coming from the pool. Cail pushed her bathing suit down and latched onto one nipple with his mouth, the other with his fingers.

She wrapped her arms around him, tangled her fingers in his hair. His other hand trailed between her legs, found her clit through the fabric of her suit and rubbed it. She couldn't resist her men. She didn't want to.

Maybe Jim couldn't resist Micah either.

She kissed Cail. Then she shimmied out of her suit and dropped it outside the hot tub. His stiff cock rubbed against her clit as she rocked

her hips against him.

His hands moved to her hips. He lifted her, impaled her on his shaft. She took his full length inside her with a content sigh.

Feeling safe in his arms, she slowly moved in time with him, eyes closed, enjoying the feel of him inside her. Despite nearly identical bodies, the triplets were as different in their lovemaking styles as they were their personalities.

In the pool, Jim's cries grew louder and more insistent. "Oh, Christ, yes! Fuck me harder!"

Cail snorted in amusement. *"Thank the Goddess we don't have neighbors."*

"I'm having a hard time reconciling what I saw a while ago with what's going on now."

"That's okay, babe. It's between them. If they're okay with it, you should be too." He slipped a hand between them, found her clit again and rubbed it.

She quieted her moans with his mouth.

He stopped thrusting, concentrated on her, trying to bring her over.

"Come for me, sweetheart. You're all mine right now for a few minutes. Give it to me."

She loved being with all of her men at the same time, but also sometimes enjoyed private time alone with one of them.

Elain whimpered as his skilled, persistent fingers teased her closer to release.

"Goddess, you've got a gorgeous ass!" Micah moaned.

Elain snorted with amusement. *"That sort of harshes my mellow."*

"Well, I think you have a gorgeous ass," Cail thought.

"Even if you have to share it with Ain and Brodey?"

He stilled his movements and made her sit up. *"It's not like that. I don't know how to explain it. It's not like we're sharing you. It's like we're all supposed to be together with you. Do you love one of us more than the others?"*

She shook her head. That was the truth, she could never pick one of her boys over the others. They were unique individuals despite their appearance.

“Don’t tease me—fuck me!” Jim groaned from the pool as Micah laughed.

Cail and Elain looked at each other and smiled. She dropped her head to Cail’s shoulder. *“I hate to tell you this, but until they go inside I’m not getting off.”*

“Me either. Let’s just sit here for a while and hope they wear out soon.”

The men fooled around in the pool for another twenty minutes before Jim playfully chased Micah back inside, both men laughing.

Elain relaxed against Cail.

“You okay?” he whispered.

She kept her eyes closed, torn between being upset and the delicious feel of Cail’s firm cock embedded inside her. “I guess.”

“Do you want to go to bed?”

Part of her wanted to say yes, but she knew sleep would be a long time coming. “Let’s finish what we started.”

Cail leaned back, stretching his body in the warm water, pulling her with him. With his hands on her waist he started a slow, rolling motion with his hips. Every stroke slid along her clit, reigniting her passion.

He captured her lips, his tongue gently pressing for entrance. Elain gave herself over to every sensation. Each long, slow, sweet thrust of Cail’s shaft touched places inside and out that his brothers didn’t reach in the same way.

Each man had his strengths, a different way of wringing pleasure and passion from her body. With the warm water caressing her body and enhancing every erotic brush of his flesh against hers, Elain felt her release blossom inside her, deep and hot, quickly spreading through her until one final stroke took her over.

He held her tighter as she muffled her cries against his shoulder.

“That’s it,” he whispered. “Give it to me.”

She rocked her hips against him, prolonging the sensation, until she went limp in his arms.

He turned them over and pulled her legs around his waist. “I could spend all night making love to you,” he growled.

She raked her nails down his back, triggering another growl from him. He kissed her as he dug his fingers into her ass and thrust, hard. Usually she only saw his aggressive side when they were making love, a hint of the Alpha wolf lurking below his normally calm surface.

Shivering with pleasure, she gave up trying to help and let him have her body. “Fuck me, baby,” she whispered.

That did it. With a soft cry, he plunged balls deep and held still as his hot seed pumped into her.

Elain shivered as her imagination focused on the vision of having his baby. Their baby.

Her mate’s child.

He would be a good dad, they all would. Of that she had absolutely no doubt.

Pushing away that thought, she let him cradle her in the water as he caught his breath. “What are you thinking, babe?” he asked.

She smiled. “You really want to know?”

“Yeah.”

Heat rushed to her cheeks as she met his gaze. “About our baby.”

Cail blinked, then his eyes widened. “What?”

“Not right now.” She nestled her head against his chest again. “In a few years.”

He buried his face in her hair. “Really? You want kids?”

“Yeah.” Again the instinctive urge to do it right then boiled to the surface. She shoved it down. “In a few years. Like Ain said, I want time to play with you guys first, if time isn’t an issue anymore.”

He turned her in his arms, resting his palms against her tummy, his lips feathering along her shoulder. “You’d look so beautiful like

that.”

She laced her fingers through his. “Yeah, fat, puking, swollen, and waddling.”

He laughed. “Beautiful. I don’t care what you say. I wouldn’t be able to keep my hands off you.”

“How does that work?”

He snorted in amusement. “You’re asking me how babies are made?”

She gently jabbed him with her elbow. “Duh. I mean, do you have to wait until last? Prime first and all that crap?”

He shrugged. “Honestly? We’ve never really talked about it.” He pressed his lips to the sensitive spot behind her ear that always melted her. “We were more concerned about finding you first. Hard to have kids without a mate.” He kissed her neck again. “He probably should be first, as Prime. I wouldn’t disagree if that’s how it should be.”

“That doesn’t sound fair, that he gets to do everything first.”

He laughed. “Yeah, but he gets all the blame if something is fucked up. Prime perks come with Prime responsibilities, too, don’t forget. I don’t envy him. Neither does Brodey.”

A few minutes later she realized she was drifting to sleep again. With her securely cradled in his arms, Cail stood and carried her to their bedroom. They dried off and slipped into bed. A few minutes later, Ain and Brodey joined them.

“Are you okay, sweetie?” Ain asked.

She was already falling asleep again. “Yeah. Tired.”

Brodey, then Ain kissed her before crawling into bed. She didn’t move from where she was tucked against Cail, his arm draped around her waist. Ain laced his fingers through hers as he cuddled close, and as she dropped to sleep, she once again thought about being a mom.

Chapter 9

The next morning, Ain and Brodey headed out earlier than normal to start working, leaving Cail behind with Elain. He was still asleep, so she slipped out of bed and pulled on shorts and a T-shirt and walked out to the kitchen to cook breakfast.

The house sounded quiet. Almost too quiet. She turned on the small under-counter TV in the kitchen and watched the early morning news while she started coffee and cooked breakfast. With shifter noses in the house, by the time she got the bacon done she should have a nearly full table.

Down the hall, a guest room door quietly opened and closed.

Elain's heart raced as she pretended she didn't hear it. She heard footsteps, then she sensed a man standing in the doorway. Sending her mind out, she realized it was Jim.

He stood there for a moment, obviously uncomfortable. Elain jumped when he spoke in spite of knowing he was there.

"Good morning."

She plastered a smile across her face and turned. "Good morning. How'd you sleep?"

He looked a little confused. From the cock-eyed smile on his face, she guessed he might be okay. "Um..." He laughed, reddened a little. "Well, what little sleep I got was good."

"Would you like some coffee?"

He nodded, apparently relieved to have an easy question to answer.

"Sit. I'll get it for you." She poured him a mug and got out the milk and sugar.

What could she say? *Sorry I went along with you getting fucked?* She kept her mouth shut.

Elain stole glances at him as she cooked. He occasionally looked at the TV and played with his coffee mug. When he spoke it startled her again. "Can I ask you a question?"

She turned from the stove. "Sure."

"Are...um...the other guys. Your fiancé and his brothers. Are they..."

She finally added, "Shape-shifters? Yes."

"Okay." He took a long sip of coffee. "Are you?"

"No. I'm..." Well, he was sort of family now. "I'm their mate."

That got his attention. "Their?"

Her turn to redden. "Yeah, sort of a family secret. It's a long story and I don't know everything yet. I'm almost as new to this as you are. They're Alpha triplets, so I'm...theirs."

"Oh."

She put a plate of food in front of him. "Are you really okay?"

He nodded. "Yeah. I don't understand it." He picked at his food, then set his fork down and looked at her. "I'm not gay."

She smiled. "That's what Micah said to me the other day when he showed up." She couldn't stand it any longer. "About last night—"

He shook his head. "It's okay." His blush deepened. "He talked to me about it." He took a couple bites of egg. "It's okay, seriously."

"I'm sorry."

"You didn't do anything."

"That's why I'm sorry."

She didn't know how much redder in the face he could get when he finally met her gaze. "How can I be in love with him like this?" He shook his head in disbelief and dropped his voice. "It's like...I mean..." He swore. "It's like I can't even remember what it was like to love anyone else."

"I can't explain it. I don't know how to explain it. I felt the same way about Ain, Brodey, and Cail."

He set his fork down again. "I'm not gay! But it's like it's all I can do not to run back to bed and jump him!" He realized what he said and dropped his gaze. "TMI. Sorry."

She laughed and reached over, touching his hand. Maybe it wasn't coincidental Ain made Cail stay back this morning. He'd be the best one to talk to the new mates. "I think you and me are in the same boat. Well, sort of."

He shoveled in another mouthful of eggs. "These are good, thank you."

She patted his hand and went to make more. When their bedroom door opened, Elain knew without looking that Cail was making his way to the kitchen.

He slipped his arm around her waist and kissed the back of her neck. "Good morning, beautiful," he softly whispered in her ear.

Just his touch settled her nerves. "Good morning."

He poured himself a mug of coffee and sat at the table. "Good morning, Jim. How'd you sleep?"

He blushed again. Elain hated that she couldn't contain her nervous snort of laughter.

Cail smiled. "Look, just ask, okay? Yes, you and Micah sort of have a unique situation. So do the four of us. We'll answer as much as we can for you."

Jim nodded and shoved a piece of bacon into his mouth.

Elain was eating at the table when Micah emerged a few minutes later. The look on his face when he walked into the kitchen and spotted Jim made Elain want to drag Cail back to bed. The unbridled love, the air of passion he wore.

He walked around the table and hugged Jim. He looked like he wanted to kiss him but held back. "There you are."

Jim looked torn between embarrassment and lust. "Um, breakfast?"

"Yeah."

Elain spoke up. "I left you a plate on the back of the stove."

“Thanks, Elain.”

The uncomfortable quiet grated on Elain’s nerves. Micah wouldn’t meet Elain’s gaze, apparently fully aware of how upset she’d been.

After a few minutes, Jim looked from her to Micah and back again. “It’s okay, Elain,” he assured her. “I’m okay.”

That did it. She shot another angry look at Micah. “You couldn’t have said something to him before? You had to do it like that?”

“Settle down, baby,” Cail growled.

She didn’t care. He could fucking spank her if he wanted. “No, I won’t settle down! Ain’s Prime edict was only for last night.” She glared at Micah. “You didn’t have to do it like that!”

“Yes, he did,” Jim quietly said, shocking her into silence. He still looked red-faced. “I would have run far and fast.”

She found her voice. “He raped you!”

Jim shook his head. “I submitted. I could have kept fighting. But...” He swore again. “TMI alert. After whatever it was started, the only reason I kept fighting was because I didn’t want to admit it.”

“Admit what?”

He looked at Micah. “That I really liked him from the first moment I met him.”

Elain checked—her jaw wasn’t gaping.

Cail still glared at her from across the table. She suspected she might get her first spanking from him, but that was a small price to pay.

Jim continued. “Yeah, okay, I guess it’s stupid to deny it now, right? I liked him. I’d never liked a guy before like that. Then I met him the other day and I thought holy shit, what the fuck is wrong with me, right?” He took a sip of coffee and looked at Micah. “I love him. It feels right even though it freaked me out at first.”

He reached over and laced his fingers through Micah’s. “He apologized for how it happened, but he’s right. He had to do it or I would have run.”

An uneasy silence descended. As Jim and Micah finished eating, the increasingly heated look on both men's faces told Elain what they'd spend the day doing. When they stood to take their dishes to the sink, Elain waved them off.

"Leave them. Go play."

Both men blushed, but they scurried back to what was now their bedroom.

Cail stood and walked around the table. In one fluid movement he snagged Elain around the waist. "Give me a reason not to spank you for that," he growled.

"Go ahead. Spank me."

They stared each other down for a moment, then Cail laughed. "You are so gonna get in trouble one of these days." He kissed her and released her. When she turned to gather plates from the table, he delivered a hard swat across her ass.

She yelped and turned. "Hey, you said to spank you," he said.

"Smart ass."

His gaze darkened. "You can't go after another shifter like that, like you did Micah, cousin or not."

She started to protest until she thought about what the men had told her about their parents. She decided maybe she should leave this argument alone.

He pulled her to him and kissed her, his hand caressing her ass. "I'm sorry."

"When do you guys start teaching me that stupid Code of the Ancients anyway?"

He released her and refilled his coffee. "Well, now that Micah has Jim, we might as well teach both of you at the same time. He's got to learn it, too."

Chapter 10

With all the shifter hormones flying around the house, Elain felt her own creeping need becoming a screaming craving once again. Three days after Micah and Jim's Ceremony, she knew she had to talk to her men. Considering how badly the last hunt attempt had gone, she was reluctant to approach them with her request. Only when she knew she couldn't stand it much longer, she talked to her men after dinner while relaxing on the lanai.

Ain closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose, a gesture she was quickly coming to think of as his "why me?" look. "Babe, I'm not so sure this is a good idea."

"I'll do it!" Brodey eagerly volunteered.

Elain slipped her arm around Brodey's waist. "Let's let him try. I promise this time I won't run into a tree."

Cail and Ain exchanged a glance. Elain didn't miss it. "What?"

Cail forced a smile. "Nothing, babe. It's okay." He pointed at Brodey. "You keep her safe."

Brodey wrapped his arms around Elain. "Save the speech, buddy." He nuzzled her neck, weakening her knees in the process. "I'm going to fuck you so good, baby."

She squirmed against him, wondering why she stupidly wanted to let him chase her before they could make love. Then her need for the hunt throbbed through her again. "That's at the end, Brod. After you catch me."

His lips skimmed down her neck. "I think I'm going to like fucking you while I'm shifted."

Her belly quivered, outrage and need doing battle with need

getting the upper hand. “You’re *not* fucking me shifted.” Who was she kidding? She knew damn well if he caught her, she was very well likely to let him fuck her even if he was shifted.

“I am if I catch you.”

Part of her wanted to beg him to fuck her right then.

The other two men looked on in wry amusement. “Brod,” Ain interrupted, “you need to let her put on some running clothes.”

“Maybe I’ll make her run nekkid.”

She snickered. “Nekkid running, hmm? Why don’t you ever say ‘naked’?”

“Because I worked long and hard to sound like a southerner. And nekkid sounds better. So does nakey.” He gently nipped her shoulder, sending electric bolts of need pulsing through her sex. “All I know is I can’t wait to fuck you hard and fast, baby.”

He kissed her one last time and stepped away after slapping her on the ass. His eyes hardened as he started unbuttoning his shirt. “Go get changed before I do make you run *naked*.”

She gulped. His voice had developed a hard edge, an Alpha tone. She knew he had no trouble slipping into the role of hunter. Of the three brothers, Brodey was the most comfortable and in tune with his wolf nature, best able to control and call it into play as needed.

“I’ll be right back,” she said before hurrying into the house.

Brodey smiled as he finished unbuttoning his shirt and draped it over one of the lounges on the patio. “This is gonna be fun.” He sat and started removing his boots.

Ain exchanged another look with Cail. “Brod, listen. I want you to be careful.”

“Dude, I thought we went through this already.”

Cail spoke up. “That’s not what he means.”

Confusion filled Brodey’s face. “Mind telling me what you do mean?”

Ain sat across from him. He dropped his voice. “You remember how she acted the night I chased her. If she gets that way again,

please try to be careful and not totally let your Alpha take over. I know it'll make it better for her if you do, but it would be difficult for me and Cail to control her and you."

Brodey sat up and looked at his brothers. "What aren't you guys telling me?"

Cail answered. "We don't know yet. We don't know enough to answer that question."

"What the fuck?"

"Brod, please," Ain pleaded. "He's right, we don't know. When we do know, we'll tell you more." He glanced toward the house, sensing Elain would return soon. "Please?"

Brodey snorted. "Fine," he grumbled as he yanked off his other boot. "You assholes think I'm the dumb one anyway."

"No, we don't," Cail insisted. "Please trust us."

Now barefoot, Brodey stood and stripped off his jeans. He'd gone commando. "Whatever. Just stay the fuck out of my way tonight, okay?" He angrily dropped his jeans onto the lounge and pushed past his brothers.

Ain was about to say something when Elain emerged from the house. "I'm ready."

Brodey smiled. "You could have skipped everything but the sneaks, babe."

"You've gotta catch me first, hot shot."

Brodey's cock stiffened as his eyes narrowed. "There's no doubt I'll catch you. The question is, how hard you gonna make me work for it?"

Elain stepped forward, her eyes on Brodey. Ain and Cail moved back to give them space.

"You're going to have to work damn hard for it, sweetie. You think I'm going to roll over and tap out for you, think again." Considering she was an expert in several varieties of martial arts, Brodey would have a fight on his hands.

He stood in front of her, his green eyes dark and dangerous with

his Alpha struggling to break free. His voice sounded low, nearly a growl. "I'm going to chase you, sweetheart. I *will* catch you. When I do, I'm going to fuck your brains out."

Elain's heart skipped in a wildly pleasant manner. She knew damn well he meant every word, too. "You're all bark and no bite, dawg."

He grinned, but when his lips drew back from his teeth it almost looked like a snarl. "I'm going to catch you, and I'm going to fuck you." He pulled her tight against his chest, his hard cock pressing into her hip as he lowered his lips to her ear. "I'm going to make sure you're good and wet, and then I'm going to fuck that sweet pussy of yours. After I know you're dying to come, I'm going to flip you over and maybe I'll fuck that nice, tight ass of yours."

She gasped, a little fear trying to fight through her desire. "What?"

He nipped her earlobe. "Ain's been the only lucky bastard to have you that way. Now I want to fuck you back there." His hands slipped down her hips, around her ass, and dug in as he started grinding against her. "I'd love to bury my cock in that sweet, tight ass of yours that I've been dreaming about," he hoarsely whispered, "and then I'm gonna shift and let you find out what it's really like being an Alpha wolf's mate."

Part of her wanted to pull away and run.

Part of her wanted to melt into his arms and let him do it right then.

Brodey wasn't finished. "Do you know what happens when wolves fuck, baby?"

"No," she squeaked.

He ground his hips against her again. "I've never gotten to fuck while I'm a wolf. After I catch you, while I've got my cock in that sweet ass of yours, I'm gonna tie with you. You're gonna feel my cock swell up and knot inside you, and you'll have to lie there and let me fuck you until I come and let you go." He nipped her again. "And while we're at it, I'm going to mark you myself." One of his hands skimmed up her back and his fingers traced the existing mark on her

shoulder through her shirt. “My mark. Everyone will know you’re not just our mate, but that you’re my sweet little bitch.”

She was vaguely aware of Cail and Ain observing them, but she felt like her world began and ended inside Brodey’s arms and his deep, musky scent.

Then his words struck home and she pushed him back a step. “Your *what?*”

He grinned and closed the gap, grabbing her wrists. “My sweet little bitch.” He licked the base of her throat, gently grazing her flesh with his teeth. “And there’s not a damn thing you’ll be able to do about it. You’ll be loving every second and begging me for more.”

Elain nearly melted into him again when her outrage broke the surface of her control and took a huge gasp of air. “Like hell I’m going to let you fuck me shifted! And I’m nobody’s fucking bitch!”

His eyes glinted, his wolf near the surface. “Then you’d better run faster than you’ve ever run in your goddamn life, little girl. This big bad wolf catches you before you get to the main barn, you *will* find out what it means to do it doggie style, in the truest sense of the phrase.”

“The main barn?”

He released her wrists and licked his lips. “Thirty seconds, babe. That’s your head start before I shift. You make it to the fence line by the main barn before I catch you, then I’ll give you another lead and chase you on two legs. If the wolf catches you, the wolf *will* fuck you.”

Elain didn’t dare waste time arguing with him. She bolted across the yard at a blazing sprint.

* * * *

Brodey watched her go, fighting the urge to shift and chase her right then.

Cail and Ain warily stepped forward, not wanting to startle him

into a reaction. “You okay, Brod?” Cail asked.

Brodey’s eyes narrowed as he watched where she disappeared into the woods. “I will be, once I get to fuck my mate.”

“You can’t take her shifted,” Ain said. “You can use it as a threat to help her with the hunt, but you can’t do that to her. And you can’t fuck her in the ass if she doesn’t want it.”

Brodey’s lips curled. “Do not tell me what I can and cannot do with my mate!”

Ain started to challenge him when Cail stepped in, his back to Brodey. “Ain, he’s already going down into Alpha. Don’t do this. He won’t hurt her, you know that.”

“We promised her!”

“Yeah,” Cail said, “and I basically used the same threat with her.”

“You weren’t in Alpha.”

“He won’t hurt her,” Cail insisted.

Ain glared at Brodey, but stepped back. Then his own lips curled as he jabbed a finger at Brodey. “You hurt her, you make her cry, I will kick your fucking ass in a way you will never forget.”

Brodey’s posture changed, stiffened. “You get between me and my mate and I’ll rip your throat out, brother or not. Prime or not.” His eyes had darkened to almost totally black as his Alpha struggled for freedom.

Cail looked over his shoulder at Brodey. “Get your ass shifted and go after her.”

Brodey growled in reply. “I’m giving her a two minute head start. I told her I’d shift, not start chasing her, at thirty seconds. You know she can’t outrun me when I’m shifted.”

Cail breathed a silent sigh of relief. “See, Ain? He’s stacking the deck in her favor.”

Ain still glared, but his body posture relaxed a little. “I hate this fucking shit. I hate doing this to her!”

Brodey backed down and circled, stretching his shoulders and neck. “She needs it. I’m willing to give her whatever she needs to

make her happy. If she needs this, I'll give it to her even if you two don't want to." Before his two brothers could reply, Brodey shifted. He threw back his head and let out a long, loud howl.

He didn't, however, immediately set off after her. He circled the pool a few times and let out a few more howls before looking at Cail.

Cail glanced at his watch. "Three minutes."

Brodey chuffed and bounded across the backyard with his nose to the ground.

Ain struggled to contain the nasty feeling in his gut. "I don't like this. What if something happens? What if she really is part shifter and it comes out?"

"Frankly? Brodey's the best one to deal with her if it does."

"I never thought I'd hear you say that."

* * * *

Elain ran, her breath coming in ragged, hitching gasps that were totally uncharacteristic of her. Long distance running was her specialty, and here she was, already struggling for air. She knew how to get to the main barn, but she couldn't beat Brodey there if he shifted, even with a head start. He was too damn fast.

She heard his howl somewhere in the distance behind her. It spurred her faster as she struggled to get her thoughts and body under control. There was no way in hell she'd beat him if she let her fear take over.

Trying to settle her mind, she focused on her breathing, her heartbeat, and then a calming haze of endorphins washed through her.

Or...was it?

This didn't feel like any runner's high she'd ever experienced. The woods suddenly seemed much brighter, like instant built-in night vision. Her hearing sharpened, picking up every sound around her.

Smells were much stronger now, from the sweet woody cypress trees to the tangy sharpness of the pines, the rich dirt and small

animals dashing for cover at her approach.

That was another thing. Her feet felt lighter than they ever had before, every step sure and without stumbling.

A steady, soothing rhythm soon developed. Her mind drifted, hearing Brodey's thoughts somewhere behind her.

"Mate. My mate. Run, little girl, because I'm going to catch my mate."

Deep inside her, another sensation welled up, unstoppable, tearing a howl of her own from her lips. As conscious thought escaped her, the last thing she was aware of was ripping her shirt off over her head and tossing it to the trail behind her.

* * * *

Brodey pulled up short. *What the fuck?*

He sniffed, immediately recognized it as the shirt Elain had been wearing. He shifted back, picked it up, and examined it. It didn't look ripped or damaged, just like she'd taken it off.

He cast his mind out, trying to find her but not wanting her to sense he'd slipped out of Alpha mode in surprise at the discovery.

She was still running, but...

He frowned and tested the air with his nose.

What the fuck?

Debating for a moment, he dropped the shirt, shifted, and set off after her again, this time with every intention of catching up with her. Not to fuck her, but to find out what the fuck was going on.

To find out why he was suddenly smelling a female wolf.

* * * *

Elain's mind drifted as her body took over. Her steps didn't feel right, two feet weren't right for running, only a good, solid four-step pattern of hind and fore would allow her to stretch her muscles.

She stopped, yanked off her sneakers, shorts, and panties, and took off running again with her tongue lolling from her mouth.

* * * *

Okay, this is just plain fucking weird.

Brodey shifted back and examined the pile of clothes. He didn't think Elain was doing it to distract him, although it was distracting him. He also didn't think she was doing it to slow him down.

And who the fuck was the female wolf on their property?

He took off again, shifting back to wolf in mid-stride.

* * * *

Run...gotta run...gotta run...

Elain felt the thought pound through her brain as hard as her heart thudded in her chest. She stretched her legs, running, wishing she could be on all fours instead of upright when the world suddenly went very bright and she seemed to lose about three feet in height.

She would have questioned it, except she caught the scent of a raccoon and veered hard off the trail to track it.

* * * *

Brodey froze and listened. In the distance he heard what definitely sounded like a howl and something very large crashing through the underbrush. Fear rippled through him. Elain was out there somewhere, and if a strange wolf was roaming their property, Elain could be in danger.

He totally missed it when she left the path. He suddenly realized her scent had disappeared and he had to backtrack to find her.

What the fuck?

Unfortunately, her scent was overlaid by the strange wolf's scent.

His heart racing, he increased his speed and pounded through the underbrush. Fuck! He'd never forgive himself if anything happened to her!

* * * *

Elain ran the raccoon to a tree, where it climbed above her reach before looking down and chattering at her from a branch. Elain growled and snarled and clawed at the tree, then realized she wasn't getting up there to the animal.

That's when she caught the whiff of a thought and her head popped up. *Brodey!*

The hunt!

She turned tail and raced through the brush toward the main barn.

* * * *

Brodey paused at the tree and stared up at the freaked out raccoon. No doubt a wolf had been here, as had Elain. He lowered his nose to the ground, found the trail, and started off again. Ain and Cail wouldn't have to kill him if the wolf harmed Elain, he'd want to kill himself out of guilt.

He raced through the underbrush, trying to close the distance, wondering how in fucking hell Elain had managed to run so fast through the woods while off the trail. Then he broke through to open pasture land and poured on speed. They were maybe two hundred yards from the main barn, but had to pass through another patch of woods to get there.

When Brodey emerged near the main barn's fence, he was shocked to see Elain crouched there, naked and filthy, snarling at him.

He immediately shifted back to human form and held out a hand. "Honey, are you okay?"

She growled, both frightening Brodey and setting off his Alpha.

Struggling to remain in control, Brodey kept his voice low and calm. There was no sign of another wolf now, the other scent trail had disappeared. “Elain, babe, talk to me.”

Her upper lip curled. She dropped into a low crouch he knew meant she was preparing to attack.

Attack him.

He hated being firm with her, but he allowed his Alpha to take control to try to rein her in. “Elain! Snap out of it!” he bellowed.

She didn’t move, continued snarling deep in the back of her throat.

His cock stiffened. This wasn’t like the night of the first chase, this was totally different. And by the Goddess, he wanted to fuck that growl right out of her.

“Mate, submit to me. *Now.*”

He heard her thoughts more than understood her growly voice. “*Fuck. You.*”

“That’s it.” He closed the gap between them as she launched herself at him, out of control, swinging her fists and gouging at him with her hands.

He maneuvered her back toward the woods, dodging her vicious attack and not giving her any room to escape. But escaping seemed to be the last thing on her mind. He tried to punch through her hazy, grainy thoughts and talk to her that way. He received nothing but incoherent snarls and growls in reply.

“Okay, fine. You want me to play big bad Alpha, baby girl? That’s what we’ll play.” He dropped his head and shouldered her, hard, backward into a tree. The impact made her grunt and drove the wind out of her.

He grabbed her arms and spun her around, fell to the ground on top of her, and pinned her face down in the dirt. “Submit!” he growled.

She snarled in response.

Brodey forced her legs apart with his. “Submit, mate!” There was

no way in hell he could rein in his Alpha now. For the briefest of moments he hated himself. Now he understood Ain's anguish that night for taking her the way he had.

Elain clawed at the ground, struggling, still growling.

Brodey wrapped one arm around her waist and pulled her to her knees. With his other hand he grabbed a handful of her hair and forced her head back. "Submit!"

"No!"

Beyond reason and hoping she wouldn't hate him the next morning, he bit down on her shoulder, on top of her existing mark, sinking his teeth hard and deep into her flesh.

Immediately, the fight went out of her and she made a tiny, mewling sound before she started grinding her hips into his pelvis.

Mentally, he tried one more time. "*Submit!*"

"Yes!" she gasped.

He thrust his cock home. This time she screamed in passion and pleasure as he fucked her hard and fast. He licked her flesh, working his lips across her shoulder to the nape of her neck where he kissed her. He released her hair and dropped his hand, slipping his fingers between her legs where he found and worked her clit.

She shivered in his arms. "Oh, Jesus, yes!"

He had just enough control of his Alpha to not shift and fuck her as a wolf, despite really wanting to.

"Come for me, mate. Come for me...now!"

She screamed as her muscles milked his cock. Her climax ripped through her and as her body lost all muscle control, he pushed her down to the ground and fucked her, each stroke burying his cock balls deep inside her until he finally exploded with a cry of his own.

Physically drained and sated, he tightly wrapped his arms around her, his softening cock still buried inside her, and rolled to his side. She snuggled tightly against him as they both fell into an exhausted sleep.

* * * *

“Ahem.”

Brodey opened his eyes. Cail stood over him.

Correction, them.

Elain was still tightly pressed against him. Gauging from the position of the moon, it had to be early morning, close to dawn.

“Um. Hey.”

Cail rolled his eyes. “Ain’s going totally batshit.” He tossed something at Brodey, which he recognized as Elain’s clothes. “Just thank your lucky fucking stars I’m the one that tracked you, not him.”

“Where is he?”

“He’s waiting with the truck over there.” He knelt beside Elain. Brodey stifled an instinctive urge to growl at his brother.

Alpha had no place here and now.

Cail reached out and stroked Elain’s cheek. “Sweetie, hey, Sleeping Beauty. Time to wake up.”

She mumbled and rolled over in Brodey’s arms, pressing her face against his chest.

Cail met Brodey’s gaze. In that moment, Brodey knew there was something his brothers hadn’t told him, but he suspected they soon would once he related Elain’s reaction during the hunt.

Brodey gently shook her. “Baby girl, we need to get up and go back to the house.”

“Uh uh.”

Brodey untangled himself and sat up, pulling her into a sitting position. She never opened her eyes. “Uh huh. Come on, you can go back to sleep at the house. We’ll sleep in.”

Cail sighed and reached out, taking Elain into his arms. Elain never opened her eyes. She wrapped her arms around Cail’s neck and let him carry her.

Brodey stood, grabbed Elain’s clothes, and padded after his brother.

Ain was leaning against the side of the truck and looked less than happy. He opened the passenger door for Cail so he could climb in with Elain and didn't bother saying anything to Brodey.

"Is she okay? Is she hurt?" he asked Cail.

"She's fine. She's just a very tired, sleepy girl."

Brodey watched as Ain stroked her forehead and pressed a kiss to her temple. "Let's get her back to the house." He glared at Brodey before walking around the truck and getting in. Brodey climbed into the backseat and avoided Ain's angry gaze in the rear view mirror.

No one spoke. Ain took it very slowly, not wanting to jostle her awake. Brodey reached over the seat and rested his hand on her arm. Cail didn't make him move it.

At the house, Cail handed her off to Brodey. "Jesus, you two are filthy. What'd you do, mud wrestle?"

Brodey was vaguely aware he looked like he'd wallowed in dirt. Elain was covered in dirt and had leaves and pine needles stuck in her hair. "Something like that. I'll clean her up."

Ain opened the front door for them. He started to follow Brodey into the bathroom when Cail grabbed his arm and shook his head. When Ain heard the shower start a moment later, he turned on Cail.

"Give me a reason not to overrule you."

"Let him take care of her. They both need this. I'd be willing to bet he feels about the way you felt after the first chase. Let him have this time with her."

Ain closed his eyes and swore. "Okay. You're right." He headed out to the kitchen. "It's almost four, I'm not getting any sleep. Might as well get to work."

Cail followed him to the kitchen and started a pot of coffee. "We have to tell him."

"I don't want him to know. There's nothing *to* know yet." He caught Cail's expression. "What? What aren't you telling me?"

Cail stared out the window at the dark yard. "Something weird happened out there, and I don't know what. You and I need to sit

down and talk to Brod as soon as possible.”

“What do you mean something weird happened?”

“I think she shifted.”

* * * *

Brodey tried to juggle Elain and turn on the shower at the same time. He finally realized that was impossible and set her on her feet. She mumbled something and kept her arms wrapped around his neck. Supporting her with one arm, he used the other to start the shower and test the water.

She never opened her eyes as he carefully washed her, untangling her hair with his fingers and pulling the leaves and pine needles loose. Then he gently swabbed her with a soapy washcloth. When she let out a soft snore, he realized she'd fallen asleep again. He kissed her forehead and carefully shampooed her hair. A few minutes later he had her rinsed off and swaddled in a large fluffy towel.

He carried her to their bed without bothering to shut off the shower. Returning to stand under the water, he finished scrubbing off before crawling into bed with her, and immediately dropped into a deep sleep.

When he awoke a little before ten that morning, Elain was still sound asleep and draped over his chest. Her hair had dried all wonky, giving her a pleasantly disheveled look.

Without exhaustion, adrenaline, and Alpha to get in his way, he had time to go over the hunt in his mind.

Her reaction.

Brodey played with her hair as he stared into her sleeping face. He wrapped a few strands around his fingers and tried to consider the ramifications of her behavior. He also knew he had to talk to Ain and Cail immediately.

Yeah, tell me that won't set Ain off like a fucking explosion. He'll never want to let her run again.

He closed his eyes and inhaled her scent. His One. Their One. How perfect she was for all of them. Brodey had never envied Ain and his Prime status, even though he himself had always been the one who felt most comfortable with his inner Alpha. Ain never tried to deny that, either.

Ain wouldn't understand her need like Brodey did. He'd felt it in her last night, the wolf within her, no matter how improbable it was. She'd needed more than a run, a hunt. She'd needed her mate to take her down, to prove to her he was capable of taking her and taking care of her.

A little while later, she stretched and opened her eyes. "Hey."

He stroked her cheek. "Hey yourself. How do you feel?"

She blushed. "Good."

"What's that for?" He brushed his fingers over her face. "Why are you embarrassed?"

"I don't remember much of last night."

"That's okay. You seemed to enjoy yourself. You back on an even keel now?"

She nodded and rolled on top of him. "I can't explain it. It's like there was something trying to get out of me. I know it sounds stupid. Whatever we did, it took that feeling away for now."

"Good." He patted her on the ass. "Want me to make you some brunch?"

"How about I help you cook. I don't feel like Cheerios."

"Deal."

He thought she'd roll off him so he could get up, but she didn't. "Why didn't you ever tell me you were a writer?"

It was Brodey's turn to blush. "What do you mean?"

Her finger lightly traced his jaw. "I found the two journals in Cail's office when I was unpacking my books. Why don't you do something with what you wrote?"

He shrugged. "It's old stuff. I should toss them."

"Don't you dare!"

The way he cocked his head almost reminded her of him in his shifted state. “What’s up?”

“It’s just a side I didn’t expect to see in you, that’s all.”

The way his face clouded made her regret her choice of words. “Yeah, I know. One of my few moments of brilliance.”

She grabbed his chin and forced him to look at her. “Stop that. You want to make me happy? Spend more time doing stuff like that, writing.” She kissed him. “I’d love you to read some of it to me.”

He studied her for a long time. “You’re not bullshitting me?”

“Hell no I’m not. Why would you think I am?”

He rolled them onto their sides and propped himself up on one elbow. “I wrote that stuff years ago. What difference does it make?”

“Because it’s part of you, of who you are.” She loved gently raking her fingers through the fuzz on his chest. “Why’d you stop writing?”

He didn’t want to answer, she sensed it. She wouldn’t let him off the hook, waiting him out.

Brodey took a deep breath and let it out again. “We’ve gone through a lot of shit over the years, babe. A lot of hard work. Yeah, we’re loaded now and never have to worry again, but sometimes there were things more important than playing around scribbling stuff in a notebook.”

That wasn’t the truth, but she knew he couldn’t lie to her. Neither could his brothers, it was part of their bond. So it was as much of the truth as he felt comfortable sharing with her.

She decided not to push him any harder.

They took a long shower, using up all the hot water. Then, wearing nothing but one of Brodey’s T-shirts, Elain helped him make brunch and they took it back to their bed to eat.

Heeding the call of nature, Brodey walked into the bathroom, closing the door behind him and leaving his phone on the bedside table. When it rang, Elain answered it without thinking or looking at the display.

The woman on the other end hesitated. "Is Brodey there?"

Elain sat up, seething.

Kimberlie.

She put on her best polite voice. "He's in the bathroom, we just woke up. Can you hold on for a moment?"

Silence from the other end. Then, "Um, no. That's okay." Kimberlie hung up.

Elain smiled, erased the call log, and replaced the phone on the bedside table. When Brodey returned a few minutes later he snuggled back in bed with her. "Who was on the phone?"

"Wrong number," she fudged. It was sort of the truth.

* * * *

Ain and Cail returned to the house for lunch. Elain wanted to go for a ride, so she dressed and left her men sitting at the kitchen table. When she was gone and the men felt confident that she was out of hearing distance, Ain leveled a serious gaze at Brodey.

"What happened last night?"

Cail watched his brother. Brodey fidgeted, hesitant to answer. Cail kept his tone soft. "Brod, please."

He looked at his brothers. "You can't stop her from running. She has to do it. It's part of who she is. She's gonna need it and you edicting her into not doing it won't help her."

Ain shook his head. "I won't do that," he said. "I swear."

Brodey looked at his hands again. "I think she might have shifted." He didn't miss the look his brothers exchanged. "What?"

"Tell him," Ain told Cail.

"Tell me what?"

Cail ran down the information they had, their suppositions, and the other information Jocko passed along. He also told them what he suspected based on the previous night's activities.

Brodey slowly nodded. "It makes sense."

“It doesn’t make sense!” Ain protested.

“You want another answer? Find it.” Brodey stood and paced the kitchen. I wasn’t really putting it together last night. I never saw her as a wolf, okay? I smelled one. The fact that her scent and the wolf’s were overlapped makes sense.”

Ain pulled out his cell phone. “I need to talk to Jocko.”

Brodey leaned against the counter, arms crossed, listening. When the call connected, neither Brodey nor Cail missed Ain’s dark expression.

“Jocko, it’s Ain. I need to talk to you about something.”

“Well boyo, that makes us even. I have something to talk to you about, too.”

Ain’s body tensed. “What?”

“There’s been two more murders.”

By the time Ain hung up the phone, numb disbelief had set in.

Micah walked into the kitchen. He started for the fridge, then looked at his cousins. “What’s wrong?”

Cail started to say nothing, but Ain shook his head. “You need to hear this.”

Micah pulled out a chair and sat.

Ain toyed with his phone. “Someone’s going around killing shifter mates. Liam Pardie’s other sister-in-law was murdered.” He closed his eyes. “And the mate of one of our cousins.”

“But why?” Micah asked.

This time, Ain did the storytelling. He filled Micah in about Elain and their suspicions. When he finished, he said, “I strongly suggest you two stay here for the duration. We can have someone go with you to get more clothes and stuff, but I don’t think Jim should leave the ranch alone.”

Micah nodded. “Yeah, no shit.” He blew out a long breath. “The Abernathys, huh? Jesus, those freaks just won’t go away, will they?”

Ain spun his cell phone on the table in front of him. “*If* Elain is an Abernathy, and *if* she is a shifter, we need to seriously think about

moving back to Maine. That includes you, Micah.”

Micah nodded. “Yeah.” He scrubbed his face with his hands. “Jesus, this fucking sucks. What about the others around here?”

“You’re the closest relative we’ve got in the area. Everyone else around here is distant or from different, friendly Clans. If the Abernathys are coming after us, they want Elain. Us getting out of town would draw attention away from the local shifters.”

“Why are they killing Liam Pardie’s in-laws?” Cail interjected. “This doesn’t make sense.”

“I don’t know,” Ain admitted.

Brodey spoke up. “We can’t tell her right now,” he quietly said.

His brothers looked at him in shock. “What do you mean we can’t tell her?” Ain demanded.

“We can’t. Not with the wedding and everything. Her mom’s coming down. She obviously doesn’t know she can shift. She will hopefully be good to go for a couple of weeks, at this rate. Once we go up to Maine after the wedding, we can talk to her, work with her. We’ll have the Clan around us for safety.”

Ain looked at Cail, wanting his opinion. Cail shook his head. “He’s got a point.”

“All right, Jesus. Fine.” Ain pinched the bridge of his nose and wished this was all a bad dream. He didn’t want his mate—the woman they’d searched hundreds of years to find—to be in danger. “Fine. After the wedding, up in Maine.”

Chapter 11

Elain rode out into the northeast pasture with Cail and Brodey the next morning. Brodey was shifted, while she and Cail rode the horses. She'd grown fairly proficient in the saddle and finally convinced the men to let her ride without the bulky protective helmet Brodey had bought for her. They still wouldn't let her work the cattle. They made her watch and stay out of the way, promising her that would come soon enough.

She sat off to the side, watching the men work, when Brodey's cell vibrated in her back pocket. She pulled it out and looked at the number.

Kimmie.

The nasty jealousy rolled in her stomach again. *Can't the bitch leave well enough alone and take a fucking hint?*

Cail sent Brodey out after a cluster of stragglers and rode over to her. "What's wrong?"

She jammed the phone back into her pocket. "Nothing."

He leaned forward on the saddle horn and arched an eyebrow at her. "Elain." Deep, commanding Alpha voice. He didn't often use that tone with her.

She sighed and handed over Brodey's phone.

Cail's brow wrinkled as he read the screen. He closed his eyes and before he could block the thought, she heard it.

"He...loved her?"

Cail glanced over his shoulder at Brodey to make sure he was out of earshot. "She's in the past. She's not an issue. He loves you, we all do. You know that. You know *you* are the center of his universe, not

her. She's his past."

Elain felt more than jealousy roll through her. She felt guilt.

The phone vibrated again, indicating a voicemail. Cail obviously didn't want to hand it over, but he placed it in her waiting palm. Elain played the message.

"Hey, Brod, it's Kimmie. Listen, sweetie, please call me back, okay? I really want to talk to you. Maybe there's some way we can work things out or something." There was a choked sound Elain recognized as the other woman crying. "I love you. I've never stopped loving you. I know you feel the same way after all we went through. Please?"

Elain closed her eyes as she deleted the message.

Cail studied her. "Sweetie—"

"No. Please, don't." Elain knew Cail had heard the message. Sometimes, super-sensitive shifter hearing had its drawbacks. She returned the phone to her pocket and turned Mina toward the house. "I just need some alone time, okay?"

Cail didn't follow her. She took a few minutes to groom the mare and turned her out into the corral before walking to the house. She didn't doubt Brodey's love for her. She was, however, only human. Guilt ate at her that Brodey had loved this woman, and she had loved him, and stupid shifter shit kept them apart. It wasn't fair. Not that Elain would ever give up any of her men, but she damn well could sympathize.

Elain made a quick phone call to confirm the woman would be there, grabbed a shower and left the men a note saying she'd be back later before heading out the door to her car. An hour later, she was in Venice.

The hostess at the restaurant seated her at a table in Kimberlie's section. When the woman saw Elain, she hesitated before walking over.

"Hi."

"Please, Kimberlie. Sit. I'd like to talk with you."

The woman did.

Elain leaned in close and kept her voice soft, fighting the harshness that wanted to creep in. “I know what you are, the truth about you and your family. That you’re shifters. I also know what Brodey and Cail and Ain are. There’s something he didn’t tell you when we were in here before because seeing you surprised him.”

Kimberlie warily eyed Elain but didn’t respond.

Elain forged on. “Did they tell you about needing a One?”

“All I know is Ain had some sort of bullshit rule.”

“It wasn’t Ain’s fault.” When Kimberlie’s brow furrowed, Elain suspected she’d hit on the truth and made a quick explanation. As she did, Kimberlie looked down at the table, her shoulders slumping.

Elain risked reaching out and touching the woman’s hand. She didn’t understand why, but instinctively it felt like the right thing to do. Kimberlie’s emotional pain seemed to flow through Elain’s fingers. “I’m sorry. It’s just the way their Clan does things.”

Kimberlie took a deep breath. “He told me his brothers ordered him to get rid of me because they had to mate within their Clan.”

Elain didn’t expect the nearly overwhelming wave of sympathy she now felt. “He did love you.”

Kimberlie nodded and wiped her eyes. “My brothers didn’t want me hanging with wolves anyway.” She sniffled. “Said they had different ways. That it couldn’t work out. The old cat and dog bullshit. I wanted to prove them wrong.” She met Elain’s gaze. “He’s a great guy.”

“I know.”

The waitress took a deep breath. “Is he happy?”

Elain nodded. “I think so. He says he is.” Elain felt it, the other woman’s heart breaking, like a physical pain in her own chest. Kimberlie had honestly felt she still had a chance with Brodey. “I know I love him with all my heart. I’d die before I let anything bad happen to any of them.”

Kimberlie slid out of the booth and wiped her eyes with the back

of her hand. "Can I get you something to drink?"

Apparently the conversation was over. "Iced tea, please." Kimberlie walked off. After she left, Elain laid two twenties on the table and left the restaurant.

Not that it would help the girl's broken heart, but it made Elain feel a little less guilty.

Only a little.

* * * *

Brodey waited for her on the front porch when she returned. She sensed the other two men weren't at the house.

Elain sat next to him on the step. "Why didn't you just tell me who she was?" she quietly asked.

He shrugged as he draped his arm across her shoulders. "It shocked me seeing her that day. I didn't want to be an asshole and say, 'Hey, Kimmie, how's tricks? Sorry I broke your heart. By the way, meet my wife.'" He kissed the top of her head. "I'm sorry, babe. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. I didn't know what to say or do. Then Ain made a valid point that it would probably make you feel bad to know who she really was. I didn't want to heap that on you too."

She snuggled closer to him. "Are you really happy with me?"

He pulled her into his lap and made her look up at him. "Babe, I would *die* for you. If I lost you, I *would* die. You're the only one in my heart. I can remember being in love with her, but since I met you, I don't remember how it *felt* being in love with her. You take up my whole heart. You're the only one in it."

"How many other women were there?"

He shrugged. "She was the most serious for me."

"Ain and Cail?"

He shook his head. "You ask them yourself. I'm not having this conversation with you. Sometimes the past is best left alone, honey. This is proof." He kissed her, long and sweet, his tongue gently

sweeping between her lips. “The only one we love is you. We’re fine letting the past stay dead.”

“Is that why you really quit writing?”

“Do we need to talk about that right now?”

She lay there quietly in his arms for a few minutes. “I’m sorry.”

He nuzzled her nose. “About what?”

“Blowing up at you. I wish you’d told me, said something then instead of keeping it inside.”

“It’s done. Doesn’t matter. She doesn’t matter to me anymore. Since I met you, you’re the only one in my heart. All I care about is that you understand how completely I love you.”

She wrapped her arms around his neck and tangled her fingers in his hair. “I do.” She buried her face against his shoulder. “I wish we could all legally get married.”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“You say that a lot.”

“That’s because it’s the truth. We’ll be taking a trip up to Maine later this summer, to the Clan compound up there. Sort of like a family reunion. We can have a recognition ceremony there for all of us. Would that be okay?”

She snuggled closer. “Yeah.”

He picked her up and carried her into the house, settled with her on the sofa. “We good, baby?”

“Yeah, we’re good.”

“You spend a lot of time running from us, you realize that?”

Elain smiled. “But I stick closer to home each time I do.”

He laughed, burying his face in her hair. “Jesus, baby, you have no idea what you do to us, do you?” His hand skimmed up her tummy, under her shirt, and cupped her breast. “I’d chase you forever.”

Cail and Ain walked through the front door. It was close to dinner time, and Elain’s stomach growled as she realized she hadn’t eaten anything since breakfast. Ain started unbuttoning his shirt to head for

the shower.

“Are we all good now, kids? Did we kiss and make up again?” he teased.

Brodey tightened his grip on her a little. “Mine.” He pressed his lips to the side of her neck.

Ain froze mid-step and arched an eyebrow at him. “Excuse me?”

Elain grabbed Brodey’s chin and forced him to look at her. “You have to share.”

He started to growl, but then she grabbed his crotch through his jeans and squeezed, hard.

Brodey’s growl immediately changed to a yelp. “Uncle!”

She eased up but felt his hard bulge throb even more under her palm.

Ain and Cail laughed. “You know, Brod,” Ain said, “I don’t think I’m going to back you down this time. I think our mate has matters well in hand.”

Cail snickered and headed for the kitchen to get something to drink.

Brodey glared at them, but when his eyes met Elain’s, they softened. “I love you, babe,” he whispered.

“I know. Now behave. We can play later. I need to eat.”

He pulled her in for one last kiss. “A three dog night tonight, huh?” he joked.

She grinned. “If you guys play nice and don’t make me mad before we go to bed, yeah.”

Micah and Jim joined them for dinner before returning to their room. After dinner, Elain and her men tumbled into bed together. Ain laid on his back and pulled her on top of him. “Feeling playful, baby?” His fingers stroked her clit before gently pressing for entrance.

Of course she was wet. Her earlier appetizer with Brodey had revved her romantic engines. He lifted her onto his cock, letting out a satisfied grunt as she settled her hips against his.

Cail knelt behind her. When she felt him drizzle lube between her ass cheeks she froze.

“No,” he assured her, anticipating her protest. “I promise, just wait. You’ll like this.”

She couldn’t relax. As much as she wanted to try anal sex again with them, she hadn’t quite talked herself into it.

True to his word, Cail pressed his stiff shaft along the seam of her ass and thrust without making any attempt to penetrate her nearly-virgin rim. “See?”

Elain relaxed. That didn’t do anything for her in particular, good or bad, but if he enjoyed it, she was game. He pushed her down on top of Ain and stroked her back with his fingers as he slowly thrust between her cheeks.

Okay, it definitely wasn’t bad. The way she straddled Ain allowed her to rub her clit against him.

Brodey leaned in and kissed her. “Want to do something else, too?”

She nodded and licked her lips. He wasted no time changing position so she could reach his cock with her mouth.

Ain played with her nipples, pinching them into hard peaks. “You’re a busy girl, aren’t you?”

She moaned, losing herself in the sensations. Part of her wondered if it made her a slut to enjoy this so much, taking these three men at once.

Surprisingly, she found she didn’t care. Nothing felt more right than life with her boys. In fact, it hit her that for the first time in her life, she honestly felt she was exactly where she was supposed to be.

Okay, brain, shut up. She eagerly devoured Brodey as the men caressed and stroked her body. Everything blended into one big mix of pleasure, her body instinctively responding to everything they did. She stroked Brodey’s sac, then gently squeezed. That was more than enough to trigger his release and he thrust his cock into her mouth as he cried out.

Elain wouldn't let go until satisfied she'd milked every drop out of him.

He sank to the bed and draped his arm across her back. "Come for us, baby," he urged.

With her eyes squeezed shut she focused on the delicious friction of Ain's body against her clit. So close...so close.

Cail leaned forward and kissed the back of her shoulder, over her mark. Without warning, he bit down, hard.

Elain screamed, but in pleasure more than pain as her climax violently ripped through her.

"That's what I wanted to hear," Ain growled before slamming his hips into her. He added his release to her.

Cail waited for a moment, then lifted her off Ain, to her knees, and slid his cock home inside her ready sex. "My turn, baby."

Ain stroked her arms and shoulders as she caught her breath, muscles trembling, unable to do anything other than kneel there and let Cail have fun. The scent of their mixed musky aromas and sex and sweat filled the air, the sound of Cail's ragged breathing and the slap of flesh against flesh the only sound.

"You want it, baby?" Cail asked, teasing.

Her head still bowed on Ain's chest, she simply nodded.

Brodey gently fisted her hair and lifted her head. His green eyes bored into hers. "Tell us. We want to hear you."

Impaled on Brodey's gaze, she helplessly whispered, "I want it. I want you to fuck me, Cail."

"I'm gonna give it to you good, sweetheart." Elain knew he was close, and after a moment he growled with pleasure as he came.

Catching his breath, instead of pulling out he lifted her off Ain and rolled them both onto their sides on the bed.

Brodey kissed her again and brushed the hair from her damp forehead. "You okay?"

She smiled and nodded, wanting nothing more than to fall asleep. She should want a shower, but on the other hand the thought of

washing away her mates' scents seemed like the worst thing in the world.

Ain captured her hand and kissed her fingers. "Go to sleep, honey. You look exhausted."

That settled, she quickly dropped into a deep and dreamless sleep.

Chapter 12

Two weeks after Micah and Jim's Ceremony, Elain felt unsettled all day. Late afternoon showers had kept her from her daily ride, but it wasn't that. It wasn't a craving for a staged hunt either.

She didn't know what it was, only that it was a creeping feeling she didn't like. She'd been thinking more and more about the two strange men lately. Mr. Creepy, as she thought of him, thankfully hadn't made another appearance. The stranger from the steakhouse, however, she wished she could run into him again.

When she recalled his face and voice, a deep, melancholy pang resonated within her.

She'd also been puzzled by an odd series of dreams. Some of Mr. Creepy and the steakhouse man, some of a sweet future with her men...and their pups.

Micah and Jim had gone to bed shortly after dinner. Elain knew they wouldn't see them until morning unless they ran out of whipped cream or chocolate syrup or lube or something. Brodey and Cail had run up to the barn to check on a cow in labor, and Ain was in the shower.

She smiled to herself as she pulled out a roast to defrost for tomorrow's dinner. Okay, the guys were right about what had happened between Micah and Jim. It still didn't make the act of marking and mating any less violent or disturbing to witness, but Jim's admission helped soothe Elain's mind.

And watching the two men interact when they could keep their pants on and their hands off each other was kind of cute.

Puppy love, she thought.

Elain stifled a nearly side-splitting laugh at that thought.

She was washing her hands at the kitchen sink when she looked out the window. In the deepening gloom, she spotted headlights bouncing up their long private driveway.

Who the hell is that?

She didn't recognize the red Toyota sedan. When the driver stepped out, Elain felt like laughing in joy and screaming in irritation all at the same time. "Mom!" She ran out the front door and down the steps to embrace her in a huge hug. "What are you doing here? You're not supposed to be here for a few weeks!"

"I know. I wanted to surprise you." She leaned in close. "And check up on that guy. Make sure you had plenty of support in case you wanted to change your mind and leave."

Elain rolled her eyes. "Mom, I promise, I'm happy." Elain helped her get her suitcases from the trunk. Her mom walked in the front door ahead of her as Ain walked out of the bedroom wearing a pair of shorts, his hair still damp from the shower.

He froze.

"Well, hello, Ain," Carla said. "Nice to see you again. Looks like you've had a haircut."

Ain's eyes flicked to Elain, then back to Carla. "Um, hello, ma'am."

Carla set down her overnight bag. "You don't need to be so formal with me, son. You can call me Mom, if you want."

Behind Carla, Elain was making *oh shit, I'm sorry, please play along* faces at Ain. "Um, okay, Mom. Thanks. Wow, what a surprise to see you again. Let me help you with those." He started across the living room to take the bags from Elain.

Carla studied Ain. Elain stood behind her, wincing. "There's something different about you, son."

"Help me out here, babe," Ain mentally said to Elain.

"Just play along."

"I'm the same old me," Ain offered.

Brodey picked that moment to walk in. Elain mentally nailed him. “*Pretend you’ve never met her!*”

He hesitated in the doorway. “Um, hello.”

Elain picked up the ball. “Mom, this is Ain’s brother, Brodey. Brodey, this is my mom, Carla.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Brodey offered without getting too close.

Carla frowned. “How many of you are there?”

“Mom, I told you he had two brothers.”

“You never said he was a twin.”

“Um, let’s get you settled into your bedroom.” Elain mentally groaned when from down the hall she heard a faint moan from Jim and Micah’s room. She couldn’t put her mom at the far end of the house close to them, they’d keep her up all night. Her mom was open-minded, but two men going at it in a loud and raunchy way would push the limits with her.

“Right this way, Mom.”

Brodey scampered into the master bedroom and shut the door behind him.

Chickenshit, Elain thought.

Ain followed Elain to the first guest room, the one closest to their bedroom. “*We need to talk, babe,*” he mentally said.

“*I know! Just...give me a minute to think!*” Aloud she said, “Mom, I’ll be right back—”

“No, I need to talk to you. Ain, would you excuse us for just a moment, please?”

He looked from Elain to her mom and back. “Sure.” He walked out.

Carla shut the bedroom door. “What the hell is wrong with you, missy?” she hissed. “I cannot *believe* you! You were messing around with your brother-in-law?”

Elain groaned. She should have known it was too much to hope she wouldn’t notice. “Now listen, Mom—”

“No, *you* listen. That man that came and got you in Spokane had

green eyes, not grey like Ain. Funny, what's his name, Brodey? He's got green eyes. And Ain has shorter hair than Brodey. No wonder you ran away!"

Panic threatened. "Mom, please. Wait a minute."

Carla dropped her voice even lower. "I raised you better than that! Does Ain have any idea what the two of you were doing? How can a brother turn on his own brother like that?"

A tap on the door caught their attention.

"Come in!" Elain gratefully called.

Ain stood in the doorway. "Ma'am, I think we need to have a talk."

Carla glared at Elain. "I believe you're right." She pushed past her daughter and followed Ain out to the living room. Elain sat on the sofa as Brodey and Ain took up positions behind her, Ain directly behind Elain. Her mom paced back and forth in front of the easy chairs on the other side of the coffee table.

"Normally, I wouldn't interfere in my daughter's business. She'll be the first one to tell you I've stayed out of her love life." She pulled herself up to her full five-three and met Ain's gaze. "I'm sorry to tell you this, but I think your brother and Elain have slept together."

He nodded. "I know. We have a confession to make."

Carla looked stunned. "You *know*?"

He rested his hands on Elain's shoulder, gently kneaded them, trying to reduce her stress. "We have a...unique situation. My brothers and I love her. We all fell in love with her, and she loves us."

Elain closed her eyes and clutched his hands. She loved him for doing this and prayed her mom would still speak to her after the revelation.

He continued. "I know it's not normal. I know it's not looked upon as proper by most people. However, I promise you, my brothers and I will make her happy for the rest of our lives. She'll have not one, but three men devoted to her and loving her."

Carla's jaw dropped. "Three? All *three* of you? What the hell

have you done to my poor daughter to drag her into this? What kind of mind games are you playing with her? How is she supposed to handle having three of you in her life?"

Cail walked in at that moment, interrupting Carla's rant in mid-stream. He froze, glancing from Ain to Brodey to Elain. "Um, hello."

Carla looked horror-struck. She staggered, caught herself. "Oh, no."

"Mom, please, let me explain—"

"Triplets. They told me about triplets. You...you're the ones Liam talked about, aren't you? Oh my God!" She wheeled around on Elain. "Did they mark you? Oh, God, please tell me they marked you!"

Elain couldn't speak. The men looked stunned and all turned to face Carla. "What?" they asked as one.

Tears ran down Carla's face. "I never believed, never thought..." She cried for a moment before regaining her voice. "She was right. Oh my God, she was right."

Ain found his voice first. "Who was right?"

Carla's tears freely flowed. "Maureen. Elain's mother. She told me, showed me, but I didn't believe." She met Ain's gaze. "Elain's mom and dad were shape-shifters. Alpha shape-shifters." Carla shook her head as she stared at the three men, then back to her daughter. "I thought she'd lost her mind. I didn't believe her. I thought they'd hypnotized me or drugged me or something when they showed me what they could do. Then he had to leave and when she got sick, she asked me to protect Elain and gave her to me. They told me what to look for, who to find if she started showing signs of shifting. But Elain never did any of that stuff, ever!"

Ain released Elain's shoulders and walked closer to Carla as he struggled to keep his voice low and calm. "What are you talking about?"

Carla grabbed her purse from the coffee table. With shaking fingers, she rooted around inside and pulled out a battered, yellowed envelope. On the front, in handwriting Elain wasn't familiar with, was

Elain's name.

With a trembling hand, she held it out to her daughter. "Maureen left this for you. I was supposed to give it to you after you were married."

Carla's face was streaked with tears. "There's some sort of blood oath. If Liam had a daughter, he had to give her up to fulfill the damn thing. He left to try to lead them away from Maureen and the baby. His Clan didn't know he'd mated with Maureen." She faced Ain. "Maureen gave Elain to me to keep her away from the Abernathy family."

THE END

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TyMBER Dalton lives in southwest Florida with her husband (aka “The World’s Best Husband™”) and son. She loves her family, writing, coffee, dark chocolate, music, a good book, hockey, and her dogs (even when they try to drink her coffee and steal her chocolate).

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You can check out her other bestsellers, such as “Trouble Comes in Threes (Triple Trouble 1),” “Love Slave for Two,” and “Love at First Bight,” also available on the BookStrand website. (Don’t forget to look up her “alter ego,” Lesli Richardson!)

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