



Loose Id

# EYES LIKE A WOLF

EVANGELINE ANDERSON

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# PART ONE: SEPARATION

## Chapter One

The rock whistled through the air and sliced the tender skin just above my right eye. I cried out and dropped my library books on the sidewalk, putting a hand to my forehead where a wet trickle of warmth was starting to flow.

“Freaky eyes, freaky eyes -- Rachel’s got the freaky eyes.” The voice belonged to Todd Jenkins, the meanest boy at Wayne Hills Elementary. I turned to see him laughing at me, his grubby fists filled with stones. Behind him were Stevie Coltrain and Jaycee Murdock, boys that followed him and did whatever he told them to. They were all older than me and several grades ahead -- by rights, I should have been beneath their notice. But Todd made it his business to notice and persecute anyone who was different, as I certainly was.

“Leave me alone!” I yelled at them, wiping the stinging blood out of my eyes. It wasn’t my fault I looked strange -- everyone in my family had the same slanting pale green eyes that could see in the dark as well as the light.

I never should have told that I could see in darkness, never should have let the girls at Priscilla Waverley’s slumber party know there was anything more unusual about my eyes than the way they looked. But I wanted so badly to be special, to fit in with the popular group. She and the other girls had turned on me, spilling my secrets to the school at large, and now I was known as “Freaky Eyes Kemet,” a name I hid from the rest of my family, especially my older brother Richard, in shame.

“Freaky eyes, freaky eyes,” Todd taunted, and his followers took up the chant as well.

I tried to remember my father’s words. *We are the Amon-kai -- that means we’re different, Rachel my darling. We’ll always be different, and the world doesn’t like people who don’t fit in. When they laugh or tease you, just ignore them.*

Bending to pick up my library books, I did my best to ignore the taunts and jeers. But then another stone hit my back, and a third hit my shoulder. I looked up to see all three of

the boys advancing on me, lobbing stones as hard as they could. When a fourth stone hit me just under my left eye, I gasped and dropped my books again. They weren't just teasing me now -- they really wanted to hurt me.

My nerve broke, and I ran stumbling down the sidewalk, feeling the stinging stones raise welts and bruises on my unprotected back. The wet warmth was getting in my eyes again, blinding me. Even eyes that can see in the dark can't see through blood. I fell, skinning my knees and palms on the sidewalk, crying with the fierce pain -- the pain of rejection as much as the physical agony of the sidewalk erasing my skin.

The boys behind me laughed at my fall and pelted me with more rocks and sharp gravel. I felt one cut my ear, and another raised a lump on my scalp. I got up and ran on, desperate now to reach the shelter of our cool, ancient, Victorian mansion at the end of the street. Only there would I be safe -- safe in my brother's shadow. Richard was actually my adopted brother, but no blood relation could have been more protective or caring. He could and would protect me with his life, I knew.

"Freaky eyes! Freaky eyes! Only dogs and cats can see in the dark -- you're an animal!" Todd Jenkins yelled behind me.

I risked a glance back and saw that they had almost caught up with me. Their hands were still half full of stones, and there was malicious glee on their piggy faces. *If they catch me*, I thought wildly. *Oh, if they catch me!* It was then that I knew I was running for my life.

"Animal eyes! Freaky eyes!"

I turned my head, not wanting to see the look of hatred on their faces, and ran headlong into my older brother's chest. The wind was knocked out of me, and I would have fallen if he hadn't caught me and held me close.

"Rache?" He used his nickname for me, peering into my face worriedly. He must have seen the smears of blood on my face and the hot tears I felt in my eyes because his face hardened immediately. He pushed me behind him and turned to face my tormentors.

"Freaky eyes! Freaky..." Todd Jenkins's mean voice trailed off as Richard advanced on him and his cronies. Richard was twelve and in middle school. He was already filling out, getting the size and strength the men of the Amon-kai were known for.

"What did you do to my sister?" Richard's voice was low and menacing. It hadn't changed yet to the bass rumble it was sure to become, but it was deep enough to frighten a schoolyard bully like Todd.

"She's a freak," he said defiantly, as if that answered Richard's question and excused his own actions at the same time. "You're all freaks -- my old man says so."

"So that makes it okay to hurt us?" Richard advanced on the three of them, and Stevie Coltraine and Jaycee Murdock backed up uneasily. Rocks, the evidence of their guilt, dropped with a clatter to the sidewalk before them. Todd, trying to look brave, puffed out his chest and held his ground.



"She's a freak," he said again. "She went to that party at Prissy Waverley's house and Prissy's dad was makin' hamburgers, so your freaky little sister asked if she could eat hers raw -- not cooked or nothin'."

Todd made a face, and Stevie Coltrain muttered, "Gross out!"

Richard shrugged as if my craving for raw meat was no big deal. "We like our meat rare. So?"

"So?" Todd looked outraged. "So then she told Prissy Waverley she could see in the dark -- proved it, too. She walked all around Prissy's house in the pitch black and didn't bump into a single thing. Prissy said ya couldn't even see your hand in front of your face, but she didn't trip or stumble or nothin'."

Richard cast a glance my way, and I shrank back, feeling much worse than I had when Todd and his crew were jeering at me. The first rule in our family was *never tell the secrets of the Amon-kai*. In my longing to fit in, I had broken that rule. It might mean punishment from my mother or father, but it was the loss of Richard's good opinion that I really feared.

"You hurt her," he said, taking another step toward Todd. "Threw rocks at her. *Nobody* hurts my little sister."

"I ain't afraid of you, ya freak." Todd's quavering voice belied his brave words. "You just come on and try somethin'. You think the three of us can't take you?"

"No, I don't. Besides, there's only two of you now." Richard's voice was flat, but he was grinning at Todd in a most disturbing way. In his dark face, the pale green eyes of the Amon-kai stood out much more than in my own, lighter features.

Todd threw a glance behind him to see that Jaycee had run away. Stevie Coltrain was still holding his ground, but just barely. Richard was not someone you wanted angry at you.

"C'mon, then." Todd's voice was filled with false bravado. "My old man taught me how to fight freaks like you." He dropped his handful of rocks and lunged forward suddenly. Richard sidestepped his advance as gracefully as a dancer. Then, moving almost faster than my eyes could follow, my brother had the bully on the ground, his right arm pinned behind his back and pulled high between his shoulder blades.

"Ow! Stop it! I'm gonna tell my old man, and you're gonna be sorry." Todd's threats were still more shouts of outrage than pain. That changed with Richard's next move.

"Never go near my sister again." His voice was cool, but the pressure he exerted on Todd's arm was serious business.

Todd shrieked, and his red face turned a dirty white color, like old socks that have been worn so often you can't ever really get them all the way clean.

"C'mon, man. Let 'im go. We didn't mean no harm." Stevie Coltrain sounded close to fainting himself.

"Look at the blood on my sister's face and tell me you didn't mean harm." Richard's voice had gone scary and adult. I was almost frightened of him myself. He looked up at Stevie's terrified face. "Leave if you don't want to be next."

Stevie didn't need to be told twice. He took off like a shot, shouting over his shoulder, "I'm gonna tell!" Richard didn't pay him any attention. He had turned back to Todd Jenkins, who was wheezing, his face pressed hard against the sidewalk.

"Are you ever going to throw rocks at my sister again?" he asked quietly, giving Todd's arm another yank.

Todd shrieked again. "No, I swear ta God. I promise, I give, whatever, just let me go!"

"Are you right-handed or left-handed?" Richard asked.

"What do you care?" Todd demanded. Another yank from my big brother had him screaming, "Right -- right-handed!"

"Good. Then you won't be throwing rocks at anybody else for a while, either." There was a muffled pop that turned my stomach, then Todd made a strangled sound and writhed on the concrete. When Richard got off him, I saw the bully's right arm was bent at an impossible angle. My older brother stooped to look into his wide-eyed face. "Remember," he said quietly. Then, turning to me, "Come on, Rache. Let's go."

I had been standing bug-eyed, watching the fight, unable to speak a word. I let Richard take my hand and lead me past the cool shelter of our wide front porch to the dim interior of the old Victorian mansion. Once he got me into the bathroom where he could tend my wounds, my composure broke.

"Richard," I wailed, feeling my face crumple like a balled-up tissue. "What if you killed him? You'll get in trouble and go to jail."

"I didn't kill him, Rache," he said with surprising patience for his age. "I just taught him not to mess with our family. Not to mess with my little sister. Now, come on, let me see your face."

He wet a washcloth in the sink and squeezed it out before dabbing gently at my wounds. Even though he was gentle, I flinched at the stinging sensation as he wiped away the blood. Richard winced in sympathy.

"Sorry, Rache. I know it hurts." He sighed. "I wish we were already bonded. Then I could heal you and stop the pain."

I wasn't exactly sure what he meant, but I submitted to his gentle wiping of my cuts and bruises with the cool damp washcloth, the tears still leaking silently from my swollen, puffy eyes. I was only seven and had never been through any kind of personal violence before. But losing my brother's good opinion mattered more to me than my stinging cuts and lumps.

"Richard," I said at last. He was finishing up with the first cut I had gotten, the one over my right eye on my forehead. "Are you gonna tell on me about...you know?"

“Tell Mom and Dad that you told a family secret, you mean?” He raised a black eyebrow at me, and his eyes seemed almost to glow in his dark face.

“Uh-huh.” I hung my head, ashamed.

“No, Rache. I’m not going to tell,” His voice was surprisingly gentle. “I never told you this, but I told once. I showed off for my Boy Scout troop when I was nine.”

“Really?” I looked up with wide eyes. Richard had always seemed so steady and sensible to my seven-year-old mind. So adult. He was almost more like a third parent than a sibling.

He nodded. “Yup. It was on a camp-out. Artie Sloan was getting on my nerves, so I decided to teach him a lesson.” He shrugged. “I was just being a stupid little kid.” His voice was an unconscious imitation of my father’s tone when he spoke of the wild pranks he’d pulled in his adolescence.

I bit my lip. “So what happened?”

Richard shrugged shoulders that were just starting to broaden. “I proved I could run faster than any other guy in the troop. Also that I could climb to the top of a tree the rest of them couldn’t even get to the first branch of. And...I forget what else. Stupid stuff.”

“But what happened?” I persisted.

Richard looked sad for a moment. “Well, the rest of the guys wouldn’t get near me for the rest of the day, and Scoutmaster Jenkins brought us back two days early. The next day he came to see Dad, and I could hear him saying that I didn’t belong in the troop. Mom and Dad didn’t want to make waves, so they took me out.”

“Just like that?” I frowned at the unfairness of it all. Was it Richard’s fault he had such extraordinary abilities? That he was better than the rest of the boys at almost anything physical? There were things that I could do that no other girl in my class could do -- mostly the seeing in the dark thing, but my other senses were sharper than normal, too. I didn’t expect to ever inherit all of Richard’s gifts because I was a girl. Girls of the Amon-kai received much more subtle talents.

“Just like that.” Richard snapped his fingers, as though to illustrate the point. “Look, Rache, the point is that sometimes it’s hard to keep it inside. We can do all this neat stuff, but we don’t dare tell anybody about it. When you do, it always blows up on you.” He sighed, a surprisingly adult sound. “Like my old scoutmaster, Mister Jenkins. I’m pretty sure he’s Todd’s dad. So that’s why Todd hates you so much – ’cause his dad hates me.”

“Oh.” My eyes widened with understanding.

Richard dabbed at my head once more with the red-splotched washcloth. “Come here for a minute,” he said, throwing the cloth in the sink and tugging at my hand. I came to stand beside him willingly enough, and he turned us to face the full-length oval mirror that was on the back of the bathroom door.

“Look at us.” He nodded at the mirror.

“Why?” I asked, uncertain of what I should see, but I looked anyway.

Two children stood there, one slight and pale and blonde with delicate features -- a little pixie, my mother affectionately called me. The other was a boy well on his way to manhood.

Richard stood head and shoulders above me, so that when he put his arm around me, as he frequently did, my head was barely at the level of his chest. Like my father’s, his hair was almost black, and his features were stronger than mine, but still finely molded. His skin was a deep, natural tan several shades darker than my own pale alabaster.

Richard had been adopted or “fostered” by my parents when he was only three. His birth parents, another family of Amon-kai, had been killed in a car wreck. He had been with my mother and father since before I was born, and he fit into our family seamlessly, maybe because he looked so much like my father that he could have been a younger version of him.

“Look at us,” he said again. I looked, but I was looking at him. Since the day I had been born, Richard had always been the dark to my light, the night to my day, the strength to my weakness. My guide, my protector and defender. The perfect big brother, even if he wasn’t really blood. But blood or not, he had the same slanting eyes the pale green of the Mediterranean on a calm day with no other fleck of color at all. The eyes that all of our people had -- the eyes of the Amon-kai.

“What do you see?” Richard asked, staring intently at our reflections, meeting my strange eyes in the mirror with his own.

“I don’t know,” I said, shrugging against his arm, which was around my shoulders.

“Family,” he said, squeezing me tight, the way I loved. “Family, little sister. And someday soon we’ll be mates. So we have to stick together, no matter what.”

I didn’t exactly know what he meant by that any more than I had understood his earlier talk of bonding. But I liked the idea of always being together, of never being parted from him. Somehow it seemed right to think of spending my life with Richard. It seemed right all the way down to my bones.

“Family,” I repeated, hugging him back, thinking that I finally understood. “And we’ll *always* stay together.”

## Chapter Two

“Look at my daughter’s face and tell me again how you want to press charges against my son.” My mother dragged me forward, pushing me almost directly into Mrs. Jenkins’s massive, out-thrust bosom.

“Well!” The pointed bosom heaved with indignation. I avoided it as well as I could, looking miserably down at my feet.

“Let her see your face, Rachel.” My mother raised my chin forcibly, and I found myself looking into the close-set, angry eyes of Todd’s mother.

“The boys said they were just having a bit of fun and got carried away.”

“Got carried away? They nearly took out my daughter’s eye!” My mother pointed to the deep gash over my forehead. It was trickling blood again, despite the fact that she had treated it with antibiotic ointment the moment she’d gotten home and seen the damage. “That will probably turn into a permanent scar,” she said in a low, angry voice, so much different that Mrs. Jenkins’s affronted bugling. “You’re lucky we don’t insist you pay for a plastic surgeon.”

“Plastic surgeon? My son’s arm was dislocated! He may never pitch a baseball again.” Mrs. Jenkins pressed forward angrily, as though trying to use her bosom to get a foot in the door. I would have giggled at the mixed metaphor if I hadn’t been feeling so wretched.

“Then maybe he won’t be able to throw a rock either,” my mother said.

Mrs. Jenkins fell back, her high, lacquered hair bobbing in defeat. But she still had one weapon left in her arsenal, and she didn’t mind using it. “You Kemets are all just freaks,” she hissed. “Nobody in town wants you here, and the sooner you realize that and pack up and move off, the better it will be for all of us.” Then she turned on her heel and marched down the echoing wood planks of our wide front porch, her impressive bosom preceding her.

My mother slammed the door on her retreating form. "Come on, Rachel," she said, tugging me further into the house by the arm. Her mouth had thinned into the narrow white line that told me she was really upset. I wished I could sink into the ground and disappear. Lately, it seemed like Mom was always upset, and I hated the fact that I had been the cause of it this time.

The front door slammed again, and we turned in time to see my father come in the door, a briefcase in one hand and a quizzical expression on his handsome face. "I just saw Mrs. Jenkins on our front walk, and she didn't answer when I said hello. Is there a problem, Lillian?"

"You're damn right there's a problem," my mother spat. "Just look at her face -- the Jenkins boy did that." I cringed, both at her tightened grip on my arm and the forbidden word. No one was supposed to swear in my family, but my mother forgot this rule when she got upset.

"Rachel." My father's pale green eyes dropped to mine, filled with a weary kind of resignation. "Come give me a hug and run to your room. It's bedtime."

It was only seven o'clock and still light outside, but I didn't argue. When Mom got into one of her towering rages, it was always up to Dad to calm her down. Richard and I just tried to stay out of the way.

My father hugged me tight and close for a long moment, and I smelled the masculine scent of his aftershave and the cigars he sometimes smoked. Under that was a base note that I simply thought of as "Daddy." It was a comforting scent, one that Richard was coming to have as well as he grew older. Maybe the scent was a part of our family or the mysterious tribe of Amon-kai, I don't know. I only know that in later years I could never bring myself to trust a man without it.

My father released me and sent me upstairs with a pat. I went to my room, which was decorated in climbing roses and delicate lace. It had a canopy bed and a small make-up table that was an exact copy of the larger one that my mother had in her room. Mine was the bedroom of a little princess, but this time the graceful decor gave me no joy. Downstairs I could hear my parents fighting -- again.

"...not right!" My mother's voice had risen from its usually well-modulated tone to a high, angry pitch that hurt my sensitive ears. "The way we live -- the way we are. It's not *right*."

"It's the way things have always been for our people -- for the Amon-kai." My father's voice was lower, soothing. "Please, Lillian, you can't listen to women like that close-minded shrew."

"It's not just her, Nathaniel, it's the whole town. They think we're freaks."

"Who cares what they think?" my father demanded.

"I do," my mother cried. "Because what if they're right? Did you ever think of that, just once, Nathaniel? Did you ever stop to think that maybe the precious 'teachings' our parents passed down to us are all just twisted foolishness and sick lies?"

"Of course not."

I heard his measured tread on the floor below, then my mother hissed, "Don't touch me!"

"Please, Lillian." My father's deep voice was desperate, but my mother was obviously past caring.

"Do you know what they'd think of us if they *really* knew? Knew the whole truth? What we are -- what our children will become?"

"I don't care what anyone thinks -- I only know I love you. And our children are beautiful -- perfect. Rachel and Richard both, even if Richard isn't ours by blood."

"So perfect their classmates tease and taunt them? So perfect they throw rocks and call them freaks?" My mother's voice had risen to a knife's edge of hysteria that really scared me. I balled myself up on my bed, pressing a lace-covered pillow over my ears, but I could still hear.

"We should have known better, Nathaniel," my mother shouted. "We should have known we'd never be accepted."

"We're different," my father soothed. "People are afraid of anything different..."

"Well maybe they're right to be afraid! Richard dislocated Todd Jenkins's arm today -- we're lucky they didn't call the police."

"He was protecting his Lana-zeel," my father protested. "It's no more than I would have done if someone tried to harm or threaten you, Lillian."

"It's wrong. *We're* wrong," my mother said. "And I'm tired of being different -- of sticking out in a crowd and attracting attention. I don't want this kind of life anymore. Not for me and not for my daughter."

"What are you saying?" My father's voice was low and tense. I could hear the muffled sound of his pacing across the living room carpet downstairs.

"I'm saying I need to leave. I need to get away from this relationship and everything to do with it. Maybe it's too late for me, but it's not too late for Rachel. I don't want her innocence to be taken at such a young age. I don't want her choices limited, her life laid out for her before she's had a chance to consider the possibilities."

"There are no possibilities outside the Amon-Kai," my father said in a low, tense voice. "And her innocence belongs to her mate -- to Richard. The same way yours belonged to me from the moment we were bonded."

"I'm not talking about me," my mother spat. "I'm talking about Rachel."

“And if you leave and take her with you, what happens then?” my father demanded. “What about me? What about Richard?”

“You two can keep each other company. Rachel and I can start a new life -- far away from here.” My mother’s voice was cool now. I had heard her threaten to leave before, but never in this calm tone of voice. I felt a shiver of fear coat my bones.

“You’re not serious.” But my father sounded uncertain. “You know how much I need you -- how much Richard is going to need Rachel in a few more years. You can’t separate them now, Lillian. Not when they’re so close to their bonding ceremony. They’ll never find what they need outside each other now.”

“I can separate them, and I will.”

“I won’t let you go.” My father’s voice had dropped to a menacing growl. “You know that, Lillian. I can’t.”

“Do you really think you can watch me every minute?”

“If I have to. Come here!”

“Why? So you can give me more freak children? So you can convince me to stay one more time and let my daughter go through the same barbaric initiation I went through? How old was I when you first took me, Nathaniel? When you first *raped* me? Was I fourteen? Fifteen, when you came to me as a beast?”

“You were seventeen -- the age of consent among our people,” he reminded her. “Almost the age of consent among the humans. And I might have come to you in beast form, but don’t say I raped you, Lillian. Not when your body wanted mine so much I could smell your heat a mile away. I still remember how wet you were -- how ready. The way you’re ready for me now.”

“Just because you can make my body react doesn’t mean I want you.” My mother’s voice was still cold. “And don’t try to pretend that was the first time you ever came to me. What about all those nights before you first bred me when you snuck into my room? The way you touched me, made me open to you...”

“It’s the way of our people.” He sounded tired, as though they had been through this argument a thousand times before and he knew he couldn’t win it. “You know that, Lillian. The Lana-zeel needs to get used to the idea of taking her Lanor-zur as a lover long before the first breeding. She needs to know his scent, his seed, his essence bathing her sex, even if there is no actual penetration.”

“Lies and excuses. The sick teachings we were taught to think of as some kind of a holy gospel.” My mother’s voice was bitter now. “You came to my room, and no one stopped you, even though my parents and yours both knew it was happening. You...you took what I didn’t want to give. And in the process, you forced my body to become addicted to yours. That’s why I’m weak now, why I can never say no.”



"You can't say no because we love each other. Because we were made for each other, the way Rachel and Richard were made for each other." My father's voice was calm and reasonable.

"No! More lies, Nathaniel. Always more lies -- I'm sick of it! I'll be damned if I sit back and let Rachel suffer through the same ordeal I endured. I don't want to see her chained naked to a rock, forced to submit --"

"You know damn well that isn't how it's done anymore," my father growled. "It doesn't have to be that way, not with the bonding ceremony."

"So what will we do, Nathaniel? Look the other way when Richard's instincts start to rise and he begins sneaking into her room at night? Should I ignore it the way *my* mother did when I go to tuck her in at night and find he's been at her?"

"Richard would never do anything Rachel didn't want or ask for." My father sounded certain. "He loves her dearly -- too dearly to scare her by moving too quickly. It will be years before he comes to her that way."

"Oh, I see." I could almost see my mother nodding her head sarcastically. "So we should just wait and let her find out on her own, on her eighteenth birthday, what he really has in store for her. We should let him change before he takes her -- come to her as a beast. The way you came to me."

"You accepted me, Lillian. I knew you were willing. But no, it doesn't have to be that way. If Rachel doesn't wish it, she'll never have to see Richard's beast at all. Because she'll help him control it -- the way a proper Lana-zeel should."

"Why should her life be sacrificed for his? Why should she waste her future with him, controlling his beast, when she could have so much more?"

I didn't understand a word they were saying, but I knew there was nothing more I wanted out of life than to be with Richard forever. I wished that I dared to go to the foot of the stairs and tell my mother so, but the icy tone of her voice told me that my opinion would not be welcome. Besides, my father was still arguing with her, still trying to talk her out of her rage.

"More in the human world, you mean?" I heard him say. "More in a world where she has no hope of finding a mate? Just because we look like them doesn't mean we're sexually compatible, Lillian; you know that. Look at me and tell me you could bear to have another man -- a human man -- touch you the way I do." The floorboards creaked, and I imagined him reaching forward to take her hand.

"Get away from me!" Her voice was sharp, but there was a breathless quality to it, too. An unwilling eagerness I found hard to make sense of. How could something you didn't want make you so excited?

"No, Lillian." My father's voice was lower than a growl now -- it was animal, inhuman in a way that both frightened me and called to me. "You say you don't want me, don't need me the way I need you. You pretend to hate the beast I keep inside."

"I...I do." But again her voice was uncertain.

"Then why do you spread your legs so much faster when I change? Why is your body so wet and willing the moment I shift to my other form? You put me off and make me chase you when I look like a human. But the moment I let the curse overtake me, you're on your hands and knees practically begging for it. Begging to have me inside you, filling you with my knot. Breeding you."

"I...I don't know what you're talking about. You're lying!"

"No, you're the one that's lying, and the only one you're fooling is yourself." My father's voice was so deep now I could barely understand him. "You're denying the Amon-kai part of yourself, the part of you that needs me and the beast within me."

"No..."

"Yes." His harsh voice was unyielding. "You can deny it for yourself, Lillian, but I'll be damned if I'll let you deny it for our daughter. The bonding ceremony will take place next week. Rachel and Richard will be together for life, the way you and I will be together. Always."

My father's last word ended in what was almost a roar, and then there were sounds of a scuffle that drew hot, frightened tears to my eyes. I knew my parents were rough together sometimes, but they always seemed content afterwards. This time I wasn't so sure there would be a happy ending.

My door creaked open, and I looked up to see Richard standing there in his pajama bottoms with a finger to his lips. I motioned him inside, and he shut the door and came to join me on the bed, curling protectively around me.

"They're fighting," I said, my voice squeezed tight with tears.

"I know." His own voice broke a little bit, but he pulled me closer, wrapping me close in his arms.

"Richard," I said, wanting to drown out the sounds of the fight downstairs. "Mom wouldn't really leave him, would she? She wouldn't really take me away from you?" It was the worst thing I could think of -- being separated from my older brother, my protector, my best friend.

In the past, Richard had refuted my fears, offering me peace. But this time he only said, "I don't know."

"But she can't!" I protested, much as my father had. "I need you, Richard. If she takes me away from you, who's gonna take care of me?"

"Shh." He stroked my hair comfortingly. I could feel his heartbeat, a steady rhythm against my back. The noises from downstairs had quieted somewhat, and the angry shouts

had turned into something else -- a heavy panting and moaning I didn't understand. Almost all of my parents' fights ended like this.

"What are they doing?" I whispered, not really expecting an answer.

"He's breeding her," Richard said flatly. "Fucking her."

I twisted in his arms to face him, shocked beyond measure at this most forbidden of words.

"What did you say?"

Richard's face had gone red, and he shook his head. "Never mind, Rache. You're too young to understand."

"Am not! Tell me -- *please?*" I wheedled.

But Richard shook his head again, more firmly this time. "You'll understand when you're older," he said. "It's part of being of the Amon-kai. All you need to know for now is that Dad is giving Mom a reason to stay. She talks about leaving, but she knows deep down she could never be happy with anyone but Dad. He's just reminding her of that."

"Oh." I lay back down, listening to the confusing noises from below and wondering about what I had heard my parents fighting about. Why would it matter to my mother if Richard came to my room at night? He already slept with me half the time anyway, curled protectively around me in a way that made me feel wonderfully safe. So what was she worried about?

"I have something for you." Richard surprised me again by opening his clenched fist to show two shiny green glass marbles that I knew he treasured highly.

"You're giving them to me?" I poked at the round green gems that clicked together gently in his palm.

"One of them, anyway." Richard put one in my hand and folded my fingers around it.

"They're the exact color of our eyes," he said, clenching the remaining marble tight. "I want you to keep that, Rachel. Promise you'll never lose it."

"I promise," I said, squeezing the marble close to my chest. "But why did you give it to me?"

Richard took a deep breath. "If you're ever lost from me or we ever get separated somehow, I want to be able to prove to you that I'm who I say I am."

"What?" I looked at him, confused. "You're my big brother -- I'll always know you."

"You think so now." Richard's voice was grim. "But people change when they grow up."

"Grow up? But we'll grow up *together*." I could hear the sudden note of panic in my voice. "Won't we, Richard? Promise me you won't leave me!"

"I don't want to," he said, pulling me close again. "I never would on purpose. Don't cry, Rache. The marbles are just a..." He seemed to be searching for a word. "Just a precaution."

“What’s a percaution?” I asked, through my tears.

“A just in case kinda thing.” He stroked my hair soothingly. “We probably won’t ever need them. But don’t lose yours. Okay?”

“Okay,” I agreed, sniffing. Downstairs the muffled moans had faded to silence while we talked. The stillness of the old Victorian house was broken only by the quiet ticking of the grandfather clock on the landing and our mingled breathing. I turned in Richard’s arms again, pressing my hot face to the cool, smooth skin of his chest. We fit together like two pieces of a puzzle, and I knew nothing could happen to me while I was with him and that he wouldn’t let us be parted. I was safe. Safe in his arms.

Clenching the green glass marble the color of our eyes tightly in my fist and lulled by the rhythm of my brother’s heart, I slept.

## Chapter Three

“We’re having a special dinner tonight.” My father’s voice was big and hearty, but the look my mother shot him wasn’t nearly so cheerful. Still, she nodded her head and gave me a small half-smile when she turned from the kitchen sink to face me.

“Your father’s right, darling. Tonight we’re having a -- a celebration.” The word seemed to stick in her throat, and she swallowed hard before she continued. “So I made your favorite dinner.”

“Mmm! I can smell it!” I lifted my nose high to catch the tantalizing scent of bloody raw steak that permeated the air. I knew that other people cooked their meat before they ate it, and I even ate cooked meat myself, as did Richard, for lunch at school. My mother didn’t dare send raw meat in our lunches for fear of attracting attention. But even though I could stand the burned, flavorless lumps of animal flesh I had to eat at school, I never really enjoyed them. Not the way I relished the raw delicacies my mother prepared for us at dinnertime.

“Filet mignon. Your favorite cut, Rache.” Richard had slipped silently into the big, sunny kitchen and was leaning against the doorjamb with his arms crossed over his chest.

“Yours, too, I thought, son.” My father smiled at both of us and then became serious. “Do you know what we’re celebrating tonight? What we’re going to be doing after supper?”

I looked at Richard at once. I had no idea what my father was talking about, but Richard was never without an answer, even to the most confusing question. My big brother was silent for a moment, his pale green eyes very serious.

“The bonding ceremony,” he said at last. “Is that what we’re celebrating? But...isn’t Rachel a little young for it, Dad?”

“She’ll be fine,” my father said a little too heartily, cutting off whatever my mother was about to say. “Rachel’s a trooper. And besides, it’s better you be bonded young as you’re the

only two of our kind left. Alone among the humans with no other outside Amon-kai besides your mother and I to curb them, your, ah, instincts may rise hard and fast.” My father sounded almost embarrassed, as though he was talking about grown-up matters that were hard to say. I saw Richard’s face get red as he nodded briefly. Then my mother dropped the knife she’d been using to carve meat in the sink with a clatter, breaking the strange silence.

“I’ll not have her taken before her eighteenth birthday, Nathaniel,” she stormed at my father. “I don’t care what you say or how fast and hard his instincts rise. He’ll just have to wait to take her!”

I looked at them, confused and concerned. “Take me where?” I asked innocently. “Where is Richard going to take me? Why can’t we go now?”

Richard was so red now he looked like the delicate cuts of raw meat my mother had arranged on her best china platter. “Never mind, Rache,” he mumbled, tugging at my hand. “C’mon, let’s go set the table so Mom can finish making dinner.”

I let him lead me into the dining room with its wide, dark, oval table topped with my mother’s best lace tablecloth, but I still didn’t understand the strange fight that had just gone on in our kitchen. Only one thing was certain -- both my mother and father thought they knew what was best for me, but clearly they disagreed on what that was. Was there any way that both of them could be right at once? I didn’t see how that was possible, but my life was becoming more complicated all the time. I decided that the safest thing to do was to just stick close to Richard, no matter what. Let my mother and father fight over me and my confusing future all they wanted. As long as they let me stay with my big brother I didn’t care.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dinner was a silent meal, a strange kind of celebration if you asked me. Christmas and Thanksgiving, which we celebrated just like the normal kids at our school, were always times to gather at the table and laugh and talk together. Usually my father and Richard tried to out-do each other with corny jokes, and my mother and I laughed until tears stood in our eyes. But tonight there was a tension in the air I didn’t understand and that no one, not even Richard, would explain to me. It caused a knot of fear to form in my stomach and kept me from enjoying the tender, bloody delicacy my mother had prepared. What exactly was the bonding ceremony, and what lay in store for me?

Looking at Richard, I wasn’t surprised to see that he seemed to have lost his appetite, too. He was barely picking at his food, but when he looked up and caught my eye, at least he tried to smile at me. That was more than my mother or father seemed willing to do. Both of them ate in stony silence, never once looking at Richard or me.

As soon as we all finished eating, I got up to help clear the table, but my father shook his head. “Leave it, Rachel,” he told me. “The moon is rising in the sky outside -- I can feel it. It’s time for the ceremony to begin.”

When I thought about it, I realized that I could feel the moon, too. It felt like icy fingertips skating along the nape of my neck, raising prickles and goose bumps all along my spine. I had never stopped to ask myself if other people -- normal people -- could feel that, too, but I guessed that they probably couldn't. Like seeing in the dark and eating raw meat, feeling the moonrise was just another peculiarity reserved exclusively for the Amon-kai.

"Where are we going?" I asked, but Richard already had me by the hand and was leading me out into the large garden that filled our backyard. The cool air was perfumed by the sweet scent of night-blooming jasmine and the green, growing smell of the grass and trees. And, as always when I was with him, I could smell the warm scent of the Amon-kai. It was on nights like this that my father sometimes took us hunting, an event both Richard and I looked forward to, even though we didn't use guns or nets the way a human hunter would have. We ran down our prey on foot, delighting in the chase. But tonight was not for hunting; it was for the mysterious ceremony I didn't understand.

I held on to Richard and stepped carefully. My mother loved to plant new flowers but wasn't too particular about getting them in any certain order or keeping them in check. So the garden was a tangle of vines and bushes, some with thorns that would snag my skin if I wasn't careful. But despite the roots and clumps of flowers in the way, not a single one of us stumbled once or made any noise. Not a twig snapped under our feet; not a leaf crunched under our shoes. It didn't occur to me that a normal person would have been crashing around in the darkness, trampling the delicate blossoms my mother cared for with negligent grace. I only knew that this was normal for us -- for the Amon-kai. We were silent in the darkness because we were at home in its velvety depths. At home in a way that only wild animals can be.

At last we reached the clearing in the middle of the sweet-smelling wilderness, a little bare spot left free of flowers where only the soft, whispering, sweet grass grew. Richard stopped and stood, still holding my hand, in the center of the grassy circle. My parents came to face us, and for the first time, I noticed that my mother was holding the sharp silver knife she had been using earlier in the kitchen. My heart started to beat triple time, and I squeezed Richard's fingers hard. He squeezed back reassuringly and murmured in my ear that everything would be all right. I wanted to tell him I was scared, but just then my father began to speak.

"Tonight as the full moon rises, we gather not as a family, but as a pack. In the old days, there would have been hundreds of us here instead of only four. But numbers do not matter to us now. We gather as Amon-kai to bind this male to this female," he intoned in a deep, solemn voice. "It is a night for promises made, promises to be kept in the future when you, Rachel, and you, Richard, are ready to fulfill them. It is a night of oneness. A night of magic. And on this night only, until years from now when you are grown and the time grows ripe for you to seal the bond between you, will you feel the pain and pleasure of the other and know that you are one. Richard." He turned toward my brother, his pale green eyes shining brightly in the moonlight. "Do you wish to take Rachel as your Lana-zeel?"

Richard nodded, as solemn as my father. "I do, pack leader," he said, still gripping my hand in his.

My father nodded and turned to me. "And do you, Rachel, wish to take Richard as your Lanor-zur?"

I knew what was expected of me, but I couldn't help seeing the anger and resentment in my mother's eyes, the almost palpable warning that I was doing something I might regret forever.

"I...what does that mean?" I asked at last. "Does it mean that Richard and I can be together forever?"

Richard smiled at me and gave me a quick, brotherly peck on the cheek. "That's exactly what it means, Rache," he promised me. "Forever, we'll be together forever after this."

"Then, yes," I said at once, feeling relief flood me. I hadn't been sure what the ceremony entailed before, but if it gave me a foolproof way to stay with my wonderful older brother until the end of time, I was all for it. "Yes," I said again, nodding at my father eagerly. "I want that -- that's exactly what I want."

He smiled at me warmly. "Very well, since both parties are agreed, let the ceremony continue. Hold out your hands."

Richard dropped my hand at once and held out his palm. I noticed that his arm was shaking ever so slightly, but the calm expression on his face never wavered.

My mother stepped forward, the unwilling look still stamped on her face. She raised the sharp kitchen knife, the moonlight shimmering on its silver blade, and stepped toward Richard.

"Born light and dark, yet of one breed, if one is bitten, the other will bleed," she intoned. Her voice was flat and expressionless, but on the last word she swept the knife down in a glittering arc, as though she would stab the blade right through the meat of Richard's palm.

I gasped and would have thrown myself between my brother and the knife if only I could have, but before I could even move, I saw my mother steady the knife and draw a long, shallow scratch down his palm instead of stabbing through it. As she cut, I saw Richard stare stoically ahead, not even flinching. I clenched my own hands in sympathy for him, and that was when I felt it -- the warm liquid dripping from my right palm.

I looked down in disbelief, spreading my fingers to see that, yes, I was bleeding. I was bleeding from the exact same spot that Richard was, my blood black in the moonlight. The cut stung faintly, like the echo of a pain I almost felt, but it was the blood that bothered me the most. The more I stared at it, the stranger I felt. My eyelids fluttered and I think I would have fallen if Richard hadn't caught me.

"Wake up, Rache," he said anxiously, patting my cheek with his uninjured palm. "Wake up -- we have to finish the ceremony, or we can't be together forever."



That got my attention, and I forced myself to open my eyes and nod for my father to go on. He nodded back, gravely, as though my reaction was not unexpected. Stepping forward, he waved one large hand over us in a strange kind of benediction and spoke softly.

"Joined as one, their bond to seal. If one is wounded, the other may heal," he murmured, and nodded at Richard.

Without asking, Richard took my hand and licked carefully along the long, thin cut in the palm of my hand. I watched him uncertainly, wondering why he was doing this. It wasn't until my palm was cleaned of the blood that I saw what he had done -- the cut was gone, gone completely, leaving not even a scratch. I caught my breath at the ease with which he had accomplished it.

"What...? How...?" I breathed, but Richard shook his head and nodded at my father, who was speaking again.

"Lanor-zur has deadly wrath. Subject to the full moon's path," he said.

Then my mother stepped forward again and said, "Lana-zeel has wisdom's flower to help contain the killing power."

Then, my parents spoke together, their voices blending in the cool night air.

"Without the other, each will die. Thus join they must as Amon-kai."

Richard grabbed my hand again, and I noticed that he had stopped bleeding as well. When he wiped his bloody palm on his jeans and held it out to me, I saw that his cut was gone, just as mine was. It was as though neither wound had ever been.

"It is done," my father said, and I felt a strange, warm tingling flowing between Richard and myself, a feeling I had never had before when he touched me.

"It is done," my mother echoed, but she sounded much less happy about it than my father. Just at that moment, I didn't care though. All I knew was that the frightening ceremony was over, and now I could stay with my brother forever.

"Richard," I said and hugged him close.

"Rachel," he murmured. "I'm so glad."

## Chapter Four

After the bonding ceremony, everything was fine for the next couple of weeks. Mom and Dad seemed to love each other again. She met him at the door with a kiss, and more often than not, Richard and I were sent to bed early so my parents could have “alone time.” We went without protest and spoke in hushed voices in my room or his, ignoring the strange sounds from below.

During this time, I felt almost happy again -- my mother had given up her crazy idea of leaving and taking me with her, I felt sure. And the big boys at school now left me strictly alone for fear that Richard would do to them what he had done to Todd Jenkins, who still had his arm in a sling. The girls wouldn't talk to me either, but I was used to that. I spent my free time in the school library, escaping into books, imagining myself as the good fairy or the princess at the top of the tower. It was a good time, but I kept the green glass marble with me always, just in case.

One day just after lunch, Mrs. DeWitt, who worked in the school office, poked her head in the classroom and said that I should gather my things. My mother was there to collect me.

At first I feared nothing worse than a dentist appointment. Mom was a big believer in surprises, both pleasant and unpleasant alike, eliminating the possibility of anticipation. She always said that knowing in advance that you had a doctor's appointment where you had to get a shot or a dentist's visit where you had to get a cavity filled tied your stomach up in knots and made it hard to think.

But when she took my hand and pulled me out to the school parking lot, I knew something worse than a visit to the dentist with his sharp, whining drill was about to happen. Mom's little red VW bug was loaded down with all kinds of things. Boxes and bags and suitcases bulged from its cramped interior, barely leaving room in the front seat for us to

sit. I felt my heart climb in my mouth at the sight, and I clutched the green glass marble Richard had given me, which was hidden in the front pocket of my dress.

"Mom, why is there so much stuff in the car?" I asked, as she shooed me into the passenger seat and buckled the seatbelt. Maybe we were just going to donate some things to the Salvation Army, I thought. *Oh, please, God, let that be it.*

"You and I are going on a trip," my mother said, dashing my hopes. "Won't that be fun?"

"What about Richard?" I asked immediately. "Are we picking him up at school, too?"

"Don't be silly -- where would we put him?" My mother indicated the crowded interior of the car and gave an affected little laugh. "Besides, this trip is just for girls. You're going to love it."

"No I won't," I said at once, squeezing the marble tighter. "I want my brother! I don't want to go away and leave him and Dad. Please, Mommy, don't take me away." I hadn't called her "Mommy" in several years, deeming it too childish, but I was desperate now.

My mother's mouth was set in a tight, bloodless line as she put the key in the ignition. "I can't expect you to understand this now, Rachel, but I'm taking us away for your own good. It's better for you not to see Richard anymore."

"Not see him anymore?" I was crying openly now. Not see my wonderful big brother? My friend -- my protector? "But why?" I demanded. "Why can't I see him?"

"It's not good for you," my mother replied obliquely. "Someday you'll thank me for this."

"I'll never thank you. I *hate* you!" I screamed, past all reason at the idea of losing him, of losing the family I adored.

Her hand struck out as fast as a snake and slapped my face with a hard, flat sound. She had never hit me before, and the small violence silenced me at once. I put a hand to my cheek where I could feel the print of her hand already forming.

"Oh, my darling, I'm so sorry!" She gathered me into her arms, stroking my hair, and dropped a flurry of kisses on the top of my head. "I didn't mean to do that, but I'm under so much stress right now. You're a little girl so you can't imagine how hard this is for me -- how hard it is to leave everything I've ever known and start all over again. But I'm doing it for you, Rachel, all for you. So you don't have to go through the ridicule and pain I've suffered. So you won't be forced to give...give more than you want to before you're ready. Someday you'll understand, I swear you will."

I let her words wash over me, her tears and promises, too. Only one thing mattered to me now. When she pulled back from her smothering hug, I looked up at her.

"When can I see Richard again?" I asked, feeling my stomach tremble as I waited for her answer.

Her mouth went from pink and quivering to a hard, cold line again. "Never," she said, taking me by the shoulders and shaking me for emphasis. "Do you understand me, Rachel? You must *never* see your older brother again."

*Never.* The word rang in my head like the tolling of the huge bells they had at the top of the Catholic church at the far end of town. I was too young to have ever lost anything of real importance to me. Even when my kitten, Miss Fancypants, died, Richard had promised me that I would see her again in heaven. But now my mother was giving me a sentence with no possibility of parole or reprieve. Never. I could scarcely wrap my mind around it.

We drove until it was dark and stopped at a cheap motel by the side of the road where a flickering neon sign proclaimed, "ac ncy." I slept the sleep of an exhausted and bewildered child in my mother's arms, but her heartbeat did not comfort me as Richard's had. In my hand I clutched the green glass marble -- all I had left of my brother and our life together. Already the pain of losing him was like a dull ache in my heart -- a splinter of agony buried so deep it could never be removed.

That night I dreamed of him for the first time, as I did for many nights after. The dreams persisted long after his memory had faded to a cherished and much worn photograph in my mind's eye. I always woke from them with a sense of longing so deep and wide I couldn't put it into words.

I dreamed of the boy with eyes like mine. The boy with eyes like a wolf.

# PART TWO: REUNION

## Chapter One

“Rachel, please! We’re going to be married in a month.”

I ducked under the encircling arm of my fiancé, Charles Rivera the Third, and stepped to the tiny bar to make myself a drink.

“That’s exactly why I want to wait. It’ll be more special that way,” I told him, mixing myself a bay breeze, heavy on the cranberry juice and light on the vodka. “You want one?” I raised my glass to him

“Not particularly.” He sighed and extracted himself from my overstuffed secondhand loveseat with some difficulty. I sipped my drink and watched as he began wandering around my small house, picking things up and putting them back down as was his habit when he was irritated or upset.

An Assistant District Attorney in Tampa doesn’t make the big bucks, but I made enough to afford the little one bedroom, one bath bungalow that wasn’t too far from downtown. It had been built in the forties and recently renovated and painted a vivid shade of lilac. I was able to get it for a song because it straddled the line between a good neighborhood and a questionable one. Charles was always after me to move someplace safer, but I had seen to the installation of new locks myself and felt secure and content in the little purple house.

Of course, safe, to my fiancé, meant a five thousand-square-foot mansion on Bayshore Drive, Tampa’s answer to Boardwalk on the Monopoly game board. Generations of his family had lived in that most desirable of South Tampa locations, and so would I a month from now when we finally tied the knot. But until then I was a free woman with no plans to give up my own residence until I absolutely had to.

“I don’t see why we couldn’t have gone to my place,” Charles grumbled. He had the slight British accent that comes with a childhood spent at the best European schools and

many summers “abroad.” He’d only come home to study “American law” so that he could join the family firm of Rivera, Rivera, and Tuscan. RR&T was the largest private litigation firm in Tampa and also the wealthiest, and Charles, by virtue of his birth, was already a partner. I had met him at a meeting of the local bar association. We had become friends and then, despite his family’s unspoken but clearly expressed horror, more than friends -- but still not lovers.

“I like it better at my place,” I said, taking another sip of my drink. “It’s cozier.” It was also easier to say “no” on my own turf, a word I was using a lot lately with Charles.

Charles made a face and ran a hand through his hair. It wasn’t as light as my own shade of pale, honey-gold, but he was still noticeably blond. His last name might have been Rivera, but that was the most Hispanic part of him. His great-grandfather, José Rivera, had come to Tampa from Cuba and made a fortune in the cigar rolling and manufacturing business in the early twentieth century. He had gotten rich, built the family mansion, and his descendants had been marrying away their ethnicity as fast as they could ever since. Charles’s surfer-boy good looks and the fact that he was fluent in both French and Italian but knew almost no Spanish spoke plainly of that.

“Your place, while charming, is somewhat cramped, my dear.” Charles picked up an old photograph in a tarnished silver frame as he spoke. “I’ve never seen this here before -- who is it?”

I looked up from my bay breeze and frowned. “Something I found going through my mom’s things this weekend.” I put down my drink on the cluttered counter and went to take it from him. “I believe it’s my brother.”

“You *believe* it’s your brother? Don’t you know? You never told me you had any siblings.” Charles cocked an eyebrow in that slightly condescending way he had.

I studied the faded picture, which showed a young man of about seventeen or eighteen dressed in a black graduation gown holding a matching cap in large, well-formed hands. He had a darkly handsome face, and the slightly slanted, pale green eyes that looked out from under his thick thatch of black hair were the same as my own.

“Well?” Charles was still looking at me, and I realized I’d been standing there staring at the young man’s face for well over a minute. I looked up at my fiancé. For some reason I didn’t want to discuss the picture with him.

I shrugged uneasily. “He wasn’t my biological brother, actually. My parents adopted him from another family with the same, uh, ethnicity as mine when he was only three. He fit in perfectly because he looked so much like my father, even though we weren’t really related by blood...” I shook my head. “Anyway, I haven’t seen him since I was seven. I only know it’s him because of the eyes -- we all have the same eyes in my family, or did anyway.”

“Yes, so you’ve told me.” Charles raised my chin, and I permitted him to kiss me lightly on the lips. “I think that’s what I fell in love with first -- those charming, foreign eyes,” he

murmured in a low tone I knew he meant to be seductive. On another night I might have let myself be seduced into kissing him again, but suddenly I wasn't in the mood.

"They used to call me 'Freaky Eyes' in school," I said, ducking under his arm again. "Did I ever tell you that?"

"No." Charles looked annoyed. "You didn't."

"It's true. You know how cruel kids can be -- unmerciful. Richard used to defend me from all the big, bad bullies." I sighed and traced a line over the tarnished silver frame.

"Richard? That was his name, was it?" Charles looked bemused. "Why haven't you ever mentioned him before?"

"He's a part of my past." I shrugged again, knowing I could never tell him how my mother had insisted almost hysterically that we forget that past, that I never try to contact Richard or my father again.

"And you never tried to find him?" Charles persisted.

I shook my head and put the picture down. The young man's eyes seemed to follow me as I walked back to my drink. "That picture would have been taken over ten years ago now. Richard was a good five years older than me, so he's probably got his own life, a wife, kids...who knows?" I finished my drink and started making another, this time with a little more vodka. "He wouldn't want his little sister butting into his life," I said.

"How do you know until you try?"

"I said, no, Charles," I snapped. "How many ways do I have to say it?" His face fell, and I felt bad immediately. I sighed and ran a hand through my hair, which I had just let down after a long day in court. It fell past my shoulders in silky blonde waves that I had never cut.

"Look," I said. "I'm sorry. I just haven't had a lot of sleep lately. I've had a lot of research to do and..." And I had been having the dream again. The dream of the boy with eyes like mine -- only lately the dream had turned bloody.

"And what?" Charles came up and put his hands on my shoulders, massaging gently. Too gently, actually, to do much good, but I let him do it anyway. "I've told you, Rachel, don't kill yourself with research. Let the paralegals do it -- that's what they're there for."

"And *I've* told *you* that I don't have an army of paralegals and legal secretaries to jump every time I snap my fingers. I have *one* lousy assistant, and I have to share him with two other ADAs," I said. "Don't forget that we court-appointed types don't get the perks you private sector fat cats do."

"Hey, who's a fat cat?" Charles patted his flat stomach mockingly, making me grin. "I'll have you know I work out on a regular basis with a personal trainer, Miss Kemet. Soon to be..." He kissed me lightly on the mouth. "Mrs. Charles Rivera the Third."

"Mrs. Rachel Kemet-Rivera," I corrected. "We talked about this, Charles. You know I'm going to hyphenate."



"Mmm, yes, I do recall you saying something of the kind right when Mother could hear you. You nearly made her choke on her salmon mousse." He laughed and kissed me again.

His mother was an ultra-conservative woman of the old South who believed women were made to be a man's helpmate, not to actually have a life and career and identity of their own. Needless to say, we didn't exactly see eye to eye. I sometimes suspected that one of the deciding factors of Charles asking me to marry him was the look of horror on his mother's face when he had announced it at the last family gathering. He loved to feel like a rebel -- like the black sheep of his blue-blooded family. And what could be more rebellious than marrying a girl with no family, no money to speak of, and strange eyes that marked her clearly as having a little too much ethnicity for comfort?

"Yes, well --" I said, and he cut me off with another kiss, this one much more amorous. *Oh boy, here we go again*, I thought. Another factor, although he wouldn't admit it, in Charles's decision to ask me to be his wife was my closely-guarded virginity. Only now that the vulgar three-carat stone that had been in his family for generations was sitting on my finger, he seemed to expect me to surrender it without a struggle.

"Rachel," he murmured in my ear, kissing a wet trail down my neck while trying to work one hand inside my blouse and grope my breasts. "You know I'll be gentle with you, don't you? That I'll make your first time a night to remember forever?"

"I have no doubt you will, Charles." I tried to push him away gently, weary of the constant battle of "would we, wouldn't we." "And you'll have your chance," I promised him. "Exactly one month and two days from tonight. All right?"

"But, dearest, I need you *now*." Charles made puppy-dog eyes at me. It was the same trick he had used to get me to go out with him on our first date, but this time it wouldn't fly.

I couldn't say exactly why I had saved myself for so long when everyone around me seemed to be having sex left, right, and center; maybe it was because I had never found a man who really stirred me sexually. But I did know one thing -- I hadn't held onto my virginity this long just to give it up on my scruffy living room rug because Charles was whining like a kid who couldn't get the toy he wanted.

I opened my mouth to tell him to forget it, at least for now, and was saved by the ringing of my cell phone.

"Let it ring," Charles murmured, licking the inside of my ear wetly.

"I can't." I pushed past him, wiping my ear with the sleeve of my sweater. "It might be a client or something else to do with work. Remember, I don't have the luxury of a private secretary who fills me in every morning."

I grabbed my cell and flipped it open, ready for business and frankly glad to have an excuse to get away from Charles for a moment. I was beginning to feel like I was engaged to an octopus.

"Kemet here," I said briskly, turning my back on the now-pouting Charles.

"Kemet? Detective Marks here," responded a husky voice on the other end.

"Oh, hello, Genevieve." I was pleasantly surprised. Genevieve Marks was a homicide detective and one of my main links to the Tampa PD. We had worked on several cases together, and she always gave me information freely and without the bullshit hassle the male cops sometimes put me through. I suspected that one reason for this was because she had a crush on me, but at least she wasn't overt about it.

"What can I do for you?" I asked, hoping she would give me a reason to come down to the Franklin Street station and get away from Charles's groping for a while.

"Actually, this time it's what I can do for you," she responded. "Got a guy down here -- a real piece of work -- wanted on a possible homicide."

"What are the details?" I reached for the pad and pen I always kept on the counter.

"He was seen by several witnesses leaving an alley in Ybor City with what looked like blood on his face. When they went to check it out, they found Chulo Martinez dead with his throat ripped out."

I stopped writing for a moment, trying to take it in. "Chulo's dead?" He was one of the most notorious pimps in Ybor City, Tampa's oldest and most historic district, and he had been around since I was still clerking for the DA to put myself through law school. Rumor had it that he also had ties to organized crime, and though nothing had ever been proven, he was thought to be more than just a pimp.

"Yeah." Genevieve was chewing gum; she popped a bubble loudly in my ear. "A couple of his girls found him. They actually called 911 for that piece of garbage -- can you believe it? But he was DRT." Dead right there, she meant.

"Wow." I started writing again. "Wonder what Momo the shark is going to have to say about that." Momo "the shark" Andretti was understood to be the local head of organized crime, but the PD had never been able to pin anything on him. Because it's a port city, Tampa had its share of wiseguys, although it's nothing like New York or Chicago. If Chulo Martinez really had been one of Momo's "button men," chances were that the mobster would be plenty pissed.

Genevieve barked out a laugh. "You know Momo -- he makes the Teflon don look like, uh, hey, what's that kind of cookware that always sticks -- you know what I mean."

"No I don't," I told her. "I never eat anything that doesn't come in a take-out container."

She sighed. "And here I thought you were an old-fashioned girl."

I laughed. "Guess again, Detective. If you want someone to cook for you, you'll have to find a girl that's a hell of a lot more femme than me."

She laughed too, delighted at my mild flirtation. From the corner of my eye, I could see Charles scowl. Damn, I'd forgotten how jealous he was.

“So what do you need from me?” I asked, trying to get back to business. “You want me to come down and offer him a deal? Play good cop, bad ADA or something along those lines?”

“That’s a tempting offer, and I’ll keep it in mind for another time. But, no, this guy actually wants you to represent him.”

“What?” I shook my head disbelievingly. “Did you tell him I’m a mad-dog prosecutor, and I eat guys like him for breakfast?”

“You might want to reconsider just this once.” Genevieve’s voice was flat. “See, he’s claiming to be your brother.”

## Chapter Two

"Dearest, where are you going?" Charles trailed me around my house like a lost puppy as I gathered my things and tried to get ready to go.

"No time, Charles," I told him, grabbing my purse and briefcase and slipping back into my black pumps. It was a damn good thing I hadn't had time to do more than take down my hair when I'd gotten home. I was glad I hadn't taken off my neat gray skirt and white blouse yet -- it saved me the trouble of dressing.

"But we were supposed to be alone tonight -- it was going to be special," he whined. "I had Lucinda clear my schedule this evening especially for you." Lucinda was his head legal secretary, a long-suffering woman who had been with RR&T since Charles was in diapers.

"I'm sorry, Charles, but this simply cannot wait." I pushed past him into the cramped confines of my bedroom and began digging through the antique rosewood jewelry box my mother had left me. In the far left corner, under a pile of silver and white-gold bangles Charles had given me was a thin gold chain with a special ornament on it. I fumbled it out of the box and tried to fasten it around my neck with my arms full.

"What's that? I've never seen you wear it before," Charles said, sounding peevish. "What kind of stone is it, anyway?"

I nearly laughed at his mistake. The "stone" was a clear green glass marble, the exact color of my eyes. On my sixteenth birthday, I had taken it secretly to a jeweler and had him drill a hole in it and hang it on the slender gold chain, the only one I could afford. I had worn it to bed every night for years, never letting my mother see it. That was back when I still had hope.

Now, as I fastened the necklace around my neck and felt the marble settle its cool weight in the hollow of my throat, I felt that flare of hope again. It was crazy, wasn't it, to still think he might finally have come for me? To believe that the man at the Franklin Street

Police Station was telling the truth? And yet, I couldn't help it. *Richard!* I thought. *If you've really come back...*

"At least let me come with you. Downtown is dangerous at night, darling," Charles protested.

I looked at him with barely concealed annoyance and realized that I would never hear the end of it if I said no. Then I reminded myself that it was sweet of him to be concerned about me and made myself answer graciously. "All right, Charles, you can come if you really want to. But I'm warning you, I might be there a while."

"That's all right; at least we'll be together." He gave me his sweetest grin, and I remembered why I loved him. He really was a wonderful man -- it was just that he wanted more than I was prepared to give at this particular time. I didn't stop to ask myself if another month was really going to make a difference in my willingness to take our relationship to a more physical level. I had already decided that I would worry about that when the time came.

"All right then, come on." I grabbed my keys as we left the house. Outside I suddenly felt the icy fingertips of the full moon staring down at me, stroking the back of my neck and sending goose bumps down my spine. It was a sensation I hadn't felt in years, and I couldn't explain it now. I pushed away the unsettling sensation as I headed for my car. "I'm driving and don't complain," I told Charles. "You know my night vision is better than yours."

\* \* \* \* \*

The man sitting behind the one-way glass in the interrogation room didn't look familiar until he turned his head and I looked at his eyes. They were slanted and pale green, and my heart skipped a beat when I met them. Though he shouldn't have been able to see anything through the mirror that was on his side of the room, I felt like he was looking right at me.

"You know him?" Detective Genevieve Marks was staring at me critically, watching my reaction to the man who was claiming to be Richard. Her bushy brown hair was cut short, and her sharp gray eyes were taking in my every move.

"I don't know," I said, looking down at my hands to avoid his piercing gaze. "I...I'll have to talk to him to be sure. I haven't seen him since I was seven."

She whistled. "That's a long time. If it is him, too bad he had to show up under these circumstances."

"I know." I lowered my voice. "Look, Genevieve, give it to me straight -- what are we talking about? Do you really think he killed Chulo?"

She shrugged. "Could go either way. On one hand, there were two witnesses, and they both pointed him out. On the other hand, they're both working girls, and at least one of 'em's a junkie. Your...uh, brother went into The Mirage for a drink after he left the alley

where Chulo was found. The junkie followed him while the other waited for the paramedics.”

“So he didn’t even leave the scene? He just went right next door for a drink?” I asked, incredulous. It was my job to poke holes in this sort of behavior, but no matter how you sliced it, that didn’t seem like the act of a guilty man.

The detective winced. “I know, I know. Of course -- there was the little matter of the blood on his mouth...”

“Oh, come on. You really think he ripped out Chulo’s throat with his teeth?” I could scarcely believe I was arguing *for* the alleged criminal in this case, but the words rose naturally to my lips.

“Well,” Genevieve admitted, “*he* says it was hot sauce. Says he was having dinner at The Cactus Club right before, and he must have gotten some sauce on his chin. There was no trace of sauce or blood by the time I got to him.”

“Did the Cactus Club thing check out?” It was a local Tex-Mex restaurant, one of many in the long row of bars that lined the main strip at Ybor.

She frowned. “Well, yeah, it did. The waitress remembered him real well -- she seemed to think he was cute. He didn’t put up a fight or anything when I brought him in either. He’s pretty polite -- nice manners. I guess that’s why I called you for him in the first place. And...” She gestured at my face. “He’s got those eyes, same as you. I don’t think I’ve ever seen eyes like that before. Uh, before I met you, anyway.” She looked away, her face coloring a little.

“Thanks, Genevieve,” I said gently. “Let me talk to him a few minutes, and I’ll decide what to do. Okay?”

“Sure.” She nodded and then jerked her head in Charles’s direction. “What about him?”

“Who, Charles? He can wait out here.” I lowered my voice. “I wanted him to wait in the car, but he insisted on coming in. You know how men are...”

“No, I don’t,” she said, grinning at me a little. “And between you and me, Kemet, I’m not too interested to find out.”

“Probably a good choice.” I patted her on the shoulder, and she let me into the room.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Rachel.” He rose as I came in the room and moved to embrace me.

“Wait a minute.” I stepped back, holding up a hand to stop him. “How do I know you’re who you say you are?”

“Look at me,” he said simply, his palms held up in a gesture of supplication. I did. He was tall -- still head and shoulders above me, just as he had been when we were kids. The black hair and pale green eyes hadn’t changed much -- he looked like an older version of the

boy I'd known and the serious young graduate in the picture I'd found in my mother's things. He was wearing a nicely tailored black suit and a dark green shirt that brought out his eyes.

"If my looks don't convince you, there's always this." He put his hand in his pocket and withdrew a small, green glass marble that matched the one I wore at my throat.

I swallowed hard. "It really *is* you."

He nodded. "It really is. Look, I know it's been a long time --"

"Seventeen years," I interrupted him.

He nodded gravely. "Seventeen years, three months, and five days."

I looked at him, surprised.

"Oh, yes," he said. "I remember like it was yesterday -- coming home from school and finding you gone. When I found the note Mom left, I knew then I wouldn't be seeing you again for a long time."

I put a hand to my throat, reliving that horrible day. "*Never*," I whispered.

"What?" He came around the table to face me, still being careful not to touch.

I looked up at him. "Never. It's what she told me when I asked when I would see you again." I felt the tears burning behind my eyelids and held them back with difficulty.

"Rache," he said softly. "I thought of you every day and every night of those seventeen years."

"Then why didn't you ever come for me?" I demanded, suddenly unreasonably angry. "All those years Mom and I moved around from town to town and house to house. I used to dream of you coming to rescue me, coming to save me and take me back home, to keep me safe forever..."

"Rache," he said again, his voice almost pleading.

"I'm sorry." I shook my head and swiped at my eyes with quick, angry motions. What was wrong with me, reverting back to childhood like this? "Here I am, acting like we're still kids," I said, half-laughing though my tears.

"It's all right," he said softly. "I missed you, too."

And just like that, I was in his arms. He held me tight, fitting me to him like a missing piece of a puzzle finally falling into place. The top of my head fit under his chin just right, and I felt protected and warm and safe -- just as I had when we were children. I took a deep breath, filling my senses with his scent, the same, rich base note that used to accompany my father everywhere -- the scent of family and home. *The scent of the Amon-kai*, whispered a small voice in my head, but I pushed the half-submerged memory away.

"Richard," I said, half laughing, half crying. It was as though seventeen years had melted away in a heartbeat, and we were children together again.

"Rachel," he murmured into my hair. He pulled back after a moment and looked at me seriously. "You grew up beautiful. I knew you would."

"You're not half bad yourself," I said, laughing. "And so *tall*. What are you? Six-four?"

"Six-three," he said modestly. He touched the green marble nestled in the hollow of my throat. "You kept it, just like you promised."

"Of course." I could feel my eyes filling up, and I blinked rapidly, trying to keep from bawling again. Richard tilted my chin up with one finger and kissed my eyes gently -- kissing away the tears. His mouth moved lower, cool and comforting on the flushed skin of my cheeks, and for a moment I gave myself up utterly to the longed-for sensation of being completely cared for and loved.

"Uh, is everything all right in here?" Charles's nasal tone interrupted the moment, and I jumped away from Richard hastily.

"Everything is fine," Richard said, giving Charles an unfriendly once-over. "Who are you?" he asked pointedly.

Charles harrumphed indignantly. "I might ask you the same thing. *I* am Charles Rivera the Third. Her *fiancé*," he emphasized pointedly.

"Fiancé?" Richard raised an eyebrow at me, and I blushed and nodded.

"Uh, yes. Charles, meet Richard, my big brother." I smiled at him affectionately. "And Richard, meet Charles; we've been dating for the past two years --"

"Two years, four months, and one week," Charles interrupted in an imitation of Richard, letting me know he'd been listening to my reunion with my brother. I felt a flare of anger at his violation of my privacy but suppressed it almost at once.

Charles held out a hand to Richard, who took it and shook firmly. I wondered if my fiancé was going to give him the "grip of death." Charles had very strong hands and found it amusing to try and out-squeeze other men when he shook with them -- a juvenile game I kept hoping he'd outgrow. I watched carefully and saw the sinews in his wrist stand out when he took Richard's hand -- that was the grip all right. There was no change in Richard's dark face, but after a moment, Charles got red and withdrew his hand suddenly.

"That's a remarkable handshake you have there, my friend," he said, eyeing my brother with a slight frown.

"Thanks," Richard said simply, smiling. He looked pointedly at the too-large diamond on my left hand. "So when's the big event?"

"We're going to be married in a month," I told him.

"Really?" He made an obvious effort to look pleased. "And here I was hoping to have you all to myself."

It seemed like an odd statement on the surface, but I understood that he meant he wanted to spend time with me, catching up. At least that was what I told myself.



"We'll have plenty of time together," I promised him. "I just need to clear up this mess first." I looked pointedly at Charles. "I need to be alone with Richard to talk about his case," I said, motioning him out the door with my eyes.

"Fine. I'll be just outside if you need me, then." He left with poor grace, throwing Richard a distrustful stare as he closed the door of the interrogation room. I looked at the one-way glass that reflected our images and made a rolling motion with my finger, gesturing to Genevieve to turn off the intercom and give us some privacy. Charles wouldn't like that, but he would just have to damn well deal with it. If anyone ought to understand attorney/client privilege, he should, being an attorney himself.

"Now." I settled in the chair on one side of the rickety wooden table and motioned for Richard to sit in the other. "I'm not the right kind of lawyer for this -- I'm actually a prosecutor."

"My little sister -- all grown up and practicing law." He gave me a proud grin. "Aren't you kind of young to have your license?"

I blushed. "Well, I was in accelerated classes in high school, so I graduated early and I went right into pre-law. After that, law school." I shrugged. "Some of the other attorneys liked to make jokes about my age and inexperience -- until I proved them wrong."

He grinned. "That's my Rache -- go for the throat, right?"

I shifted in my seat, somehow uncomfortable with his metaphor. "I guess so. Look, Richard, just tell me what happened, and I'll see if I can clear this mess up."

"Thanks, Rache." He smiled at me, that same white charming grin I remembered so vividly from childhood, but this time it caused a small flutter around my heart. He had grown up *so* handsome. It was hard to believe I was seeing him again after all these years.

"So." I opened my notepad and got a pen, trying to appear all business. "Tell me in your own words what happened."

"Let's see." Richard reclined in his chair, crossing his long legs to one side of the table, and I noticed he was wearing expensive Italian leather shoes. Well, whatever he did, he was obviously doing very well for himself. I put that question to the back of my mind -- there would be time for catching up later. Right now I had to get him out of this mess. It never crossed my mind to think that he might have actually done what they were holding him for. The thought of him killing anyone, let alone ripping out their throat with his teeth, was absolutely ludicrous.

"I came to Tampa searching for you and also to conduct a little business," Richard recounted. "I'm a freelance consultant, and one of my biggest clients is located here."

"What kind of consultant?" I asked.

"Computers, communications systems." He shrugged. "You name it, I do it."

"Judging from your clothes you do it well," I said.

He gave me a lazy grin. "I do all right for myself -- could do better if I settled down with one company. One reason I freelance is for the travel -- I've been trying to track you for years, hired a private detective and everything, you know." He sighed. "But Mom covered her tracks really well. Everyplace I went I looked for you, hoping to get lucky." He spread his hands and smiled at me. "Imagine my surprise when I actually did."

"So you found out I lived in Tampa before or after this, uh, alleged crime happened?" I asked.

"Before. I was actually having some chips and salsa at that Mexican restaurant and trying to think what I should do." He lowered his voice and looked down at his hands. "I wasn't sure if you'd want to see me again after all these years. I thought, you know, that you'd probably have a husband, maybe some kids..." He shook his head, and I remembered saying the exact same thing to Charles earlier that night.

"Richard..." I reached across the table to cover one of his large hands with my own. "Of course I wanted to see you again. I'm just ashamed that I didn't come looking for you the way you were looking for me. I wanted to so many times, but Mom --" I broke off, shaking my head.

"I know," he said in a low voice. "She didn't want you to see me."

"It doesn't make any sense," I said, feeling the anger and pain rise up in me again. That old splinter of loss still buried in my heart after all these years.

"Doesn't it?" He raised an eyebrow at me quizzically.

"Well, no. I mean, you're my brother. Why would she want to split us apart that way?" I shook my head again.

Richard took my hand in his larger, warmer one. "You know, Rachel, I love you so much, and I've spent literally years looking for you. But the fact is that there isn't any real blood tie between us, other than being of the same race of people. You do remember that, don't you?"

"Uh...sure," I said. It seemed strange that he should remind me so emphatically that we weren't really related by blood. Why should that matter to me when I still loved him like the big brother I'd always considered him, even if he was adopted instead of my actual blood relation?

I cleared my throat and made an effort to continue. "We'd better get back to business or we're going to be here all night. So you came out of The Cactus Club and then..."

Richard sat back and continued smoothly. "Then I realized I'd had a little too much tequila." He grinned self-consciously. "So I stepped into a nearby alley to, ah, relieve myself." He shrugged. "The police told me when they took me in that there was a dead body back there, but I honestly didn't see anything -- it was dark, you know?"

Something about this statement bothered me, but I let it go. "Okay." I motioned for him to go on.

He sighed. “Anyway, I left the alley, and the next thing I know there are two very scantily clad women shouting at me and pointing back down the alley. I assumed they were drunk and ignored them. I was preoccupied -- still trying to get up the nerve to call you. So I went to the bar next door and had a beer. Then I went to the bathroom and realized I had salsa on my chin -- must have looked like a real idiot, walking around like that.” He laughed self-consciously. “I cleaned myself up, and when I came out, your friend the detective was waiting to take me in.”

“You didn’t protest?” I asked.

He shrugged. “I figured it was all just a big mistake, and the fastest way to go about clearing it up would be to go with them. I let them search me and everything. But now I’ve been here for hours and well...” He ran a hand through his thick black hair. “I’m sorry about having to call you, Rache. I wasn’t sure what else I could do.”

“You did the right thing,” I assured him. “And there’s no way they should have been able to hold you this long with nothing but circumstantial evidence. I mean, these two witnesses say they saw you leaving the alley and then they found the body. But they didn’t see you actually *doing* anything...” I looked at him sharply. “Did they?”

He shrugged. “I don’t see how they could’ve. I didn’t do anything but take a leak.”

“Well, there you go,” I said, satisfied. “It’s not your fault you chose the wrong alley to go in.” I grinned at him. “But you’re up to your old tricks, I see. Do you remember how mad Mom used to get at you for watering the great outdoors?”

He laughed, a deep, rich sound that rolled through me. “How could I forget? She nearly beat me within an inch of my life when she caught me writing my name in the snow that one winter. And then you --”

“I wanted to know why I couldn’t do the same thing.” I laughed again. “That’s why she was so mad, you know. She had to explain that girls and boys have different equipment, and then that led to the birds and the bees talk...”

Richard roared, slapping the table with one hand. “No *wonder* she was so upset.”

“Yeah, well...” I shook my finger at him. “Let this be a lesson to you. If you have to go, find an *indoor* bathroom.”

“I’ll try to keep that in mind for future reference.” He smiled.

“Okay.” I stood and gathered my notes together. “So let me just talk to Detective Marks and see if we can’t spring you from here.”

“Rachel.” He rose and put a hand on my wrist to stop me as I turned to go. I felt my pulse jump for some reason.

“Yes?” I said.

“I just hope -- well, I want to spend some time with you now that I’ve finally found you. We have so much catching up to do, but I know you have a busy schedule...”

I smiled at him. "I feel the same way. Don't worry, there's nothing on my schedule I can't work around."

He broke into a grin. "I'm so glad you feel that way. Come here." He pulled me in for another hug and then bent to kiss me lightly on the lips. It was strictly a brotherly gesture, but I felt my cheeks heat, and my heart rate quickened as his mouth made contact with mine.

I pulled back and smoothed my hair, which was hanging loose down my back instead of confined to its usual tight and professional bun. I wished that I had taken the time to put it up before I came down to the PD. Having it around my face made me feel younger somehow -- more vulnerable.

"Beautiful," Richard murmured, stroking the long fall of my pale blonde hair. His hand felt warm on my back.

"I'd, uh, better go," I said, pulling away from him. "We'll save the reunion for later."

"I'm looking forward to it." I could feel his gaze on my back as I stepped hurriedly out of the room and shut the door behind me.

## Chapter Three

“You haven’t got much of anything,” I said to Genevieve reasonably. I counted it off on my fingers. “Two witnesses, one of whom is a junkie, saw him leaving the alley where he was relieving himself. They saw some salsa on his chin, found Chulo’s body, and assumed the worst. But they didn’t actually *see* anything. Did they?”

She shrugged uneasily. “Well...”

“Did they?” I persisted.

“Okay, you got me.” She sighed. “You know, this isn’t our usual conversation, Kemet. Usually we’re working together to try and put the bad guys away.”

“Only this time the bad guy isn’t a bad guy,” I pointed out.

“You sure you’re not just saying that because he’s your long-lost brother?”

I stared at her sharply, and she shrugged again.

“Hey, I got eyes. I saw the way you were hugging all over him.” She lowered her voice. “Charlie-boy did, too, and from the look of him, I’d say he wasn’t too pleased about it.” She jerked her head at my fuming fiancé, a small grin on her face. Then she looked at me seriously. “Look, Kemet, I’ve never known your instincts to be wrong -- I always say you would’ve made a damn fine cop.”

“Thanks,” I said dryly.

“So if you say he’s on the up and up, I’ll believe you,” she continued. “But this is an ongoing homicide investigation. Not that anybody’s shedding a tear that Chulo bit the dust, but still.”

“I understand,” I said, nodding. “You don’t have enough to hold Richard, but you don’t want him getting too far away either.”

“Exactly.” She nodded.

"Not a problem," I told her. "He's going to be in town for a while -- we have a lot of catching up to do."

"What hotel?" she asked, whipping out a notebook of her own.

"My place," I said immediately, surprising myself with the instant answer. After all, where was I going to put him? His lanky form was much too long for my dumpy secondhand loveseat, and I only had one bedroom. I pushed the speculation away -- it felt right to have Richard with me, and somehow I didn't think I'd have to work too hard to persuade him.

"Wow." Genevieve was looking at me sharply again. "You sure you know him well enough to bring him into your house, Kemet?"

"Of course I do -- he's my brother."

"Your brother that you haven't seen in seventeen years," she reminded me. "People can change in seventeen years. Change a lot."

"Not Richard," I said stubbornly. I thought about going into the whole spiel about how Richard wasn't actually related to me by blood and decided that would just make her even more nervous. Let her think of him as my brother. After all, I did.

She looked through the one-way glass again. His pale green eyes, so much like my own, were fixed on us. "He's a big guy," she remarked in a low voice. "Tall and built, too. Nobody you want to mess with or find yourself on the wrong side of."

"Genevieve, will you stop worrying about me?" I said, exasperated. "I'm perfectly safe with Richard, I can promise you that. Besides, I'm doing you a favor. Do you want him where you can find him or not?"

"Yeah, yeah." She nodded reluctantly. "You know I do, but I want you to be safe, too."

"Well, I'm touched by your concern." I put a hand on her shoulder and squeezed lightly. "But honestly, I'll be *fine*. Okay?"

She sighed unhappily. "You say so."

"I do," I said firmly. "Now just give me a minute to tell Charles, and then I'll take Richard home."

She glanced over my shoulder at my fiancé. "Huh. Good luck."

"Thanks," I said with feeling. "I think I'm going to need it."

\* \* \* \* \*

"I still don't see why he has to stay with you," Charles said for the fourth time as we faced off in the hallway.

"I told you, Charles, it was the only way I could get Detective Marks to release him."

He looked at me coldly. "I'm not an idiot, Rachel -- she couldn't make that sort of demand. She simply didn't have enough evidence to hold him. You're making an excuse because you *want* him with you."

My patience with my overly-possessive fiancé suddenly evaporated. “What if I do?” I said, my voice low and furious. “He’s my brother, and I haven’t seen him for seventeen years. We have a tiny bit of catching up to do, don’t you think?”

“All right, fine.” He threw up his hands. “But try to see my side of it, Rachel. I’ve known you for two years and tonight was the first time you even mentioned that you had a brother. Then, poof! -- like magic he suddenly appears, needing your help and a place to stay.”

“Charles,” I said, “he’s family. Of course I’ll help him. Of course I’ll give him a place to stay.”

“Fine, give him a place to stay. Let him stay at your house, and you can come stay with me.”

“No,” I said at once. “No, I’m staying at my own place, and Richard is staying with me.” I looked at him closely. “What’s your problem, anyway? Why are you so threatened by him?”

“I’m not threatened,” he blustered. “That is to say...”

“Spit it out, Charles,” I said flatly.

“Well, it’s just that...I have sisters, you know. Quite attractive, the both of them. But still, I don’t...don’t...”

“Don’t what?” I asked, my voice low and dangerous.

Charles had gotten so red in the face he was practically puce. “The way you were hanging all over him,” he burst out at last. “And I saw the way he kissed you -- don’t think I didn’t see that.”

“He’s my *brother*, Charles, for God’s sake,” I said, barely keeping my temper under control. “And I know you saw the way he kissed me -- I wasn’t exactly trying to hide it, was I? You really can’t hide anything in those one-way mirrored interrogation rooms.”

Charles narrowed his puppy-dog brown eyes. “I thought you said he was only an adopted brother -- that there was no actual blood relation between you.”

I blew out a breath in exasperation. “My parents adopted Richard when he was three after his parents were killed in a car wreck, thinking they couldn’t have any children of their own. He was five by the time I was born and a complete member of our family. He even took my father’s last name -- Kemet. He’s always just been my big brother. That’s all.”

Charles sneered, an ugly look on his conventionally handsome face. “I think you’re protesting a little too much, dearest. Who are you trying to convince -- me or yourself?”

“That’s it. I am not having this conversation with you.” I turned to walk away, but he grabbed my arm and pulled me around to face him again.

“Charles,” I said, in a low, measured tone. “Take your hands off of me right now.”

"Fine." He dropped my arm, and I rubbed it angrily, thinking I might have a bruise there the next day. It was the closest he had ever come to using any kind of physical force on me in our entire two-year relationship, and I was both hurt and enraged.

"I knew you were jealous, Charles," I said, still rubbing my arm. "But I didn't know you were this insanely possessive."

"Oh, so now it's insanely possessive to be concerned when my fiancée decides to take some strange man -- a man, might I add, who's wanted for homicide -- into her home? Rachel, dearest..." He took a deep breath. "Only think how it will look. I mean, we're going to be married in a month, and now you're inviting a strange man into your home. What will our friends say?"

"I find my brother after seventeen years, and all you care about is how it will look if he stays with me for a while?" I couldn't believe him. "I don't care how it looks, Charles, I just feel lucky to have the chance to re-connect with Richard again after all these years."

He scowled. "Oh, yes, by all means *re-connect*. That's exactly what everyone who hears you have him in your home is going to assume you're doing."

I turned to go again, and this time he didn't try to stop me. "He's my brother," I threw over my shoulder. "And until you can get over that, Charles, maybe we shouldn't talk for a while."

"I don't believe this! Fine!" He was shouting now. "Go on your merry way, Rachel. Get chopped to bits in your bed by a criminal. See if I care!" He stormed off down the hall in a huff, ignoring the worried officers who poked their heads into the hall to see what the trouble was about.

I felt my cheeks color at the scene he had caused, but I held my head high as I walked back to the end of the hall where Genevieve waited by the interrogation room.

"That went well," she said dryly.

"Yeah." I blew out a breath. "Look, can I just take him home now? It's been kind of a long night, and I have a rough day scheduled in court tomorrow."

"Sure." She patted my shoulder. "If you need anything..."

"Thanks." I smiled. "But I'll be fine, Genevieve. Don't worry."

She sighed. "The famous last words..." But she opened the door for me and nodded me into the room.



## Chapter Four

“Well, this is it.” I threw open the door of my little purple house and nodded Richard inside. “It’s not much but...”

“I like it,” he said. He stepped inside the cramped living room and raised his head. It almost looked like he was sniffing the air. Strange memories of myself doing the exact same thing as a child tried to surface, and I pushed them down. That was silly -- wasn’t it?

“Um, glad it meets with your approval,” I said, smiling up at him.

“Charles lives here with you?” he asked as I locked the door behind him.

I shook my head. “Heaven forbid. He has a mansion out on Bayshore in South Tampa -- a much nicer part of town than this. Your little sister is marrying old money.” I tried to make a joke about it despite the fight Charles and I had just had.

“But he was here tonight.” Richard sniffed the air again.

“Well, yes...right before I got the phone call from Detective Marks telling me to come down to the station.”

He suddenly seemed to realize he was behaving oddly. “Look, I’m sorry about causing a fight between you two.” He shrugged apologetically. “I mean, I have a hotel room I can stay in...”

“No,” I said at once. “No, I want you here. With me.” I didn’t stop to think why this should be so important; I only knew I wanted him near. “I mean...” I tried to smile. “We haven’t seen each other in so long. Now that I’ve found you again, I guess I just don’t want to let you out of my sight.”

“I feel exactly the same way.” He turned and put his arms around me, hugging me tightly against him. I hugged him back, feeling that same quickening of my pulse I had when he’d touched me at the PD. I told myself I was just excited to finally have him near again after so many years.

At last, Richard pulled back and looked down at me. "Sorry, I know I've been hanging all over you tonight."

"That's okay." I smiled up at him. "I don't mind."

"I guess I just want to keep touching you -- it's like if I let you get away for a second you'll vanish into thin air." He grinned sheepishly. "Stupid, huh?"

"Not stupid at all," I said seriously. "We're both probably just having some separation anxiety. I mean, I remember the day Mom took me away from you like it was yesterday."

"Yeah." His eyes looked haunted. "Me, too. I ran all over the house, but she'd taken all your things. I remember pressing my face against your pillow, breathing in the scent of your hair and praying you'd come back to me..."

"Oh, Richard..." I disengaged from the hug, feeling like I was going to cry. I'd had enough drama in my life for one night; I needed to get control of myself. "How's Dad?" I asked to change the subject. "Are you two still close?"

"He's...Rachel, I'm sorry but he's dead." Richard sank onto the couch, and I sat beside him, feeling like I'd been punched in the gut.

"When...when did he die?" I managed to ask. So much for no more drama.

"A few years after Mom took you away." Richard's voice was low and troubled. "He, uh...he committed suicide."

"No." I put a hand over my mouth, my eyes wide.

He nodded. "I'm afraid so. He just, well...he couldn't live without her."

"Couldn't he have found someone else? Someone new?" I still couldn't believe it. My father, the strong, black-haired man with the deep voice and the warm scent of aftershave and cigars...my father was dead. Dead so many years and I had never known it until now.

"There was no one else for him but her. Just like there's no one else --" He shook his head. "Never mind. I'll spare you the trauma and let you know that I know Mom's gone, too."

"She passed away almost three years ago," I said dully. "Some kind of fast-acting cancer. It was all through her almost before we knew anything was wrong. She got the diagnosis and a month later..." I shook my head.

Richard looked troubled. "That's fast, all right. I'm sorry, Rache."

"It's okay." I took a deep breath. "It wasn't long after that I met Charles. He was very understanding about the whole thing." I twisted the huge diamond ring on my finger, wondering what was going to happen between Charles and me after tonight. We'd never had such an explosive argument before.

Richard seemed to read the thoughts on my face. "Look, I can go," he said, half rising.

I grabbed his wrist and pulled him back down. "Don't you dare. Charles was just being petty and jealous. He'll get over it or..."

"Or what?" he asked.

"Or he won't." I shrugged and changed the subject. "So anyway, after Dad died -- you couldn't have been more than fourteen or fifteen. Where did you go?"

"Well, there were no more of our kind around to take me in --"

"*Our* kind?" I interrupted him.

"Yes, our kind. The Amon-kai." He looked at me closely. "You *do* know what I'm talking about, don't you?"

I frowned. "Mostly I remember that Dad used to talk about it a lot. I always thought it was just his way of explaining that we were different."

"So...Mom never told you anything? She never passed down the teachings before she died?" Richard looked greatly upset.

"Teachings?" I was disturbed by the oddly cultish word. "No, she never said anything about any teachings. I, uh, think she wanted to forget the past as much as she could. She'd forbidden me to talk about you and Dad, wouldn't let me refer to our old life. It was like she just wanted a fresh start."

He laughed harshly. "A fresh start? Damn, this is going to be harder than I thought."

I looked at him sharply. "What are you talking about? What's going to be harder than you thought?"

He ran a hand through his hair. "It's really complicated. Maybe...maybe we should leave it for later. It's just...I guess I assumed you'd know why I was looking for you."

"Because we're family, and we missed each other," I said immediately. "You're my brother, and I love you. And don't remind me again that we're not really related by blood. That doesn't matter to me -- doesn't change how I feel about you at all."

He smiled wearily. "I love you, too. More than I can say."

We were definitely in danger of having another mushy emotional moment. I thought he was going to hug me again, and my heart started pounding in my chest. But instead, he stood and began pacing the small area of my living room, much as Charles had been doing earlier that evening. He still looked upset.

"I think we got off the subject somehow," I said, wanting to get the conversation back on track. "What happened to you after Dad died?"

He shrugged. "I bounced around from foster home to foster home."

"That's terrible," I said. "If only child services could have located Mom --"

"They did." He stopped pacing to look at me. "She...told them to place me elsewhere."

"What?" I could scarcely believe it. "You're kidding me! I just don't understand why she --"

"To keep us apart." He looked at me for a long moment and then picked up the tarnished silver frame with his graduation picture in it. "I see she got this, anyway," he

murmured. "The best I could do was send it to her last known address and hope they forwarded it."

"Richard, I'm so sorry." I felt my eyes filling up with tears for the umpteenth time that night. "If only I had known, maybe I could have talked to her. I never understood why she took me away in the first place. I never understood why she wouldn't let me talk about you, ask about you..."

"Of course you didn't." He crossed the room swiftly to where I was sitting and sank to the floor on one knee in front of me. He cupped my cheek in one large, warm hand, brushing away my tears with his thumb. "You were only seven, Rachel. We were kids -- there was nothing we could do."

"But...but I should've been trying to find you." I was suddenly consumed by guilt. "Mom's been dead for almost three years -- there was no one to stop me. Even before she passed I should have been looking. I just..." I looked at him. "I guess I waited for you for so long, hoping that you'd find me. And after a while it began to seem like a dream -- like a fairy tale that could never come true no matter how much I wished. I...I think I made myself forget you as much as I could because it hurt too much to hope anymore."

"Oh, Rachel," he whispered. "We're together now -- that's all that matters."

"You're right." I stood up abruptly, brushing the wrinkles out of my skirt, trying to get control of myself. "I swear I haven't cried so much since the night Mom died. I'm sorry I can't seem to shut off the waterworks."

He sighed and stood up. "That's okay. It's been a really long day, and I think I heard you telling the detective you had to be in court tomorrow?"

"Well, yeah. Yes, I do." I looked at him quizzically, wondering how he could have heard my soft conversation with Genevieve through the thick, supposedly soundproofed interrogation room door. "But how did you hear...?"

"Eyes that pierce the night. Ears that can hear the snow fall. A nose that can scent the wind's least turning. The speed of the cheetah, the strength of the bull. By these things shall you know your brethren, the Amon-kai." He sounded like he was quoting from some obscure biblical text.

"Richard," I said, shaking my head. "I...I don't know what you're talking about. And frankly, you're beginning to scare me a little bit."

"I'm sorry." He looked abashed. "That wasn't my intention. I was just...trying to jog your memory."

"Well," I said briskly, "we'll have lots of time to talk about the past. But for right now, I think it's time to settle down for the night. I'm beat, and I bet you are, too."

He looked suddenly weary beyond words. "You're right, Rache, I could really use some sleep."

"Let's see," I said, looking around to see where I could put him. "I think the best thing would be if you took the bedroom, and I can sleep on the couch."

"No way," he said instantly. "I'm not going to kick you out of your own bedroom. *I'll* take the couch."

"You can't," I protested, looking at the short, lumpy love seat. "You're much too tall -- you won't fit. Look, I have an idea. Come with me." I led him through the tiny but functional kitchen and into my bedroom, which was located at the back of the house.

He stopped in the doorway again, lifting his head and sniffing as he had when he entered the house earlier. "Charles hasn't been in here," he said. It was a statement, not a question.

"Well...no," I said. It was hard enough to keep my amorous fiancé in line when he wasn't in view of an inviting bed, so I made sure to stay out of the bedroom whenever he came over.

Richard looked vastly relieved. "Well, that's good anyway," he said. "I'm sorry -- you were saying you had an idea?"

"Uh, yeah." I decided to pass over his odd statements. We were both tired, and it was late. "I know it's here somewhere," I muttered, going to my small walk-in closet and beginning to dig.

"What are you looking for?" Richard squeezed in beside me to help.

"I have this...oof...rollaway cot," I said, shifting things out of the way to get to the back of the closet. "I used it that last month when Mom was so sick. I moved her into the house with me and we had a hospice nurse... Here it is." I dragged at the heavy old iron cot, trying to budge it past the shoes and suitcases that littered the bottom of my closet.

"Let me." Richard reached past me. Grasping the iron frame of the cot with one hand, he lifted it easily out of the closet.

"Wow." I sat back on my heels, staring at him. "I guess I forgot, but you were always strong as a kid, too, weren't you?" I was a little afraid he might start quoting from the "teachings" again, but he didn't.

"I guess so. Where do you want this?" He patted the iron cot, which looked like a fat gray metal sandwich turned on its side.

"Well, I don't really have a guest room," I said. "But, I thought if you don't mind roughing it a little, we could set it up in the Florida room."

"The what?"

"It's what the real estate agents call a sun room down here," I explained. "Basically it's a closed-in back porch with lots of windows. I don't really use mine for much of anything, and it's not air-conditioned but seeing that it's a cool night..." I shrugged.

"It sounds great." Richard lifted the cot one-handed again, like someone carrying an oversized suitcase. "Where is it?"

"Right through there." I nodded at the sliding glass doors at one end of my bedroom that led out to the porch. The Florida room was located off of the living room in most houses, but whoever had designed my little bungalow had obviously decided to flout convention.

"Great." Richard led the way onto the small porch and unfolded the cot. "This is perfect for tonight," he said. "And if you want, I can go back to the hotel tomorrow."

"No, no," I said hastily. "You can go back, but only to get your things."

"Okay, if you're sure." He sighed and sat down on the cot, which was already made up with sheets and a thin blanket. "I'll take a cab tomorrow to pick up my suitcases and get my rental car. But look, the minute you want me out, just say so. I didn't come here to disrupt your life."

"You're not," I protested. "I want you here, Richard. Really."

He smiled tiredly. "Good, I want to be here. Look, it's been kind of a long night. Do you mind if I take a shower?"

"Not at all. The bathroom's through there." I pointed through my bedroom to the open door of my bathroom. "Towels on the rack, everything else in the shower. Help yourself."

"Thanks." He disappeared into the bathroom, and after a minute I heard the shower running.

I got into a comfortable sleep shirt and climbed into bed. My room was dark, lit by the diffused light from the full moon behind the curtains and the soft yellow glow coming from under the bathroom door. Despite the dim light, I could see every detail of the room clearly -- I've always had excellent night vision. When I was younger I had thought it was because I was special -- that I was *Amon-kai*, as Richard had called it.

I remembered now how my father had made up that story about us being able to see in the dark, probably as a way to explain our slanting pale green eyes and make us feel better for being different from the rest of the kids. I didn't know where Richard was getting all this stuff about the "teachings" -- maybe he'd gotten some weird ideas from my father before he'd died. Or maybe it was a fantasy that he had built into a personal reality while he was in all those foster homes over the years. I knew from experience that kids can make themselves believe almost anything to lessen the pain of a bad situation.

Just thinking of Richard spending so much of his younger life being moved from home to home made me both hurt and angry. My mother had been a hard woman, difficult to get along with in many ways, but I had never suspected her of being so deliberately cruel as to refuse to take her adopted son back when my father died.

Mom had been dead almost three years now. I thought about it as I stared at the shadowy corners of my ceiling. This coming Friday it would be three years exactly. And with her dying breath she had warned me never to see my brother again. I hadn't told Richard that because I was pretty sure he'd had enough pain and rejection from our mother to last him a lifetime.

I flipped my pillow to the cool side and rolled over in bed restlessly. Why had my mother been so set against Richard and me ever seeing each other again? Why had she taken me away and spent most of the rest of her life running, moving us from place to place, and covering our tracks to keep my adopted brother or my father from ever finding us?

My musings were interrupted when Richard emerged from the bathroom in a puff of steam. A towel was draped around his lean hips, and stray drops of water beaded on his muscular torso. His arms, I noticed, were also heavily muscled, as though he worked out on a regular basis, and his skin was still the same natural dark tan it had always been. His dark hair was damp and rumpled as though he'd been drying it with a towel, and he carried his bundle of clothes under one arm. I wondered if he planned on sleeping in the nude and hoped that my nosy elderly neighbors didn't decide to come next-door and have a look at the night-blooming jasmine bushes around my Florida room as they sometimes did. They would certainly be getting an eyeful if they came tonight.

For a moment he stood at the foot of my bed, outlined faintly by the dim light from the full moon outside. I felt like he was studying me, waiting for something. My heart pounded, but I didn't know why. He was a man now -- not the boy I'd grown up with, the boy I had trusted and loved above everyone else in my young life. Had I been wrong to rely on that trust and invite him into my home?

"Good night, Rachel." His voice was deep and gentle, carrying well in the dark room.

"Good night, Richard," I said.

It was a long time before I got to sleep and then I had the dream ...

## Chapter Five

*The boy with wolf's eyes stared at me, a look of hope and longing on his dark face. We stood in a broad sandy field, and behind him a gray-green river flowed sluggishly. White birds with long necks stalked along its banks, hunting for frogs. Heat shimmered in the distance, and the sky overhead was a merciless blue-white.*

*"What do you want?" I asked him, as I always did. He was familiar to me, but strange. Like someone I had known all my life and yet had not seen until that very moment.*

*He turned from me and walked toward the river. I followed him, treading carefully in the loose sand that wanted to fill my sandals. I had on a plain white shift, made of some kind of linen, and I was naked beneath it.*

*I thought he would lead me directly into the river, but instead he stopped on the banks and pointed. I turned my head to follow the strange boy's gesture and saw two massive figures carved from sand-colored stone on the bank beside me. They were posed as though seated, their huge stone hands turned palms-up in their laps in a gesture of supplication.*

*As I stared at the statues, I realized that one was male and one was female, which was not immediately apparent because their heads were definitely not human. I looked harder and saw that the male statue had the long muzzle and pointed ears of some kind of dog or wolf. The female possessed the sleek, whiskered face of a cat.*

*"Look," the boy said. He took my hand and drew me closer. At the base of one of the statues, he pointed to some strange carvings in a language I did not know. I stared hard, feeling like I should be able to read what was written there. Slowly, the carvings resolved into words and this is what I read:*

*Born light and dark  
Yet of one breed*



*If one is bitten  
The other will bleed*

*Joined as one  
Their bond to seal  
If one is wounded  
The other may heal*

*Lanor-zur  
Has deadly wrath  
Subject to  
The full moon's path*

*Lana-zeel  
Has wisdom's flower  
To help contain  
The killing power*

*Without the other  
Each will die  
Thus join they must  
As Amon-kai*

*"What does it mean?" I turned to the boy, but he had vanished. In his place stood a rangy black wolf with the same clear, pale green eyes the boy had had. The same eyes I had myself.*

*The wolf looked at me, and I knew it wanted something -- needed something from me but I did not know what. The same hope and longing that had been in the boy's face was plainly reflected in its beautiful, strange eyes.*

*"What?" I asked softly. I loved the wolf -- I felt that my heart might burst with the love. It tore at me that there was something it wanted that I could not give.*

*Suddenly, the white-blue sky above me darkened to indigo as night fell with no warning. The huge statues by the river bank cast ominous shadows in the gathering gloom, and I shivered as a cold, dry wind, so different from the hot sandy stillness of the day, ruffled the thin linen shift I wore.*

*“Look.” The wolf did not speak, but I heard the word plainly anyway. I looked up and saw a huge, heavy moon, pregnant with some dreadful promise, rising over the horizon. The silvery-white orb threw a chilly light over the sluggish river and its sandy banks. Everything seemed coated in a thin layer of ice.*

*Then the wolf raised its muzzle and howled -- a heart-rending sound that tore at my soul. So much pain, so much loneliness was reflected in that single liquid howl. So much sorrow. It spoke to me. The loss of a loved one -- of the only one. An endless search, an unrequited love as bitter as the love was sweet.*

*“I’m sorry!” I told the wolf. “Sorry -- so sorry!”*

*I reached forward to pet it, to soothe its torment. But when I touched its thick black fur, my hands came away wet and sticky. I looked down in horror to see they were covered in blood.*

*Blood and blood and blood. I was drowning in it, choking on it. In the sky above my head, the moon had turned from chilly white to bloated red, and I thought in my dazed horror, Even the moon’s been dipped in blood.*

*“Help me!” I cried. “Please help me!” I looked wildly for the wolf, knowing only he could save me, but he was gone...*

\* \* \* \* \*

Someone shook me awake, calling my name. “Rachel, wake up! Wake up -- it’s just a bad dream.”

“Oh, God!” I gasped. “Blood! So much *blood*.”

“Shh, calm down. It’s all right. It’s all right.” Strong arms held me, warm hands stroking my back and pushing the tangled mass of hair away from my eyes. A deep, masculine voice whispered soothing words, words meant to calm and comfort and protect.

At first I didn’t know who it was, only that I needed him -- that he must not let me go. Only in his arms was I safe from the moon and the blood. Only he could protect me from the furies of the night.

“Rachel,” he whispered into my hair. “Rachel, I love you. I won’t let anything hurt you.”

It was so nice to feel protected and warm. I hadn’t felt this safe since I was a child. Since Richard held me in his arms while my mother and father fought downstairs...Richard! Suddenly everything came back to me. Finding him after all these years, the strange things he had said to me, my mother’s warning that I must never see him again...

I opened my eyes to see him staring down into my face, a worried expression in his pale green eyes. He held me as though I were a child, cradled in his lap with my head against his chest. I could hear the steady heartbeat that had soothed me to sleep so many times when I was younger thrumming just beneath the smooth, tan skin of his muscular chest.

"Hey," he said gently. "You okay? You woke me up -- you were screaming and thrashing. Scared me to death."

"I -- I'm fine." I made an effort to sit up and shift off his lap. He was wearing boxer shorts, and I could feel them against the backs of my thighs as I moved. He helped me, keeping an arm around my shoulders just in case. "It was just a dream." I rubbed my forehead with the heel of my hand, as though to force the disturbing images out of my mind. God, the dream had been bad lately, but this was definitely the worst it had ever been.

"What was it about?" Richard asked. "Tell me and maybe you'll feel better."

I opened my mouth to tell him, but the dream was already melting away. All I could remember were blurred images and feelings of loneliness and terror. I shook my head.

"I don't know. It was something about a wolf and the moon and a boy with some statues. And that weird word Dad always used to call us -- what you were saying tonight. Something about the Amon-kai."

"Hmm." He kept rubbing my back absently, but his face was solemn lost in thought. Finally, he said, "That's all?"

I nodded. "All I can remember, anyway. It's...I have this dream every once in a while, but usually I dream of a boy with our eyes." I looked at him. "With *your* eyes, actually." I frowned and ran a hand through my hair. "Come to think of it, I started having that dream right after Mom took me away. Maybe the boy in my dream is you. Maybe it's more separation anxiety."

"Could be." His deep voice was noncommittal. "I used to dream of you, too, you know."

"Really?" I looked up at him. "What did you dream?"

He sighed. "It was always so sad. I just dreamed your face -- your eyes crying, your mouth shaping my name. It always seemed like...like you were begging me to come and get you. And I would try and try, but no matter what I did, I couldn't reach you. Then I'd wake up in a cold sweat." He scrubbed a hand over his face, making a sandpapery sound as he rubbed the whiskers on his chin. "It was so damn frustrating seeing you hurt and not being able to help you."

"That's the same feeling I have in my dream," I confessed. "Like you need me and I can't get to you to give you what you need."

"Rachel..." Richard sat up straighter beside me, and his face took on the look of a man who had something both difficult and important to say.

"Yes?" I asked, sensing the change in him at once.

"Rachel, I...there's something I have to tell you. I should have told you right away, but I was afraid of what you'd say -- what you'd think of me."

"Richard," I said earnestly. "You don't have to be afraid. You're my brother -- I love you, no matter what." I was surprised at the strength of the emotion that flooded me as I said the words. Surprised that he could disappear from my life seventeen years before and yet still

be so important to me -- so vital to my existence. Just at that moment I couldn't imagine my life without him. Couldn't bear the thought of letting him go -- of losing him -- ever again.

"You're so sweet," he whispered. "So innocent and trusting." He stroked my cheek with the back of his hand, looking into my eyes. I felt the familiar shiver of excitement course through me at the feel of his hand on my skin. Why did I never feel that way when Charles touched me?

"Shouldn't I trust you?" I asked, my voice little more than a whisper.

His eyes darkened. "You can trust me with your life. Someday I hope you'll trust me with your heart." He cupped my cheek gently and bent his head to me. I thought he was going to kiss away my tears again, as he had at the PD. Instead, his mouth found mine with a sweet naturalness I had never imagined.

I found myself sinking into the kiss, which lingered long past the bounds of brotherly affection or propriety. A small part of my brain understood that this was wrong -- that I shouldn't be doing this. But my skin was burning, my body aching for his touch, for the press of his lips on mine. I couldn't seem to stop.

Richard ran his hands through my hair and slanted his mouth over mine, tasting me gently, leading me carefully down the road to certain damnation. It was only when he tried to deepen the kiss, to open my mouth to his that I pulled back. I could enjoy the sweet pleasure of his closed lips against mine, but to allow his tongue entry into my mouth was too much -- too evocative of other acts a sister must never perform with her brother. It didn't matter that there was no real blood relation between us -- we had been raised as though there was, and I simply couldn't get past my early upbringing.

"Rachel," he whispered, trying to pull me close. I resisted him.

"No!" I panted lightly from the sweet sensations still shooting through my veins like a forbidden, addictive drug. "Richard, we can't," I said. "You're my...we just can't."

"We just did," he said softly.

"It was an accident," I said, trying to talk it away. Trying to justify it. "I was confused, and it's been so long since we've seen each other."

He looked at me steadily. "Is that what you think? Is that why your heart beats so hard I can hear it every time I touch you? Rachel, don't you remember anything about our past? About the promises we made?"

"Children promise lots of things," I said softly, my mouth trembling. "But I never promised to let you...do that to me."

"You really don't remember, do you?" He pulled away from me, taking his warmth and comfort with him. I clutched at his arm.

"Don't...don't go," I said. "Stay with me. Tell me what you need to tell me."

He shook his head. "No. Not tonight. You're not ready." He started to rise from the bed, but I pulled him back.

"Please, Richard. The dream -- what if it comes back? I need you with me."

"How do you need me?" In the darkness his voice was low and full of promises. Promises I was afraid he might keep.

"Don't you remember when we were children?" I said, hearing the note of pleading in my voice and not caring. "The way you held me close and kept me safe when I was scared? Can't...can't it be like that?"

He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "Oh, Rachel. Do you know how much I love you?"

I stared at him silently, my eyes wide in the darkness.

"No," he murmured. "I don't believe you do. All right, I'll hold you until you go to sleep. But then I'd better go back to the cot."

"All right." We lay back down on the bed, my back to his front as we had when we were children. I felt his heart pound against me and the warmth of his big body cradling my own. Feeling comforted, I let the sweet sensations lull me to sleep.

I didn't dream of the boy with wolf's eyes again, but as I slipped into sleep, another image followed me down.

\* \* \* \* \*

*My eyes fluttered closed and when I opened them again, I was in my old bedroom -- the one in the Victorian mansion where Richard and I had spent our childhoods together. I recognized the princess bed decorated in delicate lace and climbing roses as well as the make-up vanity that matched the one in my mother's room. But everything seemed smaller somehow, as though I had grown overnight.*

*I sat up in the bed and looked down at myself, at the plain flannel gown that covered my body. Something was different here, too -- I was a child no longer, the tender buds of my breasts pressing from beneath the soft fabric and the long, tan legs I saw under the hem of my nightgown proved it. Somehow I knew that I wasn't as old as my dreaming self, but I was no longer the physically and emotionally immature child I had been when I lived in this room.*

*Suddenly, the door creaked open, and I looked up in fear. But it was only Richard, standing there, wearing only his pajama bottoms as he always did when he came to comfort me and sleep with me.*

*"Richard?" I asked uncertainly. Because this was Richard as I had never seen him before. He wasn't the tall-for-his-age boy I remembered from childhood or the handsome, confident man I had recently become reacquainted with. Instead, I saw the serious face of the young man in the graduation photo I'd found in my mother's things. It was Richard as he would have been in his late teens or early twenties, if only I had known him then.*

*"Richard?" I asked again, but he shook his head and put a finger to his lips.*

*"Shh, Rache. You know how Mom feels about me coming to see you like this."*

*"Why?" I looked at him, genuinely confused. "You always come to see me, don't you? You make me feel warm and safe when Mom and Dad fight. What's wrong with that?"*

*He sighed and shut the door behind him before coming to sit on the side of the bed with me. "It's been a long time since all I've done is hold you, Rachel," he said, putting an arm around me and pulling me close. "You know that."*

*"I don't...don't understand," I murmured, but even as I spoke, he was laying me on my side and curling himself behind me, spooning me in the way that made me feel so cherished and safe.*

*"You will," he murmured in my ear. And then I felt him fumbling behind me, and to my shock, I saw him toss a bundle of fabric, his pajama bottoms, to the foot of my bed.*

*"Richard?" I asked, trying to turn around and see if he was really naked. But he stopped me with a kiss to the vulnerable nape of my neck.*

*"Shh, Rache, it's all right. Just relax and let me touch you -- the same as always."*

*"The -- the same as always?" I was still uncertain of his meaning, but he didn't leave me in the dark for long. Slowly his large, warm hands worked their way up my nightgown, starting at my thighs and stroking up my shivering sides to my breasts.*

*"Richard!" I gasped as he raised my gown, baring my breasts to the cool night air. "What are you doing?"*

*"Preparing you, my Lana-zeel." His voice was little more than a warm whisper in my ear. "Preparing your body to receive mine when the time is right. God, I wish it was tonight."*

*I wanted to protest more, but his large hands cupped the soft mounds of my breasts, stroking my tight young nipples gently. I found myself completely unable to move away from his embrace, even though I knew this was wrong in so many ways I could scarcely name them all.*

*Then I felt something hard and hot bumping against the back of my thigh, and Richard raised my top leg, opening me so that my unprotected pussy was vulnerable to him as well.*

*"Richard, no!" I begged, overcome by the wrongness of the situation even as I felt my body responding helplessly to his.*

*"Shh, Rache," he murmured soothingly. "You know I won't breed you until the time is right. But you need to feel my essence in you tonight. You need to open your pussy and let me fill you."*

*"I -- I can't," I gasped, even as I felt the thick, mushroom-shaped head of his cock begin to slide between my slippery cunt lips. "I -- I can't let you do this, Richard. It's wrong!"*

*"Only if you think like a human," he whispered back, still stroking against me. His thickness rubbed over my throbbing clit now, and he continued to play with my sensitive*

*breasts with his other hand. "If you open yourself to the Amon-kai part of yourself, you'll realize that this is perfectly right. Perfectly natural."*

*As he spoke, I felt the thick head of his cock breach my entrance and lodge just inside my tight, virgin pussy.*

*"Richard," I moaned. "Please...please don't do this!" But even as I spoke, I felt a hot flood of cum surging inside me, filling my pussy to the limit in heated waves.*

*"You're Amon-kai, Rachel," Richard whispered in my ear as he came in me again and again. "Accept it. Open yourself to it, and you'll finally be able to open yourself to me."*

\* \* \* \* \*

I woke up from the disturbing dream breathing hard, my hand pressed to my breasts. I was so wet between my thighs that for a moment I wondered if it had been no dream. But, no, Richard wasn't even in the bed with me. It was impossible, but my body didn't think so.

I could feel my heart pounding like one of the frightened rabbits my father used to take Richard and me to catch on our moonlight hunts. Then I shook my head, trying to block the memory. I hadn't thought of that in ages -- the way we'd run down the tiny furry creatures on foot and caught them in our teeth as though we were animals...

*You're Amon-kai*, the dream Richard's voice echoed in my head. I looked over and saw that he was sleeping in the cot, having apparently left my bed after I'd fallen asleep myself. What was this crazy dream, and why should I have it now? Why should I be thinking of things, feeling things, I hadn't thought of or felt since childhood?

Disturbed, I lay back on the pillow and turned my back resolutely away from the sleeping form of my adopted brother. *It's just a dream*, I told myself. *No need to be so upset -- people have weird dreams all the time.* But why should I have a dream like that? That I had somehow gone back to a time I would have had with Richard if my mother hadn't taken me away? But even if she hadn't, Richard and I never would have done...*that* together, would we? Of course not, it was stupid, crazy, ridiculous...

But no matter what I told myself, I found it nearly impossible to get back to sleep that night.

## Chapter Six

"Dearest, I'm so very sorry about the other night." The voice on the other end of my phone was obviously Charles, and he sounded sincere.

"Well..." I hedged, not sure I was ready to forgive him. I sat in a small park a few blocks from the courthouse, finishing my lunch, a cup of yogurt and an apple. It was a sunny day, but not too hot -- a rarity in Tampa -- and I had been having a perfectly good day before he called. "I'm sorry, too, I guess," I said at last, tossing my empty yogurt container in the nearby trash can.

"I mean, I should've trusted your judgment. And it was ridiculous of me to be so jealous. He's just your brother, after all, even if you aren't really related by blood."

I felt my face color, remembering the way Richard had held me and kissed me that first night. Just my brother indeed. Then why did my heart skip a beat every time he touched me? But I pushed the thought away and tried to concentrate on what Charles was saying.

"I was thinking about a double date. My cousin, Ursula, is going to be in town this coming Friday -- she'll be staying with the family until the wedding -- and I thought you and I could take both her and Richard out to dinner. Wouldn't that be lovely?"

"Ah...yes, lovely," I said reluctantly. "But listen, Charles, let me run it by Richard first and see what he thinks. I don't want to set him up on a blind date without asking him first."

"Of course, of course. Whatever you think is best, my dear." His voice was light and airy, and for the first time I wondered if he had been drinking. Unlike some men who got angry or mean when they had a few too many, Charles became almost pathologically agreeable. Would he sober up and be sorry he had extended the olive branch?

"Look, Charles, I'm going to be late for court. Can we talk about this later?"

"As long as we talk." He sounded more serious now -- maybe he wasn't drunk after all. "These past several weeks have been absolutely intolerable, Rachel. I need you in my life."



We're going to be married in a little over two weeks, for Christ's sake. Please don't shut me out."

"Oh, Charles." I was truly touched this time. It was a fact that I had made no effort to call him in the two weeks following our catastrophic fight in the downtown PD. I had decided that if he wanted me back, he could damn well make the first move himself. It was a good thing my future mother-in-law was handling every aspect of our impending wedding except the gown, which was hanging like a white, plastic-wrapped ghost in the back of my hall closet, because I hadn't even spared it a thought. And I hadn't exactly been sitting around waiting for the phone to ring, either -- I had other things on my mind besides my pouting fiancé.

For one thing, Richard was still staying with me even though he had been cleared of all charges. Both of the supposed "witnesses" had recanted their statements, a fact that didn't surprise anyone very much. Neither of them had been very credible in the first place, and it was likely that their new pimp, whoever he was, didn't want them involved with an open homicide investigation. So the case was closed, but Richard stayed. Frankly, I didn't want him to go. Not yet, and if I listened to the whispers of my heart, maybe not ever.

"I know you're in a hurry, but just think about it and let me know. Ursula has grown into quite a lovely young lady, and I'm sure Richard would fancy her."

"I'm sure," I said noncommittally. The fact that Charles was on the phone, offering to set Richard up with his own flesh and blood told me two things: one, he had checked out my adopted brother's background and found out that he was wealthy, and two, that he already knew that Richard had been cleared of the charges that had landed him in my lap over a week ago. The fact that Richard could now leave and yet hadn't weighed heavily in the air between us, but neither of us said anything about it.

"Well...I love you." Charles's voice sounded slightly uncertain.

I decided to let him off the hook. "I love you too," I said, as sincerely as I could. "Talk to you soon about Friday night. Just let me run it by Richard first."

"Of course. Later, darling." He hung up, leaving me with a vague uneasiness I couldn't understand. Two weeks to go until my wedding, and until Charles had called me, I had almost managed to forget about it completely. That didn't seem normal at all, but maybe I just had a lot on my mind.

I stood up and grabbed my briefcase. The courthouse was just a few blocks from the park, and I was looking forward to the walk. I was about to shove my cell phone back into my purse when it chimed again. The caller ID showed my home number -- Richard, then. He'd been working out of the house on his latest consulting job, redesigning the communications system for a major bank in the Tampa Bay area.

I answered the phone with considerably more enthusiasm this time. "Hi, Richard." I could hear the smile in my voice, and I knew he could, too.

"Hi, is this the phone of the big-shot attorney?" His tone was teasing, but his voice was as deep as dark chocolate.

"Close," I replied, laughing. "You've reached the phone of the lowest-ranked ADA, will that do?"

"I guess it'll have to do for now. Listen, I just called to see what time you'll be home for dinner. I don't want my latest masterpiece to get cold."

I groaned. "Richard, if you keep cooking for me, I'll be as big as a blimp." He'd been buying groceries and making dinner and breakfast for me for almost two weeks now, and he showed no sign of getting tired of it. Personally, I couldn't cook to save my life, but Richard was excellent at it.

He laughed. "What are you talking about? You eat like a bird."

"A bird that weighs a ton," I said, beginning the walk to the courthouse. "What's on the menu at Chez Kemet tonight, anyway?"

"Kobe beef stir-fry with fresh snap peas and Portobello mushrooms. You're going to love it," he promised.

"Richard, that sounds like so much work," I protested. "You don't have to fix a gourmet meal every night, you know."

"Who said anything about gourmet?" he asked. "It's quick, simple, and easy. If you get home in time, I'll teach you how to make it yourself."

"Oh, no, buster. You're not domesticating me," I said, rounding the corner that led to the courthouse. I could see the proud old granite building rising tall before me -- the sight always gave me a little surge of pride. Hokey, I know, but I'm a sentimental kind of girl. Richard's next words drove all thoughts of the courthouse out of my mind, though.

"That's exactly what I'm hoping to do -- domesticate you." His voice was soft and completely devoid of all humor. I felt a tremble somewhere inside my chest. Every once in a while he would come out with a statement like this, and it always left me feeling uncertain and somehow adrift.

"Well, it's not going to happen," I said jokingly, after an uncomfortable pause that lasted longer than it should have. "Your little sister is not a domestic kind of girl. Besides, if I could cook as well as you, I'd have to give up practicing law and become a chef. Listen," I hurried on, wanting to get over the awkward patch in our conversation. "Charles finally called me to apologize and he had a suggestion. He wants us to all get together Friday on a double date. He's bringing his cousin Ursula, and she's supposed to be very pretty. You interested?"

There was a long pause on the other end of the phone, and I could feel him trying and discarding different replies to what I had proposed. Finally he said, "Can we talk about it tonight after dinner? I feel like...well, remember the thing I wanted to talk to you about the first night I was at your house?"

"Yes." I felt a lump rise in my throat for some reason. Why did I automatically assume that whatever he had to tell me would be bad or hard to hear?

He took a deep breath. "Well, I'd like to tell you tonight. I think it's time."

"Okay," I said through numb lips. "Whatever it is, I'm sure we can talk it out, Richard."

"Hey, don't sound so upset. I promise I won't bite -- I just want to talk. Think of it as the show that goes with your gourmet dinner." The light, teasing tone in his voice made me smile with relief. Maybe it wouldn't be such a big deal after all.

"All right. Well, if things don't go crazy and nothing pops up at the last minute, I should be home around seven. But I'll try to call if I'm going to be late. Okay?"

"Okay. I'll let you go then."

"Bye," I said, about to snap the phone shut, but his voice stopped me.

"Hey, Rache?"

"Yeah?"

"Love you. Can't wait to see you."

"I love you, too, Richard," I said softly. The words came more naturally to my lips than they had ten minutes before when I was talking to Charles, but I was in too much of a hurry to wonder why.

I snapped the phone shut at last and was mounting the steps in front of the courthouse when Detective Marks nudged my arm.

"Hey, I've been trying to get your attention for the last half block." She was breathing a little heavily, her round cheeks pink with exertion. "But you were way into that phone conversation -- didn't even look up when I shouted your name."

"Hello, Genevieve." I smiled at her, glad to see a friendly face. "You ready for the Ginelli case? It's your turn on the stand today, isn't it?"

She grimaced. "And how -- man, what a pain in the ass."

"You better *watch* your ass if Ginelli's tied up with Momo the shark," I warned her.

"What, or I'll sleep with the fishes?" She gave me a crooked grin. "I don't think so. Besides, Ginelli's a little fish -- no way we could tie him to Momo. I only wish, but no, this is purely a shit detail." She sighed. "Just wish I had somebody to brighten my day like you."

"What do you mean?" I looked at her as we entered the courthouse, sincerely confused.

She gestured to my face. "You're practically glowing, and you have this little smile in the corners of your mouth that just won't quit. You and Charlie-boy must have made up, huh?"

"Well actually, yes. But just before I met you, I was talking to my brother," I said, before I realized how strange it sounded. "I mean -- he's making beef stir-fry tonight and well...he's a really good cook," I trailed off lamely.

"So he's still with you?" Genevieve looked at me directly, a little frown in her gray eyes.

"Well, sure. I mean, we're still catching up. We hadn't seen each other in --"

"I know, I know -- seventeen years. It just seems to me that a man who's been implicated in a homicide and then told he's free to go would get the hell out of Dodge pretty quick. Don't you think?"

"Not an *innocent* man," I said stiffly, disliking the turn the conversation had taken.

Genevieve shook her bushy head. "It doesn't strike you as strange at all that he's hanging around?"

"No," I said. "Look, I really need to go. I'm going to be late for court."

"Okay, all right." She held up her hands in a conciliatory gesture. "Hey, I didn't mean to offend you, Kemet. You're my friend, that's all. I worry about my friends."

"Well, your worries are unfounded," I snapped. "Richard hasn't murdered me in my bed yet, and I'm not expecting him to anytime soon. Now, if you'll excuse me..." We had reached the entrance to my appointed courtroom, and I nodded curtly at her before closing the heavy wooden door in her face with a muted bang.

## Chapter Seven

I could barely concentrate on the court proceedings that afternoon as I mulled over the argument I'd had with Genevieve Marks. She was right -- we were friends, although it was the first time either of us had really said it out loud. I supposed if I saw her entering what I considered a risky situation I would try to warn her, too. So why was I so defensive about my arrangement with Richard?

Well, I admitted to myself, part of it was our sleeping arrangements. The fact was that the first night when the dream had woken me with its bloody violence and Richard had left his cot to hold me wasn't an isolated incident. To put it bluntly, we were still sleeping in the same bed and had been for the entire time he'd been with me. I thought about that as I went through the proceedings on autopilot, something I usually try not to do no matter how minor the case was.

*It's my fault*, I thought, and that was true. Richard had started it the first night when he came to comfort me after the dream. But I had continued it the second night, and with no very clear idea of why I was doing it.

*It's not like we're doing anything together -- not really*, I argued to myself. But that didn't change the fact that I had invited Richard to share my bed or that he had accepted. It didn't alter the situation I found myself in. I wasn't sure if that was the problem, or if it was the fact that I didn't really want the situation altered at all. If only I had bitten my tongue that second night he stayed with me...

\* \* \* \* \*

He'd been fresh out of the shower again, the black hair curling against the back of his neck, his eyes almost luminous in the half-light cast by the still-full moon. The towel draped around his lean hips showed rippling abdominals -- something I was sure I shouldn't be

noticing, and yet, I couldn't seem to help myself. He looked like an ad for sex on a stick -- like he'd stepped right out from between the pages of *Playgirl*.

"Good night, Rachel," he said in that low, gentle voice I was already beginning to love. How was it that I could hear the boy he used to be in the man he had become and need them both so much? He told me good night, but he stood at the foot of my bed, as though waiting for something.

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him good night as well, but when I opened my mouth, what came out was, "You don't have to."

"I don't have to what?" His voice was careful -- almost hopeful.

"Don't have to sleep on the cot," I said, my voice little more than a whisper. "I mean, it must be uncomfortable and..." I trailed off, shaking my head.

"Do you want me to sleep with you?" he asked directly, taking a step toward my side of the bed.

I wasn't sure what he was asking me, and it scared me to death. Then again, I wasn't sure what I was asking him, either. "Just..." I cleared my throat, forcing myself to go on. "Just hold me like you did last night. Is...is that all right?"

"Sure, it's all right." If he was disappointed or in some way surprised by my request, he didn't show it in the least. "Let me just get on my PJ's, and I'll be right there."

PJ's. The word from our childhood made me smile, and I felt more relaxed. Soon Richard returned, wearing only the loose pajama bottoms, his bare, muscular chest barely visible in the dim room. "Hey," he said softly.

"Hey," I echoed him. I patted the side of the bed. "Come on in."

"Okay." He climbed under the covers and wound his arms around me. In the darkness we lay facing each other, our heads on one pillow the way we used to lay as children.

I reached up to brush the damp hair out of his eyes, delighting in its silky texture across my fingertips. "Remember how you never wanted to cut your hair?" I asked softly, my hand lingering on his forehead in an unconscious caress. "Mom ordered you to do it that one time -- she even gave you money for the haircut."

"And I used it on comic books instead." He laughed gently and shook his head. "Boy, she let me have it that time."

"Only because Dad wouldn't. He would never lay a finger on either one of us," I mused, twirling a piece of his hair between my fingers.

"You stuck up for me, remember?" He reached out to caress my hair in turn. "You told Mom if I cut my hair, you'd cut yours. We faced her down together and she finally gave in. I think she couldn't stand the thought of her little pixie without all this beautiful blonde hair." He stroked it back from my face and cupped my cheek, his thumb tracing my lips gently.

I felt suddenly shy and pulled away from his touch. "Hey, do you remember 'spider hunt?'" I said, reaching for conversation.

"How could I forget?" He grinned at me in the dark. "Nobody could do 'spider hunt' like you, Rache. Hey -- do it on me now, would you? It's been years."

"Okay, roll over." I got up on my knees, moving the oversized night shirt I had on so I wasn't kneeling on it, and bent over the smooth expanse of his broad, muscular back. Although I hadn't done this since childhood, the words of the old incantation came back to me easily as I traced the pattern on my adopted brother's back.

"Goin' on a spider hunt, X marks the spot," I intoned, drawing a wide capital X across his shoulder blades with my finger. "Three big bumps and a question mark." I drew a question mark and dotted it in the muscular hollow of his lower back. "Spiders crawlin' up your back..." I made my fingers skitter in a ticklish little pattern from his lower back to the back of his neck. "Spider bite!" I pinched the back of his neck suddenly, making him jump, although I knew he was expecting it.

"Blood rushin' down...blood rushin' down..." My fingers tickled their way down his spine and shoulders again, miming the flow. "Break an egg on your head..." I knocked the back of his head gently with my fist. "Yolk runnin' down your shoulders, yolk runnin' down your spine." I made ticklish swirls across the breadth of his wide shoulders and fluttered my fingertips down the long groove of his spine, drawing out the tension as long as I could.

It was time for the big finale, and I felt Richard tense ever so slightly beneath my hands. "Cool breeze," I whispered, leaning forward to blow a cool stream of air over the vulnerable back of his neck. "Tight squeeze." I pinched him again, just where I had blown. "Now you've got the chillies!" I pounced on him, tickling his sides, feeling the hard muscles roll and bunch beneath my fingertips as I never had when we played this game as children.

Richard roared with laughter and pinned his arms to his sides, trying to protect his sensitive ribcage from my prying fingers. Then he flipped suddenly, grabbing both my wrists in one of his large hands, and began to give me a taste of my own medicine. He tickled me unmercifully until I howled with laughter and begged him breathlessly to stop.

"Oh, Richard! Please, not...no, no!" I moaned, trying to draw my own arms in tightly as we rocked the bed with our game. With all the creaking and banging, I was sure my next door neighbors would get the wrong idea about what was going on in my house, but I frankly didn't care. I was having too much fun.

Richard stopped tickling me just when I thought I would never be able to get a deep breath again. I collapsed, panting in his arms, little snorts of laughter still escaping my lips as I tried to recover my composure along with my breath.

"I...forgot what a...dirty fighter...you are," I managed to say at last, between giggles and pants.

"Dirty fighter? Me?" He put a hand to his bare chest and tried to look wounded. "You were the one that started it, Rache. You know that's not how 'spider hunt' is supposed to end."

"That's the way you always ended it when you did it to me," I said indignantly, sitting up to poke him in the chest. "Every single time, buster. You always said you wouldn't tickle me and then you always did. I don't know why I kept trusting you."

"Trust me now," he said, suddenly serious.

"What?" I searched his face, confused at the abrupt shift in his mood.

"Trust me -- go on." He was urging me to lie down on my stomach. "Let me do this, Rachel. I promise I won't tickle you." His voice was deep again with that unspoken promise, but I tried to ignore it.

"Do you cross your heart and hope to die?" I asked, trying to keep the child's game going so I didn't have to face any adult uncertainties.

"Cross my heart and hope to die," he repeated softly. "Lay down, Rachel. Let me touch you."

His words sent shivers down my spine, but I lay down on my stomach as he asked me and buried my head in the cool cotton side of my pillow. Then I felt a chilly breeze along my spine -- he was lifting up the oversized sleep shirt I wore to expose my back.

"Hey, wait a minute!" I reached behind me, halting his progress.

"Can't play 'spider hunt' unless you've got a bare back. Don't you remember?" His voice was soft and soothing, making my fears seem foolish.

"Well..." I let my hand drift back to my side, not really answering him but not stopping his actions anymore, either. I shivered as I felt the cool wind circulated by the ceiling fan caress my bare back with ticklish fingers. I expected Richard to stop when he reached my neck, but instead he pulled the shirt over my head and all the way off me, leaving me bare except for my white silk panties. I didn't protest, but I drew my arms in tight to my body, covering the sides of my breasts, all that was visible since I was lying on my stomach.

"Relax, I'm not going to hurt you." Richard's deep voice was so soothing, so gentle that I did feel my arms relaxing somewhat, despite the awkward position. After all, it wasn't like he could see anything with me lying face down.

"Goin' on a spider hunt. X marks the spot..." he began, his fingers warm on my shivering skin as he drew the patterns with great deliberation. He continued with the regular words, but when he got to the first "spider bite," I felt not his fingers on the back of my neck, but his lips instead.

"Richard..." I half rose, then remembered my state of undress and lowered myself hastily to the bed again.

"Shh," he whispered, his breath warm on the back of my neck. "New rules. No tickling -- just kissing. All right?"

"I don't know," I said fretfully, hugging my arms tight to my body. "It doesn't seem right, Richard."



"But it *feels* right," he said, and kissed me again, this time right between my shivering shoulder blades. "Doesn't it?" he asked, withdrawing after a moment.

"I...don't know." I felt confused -- a swirling mixture of emotions. On one hand, his touch burned me like fire -- that one simple kiss to the back of my neck was like a brand on my body that would never fade. On the other hand...well, the other hand was obvious, but I didn't like to say it out loud. "We shouldn't," I said at last, knowing it sounded weak and inadequate.

"Just your back," he whispered softly. "I just want to touch you a little bit, Rachel. It's been so long..."

"I know." At his words, the years seemed to roll between us like waves, and I could feel the longing within me that matched his own -- to touch and be touched -- to never let go and lose each other again. So what if his request was a little unorthodox, I argued to myself. It wasn't like he was asking to kiss my breasts or anything like that... The thought gave me an odd shiver, which I pushed quickly away.

"Rachel?" His voice was still questioning, waiting to see what I would decide. I understood that he wouldn't do anything without my permission and that gave me the confidence to allow what he wanted.

"All right," I said at last. "All right, but just my back. Nothing else. Okay?"

His answer was a soft, slow kiss at the small of my back and then a trail of tender bites and licks up the groove of my spine. When he reached the back of my neck, I turned my head to one side, giving him access to the vulnerable side of my throat. Richard straddled me, and I could feel the heat from his broad chest against my bare back, covering me. He fastened his mouth to the skin there, sucking and lapping, teasing the sensitive spot where my shoulder met my neck. I writhed beneath his touch, pressing my thighs together as I felt an unfamiliar heat course through me.

I had had several boyfriends before getting engaged to Charles, but none of them had kissed me like this. And none of their kisses had made me feel this way -- breathless, aching, wanting something I didn't even dare to name to myself. I could feel myself losing control.

"That's enough!" I pulled away from him suddenly, sitting up in bed, heedless of the fact that he could see my bare breasts. "Don't, Richard," I told him, holding up a hand when he would have gathered me into his arms. "Don't. We can't -- it's wrong."

"Sorry...I'm sorry." He shook his head and ran a hand through his thick, dark hair, his eyes glowing green in the darkness of the room. "It's just that I...I missed you so much, Rache."

I knew it was more than that -- more than missing -- more than longing for whatever it was that we had had as children that was now perhaps lost to us forever. But I didn't want to admit it to myself or to Richard.

"Let's just...just go to sleep." I fumbled for my nightshirt, suddenly aware of my state of undress.

"Wait..." He put out a hand to stop me. "Let me just...let me look at you for a minute. You're so beautiful, Rachel, so absolutely gorgeous. I just want to look, I swear."

"All -- all right," I said at last. Lowering my crumpled nightshirt to my lap, I let him see me, let him drink in the sight of me bare-breasted in the dim light of my room.

"Goin' on a spider hunt," he said softly, trailing one long finger over my full breasts and down to the shivering cup of my navel. "X marks the spot."

But instead of marking an X on my trembling flesh, he cupped my naked breasts in his hands, rubbing gently over my tight nipples with his thumbs until I had to bite back a moan.

"You said...you said you just wanted to look," I accused him in a breathless whisper. I wanted to pull away from him, but somehow I didn't feel able.

"I can't help myself," he murmured, still stroking the tight nubs of my sensitive nipples. "I need to touch you, Rachel. Even if it's just to play a child's game."

I don't think it was lost on either of us that what we were doing was much more serious than any game we'd played as children. From somewhere deep inside of me, I found the strength to pull away from him and slip my nightshirt back over my head.

"No more 'spider hunt' tonight," I said. "Okay?"

"All right." He made as though to leave the bed, but I pulled him back, unable to let him go no matter what forbidden thing had just happened or almost happened between us.

"Just hold me," I told him. "Hold me and let's go to sleep."

Richard lay with me cupped in the curve of his body in the old familiar way. But when his hands traveled under my nightshirt and cupped the bottom curves of my breasts, I somehow couldn't stop him. Even when he stroked my nipples with gentle fingers, I didn't say a word, although I told myself I would if he tried anything else. To my mingled relief and disappointment, he didn't try to go any further. But I felt a hot hardness pressing against the back of my thighs, reminding me that the innocence of our childhood was gone forever even as he stroked me to sleep.

## Chapter Eight

What happened that second night had frightened me, but not enough to forbid Richard my bed. As wrong as what had happened between us seemed to me, somehow I just couldn't give up the comfort of his arms. From then on when he slept with me, he held me and we talked for hours of the past. Sometimes he reached beneath my shirt and stroked my naked breasts, but we never talked about that, pretending it wasn't happening even as my breath grew short and I felt him harden against my thigh. Several times I had asked him what he wanted to tell me the first night, but he always put me off, saying that I wasn't ready to know.

I thought about that in court as I packed my things to go and said goodbye to my colleagues absently. Richard and I never discussed what had happened between us that second night and what was still happening to a certain extent -- was that what he wanted to talk to me about? Or was it more about the Amon-kai and the "teachings" he had referred to the first night at my house?

Still debating with myself, I drove home and opened the door of my little purple house with some apprehension. A delicious aroma wafted through the front room, and I followed my nose to the bungalow's tiny kitchen where Richard was stirring something in a frying pan. Today he had on a pair of tight, faded blue jeans that hugged his narrow hips and firm ass lovingly and a short-sleeved black T-shirt that showed the bulge of his biceps when he stirred. He was making a lot of noise, but he didn't appear surprised when I came up behind him.

"Mmm, smells delicious," I said, looking around his shoulder at the contents of the pan.

"You're just in time. It's almost done."

"I can't wait." I leaned over to give him a peck on the cheek, but he turned his head so that my kiss landed on his lips instead. I felt a familiar tingle rush through me and drew back

quickly, blushing. Why did my heart pound so hard when we touched? I knew I couldn't blame it on my excitement at seeing him again after so long anymore -- after all, he'd been staying with me for nearly two weeks now.

Richard had gone back to cooking, and it was impossible to tell if he had turned his head on purpose or not. I wondered briefly if he felt the same way I did when we touched, but I wasn't about to ask him.

"How was work?" he asked casually, pouring some soy sauce into the pan and stirring vigorously. Bright green snow pea pods glistened with a light coating of oil. Beside the stove on a china plate were some long, thin strips of almost raw meat that had obviously barely touched the pan.

"The usual," I said, trying to sound casual myself. "Mostly petty stuff. I'm not involved in any really big cases right now."

"Lucky for me," he said, smiling at me. "Or I'd never get to see you."

"How about you?" I asked. "Get much done?"

"I'm almost finished with the bank's system. A few more days oughta do it." He gave me a sidelong look. "Then I guess I can get out of your hair, if you want me to."

"No," I said at once, putting a hand on his arm. I didn't understand the sudden wave of anxiety I felt at the thought of Richard leaving me, but it was undeniable. Just the thought of him getting on a plane and going away from me made my stomach clench in knots.

He smiled down at me, stilling his motions at the stove for a minute. "All right, I'll stay for as long as you want me to." His dark face became serious. "Only..."

"Only what?" I prompted him, troubled by the doubt I saw in his clear green eyes.

"Only you may not want me to after you hear what I have to say." He sighed. "Let's eat first though, okay? Hard to talk on an empty stomach."

I didn't think so, but I nodded mutely and began getting plates from the cupboard to set the table. What in the world did Richard have to tell me that was so bad he thought I would want him out of the house when I heard it?

I could scarcely eat for worrying, though the food was delicious. The snow peas were crisp and tender and the almost raw beef seemed to feed a craving inside me that I'd been suppressing for years. Across my tiny kitchen table, Richard was barely picking at his food as well. When he looked up and saw me watching him, he gave a rueful laugh.

"I guess maybe we'd better talk now, Rache. Neither one of us seems to be eating much."

"I'm sorry. It's really delicious." I ate a crisp green snow pea to prove my point and tried to smile at him.

"Come on." He pushed back from the table and extended his hand. "Let's sit on the couch."

Feeling like a lost child, I took his hand and allowed him to lead me to the small, lumpy loveseat in my living room. We sat for a minute, then Richard took a deep breath, squeezed my hand, and let go.

“Okay, where to begin?” he mused aloud to himself. He looked at me. “I know Mom didn’t tell you anything about our people or pass down any of our beliefs, so I feel like I’m starting from scratch.”

So he wanted to talk more about the “Amon-kai” thing. “Just begin at the beginning,” I urged him.

“I will, but I want you to keep an open mind. Some of what I tell you may sound, well...a little strange.”

“I’ll try,” I told him honestly. I felt like he was about to try and convert me to another religion but I loved him, so I’d attempt to keep everything in perspective no matter what he said. I promised myself that.

“Listen then, to the legend that has been passed down for generations -- the origins of the Amon-kai -- night’s children.” Richard closed his eyes as he spoke, and his deep voice took on an almost orator-like quality. I watched him, fascinated by his change in tone and demeanor.

“Long ago, Anubis, the Egyptian god of death and the afterlife, was lonely and desired a wife. He had the head of a jackal but the heart of a man, and he longed for love and for someone to share his life. He searched throughout this life and the next, but no woman pleased him so well as the goddess, Bast. She had the head of a cat but the heart of a woman, and when Anubis asked her, she agreed to be his wife.”

He opened his eyes and looked at me briefly to see how I was taking this, but I only nodded for him to go on.

“Anubis and Bast loved each other, and from their union were born the Amon-kai -- night’s children. From their father, the sons of the Amon-kai inherited their strength and speed and from their mother, the daughters inherited their clarity of vision and inner wisdom. Both sons and daughters are gifted with Bast’s pale green eyes that pierce the night.”

He looked at me again, and I got the feeling he wanted me to say something. “That’s...I’ve never heard that,” I said at last. “It’s...interesting.” Privately, I thought it sounded like something made up to explain our family’s differences from the outside world. But just because we all had green eyes and really good night vision didn’t make us descendants of an ancient Egyptian god and goddess. Still, I motioned for Richard to go on.

“It gets more interesting,” he said darkly. “You see, to balance their increased abilities, the sons of Anubis were given a curse: that they should bear the true form of their father every full moon and bathe in blood before they regained their own faces again.”

For the first time I drew back from him, really scared. “Uh...bathe in blood?” I tried to laugh. “That sounds pretty grim, Richard, for a fairy tale.”

"This is no fairy tale." His gaze was intense, willing me to understand -- to believe. "It's folklore passed down for generations -- the story of our origins, Rachel. The origins of the Amon-kai. And the only way the sons of Anubis, the Lanor-zur, can control the curse is with the help of a Lana-zeel -- a mate, a true daughter of Bast."

I shook my head. "I don't understand. What are you trying to tell me, Richard?"

He closed his eyes briefly, and I saw the muscles in his jaw clench. "This is hard to say, but I can't wait any longer," he said at last. "We have barely two weeks before the next full moon. I'm saying I need you, Rachel. Need you in my life, now and forever."

I felt a surge of relief, although I wondered what in the world the moon had to do with anything. "Well, of *course* I'll stay in your life, silly. Now that we've found each other, we're never going to lose touch again. I thought we already agreed on that."

"No, Rachel." He reached over to take one of my hands in both of his. "I mean I *need* you." He lifted my hand and kissed the palm gently, a hot, slow kiss that sent a shower of sparks throughout my body, before raising his eyes to mine. "You know what I mean," he said softly.

"No, I don't." I tried to pull my hand away, but he wouldn't let me. "What are you saying?" I demanded, giving up my futile efforts to be free. "Are you trying to say that you need me...?"

"As a mate," he said simply.

"Richard, this is bizarre! Are you asking me to marry you or something? Do I need to point out why that's impossible?"

"We don't have to get married, just live with me." He said it as though it was the most natural thing in the world.

"Well...but we *are* living together -- at least for now," I clarified, gesturing with my free hand to indicate our semi-domestic situation. "I mean, what more do you want from me, Richard?"

"It's what I need from you, Rachel," he repeated earnestly. "Not just what I want."

"Okay, so what do you *need*?" I demanded. I had an idea of what he was going to say, but I just couldn't believe it. Couldn't believe that he would actually ask for what I was afraid he was going to ask for until I heard it from his own lips. I kept hoping I was wrong, that he would say something completely different and surprise me.

"Do I really have to spell it out?" His face was anguished.

"Yes, Richard," I said quietly, through lips that felt numb. "Yes, if you're going to ask for what I think you're going to ask for, you have to say it out loud."

He heaved a sigh and reached out to caress my face, but I flinched away. He looked sad, but determined. "I need you sexually, Rachel," he said at last, meeting my eyes fully. "I need to make love to you. Need to breed you."

His words unloosed a torrent of emotions within me. Disbelief that he had actually said what I was most afraid of. Horror that he would ask such a thing of me. Shame that his request didn't disgust me as I knew it should. And under it all was the bright spark of heat that his touch always ignited in me, glowing like a hot coal in the center of my chest, making my breath hitch in my throat and my eyes grow wide.

"Richard..." I shook my head, at a loss for words.

"I know what you're thinking -- that it's wrong," he rushed on. "But it's not for us, Rachel. It's the way of the Amon-kai. We mate our own, and you and I were bonded as children. It doesn't matter that we were raised as siblings -- we're really not, and besides, only a Lana-zeel can help a Lanor-zur control his blood lust."

I shook my head again. If he hadn't had me so firmly by the hand, I would have been backing away from him. "Richard, no. I can't hear this right now. I don't...we can't --"

"Our parents did," he said quietly, cutting my denial short. "They were raised together and bonded as children, just as we were -- two halves of the same whole."

"You're lying," I said in a voice that shook.

"No." He sighed. "Look, why do you think Mom wanted to take you away from me? Why do you think she warned you never to see me again, never to think of me, look for me? She was looking for a way out, and she didn't want you raised in the ways of the Amon-kai. Why else would she take you away?"

"I don't know why," I nearly shouted. "But not this -- never this. Richard, please..." I was begging him now, all my outrage suddenly evaporated. "Can't we just forget you ever said these things and go on having a nice visit together? These last two weeks have been so perfect -- almost magical."

"Because we belong together, Rachel. Can't you see that?" He leaned forward, searching my eyes earnestly. "Even if you don't believe the legend, you have to feel how right we are together. Every time I hold you, every time I touch you, I feel it." He raised a hand and brushed his fingertips lightly across my cheek, making me gasp with the sudden heat his touch raised under my skin. "You can't tell me you don't feel it, too," he almost whispered.

I shook my head, determined to deny what he was saying at all costs. To agree was to set my feet on the road to ruin and certain damnation. I would be lost forever if I gave even an inch.

He frowned. "If you don't feel it, if what there is between us is so wrong, why do you let me touch you at night? Why do you let me cup your breasts and stroke your nipples?"

"I...I..." I shook my head again, feeling betrayed. What had been happening between us at night was something we didn't discuss, something I didn't want to discuss. Because as long as we didn't talk about it, it was almost like a dream. And you can't help what you do in

dreams, can you? And now Richard wanted to bring it out into the open and make me admit that I let him touch me, fondle me. It was too much.

Richard saw the denial in my eyes. "Let me prove it to you," he said softly. "Let me prove that there's something between us. Give me one chance, Rachel, that's all I ask."

"Prove it?" I drew back from him mistrustfully. "How?"

"With a kiss, just one real kiss." He drew me back into the circle of his arms. "How many boyfriends have you had in your life before Charles, Rachel? How many men in your life before I found you?"

I looked at him uncertainly, surprised by the change of topic. "Um, a few," I hedged. "Not many, actually. I was always busy with school or my career, I guess."

"And did you give yourself to any of them? Have you given yourself to Charles?"

I thought of my fiancé's endless groping and his clumsy, too-wet kisses. "No," I said at last. "No I...I never."

"Because you couldn't," Richard said. "You've been saving yourself; you just didn't know why."

"Did it ever occur to you that I was saving myself for my wedding night?" I demanded. But the words sounded weak, even to me.

"When Charles touches you, kisses you, does it arouse you?" Richard looked at me intently, as though everything depended on my answer. With him staring at me that way, I somehow couldn't bring myself to lie.

"No," I said, looking away. "No, but that's just because we're not married yet."

"Do you really think so?" he demanded. "He's human, Rachel, and you're Amon-kai -- the two species are not sexually compatible. Do you think a gold ring to match that ridiculous diamond on your finger is really going to make a difference in how you feel when he touches you?"

"I don't know, all right?" I flared at him suddenly. He was pushing me into a corner, challenging my very belief in myself, and I couldn't take much more of it. "But it doesn't matter anyway because even if Charles doesn't turn me on, that doesn't change a thing. He's still my fiancé, and we're still going to be married in two weeks."

"That's not what you really want." Richard sounded so sure of himself that I almost believed him.

"What do you know about what I want?" I glared at him angrily, thinking of all the lost and empty years spent apart. How dare he come back into my life now and try to dictate my actions -- my very emotions?

"I know what you need," he said quietly, refusing to fight back. "It's the same thing I need, Rachel. Give me one chance to prove it to you -- just one real kiss."



So we were back to the kissing again. "What do you think you're going to prove by kissing me, Richard?" I demanded. "What do you think you'll gain?"

"Your heart," he said simply. "Or at least a chance to win it. Please, Rachel, one kiss isn't so much to ask."

"Look who you're asking," I said, but I could feel myself relenting. If kissing him once would make him abandon this foolish notion, then I supposed I could give it a try. I sighed. "All right -- one kiss."

"One kiss to prove that my touch moves you -- that we need each other," he clarified. "Like the bets we used to make when we were kids."

I wasn't sure how he thought one kiss would prove all that, but I shrugged anyway. "All right, one real kiss. But what are we betting?"

He smiled, a slow, lazy smile that made my heart bump noisily in my chest. "More kisses of course, if I prove my point. If I don't, I'll move out of your life and leave you alone forever."

"Richard," I protested. "I don't want you out of my life. I just want you to forget this nonsense."

"It's not nonsense," he said. "And it's not a bet I intend to lose. Come here, Rachel. Let me kiss you."

Trying to still the beating of my heart, I leaned forward and closed my eyes. *Just one kiss*, I promised myself. *Just one and then I'll put an end to this nonsense*. Even when he touched my breasts at night he didn't kiss me -- it was going too far, giving too much, I always felt. Now I was determined to be calm and cool while I let him kiss me. I decided I wouldn't react in any way. When it was over he would see how wrong he was and drop all this. Of course, I didn't want him out of my life forever -- I loved him too dearly for that. But it would be good to go back to the way things used to be before he'd brought this awkwardness between us.

"Not like this." Richard's voice interrupted my train of thought, and I opened my eyes to see him frowning at me.

"What do you mean? You asked for a --" That was as far as I got before he picked me up and sat me on his lap.

"Richard!" I protested, pushing against his chest. He had me settled on top of him so that I was straddling his hips. I was still wearing my gray business skirt and my white silk blouse with small pearl buttons, although I had kicked off the gray suede pumps I'd had on earlier. My skirt hiked up to somewhere around my hips, and I found myself pressed hard against the crotch of his faded blue jeans.

"This is more like it." He smiled at me, and I understood that he wouldn't let me go until he had gotten his kiss. I tried to settle a little higher up on his thighs, but he pulled me back down to him, cupping my ass in his palms. "Come here," he whispered.

Feeling like I was drowning, I relaxed and leaned toward him. *One kiss, just one...* It became like a mantra in my mind -- at least until his lips touched mine. Then the heat that flowed between us wiped out every other thought in my head.

One real kiss, Richard had said, and I knew what he meant -- I would have to give him the access to explore me that I had refused him that first night. What I hadn't counted on was how easy it would be to do just that. His soft, sensual exploration of my lips drew a groan from me, and before I knew it, I had opened my mouth to him with no urging at all.

He tasted salty -- like the soy sauce we had both been eating, but under that was a sweet, spicy taste I couldn't name. Maybe it was just his natural flavor, the taste of the Amon-kai, but I found it completely delicious and utterly addicting. Before I knew it, I was writhing on his lap, the unfamiliar heat raging through my body like a wildfire, out of control. I could feel my nipples hardening into tight, aching points at the tips of my breasts, and between my thighs, my sex felt slippery and swollen -- begging for something I had never had but wanted desperately now.

Richard reached behind me and pulled the clip out of my hair, releasing it from the tight twist I wore it in at court and letting it cascade around my shoulders like a curtain made of silk. He ran his hands through the loosened strands, his lips never leaving my mouth as he kissed me senseless. I could feel the rigid lump of his cock against my inner thighs and I ground myself against him shamelessly, loving the sensation of his thickness parting my damp folds, even through the layers of our clothing.

All thought of the wrongness of what we were doing was wiped from my mind by the desire that was building in me relentlessly. The only thing I could think of was that I needed more...more of his mouth on mine, more of his hands on my body, and most especially, more of the feel of his hard cock grinding against the soft, slippery heat of my sex. I forgot that the man I was kissing had been raised with me as my brother for the first seven years of my life. I even managed to forget entirely that I was supposed to be married to another man in the next two weeks. There was no room in my thought process at all for anything except the lust Richard was building in me with his hungry, passionate kisses.

Richard ended the kiss abruptly, pulling away from me and breaking the contact between us.

"What...why ...?" I floundered, still unable to think. I had completely lost myself in the kiss, and losing the sweet feeling of his lips against mine was almost as jarring as though he had dragged me out of a warm bed and poured a bucket of ice water over my head.

"Tell me that didn't arouse you." Richard was staring at me intently, still breathing hard from the kiss himself. There was a challenge in his pale green eyes, so exactly like my own, that brought me back to myself.

What was I doing here, sitting on his lap and kissing him? Never mind the obvious taboo I was breaking, or at least, felt I was breaking despite the lack of actual blood ties between us; there was also the fact that I was engaged to Charles. The vulgar diamond ring

on my left hand sparkled at me reproachfully, reminding me of promises I had made, vows I didn't intend to break. And then there was the fact that my mother had warned me so strenuously against ever seeing Richard again -- there must be something he wasn't telling me. Something about the Amon-kai that I couldn't remember. But it was hard to focus on any of these things -- hard to focus on anything but the needs of my newly-awakened body.

"Well?" He was still looking at me expectantly.

"I...no," I said at last, knowing it was a complete lie, but unable to tell the truth. "No, kissing you didn't, um, didn't arouse me, Richard." I tried to crawl off his lap, but he wouldn't let me, keeping us pressed together. I was uncomfortably aware that he was still intensely aroused himself -- the evidence of it was pressing against the sensitive cleft between my legs.

"You're lying." His black eyebrows drew together, but his expression was more one of gentle amusement than anger.

"I am not," I denied with quiet intensity. This was something I had learned in the courtroom from observing the defendants I was prosecuting. No matter how blatantly obvious it is that you're lying, doing it softly and vehemently makes your lie seem at least marginally more credible.

Richard didn't bother getting into a verbal "are not, am too" sparring match of the kind we used to have on the rare occasion we fought when we were children. Instead he laughed softly, a low, warm chuckle that seemed to pour through me like melted butter. Reaching up, he began unbuttoning my white silk blouse.

"What do you think you're doing?" I demanded.

"Proving my point." He pulled the blouse apart, and I watched, feeling somehow helpless to stop him as he unfastened the front-hook bra I wore and pulled it apart, baring my breasts to him. I had never watched as he did this, never acknowledged it when his hands slipped under my night shirt and stroked my nipples, but now he was forcing me to watch. Forcing me to look while he cupped my naked breasts in his large, warm hands, making me gasp.

"What about these?" he asked, flicking my hardened nipples lightly with his thumbs. "Why are your nipples hard if you're not aroused?"

"I...you..." His touch sent fire shooting through my veins, bright sparks of pleasure that seemed to burst inside my chest, making it almost impossible to refute him. But somehow, I knew I had to try.

"Well?" Richard laughed at me again. He pinched my nipples lightly, his touch on my inflamed flesh making it terribly hard to think.

"I -- I'm cold," I stuttered, though I felt I was burning up. I wanted to pull away from his touch, but I was powerless to do so -- as powerless as I had been to stop kissing him.

"Rachel," he said softly. "You're still lying. Don't make me prove it beyond the shadow of a doubt."

"I...I don't know what you mean." He twisted my nipples gently, sending sparks of pleasure straight down to my slippery sex. I knew I ought to stop him, but somehow I just couldn't. Touching Charles had never made me feel like this -- my fiancé's hands on my body had never made me feel like I couldn't get a deep enough breath, like my heart was going to pound out of my body. It was a completely new sensation and one I was helpless against.

"I mean *this*." His hands left my breasts and slid down my trembling abdomen to the tender vee between my legs. I gasped and bit my lip as Richard ripped a hole in the crotch of my panty hose, exposing my white silk panties.

"What...?" I couldn't even form the question.

"Are you wet for me, Rachel?" he whispered softly, cupping my pussy through the thin, silky material in one warm palm. "I'm only going to ask you one more time. Did your body respond when I kissed you?"

The panties I had on were unlined, and I gasped as he pressed one large finger against them, rubbing the slippery material into the hot, wet folds of my cunt. I had never allowed him to go so far while we lay in bed together, but now I couldn't seem to stop him. I could feel my body opening for him spontaneously, my pussy lips so swollen and hot that they were spreading of their own volition, welcoming his invasion despite the thin silk barrier between us. But still I couldn't bring myself to tell the truth.

"N -- no," I whispered, biting my lip as the lie escaped me.

Richard sighed. "You leave me no choice, Rachel," he said. With one swift, violent motion, he gripped the crotch of my panties and ripped them away, baring me completely. I gasped when I felt the thin sides of the panties give way and the cool air of the room hit my unprotected sex. Then Richard's big hand was there again, cupping me, spreading me so that his blunt fingertips could explore my naked cunt with nothing between us.

"Richard...*please*," I begged, but I didn't know if I was begging him to stop or to never stop. I had never felt so helpless or so completely out of control of my body. Here I was, straddling his lap, my breasts exposed completely and my legs spread wide while he explored my naked, wet pussy with gentle but insistent fingers, and yet I couldn't stop -- didn't *want* to stop.

"If my kiss didn't arouse you, then why are you so wet?" he whispered roughly, in answer to my plea. "Why are you spread out on my lap, letting me touch you like this if you don't like it? Who have you been saving yourself for all these years, if not for me, your Lanor-zur?" he demanded.

I shivered and bit my lip as he pressed one long finger gently into me, feeling my virgin barrier. No one had ever touched me there before, not even Charles. But I could feel my body wanting more, wanting Richard to breach that barrier and claim me as his own, even as

my mind was insisting that it was completely, utterly wrong. It was difficult to understand how something that felt so wrong mentally could feel so right physically.

"Please," I gasped again, then bit my lip to keep the rest of my plea from coming out.

"Do you want me to stop?" Richard's eyes were half-lidded, an almost lazy expression of lust in his pale green eyes. He seemed to enjoy watching me writhe against his exploring fingers, watching the needs of my body war with the conflict in my mind.

I couldn't say a word, but I found myself shaking my head very slowly. If he stopped now, I'd die. I needed his touch on my body the way the parched land of the desert needs the cooling rain.

"Didn't think so." One blunt fingertip began to stroke relentlessly along the sensitized side of my clit, building incredible sensations in the tight little bundle of nerves even as I moaned and cried, writhing against his hand. I found that my own hands were on his broad shoulders, my fingernails digging into his back as the pleasure built inside me.

"I want you to do something for me, Rachel," he whispered, never stopping the steady motion of his fingers inside the wet folds of my cunt. "I want you to come for me, right here and right now. I want to watch you come as I claim you -- watch you come as I finger your hot, wet cunt and prove to you that we belong together."

Even as he spoke, I felt the waves of pleasure beginning to crest inside me. The orgasm he was building in me was unlike anything I had ever experienced before. No hand but my own had ever touched me where Richard was exploring with such expert care. No one had ever spread open the lips of my pussy and pressed his fingers inside me to test my depth, or caressed my clit so knowledgeably with just the right amount of pressure to make me come.

"Oh, God!" I moaned. I was coming so *hard*. I threw back my head, giving in completely to the sensation as I pressed myself against him, feeling my inner muscles contract around his fingers which were suddenly inside me again, fucking me as deeply as he dared without breaching my barrier.

"God, Rachel, I can feel you coming." Richard's deep voice was ragged, as though he was at the very edge of his control. "That's right, baby, come for me. Come hard," he murmured, still stroking in and out of my wet sex. "My sweet one, my Lana-zeel."

"Richard...*Richard!*" I dug my fingernails into his shoulders and closed my eyes, my orgasm so intense I actually saw stars behind my tightly closed eyelids.

No one had ever made me come like this before; no one had touched me as he touched me; no one had made me feel so alive, so perfectly aligned with the needs of my body. How could he do this to me -- make me react like this? *He can do it because he's right -- you're both of the Amon-kai, and you belong together*, whispered a little voice in my head.

But as the intensity of my pleasure ebbed, I pushed the certainty away. This was wrong! Richard was my brother in all but blood, and besides, I had a fiancé whom I was

going to marry in two weeks. It was as though the orgasm had cleared my head, broken his hold on me, and I found myself finally able to pull away from Richard's addictive touch.

"Richard," I said in a shaky voice, putting my hand to his wrist and pushing him away from my unprotected sex. "We can't do this; it's wrong."

"Then why does it feel so right?" he countered, grabbing my arms when I would have slipped off his lap.

"I -- I don't know. But you can't always allow yourself to be led by how you feel," I said, trying to make myself believe it. "We can't do this, Richard, so let me go."

He frowned, and his hands tightened on my arms, obviously unwilling to comply. I was sure for a fleeting second that he would unzip his jeans and force me to spread my legs once more, this time to receive his hard cock into my pussy instead of his fingers. I felt my heart rate double at the thought, and my naked cunt felt even hotter and more slippery than when he had been touching me. Would he do that to me? Would he take what he wanted by force?

"No." His voice was a growl and then he took a deep breath and let it out slowly, as though forcing himself to get control. "No," he said again, and his grip on my arms loosened, allowing me to scramble off his lap and pull down my skirt. Richard looked up at me as I buttoned my blouse with shaking fingers. There was a mixture of despair and determination in his pale green eyes. "I won't take you against your will, Rachel," he said at last. "When you give yourself to me, I want it to be voluntary and with all your heart. I won't claim you completely until you can do that for me."

"Then you'll never claim me," I whispered through trembling lips. "I'm sorry, Richard, but I can't do this with you. Never again."

He stood up from the couch suddenly, looming over me like an ominous dark mountain. "Never is a long time, Rachel. And don't forget, I won our bet. I'll come back to collect when you're ready to be reasonable."

With those words he was gone, leaving me alone in my little purple house to cry in bewilderment and need on the small, lumpy loveseat where he had touched me so gently.

## Chapter Nine

He didn't come home that night.

I sat up until almost three o'clock in the morning, hoping to hear his key in the door, his step on my front porch. But there was nothing. I finally fell into a troubled sleep a little after three and then I had the dream over and over again -- the moon, the statues, the boy, the wolf, the blood...it beat in my brain, making me crazy, waking me over and over with his name on my lips.

I felt like shit the next day, and I'm sure I looked it, too. I lost a case that should have been a cut and dried conviction and went home early with a feeling of dread in the pit of my stomach. Would he be there, waiting for me, as though nothing had happened between us?

He wasn't. I sank onto the uncomfortable loveseat wearily after checking the entire house. The only thing that gave me hope was the fact that his clothing was still there, neatly placed in the small bureau I had cleaned out for his use. If Richard was leaving me for good, he would have taken his clothing, wouldn't he? I tried to cling to the hope, telling myself that it was all right, that he would walk in the door at any moment, and we would be together again soon.

It didn't occur to me to wonder why I needed him so much -- I was hurting too badly to give the source of my pain much thought. I had read that people who lost limbs often had phantom pains, an aching where the part of them that had been amputated had been, and that was how I felt now. It was as though a part of me had been cut off, leaving me helpless to do anything but hurt.

My cell phone chimed, startling me out of my misery for a moment. I fumbled in my purse eagerly and flipped open the phone without checking the caller ID. "Hello?" I was almost breathless with anticipation, certain I would hear Richard's familiar, deep voice on the other end of the phone.

“Darling?” The nasal, proper tones of my fiancé in my ear dashed all my hopes completely.

“Oh, hello, Charles,” I said dully, forcing myself to speak.

“Are you all right, Rachel? You’re not quite sounding yourself,” he said briskly.

“Fine, I’m fine,” I lied. “I just...thought you were someone else. Look, Charles, I’m really busy right now so if you don’t mind getting to the point --”

“The point is that I’m calling to see if you and Richard are up for our little double date tomorrow night.” He sounded a little huffy now, probably at my abrupt tone, but I couldn’t make myself care.

“Double date?” I tried to force my tired mind to remember what he was talking about, but I was drawing a blank.

“Yes, Ursula is so excited. I went ahead and took the liberty of getting a reservation for four at Bern’s,” he continued. “I didn’t want to wait too late to book.”

“I...Charles, I’ll just have to get back to you. Honestly, I’m just about to walk into the courtroom,” I lied. “I promise I’ll call you back tonight or tomorrow. All right?” Without waiting for his answer, I flipped the phone closed, ending the call. Then I balled myself up on the loveseat and closed my eyes, trying to forget everything and just sleep.

But sleep wouldn’t come. I was tormented with thoughts of Richard and new doubts that kept rising in my head. Why, I asked myself for the hundredth time, had my mother been so desperate to keep us separated? Obviously she was worried that Richard and I would end up together in a way she had never meant us to be, but the fact was, there really was no blood tie between us. Was she that worried about us breaking a taboo that wasn’t really there? Or was it something else? Something to do with the Amon-kai? The strange “teachings” Richard had spoken of? Why had she urged me to be so human, so normal, to ignore and forget everything she and my father had taught me for the first seven years of my life?

And why did Richard keep insisting that he “needed” me so desperately? Was there really a tie or bond between us that even seventeen years of separation couldn’t break? And what about the weird and frightening fairy tale Richard had told me to explain why we should be together? What were the words he had used? Lana-something... And the talk about bathing in blood -- what was that about?

My eyelids began to feel heavy as the unanswerable questions swirled in my brain. Whatever or wherever Richard was, I only knew one thing -- that I wanted him back with me. Thinking of that, I fell asleep, my head cradled in the crook of my arm against the side of the tiny loveseat.

\* \* \* \* \*



Warm arms encircled me, pulling me close to a hard, muscular chest. Someone placed a tender kiss on my temple and whispered in my ear.

"Rachel," he said, and the deep voice was wonderfully familiar. I was almost afraid to open my eyes, for fear of it being a dream, but when he kissed me again, I couldn't resist looking.

"Richard," I breathed, staring up into his pale green eyes, so much like my own. "I thought you were never coming back."

"I had to come back," he whispered tenderly. He scooped me up and lifted me as though I weighed no more than a feather. "Couldn't stand to be away from you any longer. God, it was hell leaving in the first place, Rache."

"Then why did you?" I demanded. He was carrying me toward the bedroom now, but I didn't even care.

"I had to." His voice sounded ragged and strained. "As hard as it was, I had to show you that we belonged together. Did you miss me as much as I missed you?"

"More." I put my arms around his neck and nuzzled my face into the hollow of his shoulder. He was warm and smelled spicy and right -- the scent of the Amon-kai, I vaguely acknowledged to myself. "Never leave me again," I told him.

Richard laid me on the bed, but remained hovering over me. "I never will, if you're ready to admit that we belong together. Are you ready to do that, Rachel? Are you ready to give yourself to me? To let me breed you?"

I felt myself go cold and hot all over. He wanted me. *No*, I told myself. *Be honest; say it like it is*. Richard wanted to make love to me -- wanted to *fuck* me. Or to breed me, as he put it. And if I was completely honest with myself, I knew that I wanted it, too. But I just couldn't do it.

"Richard," I said as gently as I could, stroking his cheek, which was sandpapery with two days' growth of beard. "I can't do that with you. You're my brother, for God's sake. Not to mention the fact that I'm supposed to be marrying another man in two weeks."

"Rachel..." He shook his head, his handsome face looking haggard. "You know there isn't any blood tie between us. And you know that you don't love Charles. Please...if you only knew how much I *need* you."

"Can't you just lay here beside me for a while and forget about that?" I pleaded. "Can't we be close without being...well, *that* close?"

He sighed and slumped on the bed beside me, one arm over his eyes. "I'd never hurt you or force you, Rachel, but, my God, you're making this difficult."

"Richard..." I propped myself up on one elbow beside him and leaned over to run my fingers through his mane of wild, black hair. "If you only knew how much I love you. I'm so sorry I can't get past the way we were raised. If only your parents hadn't died, if you hadn't been raised as my brother... But it's too much, too...too *wrong*. I just can't."

"Can you keep your end of the bet, at least?" he asked, uncovering his eyes and looking up at me.

"Bet?" I frowned, at a loss for a moment.

"You lost yesterday." He sat up suddenly and flipped me onto my back in one smooth move. "We bet that if my kiss didn't excite you, I'd leave your life forever."

"I don't want you out of my life," I protested earnestly, looking up at him. "I want us to be close, Richard, just not the way you want us to."

"It doesn't matter because I won the bet." His eyes were blazing now, despite the fact that his voice was low and gentle. "You can't deny that, can you?"

I bit my lip and looked away from the eager, hungry expression on his dark face. The worst thing was I could feel that same hunger in me as well. "No," I said at last. "No, you won the bet."

"Do you remember what I won?" he asked softly, stroking my cheek.

"Another kiss?" I looked up at him again, feeling my heart start to pound.

"Several more, to be exact." He leaned down and kissed me lightly on the nose, making me smile despite my fear and the forbidden desire. "Take off your clothes, Rachel," he said softly. "I want to collect on my bet."

"But I don't...we can't..." I shook my head, my heart racing. It wasn't so much that I didn't want him to see me naked -- it was the fact that without the barrier of our clothes, I was afraid I wouldn't be able to stop myself from going too far, from taking that final step and letting him fuck me.

"Don't worry," he said, obviously seeing the fear in my eyes. "I won't do that until you're ready to. I won't let things go too far; I just want to kiss you for right now."

"Why do I have to be naked for you to kiss me?" I protested, hearing the fear in my voice.

"Because I didn't say where I was going to kiss you." Richard smiled at me lazily, already unbuttoning the blue silk shirt I had worn to work that day. "I don't want to just taste your lips this time, Rachel." He pulled apart the pale blue silk and unhooked my bra effortlessly, peeling it back to reveal my breasts. My nipples were already hard in anticipation, and I could offer only token resistance when he leaned down and kissed the right one gently.

"Richard," I protested weakly, "You know we shouldn't do this..."

"You mean this?" He leaned down again, this time kissing the left nipple very lightly. "Or maybe this?" His tongue flickered out, lapping my hot flesh and making me gasp. "Or even this?" Richard whispered. This time he sucked my nipple completely into his mouth, nipping it gently and sending a shower of sparks throughout my entire body.

I moaned and pressed myself up to his mouth, offering my breasts to his gentle, intoxicating torture. It felt so good, so right to let him do this, even as my mind was

screaming that it was wrong, wrong, wrong. I tried to remember all the troubling questions that had been running around in my brain before I'd fallen asleep on the loveseat, but I was drawing a complete blank. My body had taken over now completely, and all I could do was feel.

Richard spent a long time on my breasts, sucking and biting my nipples gently, marking the tender slopes of my tits with dark red love bites I knew wouldn't fade for days. I was helpless to stop him -- in fact, I urged him on. I buried my fingers in his thick black hair and pressed my breasts up to his mouth, giving him free access to my body.

But while Richard's mouth was busy above my waist, his hands were busy below. I barely realized that he was undressing me until I felt the cool breeze of the ceiling fan on my unprotected sex.

"Richard, please, I shouldn't let you," I begged. But even as the words left my mouth, I was spreading my legs for him, inviting his fingers to touch me again, to explore me as he had the night before. I was already so wet for him, wet and ready for things I dared not name or acknowledge to myself.

"I love to touch you here," Richard whispered, sliding two long fingers carefully into my wet sex. "You're so hot and wet, Rachel. Can you imagine what it would feel like to have my cock inside you, filling you up, instead of just my fingers?" His fingers mimed the act, pressing gently inside me, thrusting rhythmically as far as he could without taking my virginity.

"Please..." I wanted to close my legs, but I couldn't.

"Please what?" Richard leaned over to look at me, and I found I couldn't meet his eyes. I couldn't look at him while he was touching me so intimately, not without losing what little control I had left.

"I...I thought you were going to kiss me," I whispered at last, not sure what else to say. I could feel my cheeks growing hot even as my body gave him what he demanded. Why couldn't I control myself around him?

"Oh, I am," he reassured me softly. "I'm going to kiss you until you come, Rachel. Come *hard*, just for me."

"I don't --" I began, but he pressed a soft, warm kiss to my lips to silence me. His fingers left me, but even as a protesting moan fell from my lips at the loss of the sweet sensations he had been building inside me, his mouth began to travel down my body. He kissed my breasts again, and the valley between them, and moved lower, sucking and nibbling the soft skin of my trembling stomach, circling my navel with his tongue teasingly until I wanted to scream with frustration.

By now I knew what he intended to do, and yet I still couldn't summon the willpower to stop him. *Just a little while longer*, I told myself. *Just a little bit more, and then I'll make him stop...* When he reached the tender vee between my legs, I knew I had to tell him no. It was wrong to let him do this to me -- wrong to let ourselves go so far.

"Richard..." I tugged at his hair as he bent to kiss me *there*.

He looked up, his pale green eyes full of need.

"Richard, *no*," I said as firmly as I could. But my voice trembled with the effort of making myself say the words. "We can't do this... It's wrong...*dangerous*."

"Just one kiss," he said thickly, his voice rough with desire. "Just one, Rachel. You don't know how long I've wanted to do this, how long I've wanted to taste your sweet, wet pussy."

His words almost took my breath away, and as our eyes locked, my breathing quickened and my pulse thudded in my ears so hard I could barely hear myself think. What he wanted, what he was asking me to let him do, was wrong on so many levels I could barely name them all, even to myself. I couldn't let him do this, could I? Couldn't let him spread open the wet folds of my sex and taste me this way? Such an intimate kiss surely exceeded the boundaries of all decency. But maybe, I thought, trying to justify the act to myself, I could make it a little less wrong somehow. Maybe we could compromise...

"All right," I whispered at last, giving in, but only a little, I told myself. "All right, but just one, Richard. On...on the outside, okay?" I squeezed my legs together as I spoke, pressing my thighs tightly closed to make sure there was no mistake.

"The outside?" He stroked gently over the outer lips of my cunt, crowned with a soft thatch of barely-there blonde curls. I shivered at his touch, feeling the fire wash through me all over again.

"Y -- yes," I managed to say. "Just one kiss on the outside, and that's all."

He bent his head without answering, his breath hot on my exposed sex. He placed his hands, warm and large and somehow comforting, on my inner thighs and began to spread my legs.

"Richard!" I protested, resisting the gesture.

"I can't reach you with your legs locked shut," he said reasonably, stroking my thighs. His touch was gentle and soothing. "If I only get one kiss, I want to be sure to do it right, Rache."

"I...all right, I guess," I whispered at last, giving up my resistance. I felt his hands parting my legs, spreading them wide and then wider as he devoured me with his eyes. I tried to relax and trust him, telling myself it was only one kiss...just one. But the lips of my sex were swollen with need, and as Richard spread my legs, I could feel my cunt parting as well. I was opening for him whether I wanted to or not -- it was as though my body had decided independently of my brain what it needed. What could I do when my own flesh was betraying me this way?

I bit my lip against the protest that wanted to come out as Richard opened my legs fully, exposing me completely to his gaze. The lips of my sex were fully parted as well now, the soft inner folds glistening and my throbbing clit prominently displayed like a pink pearl

for his pleasure. I felt waves of shame and desire sweep over me at the obvious display of how much I needed him -- of how much my body longed for his.

Richard bent his head, and I tried to brace myself for the touch of his mouth, hot and wet, against the parted lips of my naked pussy. What would it feel like to have his tongue explore me? To have him press deep inside me? To feel his kiss on my clit?

But to my surprise, Richard placed a soft, chaste kiss on the springy mound of curls at the apex of my sex without taking advantage of my exposure at all. Then he looked up at me, waiting.

I let out the breath I hadn't known I was holding, feeling a strange mixture of disappointment and relief. Maybe he had changed his mind about wanting to taste me. Maybe he had realized how wrong this was and was willing to give it up... But his next words shattered that half-formed wish completely.

"Look at yourself, Rachel," he said, his voice low and needful. "Look at the way your body responds to mine. Look at the way your pussy opens for me -- so sweet and wet. Your body knows what you need -- that we need each other, that we belong together. Why can't you accept it with your mind as well as your body? Accept that you and I are Amon-kai and that we're right together?"

"Richard, please..." I shook my head and tried to close my legs, but he wouldn't let me.

"You can't think of any reason not to let me give you another kiss, can you?" His voice was low and seductive now, promising things I was both afraid of and wanted desperately.

"Another kiss?" I stopped struggling abruptly.

"On the inside this time." His intense green gaze pinned me down, holding me in place as surely as his hands on my thighs. "You want it, Rachel," he told me softly. "You want it, and you can't deny it. You want me to spread open your pussy and suck your hot little clit into my mouth. You want to feel my tongue stroking in and out of you...tasting you...*fucking* you."

"I..." I shook my head, feeling myself weakening. I fell back on the only thing I could think of. "Just once?" I asked weakly.

"Unless you ask me not to stop," he replied, his eyes still locked to mine. "Unless you want me to keep kissing you, to eat your soft little pussy until you come all over my face."

His hot, dirty words excited me almost more than I could have imagined possible. He was asking for more than permission to taste my pussy -- he was asking for my complete surrender.

I had no words to answer his demands. Instead, I buried my hands in his thick hair and urged him down, showing him what I needed, what I couldn't bring myself to ask for. *It can't hurt to let him just once...just a little*, I told myself. The truth was that I wanted him so badly I was almost beyond reason. Only the thinnest thread of self-control was keeping me from begging him to not only taste me but to fuck me as well.

Richard understood my consent, and he needed no further urging. Dipping his head to the vee between my legs, he spread the lips of my cunt even wider and laid a gentle, open-mouthed kiss on my wet pink interior. I felt the brush of his lips over my clit and then the stroking of his tongue. He tasted me, as he had said he would, laving my trembling flesh with kisses and licks until I could stand it no more and cried out with pleasure.

Richard looked up for a moment, his mouth wet with my juices. "Should I stop now, Rachel? Is that what you want?"

I shook my head, completely out of control. "Please, Richard," I begged him shamelessly. "Please...oh, God, don't stop. *Don't stop.*"

"That's good, that's right," he murmured, stroking along the heated skin of my naked thighs. "That's what I needed to hear. I want you to relax now, Rachel. Relax and let me take you where you need to go."

Once again he was asking for my surrender, for me to give myself up to him completely and utterly, and this time I had no defenses left. "Yes," I whispered, spreading my thighs even wider, offering him my naked, unprotected sex. At that moment I think I would have agreed to anything. His touch on my skin was like a drug -- instantly addicting -- and one I couldn't get enough of.

"That's right, baby," he whispered tenderly, placing another soft, chase kiss on the top of my slit. "Spread your legs for me and let me make you come." Then he bent his head to me again, and again I felt an instant surge of pleasure, of *rightness*, when he touched me. He kissed my aching clit once more and then he pressed lower and entered me with his tongue. I felt him pressing deep inside me, exploring the most secret and forbidden part of my body, gently but with great determination. He fucked me with his tongue, claiming me, owning me in a way no one else ever had. I had never been so utterly vulnerable with a man before, and I reveled in the sensation. I was helpless and naked on the bed, my thighs spread wide with his tongue buried in my tight, wet cunt, and there was nothing I could do about it. Nothing I *wanted* to do about it.

"Richard! Oh, God...Richard!" I moaned wantonly. I pressed my hips up to meet him, offering myself to him shamelessly. I was no longer in control of my own actions, nor did I want to be. I could only react to the pleasure he gave me, the intense sensations he built inside my body until I felt I was going to explode. If only he would press just a little deeper...

It was as though Richard could read my mind -- as though I had spoken the request aloud. I felt his tongue press deeper, harder into me and knew that if it had been his cock entering me instead, I would no longer have been a virgin. At the same time, I felt the broad tip of his thumb pressed directly over my inflamed clit, rubbing with just enough force to send me screaming over the edge of orgasm, feeling like I might die from the overload of pleasure he was giving me.

"Oh, God... Oh, God..." I panted the words, feeling my nipples tighten with the wave of pleasure washing over me. I gasped for breath, literally seeing stars. It was the most

incredible feeling I had ever experienced -- even more intense than when he had touched me before.

"Rachel, you taste so good, baby. So sweet." Richard slid up my body, kissing me gently until he was cradling me in his arms. He parted my lips with his own and fed me the taste of myself on his tongue, letting me know how delicious he thought I was. I kissed him back, still tingling with the aftershocks of my intense orgasm, still willing to give him what he wanted as long as he would just keep touching me.

Richard reached between us, and I heard a low, purring sound as of a zipper coming down. Before I knew it, he slid out of his jeans and was pressed naked and hot against my thighs. I felt the hard, heated shaft of his cock against my inner thigh, not seeking entrance...yet. But it was still undeniably there, ready and waiting for me to give my permission.

"Doesn't this feel right?" Richard whispered in my ear. "To hold each other this way, with nothing between our bodies? No barriers to stop us. I love you so much, Rachel, my Lana-zeel. I've waited for you for so long..."

"Richard," I whispered, forcing myself to make the feeble protest even though I was still aching for his touch. "Richard, we can't. Please."

"Just let me be close to you for a while. Let me feel you against my skin." He nuzzled his face into the side of my neck and kissed me there, sending a shiver down my spine. "Give me a chance to touch you before you say no," he whispered, and there was a note of pleading in his deep voice I didn't feel able to deny.

"How? How do you want to touch me?" I asked him, even as I pulled him close for a soft kiss on the lips. What we were doing felt so wrong and yet so right. My brain was so clouded with need and pleasure that I felt incapable of telling him to stop and get off me at once, which was what I knew I ought to do.

"Like this," he whispered. I felt him shift, and then he was parting the swollen lips of my cunt once more, this time with his cock instead of his tongue. I bit my lip, prepared to tell him to stop if he began to enter me, but he didn't. Instead he slid slowly along the length of my slit, rubbing against my oversensitive clit with his shaft until I gasped aloud with the pleasurable tension.

"Richard," I protested, knowing I shouldn't let him do this. Shouldn't allow him to slide his thick cock against my open, unprotected pussy no matter how incredibly good it felt.

"Just think," he whispered softly in my ear, ignoring my half-hearted protest. "How good it would feel to be joined together right now. How perfect it would be if you let me make love to you, the way we both want to so badly. I could just spread the lips of your sweet little pussy apart and slide my cock all the way into you the way I need to -- the way you need me to. "

As he spoke, I felt him shift again until the broad head of his cock was positioned just at the entrance to my cunt. A sudden spear of panic stabbed through me. He wouldn't really do that, would he? He couldn't -- I couldn't let him!

"Richard," I gasped. "Stop -- *now*. I can't let you do this."

"But you want it -- you need it as much as I do," he whispered in my ear. "We have so many lost years to make up for. Every day that goes by we need each other more." He pressed into me gently, breaching my entrance until just the head of his cock was inside me, opening me, ready to penetrate me completely if only I gave him permission to do it. It was so like the dream I'd had the first night he stayed with me that I bit my lip.

"Please!" I moaned. I wanted to push him away, off me, *out* of me, but I didn't seem to have the strength.

"This is our destiny -- we were bonded as children -- fated to be together. If we hadn't been separated so young, torn away from each other, I would have had you years ago," he whispered. He withdrew the head of his cock and pressed into me again, a little more deeply this time so that another inch of his thickness entered my unprotected cunt. "I would have come to your room at night and touched you, just the way I've been doing every night since I've been here. I would have stroked your breasts and pussy and filled you with my cum, my essence, many times long before I fucked you and bred you. Your body would have been used to mine completely by the first time I took you."

His words seemed to awaken some long-ago memory of a fight I'd heard my parents have back in the old Victorian mansion we'd lived in as children.

"That's why," I murmured, still fighting to get control of myself. "That's why she took me away from you -- she knew that you'd do that. Do what you're doing now."

"I used to lie awake at night dreaming of this," he told me in a deep, ragged voice. "Wondering where you were, imagining how sweet it would be to take you for the first time, to fill you with my cock and claim you for my own. Entirely my own."

He pulled out once more and fucked into me again, again a little more deeply. I could feel at least three thick inches of his cock sliding into me now, filling me, stretching me to the limit and beyond, but he was being so careful that the pleasure I felt far outweighed the pain. In fact, I realized the pleasure clouded my brain so that I could barely think -- barely protest what he was doing to me. I could only imagine the effort it was costing him not to take me completely.

"Richard," I begged breathlessly, "Please..."

"I'm only giving you what we both need," he told me softly, still sliding into me, a little deeper with every thrust. "It feels so good inside you, Rachel. I love you so much. Can you honestly say it doesn't feel good to you, right to you, to have me here?" As he spoke, I felt the broad head of his cock press deep into me, right up against my virgin barrier. One more thrust and he would be buried inside me irrevocably. If I didn't stop him now, there would



be no stopping any of it. Richard would fuck me and come in me, claiming me as his own forever.

"Richard," I whispered, stilling his motion with my hand on his hip. "Why? I...I think I understand why I was taken away from you, but I don't understand why you feel you need this so badly. What are you not telling me?"

"There's nothing you need to know right now except how much I love you. How much I need you. Need to make love to you. Need to come in you, Rachel," he whispered hoarsely with barely contained passion.

His words so exactly mirrored my thoughts, and my body was on fire for his touch. It was hard to refute what he said. It wasn't an argument I could win, and so I had to stop arguing and leave before it was too late. "Please," I said, struggling against him to get up, to keep him from taking that final step. "I don't...I can't..."

"Give me one reason," he said, holding me down effortlessly but not thrusting any deeper into my wet, open pussy. "You can't think of a reason not to join with me here and now. Not to give yourself to me totally." He kissed me softly on the lips. "Give yourself to me, Rachel. Let me take you where we both need to go."

"There's..." I shook my head, trying to think past the rushing in my ears. It seemed I had been in a state of overwhelming arousal for hours. "What about Charles?" I said, finally finding my voice.

Richard shook his head. "Not good enough. Your body doesn't respond to him the way it responds for me, and you know it. You don't ache for him in every fiber of your being the way you and I ache for each other."

I clenched my fingers against the bedspread, trying not to give in. "Mother warned me about you," I said at last. "She told me to never see you again and I don't think this was the only reason. There's something you're not telling me, Richard," I accused.

"Her wants were not your wants, and deep down she knew it was wrong to separate us," he whispered softly. "You know that, Rachel."

I let out a long, trembling breath and shook my head. "You're my brother," I said at last. "I'm sorry, Richard, but that's what it really comes down to. Blood or not, we were raised as siblings. I need you to stop this now. I need you to get off of me. To get out of me. Please understand I can't...can't let my own brother fuck me. I just can't."

"We're not truly siblings, but we are of the same breed -- the Amon-kai," he countered. "And blood is thicker than water, Rachel. There's a bond between us that can never be severed. You'll never be satisfied until you let me in, until you give yourself to me completely. Only when you feel my cock buried deep in your willing pussy and my essence filling your womb will you find peace. One day you'll understand that."

"But not today. Not now. *Please*, Richard." I could feel the hot tears welling in my eyes. I just couldn't do it -- couldn't let him go through with it. "Don't do this to me," I told him,

my fear overwhelming my pleasure at last and letting me think clearly. "I love you, Richard, but there are some things I can't forgive. Don't...don't rape me."

My words had an immediate effect on him. He pulled out of me abruptly, leaving me intact, and rolled to one side, breathing heavily with one arm over his eyes. I curled myself into a ball and pulled the edge of the bedspread over me to hide my nakedness.

"I'm sorry, Richard," I said, my throat thick with tears. "But I can't...we can't let ourselves do this. It's...it's wrong in so many ways. I think we should try to forget this happened and...and just go on like before."

"Just pretend I didn't almost claim you?" he asked bitterly, lifting his arm to look me in the eyes. "Pretend my cock wasn't just halfway buried in your cunt? I suppose next you'll say we should go out on that ridiculous date your fiancé has planned tomorrow night and pretend we give a damn about Charles and his little cousin."

"I *do* give a damn about Charles," I said, but my voice didn't sound as strong as I wanted it to. "And..." I sat up, being careful to keep the bedspread wrapped around me. "... I think we should go out. We need to do something normal. I love you, Richard, but we've gotten too wrapped up in each other since you came back into my life. We need to get out and see that there are other people in the world."

Richard's face looked haggard -- the face of a lost soul. "You don't understand. Even now, you don't understand. There's never going to be anyone else in the world for me besides you," he whispered in a low, wounded voice.

"Richard," I reminded him as gently as I could. "I can never be yours. I'm engaged to another man, and besides, I'm your *sister*."

"My sister in nothing but name," he said bitterly. "But fine. You want to go out and spend time with other people, we'll go. I'll even do my damndest to show Charles's cousin a good time. I can be very charming when I want to be."

"So I've noticed," I said quietly.

Richard got off the bed, careless of his nudity. I had to look away from his muscular body because of the lust the sight kindled in my belly.

"You'll see," he said. "The bond that was formed when we were children is already too strong to break. Nothing but death can separate us now, and I promise you, by the end of the evening, we'll both be wishing we *were* dead. It's going to be painful, in more ways than one."

## Chapter Ten

“So, Charles tells us you’re an actress.” Richard leaned forward and put an arm around the back of Ursula’s chair, smiling charmingly. He was dressed impeccably in a dark charcoal suit and a bottle-green tie that brought out his eyes. We were sitting, Charles and I on one side and Richard and Charles’s cousin, Ursula on the other, at a small rectangular table draped with spotless white linen in the imposing gold and scarlet-draped dining room at Bern’s.

“I can tell just by looking at you that the camera must love you,” Richard continued. Somehow he managed to make the compliment sound sincere and to look truly interested in his date’s vocation.

Ursula blushed becomingly, obviously overcome by my adopted brother’s charm. “Well, I’ve just had a few bit parts here and there,” she murmured modestly. She was a natural redhead with a creamy complexion and a stunning figure that looked poured into the little black dress she was wearing. Beside her, I felt frumpy and overdressed in the slinky, pale green silk dress that usually made me feel so sexy and sleek. Even the Jimmy Choos Charles had bought me that exactly matched the dress didn’t help. Besides, they hurt my feet.

“Ursula had a speaking part in *Faces in the Mirror*,” Charles chimed in helpfully.

“Oh, yes, I loved that movie. You were...” Richard snapped his fingers, “You were the waitress, weren’t you? The one with the mentally-challenged brother and the cocaine habit?”

“Yes, that was me.” Ursula blushed again and smiled, clearly pleased.

“Well, that was an amazing performance.” Richard smiled at her and casually reached out to brush a lock of silky red hair out of her eyes. I felt the burn of jealousy all the way down to my fingertips when his well-shaped hand lingered just a little too long on her pale

skin. "Tell me," he said. "What do you think your character's motivation was when she grabbed the gun?"

"I thought about that," Ursula said eagerly. "I mean, I think she was frightened -- terrified, actually. I had to put myself into her shoes when I did that -- I literally had to *scare* myself."

She was scaring *me* for sure, but Richard continued to hang on her every word attentively, as though she were the only woman in the room. I wanted to pull her silky red hair out by the roots, but I restrained myself and crushed the impulse. What was wrong with me tonight?

Charles leaned closer to me and whispered in my ear, "Well, those two seem to be getting along famously. I think we've got a match." He patted my knee under the long, white linen tablecloth, making me flinch.

"Uh, yeah," I made myself say, trying to inch away from him a little bit. For some reason, I didn't want to be near him tonight, and it wasn't just that I had gotten used to being near Richard, either, or so I told myself. In fact, it had nothing to do with Richard's predictions of doom if we tried to see other people. It was just that... I wasn't in a very touchy mood tonight. Wasn't in the mood to be pawed at.

Just then the waiter, dressed in black pants and a spotless white jacket, came to take our order. Bern's is one of those once-a-year places where you go for your anniversary or where you take a major client if you want to impress them and you have money to burn. Their menu is full of aged steaks, ultra-fresh exotic seafood, and they have something close to seven thousand selections on their wine list. They even have a magnum of wine that belonged to Napoleon that costs as much as a luxury car. It's been on the menu for years. Charles, who was a wine connoisseur, speculated about it every time we went.

Generally I loved going to Bern's, although I couldn't help secretly thinking that it was an extravagant waste of money. I mean, the restaurant could talk about specially raised, organically fed cows, aged meat, and exotic sauces all they wanted to, but they still, in my opinion, couldn't make a steak good enough to charge a hundred dollars for it. Money was no object to Charles, however, and I stared blindly at the menu, trying not to notice Richard's flirtation with Ursula as he ordered.

"Let's see now..." Charles mused. "I think I'll have the special chateaubriand with the pinot noir reduction, a Hawaiian red salt baked Okinawa sweet potato, and the grilled asparagus au poivre on the side." He looked up at me, one eyebrow quirked. "Darling, what would you like?"

"I'll have the filet mignon, extra rare," I said, trying to sound interested in what I was ordering.

"Really?" Charles looked surprised. "But you never order red meat, and you certainly never eat anything rare." He tsked disapprovingly. "What about your usual charcoal-grilled salmon paillard salad, darling?"

"I'm not in a salad mood tonight," I snapped, trying not to notice the way Richard whispered something into Ursula's little pink shell of an ear that made her giggle. Then I looked apologetically at Charles. "I mean...that salad is so huge, and I'm saving my appetite for dessert," I told him. "You know how I love the Bananas Foster here." Another nice thing about Bern's is that they have a whole separate dessert room with a baby grand piano and a piano player who takes requests so you can dance after you've finished your ridiculously expensive meal. Not that I was interested in flaming bananas or romantic dancing at the moment.

"Of course." Charles smiled at me forgivingly and nodded at the waiter. "My bride-to-be always eats like a bird."

"Actually, she's got a good appetite -- if you know what to feed her," Richard said, interrupting his attentions to Ursula for a moment. "Isn't that right, *sis*?"

"Oh?" Charles looked at me for confirmation. "Have you two been dining out a lot these past few weeks?"

"Not at all." I took a sip of sauvignon to cover my confusion. "Actually, Richard has been cooking for me. He's the next best thing to a gourmet chef."

"What do you mean the *next* best thing?" Richard grinned at me, pulling an unwilling smile to my lips as well.

"All right -- he *is* a gourmet chef," I said, laughing a little.

"And of course you would know." Richard's voice was deep and seductive now that he was focusing on me instead of his date. "You taste excellent -- or, excuse me, I meant you have excellent taste, Rachel."

Unbidden, the image of him laying me on the bed and kissing me all over, of him *tasting* me, rose to the forefront of my mind, and I felt myself blushing helplessly. Richard looked into my eyes, and I knew that he somehow knew what I was thinking. A slow, sensual smile curved the corners of his mouth, and the room seemed to narrow down to just him and me. I could feel my heart pounding against my ribs, and my mouth was suddenly dry. Damn him -- how could he do this to me and in front of Charles, of all people?

"Well, of course Rachel has excellent taste," my fiancé said, breaking the sudden tension with a forced laugh. "I knew that the moment she agreed to marry me." He squeezed my knee under the tablecloth, and I pushed his hand away without thinking. Ursula joined in with a nervous titter, and the strange mood that had settled over the table was broken, at least for a moment.

After that brief exchange, Richard went back to pretending that Ursula was the love of his life, and Charles began to natter on about our upcoming wedding and the honeymoon to follow. We had decided, or rather, *he* had decided, that we would fly to Paris and tour Europe for two weeks, which was all the time I could get off from the DA's office. I would rather have taken a cruise to Alaska and hiked through the wilderness, observing the wildlife, but Charles had vetoed that out of hand. He wasn't a very outdoorsy kind of person

and wouldn't even go on a picnic unless there was a domestic along to serve him his chilled champagne and caviar.

As the night wore on, I found myself more and more irritated by my fiancé. Nothing he said seemed to make an impression on my brain, and I had to keep asking him to repeat himself, which he did in his high, nasal voice that sounded like an annoying gnat buzzing around my ear. Also, he kept trying to grab my thigh under the tablecloth. This was something I would have put up with in the past, but tonight I felt like I might take my steak knife to his fingers if he tried it one more time. Something about his touch repelled me, all of a sudden. Having his cold, slimy fingers creeping up my inner thigh was like being crawled over by slugs, and I simply couldn't tolerate it.

Across from us, apparently focused on nothing but each other sat Richard and Ursula, staring dreamily into each other's eyes. If they had been on one of those reality TV dating shows, the studio audience would have voted for them to go out on a second date for sure -- they practically had *love connection* stamped on their foreheads.

I knew that Richard was just trying to make me jealous and I shouldn't rise to the bait, but I couldn't seem to help myself. By the time we were all slow dancing, I with Charles and Richard with Ursula, in the dimly lit dessert room after a double order of Bananas Foster, I felt like I might start to scream. Just the sight of him, holding Ursula's slender form close and whispering in her ear, while Charles put his slimy, reptilian hands all over me as we swayed to the music made me feel sick.

As I moved my fiancé's hands from my ass to my waist for what felt like the fortieth time, I realized that it wasn't an exaggeration. I was literally, physically ill and feeling more nauseated by the minute. I wasn't sure if it was the sight of Richard with another woman or the feel of Charles's hands on me or a combination of the two, but I suddenly thought I might throw up or faint at any moment.

"Darling?" I heard Charles ask. "Are you all right? You're looking frightfully pale."

"I'm --" I started to say.

Richard's familiar, deep voice said, "May I cut in?"

"I think she's ill." Charles looked at him doubtfully.

"Nothing a little dance with her big brother won't cure," Richard said easily. He took my hand, and Charles relinquished his grip on me with rather poor grace. Instantly, I began to feel better.

"Dearest?" My fiancé was still hovering around uncertainly as Richard's large warm hand settled at my lower back and we began to sway to the music. My brother's touch on my skin seemed to revive me in some strange way -- I felt like a houseplant that had just been watered after a long dry spell, and the slick fist of nausea that had been gripping the pit of my stomach dissipated as though it had never been.

"I'm fine, Charles," I said, trying to smile at him. "Go dance with Ursula for a while -- you don't want her to feel you're neglecting her."

"Oh, well, of course. Just let me know if you need anything." He gave a forced laugh and edged away to where his cousin waited. Ursula looked at Richard with a mixture of confusion and yearning as Charles took her in his arms to dance.

"Feeling better?" Richard murmured in my ear. His warm breath on the side of my neck made me shiver. But now that my stomach had stopped rolling, my temper picked up speed.

"I don't know what you're trying to prove," I hissed in his ear. "But I don't appreciate it."

"I'm not *trying* to prove anything -- I've already proved it," he said, pulling me closer. "Proved that we need each other -- that there is no one else in the entire world for either one of us."

"That's bullshit," I said, trying to make some space between us. "Don't hold me so close -- it doesn't look right."

"But it feels right, doesn't it?" He ran a caressing hand down my bare arm, making me shiver. Why was it that his touch did this to me, made me feel like an electrical storm was brewing just under my skin, like lightning might strike wherever he kissed me? Not that I wanted him to kiss me -- it was completely wrong, and besides, Charles watched us over Ursula's shoulder as they danced.

"It doesn't matter how it feels," I told him, trying to look like we were just making polite conversation. "It's *wrong*, Richard."

"Why?" he insisted. "Because we were raised as siblings? Or because of your precious fiancé?"

"Charles is a big part of my life, which is more than I can say for you," I retorted angrily.

"Rachel," he said softly. "I would have been a bigger part of your life if I could've. If I'd been able to find you sooner. Don't you know that?"

The love I saw in the depths of his pale green eyes made me feel defensive and angry. What right had he to remind me that he had never given up searching for me, even though I had given up searching for him? And what was he hiding from me? There had to be more to it than the legend of the Amon-kai. Why did he need me so badly, and why did I feel that I needed him like my next breath now that we had found each other again? It was almost like I was *addicted* to him in some sick way. The thought scared me more than I cared to admit.

"It doesn't matter," I told him stubbornly. "Charles is my fiancé, and he's been there for me for the past two years --"

"And he'll be there in the next two weeks, waiting for you to give him what he wants in bed as soon as you're married," Richard interrupted me, a dangerous glint in his eyes. "Are

you ready for that, Rachel? Ready to give him everything he wants -- to give him your body, your soul, your heart?"

I felt my stomach roll at the image his words inspired -- Charles waiting in bed for me on our honeymoon night, eager to collect on the emotional debt I'd been accruing for the past two years. Every single time I had told him no or put him off, telling him to wait until we were married flashed before my eyes. I realized it wouldn't matter if we spent our honeymoon in Paris or Alaska, because I wasn't likely to see anything except the bedroom ceiling for the entire two weeks. I thought of Charles on top of me, taking me, penetrating me...and I felt like I might be getting sick all over again.

But I knew my reaction was wrong. The idea of making love to the man who was soon to be my husband ought to make me feel good. Instead, I felt like I was a contestant on one of those TV reality shows where they put you in a clear Plexiglas tub and dumped spiders or snakes or pig entrails all over you. Words like "slimy," "skin-crawling," and "horrible" shouldn't be associated with the man I told myself I loved. What was wrong with me?

"Is that what you really want?" Richard asked me, obviously reading my emotions on my face.

"Yes," I said stubbornly, despite the way my *filet mignon* wanted to rise at the thought of Charles touching me, taking me the way Richard almost had the night before. It *was* what I wanted -- or what I ought to want, anyway. What I *shouldn't* want was to make love with Richard, and yet my body felt warm and willing whenever he touched me. Felt ready to melt with desire the moment I looked in his slanting green eyes. How had he done this to me? Poisoned me against the touch of any other man? Ruined me for anyone but him?

"Liar," Richard whispered in my ear, and it was too much. I tore myself away from his arms and stalked toward the graceful archway that led from the dessert room to the rest of the restaurant. Charles was instantly by my side.

"Darling, are you quite well?" he asked, attempting to take my elbow and guide me back to the table.

"I'm fine," I said, evading his touch as I had been all night. "Perfectly fine. I just want a little fresh air, that's all."

"I'll come with you." Charles started to get his coat.

"No," I almost shouted. Then, forcing myself to be calm, I said, "I mean, I just need a little alone time, that's all. Give me a few minutes, all right?"

"Well, if you're certain..." He looked at me doubtfully, as though I was a house pet that might wander off if he let me outside.

My calm broke. "I said I'm *fine*, Charles. Now, will you please give me one goddamn solitary minute of peace?" I bit out. I turned from the petulant, pouting expression my outburst provoked and headed for the exit. If I didn't get a moment alone, without my



clinging fiancé on one hand and my seductive, secretive older brother on the other, I was going to lose it completely and start screaming.

## Chapter Eleven

Outside it was dark and chilly and silent because Bern's takes up almost an entire block by itself, and there aren't any other businesses around it. I took some deep breaths of the cool night air and began to calm down. I felt like I'd just left a room where the atmosphere was tinged with a low-grade poison gas, and I needed to clear my lungs of it before I could feel normal again. Not that I knew what normal felt like anymore.

Bern's is located on the far end of South Howard -- the SoHo district, trendy South Tampa residents call it. I knew that if I took a left I'd hit Bayshore Boulevard and from there it was only a few blocks to Charles's house. But more importantly, there was a long strip of sand running the length of Bayshore that was as close to a beach as you could get on this end of town. I decided that what I really wanted was a long walk beside the water, digging my toes into the sand and smelling the cool, salty air of the bay. I needed to clear my head away from both Richard and Charles and re-evaluate where my life was headed.

I thought about telling Charles where I was going, but I was a big girl, after all, and it wasn't like I needed his permission. As for Richard, let him wonder for a while. It might do my annoying brother some good to not be so sure of me. He and Charles both seemed to think they knew exactly what was right for me, and I was beginning to feel like a pawn in a badly played game of chess. I'd been on my own before, and I could take care of myself.

I didn't want to walk on the main road because of traffic, so I turned down a side street that was still headed in the direction of the bay. This part of South Tampa was more residential, and the houses on either side of the street I walked on would sell in the millions, easily. They were stately old homes, surrounded by carefully landscaped lawns and huge, ancient trees that cast thick, black shadows in my path. It was still a good two weeks until the next full moon, and the few streetlights didn't do much to illuminate my way, not that I needed them to since I've always had great night vision. The expensive Jimmy Choo heels

Charles had bought me were killing my arches, and I was just thinking of taking them off and walking barefoot when I realized I was being followed.

They must have been behind me for a few blocks at least, creeping up quietly, and I hadn't noticed because I was so caught up in my own thoughts. I might have been taken completely by surprise, but one of them stumbled and cursed in the darkness. When I turned my head, I saw two black shapes in the gloom behind me. Two *big* black shapes.

I'm a prosecutor, so the first thing I thought of was the rape/murder case I'd worked on with Detective Genevieve Marks a few months before. A girl had been found in one of the dumpsters behind a downtown restaurant with her throat slit and evidence of multiple sexual assaults. The PD had gotten one of the perpetrators and we had managed to put him away, but they were pretty certain there had been more than one to start with. Genevieve had speculated to me that there might have been as many as three attackers, but the man we were prosecuting wouldn't give up any other names.

So the minute I saw the two men following me, my mind jumped to the first scary conclusion it could find. I was sure the friends of the man I had put away were after me, intent on paying me back. My heart started trip-hammering in my chest, and my palms went cold and clammy. My mouth felt like I had tried to swallow a handful of cotton balls.

"Shit," one of them said in a deep, grating voice. "She saw us."

"Get 'er!" the second man commanded in a nasal tone.

I kicked off the Jimmy Choos and ran.

I thought of going up to one of the mansions that lined the street and pounding on the door, but most of the windows were dark. By the time I'd roused someone out of bed to come to my aid, the two men would have gotten to me and dragged me off to do who knew what horrible things to me. My only chance was to keep running until I got to Bayshore, and maybe I could flag down a car.

I could hear the men behind me gaining on me -- no surprise since they weren't running barefoot over sharp gravel the way I was. I needed to get off the road. To my right was a small park surrounded by a wrought iron fence. It wasn't the kind of place you took your kids because there were no swings or teeter-totters. It was just a lot of ornamental plants and carved stone benches that were dedicated to different people, probably by old South Tampa residents who wanted their relatives memorialized. I didn't care about any of that, though. I thought that I could make better time on the lush, green grass than on the street. Maybe I could even lose the two men pursuing me in the decorative arrangements of trees and bushes.

I zigged right and ran under the ornamental wrought iron arch that served as a front gate of the park with the two men right behind me. I could hear at least one of the men puffing and blowing, which gave me hope that I could outrun them. How close were they? I had to look. I whipped my head back around to catch a glimpse of them, which turned out to

be a mistake. My foot caught on a flowering shrub, and the next thing I knew I was flat on my face, sprawled in the grass that had looked so inviting moments before.

I tried to scramble up, but they were already all over me. Rough hands pinned my arms behind my back, and dragged me to my feet. I opened my mouth to scream, but a large, beefy palm slapped over my lips before I could get out so much as a peep.

"Don't think so, girly," the man with the grating voice panted. He was a balding guy, built like a Mack truck, with a gut to match. It was his palm that was covering my face, and I could smell cigarette smoke on his skin. No doubt that had something to do with the grating voice and shortness of breath. At the moment, however, I was more concerned with my health than his.

"She's kinda pretty." My other assailant was a thin, rat-faced guy who looked considerably younger than his counterpart.

"Shut up and do it." The older man grabbed my hair and yanked my head back, baring my throat. "Make it look good -- Mister Andretti says he wants to send this guy a message."

So this had nothing to do with the murder/rapist I had put away -- it was something worse. My mind raced. *Andretti -- as in Momo "the shark" Andretti?* What would a mob boss want with a peon ADA like me, and what guy were they teaching a lesson to? Then I saw the silvery glint of a knife in the rat-faced guy's hand and knew what the older man meant by "do it."

My heart, which had been beating double-time up until then, started beating triple-time instead, until I felt like it might burst right out of my chest. These men were going to kill me -- I had to get away! I bit down hard on the beefy palm over my mouth and kicked at the same time, catching the skinny, rat-faced guy in the lower shin. He went down hard, the knife still clutched in his hand.

This would have worked out fine if the guy holding me would have let go when I bit him. But though the nauseating, coppery-sweet taste of fresh blood filled my mouth, he kept a firm hold on my hair, and I couldn't get loose. He did yank his hurt hand away, however, and I was able to scream for help. If I could just get someone's attention, I was sure they would call the police. This wasn't the kind of neighborhood where blood-curdling screams were ignored, and the PD is always quick to respond to a disturbance in the more affluent areas of town.

"Shaddap," Gravel Voice growled. He twisted his fist in my hair and yanked my head around so fast, it was a miracle he didn't break my neck. "Keep your mouth closed, or this is gonna go a lot harder than it has to," he warned me. I could feel the cold steel of his knife blade at the side of my neck. "We got orders to do this, and it can go real fast or real slow, if you know what I mean."

"*Bitch.*" Rat Face got to his feet, rubbing his shin. "I'm gonna fuck 'er up," he told Gravel Voice.

"Wait a minute," I babbled, my lawyer's instinct taking over the moment I had my mouth free. "I'm sure we can work something out here. I think you gentlemen have me mistaken for someone else. I've never done anything to make Mister, uh, your boss come after me, and I don't know anybody who has either."

"You know a guy named Richard Kemet?" Gravel Voice asked me skeptically.

"Well...yes," I admitted. "He's my brother. But he doesn't even live here. He's only been in town a few weeks, so there must be some mistake."

"No mistake, bitch," Rat face growled. "Your precious brother was here long enough to kill one of Mister Andretti's trusted associates, and he wants to return the favor."

"By killing me?" I said, trying to keep my voice calm. "Gentlemen, I'm tied to the district attorney's office. I really think you ought to rethink this. I mean --"

"Wait a minute," Rat Face interrupted me. He grabbed me by the shoulder and spun me around, studying my face in the dim light. "Hey, I know you! You're the bitch lawyer that put me away the first time I ever came up on charges." He looked at Gravel Voice. "I was just a kid -- but she got 'em to try me as an adult. Got me sent up the river." He frowned back down at me. "That was some hard time I did, bitch. Guess I know who to blame for that."

"All right now --" Gravel Voice started, but the younger man cut him off.

"I remember wonderin' how such a fuckin' cunt could look like such a sweet piece of ass. Promised myself that if I ever got the chance I'd do you good."

I felt my entire body go cold all over. Great, I had just upped the ante from getting my throat cut to being raped and *then* getting my throat cut. I was really batting a thousand tonight.

"Hold her," Rat Face said to his companion, rage twisting his narrow features. "I'm gonna enjoy this."

"Not half as much as you're going to enjoy *this*," said a new voice, behind him. It was vaguely familiar and I felt like I ought to know it, but the tone was so deep it was nearly a growl. It sounded like a wolf or a lion that had somehow learned to speak.

"What the fuck?" Rat Face whipped his head around just as a tall figure appeared behind him. Again the shape was vaguely familiar, and as it came closer, my excellent night vision asserted itself. Richard -- it was Richard, come to save me! I felt a massive flood of relief, but it didn't last for long. For this was Richard as I had never seen him before.

He looked about ten feet tall, for one thing, and I didn't think all of that was my perspective looking up at him from the ground. He was bigger, his shoulders broader. Somehow he had grown. His eyes -- our eyes -- the eyes of the Amon-kai, glowed with pale fire in the night, and when he parted his lips to speak, I saw that his teeth were no longer the straight, even white rows I had grown used to seeing. They were long and curving now, horribly sharp and ready to tear flesh and spill blood. I had seen teeth like that on nature

programs when they showed the lions of the Serengeti yawning lazily in the noonday heat. Predator's teeth.

"Let her go," Richard said, in his new, strange voice, and my attackers weren't the only ones that shrank away from him. I drew away too. There was something wrong here -- something dreadfully wrong. My mother had tried to warn me, but I had refused to listen. There was more to Richard than met the eye. Much more.

Gravel Voice was the first to break the silence that fell after Richard made his demand. He was the older and presumably more experienced of the two, and I had an idea he didn't let much of anything rattle him. Just because the man he had been sent to warn turned into some kind of animalistic monster was no reason for him not to do his job.

"You Richard Kemet?" he asked in a reasonable, "hey, it's just business, don't take it personal," tone of voice.

"I am," Richard said, or rather, growled. "And the woman you are currently touching is *mine*. I suggest you take your hands off her now, if you want to leave here with your miserable lives."

"Sorry, buddy, we can't do that," Gravel Voice continued in that same maddening, reasonable tone. "See, you killed an associate of Mister Andretti, who just happens to be a very prominent citizen of this fair city. I'm here on behalf of Mister Andretti as a warning and a lesson to you."

"But Richard didn't kill Chulo," I gasped, despite the sharp silver tip of the knife pressed against my throat. "He didn't --"

"If you're talking about the pimp," Richard interrupted me, "He was scum. He was beating one of the girls in that alley for no good reason. I took great pleasure in ripping out his throat."

"*Richard!*" I squeaked. "You said you didn't. You said it was dark, and you didn't know he was even there. How could you?" As I spoke the questions, I felt like the worst kind of fool. Of course he'd been able to see in the dark alley -- he had night vision every bit as good as my own. Amon-kai vision. The whole thing had been a lie from start to finish, and I had been so eager to see him again, so eager to reconnect, that I swallowed it whole and begged for seconds.

"I'm sorry, Rachel." For a moment the pale green fire of his eyes rested on me. "I know there were lies and half-truths between us, but after tonight there will be no more."

"After tonight there ain't gonna be no more of either one of you," Rat Face snarled. Apparently, his companion's courage had bolstered his own. Too late, I saw that he had pulled a gun, which he waved menacingly at Richard. "Back down, wolf man. I don't know what the hell you are, an' I don't give a shit either. Mister Andretti says the girl gets it, so the girl's gonna get it."

With an inhuman roar, Richard launched himself at the man. I heard the muffled roar and saw the muzzle flash at the same instant. The gun was pointed right at Richard's chest.

I screamed, expecting his big form to crumple to the ground, but the bullet didn't appear to faze Richard at all. Could Rat Face have missed? He had been no more than two feet away -- impossible to miss at such close range.

Whether the bullet hit or missed, it didn't stop Richard from his intended target. He grabbed Rat Face by his narrow shoulders, and then I saw something that I knew would haunt my dreams for years to come. Those long, sharp teeth closed over the vulnerable front of the young thug's neck. Then, with a sound like someone tearing rotten linen, Richard ripped out his throat.

The gout of blood from Rat Face's tattered flesh was black in the dim light, and I heard Gravel Voice behind me mutter, "Holy Mary, mother of God," in a low, trembling voice. All his reasonable "this is just business" attitude seemed to have deserted him the moment he saw his buddy get slaughtered. I could feel the sharp tip of the knife trembling against the side of my neck, and then Richard dropped the still twitching corpse of Rat Face to the ground and turned to face us.

"*Let. Her. Go.*" His face covered in blood, his eyes shone out from the mask of crimson like the eyes of a demon. I felt the knife drop away from my neck, and then Gravel Voice scrambled backward, away from me.

"Okay, you got it, buddy. Swear to God, we didn't mean no harm. It was just business, all right? Nothin' personal. We was just followin' orders."

"Oh, it's personal, all right." Richard advanced, stepping over the fallen body of the man he'd murdered casually, as though he was stepping over a sack of garbage in the alley. He lunged at Gravel Voice, and I threw myself to one side. I didn't want to see the bloody spectacle he was capable of a second time that night.

He pounced on my other attacker, and they rolled in the grass. I didn't stay to watch. I got up and ran, putting as much distance between myself and the slaughter going on behind me as possible.

"Rachel? *Rachel?*" The deep, inhuman voice barely recognizable as Richard's penetrated my consciousness, but I just kept on running. I didn't want to see. I didn't want to know. I reached the road and kept on going.

With every slap of my bare feet on the pavement, I seemed to hear my mother's voice inside my head, keeping time to the rhythm of my feet. "You must never see him again. Never see your brother again. Never. Never again."

## Chapter Twelve

The moment I got home -- via taxi; I couldn't face Richard or the simpering Ursula again -- I stepped in the door, slammed it, and locked it behind me. I used the dead bolt too so Richard's key would be useless. Then I went from room to room, methodically locking the windows and the doors, making sure not the slightest crack remained to let in the green-eyed demon I had seen in the tiny park not an hour before. Then I went around a second time, double checking, and then a third, obsessively inspecting to make sure I hadn't missed anything. Making sure that everything was locked down and secure.

Certain at last that I was safe, I went into the bedroom and began to strip off the grass-stained, pale green silk gown. The Jimmy Choos were long gone, lost somewhere on the streets of South Tampa.

I was out of my strapless bra and about to take off the green silk panties that matched my dress when a deep, horribly familiar voice behind me said, "Hello, Rachel."

I turned, clutching my arms to my breasts, my heart hammering against my ribs. Richard sprawled casually on his side across the bed. He still wore the charcoal suit he'd had on earlier, but it was rumpled and bloodstained. He grinned, showing teeth that had gone back to normal, but his eyes still blazed unnaturally bright, reminding me of what he had become. Of what he still was. A monster. A stranger.

"Richard!" I backed away from him, feeling the icy fist of fear clutch at my throat. "What...what do you want?" I asked in a voice that shook more than I wanted it to.

"The same thing I've always wanted." He rose from the bed and came toward me. "You."

I backed up until I felt my dresser hit the back of my thighs. *Trapped!* I felt my pulse skittering in my throat like a small, frightened animal. Would he kill me the same way he'd killed Rat Face in the park? Or would he make it slow and painful?



Richard frowned at me as I backed away. He took another step toward me, a look of concern on his dark face.

"Stop!" I held out a hand that trembled so much I had to put it down. "Stay...stay away from me," I said, forcing the words out past numb lips. Charles...Genevieve...everyone who had warned me about him had been right, but I had been too bullheaded to see it. Now I would die for my stubbornness, I was sure.

"Rache?" Richard looked at me as though I was crazy. "What's wrong with you? It's only me -- Richard."

"Only you. Only *you*?" I laughed, a high hysterical sound that frightened me. I had to get hold of myself! I took a deep breath. "Which Richard are you talking about?" I asked in a calmer tone. "The loving older brother who tracked me down to be with me after all these years? Or the...the animal I just saw rip a man's throat to bloody rags in the park? Which is it, Richard? Which one?"

His darkly handsome face took on a haggard look. "Both," he said heavily. "They're both me, Rachel. But I killed that man to save you. Surely you can understand that. Look." He stripped off his jacket and shirt rapidly, revealing powerful shoulders and the muscular planes of his chest. On his right side, just below the flat copper disk of his nipple was a bloody, puckered hole. A bullet hole, I realized. So the gunshot hadn't missed him after all. And yet, he didn't seem to be in distress from the wound. Didn't seem to have a collapsed lung or internal bleeding. Then again, what did I know about internal bleeding? I was a lawyer, not an MD.

"You have to understand," he said again.

"All I understand is that I saw you turn into...into some kind of monster," I said. As I spoke, anger overcame my fear, and I stood up straighter, my voice gaining strength. "And that man wouldn't have been trying to kill me in the first place if you hadn't killed that pimp -- Chulo Martinez -- and pissed off Momo 'the shark' Andretti. They were trying to make an example of me tonight -- all because of you."

"You don't have to worry about that, about them coming after you anymore. I took care of it. Please, Rachel..." He put out a hand to me, as though to touch my bare shoulder. I pulled away from him.

"Don't touch me," I said sharply. "And don't lie to me anymore either. You keep asking me to understand. What do I have to understand, Richard? That you came to town, murdered a pimp, and lied to me about it? That you got *me* to lie, too? I told Genevieve Marks that there was no way you could've killed Chulo. I got her to release you into my custody. I convinced her to release a monster."

"I'm not a monster," he said, but there was doubt in his voice. Doubt and self-loathing. "At least, I don't have to be anymore. Not if you'll help me."

"What do you want me to do?" I spat. "Lie for you some more?"

"No." He took another step forward, trapping me between the dresser and his big body. I could feel his heat like fire radiating against my skin, could smell his spicy, masculine fragrance as I did every time I was with him. The scent of the Amon-kai. "No, Rachel," he said. "Just touch me. Be with me. Love me, and let me love you. That's all I ask -- all I've ever wanted."

I looked at him and couldn't hide the loathing and fear in my eyes. "Are you crazy? Richard, have you been paying any attention to who I am and what I do the last couple of weeks? I'm a prosecutor -- I put people like you away."

"People like me don't exist outside of fairy tales and nightmares," he said, leaning down to look into my eyes. "Except for you, Rachel. We're the only two -- the only two that I know of, anyway. Please, can't you see I need you by my side?"

"I can see you need serious help," I said. "Now get away from me."

"No." He leaned against the dresser, putting his hands on either side of me to block my escape. "This is what I wanted to avoid. This is what I've been hiding from you, Rachel. My other nature -- the dark face of the brethren of the Amon-kai. And had I been successful in seducing you, you never would have had to see it at all."

"What the hell does it matter if I let you fuck me or not?" I shouted in his face. "It wouldn't change the fact that you killed a man and lied about it. It wouldn't change the fact that you're a monster."

"I've killed many, many men, dear little sister," he said, his voice a soft, menacing growl. "And with every one I wanted you more. With every one I redoubled my efforts to find you. Because I knew that only by binding you to me could I ever have a hope of stopping the bloody urge that lives beneath my skin."

The pale green glow was back in his eyes, making them shine like demonic lamps. I felt like a cold hand had reached inside my chest and squeezed my heart. He was telling me that Chulo and Rat Face weren't the only two people he'd killed. He was telling me that he was a murderer many times over. Possibly a serial killer. Dear God. And I had invited him into my house and let him sleep in my bed. Hell, I'd kissed him and let him touch me in ways no other man had ever touched me. I'd nearly made love to him, despite Charles, despite the fact that we had been raised as siblings, despite my own better judgment. If I died tonight, it would be my own fault. The same as if I had put a gun to my head and pulled the trigger.

Richard must have seen the look of terror and disgust on my face because he drew away from me and seemed to shrink back to his normal height. He looked tired and worn down suddenly -- a man who has struggled against his demons and lost.

"It's the curse, Rachel, don't you see? The curse of the Amon-kai. Remember what I told you? The sons of Anubis are forced to wear the true face of their father, once a month at the full moon. And they must bathe in blood before they can return to their human forms."

"I...I don't understand," I said, shaking my head. "What are you telling me, Richard? That you're some kind of a...I don't know...some kind of a werewolf? And you feel compelled to kill someone every full moon?"

"I don't feel compelled -- I *am* compelled," he said earnestly. "What you saw tonight was nothing. It was voluntary. But once a month when the full moon is in the sky, I become a creature that is neither wolf nor human but partially both -- a form which truly *is* monstrous. And then I'm nothing but a savage, ravening beast. When that happens, there are only two ways to regain my human form." He looked at me intently. "Either I have to join with my Lana-zeel, something I have yet had the opportunity to do, or...I have to kill someone."

"Oh my God." I actually felt faint. I think I started to fall because the room tilted, and then suddenly I was sitting on the bed, still wearing only my panties, with Richard beside me. His bare muscular arm was around my shoulders, supporting me gently.

"Are you all right?" he asked earnestly. "Want me to get you a drink of water?"

I shook my head, then laughed, an ugly, cracked sound, even to my ears. My brother was a serial killer who felt compelled to bathe in blood every full moon, but aside from that, he was such a sweet considerate guy. Who'd have thought? Richard was talking again. I dragged my mind back from the edge of the abyss and made myself listen.

"Do you understand what I'm trying to tell you, Rachel?" he was saying. "I can't make myself stop -- only you can stop me. Only you can break the curse. The Lanor-zur needs his Lana-zeel to stop killing. I need to make love to you, to seal our bond, in order to control the blood lust."

"Richard," I said, feeling like I might be sick. "I'm sorry about the shitty life you had. Mom had no right to take me away from you and refuse to see you ever again. And when Dad died, too, well, I guess your mind just cracked. You need help. We're going to get you some help."

"The only help I need is right here," he said harshly. He pulled me against him and pressed his mouth against mine in a rough, demanding kiss that bruised my lips and poured fire down my throat. Against my will, I felt my body reacting to him. Oh, God, even knowing all that I knew about him, I still couldn't help the rush of heat that made my nipples into hard little points, that made my sex wet and slippery and ready for him.

"Stop it!" I gasped, pushing away. I put both hands on the flat, muscular planes of his chest, trying to keep some distance between us. But Richard didn't try to kiss me again. Instead he drew back and pointed to the right side of his chest, just below his nipple.

"Look, Rachel. Look at what you've done for me, even with that little bit of unwilling passion."

I looked and saw that the puckered bullet wound was gone -- healed. There was only a faint trace of white scar tissue where the bloody hole had been, and as I watched, it faded away too. Magic.

"I -- I --" I shook my head, at a loss for words. So he wasn't lying -- at least about some things. But that didn't change one fact.

"You're still a killer," I said, keeping the hard-won distance between us. "Curse or no curse, Richard. And you can't lay that at my door."

"I'm not trying to lay anything at your door, Rachel," he said softly, and the agony and guilt were back in his eyes. "Every drop of blood I've spilled is on my own soul. I'd never ask you to assume blame for any of that. But now that we've found each other, all that can stop."

"How, Richard?" I said numbly. "How does it stop? I let you fuck me, and you suddenly stop getting the urge to kill? Is that how it works?"

"No." He took me by the shoulders and tried to pull me closer. I resisted him, and he gave up the effort. "No," he said again. "No, what happens is that when the bond is sealed between us, *the curse will be broken*. I won't *have* to change anymore -- not if I don't want to. I won't have to kill as long as I have you by my side. Don't you see? It's what I've been telling you all along -- we belong together. I love you Rachel. And I need you."

"But..." I still couldn't get over one fact. That he'd killed -- multiple times. "You killed them," I said to him. "Killed innocent people. How many? How many died, Richard, because you couldn't find me?"

"One a month since I reached physical maturity at sixteen," he said bitterly. "You know how old I am, Rachel. You do the math." He got up from the bed and started pacing and gesturing as he talked. "At first, when I was young, smaller deaths would do. Dogs, cats, raccoons. Whatever animal that happened to be unlucky enough to cross my path on a full moon night. But once I reached maturity, that didn't work any more. My prey had to be human."

"Dear God." I put a hand to my lips to silence the scream that wanted to come out.

"That's right," Richard said harshly. "Why do you think Dad killed himself? Because he didn't want to kill anyone else. But after Mom left him, he didn't have a choice. He was driven to it -- forced by the curse. But I...I found a different way. A better way."

"What way is that?" I whispered, wrapping my arms around myself to keep from shaking.

"Evil people." Richard turned to me, a desperate light shining in his pale green eyes. "I only kill those who hurt others. Pimps, murderers, rapists. I make sure I'm near one of them when I turn, on the night of the full moon. And that's who I kill to break the curse and regain my human form."

"Evil people?" I laughed again, that same jagged, crazy-sounding laugh that hurt coming out. "You kill *evil* people, Richard?"

"Yes." He dropped to his knees before me in one fluid motion and took both my hands in his. "I swear on my soul, Rachel, that I have never killed anyone who didn't deserve it. I've never taken an innocent life."

"And what if you're wrong?" I asked, pulling my hands away from his. "What if you're mistaken, Richard? Who are you to decide who's guilty and who's innocent? Who are you to decide who ought to die?"

"You decide," he said softly. "Every day in court. It's your job."

"My job," I said in an icy voice, "Is to present the facts to a jury and a judge. I do my best to win each case I take, but I *never* for one instant believe that I should have the power of life or death over another human being. To think otherwise goes beyond hubris, Richard. It's a sickness. A disease."

He looked at me, anguish filling the handsome face I had grown to love all over again in the last few weeks. The face of my brother. My lover. A monster. A stranger.

"It was all I could do, Rachel," he said, his deep voice breaking over my name. "I couldn't find you. Couldn't claim you. Couldn't break the curse on my own. Please, can't you see how badly I need you?"

I shook my head. An icy blanket had covered my emotions. A layer of frost had settled on my heart that nothing could thaw. "I'm sorry, Richard," I told him, feeling each separate syllable fall from my lips like a cube of ice. "But I just can't. Can't be a part of this. Can't do what you're asking me to do. I'm sorry for you, for everything you've been through, but I can't be your salvation. I'm not your savior -- I'm just your sister."

"And that's what it boils down to, doesn't it?" He was on his feet again, bending over me, the fire back in his eyes. "Not just my bloody history or your stupid fiancé -- the one you can't even bear to touch. No, the reason you won't be with me is the simple, stupid fact that my parents were killed and yours adopted me. That I was raised as your brother."

"It's not --" I began, but he cut me off.

"Well, let me tell you, Rachel." He crouched down and took my hands, his eyes blazing into mine. "Let me tell you, I'm *not* your brother. But that doesn't mean we aren't blood. We're Amon-kai, the both of us, and whether you like it or not, blood calls to blood. Rachel, please..." His eyes were desperate, demanding. He kissed my hands, my wrists, slow, hot kisses that sent fire down my arms and threatened to melt the ice that had formed over my heart. "I need you -- we need each other. Let me take you now. Let me join with you -- fill you with my essence and seal our bond. It's the only way to break the curse."

I still felt numb. "So if I lay back and spread my legs for you, this can all be over?" I demanded. "If I let you come in me? If that's all there is to it, why didn't you just do it the other night when you practically raped me?"

Richard's eyes hardened. "I didn't do anything you didn't want, Rachel. Didn't do a damn thing your body wasn't crying out for."

"Fine, see it however you want to." I stared up at him angrily, my hands balled into fists. When it came down to it, Richard was as bad as Charles, always wanting something I didn't feel willing or able to give. Just because my body reacted to his didn't mean I felt right

about letting him touch me...letting him take me. But it seemed to be all he cared about, all he wanted from me. And it seemed like this horrible nightmare was never going to stop until I gave him what he wanted. Abruptly, I made a decision.

Pulling my hands from his, I stalked over to the side of my bed. Very deliberately, I hooked my thumbs into the waistband of my panties and slid them down my legs. Then I lay back on the bed naked and spread my legs, baring myself to him completely.

"What are you doing?" Richard looked at me uncertainly.

"Giving you what you want. Giving you the only thing you seem to care about," I told him. I felt like I was dying inside, like his touch on my skin would either make me burst into flame or wither away to nothing at all, but I couldn't stop now.

"Is that what you really think?" His eyes were anguished now. Anguished and outraged. "That the reason I spent so much time and effort to find you was in order to break the curse? That you don't matter to me except for that?"

"That's what it seems like." I was getting cold, lying on the bed naked, but I was damned if I would move. "Isn't this what you've been after from the minute you found me?"

"Goddamnit, I *love* you, Rachel! I've loved you since we were kids. Remember how we used to lay in bed at night and listen to Mom and Dad talking downstairs? I used to lay there with you wrapped in my arms and think, 'Someday that'll be us. Me and Rache.'"

"Listen to them *fucking* is more like it," I spat, pushing myself up on my elbows. "That's what they were doing. That's the way he kept her for as long as he did. Well, let me tell you, Richard -- you can't keep me that way. Just because my body responds to yours doesn't mean it's meant to be, or that it's right, or that we have to seal some kind of weird, ritualistic bond that started growing between us when we were children."

"What does it mean then?" he asked softly, coming to stand over me where I lay on the bed.

"I...I don't know. I just know what you want from me isn't right." I took a deep breath and lay back down again, trying to relax in the impossibly tense situation. "But I'm willing to give it to you," I said, forcing the words out. "Once. Tonight. But never again."

"What are you offering me, Rachel?" Richard's voice was dangerously soft.

"What you've been after all along," I said. "Me." I looked up at him. "You say you need me to break the curse -- that you need to come inside me. Well, fine, Richard, I'll let you." I gestured to the bulge behind his expensively tailored charcoal gray slacks. "Put it in me," I said. "Just like you did the other night -- but only that far. Put it in me and come -- fill me up if you want to. I'm on the pill, so it should be safe. But don't you take my virginity -- you can go only so far and no farther. That's my only stipulation."

"Listen to you," he growled, his deep voice thick with anger. "Your only 'stipulation' is that I not take your virginity? Why, because you want to give it to your darling Charles on your wedding night?"

"As a matter of fact, yes," I said, trying to sound calm. "Charles has certain...expectations about our first time together. I'd just as soon not disappoint him." I spread my thighs wider and looked up at him. "Well?"

"Expectations, hmm?" He stepped closer and to my horror, began to unzip his pants. I had been sure he wouldn't take the bait. That I could call his bluff by offering myself when I was clearly unwilling. But now his pants were parting, showing black silk boxers beneath the charcoal fabric.

"Y -- yes," I almost whispered.

"Well, if he expects to be the first cock in your tight little pussy he may be disappointed. Don't you think?" Richard asked.

"Richard...I..." I started to scramble up, but he held me down effortlessly with one hand while he continued to shed the rest of his clothes with the other.

"But you know, I think you have some unrealistic expectations yourself, Rachel," he continued, caressing my belly with one warm, horribly strong hand. "And some wrong ideas in your pretty little head."

"What...what are you talking about?" I gasped. He was naked now and stroking his long, thick shaft with one hand while he continued to hold me down with the other.

"Well, first of all, being on the pill might protect you from a human man, but we're not strictly human," he told me. "And then you seem to have the idea that if I just put the head of my cock in you and fill you with my essence -- my cum -- it will seal our bond, break the curse, and absolve you of any further difficulties with your troublesome older brother."

"I thought that was what you said. What you kept telling me." I stopped struggling and looked up at him. I tried not to see the long, thick shaft of flesh with its broad, mushroom-shaped head rising from between his muscular thighs.

"Nothing could be further from the truth," he growled softly. "Because I don't just need to bond with you, don't just need to fuck you, I need to *breed* you, Rachel. Especially the first time."

"I don't...don't understand," I stammered. "Breed? What does that even mean?"

He let me sit up. "Look closely," he commanded, directing my eyes exactly where I had been trying not to look -- at his naked, hard cock. "Look at the base of my shaft; what do you see?"

I bit my lip and willed my body not to respond as his musky, intensely male scent filled my nose. Still, my nipples tightened and my sex got even wetter as I watched his large, capable hand caress the thick shaft of flesh.

Being a virgin I was no expert on penises, but that didn't mean I'd never seen one before. I knew what they were supposed to look like. I had felt Richard's before, the last time he had almost taken me, but I had never gotten a good look at it. Now I did and it appeared completely normal -- well, other than being bigger than any other male member I'd ever

seen -- except for a definite thickening around its base. Yes, I decided as I stared at it more closely, almost mesmerized, the root of his cock was definitely much wider and broader than any other I had ever seen in my limited experience. But was that normal? Or some strange Amon-kai trait?

"What am I supposed to be seeing?" I asked nervously.

"My knot." He stroked it again and it seemed to swell. I was fascinated and frightened at the same time -- unable to look away. "It's much more pronounced when I'm in my, ah, my other form," he said. "But I hope you'll never have to see that. Never have to go through that."

I had a sudden, vivid mental image of a huge black wolf, the wolf I always saw in my dreams, with Richard's pale green eyes. I shivered.

"What...why are you showing it to me?" I asked.

"To explain what's going to happen -- what *has* to happen the first time I fuck you," he said. "Here." He took my hand and tried to lead it to his shaft.

"No!" I pulled back quickly, as though stung by the touch of his heated flesh, but Richard was relentless.

"I can *show* you this using your hand or I can let you *feel* it in your pussy, Rachel," he growled. "Make your choice."

Reluctantly, I gave him my hand and stifled a gasp as he wrapped my small fingers around his thick, arrogant cock. He was molten steel and rose petals against my palm -- hard and hot and soft all at once -- and his musk was still strong in my nostrils, making it hard to think.

"Now." Richard's voice was hoarse, as though he could barely talk with my hand wrapped around him. "The first time I enter you...really enter you, I'll need to press deep, to be sure I get all the way in." He demonstrated by sliding my hand down the length of his shaft to the base, just where the mysterious swelling began.

"Why?" I whispered, completely beyond protesting that what he said would never happen.

"To get this in you." He stroked the swelling at the root of his cock. "To get my knot deep into your sweet, wet, pussy, Rachel." He demonstrated further, sliding my fingers down until they encircled the area in question. Or rather, tried to encircle. The knot, as he called it, was so wide and thick, there was no possible way for me to get my hand all the way around the base of his cock. I thought of how much larger my hand was than the tender area between my legs.

"There's no way," I told him. "Even if I wasn't a virgin, even if I let you, there's no way you could possibly force that thing into me. I'm too small."

"Don't worry, my Lana-zeel, your body will open to accept me." He stroked my cheek gently with the back of his hand, and I shivered. "And it won't really expand until I'm all the



way inside you, until my cock is buried to the root in your tight pussy. It's like a key that fits a lock exactly."

"But...but what then?" I realized I was touching him on my own now, that he was no longer forcing my hand, and yet I couldn't stop.

"Then I'll breed you," he said simply. "You see, I can put my cock inside you, stroke in and out a little and come, just like any other man could. But that's the easy way -- the human way. That's not the way we of the Amon-kai fuck. Not the way we breed."

"How do we, I mean *they*, fuck?" I asked breathlessly.

"It takes much longer for us. Once we're joined, we'll be together for hours," he promised me darkly.

"Hours?" For some reason my mind flashed back to something I'd seen once as a small child. I'd gone to the zoo on a field trip and somehow I'd gotten lost from my classmates and wound up near the wolf habitat. It must have been mating season, or maybe the female wolf was simply in heat, I didn't know. All I remembered was watching the male mount her over and over, thrusting rhythmically into her from behind as he bit her neck. Finally, my teacher found me and dragged me away, horrified at the spectacle I'd been subjected to. But what I remembered most of the whole experience was the way the female wolf had been held in place, and not just by the male's fangs buried in her scruff. I remembered thinking that he was locked to her, locked inside her somehow, that he would never let her go until he finished, although I had no idea what exactly finishing could mean in such a situation.

Was that what Richard was proposing for me? For us? That we would be locked together with his cock buried deep inside me as he fucked me over and over and over again? God, what a nightmare! But the wet heat between my thighs made a liar out of me. His words weren't repulsing me -- they were turning me on, turning on the Amon-kai part of me I tried so hard to keep buried, even though I knew it was wrong.

"Hours? Really?" I repeated, feeling my face grow hot as I continued to stroke his shaft.

Richard nodded. "My cock will be lodged deep in your pussy, and when my knot enters you, my body will begin to make a special kind of cum -- *essence* is what we call it." He stroked my cheek again. "I'll fill you with it, Rachel. And your body will open to me and drink it in, like a flower drinks in the rain. I'll unlock the secret part of you -- the Amon-kai part. And then our bond will be sealed. But that's not going to happen tonight."

"It's not?" I looked up at him, blinking, trying to shake the daze of lust. I had somehow fallen into. "Oh, right. It's not," I said, more firmly, forcing myself to take my hand from his shaft and sit back on the bed, away from him.

"No, because I won't breed you against your will." Richard's voice was harsh now. Taking me by the shoulders, he pushed me down on the bed.

"What...what are you doing?" I struggled against him, but it was useless. He was too strong.

Richard held me down easily, his green eyes burning. "Just because I won't breed you tonight doesn't mean I won't take what you offered." He got on his knees in front of me and spread my legs, his shaft jutting dangerously from between his thighs. "I won't take your virginity completely, Rachel. But I'm going to put my cock in you and I *am* going to come in you."

"What? Why?" I demanded, fighting a losing battle to close my thighs. "What possible good can it do you if you don't...don't do everything you said? If you don't, uh, *breed* me?"

He gave me a hard, humorless smile. "Just being this close to you and breathing in your scent will cause my body to make some essence. Not as much as if I was all the way inside you with my knot lodged in your cunt, but enough to make you understand what you're missing. Now hold still, Rachel; I wouldn't want to slip and go too far."

"Please, Richard," I moaned softly. "Please don't do this." I thought of how he'd said the pill wouldn't protect me from him, from his cum. But he seemed to read my mind.

"Don't worry, Rachel," he said softly, stroking my cheek again. "You're safe enough as long as I don't breed you. And I won't -- not tonight."

Part of me wanted to struggle and fight, but I knew there was no use. He was too strong, too big. There was nothing I could do but spread my thighs even wider and let him slide his cock inside me, praying he didn't go too far and take my virginity completely.

I closed my eyes tightly as I felt his broad, mushroom-shaped head part the swollen lips of my pussy and begin to enter my warm, wet entrance. God, I couldn't believe I was letting him do this. Couldn't believe I was actually lying still and letting him push his thick shaft into my sex while I did nothing.

"No." Richard's voice was like a whip crack, forcing me to open my eyes. "No, Rachel," he said sternly, his green eyes still burning. "I want you to watch this. Want you to watch me fill you up and come in you. It won't be nearly as much as either one of us needs, but I want you to see it anyway."

Helpless to disobey him, I lifted my head and watched obediently as another inch of his broad shaft slid into my tight entrance. And then another and another. He was almost halfway buried inside me now, but the thickest part of him, the root, or knot, or whatever you wanted to call it, was still safely outside. Suddenly I could feel him against my virgin barrier, pressing lightly, threatening to break through.

"Richard!" I gasped, digging my fingers into his muscular forearms. "Richard, no!"

"Shhh," he said softly. "Gently, Rachel. I promised not to take your virginity, and I won't. But you'll have to endure me inside you a little while longer until I come."

"Why...why don't you go ahead and come then?" I gasped, tightening my inner muscles involuntarily around the thick shaft that invaded my pussy.

He hissed and I felt every muscle in his big body tense, as though he held himself back by sheer force of will. "I will, baby," he promised me, drawing back ever so slightly and

surging into me again, right up to the barrier. "I will come inside you, but I need to fuck you first."

"God, Richard..." I moaned, letting my head fall back in mounting frustration. I couldn't tell if I was horrified to have him buried halfway inside me like this or upset because I couldn't have him all the way in me. I was so *confused*. But Richard wasn't.

"Quiet now, Rache," he murmured as I whimpered softly beneath him. "Lie still like a good girl and let me fuck you."

"Please...oh, God," I moaned as he pulled back again and pressed into me again. I could feel myself stretching to accommodate his invading shaft, but I knew what I felt was nothing compared to what it would have been like if I had his knot lodged inside me. But that wasn't going to happen tonight, was it? Please, God, no...it couldn't happen tonight. I couldn't let it.

"That's right, baby...good girl," Richard said softly, pulling me away from my half-delirious, guilty thoughts. He stroked into me in a slow, steady, maddening rhythm now, and his warm hands had found my breasts. Slowly, in time to his fucking, he twisted my ripe, aching nipples, causing a low grade current of pleasurable pain to arc between the sensitive tips of my breasts and my open sex.

"Oh...oh..." I couldn't make myself stop moaning. I could feel the hunger in my body, the need to let him in completely, and I fought it with all my strength. Still, I knew that if Richard had decided he wanted to take me all the way, to breed me as he has put it, I wouldn't even have put up a token resistance at this point. No, I would have welcomed him, would have drawn him into me, even though I knew with every fiber of my being it was wrong.

"That feels good, doesn't it?" Richard smiled down at me, his large hands still playing over my naked, helpless body. "But I know what can make you feel even better." One warm hand trailed down my trembling stomach, and then I felt the broad pad of his thumb settle between my pussy lips and rub lightly over my throbbing clit.

"Richard!" I bolted upright at the shock of pleasure it caused. Richard caught my wrists and pushed me back down on the bed.

"Careful, Rachel," he warned me, his deep voice hoarse. "I almost went too far that time. Remember, no sudden moves if you want to keep your virginity intact." He nudged the barrier inside me again with the head of his cock, as if to remind me of the seriousness of our situation.

"Please, Richard! God, please, I'm going insane!" I breathed, wondering how the hell he could keep so calm while he thrust into me. "Please, can't you just end it? Can't you just come in me?"

"I'm very close now, baby," he whispered, stroking my cheek. "Very close to filling you up. But I need you to come with me."

"Why...why do I have to come?" I demanded, panting.

“Your orgasm will carry my essence deeper into your body. Deeper into your cunt.” Richard’s hands moved again, trailing down my shivering belly until he reached the place where he pierced my open pussy. This time I didn’t jump when he slid his thumb gently over my clit. I just moaned and tried to open myself wider. There was no way I was getting out of this until I did exactly as he wanted -- there was no way around it; I would have to go through it. So I needed to relax and let him make me come.

Easier said than done. I had never felt so tense in my entire life, and the slowly building spiral of pleasure tightening in my belly didn’t help either. God, when I came I was going to come so hard. I just knew it. Richard seemed to know it, too.

His thumb stroked across my swollen clit in time to his cock moving in my body, and all the while his green eyes -- Amon-kai eyes -- burned into me as though he wanted to unlock the secrets of my soul while he fucked me.

“Come for me, Rachel,” he whispered. “Let me feel you come.”

His words seemed to trigger something inside me. The slow swell of need and desire ended abruptly as the orgasm rushed over me like hot lava. As the convulsions of pleasure shook me, I had a thought that he could have made my body come much faster if he’d wanted to, but for some reason he had wanted to draw this torture out.

“Richard! Richard!” I came sobbing his name, clawing at his forearms and looking into his eyes, my soul naked before his.

“Rachel,” he whispered. “I love you.” He pressed into me, and I felt him hard against my virgin barrier once more. Then with a hot rush, he filled me with his cum.

I had never felt anything like it and I suspected there *was* nothing like it in the human world. The flood of heat that filled me seemed to reach deep inside my body, looking for an entrance to my soul. I felt myself coming again, crying out as the contractions of my orgasm pulled his essence even deeper into me. I had a fierce, burning desire to have him in me, all of him. To have his cock buried to its thick root in my cunt and feel his knot swelling inside me, locking us together for however long it took to seal the bond. It was an animal urge. An Amon-kai urge. And suddenly it was too strong to deny.

I surged upwards again, trying to force him into my body, trying to make him take me all the way. All thoughts of Charles and our upcoming wedding, or of my childhood and being raised as Richard’s little sister disappeared. At that moment I didn’t see him as my brother, or even as a man. He was simply the other half of my soul, my mate, and I needed him desperately.

“No!” Richard held me back. “No, I promised not to breed you tonight, Rachel. I won’t do that until you come to me of your own accord. Until you offer yourself to me.”

With one swift move, he drew out of me and knelt panting on the bed beside me. His sudden withdrawal left me feeling dazed and helpless and damn near tears. But that was crazy, wasn’t it? There was no way I could want him, not now, not knowing what he was. A

killer. A monster. And still, on a very deep psychological level, my brother. But still I ached for him, ached for promises unfulfilled.

"Richard..." I said, and stopped, not sure how to finish. I could feel his heated essence leaking from between my thighs. I looked down at myself and saw how it filled my pussy to overflowing. It was creamy and pearly white in contrast to the deep pink of my inner cunt lips and almost seemed to shimmer in the dim light of my bedroom.

"Look at the mess I made." Richard's deep voice was hoarse and anguished, and I knew he wasn't just talking about the soft vee of my sex, now filled with his essence. Swiftly he knelt between my legs and I felt him cleaning me with long, strong strokes of his hot tongue.

"Richard -- oh!" I cried out as his tongue parted my pussy lips and pressed deep inside me, ruthlessly cleansing me of the evidence of his need. I wanted to bury my hands in his dark hair and hold him in place as I had before when he offered to kiss me between my legs, but it was over too quickly for that. Before I could say anything else, Richard had finished the tongue bath and stood up beside the bed.

I watched numbly as he pulled on his boxers and pants, not certain what to say. Finally I managed to ask, "What...where are you going?"

"Away. I'll only make things worse if I stay here." Richard looked at me sadly. "I'm sorry if I hurt you, Rachel. Sorry for everything I did. Sorry that you had to find out what I was."

"Richard," I whispered. "Please, don't go."

He laughed bitterly. "Why not? Why should I stay? So you can tell me again how you don't think of me 'that way?' So I can watch you deny the Amon-kai part of yourself and marry Charles?"

"But..." I started and didn't know how to go on. But Richard was at no loss for words.

"Look at me, Rachel," he demanded, leaning down and putting a hand under my chin. "Tell me what you're feeling right now. Can you look at me and see me as a man and not a monster? Can you honestly tell me you can get past our childhood and accept me as your lover and not your brother?"

"I..." I bit my lip, feeling the wrongness of that old taboo come back to haunt me once more. I knew he was right. I might get over his monthly killings in time, as horrific as they were, but there was still a part of me that looked at him and thought *family*. Still a part that was horrified at what I had just let my own brother do to me.

"You can't, can you?" Richard looked sad, but his eyes were hard. "I guess I hoped after seventeen years you could think of me differently. That you could see past our childhood relationship. I guess I was wrong."

"Richard..." I began, feeling hot tears well up in my eyes.

"I love you. I always will," he told me. "But I'm leaving now. And this time I won't be back."

## Chapter Thirteen

It was worse than before. The sickness, the feelings of desperation and despair. They grew every hour I was apart from him. It was like going through a drug withdrawal that got worse and worse instead of ever getting better.

At night I paced the floor, unable to sleep. Because every time I laid my head on the pillow, the dream was there, waiting to carry me away to misery and pain and bloodshed. The wolf's howl was piteously mournful now, and the boy looked at me with accusation written plainly in his pale green eyes. I was hurting him as much as I was hurting myself -- that was clear to me, even in the dream. I was hurting both of us because of my refusal to break a taboo that really wasn't even there.

I woke up with reasons on my lips -- reasons I couldn't see him, couldn't give him what he asked. He was a murderer -- a serial killer, for God's sake. How could I let myself even think of being with him after knowing that? *I only kill evil people*. Richard's voice echoed in my head on those occasions. Yes, but who was he to judge? It was true that Chulo Martinez was no great loss to society -- he had been an abusive, foul-minded pimp and a button man for the mob. But he should have been sent to a court of law and given due process, not summarily slaughtered on a full moon night because Richard needed a sacrifice in order to regain his human form.

And what about Charles? We were still getting married -- I had promised myself that. There was no way I was giving up the normal, sane life I'd worked so hard to build for myself. True, we weren't talking much lately. Every time he called me, I put him off or promised to call back later -- promises I always broke. But on the day of our wedding, I fully intended to be there, dressed in the billowing white dress I had picked for the occasion. If anything would carry me through this difficult time it was my stubborn refusal to let go of my ideals. And those ideals did *not* include leaving my normal if somewhat boorish fiancé to

run away with a man who was a shape-changing serial killer who had also been raised as my brother. Or so I told myself on a daily basis.

Of course the most pressing reason I knew I could never be with Richard was always with me. The fact that he was my brother -- at least in my eyes. True, there were no blood ties, but we'd been raised by the same parents, tucked in at night and taken to school each day by the same mother and father. He'd been my older sibling my entire life, and it was hard, too hard, to think of him as anything else now. That was why I was certain that even if I had given in to my unnatural urges and let him make love to me, or breed me as he called it, we could never have a lasting relationship. I might be able to put aside my feelings of breaking a taboo at night when we were naked together in bed and the lust for his body in mine overcame me, but by the light of day the shame of what I was doing and who I was doing it with would maim and cripple me. I wouldn't be able to stand myself -- not in the long run.

But at the end of the first full week without Richard in my life, my reasons began to wear thin. My withdrawal symptoms weren't getting any better -- they were getting worse. I forced myself to get up and dragged myself to work every morning, even though I felt like death warmed over and knew I looked even worse. I forgot what I was supposed to say in court, and coworkers began looking at me out of the corners of their eyes and talking in hushed voices that stopped abruptly when I came too near. I knew they thought I was crazy or sick or both -- or maybe just on drugs -- but there was nothing I could do about it. It wasn't until Friday of the second week, though, that things came to a head.

I was in court again, prosecuting a routine case that I knew I had prepared for. And yet, as I looked over my notes, it was as though I was looking at them for the first time. The words on the page made no sense to me -- as though they were written in a foreign language. I stood up to cross-examine a witness, and I could barely speak. My brain was fogged with pain and need and longing. The dream the night before had been particularly bad, and it insisted on replaying itself behind my eyes as I tried to do my job.

As I stuttered and stumbled through my cross, I saw the eyes of the other attorneys in court looking at me with pity and contempt. Even the jurors seemed to know that something was wrong. And the judge, an older woman named Caroline DeBerg who had taken the bench back in the seventies, had one skinny eyebrow raised in an expression of severe displeasure. I was doing a horrible job and I knew it, but I couldn't seem to do any better.

"Mister...Mister Manzetti," I said, talking to the witness, who looked at me like I was crazy.

"Name's *Maniro*," he interrupted me.

I nodded quickly, trying to cover my mistake. "Of course, Mister Maniro. Where were you on the night of October seventeenth?"

"At home in my living room with my wife." He frowned at me. "But don't you wanna ask me about October twenty-seventh? That's when I saw O'Brian kill that guy."

"Objection!" The attorney for the defense, a portly man with an unbearably smug attitude named Joseph Barnes, was on his feet, glaring at me. "Your honor, I don't know what game Ms. Kemet is playing here, instructing her witness to make false statements to the jury, but --"

"Your honor, it was a simple slip of the tongue," I interrupted him. "I haven't instructed Mister Mandero to say anything of the kind."

"Mister *Maniro*," the witness said again. "Get it right, lady."

"Your honor, she can't even remember the name of her own witness," Joseph Barnes said, throwing me a contemptuous look.

"I resent that, your honor," I said.

"What?" Barnes smirked. "You resent me pointing out the truth?"

"Enough!" Judge DeBerg pounded her gavel until both of us were silent. "Ms. Kemet." She crooked a long, thin finger at me. "You may approach the bench."

I walked slowly forward with the feeling of being called to the principal's office. Disapproval was written in every thin line and sharp angle of Judge DeBerg's black-clad form.

"Ms. Kemet," she said in a voice low enough not to carry, but icy enough to cut me to the bone. "I have never seen such a display of incompetence in my courtroom. Truly, it is staggering."

"Your Honor," I said, keeping my voice low. "I have to apologize. I --"

"This isn't like you," she continued, cutting me off. "I've seen your work before, counselor, and you're usually as sharp as a tack. In fact, I remember thinking that you'd be sitting here on the bench yourself in another eight or ten years. What happened?"

"I...I..." I fumbled for an explanation.

"Are you sick?" she demanded. "Taking some kind of medication that alters your mental status?"

"Sick," I said, grasping at the explanation she offered me. "I'm ill -- have been for the last two weeks." The minute I said the words, I knew they were true. My hands were trembling so badly I had to cross my arms and tuck them beneath my elbows, and I felt nauseous and faint. Just how long I'd been feeling so bad I couldn't say -- it had been creeping up on me so gradually that the full impact didn't hit me until Judge DeBerg put a name to what I felt.

"Well, if you're so ill that you can't do your job, you shouldn't be here at all," she said severely. "You're doing both yourself and this court a disservice by showing up in this condition."

"You're absolutely right, your Honor," I said. "And I'd like to apologize."



Judge DeBerg lowered her eyebrows and stopped staring a hole through my forehead. Apparently she was mollified by my abject apology. "Were it any other attorney standing here before me, Ms. Kemet, I would demand that they excuse themselves from this case permanently. However, I know the damage such a request could do to a budding and, for the most part, promising legal career. As you have impressed me in the past, I'll excuse you for now, and we'll recess. Court will reconvene this following Monday."

I thought about telling her that another ADA would be taking my place anyway on Monday since I had my rehearsal dinner planned for tonight and the wedding was Saturday at noon. By Monday I would, hopefully, be on my way to Paris and my honeymoon. But I knew if I said anything like that, she was liable to suspect me of having my mind on something else instead of my job. She would be right, of course, but what occupied my mind wasn't my upcoming nuptials -- it was Richard and the dream.

"You're dismissed, counselor." Judge DeBerg's crisp voice cut through the fog my mind had drifted into yet again. "And a word to the wise -- don't ever let me see you behaving this way in my courtroom again."

"Yes, your Honor," I said humbly. "Thank you."

I turned and almost stumbled as I made my way back to the prosecutor's table to collect my briefcase. Behind me I heard the gavel bang again and Judge DeBerg announcing that we were in recess until the following week.

I made my way out of the courtroom as best I could, wishing I had something to lean on. Just something to give me a little support. *Oh, Richard*, I found myself thinking. *If only you were here. If only you'd come back.* But though I had searched through all the hospitals, hotels, and police records in the Tampa Bay area, he was nowhere to be found. It was as though he had disappeared off the face of the Earth and taken my heart with him.

*No*, I scolded myself. *Don't think that way. You're going to marry Charles tomorrow at noon. Tonight is the rehearsal dinner.* We were scheduled to have the dinner at a small, intimate Italian restaurant called The Laughing Cat, which made the best Portobello mushroom and asiago cheese ravioli in town -- maybe the world, in my opinion. Yet now the idea of eating anything, even The Laughing Cat's famous ravioli, left me feeling sick and unsteady. It was getting to where I could barely function.

*Stop thinking like that*, I told myself. I made an effort to straighten my shoulders and left the courthouse, keeping my head high. Once outside in the warm Tampa sunshine I headed for the nearest bench, meaning to sit down just for a moment and regain my strength. All I needed was a little rest. Just a little shut-eye before I had to face Charles and all his disapproving relations. Just a little nap to make things all better...

I closed my eyes and let my head drop against the back of the bench, not caring that I probably looked like a woman in an alcoholic daze to anyone who happened to walk by. I was tired...just so damn tired. The dream...the dream of the boy and the wolf and the moon and the blood wouldn't leave me alone. It seemed to grow stronger with every passing night

as the moon grew fuller in the sky. But there was no moon here, only the sun shining down on me with a benevolent warmth that felt like a blessing against my tired eyelids. I let myself relax, just for a moment...

\* \* \* \* \*

*"Please," I heard the boy with Richard's eyes pleading in my head. "Rachel, the moon is full tonight. Please, come to me."*

*In the dream, the boy was sick, his pale green eyes sunken in his thin, dark face. His mouth was a white line of pain. He was hurting as much as I was. But where was he? How could I find him?*

*Overhead, I saw the moon, bloated and angry, red with blood and pregnant with an ominous warning. Somewhere a wolf howled -- a desolate sound that pierced my soul.*

*"Please," I told the boy, feeling his pain as though it was my own. "Where are you?"*

*"Rachel," the boy said, in Richard's voice. "I'm dying."*

*"No!" I said. "No, please, if you'll just tell me where you are..."*

\* \* \* \* \*

"Kemet? Hey, Kemet?" A hand shook me awake, and I looked up, blinking in the blinding sunlight to see Detective Genevieve Marks looking down at me. She had a worried expression on her face, and the sunlight caught her bushy hair and made a frizzy halo around her head.

"He's dying," I said, unable to stop myself, unable to shake the dream. "He's dying, Genevieve, and I can't find him."

"Who's dying?" She sat beside me on the bench, still looking concerned. "What are you talking about?"

"My brother -- Richard," I said. "Well, he's not actually my brother. He was raised by my parents, but we don't really have any blood tie between us. I mean, we're only related in name, not actually by genetics. It's just that his eyes are like mine because we have the same ethnic background and..." I trailed off, realizing that I was babbling. Genevieve was staring at me, one bushy eyebrow raised high.

"Wait a minute, Kemet. Are you telling me that the guy you had staying with you, the one we arrested and you convinced me to let go, wasn't really your brother at all?"

"He is and he isn't," I said miserably. "It's all just a big mess." I slumped farther down on the bench, feeling its hard wooden slats dig into my back. "It doesn't matter now because he's gone. He's gone, and I can't find him."

"Maybe you're better off without him." Genevieve frowned at me. "I mean, what about Charlie-boy? Or did you two break it off?"

"No," I said listlessly. "We're still together. The rehearsal dinner is tonight, and the wedding is tomorrow morning. Eleven o'clock sharp at Our Lady of the Immaculate Heart." I gestured briefly in the direction of the church where I was to be married. Charles's mother had chosen it and it was only a few blocks from the courthouse, but I had yet to step inside it. I just knew what time I was supposed to show up.

"Wow, don't sound so enthusiastic. You're practically jumping for joy," Genevieve said dryly.

I sighed and made an effort to sit up straighter. "It's just...I'd feel a lot better if I could find Richard. He seems to have disappeared off the face of the Earth and I keep having this dream...I mean, I need to know he's okay," I finished lamely. "I just...I have this terrible feeling he's hurt. And...and I miss him, Genevieve." I looked at her, unable to stop myself from telling the truth. "I miss him a lot."

"He's more than just a brother to you, isn't he?"

"Yes...no...I don't know." I shook my head.

She looked grim. "Well, I do. He's important to you, or you wouldn't have bitten my damn head off when I tried to warn you off him."

I twisted my hands in my lap. It seemed it was my day for apologies. "I know I was rude. That was wrong of me, and I'm sorry." I looked up at her. "It's just that, well, my feelings for Richard are...undefined. He was raised with me as my brother. But now...now I don't know."

"I know," she said, patting my shoulder awkwardly. "I could tell by the way you looked at him the very first time I saw you together. But it's not easy for you. You've got Charlie-boy on the string and that rock on your finger. Then this guy that's supposed to be your brother but isn't waltzes back into your life and screws everything up."

"Exactly," I said. "And I'm just so...so confused. I haven't been sleeping well since Richard left. And I feel like crap."

"You *look* like crap," she said frankly. "And I heard about what happened with Judge DeBerg. Pretty rough."

I felt my cheeks heat with shame. No doubt everyone in the law enforcement and judicial community would know what a moron I had made of myself in court today by now. "Yeah," I said. "Pretty rough is an understatement."

Genevieve shifted on the bench, turning to face me. "So, why'd he leave?"

If my face had been hot before, it was on fire now. "He...wanted more than I was willing to give," I said at last, after trying and rejecting various lies in my head. No matter how rudely I had treated her in the past, Genevieve was my friend -- she deserved as much of the truth as I could tell her.

“Uh-huh.” She nodded her bushy head thoughtfully and tactfully didn’t comment further on my weird pseudo-family relationship. “Sounds like a mess, all right. So if you miss him, why haven’t you filed a missing person’s report?”

I thought of Richard’s confession to me -- his monthly killings. Friend or no friend, that certainly wasn’t something I could divulge to Genevieve. She was first and foremost a detective. “He’s...I thought it would be better not to involve the police,” I said at last. “I mean, considering what happened when he first came to town,” I ended lamely.

“Uh-huh.” She nodded again. “There’s something you’re not telling me about him, Kemet, but I’m not going to ask what it is. And if you ask my advice, I’d say you should let him stay lost. That guy is seven miles of bad road.”

“I know,” I said. “But I can’t help myself, Genevieve. I...I need him. Need to know he’s okay, I mean.” I put out a hand to her, and she grabbed it in both of hers.

“Jesus, Kemet, you’re shaking like a leaf. What’s wrong with you?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I’m sick. I need...I need to find Richard. I think I’d be well again if I knew he was all right.” I looked at her hopefully. “I’ve checked all the hospitals, hotels, and as many PD records as I could get access to,” I said. “But you have access to things I don’t.”

“Crap.” She squeezed my hand, then dropped it. “I’m going to regret this. I know I am.” She ran a hand through her bushy hair, making it even messier. “I’ll try and help you, Kemet, even though I think it’s stupid and wrong. I don’t know that I’ll have much success, but I’ll try.”

“Thank you.” I leaned over impulsively and gave her a hug.

“All right.” She patted my back awkwardly and drew away. “Like I said, I know I’m going to regret this.”

## Chapter Fourteen

“Kemet, can you hear me?”

“Genevieve?” I held the cell phone to my ear, straining to make out her words. It was barely an hour before my rehearsal dinner, and I sat alone on my lumpy loveseat, trying to work up the energy to get a shower and get dressed for the happy occasion. So far the farthest I’d gotten toward this lofty goal was kicking off my sensible black leather pumps and letting down my hair. The huge, vulgar diamond engagement ring Charles had given me lay discarded on my coffee table. It had suddenly seemed too heavy to wear when all I could think about was Richard and whether he was alive or dead. I had been sitting for hours in the semi-gloom of my living room, reliving the feel of his hands on my skin, the taste of his lips on mine. Only when the shrill tone of my cell phone intruded had I come to life.

“Kemet?” she said again in a barely audible voice. “Sorry I have to whisper, but I don’t think I’m alone here.”

“Where? Where are you?” I demanded breathlessly.

“If I tell you, you have to promise not to come down here until I get some back-up and clear the scene,” she whispered. “Swear it, Kemet.”

“I swear,” I said at once, fully aware that I was lying through my teeth. But at that point I would have said anything, would have told any lie, to find Richard. To have him near me, to touch him again.

“Well...okay.” Detective Marks sounded doubtful, but to my relief, she began to talk anyway. “I’m down here at the far end of Channelside. You know the part with all the abandoned warehouses?”

“Yes? Go on,” I urged her.

"Well, I'm beginning to think that one of them -- the old Ormond one, isn't quite as abandoned as the others," she murmured. "At least, not many abandoned buildings have a brand new Mercedes S-class parked around back."

"Is that all?" I asked, my heart sinking. "What makes you think Richard is there just because of some car parked out back?"

"For one thing I followed a lead out here -- a tip from my best informant," she said, still keeping her voice low. "Word on the street is that Momo wants to make an example out of your brother. Or, uh, whatever he is to you. The wiseguys like to spend time on this end of town -- not many prying eyes to interrupt their deals. So I figured if they snatched Richard, they took him here."

"Oh, my God." I clutched the cell phone so hard its plastic casing creaked in my hand. "Oh, God, Genevieve, what if he's dead? What if they killed him?" Just the thought of never seeing him again, of living the rest of my life without him was enough to bring me to my knees. I couldn't live without him -- I just *couldn't*.

"Settle down, Kemet," Genevieve muttered. "He's not dead."

"No?" I asked, almost afraid to let myself feel relief.

"No, but he is hurt. Or it looks like it anyway. I'm watching him through a busted out window around the side of the building. They've got him in some kinda weird cage, and he's lying on his side. Looks sick."

"God." I closed my eyes briefly, remembering my dreams. *Rachel, please come to me. The moon is full tonight.* I had to get to him. Had to get to him now. Genevieve must have heard the anguish in my voice because her own voice sharpened considerably.

"I'm telling you, Kemet, don't come down here," she warned. "It's not safe. I mean, I shouldn't even be here by myself and I'm *armed*. I'm going to call for back-up just as soon as I hang up with you. We'll clear the scene and get him out of there. I want you to just wait by the phone until you hear from me again. Got it?"

"Got it," I said obediently, but I was already slipping back into my shoes and grabbing my keys. I knew the warehouse she was talking about because I'd taken a field trip down to the seedy area of Channelside once while doing research for a case. It was at the far end of the industrial district, about a mile from where the cruise ships docked, and it had peeling orange paint and the word, *Ormond* printed in huge, black letters along the side.

"Good." Genevieve sounded relieved that I was obeying orders so nicely. "I'm gonna let you go now and call --" There was a sudden thumping sound and then a clatter, as though she'd dropped the phone and it had landed on concrete.

"Genevieve?" I asked. "*Genevieve?*" There was a dry click on the other end, and the phone in my hand went dead abruptly. Oh, God, what had happened? Was she all right? Or had she just dropped the call?

I stood shifting from foot to foot for almost a minute, paralyzed by indecision. Then I thought of my dream again. Of the boy with Richard's eyes. With eyes like a wolf. *Rachel, I'm dying*, he whispered in my head.

Suddenly, my paralysis broke, and I knew what I had to do. Richard was sick, maybe dying, and I knew without anyone having to tell me that he was dying for want of me. For lack of my touch. No matter what danger I was walking into, I had to get to him. And I had to go now.

I ran out the door, forgetting all about Charles, forgetting about the rehearsal dinner and the fact that I was supposed to be married at eleven o'clock the next day. Forgetting everything but the man I needed so desperately.

"Richard," I murmured under my breath as I started my car. "I'm coming. Just hold on -- I'm coming."

## Chapter Fifteen

*Don't let me be too late. Please, don't let me be too late.* The thought circled in my head like a mantra as I pushed my little car to the limit trying to get to Channelside on time. The district wasn't far from my house, but I got stuck in Friday night traffic on the way, people trying to get to the trendy new restaurant and shopping district that had grown up around the Forum where the Tampa Bay Lightning played.

I thought about calling the police as I drove, but even if Genevieve hadn't done that already, I just wasn't sure I wanted them involved. I mean, what was I supposed to tell them, that I needed help freeing my brother, who was being held by the mob for turning into a werewolf and slaughtering one of their button men? And what if Richard was...in his other form when they found him? He'd be locked up and probably taken away by the government to be studied like some kind of freak. No, I couldn't risk it. It was better to go alone and see if there was any way I could get him out myself before I involved anyone in authority. I just hoped I'd get there before Genevieve's back-up -- if she had gotten a chance to call them, that is.

There was one call I did make, though. I left a brief message on Charles's voice mail telling him not to worry if I didn't make it to the rehearsal dinner. I said there had been an emergency with a friend, and that I would get back to him as soon as I could. I felt guilty for the little white lie but the last thing I needed was for Charles to put out an APB on me. Call finished, I threw the cell phone in the backseat and put my fiancé, my rehearsal dinner, and my upcoming wedding completely out of my mind. Richard was the only person who mattered to me now. I had to concentrate on finding him. Finding him and bringing him home.

"Come on, come on," I muttered under my breath as I looked for a back street, trying to get out of the bottleneck of cars lined up to get to the parking garage. I finally managed it and headed in the direction of the abandoned warehouses. It was already getting dark by the



time I spotted Genevieve's car, parked at a discreet distance from the Ormond warehouse, which sat like a huge white ghost in the gathering gloom.

I got out of my car warily and made my way around to the side of the big building. I didn't see any lights burning in the broken windows, but the warehouse didn't *feel* empty to my highly attuned senses. I walked softly around the edge of broken concrete that encircled the warehouse, keeping my eyes wide for any danger. My plan, such as it was, was simple. Find a way in, rescue Richard, and get him out of there. I didn't have any idea how I was going to manage that, considering I was an unarmed woman alone, but I hoped that maybe I'd be able to sneak in and have him out before anyone noticed he was missing.

I was so intent on not making a sound that I almost missed the small silver object lying on the ground in front of me. It was far to the side, half hidden in a straggly clump of weeds that had grown up between the cracks in the concrete. But the last rays of the setting sun caught it just right and reflected a glare into my eyes. I stooped instinctively to pick it up and recognized it at once -- Genevieve's cell phone. Turning it over, I saw it had a smear of blood on it. Oh, God, what had I gotten her into?

I looked to my left and saw a broken window with jagged shards of glass sticking out of its frame like loose teeth about eye level. Remembering that Genevieve had said she was looking at Richard as she talked, I stepped over to the window and stood on my tiptoes to look in. The interior of the warehouse was a large, cavernous space that was only dimly lit by the weak light from the setting sun. In the center of it, I saw a large, iron holding cage that looked like something you might see at the zoo or circus.

I caught my breath when I saw Richard lying in the middle of the cage on his side. As Genevieve had said, he looked sick. He laid half on his side facing me, and he had his eyes closed. He was shirtless, and his muscular chest moved up and down rapidly with his shallow breaths. Every once in a while he would stir and cry out in a low, hoarse voice, like a man having a terrible nightmare.

*"Richard,"* I hissed, not daring to raise my voice too much in case I attracted the attention of whomever held him. *"Richard!"*

Slowly, his eyes opened, and he looked up at me from where he lay on the floor of the cage. His pale green eyes were dull and lifeless, and there looked to be at least a week's stubble on his cheeks. How long had he been a prisoner here?

"Rachel?" he asked. "Is that really you or just another dream?" There was a hopelessness in his deep voice that shook me to the core. God, I had to get him out of there!

"It's me," I said, wishing I was tall enough to climb through the window. Then I had an idea. "It's really me, Richard," I told him. "Here, smell." Carefully, I put my arm through the broken window and waved it at him, hoping to waft some of my scent his way. If he didn't believe his eyes, maybe he would believe his nose. I knew an ordinary man wouldn't have been able to catch the faint fragrance of my skin from twenty yards away, but Richard was anything but ordinary.

I saw his nostrils flare and he sat up suddenly. "Rachel!" His voice had lost all its apathy and was charged with urgency.

"Hold on," I told him. "I'm going to get you out of there."

"No, you can't," he said. "This thing is locked up tighter than Fort Knox. Just get out of here and get some help. And *hurry*. Whoever you call has to be here before moonrise or your friend is going to be in serious trouble."

"My friend?" I followed his gesturing hand to what I had assumed was a crumpled mass of clothes in the corner of his cage. My heart stopped beating when I saw that it was Genevieve. The light was so dim it was hard to tell how badly she was hurt, but I thought I could make out a smudge of blood on the side of her head when I looked closely.

"She's out cold," Richard said. "And they took her gun, so she doesn't even have anything to defend herself with."

"Defend herself? Who does she need to defend herself from?" I asked. I didn't see any of the people who must be holding them in the cage around. It was just Richard and Genevieve in there, and as far as I could see, no one threatened them at the moment.

"Me, Rachel. She needs something to defend herself from *me*. There's going to be a full moon tonight -- I can already feel it calling me. And if she's left alone in here with me when I change..." He let the words trail off, and I felt my stomach do a slow, forward roll. My God, he wouldn't really hurt Genevieve, would he? But if he was as mindless in beast form as he claimed, then how could he help it? Richard was right -- I had to go get help, and I had to get it fast. Already the last light of the dying sun faded from the sky. How long until moonrise? Not long enough, I was terribly afraid.

"I'll call right now," I said, fumbling with Genevieve's cell phone. "I'll call 911 and --"

"Rachel, behind you!"

Suddenly the small hairs at the nape of my neck stood up, and I heard the scrape of shoes on the concrete behind me.

I knew I was in trouble.

## Chapter Sixteen

A rough hand grabbed me and pulled me away from the window. I dropped the cell phone with a clatter. My bare forearm caught a jagged piece of glass, and I felt a stinging line of fire as it sliced my skin. Dimly, I heard Richard roar with outrage and anger, and I caught one last, quick glimpse of him as he slammed into the unyielding bars of the cage.

“Well, well, what have we here?” The coarse masculine voice was familiar, and when my captor spun me around, I recognized the man I had nicknamed Gravel Voice on the night of my attack. The night when I first learned what Richard really was.

Gravel Voice was dressed entirely in black, and he looked about the same, except for the ragged pink scars that decorated one cheek and the right side of his throat. I could imagine how he had gotten those.

“Leave me alone!” I said, fighting his grip and trying to staunch the flow of blood from my cut arm at the same time. “Let me go -- now!”

“Can’t do it, girly,” he said, frowning. “See, you’re trespassing on private property here. And it looks like you already seen too much.” He shook his head. “I told the boss we shoulda gone after you again, but he seemed to think it was enough to have your boyfriend.”

“He’s not my boyfriend,” I said instantly. “He’s my brother.”

One salt and pepper eyebrow shot up instantly. “Oh yeah? Well you must have a helluva strange family unit, girly.”

I felt my face heating. “It’s none of your business.”

“Is now.” He started dragging me over the cracked concrete as I struggled uselessly.

“Where are you taking me?” I demanded. My head was filled with every mob movie I had ever seen. Was my body going to be dumped in the bay wearing cement shoes? Or would they put two behind my ear and leave me as a warning for nosey ADAs everywhere?

"Where you wanted to go in the first place," Gravel Voice said. "To see your brother."

He pulled me around to a small side door that led directly into the cavernous space inside the warehouse and marched me over to the large metal cage. Richard was at the bars, shirtless and growling, looking twice his normal size. There was a caged tension in his big body, but as far as I could see, he hadn't changed in any other way. Was there a reason he was holding the beast inside himself at bay? If there was ever a time to let it out, this was it, in my opinion.

Gravel Voice kept a firm hold on one of my upper arms with one hand and drew a gun smoothly from some hidden holster with the other. "Back down, friend," he said, his voice cool and deadly. "We both know I'll do it."

"Take your hands off her. Don't touch her -- she's *mine*." Richard's voice was a low, uneven growl.

"Back away from the bars and you'll get to see her up close and personal. But any funny business and she buys it right here in front of you." Gravel Voice was all business, just as he had been the night he and Rat-Face had attacked me.

"Fine. But you're going to pay for putting your hands on her." Richard backed away from the bars, his green eyes blazing, his broad chest heaving.

Gravel Voice went slightly pale, and I thought he might be remembering the way Richard had ripped out his buddy's throat. "Big talk," he said, pressing me up against the bars. He let go of me, but I could feel the cold ring of metal as the mouth of the gun slipped into my hair and settled snugly against the nape of my neck. I went absolutely still. One twitch and he could blow my head off. Better not to twitch.

There was a jangle of keys and then the door of the cage slid open with a protesting screech. Gravel Voice shoved me inside. Before I could even turn around, he'd slammed the door shut again and turned the key. Obviously he wasn't taking any chances.

"You're a lot of big talk," he told Richard, still pointing the gun in our direction. "But I know you can back it up. I know what I saw."

Richard grabbed me and pushed me behind him, shielding me with his body. I peeked out from behind his muscular arm to see what Gravel voice would do next.

"The others think I'm crazy," he continued, frowning. "Hell, I convinced the boss to steal this damn cage from that fuckin' Big Cat Rescue place special just for you -- to keep you locked up once we brought you in. This cage could hold an eight hundred pound tiger -- you know that? And all you do is sit in it. But I know you can do more. Because I saw."

"What do you think you saw?" Richard grinned at him ferociously, and I shivered at the malice in his tone.

"I don't know, but whatever it is, I'm gonna see it again tonight. The boss is coming over later on, and you *will* change for him or I'll shoot that pretty little girlfriend, or sister, or whatever the hell she is to you right between the eyes."

Richard roared and threw himself suddenly at the bars. To his obvious satisfaction, Gravel Voice paled and took two quick steps back. Then he scowled.

"Just wait," he said, holstering his gun with quick, jerky motions. "Just you wait, you freak." He turned and stalked away from the cage, his footsteps ringing in the huge, dusty space of the warehouse, leaving me alone in the cage with my unconscious friend and my possibly dangerous brother.

When he was gone, Richard grabbed me in a fierce hug. "Rache," he murmured hoarsely in my hair. "Never thought I'd see you again."

"I didn't think I'd see you either." I hugged him back, content for the moment to just be near him and drink in his wonderful, masculine smell. It was the scent I had missed so much as it slowly faded from my sheets and pillows in the last few weeks. Breathing him in, I felt like a drowning woman who had just gotten her first breath of air in days.

He pulled back from me and frowned. "You're bleeding."

I looked down at the long, shallow cut in my forearm. I had almost forgotten it was there, but sure enough, I was still dripping blood.

"I cut myself on the window," I said. "It's nothing."

"The hell it's not. Here." Richard lifted my arm to his mouth and for a moment I thought he was going to bite me. I tried to pull away, but he shook his head, his voice as soft and coaxing as it had been harsh and menacing a moment before when he talked to Gravel Voice. "Trust me, Rachel," he said. "I would never hurt you."

I allowed him to bring my arm to his lips, but instead of kissing or biting, he stroked gently over my cut flesh with his tongue. I gasped at the sudden warm, tingling sensations that shot up my arm. It was as though he licked me somewhere else entirely. I pressed my thighs tightly together and tried not to think about that.

"What...what are you doing to me?" I could barely get the words out.

"Healing you." Richard gave my arm one last, long caress and looked at me, his pale green eyes filled with fire. "Look."

I looked down, surprised to see that the long jagged cut in my arm was almost entirely healed now. Only a faint pink scar remained, and even that faded as I watched.

"How did you do that?" I looked up at him in bewilderment.

"Born light and dark, yet of one breed. If one is bitten, the other will bleed. Joined as one their bond to seal. If one is wounded the other may heal," he murmured.

I had the strangest feeling I'd heard those words before, but I couldn't remember where. "What does that mean?" I asked, looking up at him.

"It means that I'm your Lanor-zur -- your mate whether you want to admit it or not. It's the reason I can heal you -- because we're bonded. Because I love you." He stroked my cheek softly with one hand, and for a moment I forgot that we were standing in a cage waiting for Momo "the shark" Andretti to come do away with us.

"The same way that bullet wound in your chest healed," I said.

"Yes," he said. "Because we're stronger together than apart. Because we need each other. I missed you, Rachel. I need you." He captured my mouth in a hot kiss, sliding his hands into my hair to hold me in place. I felt the forbidden fire pour into my veins like a drug and for a moment I melted against him, giving in to the kiss completely. He kissed me long and thoroughly, exploring my mouth as though he needed to reassert his ownership of me. I felt my body heating under his touch, my nipples tightening, and the tender vee of my sex getting suddenly wet. Oh, God, we couldn't do this now...not now.

It took a tremendous effort but I finally managed to push him away. He tried to kiss me again, almost roughly, as though he was driven to do it, unable to help himself.

"Please, Richard," I gasped, putting my hands on his chest and trying to catch my breath after the merciless kiss.

He frowned and let me go. "So you're still not ready to admit what you feel? What you need?"

I shook my head. "We don't have time for this now. We have to get out of here."

"Like I haven't tried about a thousand times already." He laughed mirthlessly and sat down heavily, his bare back to the iron bars. "But you're right; if we don't get out of here in the next half hour, your friend is going to be in serious trouble."

"Genevieve!" My hand flew to my mouth, and I ran to where she lay in the far corner of the cell. I felt a surge of shame that I'd completely forgotten her in the urgent rush of seeing Richard again. I got on my knees beside her and touched her face tentatively. She lay on her side breathing deeply, but when I patted her cheek and called her name she didn't wake up. There was a small smear of blood on her forehead, and I could feel a lump rising under her bushy brown hair. Gravel Voice must have knocked her on the head with the butt of his gun -- I only hoped she wasn't in some kind of a coma.

"There's nothing you can do for her, Rachel. And if we can't get her out of here, it's better she stays unconscious." Richard's voice was bleakly pragmatic. Reluctantly, I turned away from Genevieve to face him.

"What are you talking about? You wouldn't really hurt her, would you?"

He looked tired and sad. "I won't be able to help it when I change. I won't touch you -- you're my Lana-zeel, and I'd know you, know your sweet scent, in any form. But her...to the beast inside me, she's just prey."

"I don't understand." I sank to the ground in front of him, wrapping my arms around my knees. The light in the huge warehouse was growing dimmer and dimmer, and soon the moon would start to rise. "Why couldn't you escape earlier? I know how strong you are."

Richard shook his head. "I was weak. I stayed away from you too long, and it took a toll on me."

"I was weak too." I thought of my horrible dreams, the way I couldn't seem to think properly, the way I barely had the strength to do anything in those past horrible two weeks and realized that I felt better now, stronger than I had in the last fourteen days since Richard had left.

"I knew you would be," Richard said. "Because we *need* each other, Rachel." He sighed. "I wanted to go back after the end of the first week -- couldn't stand to be away from you anymore. And I was hoping you might be feeling the same way. That you'd finally be ready to admit what we both need."

"So what happened?" I asked, refusing to be drawn into a discussion of what we meant to each other again.

Richard shrugged. "I was weak with wanting you when they jumped me -- too weak to even do a partial change. They beat me. When I wouldn't lose consciousness, they drugged me. I woke up here." He gestured around the stark confines of the cage. "I think they've been holding me because the big boss is out of town. I guess he's coming back tonight."

"And you're supposed to be the prime entertainment," I murmured, thinking furiously. "Look, Richard, do you think that you could break out of here now? Now that we're back together?"

He looked thoughtful. "It's worth a try. I do feel better than I have since that last night...the night we --"

"Well, maybe you should try," I said urgently, cutting him off. Why was it that we were stuck in a life-threatening situation, and all I could think about was his hands on my body, his mouth covering mine and moving lower in a hot, wet, trail of kisses? Things I knew I shouldn't be thinking about at all.

Without another word, Richard stood and put his hands on two of the bars. They were rough and thick, about the circumference of one of my wrists and I never would have expected a normal man to be able to bend them apart. But I knew my brother's strength, and I hoped against hope that it would be enough to get us out of this mess.

He closed his eyes and I saw his biceps and the impressive muscles in his broad back flex as he pulled with all his might. All the veins under his smooth, tan skin popped out alarmingly, and the iron bars gave a low groaning sound. His face contorted with effort and I could tell he was doing the best he could, but they gave less than a centimeter.

He stopped, panting. "It's no good. Maybe if we hadn't spent so much time apart. Or if we'd sealed the bond. A sealed bond would give me ten times my normal strength. But not now. It's been too long, and I'm too weak." He sounded bitter, angry, and disappointed with himself.

I bit my lip, not wanting to talk about the bond between us or what it would take to seal it. "Try again," I urged. "One more time -- they gave a little bit. If they were just a little wider apart, I could squeeze through and go find help."

Richard nodded. "All right." He grasped the bars again with the same result -- nothing. But he strained against them until the big muscles of his arms were jumping with tension.

"Stop, Richard." I put a hand on his broad back and felt him trembling. But when he turned to face me, I could see that it wasn't exhaustion that made him shake. His eyes were wide and full, the pupils tiny pinpricks as the pale green fire around them ate the black. I could smell his scent again, and it was stronger than ever, muskier, more animalistic. He looked at me with unmistakable hunger in his eyes.

"The moon...I can feel it." His voice was a low growl.

To my horror, I could feel it too -- the familiar, icy fingertips on the back of my neck sensation that told me the full moon was out. And, oh, God, Richard was starting to change! I didn't know what to do, how to stop it. If he changed, he would kill Genevieve, who still lay helplessly on the floor in the far corner of the cage. And if I saw him do that, if I saw him kill my friend and bathe in her blood, I knew things would be over between me and Richard forever. Because no matter how horrible I felt physically when we were apart, I just couldn't get over watching him do something like that. I just couldn't.

"Rachel, God! I don't want you to watch this. I'm sorry...sorry it had to come to this." Already his features were distorting. His even, white teeth were lengthening into fangs as I watched, and his eyes were growing wilder, less human, by the second.

"Richard, *stop*," I begged him, as though my pleas would do any good. Inside, I cursed myself. If only I had made love to him, had let him breed me when he wanted to, this would never have happened. In fact, if our bond had been sealed, Richard probably would have been strong enough to break out of here and come back to me. But then, he never would have left in the first place, if I had granted him full access to my body and let him do what he wanted. It still felt wrong to think of letting him do that, to think of letting him take my virginity and shove his thick cock all the way inside me to flood me with his essence. But breaking a taboo that was mostly in my own head would have been infinitely preferable to watching him change helplessly into a beast and tear my friend apart.

Even as I thought these things, it was too late. Richard's entire body changed. His face lengthened into a muzzle, and his fingers grew together into paws. I watched in the semi-gloom, horrified at what I saw, what I heard. His skin was popped, and patches of thick black fur broke out all over his body. He was shaking, trembling, and I knew the process had to be horribly painful for him. The jeans he had been wearing suddenly split at the crotch and waist with a low, purring sound and fell to the floor at his feet.

I watched in horrified fascination, unable to look away as my brother became something completely alien. This was nothing like the semi-human monster I'd seen him change into the night after our dinner at Bern's. This was an animal, pure and simple. And as I looked into its eyes, I realized it was a *hungry* animal.

"*Richard*." I was almost crying in fear and despair. "Oh, God, don't do this! Come back to me!"



I think he may have tried to talk, but by then his mouth wasn't able to form words at all. I watched as his body contorted and the last of his humanity leaked from the pale green eyes. And then, suddenly, I realized he was completely gone.

A huge black wolf-like creature with eyes like green fire stood before me. As I watched, it threw back its head and howled, a long, lonely sound that split the night and froze the blood in my veins.

I was going to die.

## Chapter Seventeen

“Richard?” I said tentatively, my eyes never leaving the huge, shaggy, black form. It stood on its hind legs like a man, or maybe more like a bear that has reared up to attack, but its features were completely non-human. I searched the depths of those pale green eyes, looking for a single spark of humanity, just one faint trace of my brother. But there was nothing to see.

The beast that had been Richard threw back its head and howled again, a sound filled with hunger and need. Fear crawled up my spine as the beast took a step toward me. It was at least ten feet tall, and thanks to my Amon-kai vision, I could see it very well, despite the fact that it was now completely dark in the warehouse. Its arms and legs were shaggy, its paws tipped with long, deadly looking claws. Its chest and belly were smoother, however, and as I looked lower, I saw that it still had all-male equipment, though it was considerably larger than it had been when Richard was a man. In fact, it was huge -- I could tell that, even though he wasn't erect at the time, thank God.

It took another step toward me, and I shrank away, feeling the cold iron bars brand my back like icy fingers. Oh, God, there was no place to go, no place to run. Richard had told me he would know me in any form, but pure hunger burned in his inhuman eyes. The desire to devour and I was his intended prey.

“No,” I said in a low, trembling voice. “No, please. Please, don't.”

The beast whined deep in its throat and took one more shuffling step toward me. I shrank away from it, scooting around the perimeter of the cage, keeping the bars to my back. I didn't know what I was trying to accomplish, since there was no place to run, but my mind was a blank slate, filled with panic. I wasn't thinking very clearly at all. I just knew I had to keep moving, had to stay away from the huge, shaggy nightmare that had been my brother.

Pale green eyes followed me, but the beast made no move to advance. Suddenly, my foot kicked something soft and giving, and I stopped, confused as to what I had stepped on. I didn't want to take my eyes away from the thing that had been Richard, but I risked a quick glance down at my feet. Genevieve! My friend was still out cold, helpless and defenseless, and I had led the beast right to her.

She stirred slightly and moaned, and I saw the beast's eyes narrow at the soft sound. Its long pointed snout wrinkled in a silent snarl, and then it began to advance, the hunger burning in its green eyes like torches in the night.

"No! No, *no*." I put out my arms like a traffic cop signaling "stop" and shook my head at the beast. The fear I'd been feeling for my own safety dissipated in my horror at what might happen to Genevieve. "Richard, no," I told him. "No, you *can't*."

But he, or it, was already sidling around me, sniffing at Genevieve's feet and legs, clad in her customary comfortable flats and black dress slacks. It opened its mouth and I could see rows of teeth gleaming like daggers, white and curved and deadly.

"No!" I tried to shoo it away, but it growled at me. Obviously, the hunger was too strong to deny. Richard's beast demanded to be fed, and it had to be appeased. But how? How could I stop it from ripping my friend to chunks and shreds and swallowing her whole? I bit my lip and closed my eyes, and then I seemed to hear Richard's voice in my head.

*Once a month, when the full moon is in the sky, I become a creature that is neither wolf nor human but partially both -- a form that truly is monstrous. When that happens, there are only two ways to regain my human form. Either I have to join with my Lana-zeel, something I have yet had the opportunity to do, or...I have to kill someone.*

My eyes flew open, and I knew what I had to do. Knew exactly how I would keep Richard from killing Genevieve and get us out of here, too. God, this was going to be so hard. I didn't want to think about it -- if I thought about it, my courage would surely fail me. I just had to do it.

I took a deep breath and started stripping off my clothes. Off went my black pumps and my sensible blouse and skirt combo. Then, not letting myself stop for a minute, I pulled off my bra and slipped out of my nylons and panties. I stood naked before the beast, the metal of the cage floor cold on my bare feet and a chill crawling up my spine.

The beast still sniffed around Genevieve's feet and legs, paying me no attention in his single-minded hunger. I could see by the way its jaws moved and its impossibly broad shoulders bunched under the black hairy pelt that it was getting ready to pounce. I was out of time.

By instinct, I reached down by my feet and grabbed my discarded panties. I knew they were damp because the moment I'd been forced into the cage with Richard, the vee of my sex had gotten wet. Richard had told me he would know my scent anywhere. It was time to see if that was true.

The soft, silky pink fabric of my panties hit the beast right in the snout, and it snorted in obvious surprise. I waited breathlessly to see what it would do. Would it take a bite out of Genevieve? Or come for me? Its huge chest expanded as it inhaled. Then it plucked the pink fabric from its muzzle with surprising agility and dropped the panties to the floor. Then, just as I had both hoped and dreaded, the pale green fire of its eyes turned to me once more.

The beast growled softly and took a step toward me. I backed up again, but this time to lead it away from Genevieve. I felt cold and vulnerable, leaving my clothes in a heap on the floor of the cage, but what could I do? I had to get it away from her, had to keep its attention fixed on me.

I saw that it was wavering, its eyes turning from me to Genevieve and back again. "Richard," I said. "Richard, here. Over here. Look at *me*." It seemed wrong to call the beast by my brother's name, but I knew he had to be in there somewhere, even if I couldn't see him. In desperation, I reached between my legs and dipped two fingers into my hot, wet pussy. Why I was still so wet and hot when I was about to do something so horrible was a subject I didn't want to think about. Because surely I didn't want to do this -- did I? Maybe it had something to do with the musky, male scent still filling the air. The scent of Richard. The scent of the Amon-kai. I didn't know and didn't want to know.

"Richard," I said, taking a step toward the beast and holding out my hand. "Richard if you'll just come here and leave her alone I...I'll give you what you want. What you need."

The beast's long head came up, and I saw it sniff the air, inhaling my scent. It took a step toward me again, and then another, and suddenly, it was almost on top of me. I lifted my fingers to its face, reaching up to do it despite the way my heart was practically pounding out of my chest. The long mouth opened, revealing all those rows of sharp, curving fangs, and I squeezed my eyes shut, fully expecting to feel the horrible, searing pain of those teeth biting through my extended fingers.

But instead, something warm and wet stroked my vulnerable hand.

I gasped and opened my eyes to see the beast licking my fingers with a long, pink tongue. Its green eyes were half closed in ecstasy, as though it was savoring the richest, most delicious thing it had ever tasted.

"That's right," I whispered, both relieved and terrified to finally have its undivided attention. "That's right, Richard, and there's more where that came from." Slowly, I lowered my hand and dipped back into my pussy again. The beast followed my movements, and before I could get my fingers back up to its mouth, it crouched in front of me. I bit back a gasp as the long pink tongue lashed over my tight nipples. I was afraid again that the beast would bite, but it didn't. It lapped at my nipples and breasts a while longer, and then the long muzzle continued down the trembling flesh of my belly until it reached my sex.

"Richard!" I gasped. The long, hot tongue swiped between the swollen lips of my cunt, and the beast's huge bulk surged against me, pressing me back against the iron bars of the cage. Conflicting sensations swamped me, the cold metal biting into my back and the heated

tongue invading my pussy. I cried out and pressed my hands down on the huge, shaggy head, trying to push the beast away from me. But it was useless; it was single-minded in its purpose -- to taste me thoroughly and completely.

I bit my lip and closed my eyes. There was nothing I could do. I was trapped against the bars of the cage with the beast between my thighs. I shuddered helplessly as it pressed even closer, making wet, lapping sounds as its tongue invaded my body. I couldn't help thinking of its long, curving teeth, but to my surprise, I didn't feel them at all. In fact, aside from its determination to taste me, it was surprisingly gentle. As gentle as Richard would have been.

I curled my fingers in its coarse fur and let it take me. What else could I do? I was naked, vulnerable, and entirely helpless as it pressed me against the bars of the cell and feasted on my cunt. There was nothing I could do but spread my legs and give in to the sensation of the long pink tongue spiraling around my swollen clit and invading my pussy, piercing me as deeply as it could. A faint hope had begun to grow in my mind as the pleasure grew in my lower belly. A hope that maybe the beast would be content to taste me, content to eat my pussy. Maybe I could satisfy its hunger without letting it do what I was so afraid of. Without letting it breed me.

The hope died as the creature raised its face from between my thighs and growled softly. Clearly the foreplay was over.

"Richard?" I whispered in a trembling voice. "Richard, please..."

It growled again and stood up from its crouching position. The huge, muscular form towered over me, and I saw that he was fully erect. Its cock looked almost as long as my forearm now, the broad, slit head dripping pre-cum to the cold metal floor below. But what frightened me the most was the swelling at the base of its shaft -- the knot, as Richard had called it. I remembered how huge and thick it had seemed to me that last night we'd been together, when he made me touch it. Now, it looked twice as big and menacing. Oh, God. I clenched my hands into fists at my sides. I was resigned to taking its thick length into my virgin pussy because I knew I had no choice. But the idea that it would try to force that huge swelling into my tight, unused sex was too horrible to contemplate.

For a moment I closed my eyes, hating Richard with all my heart. Since he'd come into my life, he'd brought me nothing but trouble. First, he'd urged me to commit incest, or what felt like incest to me, anyway, and now, I was going to be reduced to an even lower and more despicable act -- bestiality. The shame was almost more than I could stand. To know that I was going to have to accept the beast's cock into my body, to allow it to strip me of my carefully-guarded virginity and pump inside me until it filled me with its cum was almost too much to bear. I promised myself if I got out of this night alive, I would break the bond between Richard and myself, no matter what he said or how ill and weak I felt. I would leave him and go my own separate way, and to hell the Amon-kai and all their sick traditions.

But my lofty aspirations for the future had to wait because the beast would not. It growled at me again and came at me, as if it would bowl me over on my back and take me by force.

“No,” I whispered, knowing it would do no good. I knew this was going to happen whether I wanted it to or not. The beast was going to fuck me -- breed me. I no longer had any say in the matter. I swallowed hard. Well, if it had to happen, at least I wanted it to happen on my terms. And I knew that I didn’t want to look into those pale green eyes, Richard’s eyes, while it took me.

Slowly, deliberately, I turned my back to the beast and grasped the cold iron bars of the cage. Then I spread my legs and waited for the worst. Waited to feel the beast enter me.

## Chapter Eighteen

I didn't have long to wait. I felt the brush of the beast's coarse fur against my naked back and then the heat of its breath against the vulnerable nape of my neck. I tightened my grip on the bars, feeling the rough iron cut into the tender flesh of my palms. Then the broad knob of heated flesh that was the head of its cock rubbed over my swollen folds, making me moan despite myself as the beast swiped over my clit, coating my inner cunt with its burning pre-cum.

I cried out as the head of its cock found my entrance, and I could almost imagine Richard saying, *That's right, baby, spread your legs and let me fuck you.* God, how I wished I'd let him do this when he wanted to, instead of waiting until now. Now, when I was forced to submit to him in his animalistic form, when I was forced to take whatever he gave me because there was nothing I could do to stop him. Now, when there was nothing I could do but spread my legs, grit my teeth, and try to bear it.

I felt the flaring crown of its cock breach the entrance to my pussy, pressing forward inevitably, stretching me, filling me to the limit and beyond. *How can I take it?* I thought wildly. *But I have to -- have to take it all.* And the beast pressed ever inward, filling my tight cunt with a seemingly endless supply of long, thick cock.

It stopped for a moment, and I realized it was pressing hard against my virgin barrier, the thick head of its cock lodged right against it. I wanted to cry when I remembered how careful Richard had been not to breach that barrier, how hard he'd worked to leave me intact even when he must have been aching to take me all the way, to fill me to the limit with his cock.

"Please," I whispered in a low, broken voice. "Please, don't do this."

But the beast my older brother had become knew no boundaries and knew nothing of compassion or shame. All it knew was that it was hungry, hungry to have me, hungry to breed me, and it wouldn't stop until it had accomplished its goal and sated its desires.

It growled softly in my ear and pulled out of me, perhaps an inch. Then, just when I was beginning to hope it had heard and understood my pleas to stop, it rammed back into me in one savage thrust, ripping through the barrier and pounding its way to my very core.

I screamed -- I couldn't help it -- and the beast was suddenly still within me. I could feel its massive bulk behind me, breathing heavily in my ear, but the huge body didn't move an inch, almost as though it waited for me to get used to its thickness inside me.

I bit my lip and hung my head with shame as I tried to do exactly that. There was no way to express what I felt, being filled for the first time and by such a huge instrument. My tender pussy felt stretched tight around the thick shaft, and I could feel the broad head pressing hard against the mouth of my womb, leaking drops of burning pre-cum inside me. I didn't remember Richard's cum being this hot before, but then, his cock hadn't been all the way inside me at the time. Now it was, all except the knot. I could feel that pulsing with heat against my outer pussy lips, and I felt a rush of relief that the beast had been unable to get it in. *At least I'll be spared that*, I thought, biting the inside of my cheek to keep from crying out again. *At least it won't be able to get the knot in me.*

As if sensing that I was used to it at last, two large, muscular arms wound themselves around my waist and the beast began to move. I squeezed the bars tightly and tried to keep my balance as the thick shaft began to thrust in and out of my pussy. I gasped sharply as I felt its heavy balls slap against my open cunt, stimulating my enflamed clit with the sharp motion. But more ominous than the heavy balls caressing my outer pussy was the thick bulge I could feel pressing at my entrance. The beast had gotten further into my wet sex than I could have believed possible, but the menacing knot still remained just outside my cunt.

*It won't be able to. It will never be able to...* I thought, and then the beast began to fuck me in earnest.

It drew almost all the way out of my trembling sex and then thrust back in, skewering me ruthlessly on its thick cock, filling me with its shaft. I could feel it panting above me, its horribly strong arms pinning me against its body as it pressed deeper and deeper inside me. The heavy balls slapped a maddening rhythm against my swollen clit as it pounded into me again and again and again.

I moaned out loud, and tears of pain and pleasure coursed down my cheeks as I spread my thighs and gripped the cold iron bars, now slick with my sweat. I tried to concentrate on being open enough, on taking all of the thick cock inside me, on letting the beast ride me to completion. I knew if only I could get through this, I could get through anything. *I have to stand it*, I told myself over and over as its hot breath bathed the back of my neck and its throbbing shaft filled my pussy to the limit. *I have to stand it. There's nothing else I can do.*



Completely against my will, the pleasure began to build within me as the beast fucked into my helpless, open cunt. *Oh, no, I don't want to come like this*, I thought wildly as the engorged shaft pounded into me and its balls slapped against my clit. But as it pressed even deeper into me, I felt a cold fear begin to build in my belly. Because with every thrust inside me, I could feel the menacing bulge get a little closer, pressing hard against the entrance to my cunt, stretching me even wider. And at the same time the pleasure built inside me, tightening like a wire that would soon have to snap.

I gasped as the bulge at the base of its cock pressed even harder against me and I felt it begin to slide into my cunt, just for a moment before the beast pulled back. *Oh, God, no! It almost went in that time!*

I felt myself begin to panic. I would have pulled away if I could have, but the beast had me pinned securely in place, my pussy spread wide and speared on its thick cock and all I could do was tremble and submit, praying I would be able to take it all. I felt like I was drowning in darkness and noise, but the only sounds were my own soft, helpless cries and the wet slap of flesh into flesh as the beast took me.

*Please*, I thought. *Please, no. Please, no. Please, no.* But still I felt the beast press forward, its thick cock plunging a little deeper into my battered cunt, the knot breaching my entrance a fraction of an inch more with each thrust. Soon it would be all the way inside me -- there could be no doubt. The beast was determined to breed me thoroughly, and part of that was forcing its knot all the way into my helpless pussy. At last, with a final ruthless thrust, I felt the bulge at the base of its cock enter me completely, and in a moment of complete despair, I began to come.

*In me. Oh, God, so deep in me!* I thought helplessly as the thick knot slipped all the way into my entrance and lodged securely in my cunt. My own orgasm helped, for as the waves of painful pleasure washed over me, I could feel my muscles spasm, pulling at the bulge of flesh, contracting around it and dragging it deeper into my ravaged pussy. I had no idea how my virgin sex was able to accommodate such a huge invader -- maybe it had something to do with my Amon-kai blood or the bond between Richard and me. But just because I was able to take it, didn't mean it didn't fill me with ecstasy and agony like nothing I had ever felt before.

My nipples hardened in pleasure so intense it was painful, and I felt my sex gush with moisture as the beast sank the final fraction of an inch inside me and began coming as well. Its knot swelled within me, locking us together, and then pulse after pulse of burning essence filled me just as I felt its jaws close around the back of my neck and it held me in place for its assault.

*Oh, God. Oh, God. Ohgodohgodohgod...* I was incapable of thought, my entire world focused on the way I was feeling, the way the beast filled me so completely. And to my horror, it wasn't just shame and pain and degradation I felt -- it was a sense of total rightness. I felt as though Richard or the beast that he had become fit me perfectly, like a key fitting a

lock, to use his own metaphor. It felt *good* to be so completely filled and fucked, it felt *right* to be held and taken this way. Right to bow my head, spread my legs and submit to being owned...to being bred.

I pushed those feelings away from me as hard as I could. It was one thing to sacrifice myself to save my friend, to submit to the beast breeding me the way I would submit to a rape. But it was something else entirely to admit that I enjoyed it. Because I didn't enjoy it -- did I? What kind of a sick person would I be to want to submit to something like this, to submit to having a beast sink its thick cock into my body and fuck me until it came deep inside me? It was unthinkable, horrible.

I wanted to pull away, to get free of Richard's beast and the terrible feelings it raised inside me, but there was no hope of escape and I knew it. I remembered Richard's promise that we would be tied together, possibly even for hours the first time he bred me. With the knot buried deep inside my helpless cunt, I was trapped. The beast was free to ride me for as long as it wished, fucking me ceaselessly, making me come and coming inside me in turn, filling my pussy with its scalding heat until it was finally satisfied. And I knew it might take the beast Richard had become hours to be truly satisfied after he had been waiting so long to breed me.

I made myself face the inevitable. It might be an hour, or many hours, but until the beast finished and the knot at the base of its cock deflated, I was helplessly stuck in this position, a prisoner to its insatiable lust. There was nothing I could do but submit and let Richard fuck me for as long as he desired. My body was no longer my own -- I belonged to the beast he had become, the beast mounting me, claiming me, sealing the bond between us irrevocably and forever.

I lowered my head in defeat as the thick shaft began to move inside me once more, pressing hard against the end of my channel. The beast pulled out, but not far enough to dislodge the knot, and I felt its cum, its essence, like a river of molten lava, burning down both of my inner thighs. But even as some of its essence was lost, the beast replaced it, pumping more cum into my swollen pussy. I felt a new wash of searing heat bathing the mouth of my womb, and I knew the beast was forcing its inhuman seed deep inside my helpless body, determined to breed me thoroughly and well. I was stuck, trapped, and I would never be free. Never be free.

As another wave of pleasure and pain hit me, I felt my head grow light even as the push and pull within my body continued. And then, mercifully, everything went dark.

## Chapter Nineteen

“Rachel? Are you all right? Rachel, talk to me!”

I came back to consciousness slowly, to the sound of an urgent, familiar voice in my ear and a gentle hand patting my cheek. I blinked slowly, trying to focus. It was Richard, holding me in his arms and looking at me with a worried expression. But where was I? And why was I naked?

“Richard?” I murmured uncertainly. At the sound of my voice, his face filled with relief.

“Oh, thank God! Are you all right?”

“I...think so.” I moved my arms and legs experimentally. Everything seemed to work fine, except that I had a deep, almost pleasurable ache between my legs. I pressed my thighs together, wondering where *that* had come from, when suddenly, images began flooding my memory. Richard changing, becoming the beast. The beast coming toward me, sniffing at Genevieve. The way I had been forced to distract it...what I had let it do to me...and how much I had wanted it, even though it was disgusting and wrong.

I let out an involuntary cry as my memory returned completely and tried to jerk out of Richard’s arms. But he wasn’t about to let me go.

“Don’t,” he said softly. “I...I can imagine what must have happened between us, even though I don’t remember any of it. All I know is the bond is sealed -- I can feel it. Did...did I hurt you?”

“What do you think?” I avoided his eyes, avoided thinking about the pain and pleasure he had put me through in his beast form. Of the way my body had reacted against my will -- the worst kind of betrayal.

“I think I want you to tell me what happened and how you feel about it,” he said patiently.

"I'm not exactly overjoyed," I said stiffly. "But you must be happy. Now that the bond is *sealed*, as you put it."

He ran a hand through his hair, and a look of abject shame crossed his handsome features. "Of course I'm not happy. I hurt you. I never wanted that. I'm sorry. So Goddamn sorry, Rache."

"Sorry can't take back what happened," I whispered. "It can't help you undo the past. Can't make me forget..." I trailed off, shaking my head. No way in hell was I going to tell him what I had felt when he bred me. I didn't even want to admit it to myself.

"I don't know what to say to you. How to make this up to you." Richard took one of my hands and looked into my eyes. "But I swear to you, I *swear* that nothing like that will ever happen to you again. Now that the bond between us is sealed, I'll never have to change again if I don't want to. And even if I do change, I won't lose my ability to think or have to kill anyone to come back to my human form. You cured me of all that, Rachel, and for that I'll be forever grateful."

"You're right," I said, pulling my hand out of his. "It's never going to happen again because you and I are finished, Richard. Completely finished. As brother and sister and as...whatever else we were to each other. After tonight I don't want anything else to do with you."

"What?" He looked at me in disbelief. "But we're bonded now, Rachel. We belong together -- we need each other. You don't mean that."

"Yes," I said. "I do." I struggled to sit up and get away from him, away from the constant pull of my body toward his. There was no way I should want him again, not after what I had just been through. But I did, despite the ache between my thighs, I still did. I was sick, and not just physically. I looked away from him, looked around the warehouse in order to keep from meeting his eyes.

We were still in the large iron cage, but now there was a gaping hole between two of the bars. It looked like a creature with immense strength had bent and broken its way through the side of the cage. Richard hadn't been kidding when he said sealing the bond with me would give him ten times his normal strength, apparently. But the damage to the cage didn't concern me nearly as much as what I saw outside it.

Lying in grotesque heaps like piles of dirty laundry, lifeless bodies littered the warehouse floor. It was still very dark, but my night vision told me that Tampa was now less six or seven wiseguys. Along with Gravel Voice and a few others I didn't recognize, I saw the sharp features of Momo "the shark" Andretti. I couldn't believe he'd done so much damage while I was passed out.

"Oh, my God, Richard!" I turned to him and noticed for the first time that there was blood drying on his broad, bare chest. "What did you do?"

"I had to." His green eyes were pleading. "It was either that or let them kill us both. That's what they came here for, Rachel, to see me put on a show and then to shoot us and get rid of the bodies. What was I supposed to do?"

"I...I don't know." The sight of so much blood sickened me, and I found myself longing for the familiar if boring existence I had been leading before Richard came back. I had disobeyed my mother's dying wish and let him into my life, and look where it had gotten me. Not content with incest and bestiality, I could now include mass murder in the list of delightful life experiences Richard had subjected me to. Suddenly, I couldn't stand it any more. I knew I had to get out of there, out of the cage and the warehouse where I had seen and endured so much and away from Richard who was the cause of it, or I would scream.

I got to my feet, ducking away from Richard when he would have lent me a hand, and began gathering my scattered clothing. I didn't bother with the panties, nylons, or bra. I just shrugged back into my shirt and pulled my work skirt back up over my trembling, sticky thighs. There was blood on my skin -- my blood -- and other substances I didn't want to think about. I wanted to take a bath in the worst way, or at least a very hot shower, but I had a lot to do before I could sink into a hot tub filled with bubbles.

"What are you doing?" Richard asked reasonably. "Where do you think you're going?"

"First of all, I'm going to take Genevieve to the ER," I said. As I said the words, I had a sudden surge of panic. "She's still breathing, isn't she?"

Richard nodded slowly. "Yes. She never regained consciousness through the entire thing."

"Thank God for that." The idea of my friend seeing what had happened to me was unthinkable. I didn't want Genevieve to have any permanent damage, but I was grateful beyond belief that she hadn't seen my shameful submission to Richard's beast.

"You're ashamed of it. Ashamed of what we did, aren't you?" Richard asked in a low voice.

"What do you think?" I snapped. "And don't you mean I'm ashamed of what *you* did to me?"

He faced me, his big body tense. "Rachel, tell me now if I raped you. I don't believe I would have taken you completely against your will -- even in beast form -- *especially* in beast form. I can tell by your scent whether you want me or not. If your body is ready for mine."

"I --" I blushed hard, looking away.

"What did I do?" Richard demanded, his deep voice insistent. "I need to know, Rachel. Did I force you down on the ground? Did I?"

I thought of the way I had faced the bars and spread my legs. The way I had offered myself to him, dipping into my wet sex to tempt him with my scent. But what other choice had I had? I shook my head.

"Well?" Richard sounded more and more upset, and I could see I wasn't going anywhere until he got an answer.

"No," I almost shouted. "No, I..." My voice dropped to a whisper. "You were going to kill Genevieve -- to eat her. I had to distract you some way so I...so I let you do what you did. I had to."

"So you didn't want me at all? Your body didn't react to mine in the least?" He was probing now, looking for answers I didn't want to give. He stepped closer to me and lifted my chin to look in my eyes. "Were you wet, Rachel?" he murmured. "Did you come?"

"That's none of your business!" I jerked away from him and pointed at Genevieve's sprawled form. "Help me get her out to the car so I can take her to the ER. And after that, you need to clean up this mess. Bury the bodies or dispose of them some other way -- I don't care. Just don't tell me about it."

I knew that was wrong, knew that I ought to be calling the police right now and letting them handle the bloody crime scene the empty warehouse had become, and the old me would have done just that. But when I tried to care, I just couldn't. The old me -- the me that cared about truth and justice and due process -- was dead. There was a new woman in her place. A woman who had been forged in blood and fire and pain and pleasure, and all she cared about -- all I cared about -- was getting out of here and forgetting everything that had happened in this Godforsaken place.

Richard was still naked, his jeans ripped to shreds, but he didn't seem to mind it -- or maybe he was just concentrating on what he could say to change my mind. He was smart enough not to speak a word until Genevieve was deposited safely in my car and strapped in, but obviously he wasn't about to let me go without a struggle. Before I could start the engine, he came around to the driver's side and grabbed my hands.

"Rachel, don't go. Not like this." There was desperation in his deep voice, and need, too, as if he could never get enough of me. I felt the pull of his body once more, the tingling between my thighs and at the sensitive tips of my breasts. Despite the ordeal I had been through tonight, or maybe because of it, my body still wanted him. But I refused to give in.

"I have to go," I told him. "I have to get Genevieve to the ER. And you have to clean up this mess." I thought of the last time he'd "cleaned up a mess," of his rough tongue between my legs, licking the last of his essence from my sex, and had to suppress a shiver of desire. *I don't want him anymore*, I told myself sternly. *Not like that. Never again.*

"We're bonded now, Rachel," he said, still looking intently into my eyes. "That means neither one of us is complete without the other. Don't break our bond so soon. I need you, and you need me. We'll never be happy apart, either one of us."

"Forget happy," I said, frowning. "I'd settle for *sane* at this point. Richard, I just want things in my life to go back to normal. To go back to the way things were before...before you came back to me."

“Fine.” He released my hands and folded his arms across his broad, bloody chest. “I’ll see you later.”

“I hope not,” I said shortly. I slammed the door and drove away, leaving him standing in the darkness.

## Chapter Twenty

The green, glowing numerals of my dashboard clock said 6:15 by the time I finally left Tampa General Hospital and turned my little car toward home. The first faint blush of dawn colored the sky a delicate gray-pink, and I was supposed to be married in less than five hours.

I felt like hell.

At least Genevieve was going to be okay. She'd regained consciousness not long after being admitted, and I had held her hand until the nurse made me leave. She seemed a little disoriented, but she was still sharp enough to take in my appearance and see that I wasn't my normal self.

"Holy shit, Kemet," she muttered when she got a good look at me. "What the hell happened to you? My head feels like a pride parade is going full tilt inside it, but you look like the parade ran you over."

"I'm fine," I assured her. "And the doctor says you will be, too. Thanks for helping me; I'm just sorry you got knocked around in the process."

She waved her injury off with a flick of her wrist. "Did you find what you were looking for?" she asked, tactfully not mentioning Richard by name.

I cleared my throat. "Yes, unfortunately."

She shook her head and winced. "Ow, my head. I knew I'd be sorry I helped you."

"Don't be sorry," I said, squeezing her hand. "Some things we have to find out for ourselves. You're a good friend, Genevieve. I'll never forget you."

She looked alarmed. "Hey, you sound like you're gonna go end your life or something, Kemet. For God's sake, don't do anything you'll regret."



I laughed, a broken, choppy sound. "It's hard to regret if you're dead, you know. But no, I'm not going to commit suicide. I'm just going to get married. If Charles will still have me."

"Charlie-boy?" She frowned. "You're going back to him? But I thought your brother, er, I mean Richard, was the guy you were jonesing after."

"I thought he was, too." I closed my eyes, seeing flashes of my ordeal in the cage, of the beast plunging into my open, unresisting body, of the pain and pleasure that had filled me.

"So what changed?" Genevieve asked with genuine curiosity.

I sighed. "I guess I found out that sometimes the dull, safe choice is the best. I've gotten involved in some...some pretty bizarre things since Richard came back into my life. I was seduced by the excitement of seeing him again at first, but now...now the normal, boring existence I have with Charles is looking pretty good."

"Well..." Genevieve looked at me doubtfully. "I guess now is the chick-flick moment when I'm supposed to say, 'follow your heart,' or some kind of shit like that. But to be honest, Kemet, I've seen too much on the job to tell you that. What you need to do is follow your gut. If you have warning bells going off inside your head, then don't ignore them. But don't just jump into one situation to get away from another."

"I'm not jumping into marriage with Charles," I pointed out. "We've been engaged for what seems like forever. I'm just going to follow through."

"Okay." Genevieve closed her eyes wearily. "I'm too beat to argue with you here, Kemet. Just take care of yourself and do the best you can to stay out of trouble."

"Lately my best isn't enough," I said with a sigh. "Especially after..."

"After what?" She cracked one eye to look at me. I thought about telling her that the Tampa PD had to worry a lot less about organized crime now and decided against it. She'd find out on her own soon enough, and besides, the nurse was shooing me out the door.

"Never mind," I said. "Just take care of yourself, Genevieve."

"You too," she murmured, her eyes closing again.

I left her dozing peacefully in the hospital bed and headed for home. I didn't want to do it, but I knew that a call to Charles was in order, especially since I had now decided that boring and predictable was good -- very, very good. With Charles, I could be certain of a life of normalcy and stability. And even more importantly, I would never have to worry about my body betraying me into unnatural lusts or moonlight murders. Yes, that was definitely the way to go. Which meant I didn't have much time to get ready.

On the way home as I watched the sunrise, I called my fiancé, hoping to get his voicemail again. It would be so much easier to just leave a message and show up at the wedding as though nothing had happened than to dredge up an explanation of why I had missed my own rehearsal dinner. But luck wasn't with me this time. Charles picked up on the first ring.

"Rachel?" he asked, his voice sounding tense and irritated. "Where the hell are you? And where were you last night? Mother was beside herself when you didn't show."

I sighed wearily and thought, *Here we go*. "Didn't you get my message?" I asked him. "I was with a friend. I, uh, had to take her to the hospital. In fact," I added with sudden inspiration, "I just left the Tampa General ER not ten minutes ago." It wasn't a complete lie, but it wasn't really the truth either and telling it made my stomach hurt.

"This must be some wonderful friend for you to stand me up at our rehearsal dinner." Charles sounded extremely pissed. Or "put out," as he might have said himself. "Are you going to stand me up for the wedding as well, *dearest*?" he asked in an icy tone.

"No. I'll be there." I swallowed the angry retort I wanted to throw at him. He deserved to be angry at me. In fact, he deserved to be *much* angrier than he was; he just didn't know it.

"Are you certain?" Charles's voice softened a little. "I really was terribly worried about you, darling. You weren't home and you didn't answer your phone, and I guess I just assumed...well, that you'd reconsidered."

"You thought I got cold feet and decided to skip town?"

"Well, from the way you've been ducking my phone calls the last two weeks and the cool reception I've been getting from when you *do* pick up, it didn't seem to be an unreasonable assumption," he pointed out.

I felt a sudden stab of guilt. Charles might be a bore sometimes, but he was still my fiancé. I'd made a commitment to him, and I knew I needed to honor it no matter how empty I felt when I imagined myself walking down the aisle to stand by his side.

"I'm sorry," I said in a low voice, taking the turn for my house. "I know I haven't really been emotionally available lately, Charles. I've just...I let myself get distracted."

"So I gathered," he said dryly. Neither one of us mentioned Richard's name, but it hung in the air like a boulder between us.

"I'm back on track now," I said in a stronger voice, trying to assure myself as much as Charles. "No more distractions. And I promise I'll show up at the church on time."

"Well...all right then. I'll be waiting for you. You're going to make a ravishing bride, you know." His voice dropped into a sexy growl. "And I, for one, can't wait to ravish you."

"And you're going to make a handsome groom. I...I can't wait." I swallowed hard, hearing a click in my throat. "I better go, Charles. I just pulled up at my house and it's going to take me forever to get ready."

"Shall I send Mother or Ursula to help you?" he asked considerately. "I know they'd be more than pleased."

The thought of having to deal with either my nasty-nice, fake-polite future mother-in-law or the simpering Ursula at this time of day turned my stomach.

“No, no,” I said hastily. “I’ll be fine. In fact, I think I need a little alone time. To calm my nerves.”

“Well, if you’re sure...”

“I am. But thank you, Charles. And I’ll see you at Our Lady of the Immaculate Heart right on time, I promise.” It was like I was promising to keep a business appointment instead of talking about my own wedding, but I refused to let myself think about that.

“All right then, I’ll let you go. And, Rachel?” he said.

“Hmm?” I was already getting out of the car, planning to take the hottest bath I could stand.

“I love you.” Charles sounded so sincere that it stopped me dead in my tracks.

“I...love you, too,” I forced myself to say. The words felt heavy and dry in my throat, but he didn’t seem to notice.

“Good, then get ready to stand up in front of five hundred people and say so.” He laughed and hung up.

I flipped my phone closed and made my way to the door. A bath, I just needed a nice hot bath to wash the grime and craziness of the previous night off my skin, and then I’d be ready to get married. Wouldn’t I?

## Chapter Twenty-one

I lit an aromatherapy candle and lowered myself into the steaming hot tub. Oh, God, this was *exactly* what I needed. I just wanted to relax and --

“Ouch!” I gasped and winced as the heated water lapped over the sensitive flesh between my legs. Spreading my legs, I examined myself carefully, noting that the soft lips of my sex were slightly swollen and red. And I was *really* sore. It wasn’t surprising, considering what I’d been through the night before, but I still had no idea how I was going to explain it to Charles. Well, maybe I could plead wedding day exhaustion, and he would leave me alone at least for our first night as a married couple. I just hoped my condition would improve after that or I was going to be in a world of trouble. The absence of a hymen could be explained away as an accident with a fence post or riding a boy’s bike when I was a girl, but the fact that I had been so obviously and thoroughly taken might be harder to pretend away.

“I can’t think about that now,” I told myself, sinking lower in the bath until the hot water lapped against my chest. “I’ll worry about it later, after the wedding.”

My skin was finally used to the heat of the water, and I felt my tense muscles begin to relax. The knots in my shoulders eased and my eyelids began to feel like they had been dipped in lead. The weariness and tension of the night before seemed to seep out of me, and before I knew it, I had fallen asleep.

I had the dream again -- the boy, the moon, and the statues. Only this time when the wolf appeared, it changed into Richard. He held me close, and our bodies fit together like two pieces of a puzzle, my head tucked neatly under his chin and his muscular arms wrapped around me. I sighed in contentment because it felt so good. Richard was telling me that everything would be all right from now on. That we were bonded for life and he would never leave me. That he would always protect and defend and love me.

His hot mouth trailed down my neck, and he sucked gently at my tight, pink nipples. I felt a wave of pleasure take me, and I moaned and opened my arms, welcoming his advances, offering myself completely for his love ...

The next thing I knew, strong arms lifted me out of the tub, and someone was patting me dry with a soft towel. I moaned in contentment as he considerately blotted the beads of water from the tips of my sensitive breasts and spread my legs wider so that he could pat my vulnerable sex dry as well.

The dream was still so strong in my brain that at first I wasn't even surprised when I opened my eyes and saw that it was Richard who was drying me off. He was shirtless as he had been the night before but the blood had been washed off the tan expanse of his broad chest. All he wore was a pair of tight blue jeans that defined his narrow waist, and he looked damn good. I could feel myself wanting him, wanting to be closer to him, to feel his lips on my skin... Suddenly, the reality of the situation rushed back, and I pushed against the muscular planes of his chest, trying to get away.

"Hold still, Rachel, and let me examine you." His deep voice was stern and I saw that he was still looking carefully at the swollen lips of my sex.

"Richard, no!" I was almost too tired to fight him, but I knew I had to try. "What are you even doing here?" I demanded. "I thought I told you we were through."

"I had to get my things," he said absently, still looking between my legs. "God, Rachel, I really hurt you, didn't I?"

I blushed, remembering the way I'd incurred the injuries. "I'm just a little tender, that's all."

He shook his head. "No, I was rough with you. Really rough. I'm so sorry; the beast must have gotten out of control."

"A...a little," I admitted, remembering the way the thick cock had filled me to the limit, the way the beast had forced its broad knot into my tight sheath until I moaned and cried and came and fainted.

"I'm sorry, Rachel," he said again, looking at me. "The first breeding is always a little rough. There's this instinct a Lanor-zor has to fuck hard and deep, to get as far into his Lana-zeel's pussy as he can before he releases his essence. It makes for a better, stronger bond."

I blushed even harder. "I sensed something like that," I admitted. "You, uh, were pretty wild."

"I wish I could remember it." He sounded wistful. Then his voice dropped into a lower, more intimate tone. "Did I...was my knot all the way inside you or just partially? Breeding is possible either way, but it's better when the knot goes all the way in." His big hand touched me lightly, tracing the slit between my pussy lips as though illustrating his point.

I shivered and pressed my thighs together tightly. "No, you...you got it all the way in. All the way inside me before you came. You...you filled me up completely," I admitted, my

stomach fluttering at the memory. Then I reminded myself that I was supposed to be getting ready for my wedding. I forced myself to meet his eyes. "You should be proud of yourself, Richard," I told him, my voice hard and cold. "You fucked me hard and bred me well. Now, can we stop talking about this so I can get dressed for my wedding?"

His face paled, but his voice was calm when he answered. "If you think I'm here to stop you, Rachel, you're wrong. I can see you've made up your mind. I just came to collect my things, and I promise I'll leave and get out of your life forever, if you'll just let me do one thing."

"If you think I'll let you 'breed' me again, you're mistaken," I said flatly, even though my heart skipped a beat and my sex was instantly wet at the thought.

"No, nothing like that." Richard shook his head. "I don't want to breed you, Rachel. I just want to heal you. I want to heal the damage I caused before I go." His fingertips brushed against the swollen lips of my pussy lightly, and I bit back a moan. "Will you let me at least do that?"

I remembered how he had healed my arm the night before, lapping at the long gash in my arm with his tongue. I opened my mouth to tell him no way in hell and shut it again abruptly. Hadn't I just been thinking that there was no way I could explain the way my sex had obviously been opened and used to Charles? I needed a way to get rid of the evidence of what had happened between Richard and me the night before, and Richard was actually giving me the perfect answer.

Still, I didn't know how much I trusted myself around him. I had allowed him to do unspeakable acts to my body last night, and still I craved more. If I let him start by "healing" me between my legs, where would it stop?

"I won't go too far," Richard said softly, as if reading my mind. "I won't breed you without your consent, and I won't come in you either, Rachel. I just want to heal you. My jeans will stay on the entire time."

"Well...I guess as long as it doesn't take too long," I said stiffly, glancing at the clock on the bathroom wall. "I have to be at the church in a couple of hours, and I still have to get dressed."

"It won't take that long," he promised, taking me by the hand. "Come on, Rache; let me heal you one last time."

I sighed and allowed him lead me into the bedroom and position me on the bed so that my legs were hanging over the side. He got on his knees before me on the floor and gently spread my thighs. As his dark head bent to the barely-there blond fuzz that decorated the top of my mound, I reached out a hand and stopped him.

"Rache?" He looked up at me uncertainly.

"Just...just heal me, Richard," I said, my heart thumping in my chest. "Nothing else, okay?"

He nodded gravely. "I'll only put my mouth where you need to be healed," he promised softly.

"All right." I didn't know if I trusted him, or myself for that matter, but I knew how much I wanted him. *This is the last time*, I promised myself. *The very last time and then I'll never see him again*. I didn't want to think how empty and sad I felt about that, so I made myself concentrate on the physical instead. On what he was doing between my legs.

He had his large, warm hands on both my inner thighs, holding me open, and I knew that even if I tried to shut my legs I wouldn't be able to. So I didn't try. Instead, I let him spread me as wide open as he wanted without protest. Even when my pussy lips parted, showing the ripe, inner part of my cunt to him, I didn't complain.

"So soft," Richard breathed, his breath tickling my blond curls. "So beautiful. Hold still, Rachel. I want to do this right. Want to show you how much I love you one more time."

"All...all right," I murmured, the words catching in my throat.

"Good girl," he whispered, and then he went to work.

First he dropped tiny, soft kisses all over my trembling pussy and then he started licking. He lapped gently at the outside of my cunt, bathing my outer pussy thoroughly with his tongue. I felt a soothing warmth as he licked and kissed, and I wondered if I was healed already but I didn't say anything. I was ashamed to admit it, but I didn't want him to stop.

But he did stop, long enough to look up at me and ask another question.

"Did I hurt you here, Rachel?" he murmured, tracing the length of my slit with one fingertip.

"What...what?" I almost gasped at his intimate touch.

"When I was fucking you...breeding you." Richard's fingertip circled my sensitive clit, stroking expertly, as though he knew my body better than I did. "Did I hurt you here?" he asked again.

"I...yes," I breathed even though it wasn't strictly true. The beast he had become had spent much more time making sure its cock was buried completely in my cunt than it had on foreplay. But somehow I couldn't forbid him to stop.

Richard didn't wait for me to change my mind. "All right," he murmured softly, and then I felt his lips on me again. He sucked my clit into his hot mouth and laved it gently with the tip of his tongue, teasing me, making me crazy.

"Oh, God, Richard!" I groaned, as he continued to work on me with his tongue. I could feel the swelling and tenderness going away, but a new heat was growing inside me. It was as though my body was blossoming under his mouth, opening for him in anticipation of a much deeper connection. It was all I could do not to wrap my thighs around his head, grab his thick black hair and thrust up shamelessly to meet him. But somehow I restrained myself.

“God, you taste delicious.” Richard looked up again, his mouth wet and shiny with my juices. “Are you hurt inside, Rachel?” he asked me, as two long fingers entered my wet cunt. “Deep inside here, where I put my cock?”

I nodded, almost unable to speak. He was asking if I wanted his tongue inside me, and the answer was God, *yes*. But, still, I couldn’t let myself react.

“Spread a little wider, baby,” Richard told me in a hoarse voice. “Let me get all the way inside your pussy. Let me heal you with my tongue.”

I bit my lip so hard I nearly bled as he tilted my pelvis and spread my legs wider for a better angle.

*He’s healing me*, I reminded myself, even as I felt his tongue slide down from my clit and begin to enter my wet pussy. *I just have to lie here and take it until he’s done*. I gripped handfuls of the bedspread as Richard pressed closer to me, forcing his tongue deeper and deeper into my open cunt, healing me, loving me, tasting me.

Richard seemed to sense my determination not to react because he looked up for a moment and met my eyes. “You’ll heal better if you let me make you come, Rache,” he said matter-of-factly. “Come on, just let yourself go. Let me make you come one more time.”

I didn’t know if I believed him or not, but the pleasure building inside me was too great to deny. As his tongue plunged deeply into me, I felt the broad pad of his thumb rub firmly over my clit, and then I was coming, coming so hard I felt like I might pass out from the intense sensations.

Richard guided me through my orgasm and then kissed me once more, gently, at the top of my slit. I took a deep trembling breath, trying to come back to myself. The orgasm had been so intense I almost felt like I was floating on a cloud of pure contentment. It was hard to want to do anything but just lie there, but I knew it was time to get up. Time to get ready to go.

I sat up reluctantly, but just as I was about to get off the bed, a wave of longing hit me. I gasped and fell back as the physical need assaulted me, a need that demanded that I be filled here and now, that I spread my legs and allow myself to be fucked, to be bred.

“God!” I moaned, grasping handfuls of the coverlet and arching my back. The hunger inside me was so great it was almost a pain. “God, what’s wrong with me?”

Richard looked concerned. “Your body must be reacting to your orgasm with a biological need for a second breeding. Sometimes it happens when a first breeding is especially deep and intense and the bond between the Lanor-zur and the Lana-zeel is unusually strong.”

“You...you did this on purpose!” I accused him. Part of me wanted to kill him and part of me wanted to fuck him; it was confusing to say the least.

He shook his head. “Not entirely. It doesn’t happen every time, although I admit I hoped it would. I was hoping you would see how much we need each other.”



"You bastard!" I swore at him. "There's no way I'm letting you breed me again, so what the hell am I supposed to do about it?" I arched my back again as another wave of need came over me. I was desperate to have him between my legs, but I was damned if I would give in to the sudden rush of lust that possessed me.

He frowned. "I hate to tell you this, but you'll just have to let it pass. It shouldn't take long, and it will get better once I leave."

"What do you have to do with how long it lasts?" I glared at him.

He shrugged, looking unhappy. "I make it worse just by being around you. Your body is fertile right now, and it wants me -- it wants its mate."

"You're not...my mate," I ground out, fighting another wave of desire as it rippled through me. God, I was so wet and ready I felt like I could even take Richard's beast again with no problem. In fact, the thought of that huge cock with its swollen knot forcing itself up inside my cunt made me hotter than ever. Which made me angry at my body for wanting such perverted things. What was wrong with me?

Richard shook his head. "You can deny it all you want to, Rachel, but we're bonded now. As far as your body is concerned I *am* your Lanor-zur -- your mate. Even if we don't act on it."

"Is this going...going to be a problem in the future?" I demanded angrily, panting. I could just imagine being slammed with waves of lust at inconvenient and inappropriate times -- like when I was pleading in court.

"No," he said in a low voice. "You won't have it anymore after I leave. Eventually the bond will fade and we'll go back to the way we were before I met you."

"Meaning?" I asked, gritting my teeth.

"Your need for me will evaporate, and my self-control on the night of the full moon will disappear as well. You'll stop wanting me, and I'll start killing again." He said it simply and quietly, and I could tell he was just stating a fact, not trying to make me feel guilty. But that made me even angrier.

"I don't want to hear about it," I nearly shouted at him. I forced myself to get off the bed, even though my legs were weak with lust. I kept my distance from Richard, although I needed him so badly I shook. Staying away when he was within easy reach was like being an alcoholic and having a full bar right in front of me

"Fine. I'll leave." He looked at me so sadly that I was tempted to give him a hug goodbye. Richard had only been in my life for a little over a month, but he had changed me and the way I lived completely. Hot tears stung my eyes at the thought of being torn away from him, of never seeing him again. But as another wave of lust passed through me, I knew I couldn't afford to get anywhere near him. If I hugged him, I would fuck him. It was as simple and as crude as that.

“Please, Richard, just go,” I croaked, holding onto one of the posts of my bed to anchor myself. To keep from going to him.

“I love you,” he whispered. “I’ll always love you, Rachel.”

“Please...” The tears were pouring down my cheeks now, making me feel weak and helpless. In another moment I would be in his arms, my wedding plans and promises to Charles completely forgotten.

Richard gave me one last, longing look from those pale green wolf’s eyes, the eyes we shared. And then he turned and walked out of my room. I heard his footsteps in the hallway and kitchen and then the sound of the door opening and closing.

He was gone.

## Chapter Twenty-two

I don't know how I got into my wedding dress or from my house to Our Lady of the Immaculate Heart -- I have no memory of any of it. I only know I got there in time for my future mother-in-law to fuss with my hair and put some make-up on me.

"My gracious, Rachel," she murmured while she powdered my cheeks with enough blusher to make me look like a whore. "You're just as pale as can be. Are you having the pre-wedding jitters?"

"I don't think so," I murmured wearily. "I just...I'm just tired. I had a very long night." I sat in front of a mirror in a little anteroom to one side of the chapel, letting her work on me. My eyes, which were now ringed in dark grey liner, looked tired and troubled, and my complexion was alarmingly washed out under the generous blusher. The waves of need had faded after Richard left, leaving a cold emptiness in their wake. But at least I was no longer having lust seizures.

"Oh, yes, I heard about that." Charles's mother tsked disapprovingly. "Gracious, what a good friend you are, up all night at the hospital and missing your own rehearsal dinner."

"Yeah, I'm sorry about that," I mumbled, trying to hold still as she applied some kind of extremely sticky, red gloss to my lips. I almost never wore much make-up, and to suddenly have five pounds of it on my face made me feel weighed down and clownish.

"Well, Charles and I were just worried sick, but we're glad you're all right, dear," she said, flicking at my eyelashes with a mascara wand. "He was pacing and fretting half the evening, but I told him that if you weren't there you had a good reason not to show."

"Uh-huh." Suddenly a wave of guilt swamped me. A good reason not to show? How about letting Richard breed me, getting lost in the painful ecstasy of his cock buried inside me to the hilt while I gave him what I had been promising to Charles for two long years? How was that for a good reason?

"Why, Rachel, where are you going?" My future mother-in-law looked flustered, and I realized I was on my feet and heading for the door.

"To see Charles," I said, my hand on the knob.

"Oh, you can't!" she exclaimed, one plump hand fluttering to her chest. "It's bad luck for you to see him on your wedding day before you get to the altar."

But I didn't give a damn for bad luck. I only knew I couldn't keep what had happened between Richard and me a secret from Charles any longer. I couldn't start a marriage based on lies. I would tell Charles what had happened, and if he still wanted me, so be it. If not...I didn't know what would happen if not. I only knew what I had to do.

I found my fiancé in the anteroom opposite my own, checking his reflection in the mirror. His dark gold hair was smoothed back neatly, and he looked devastatingly handsome in his tailored Armani tux. I tried to feel something about that, tried to feel the same waves of desire that overcame me when I was near Richard. But I felt nothing.

"Hello, dearest." He turned to face me and gave me a scolding little smile. "You're not meant to be in here, you know."

"I know, but I need to talk to you, Charles." I shifted uneasily, the huge, puffy white skirt of my dress swishing as I moved.

He frowned. "You look serious; I hope you're not getting cold feet after all. The ceremony is just about to begin."

"I'm not," I said steadily. "But you might when you hear what I have to say."

His handsome features took on a grave cast, and he sat down on the small blue couch in the middle of the room. "All right," he said. "I'm listening."

There was nothing I could do but just say it. I took a deep breath, smelling the aroma of the church, wood polish, and dusty hymnals mixed with the hundreds of white roses Charles had ordered to decorate the chapel.

"I'm not a virgin anymore, Charles," I told him. "I lied about last night. I wasn't in the ER all night -- only part of this morning. The other part of the evening I was with Richard and we...we had sex."

"My God!" His face twisted in revulsion, and he sprang up from the couch and began to pace. "Are you serious, Rachel? You actually had sex with your own brother?" he demanded.

"He's *not* my brother," I shot back at him, and to my surprise, for the first time I really meant it. When I thought of Richard, when I saw his face in my mind, I no longer automatically labeled him *family*. "He's not my brother," I said again, still trying the concept out. I tried to think when I had finally let go of the old taboo in my mind and couldn't put my finger on it. Maybe it was because my physical need for Richard was so strong, or maybe the new bond between us had broken the old one. Maybe my emotions of love and lust were stronger than a tie seventeen years in the past. Or maybe it had finally just sunken in. "Richard is *not my brother*." I said it a third time, and Charles looked impatient.

"Yes, you've said that," he pointed out, his voice cold. "But that wasn't the song you were singing a month ago when he first wandered back into your life."

"I...I know," I said, scrambling for an explanation. "But I don't feel that way about him anymore. I just...I don't."

"Well, it was a short step from affection between siblings to screwing, wasn't it?" he sneered. "Have you been fucking him all along? Laughing at me behind my back?"

"No," I said, trying to keep my voice steady and my chin up. After all, I felt I deserved every bit of what he dished out. "It's been a gradual thing. I swear I never meant to hurt you, Charles. If...if you want to call the wedding off, I'll understand completely."

"Call it off?" He ran a hand through his hair, mussing the carefully combed strands. "Not bloody likely. There are five hundred guests out there waiting to see us wed, and two of them are U.S. Senators. Not to mention all the clients from my firm and my mother's society friends. No, we're getting married today if it kills us -- I'd be ruined socially if we didn't."

I felt my heart sink. "Then...then you still want me? Even after what I did?"

"I want what I waited for," he snarled. "What I paid for." He grabbed my left hand and held it up, gesturing at the huge, antique diamond engagement ring I'd somehow remembered to slip back onto my finger before I left for the church.

"What you *paid* for?" I stared at him in disbelief. "What do you think this is -- some kind of financial merger?"

"Oh, there's going to be a merger, all right." His laughter was low and ugly. "A merger between you and me *tonight*. I was all prepared to be careful with you, dearest, to break you in gently on your first time. But since that happy little occasion came and went without my participation, I think we can dispense with the gentleness, don't you? In fact I think a little rough riding might be the order of the day."

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said, but I had a cold feeling in the pit of my stomach that I did. Charles was talking about rape, and despite my rough initiation to sex at the hands of Richard's beast the night before, my mind rebelled against it. The thought of Charles touching me, taking me the way Richard had, turned my stomach. In fact, just the feel of his hand encircling my wrist made me feel sick and weak, as though I'd been breathing some kind of poison gas.

"I think you *do* know." Charles wore a hard, angry grin. "I think you know exactly what I have planned for you tonight, darling."

"I can't do this," I said. "I don't know why I thought I could." I twisted the diamond ring off my finger and held it out to him. "Here, take it and let me go, Charles. I'll get out of your life, and you'll never have to see me again."

"Haven't you been listening to me?" His grip on my wrist tightened painfully. "I said we're going through with this wedding, even if it is a sham. I've waited two years to have you, and I won't wait a second more."

I stared at him in disbelief. "You're crazy," I said. "You can't *make* me marry you. And if you think you can get me up to the altar and I'll say 'I do' because I'm too embarrassed to make a scene, you're dead wrong. I don't care if there are five *thousand* people sitting out and half of them are senators; I'm not marrying you, Charles. Now, *let me go!*"

"Not until I get what I paid for!" he snarled. And then he pushed me hard against the flowery wallpaper that decorated the antechamber's wall.

The breath rushed out of my lungs, and I was momentarily stunned at his sudden actions. The only time Charles had ever acted remotely like this was when he had grabbed my arm in the police station the night I insisted on taking Richard home with me. I had never dreamed he had such violence in him -- or such malice.

The feeling of him fumbling to get under the voluminous white tulle skirt of my dress broke through my disbelief. Apparently, Charles had decided not to wait for the wedding night, since there wasn't going to be one, and he wanted what he considered his due now. I felt bad about cheating on him, bad about jilting him at the altar in front of his family, clients, and friends. But not nearly bad enough to let him rape me.

"Stop it! *Stop!*" I demanded, pushing at his hands and kicking at his legs. But Charles was like a man possessed. He wanted me, and he was intent on having me. This was so much different than the night before, I thought disjointedly as I struggled with my fiancé turned would-be rapist. So entirely different, and it wasn't just because Charles was behaving more like a beast than Richard ever had.

The night before I had feared Richard in his beast form, but I had wanted him as well. Or rather, my body had wanted his. I had been wet and ready to accept him, my nipples tight peaks of need and my sex flooded with my own desire. I had none of those feelings now. Now I was just frightened and revolted. And weak...so very weak. Just being near him seemed to make me ill.

"Charles, *no!*" I gasped as he got his hand up my skirt and ripped away the crotch of my sheer white nylons, leaving me defenseless. "Get away -- get back!" I threw the heavy diamond ring at him hard since it was the only weapon I had. It hit him on the cheek and left a bloody scratch, but that only seemed to make him angrier.

"Hold still, *dearest*," he snapped, working to get my legs apart. "It will all be over in a moment. Just lean back, relax, and enjoy yourself. Or don't -- I don't give a damn either way."

I beat at him weakly, feeling like I was moving under water. I felt sick -- literally sick to my stomach. I wondered distantly if throwing up on his head would stop Charles in his mad assault and doubted it. He was enraged -- a man who'd been cheated of his rightful property. Because that was all I was to him, I now realized, just property. A pretty piece of arm candy to show off during the wedding of the decade to all his clients and society buddies. I just wished I had seen it sooner. And even more, I wished I had the strength to push him off me. But I felt so weak, so terribly weak...

“Get off her. She’s *mine!*” The sudden roar in the tiny room was so loud I thought it would make my ears bleed. With immense relief, I saw Richard storm through the door, his green eyes glowing possessively. But Charles was so intent on having me that he didn’t even look around. He had the fly of the elegant tux trousers open now, and his short stubby cock stuck out, proving that he meant business. Despite my efforts to push him away, he still fumbled between us to make a connection. Only my huge skirt had saved me so far, but I had the feeling he was crazy enough to just rip it off in order to get to the prize.

Richard didn’t give him a second warning. Instead, he grabbed Charles by the scruff of the neck, as though my fiancé were a small kitten, and heaved him across the room. I heard a hollow thumping sound as Charles’s head hit the wall and he landed in a heap in the corner. He scrambled to his feet indignantly, clutching his head with one hand.

“How...how dare you?” he spluttered, pointing at Richard. “This is my wedding and that’s *my* fiancée.”

“Not anymore.” Richard’s voice was a low, menacing growl. “She’s my mate now. You ever come near her again, and I’ll kill you.” He looked at me. “Are you okay? He didn’t hurt you, did he, Rache?”

I swallowed hard. “I...I’m fine. Just a little sick to my stomach.”

“Well, well, and supposedly he only just fucked you last night. Having morning sickness already, *dearest?*” Charles hissed.

“That’s enough.” Richard took a step toward Charles, and at first I thought my fiancé, or should I say *ex-fiancé*, would stand up to him, which would have been a very stupid move. Instead, he straightened his tie and cleared his throat.

“Well,” he muttered and ran a hand through his hair to try and restore it to its former state of perfection. He reminded me of a cat that has been surprised into being clumsy and is grooming itself to hide its embarrassment.

“I’m leaving, Charles,” I said, smoothing my dress down with shaking hands. “I’m sorry it had to end this way.”

“Go on, then. Go.” He stood up straighter and gave me a superior look, as though dismissing me like a grubby child who’s been caught where she doesn’t belong. As though he hadn’t just been trying to rape me.

“Tell your mother I’m sorry she went to all this trouble for nothing,” I said. I was through apologizing to him, but I did feel bad that his mother had planned, not to mention paid for, the entire wedding for nothing.

“I’ll tell her she was right about you all along,” Charles snarled, looking down his aquiline nose at me. “She always said you were trash, now I can see she was right. But first I shall go inform my guests that there will be no wedding today -- or any day for that matter. Not with *you*, Rachel. I hope you realize what you’re missing because I’ll *never* take you back.”

"I don't want you to," I said quietly. "Don't worry, Charles, I'll be perfectly happy if I never see you again."

He lifted his chin. "We'll see if you're still singing the same tune once you've had five or six months of living in incestuous squalor with that...that --"

Richard's menacing growl cut him off, and Charles shook his head and repeated, "We'll just *see*." He stalked past us, giving Richard a very wide berth, and slammed the door of the antechamber behind him.

After a moment of silence, Richard turned to me. "Do you think we should have told him his dick was still hanging out of his fly before we let him go out in front of five hundred people to tell them the wedding is off?"

I burst into a fit of hysterical giggles. "Was it still? I didn't even notice."

"He's swinging in the breeze," Richard assured me, beginning to laugh, too. Then he came over and put a soothing hand on my shoulder. "Are you okay?"

At his touch on my skin the horrible weakness seemed to melt away, and the nausea that had been oppressing me passed at once. Wow, touching him was better than taking a Tums and chasing it down with a Red Bull.

I was still laughing at the idea of Charles stepping into the crowded chapel with his dick hanging out -- what would the U.S. Senators think of *that* -- and the crazy thought about Richard made me laugh even harder. I don't know when the laughter turned to tears, but suddenly, I was sobbing in his arms.

"Hey, it's all right, baby. It's all right." He cradled me close, and I fit against him perfectly just the way I always had. "Come on." Richard swung me up into his arms and kicked open the door.

"Where...where are we going?" I managed to ask, my head still buried in his shoulder.

"Home," Richard told me. "To finish this once and for all."



## Chapter Twenty-three

Richard had taken a taxi to the church, so we went home in my car with him driving. I rolled down my window and let my hair blow in the breeze, taking gulps of fresh air to clear my head and dry the tears that streaked my cheeks.

We pulled up in front of the house, and I tried to get out of the car, only to find myself still dizzy and a little weak -- probably more from the emotional scene I'd just been in than the lingering aftereffects of touching Charles. Richard saw how I was feeling and put a hand on my arm to stop me.

"Hold on," he said. He came around to my side of the car and swung me up into his arms. Then, without a trace of irony, he carried me over the threshold and shut the door.

Once in the bedroom he helped me strip out of the confining, white tulle wedding dress and the ruined remains of my nylons and panties. It occurred to me that we were right back where we'd been a few hours before, but I was too worn out to care. I glanced in the mirror as Richard got me undressed and saw that I looked like a raccoon. All of Charles's mother's perfectly applied make-up seemed to have pooled around my eyes very unattractively.

"I'm a mess," I said, pointing at my face. "I need to wash all this goop off me. Come to think of it, I want to wash Charles off me, too."

"Not a problem." Richard disappeared into the bathroom, and soon I heard running water and a cloud of steam began to float out the door. He came back in a minute, and this time he was naked. He scooped me up in his arms again and carried me into the bathroom.

Ignoring my weak protests, he stepped into the shower, still holding me, and got us both wet in the steaming spray. The hot water on my skin seemed to revive me, and I got him to let me down, insisting I could stand on my own. Richard held on to me, just in case,

his large, strong hands planted firmly on my hips while I lathered my face with a washcloth and scrubbed off the make-up.

I wanted to wash my body, too, but Richard took the washcloth out of my hand.

"Let me," he murmured, and for some reason, I did.

He added a big dollop of my favorite peach body wash to the cloth and began to wash me with long, slow strokes, looking in my eyes the entire time. I shivered at his intense gaze and the warm, sensual way he washed my body. Now that the water had revived me and we were in close proximity again, I could feel my body wanting his once more, and it was obvious he wanted me, too. I tried not to notice the water droplets beading on the muscular planes of his broad chest, running down his rippling abdominals and pointing the way to his erect shaft. I tried not to see it, but it wasn't easy when my eyes kept wanting to return to it again and again. My mind kept showing me quick glimpses of the night before in the cage and that morning when he had healed me with his tongue. It was an X-rated slide show that wouldn't stop. But as much as my body wanted him, my brain still wasn't sure. I knew I had better tell my body that in a hurry because in a minute it would be too late.

Richard had dropped the washcloth and started soaping me all over with his bare hands. He turned me so that my back was to his front and I leaned against his broad chest. I felt his hard cock digging into the back of my thigh and gasped as he cupped my full breasts in his hands and then plucked gently at my tight nipples, shooting sparks of desire down to my wet sex. Then his hands traveled lower, tracing a path down my lower belly to cup my mound.

"Spread your legs, Rachel," he murmured in my ear.

"Richard," I tried to protest, but his name caught in my throat. Instead I found my legs parting. I moaned as one slick, soapy finger slipped between my swollen pussy lips, washing me gently, tracing my aching clit as he dipped into my liquid depths.

"Just relax, baby, and let me wash you," he whispered. "I love how wet you are -- how wet you get when I touch you. Can you feel how much we need each other? Can you feel how ready you are to take me?" He sank two long fingers deep into my cunt and fucked me with a slow, hypnotic rhythm I felt helpless to stop. They felt so good -- so right in me. But not nearly as right as his cock would have felt. I needed it in me, filling me. Needed to feel his knot swelling inside me once more to join us completely. But, no -- I pushed the thought away.

"Richard," I gasped, even as I spread my legs wider for him. "Richard, please..."

"There, now I think you're clean," he murmured in my ear after what seemed like an eternity of his thick fingers stroking inside me. "Let's rinse you off."

I bit back a gasp as he spread me open, parting my cunt lips and baring me to the hot, pounding spray of the shower. My tender clit throbbed at the rhythmic stimulation, and my legs were getting so weak with pleasure that I was afraid they wouldn't hold me up.

"You have such a sweet, soft little pussy, Rachel," he growled softly in my ear as he touched me. "I know I just tasted you this morning, but I want to do it again. I want to taste your sweet juices mixed with the water and feel you grab my shoulders while I put my tongue deep inside you."

His words made me moan with desire, and I knew I had to stop him before we went too far. If I let him taste me again then I would certainly let him fuck me --breed me -- again, too. Because if he made me come and those waves of needing and lust came back, if my body demanded a second breeding, I wouldn't be able to deny him this time.

"Richard, stop," I said as he turned me to face him. "Stop this now. We...we need to talk."

"What's there to talk about?" he growled softly. "Our bodies need each other, Rachel. By denying me you're only denying yourself."

"I...I realize that," I said, still trying to make my brain work when it wanted to just shut down and let my body take over. "But, Richard, just because I'm not with Charles anymore doesn't mean I want to be with you. Maybe...maybe I need a little time to recover. Did you ever think of that? And I still have...issues with you. Deep ones that I don't know if I can ever resolve."

"All right." He sighed and turned off the water. "But can we at least *try* to resolve them? Will you at least talk to me instead of running away this time, Rachel?"

"Yes." I nodded, knowing that I owed him that much at least. "Yes, Richard, I will. But not here -- I'm freezing!"

He frowned. "You're shivering. Here." He grabbed some towels hanging on the rack by the shower, took one for himself, and handed one to me.

I rubbed myself all over and wrapped the towel securely around me, knotting it under my arm. Then I squeezed the water out of my damp hair and stepped out of the tub. Richard looked like he wanted to help me, but I felt stronger now and more in control of myself. I knew that if I let him touch me again, the balance of power might shift. So I kept my distance as we went back into the bedroom and sat on opposite sides of the bed.

"Now." Richard had draped his towel around his lean hips, and he sat easily at the foot of the mattress, staring at me.

I stared at him in incomprehension. "Now, what?"

"Now tell me about these issues." He rubbed a hand over his face wearily. "Is it the whole brother-sister thing again? Because I swear to you, Rachel, there's not so much as a drop of common blood in our veins. We're not even fourth cousins twice removed."

"No," I said, curling my legs under me carefully and smoothing down the edge of my towel. "No, it's not that exactly." I didn't want to tell him what it was -- didn't want to tell him in the worst way because it was so embarrassing I could barely think about it, let alone talk about it.

"Well then?" He looked at me questioningly. "Is it that you're still having problems accepting how I dealt with my curse before I found you? Because honestly, Rache, I didn't just pick people at random. I actually researched their lives. I followed them -- watched them beating women and selling drugs to kids and a hundred other horrible things. No one I killed to free myself from my other form was a saint by any stretch of the imagination."

I bit my lip for a moment and thought of the bloody bodies of the mafia wiseguys he'd killed. No saints indeed. Maybe I could bend my ideals on this one -- at least a little. "I believe you," I said at last. "I do, Richard. It's hard for me to take, but I guess...I guess I can accept your past as long as you promise never to do anything like that in the future."

He nodded gravely. "As long as you stay with me I can control the curse. So I'll swear never to kill again as long as I have you by my side. If you leave, all bets are off, though. I don't intend to spend the rest of my life as a beast."

"I guess that's fair," I said, nodding. But when he scooted up the bed and reached for me, I still pulled away from him.

"Rachel." He looked at me sternly. "There's something else. Something you're not telling me. Whatever it is, I need to know because it's standing between us."

I could feel my cheeks beginning to heat up. "I...I don't like the way I feel when I'm around you," I said, trying to think of a way to say it without saying it. "I mean...the way I seem to lose control. The way I can't say no to...to anything."

"Anything?" He raised one black eyebrow at me and frowned. "Or something specific? Tell me, Rachel. I need to know."

It seemed like I was just going to have to say it. "Richard," I said, looking down at my hands and speaking slowly. "You made me want you. Even when I thought of you as my brother. Even when you took me while you were...while you weren't even human. While you were an animal." I looked up at him, feeling my cheeks heat to burning with my shame. "What does that say about me?" I asked him. "What kind of person am I to want to have that kind of relationship? It's sick -- *I'm* sick."

"No, you're not." He stroked my cheek gently. "You're not sick, Rachel. You're Amon-kai, and we are a different breed. There's nothing wrong with wanting me to take you. With your desire to give yourself to me."

"Yes, there is," I insisted. "Especially when I...I enjoyed last night. Well," I rushed on. "I don't know if *enjoyed* is the right word, but...but I wanted you. Wanted you in me even though you were...were an animal. I spread my legs for you willingly, and even though part of me hated it, part of me loved it. Part of me wanted it. I don't want to be like that. I don't want to be that person."

"I think I see the problem." He scooted closer to me and put a warm hand on my bare knee. I shivered but didn't try to move it. "The problem is that you're still thinking like a human," Richard said. "But you're *not* human -- neither one of us is. We're Amon-kai."

"Stop saying that," I said irritably. "What does it even mean?"

"It means that your body has different needs and desires, and there's nothing wrong with acting on them. Look," he said reasonably. "You're upset because you wanted me to fuck you -- to breed you -- even when I was in my beast form. Right?"

I nodded briefly, not meeting his eyes.

"But that's normal for us," he told me quietly. "In fact, back at the beginning of our race it's how prospective Lanor-zurs found their Lana-zeels."

I looked up at him. "What do you mean? I thought they were bound as children -- the way you said we were."

"That's a fairly recent custom," Richard told me. "It used to be that when a female became fertile, she was taken to a stone altar in the middle of a large field on the night of the full moon. Then she was stripped naked and bound on her hands and knees with her legs chained wide apart so that she was helpless to resist what happened next."

I looked up at him with wide eyes, captivated by the story against my will. "What...what happened next?" I asked, biting my lip.

Richard stroked my knee gently. "All of the prospective Lanor-zurs came to circle her in a pack -- and this was *after* they had changed and were in beast form. One by one they each mounted the steps to the altar. They breathed in her scent and tasted her nipples and pussy as she knelt there, vulnerable and exposed."

"And then?" I knew what was coming next, but I wanted to hear him say it. For some reason the story made my sex feel swollen and sensitive. I could just imagine the poor girl, bound in the moonlight on her hands and knees, forced to submit, just as I had been forced to submit, while the hot, wet tongues of her prospective mates lashed at her nipples and lapped at her open cunt.

"If her scent was attractive enough, the male who was tasting her would breed her," Richard said matter-of-factly. "And if she was attractive to more than one male, then she got bred more than once. Sometimes the same female would be bred by four or five different males."

"My God!" I blurted out. "How...why ...?" I had barely survived my own ordeal the night before. I couldn't imagine going through it four more times. "Why, why would they do that?" I finally managed to get out.

"To learn which one of them was her true mate -- her Lanor-zur," Richard said patiently. "You see, her body would only open all the way to the right male. And so the male that was able to get his knot all the way inside her pussy, to join himself to her and shoot his essence more deeply into her body than any of the others, was her mate. That's where the instinct to breed hard and deep comes from -- it's a biological imperative. And it's also why the body of the Lana-zeel -- your body -- sometimes craves a second breeding almost at once. To strengthen the bond with the right male."

"You said you wanted it to happen," I said softly.

Richard leaned closer and looked in my eyes. "I did, Rachel," he murmured. "I wanted your lust for me to be so strong you couldn't help yourself." He laughed ruefully. "But I didn't count on you being so bull-headed and stubborn."

I lifted my chin. "I don't want to do something that doesn't feel right to me, that's all."

"Is it beginning to feel at least a little more right?" Richard asked me. "At least now you understand why your body craved mine even when I came to you as a beast -- it's in your nature to crave being bred by the beast."

I looked down at my hands, my heart pounding. "Does that...does that mean I'll want you again that way?"

"You may or you may not," Richard said neutrally. "My essence is stronger when I'm in beast form -- more concentrated -- and your body will probably crave it at some point. Possibly at every full moon when it's easiest for me to change completely."

"So if I stay with you I'll...we'll do it that way again?"

"Only if you want to," he said soothingly. "And even if I change completely, I'll still retain my human consciousness -- my sense of self. You do that for me -- our bond tethers my mind to my body. So I can be as gentle or as rough as you want me to and you won't have to be afraid."

"I'm not," I said, and was surprised to know it was true. The idea that I might want to have beast sex with him again still made my cheeks hot, but if the urge was truly a part of my genetic heritage...well, I would have to think about that. About whether I really believed wanting something so strange could actually be a biological urge rather than an emotional disorder.

"Can you do it, Rachel?" Richard asked me, lifting my chin to look into my eyes. "Can you accept me for what I am and yourself for what you are? Can you let go of your human ideas long enough to embrace your Amon-kai heritage?"

"I..." I searched his eyes, Amon-kai eyes. "I don't know, Richard," I said at last. "I need a little time. A little time to think about it."

"All right." He nodded and stood up from the bed, careless of his nudity as the towel dropped away. "I'm going out, Rachel, and I won't be back until after dark. But when I do get back, I want your answer. Understand?"

"You'll have it," I said quietly. "I promise you that, Richard. One way or another, you'll have it."

"Good." He reached for his clothes and left me to sit on the bed and try to decide how I would spend the rest of my life.

## Chapter Twenty-four

I knew I was supposed to be thinking about my life and making some difficult choices, but being up all night and the emotional scene I'd gone through with Charles had tired me out. I lay on the bed, too exhausted to even crawl under the covers, and tried to consider my options.

On one hand, having a normal life with Charles was now completely out of the question. In fact, I didn't even know if I wanted to go on living and practicing law in a town where I might run into him at any time during the course of my work. Tampa, which had seemed like my home town for so long, was no longer where I wanted to spend my life. The little lilac bungalow I loved so much just wasn't home anymore, but then again, I didn't know where home was if it wasn't in the cozy nest I'd created for myself. Maybe home was wherever Richard was. Maybe it always had been.

I rolled over and pressed my head into the pillow. Did I really want to spend the rest of my life with him? Did I want to give myself up to the urges I had suppressed for so long? I remembered how hard it had been for me when my mother first took me away, the craving for raw meat I'd had to suppress, and the desperate fight to fit in, to seem like just another human girl at the series of anonymous schools I'd gone to. I'd given up my heritage at my mother's command. I'd forgotten the joy of hunting in the deep of the night and learned to ignore the call of the moon. I'd even managed to suppress most of my senses until all that was left of my Amon-kai nature was good night vision. I had done all of that, given all of it up because she wanted me to, because she warned me there was danger in remembering what I really was -- that I was something besides human.

And she was right, I realized as I rolled over the other way, trying to get comfortable beneath the thin towel which barely covered me. There were dangers like nothing I had ever imagined. The man I was considering spending my life with had a killer beast locked inside him, and the door to that cage wasn't always firmly closed. But it wasn't Richard's beast that

bothered me so much as the fact that I desired it -- desired him, even when he was in that other form. I understood the story he'd told me about the mating habits of our people, but I still wasn't sure I wanted to give in to those urges, even if they were a biological imperative. In fact, there was so much about my Amon-kai heritage that made me uncomfortable. So much that I had been taught was dirty, disgusting, wrong ...

I sighed heavily as my head landed on just the right spot on my pillow. Suddenly it didn't seem to matter what thorny moral questions were crowding my head because I couldn't keep my eyelids open one second more. I curled into a ball beneath the thin towel and let sleep take me.

\* \* \* \* \*

This time I didn't dream of the boy with wolf's eyes or the statues or the blood. Instead, I dreamed what might have been -- snippets of a life that might have been mine if my mother hadn't taken me away.

I saw Richard and myself as older children and watched in impossibly quick glimpses as we grew through puberty and to what the Amon-kai recognized as the age of consent, even though it was younger than the human standard. I saw him come to my room the first time as more than a friend and brother -- I saw him come as my promised mate. I saw him raise my nightgown and caress my budding breasts, kissing and sucking my tender nipples until I moaned with delight. I watched as he explored my sex, carefully parting my ripe pussy lips to touch me and taste me for the first time.

Even in the dream the pleasure was almost more than I could bear. And in the dream I felt no shame. I only knew that this was right, that this was the way it was supposed to be between us because this was the way it had been for our people for thousands of years. Even when Richard pressed the thick head of his cock into my virgin sex and filled me with his cum, I felt only joy and pleasure in giving myself to him, in letting him know my body in this most intimate of ways.

In my dream the years flew until the night when my body was finally completely ripe for the taking. I saw myself naked in the garden -- the same garden where we had performed the bonding ceremony so many years before. I heard a growl behind me and when I turned, I saw Richard's beast for the first time, standing in the moonlight.

My sleeping self gasped at the sight and wanted to run, to get away from the frightening monster that had suddenly appeared before me. But my dreaming self, the girl I might have been if only I had been given the chance, had no fear of the huge, shaggy form. In my dream, I stepped forward bravely and raised my hand to stroke the coarse black pelt that felt like rough silk under my palm. Then, daring even more greatly, I let my fingertips trail down the beast's broad chest until I was stroking the long, thick cock with the swelling knot at its base. The beast growled gently, a sound of desire that rose from its inhumanly



broad chest. But again, I felt no fear, only a deep desire to know Richard completely in his most primal form.

I watched myself turn my back to the beast and kneel on the long silky grass in the center of the garden. This was where we had started the bond we shared between us, and this was where we would seal it. I felt the rough pelt of the beast as it knelt over me, preparing to mount me, and its heated breath on the back of my neck. I spread my legs eagerly, feeling the long grass tickle my naked inner thighs. My pussy was wet, drenched with my juices, ready for my lover, ready to take everything he offered and more.

The dream seemed to slow down now, as if to show me the tiniest detail while the beast mounted my dreaming self. I watched as the thick cock breached my cunt for the first time and saw the expression of ecstasy on my face as the wide knot at its base finally found its way inside me. I watched in horror and fascination as I rutted with the beast, as I spread my legs and arched my back to get its cock more fully inside me. I gasped and groaned and cried with pleasure when its hot essence began filling my cunt.

God, could I really be enjoying this, even in a dream? Could I really have given in to my Amon-kai instincts so completely that I *wanted* to be fucked by the beast? Apparently, in the dream, I could and I had. What I was watching wasn't the me that was, the me that had been taken away as a little girl and taught that everything she wanted and longed for was bad. It was the me that could have been. Or, I realized, the me that could be, if only I would give in and accept the Amon-kai part of my nature.

I watched as the beast lifted its shaggy head, howling its lust to the moon above as it bred me, as it took me completely, owning and claiming me as I had always meant to be claimed. Beneath its bulk, the slender blond girl on her hands and knees howled, too, in pleasure and in completion. She had what she wanted, what she needed, what her body had demanded for years. And was that really so wrong?

\* \* \* \* \*

I woke with a start, my heart pounding and my pussy soaked with my juices. I remembered every detail of the dream, right down to the end. Instead of trying to push it away, I examined it, trying not to feel ashamed of the desire that rose in me when I thought of the erotic details. Was it really so wrong, what my body wanted? Was it really so wrong to open myself to the part of me I had suppressed for so long?

I sat up in bed and saw that it was dark outside -- I had been so exhausted I had slept the day away. Soon Richard would be back, and I still didn't know what I would tell him. Standing, I pulled a thin silk robe around me and went through the Florida room out onto my small back porch.

The moon was full and high overhead, and the air was perfumed with night blooming jasmine, a scent I always associated with my childhood and home. For once my nosy next-

door neighbors appeared to have gone to bed early. All their lights were out, so it was just me and the moon.

Taking a deep breath, I untied the robe and let it fall to the ground at my feet. The cool night air teased my tight nipples and slid cool fingers along the slippery lips of my sex. I was still wet and throbbing from my dream, and I spread my legs, welcoming the invisible invader, opening myself to the night as I hadn't done since I was a child.

I could feel the moonlight like icy fingers at the back of my neck and smell every plant in my small garden distinctly and separately. I could hear the heartbeat of a gray squirrel that lived in the branches of one of my trees and smell the warmth of its fur even though it was hidden away and not moving a muscle. I could see everything with my Amon-kai eyes. The shadow in the corner of the house wasn't just a shadow; it was one of the many tiny lizards that lived near the cool shelter of my home, and the cloud overhead wasn't a cloud but an owl, searching for dinner.

Suddenly, there was something else in my line of vision. A larger shadow detached itself from the side of the house and drifted silently forward. It was Richard, and he was in the form of his beast.

My first instinct was to scream and run -- to get away from him in the way I hadn't been able to in the cage the night before. My body was poised for flight, my heart stuttering in my chest like a machine gun, but then, something stopped me. Maybe it was the dream I'd just had, or maybe it was the realization that if I ran now I would be running forever. Running from the man I loved, the man who loved me, running from my future and my past and never finding happiness because I was too timid to look it in the face and realize that what might be wrong for everyone else on the planet was somehow right for me.

Taking a deep breath, I took a step toward the beast. It stood perfectly still, as though waiting to see what I would do. I took another step until I was close enough to touch it, close enough to feel the heat from its furry pelt and smell the dark, musky, male scent it exuded. The scent of the Amon-kai. With one trembling hand I reached out to stroke its chest, just as I had in my dream. The beast growled encouragement deep in its throat and I knew that Richard was urging me on. Boldly, I let my hand wander lower until I stroked the long, thick cock that quivered between his muscular thighs. He was hard and ready, and I could feel my pussy throbbing, letting me know that I was ready, too. Letting me know that my body was ready to accept his no matter how big he was or how frightening it seemed to kneel before the beast.

Hardly knowing what I was doing, I dropped to my knees in front of him and rubbed the thick shaft against my cheek. There was another low growl of approval, and then one large paw stroked my long, loose hair so gently I could barely feel it.

The scent of him was all around me now, filling my senses and overwhelming all my rational judgment. I had never dreamed I could want anything so much as I wanted Richard right then, even in the form of a beast. The broad, mushroom-shaped head of his cock was

tipped with a pearly drop of his essence, and I leaned forward and lapped it off. It was salty and sweet and bitter and somehow completely delicious. I knew that I wanted more.

I leaned forward again and sucked as much of the thick head into my mouth as I could, lapping eagerly to get more of Richard's cum, wanting to taste him as he had tasted me so many times. I wondered if he found me as delicious as I found him, if he understood how much I wanted him. But how could he unless I showed him?

With one last lick, I released the massive cock and turned my back to the beast, just as I had in the dream. Then, settling myself on my hands and knees, I spread my legs and waited.

But instead of the coarse brush of fur on my naked back and the hot breath of the beast on the nape of my neck, I felt a very human hand stroking the curve of my spine.

"Rachel," a deep voice murmured in my ear, and then Richard knelt beside me in human form, taking me into his arms.

"Oh, Richard." I threw my arms around him, pressing my naked breasts against his broad, bare chest. I wanted him so much I ached with it, and for the first time the need I felt for him didn't make me ashamed.

"I had to know," he whispered, kissing me gently on the cheek. "Had to know how you really felt about me. I knew if you could give in to your Amon-kai side enough to accept my beast, you could accept everything."

"You're right." I kissed him hungrily, feeling the desire rise in me once more, the need for a second breeding. "You're right, Richard, I want you. I want all of it. I think I'm finally ready to commit to being what I really am."

"Which is?" He drew back to look me in the eyes, a little smile playing around the corners of his full mouth.

"I am both more and less than human," I said, choosing my words carefully. "I am Amon-kai. And I'm not ashamed of that."

"Good." He nodded and stroked my cheek. "And are you ready to prove it?"

"Prove it?" I felt my heart begin to beat faster. "How...how am I supposed to do that?"

"By doing what both of us have been needing and wanting," he said. "By accepting my cock into your pussy again for a second breeding."

At his words felt my sex gush with juice and my nipples tighten. My reasons were gone and my boundaries were stripped away. I knew I was going to accept him, was going to submit to him in any way he demanded.

"Well?" Richard asked, and I realized he was waiting for an answer.

"Yes," I murmured, taking his hand and leading him toward the house. "Yes, Richard, I'll accept you. How...how do you want me?"

We were in the bedroom now, and he leaned in to kiss me softly on the lips. "I want you in every possible position, but I have a feeling that this is going to be a long breeding," he murmured. "So we ought to get comfortable."

I thought of how I'd fainted the night before while I tried to stand and let him breed me and nodded. It was good that we were someplace safe and secure this time, not in a cold iron cage with a dirty metal floor.

"Let's do it like this." Richard sat back against the headboard. He motioned to me, and the sight of his erect and ready cock caused another gush of moisture in my own sex. Suddenly, I couldn't wait to have him inside me. Still, I wasn't sure about the position.

"Uh, sitting?" I asked, even as I straddled his thighs obediently.

He nodded. "I want to be able to look in your beautiful eyes while I fuck you. I want to watch your face when my knot swells inside you and my essence fills you."

His words made me so hot I could hardly think. "Yes," I whispered, scooting up so that the broad head of his cock was positioned directly under the entrance to my pussy. "Yes, Richard, I want that too."

"Of course you do, my beautiful Lana-zeel." Carefully, he guided himself into my wet depths and I moaned as I felt him filling me to the core.

"Look down, Rachel," he commanded. "I want you to watch as my knot fills you -- as we're joined together."

Biting my lower lip hard, I watched as the thick swelling pressed up inside me, filling me as it had the night before. For a moment I almost wasn't sure I could take it, but then, as I gasped and panted, something inside my body seemed to open up, just as Richard had told me it would, and the knot slipped fully into my pussy at last.

"God, Richard!" I moaned as I felt his thickness begin to swell inside me, joining us together.

"Feels good, doesn't it, baby?" he murmured, resting his hands on my waist. "Feels right, doesn't it?"

"Yes! God, *yes*," I gasped as the first spurt of his essence flooded me.

"Good girl." Richard's voice was hoarse, but he was still absolutely in control as he began moving his hips to fuck up into me. "Good girl, Rachel. Just ride me, baby. Just let me breed you."

I had no choice but to do as he said, but I had never found it easier to obey orders. Somehow everything he did felt right. His hands on my waist, holding me in place, the slow, hard motions of his cock inside me, even the continuous, hot stream of essence that flooded the mouth of my womb as he fucked me felt perfectly natural.

Then Richard's thumb found the swollen nub of my clit, and I felt the pleasure spiraling lazily within me suddenly spike.

“That’s right, Rache,” Richard murmured, watching my face as the whip-crack orgasm shot through me. “That’s right -- come for me, baby. Need to make you come as many times as you can for the breeding to be right.”

“God!” I gasped as I felt my inner muscles contract around the thick shaft invading my body. And then I realized that I was actually milking him -- that my body was encouraging him to produce even more essence to flood me with.

“Rachel,” Richard groaned softly as he continued to work his thick cock into me. “Rachel, I love you so much. Need you so much, my Lana-zeel.”

“I...I love you too, Lanor-zur,” I whispered, using the strange name on him for the first time. And yet, as unfamiliar as it was, it felt perfectly right in my mouth. The same way his cock and his cum felt perfectly right in my pussy.

As a deeper, more powerful orgasm began to build inside me, I realized that I had finally let go of my human ideas and embraced my heritage by embracing Richard. And in embracing him, I had found my true love -- my mate for life.

The boy with eyes like a wolf had come home at last, and I never intended to let him go.

 THE END 

## **Evangeline Anderson**

Evangeline Anderson is a registered MRI tech who would rather be writing. She is thirty-something and lives in Florida with a husband, three cats and a college-age sister but no kids because enough is enough already. She had been writing dirty stories for her own gratification for a number of years before it occurred to her to try and get paid for it. To her delight, she found it was actually possible to get money for having a dirty mind and she has been writing steadily ever since.

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