

# RUNNER'S MOON: JEBARAL

Book 1

*Linda Mooney*



**RUNNER'S MOON**  
**BOOK 1:**  
**JEBARAL**

by

**Linda Mooney**

**WHISKEY CREEK PRESS**

[www.whiskeycreekpress.com](http://www.whiskeycreekpress.com)

Published by  
WHISKEY CREEK PRESS  
Whiskey Creek Press  
PO Box 51052  
Casper, WY 82605-1052  
[www.whiskeycreekpress.com](http://www.whiskeycreekpress.com)

Copyright © 2007 by *Linda Mooney*

*Warning: The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to 5 (five) years in federal prison and a fine of \$250,000.*

Names, characters and incidents depicted in this book are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental and beyond the intent of the author or the publisher.

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

ISBN 978-1-60313-001-1

### **Credits**

Cover Artist:

Editor: Chere Gruver

Printed in the United States of America

## **WHAT THEY ARE SAYING ABOUT *RUNNER'S MOON BOOK 1: JEBARAL***

“RUNNER’S MOON: JEBARAL is an intriguing story that will pull you in from the first page. I was so captivated by the passion between Jeb and Hannah that I couldn’t read fast enough to see what would happen next. Linda Mooney is a terrific author and her fantastic tale proves that she has a bright future. I highly anticipate her next book and hope that (this) is the start of a wonderful new series.”

4.5 Blue Ribbons

Reviewed by Romance Junkies

“If you like your man to be strong, gentle and able to defend your honor then this is the book for you. That strong man who rushes in to save the weak damsel in distress just makes your heart go ahhh and knees go weak this is that story. Ms. Mooney has done well. This book was well written and paced appropriately. JEBARAL will pleasantly keep you company for afternoon read.”

Robin S.

My Book Cravings

“This imaginative book is well written, and has the warmth and togetherness I expect from a good romance, and for that I give it 5 red roses.”

Anne

Red Roses for Authors



## **Dedication**

To Dee,  
the greatest cheering section a writer could ever wish for



## Prologue

*Five Years Ago*

The hot summer storm left the air sticky. However, it had provided the perfect cover for the spacecraft to land silently and completely undetected amid the growl of rolling thunder and lightning. Deep within the heart of the forested area, the ship had grounded itself with a jarring thump. It was on its last reserves, and powering down the engines this time would mean a complete shutdown of all systems. Permanently. Outside, the driving rain had pounded the outer hull of the craft like nails, frightening the thirty-one refugees huddled inside.

As the wind blew the black clouds to the south, the refugees exited to stand on solid ground for the first time in years. Some had to be helped out of the ship. Others stood on trembling legs and stared in amazement at this strange new place they would have to learn to adapt to. Learn to live in. Learn to survive.

Jebaral Gitall Morr breathed in the fresh, rain-soaked air. His skin tingled with awareness, and the possibility of danger and opportunity now facing him and his fellow survivors. Aware he was standing with his hands clenched into fists, he forced himself to open his fingers and take another deep lungful of air.

There were scents here he didn't know. Not yet, anyway, but soon. Soon he would be able to identify those things which could be harmful to him, and those which wouldn't. Right now, though, all he wanted was a few hours to stand here and listen to the coming night. And, hopefully, he would be able to find a



little time when he could stop being afraid and waiting for the retaliatory blow to fall.

“What are you thinking?” a deep voice behind him rumbled.

From the corner of his eye, Jebaral watched the stocky form of his brother come to stand beside him. He heard the man sniff appreciatively, and he allowed himself a tiny smile in response. “I am thinking how glad I am to be out of that ship. I am thinking about what I am going to do with the rest of my life...”

Simolif glanced over at him. “Now that you have a life?” he finished for his younger sibling.

Nodding, Jebaral let his body do his talking for him. This world might be unknown territory, but it held promise. More than that, it held security. And hope.

A movement near his shoulder made him turn his head in question. “What are you doing?”

Simolif continued to bounce up and down on the balls of his feet almost like a youngling discovering a new sensation. “Gravity’s lighter here. If I weigh sixty *koll*, I will be surprised.”

“That is good,” Jebaral noted. “It means our denser muscle mass will be beneficial to us. Give us more strength.”

Overhead the departing clouds revealed a sky of oranges and blues. Between the leaves of the huge plant growth found on this planet, the distant stars were familiar friends, although their patterns were strange and unidentifiable. He felt Simolif place a hand at his back, inadvertently on the very spot where the *adjac* had chewed a hole in his shoulder. He jerked back from the white hot streak of agony that zipped through his body, searing nerve endings. A grunt escaped him before he could stop himself. Simolif immediately raised his hand.

“Forgive me. I was too wrapped up in the moment and forgot.”

“Do not apologize. I almost forgot as well.”

They continued to stare at the fall of night. Creatures emerged around them, creating noises that, oddly, didn't seem intimidating, although they knew there would be some danger on this planet. Still, it would never compare to the horrors they had escaped from.

"I wonder what the inhabitants look like," Simolif commented softly.

Throwing a glance over his shoulder, Jebaral gave him a tight smile. "We will never know if we remain here, will we?"

"We will need to find out soon so we can blend in among them once the sun rises."

Jebaral nodded without commenting. It was time. They both knew it. Pivoting around, Jebaral walked over to where the rest of them who remained gathered in small groups. They lifted their heads at his approach, waiting to be told what they knew was coming.

"My friends, welcome to your home." Standing as straight as he could, and trying to ignore the burning pain streaking up and down the backs of his legs, Jebaral gave them his blessing. "From here on, you are on your own. Scatter and find a place where you can finally be happy. We will survive and thrive here, I am certain of it." Unconsciously he drew another deep breath of the rich, fragrant air. Deep in his gut he knew this planet had been a good choice. For some reason he couldn't explain, he felt he would be able to live many long years here—at least a few more than he would have under Arran domination. His eyes raked over the weary-looking group before him. They all had taken the chance, basically placing their lives in his and Simolif's hands in order to escape the deaths they knew would come if they had remained on Barandat.

"Good fortune, and have a long and happy life," he said softly, holding his hands up in the air.

At the sign of dismissal, the group slowly broke apart, walking away singly or in clumps of twos or threes. Jebaral watched them go until there remained only himself and his brother.

“But never forget the Arra may ultimately find this place,” Simolif muttered under his breath.

“Which is why the ship must be totally destroyed. We cannot make it easy for them to track us.” Pulling a slender rod from his tunic pocket, Jebaral walked over to the narrow doorway, broke the rod apart, and tossed it into the interior of the spacecraft. That done, he turned his back on the ship that had been his home, his refuge, and his prison for the past two years and walked away. Simolif joined him, and together they disappeared into the woods as a boiling black cloud rolled out of the ship’s doorway.

In less than an hour, the craft was nothing more than a bubbling mass of liquid seeping into the loamy soil. By morning there was no trace anything unusual had occurred the night before.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Hannah**

“Get your butt in here, girl, and hope Billy doesn’t find out I’ve already clocked you in. Or else it’ll be *my* butt!” Barb grabbed the woman by the wrist as she came through the back door. She thrust the apron into Hannah’s hands as the young woman shrugged out of her sweater. “I’m sorry. Carl was being his usual self, and I had to walk over here.”

The older woman narrowed her eyes and hastily scanned the slender woman tying on her pocket apron. Slender, hell. Hannah Pitt was downright skinny, no thanks to that no-good boyfriend of hers.

Another more pointed examination revealed the fresh bruises on the woman’s upper arm. At her scrutiny, Hannah pulled on her sleeve to try and cover them. Barb snorted with a trace of anger. If a soul knew where to look, they could spot a dozen of the telltale signs—the fresh or fading bruises, the scabbed-over scratches. The covered-up marks that told more about the short-tempered man Hannah lived with. Worse still, Barb realized the haunted look in the young woman’s eyes was growing more and more pronounced as the weeks went by.

Hannah had come to work at Barkett’s Diner eight months ago. Although the woman was friendly, and their regular patrons had taken to the painfully shy introvert, there was very little Barb knew about her. But there was a novel’s worth of information the older woman could read on the younger blonde’s face. In the way she reacted to others, it was a classic

case of abuse, plain and simple. And it was a damn shame. No woman deserved to be treated as such, especially not a sweet girl like Hannah Pitt.

If Carl Jamison was *being his usual self*, it meant the son of a bitch had taken her tips from yesterday then absconded with the ten-year-old Ford to find an open bar. Barb knew Hannah was the sole supporter of the two since Carl had suffered a *back injury* some time in the past and therefore wasn't able to hold down a full-time job.

"Who's in my section?" Hannah whispered, rubbing her palms on her skirt. If the overflow wasn't too bad, Barb would take her customers if she was running late.

"Just Mr. Braddock over at his usual table," the older woman replied. "I told him you were helping in the kitchen, which was why I took his order." Lifting her head a few inches, Barb glanced over the storage cabinet and through the narrow slit in the doorway which led out into the dining area. "He's probably ready for a refill on his coffee by now."

Hannah flashed her a thankful smile. "Thanks a bunch, Barb. I owe you." Straightening her shoulders, the young woman went out the swinging doors with her ponytail swinging like a pendulum.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Hannah grabbed the pot of decaf and marched over to where the hardware store owner was sitting back in his favorite booth, the day's paper shielding him from view. Quietly she refreshed his cup and picked up his empty plate to take back to the kitchen.

"I'm gonna need a to-go order of some biscuits and gravy," the man requested from behind his newsprint shield.

"Not a problem, Bart. I'll go put in the order for you right now," Hannah replied. The moment she spoke, the paper jerked to one side and Braddock gave her the once-over.

"Morning, Hannah. 'Preciate it."

She nodded and went back to replace the pot before entering the kitchen. Stepping over the threshold, she nearly collided with Billy Barkett, owner of the diner. A look at the man's face told her what she didn't want to know.

"Glad to see you finally got here, Hannah. Tell Barbara I'm docking you both the thirty minutes you tried to finagle out of me by clocking in early." His eyes were narrow, his face flushed from the heat of the kitchen. The man was not in a good mood.

Hannah tried to swallow over the lump in her throat. The man intimidated her. In fact, most men did. "Sorry, Mr. Barkett. It won't happen again."

"Of course it won't," he snapped and abruptly turned back into the kitchen. Hannah let go of the breath she had been holding and followed him inside to put the empty plate still in her hand into the deep sink. Quickly scribbling Mr. Braddock's to-go order on her pad, she ripped off the top sheet and slipped it underneath the clip on the order turn wheel.

Exiting back into the restaurant, she reached for the boxes underneath the counter to keep herself busy. Little mundane chores like refilling the napkin holders and the salt and pepper shakers allowed her to keep busy, at least enough to satisfy the boss man so he wouldn't yell at her for goofing off on the job. It also kept her mind off of her current situation at home, and what she had to face after her shift was over. Every now and then she glanced around to see if anyone had come in and sat down in her section. Once Braddock left for work after she had delivered his to-go order, she cleaned off his table and scooped the fifty cents he always left as a tip into her apron pocket.

She had just reached for the tray of ketchup bottles to refill when an finger poked her in the back. "Mr. Hunk of the Month just walked in," Barb whispered next to her cheek. Immediately that same cheek, plus its twin, went bright red, drawing a chuckle from the older woman. "Oh, come on, Hannah. When

are you two gonna stop dancing around each other and go out on a date?"

"Barb! I already have a boyfriend."

"Yeah. A boyfriend. Not a husband," the woman reminded her.

Hannah shot her friend a look of dismay, then glanced up at the man taking his usual seat at the far end of the diner, facing the interior where he could see the whole of the establishment. She took a deep breath to try and calm the heavy thudding of her heart as she grabbed the coffee pot and went over to take his order.

As she approached the man, she could feel her knees going watery with every step. Fortunately his head was bowed over something he held in his hands, which prevented him from seeing her until she reached down to turn his cup over in the saucer.

"Morning, Jeb," she somehow managed to say.

Jeb raised his face and graced her with a smile. The whole diner lit up with sunshine. The man couldn't have been more gorgeous than if he had just stepped out of one of those fashion magazines. By sheer will alone she managed to grab onto her racing heart and calm it down to a slow trot.

"What can I get you this morning?" she asked, hoping he wouldn't notice her flushed face. *What would you like? Pancakes? An onion and mushroom omelet? Me?*

*Shut up, Hannah,* a little voice told her. Hannah knew that voice and that tone all too well. She referred to that part of herself as Mr. Mean. It was the side of her conscience whose job it was to remind her of her obligations. Of her duties. Of her inevitable lot in life.

"Morning, Hannah. I'd like a Belgian waffle, please." His voice was as warm as the syrup they served. The mere sound of

it had the power to ooze through the cracks in her parched soul and tempt it with its undeniable sweetness.

“Would you like strawberries or blueberries on top?”

Her eyes were drawn to his large, long-fingered hands as they emptied two packets of granulated sugar into his coffee, then picked up a spoon to stir. The utensil looked tiny in his hand. On the seat next to him was a pamphlet of some sort. She couldn't read it because it was lying face down.

“Strawberries, please.”

*Please. He always said please.* Didn't matter what he needed or did, Mr. Jeb Morr always added a please to the end. Hannah had a fantasy that he even said please to the women he took to bed. *Let's make love, please.* A shiver ran through her at the thought.

Immediately those brown-gold eyes narrowed slightly. She could see his nostrils thin as he inventoried her from top to bottom. Before she was aware of doing it, Hannah reached up to tug on the sleeve of her blouse, hoping he hadn't seen the fresh marks. Pasting a smile on her face, she nodded. “One plate of Belgians with strawberries on top coming up!” She knew without looking back that he watched her departure into the kitchen.

While his breakfast was on the griddle, Hannah went from table to table to exchange the salt and pepper shakers with refilled ones. All the while she kept one eye on Jeb while he continued to read the brochure. By the time she reached his table she noticed he was ready for a refill. Quickly she went to get the pot.

“Planning a vacation?” She tried to sound nonchalant. Making casual conversation.

“Just reading up on a few things,” he answered enigmatically as she poured. “Looks like today is going to be another scorcher.”



He had an accent, but no way could she place it. It didn't sound French or Spanish. Or Italian, or German. Heck, it didn't sound like any kind of accent she had ever heard on television, but she didn't want to appear rude by asking him where he was from.

Not that she hadn't dwelled about it in the past.

In all the time he had been coming to the diner for breakfast, regular as clockwork for the past five months, they had spoken less than a page full of words to each other. And most of those had been what he had ordered to eat.

She knew he worked on the construction site for the new bank over on Fifth. She knew he was a vegetarian, of sorts. He never wanted any kind of meat with his breakfast, although he ate eggs. She also knew he seemed overly alert to whoever entered the diner, as if he was anticipating someone. That was the extent of what she knew about the man. That, and the fact that his name sounded as foreign as his accent. But it was enough to make her happy. It was enough to allow her to dream.

*Did he have a girlfriend?* It didn't matter, and Hannah wasn't about to ask for fear of finding out that he did. In her dreams she could imagine him timidly asking her out on a date.

*Him. Timid. Instead of me.*

*Me. Hannah. The aggressor instead of the subservient one.*

In her dreams he wasn't the abusive kind. He used those large hands to hold and caress instead of clenching them into fists to strike at her.

They would agree to meet at some out-of-the-way place where he would pick her up and take her to some nice secluded restaurant so they could enjoy a real meal over candlelight. They would talk about everything and anything. They would be honest with each other, and make confessions they knew would not be spread about.

And then he would ask her if she wouldn't mind going back to his place for an after-dinner coffee. It would be a nice little apartment, all clean and tidy because he cared about appearances. And one thing would lead to another. First a kiss. Then an admission that he had loved her ever since the first moment he laid eyes on her. And he would carry her back to the bedroom where they would make love.

Finally he would take her back to where they had met. Maybe take her back to the movie theater so she could use going to the film as her excuse as to why she had been gone for two hours. Before he left her there, he would make her promise she would go with him wherever he went. He would promise to come for her when it was time for him to move on, and she would have no choice but to go with him because he couldn't bear the thought of leaving her behind. Just as much as she couldn't bear for him to leave her behind.

The counter bell ringing brought her back to the present. Hannah blinked at the rude awakening.

"Order up, Hannah! Get your head out of the clouds and feed the customers!"

Throwing her boss an apologetic look, she grabbed the plate of waffles and took them over to the dark-haired man she had been fantasizing about. She was about to turn and leave when that deep, liquid voice said, "Tomorrow's my last day."

It was as if her heart froze in place. Honest to God, she could feel her face go as stiff as stone. But somehow she managed to turn around to face him.

"Oh?"

"Yeah. I was thinking about going up to Clearwater to see if there might be work for me there."

She knew the bank was finished. Connie Culpepper, who worked at the old location, had been in yesterday during the noon lunch rush and told Hannah they were already moving in

the furniture. By next Monday they expected to have the doors open for business.

The bank was built, but she had figured he would move on to another construction site. A site here in Laughlin. Not Clearwater. Not all the way up there. It was a good hundred some odd miles away. If he went to Clearwater, there was no way he would drive down here just to eat breakfast.

"That's...I mean, I'm sorry to hear you're going to have to move on, Mr. Morr."

She saw his eyes dart back to the marks on her arm, but she no longer cared.

"I have enjoyed our conversations in the past, Hannah. I am going to miss seeing you in the mornings."

*It was nice of him to say so.* Her heart cracked under the strain of the cold and pressure. Already little slivers were breaking away on their own and falling to her feet.

"I'm going to miss having you come by," she managed. She couldn't breathe. Her lungs wouldn't draw air. A sharp, brittle-edged pain lanced up through her belly and into her throat. Hannah gasped as the hurt burned her eyes, making them water.

*Oh shit, what is wrong with me? Why does the thought of him leaving make me hurt so damn much?* She had a man. Actually, she was *stuck* with a man. With Carl. But at least he wanted her. He needed her. And, in some vague way, he honestly loved her, although she was no longer able to tell.

Jeb Morr had to move on. He had to earn a paycheck, just like everyone else. After tomorrow he would be gone, but she would still have her memories of him. She could still cherish her dreams. Those would never be taken away from her. Or beaten out of her.

They stood staring at each other for several heartbeats, until a family entered the diner and took a seat at one of Hannah's stations. A man, woman, and three young rowdy boys. Tourists

passing through, from the looks of them. Muttering an apology, she tore herself away from his booth to go wait on them.

By the time she managed to bring them their drinks and take their orders, Hannah turned to find the back booth empty. The sight of it was almost too much to bear.

Walking over to clean it up, she lifted the five dollar tip from where he always tucked it under the saucer, and shoved it into her apron pocket. The rest she carried over to the cashier's station.

Barb came up behind her and watched her shove the register drawer closed. "What's the matter, hon? You got that look that makes me think you just got some bad news."

Hannah turned around, keeping her eyes directed downward. The last thing she needed was to fall apart. Not that Barb wouldn't put her arms around her like she'd done in the past and try to make things appear better than they were. But having a crying jag right here and now wouldn't be good for business. And the last thing she needed was to lose her job because of some silly daydreams she had cherished about a man who never thought twice about her.

She gave a small shrug with one shoulder. "It's nothing. Jeb told me tomorrow would be his last day in Laughlin. The bank's finished, so he's thinking of moving up to Clearwater to see if he can find a job up there."

A work-roughened hand reached out to take one of hers. Barb gave it a squeeze. "I'm sorry, hon." The woman's voice was filled with compassion. To Hannah it felt good.

"S okay."

"Want to take a quick break?"

Hannah shook her head. "I can't. I just got here."

"Then go throw some water on your face and freshen your lipstick. You look like hell."

Finally raising her eyes to look at the older woman, Hannah gave a watery chuckle. "Gee. Thanks a lot."

Barb smiled at her and gave her a little shove toward the restrooms. Hannah obliged because she had no other choice.

But there was still tomorrow morning. His last morning to come to the diner. Without realizing it, a plan began to form in her mind. She had one chance, and she was determined to go for it.

After all, she had nothing else to lose.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Jeb**

The pickup was over fifteen years old, but she still had a lot of life left in her. Jeb coaxed the stick shift into second as he neared the construction site. A quick turn south, and he could park in the lot for the bank's employees.

From the moment she had come to serve him coffee, he had known she had been victimized again last night. Breakfast rolled uneasily in his stomach at the thought of what she'd had to endure. That made three times this week, and the week wasn't over.

He knew he had to tell her he was moving along. It wouldn't have been right to just stop showing up when his having breakfast at the diner had been a morning ritual for almost five months. What irked Jeb more was the fact he couldn't figure out *why* he cared enough about the woman to think he owed her any sort of explanation.

He glanced down at his hands that gripped the steering wheel. They were good hands, if he did say so himself. Although keeping the nails clean could sometimes be a pain. Turning his left wrist over, he looked at the inside of his arm, knowing he wouldn't see them. But they were there, underneath the pale skin. Visible only at night after he had sloughed his outer layer.

He had phoned Simolif last night from the pay phone at the end of the block, since the motel room he was renting by the week didn't have that luxury. They had chatted about what they were doing. Interesting things they had discovered. Oddities

they had noted about these people they lived among. Then Jeb had told Simolif he was moving on and that he would call as soon as he was settled to let his brother know where he could be reached.

Five years ago they had risked the chance to find civilization together. They needed to find the dominant species on this world. Needed to see what they looked like so they could morph into a nearly carbon copy of them. Or else they would not have been able to blend in among them.

They had been astonished to find that the inhabitants were bipeds, like them. Even more astonishing was the fact their body structure was almost identical to the natives. Other than a change in the outer layer, there would be little they would have to do in order to fit in. It was almost too good to be true.

Still, there were some irregularities they had to adjust in order for them to fit in. Not to mention certain peculiarities about this species that proved to be minor roadblocks.

Jeb strode from the parking lot to the bank building. Grabbing his hardhat from the stack, he went inside to find the construction boss. B and A Construction used its own team of men to complete a job. But because of the time constraint, they had gone to the local employment agency and hired six more men to come aboard temporarily. Now that the bank was finished, Jeb had gotten his walking papers yesterday. He would finish up on those pneumatic machines in the drive-thru lanes today. Tomorrow he would pick up his last paycheck and hit the road.

"Hey, Morr." Anson Bennetson, senior co-partner of the firm, gave him a nod. "Finishing the drive-up lanes today?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good." The man paused, then added, "Hate to have to let you go, Jeb. You're a damn good worker. In fact, I was wondering if you wouldn't be interested in coming on full-time."

It's a done deal. All you would have to do is fill out the paperwork and do the drug testing. No big deal. What do you say? Can you go with it?"

Jeb balanced his hands on his hips. The man's offer tempted him in ways he couldn't begin to explain. Yet the answer would always be—

"No. Thank you for the offer, Mr. Bennetson, but I'm going to have to pass. In fact, after I pick up my paycheck tomorrow, I'll be heading for Clearwater."

The older man tried to hide his disappointment. "Clearwater? What's up there, if I might ask?"

Jeb threw a shrug into the mixture. It was a gesture he'd found could convey any number of emotions and unspoken explanations. "I have a brother up in Templeton. Eventually I hope to connect up with him."

"Templeton, huh? Is that where you're from?"

"No, sir. We're from...overseas. A little country called Barandat."

Bennetson nodded. "That's where you get that accent. I figured you must not be from around here. But you have your papers, and you're a damn fine worker, and that's all that counts with me. Well, son, it's been a privilege. Thanks for coming aboard this time around. If you change your mind, you know my number." He held out a beefy hand which Jeb took, and they shook. Giving the boss a little salute with his hardhat, Jeb went outside to complete work on the base of the machines.

*Staying. A home.*

They were forbidden words. Wishful words. Without provocation images of Hannah popped into his mind. Angrily Jeb set his jaw and turned his concentration to setting up the bricks.

What wouldn't he give to be able to set down roots? To stop running and be able to live a life without fear?



The image of Hannah's face floated before his mind's eye again. Jeb figured it had to have been because of the fear word. The woman lived in fear every day of her life, just like he did. Although it was a different kind of fear. If mankind ever found out about the race of beings called Ruinos living among them...

He glanced overhead at the bright sunlight. It would reach into the low nineties today. His epidermal layer would stay nice and tight until sunset, but by that time, he would be safely ensconced inside his motel room for the night. Only then could he remove the human-looking layer and relax in his own skin.

That relaxation came with a price. The Arra could not track them in the daylight when they were wearing their outer skin. At night, however, the pale reflection of light that bounced off the moon wasn't enough to keep them imprisoned. By opening themselves to their true forms, the Ruinos also placed themselves in jeopardy of being discovered. Hunted. Captured or killed.

No. Not *or* killed. *And* killed. Ruinos had unbelievably short life spans when they were captives of the Arra.

Jeb shook his head in thought as his hands automatically laid a symmetrical foundation of bricks around the shiny aluminum machine. There was a lot he had accomplished in the short time he had been on this planet. He could physically pass for one of them. He could speak their language—or at least one of them—well enough to be understood. Plus read and write in it. He had even managed to soak up as many of the nuances he could find regarding their culture.

Yet for every accomplishment, there were many more he couldn't fully grasp. At least not now. For one, he couldn't pass a drug test. For another he had no legal documentation. What papers he had he'd paid a lot of money for. He was as illegal an alien as he could be.

His thoughts wandered back to Hannah. She had gone totally white when he had told her he was leaving. Her blue eyes had filled with tears. If Jeb allowed himself to believe, he would have thought she had been devastated by the news.

The image of the purplish bruise on her upper arm came back into focus. *What kind of human could hurt an innocent such as Hannah?* The woman wore her vulnerability about the same way he wore his outer skin.

*Why didn't she leave the man?* It wasn't like she needed him for anything. At least, not financially. According to Barb, she was the only breadwinner in that relationship. That was what the woman had told him that one morning he had gone to breakfast and not seen Hannah at work.

\* \* \* \*

*"She called in sick," the woman said tightly, pouring him a cup of coffee.*

*"Sick? Is it serious?"*

*Barbara gave him a cautious look, wondering how honest she could be with him. "If you're thinking a stomach virus or something like that, you'd be wrong. What can I get you?"*

*He decided on a cheese omelet, then watched as the woman went to place his order. The diner was practically empty this time of the morning. Although it opened for business at six a.m., the morning rush usually didn't start until after seven.*

*Breaking his morning routine, he picked up his cup and walked over to the bar, perching on one of the stools. Barb turned around and gave him a surprised look. Before she could say anything, he asked point blank, "Did he hurt her again?"*

*"She didn't say, but I would put money on it."*

*Jeb chewed over the saying and took it for a yes.*

*"It's almost become a nightly ritual," the woman continued in a whisper. "You'd think he'd lay off of her since she's the one footin' the bills. Payin' the rent. That no-good boyfriend hasn't held down a job for*

*the past year and a half. Says he hurt his back. He was collecting workman's comp until a few months ago when it ran out." Barb shook her head at the injustice. "I feel so sorry for the woman. I just can't tell you."*

*"Think she'll be back tomorrow?"*

*"Maybe. Depends on how bad he roughed her up. But I will tell you this. Carl's gotten a lot more careful where and how much he bruises her. The man knows if he's not careful he could hospitalize her, and that would mean an end to his bar-hopping with the boys until she got well enough to go back to work."*

\* \* \* \*

A crunching sound brought him back to the present. Jeb stared at the dust particles in his hand. He had crushed the hard clay brick as easily as wadding a sheet of paper. Gritting his teeth, he bent back to his task.

He wished he could do something for her, *but what?* The woman was claimed. He had no rights to her. Even if he did, there was nothing he could offer her. Absolutely nothing.

Lane one was finished. Getting to his feet, Jeb went over to the truck with the water cooler and poured himself a paper cup full. *One down, three to go.* At this rate, he would be finished well before quitting time, not that it mattered anymore. He would go back to the motel and pack his things. Maybe go out for a nice last meal at La Italiana before calling it a day. Then in the morning go see Hannah at the diner for one final breakfast before picking up his last paycheck and heading out of town. Next stop, Clearwater.

Draining the cup, Jeb tossed it into the trash bag and returned to his brick laying. He would be able to keep his hands busy, but his mind had the whole day to dwell on Hannah Pitt. To dwell. And reminisce. And wonder why the woman affected him as much as she did, when no other woman on this planet had before.



## **Chapter 3**

### **Carl**

The moment he stepped into the diner he knew something was wrong. The place had opened up less than ten minutes ago, and there were only two other customers besides himself. But there was an odd feeling to the place.

His Ruinos abilities came to the forefront. Emotions had a smell to them, and sometimes a taste. The stronger the emotion, the stronger the smell. They could be sensed above all other smells, like the fresh-perked aroma of coffee, the frying bacon and sausage patties.

This morning, Jeb could smell sadness.

And anger. Pungent, acrid anger. Unleashed anger, from what he could tell with another tentative sniff.

Trying to appear nonchalant, he ambled over to his usual booth and slid onto the Naugahyde seat. Tapping his fingertips together, he waited to be served. He didn't have to wait long.

Barb bustled out from the back and spotted him. Grabbing the carafe from behind the counter, she hurried over to pour him a cup of coffee. One look at her face said it all, but he had to ask anyway.

"Where's Hannah?"

"She called in sick."

He barely managed to stifle the groan that rose in his throat. "Not again," he said to help cover up his disappointment. She couldn't be gone. Not on his last day in town.

"Yeah. Only this time I think it's worse." She gave him a worried look. "It was Carl who called in for her. Said Hannah was in the bathroom throwing up and couldn't make it to the phone."

Suddenly she plunked the carafe on the table and sat down in the seat across from him. "I hate to say this, but I'm worried sick. She's never had Carl call in before."

"You're thinking he's hurt her so badly she can't call in herself?"

The woman nodded. "I have half a mind to call the cops and report it."

"Why don't you?"

"Because what if she's really sick, like with the flu? Wouldn't I look like an idiot? So the next time he really does do a number on her and I try to call it in, they might think I'm yelling wolf again."

The analogy totally threw him, but Jeb made a mental note to check out its meaning.

"Is there anything I can do?"

This time the reaction he got from the waitress was completely foreign to him. She reached out to take one of his hands in both of hers and squeezed. "If I could, I would go over there to check on her. Make sure she's okay. But I can't leave here, not when we're short-handed and we haven't had the morning rush yet. But..."

"You want me to go over there?" The remark was both a question and a request. Jeb knew there was no way he could leave Laughlin without a final goodbye.

"Could you? Please?" Before he could answer, she took out her order book and tore out the last page. Hastily she scribbled an address on it. "She's in lot number four. You can't miss it. She has daisies planted all around. Even has little daisies painted on the fence."

Jeb glanced at the address. It was of a trailer park not too far down the road. "Want me to call you when I find out something?"

"Please?"

He nodded, getting to his feet. "Shouldn't take me too long."

"Oh, by the way, they have an old brown Chevy pickup. If it's there, it means he's home. The son of a bitch never lets her take it by herself."

"Don't worry." Flashing her a smile, he hurried outside and climbed into his truck.

The mobile home park was eight blocks away. It took him less than ten minutes to pull into the main driveway that laced its way around and through the site. Barb was right. He spotted the trailer almost immediately, looking like a garden oasis. A riot of flowers ran around the outer rim of the trailer. Another lengthy bed lined the fence that had more flowers painted on each individual slat.

The narrow slab of concrete that sufficed as a parking area was empty. There was no brown truck, meaning Carl was not at home. *Good*. Then Hannah wouldn't be afraid to give him some honest answers.

Walking up to the front door, he rang the little doorbell whose button was the center of a bright yellow and white daisy. And he waited.

There was no sound. No one came to the door or attempted to. For all he could tell, there was no movement at all inside. He rapped on the small window inset. "Hannah? It's me, Jeb Morr."

Still nothing.

Taking a deep breath, he walked around to the back side of the trailer where he noticed one partly opened tiny screened window.

"Hannah? It's me! Jeb Morr. I came by because Barb said you called in sick."

There continued to be no discernable movement inside. For a second, he wondered if Carl hadn't taken her to the hospital himself, when an odor drifted to him from the hand-cranked window.

It was the scent of pain. And blood.

He rushed back to the front door and tried to open it, but it was locked. Bracing himself, Jeb firmly grasped the doorknob and applied more force on it. The lock crunched inside, the inner mechanism shattered by his great strength, and the crumpled brass knob came off his hand. The door swung open easily.

The place was dark. The stench of pain smacked him in the face like a well-aimed blow. Slowly he walked down the narrow hallway, peering into the second bedroom as he passed. Then the bathroom.

Reaching the master bedroom, he scanned it for any sign of her, but the place was empty.

Empty except for the smattering of blood droplets on the rumpled sheets.

The thick, hot scent of blood filled his nose. Jeb paused. The smell was too great to be coming from just those few drops.

*"It was Carl who called in for her. Said Hannah was in the bathroom throwing up and couldn't make it to the phone."*

The bathroom.

There was another door at the rear of the master bedroom. At first glance, he had thought it was a closet, but then he noticed it was to his right. In three long strides, he reached the closed door and threw it open.

At the sight of her, he nearly gagged.

She was hunched over between the toilet and the bathtub. Her face was hanging over the seat so the blood would fall



directly into the bowl. She appeared unconscious, but alive. Barely.

Jeb dropped to his knees. "Hannah? Hannah, it's me. Jeb. Oh, dearest heavens, talk to me, Hannah. How badly did that son of a bitch hurt you? Do I need to take you to the hospital, or what? Hannah?" He reached for her as one blackened eye managed to open to peer at him.

"Jeb?" Her lips were split open. Blood had run down the corner of her mouth and over her chin. Congealed smears masked one entire side of her face from temple to jaw.

"Why would he do this to you?" Her pain was his now. He could almost feel his skin cracking and tearing.

"Jeb?"

There was no question as to what he had to do. Getting to his feet, he lifted her in his arms and kicked down the toilet lid before sitting her on top of it. With a wet washcloth, he tried to clean up as much of the gore as he could, and prayed his ministrations weren't causing her any further agony.

"What..." She tried to swallow but couldn't. "What are you doing here?"

"Carl called in to the diner to say you were sick and wouldn't be able to come to work. Barb and I feared the worst, so I came over to check up on you." He paused to look over the damage done to her beautiful face. "He did this to you, didn't he?"

"It was my fault," Hannah tried to explain. Jeb cut her off angrily.

"There is no excuse for him to do this to you."

"Yeah...there was." She tried to smile but it hurt too much.

"Go on. I'm listening. What excuse could you give that would convince me you deserved this kind of brutality?"

She tried to take a deep breath. It came out as a painful gasp, leading Jeb to believe she could have some internal

injuries. Not waiting for her to answer, he tenderly lifted her into his arms and took her out to his truck. She protested feebly but he ignored her. Going back inside he couldn't find a suitcase or duffle bag, but he did find a box of garbage bags underneath the kitchen sink. Tearing one off the roll, he went back into the bedroom and began stuffing clothes from the closet into it. In the dresser he found underwear. Nightgowns. Socks. Her tennis shoes she always wore at work he found beside the bed. On top of them he threw in what he could find in the bathroom. A toothbrush, hairbrush, and some of those hair clips and elastic things he had seen her wear. The last item he grabbed was her handbag that was sitting open on the kitchen counter.

Closing the drawstring, he tossed the bag into the bed of the truck, then climbed in on the other side.

"Jeb, don't do this," she whispered brokenly against the other door.

"I'm taking you to the hospital."

"No!" A small hand still bearing traces of blood latched onto his arm. Jeb looked over to see her eyes wide and pleading, despite the puffiness around the blackened, swollen sockets. "No hospital," she begged.

"Why not?"

"They'll think...you did it. Until I tell them different. And I...I don't know if I'll still be awake then." She released his arm, letting her hand drop to the seat between them.

She looked so small and defenseless. The thin nightgown she wore was still coated in blood. It clung to her body, outlining her breasts and abdomen. It was all he could do not to pull her into his embrace and promise to shelter her for all the rest of his days.

The sudden surge of emotion rocked him to the core.

He gave her a brief nod and put the truck in reverse, when the roar of another engine drew up behind them. Jeb glanced

into the rearview mirror to see a battered brown pickup pulling in.

A fair-haired man wearing a pair of jeans, a faded blue t-shirt, and a baseball cap that read Nolander's Automotive got out from behind the wheel and came striding over to Hannah's side of the truck. Instinctively Jeb leaned over and punched down the door lock after making sure the window was all the way up.

"Hannah! Hannah! What the fuck are you doing?" The man, Carl, tried to open her door without success. He glared at Jeb. "Who the fuck are you? What are you doing with my woman?" he yelled.

Hannah moved as if to open the door for him. Jeb reached out and took both of her hands in his. "Don't."

She turned blue eyes fogged with pain in his direction. "But—"

"You're coming with me."

He could swear she literally melted at that remark, as if she had wanted him to say something along those lines. Putting the truck in reverse, Jeb cut the wheels to avoid hitting the vehicle parked behind him.

Carl pummeled the cab with his fists. He tried kicking the door. Realizing he wasn't accomplishing anything, he ran around to the driver's side and began beating on the window.

It would only be a matter of seconds before the glass cracked. Throwing the stick shift into park, Jeb opened his door and stepped out, leaving the motor running.

A fist came flying around the door frame. It failed to make contact. Jeb caught it with his own and tightly clamped his fingers down over it. And kept tightening.

Carl hooted at the sudden pain. He tried to extricate his hand from the man's grasp, but it was like having the bones crushed in a vise. Dropping to his knees, the hoot escalated into a thin shriek of pain. "Let go!" he finally howled.

Jeb let go. In one smooth move, he slid back inside the truck cab, slammed the door, and pulled out, leaving the man bending over in agony near the daisy-painted fence.

He drove back to the diner, pulling up at the rear. Jumping out, he hurried over to the back door and rapped on it. Seconds later Barb stuck her head out. Her eyes widened with horror when she saw Hannah propped up in the seat.

"Oh, dear God! Is she alive?" The woman hustled outside and over to the passenger side. Hannah was either out cold or unable to respond. Either way, her eyes were closed, her breathing shallow.

"I want to take her to the hospital but she won't let me," Jeb told her. "I would have called, but Carl showed up as we were leaving, so I brought her here." He paused, then added, "We had a minor disagreement. He'll be nursing that right hand for a while."

Barb slowly shook her head. "You know the man's gonna come over here next. She can't stay here."

"She's going with me." The words were out of his mouth before he had the chance to think about it. Barb gave him a look of disbelief. "Until she's well enough to decide what she wants to do, I'll take care of her," he promised.

"Just a second, then," the older woman ordered him, and disappeared back inside the diner. Jeb nervously watched the road for the brown pickup until she reappeared with two brown paper bags. Shoving them into his hands, she told him, "I put a couple of breakfast biscuits and two cups of coffee in this bag. Her tips are in the other." Seeing his quizzical expression, Barb made a shooing motion with her hands. "It ain't much, but it should help get her back on her feet. Don't worry about Carl. If he comes here, I'll have Billy greet him with that Winchester he keeps behind the counter for emergencies. Now *go*."

Jeb got back into the truck, tucking the two bags in the seat between him and Hannah. As he pulled away, he raised a hand in farewell to the woman watching them go. She waved back, and the last thing he thought he heard her say was to plea, "Keep her safe!"

## **Chapter 4**

### **Tumbril Harbor**

Clearwater was one hundred and eighteen miles northeast of Laughlin. Even so, Jeb felt it wasn't far enough away. Once Carl recovered, he would come after the man who had taken Hannah. Then he would be coming after her.

He pulled down the pamphlet from where he had tucked it over the visor. Mr. Bennetson had given it to him Wednesday. It was a tourist brochure for a place called Tumbril Harbor. The man had a close cousin there who ran a lumbermill. The place was known for the timber it produced exclusively for shipbuilders.

*"If you ever venture in that direction and need a few days' or a few weeks' worth of work, tell Tom I sent you."*

Tumbril Harbor wasn't off of any major highway or secondary artery. One had to travel winding country roads to reach it.

As a town, it was slightly smaller than Laughlin, but it was surrounded by forest, with a direct route to the ocean. Picturesque. Easy to get lost in. And it was only another four hour drive away.

Hannah hadn't awakened since she had passed out on their way back to the diner. Neither had she moved when he got back into the truck after picking up his paycheck. It wasn't until he had to stop to pick up a bottle of aspirin and gas up the truck just outside of Clearwater that she finally came to. Slowly she pulled

herself up and looked groggily around. When she focused on him driving, it all came back to her.

"Take a couple of those aspirin," he gently ordered, nodding toward the small bottle sitting on the seat between them. "There's also coffee and a breakfast biscuit in the paper sack."

"Where are we?"

"North of Clearwater." He nodded at the second sack in the floorboard near her feet. "Barb put your tips in that other sack."

He noticed her glance at him as she reached for the first sack containing the coffee. "North of Clearwater?" she finally understood. "I...thought..."

Tossing her the brochure, Jeb explained, "I changed my mind. We're going to Tumbril Harbor. I was told it has a mill that's owned and run by Mr. Bennetson's cousin. He said I could have a job there if I wanted it." He glanced at her sipping from the Styrofoam cup. "That's probably cold by now. I can stop at the next town and get you some fresh, if you want."

"No." She carefully shook her head. "It's okay. It's still warm. It feels good on my throat." Sighing, Hannah stared out her passenger window at the passing scenery. From that angle, the worst of her cuts and bruises were out of sight, although the black fingertip-sized splotches around her throat and neck were clearly evident. Jeb felt his anger simmer in his blood. He had been too generous letting the man get away with just a crushed hand.

Long minutes and several miles went by. Jeb rarely played the radio in the truck, preferring the quiet and peace of mind he could obtain while driving. So the next time she spoke, her question vibrated in the air.

"Why?"

He knew sooner or later she was going to ask him that question. Human emotions were fragile things. And early on he

had learned that the truth, no matter how much it could wound, was always the best road taken.

"Because I could not bear the thought of him hurting you anymore."

His answer got her attention. Hannah turned to stare at him. Instead of asking any further questions, she dipped into the sack and brought out the breakfast biscuit. Beth had dropped one with sausage and egg, and one with egg and cheese only. Jeb had left her the one with the meat.

Slowly he watched from the corner of his eye as she pinched off pieces of the biscuit before putting them into her mouth and carefully chewing them.

"Jeb?"

"Yeah."

"What's going to happen to me now?"

"I guess that all depends upon you."

Blue eyes dulled with the hopelessness of their situation looked over at him. "Don't leave me," she whispered. Her plea was barely audible above the growl of the engine.

"Don't worry," he assured her. "I'll be here for you until you decide what you want to do with your life."

"And then?"

"And then you're free to go," he said as his insides turned inside out. Crystal bright pain shot through his chest, stunning him with the force of his reaction. Jeb knew he would have to face a very real, very possible future without her in it because of the decisions he had made today.

*When she is ready to leave me, will I be able to let her go?*

After eating, Hannah curled up on the seat, her head propped against his leg and thigh, and dropped back to sleep. He had picked up a thermal blanket at the Gas 'N Go when he'd filled up. Now he tucked its plaid edges around her to keep her warm as she slept.



Sleep was good for her. It was the great healer, and that was what she needed lots of. He soon found having her head resting on his thigh was causing unusual stirrings in his chest and lower belly. It also was a feeling he could easily grow to like. Despite the circumstances of her being with him, Jeb couldn't deny the fact he had no regrets over bringing her with him. In all honesty, he knew he hadn't made it a point to go to the diner every morning simply to have breakfast. He had gone because of Hannah. Because he wanted to see her face and teasing smile. He needed to hear her voice and her laughter when she tried to pass along a joke she'd heard.

Hannah Pitt had come to mean something very real and promising to him. Which was why any dreams of a future with her were both poignant and impossible.

Hannah Pitt was human. He, Jebaral Gitall Morr, was nothing remotely human.

Still, he could protect her as he promised. Protect her and care for her until she healed and was able to face the world again on her own two feet.

Silently, Jeb prayed that time would not come too soon.

It was nearly three when he turned onto the simple two-lane blacktop that led to Tumbril Harbor. Hannah also roused herself from sleep and sat up with the blanket wrapped tightly about her.

"We're about seven miles from Tumbril Harbor. When we get there, I'll find us a place to stay, then I'll get us something to eat. Anything in particular you'd like?"

She shook her head. Hunched over slightly, she appeared extremely vulnerable and lost. "I don't care," she finally answered. "But I would love something cold to drink, if that's all right."

"Not a problem."

"What time is it?"

"A little after three."

She reached up to tuck a lock of hair behind her ear. Her fingers encountered some dried blood, and she stared at the flakes in numb surprise.

"You can take a bath while I'm gone."

"I don't have anything to wear," she protested feebly. Parting the blanket slightly, she noticed the bloodstains on her gown. "I don't think I'll be able to get all the blood out of this."

"Don't worry. I brought along some of your things. They're in the bag in the bed."

He watched as she shifted around and looked out the back window. "Thank you."

\* \* \* \*

According to the sign, Tumbril Harbor was established in 1818, and many of the buildings they drove past looked like they had been built around that time. As the brochure promised, modernization was not allowed within fifteen miles of the city limits. So if one came to this little seaside resort looking to shop at a department store, or to eat at a well-known fast-food restaurant, they would be out of luck.

Which was fine with Jeb. One of the reasons he preferred the smaller towns was because each one had its own unique flavor. A specialness that crept into his bones and made him feel more at ease.

Simolif, on the other hand, preferred the anonymity of living in bigger cities. Between the two of them, they could argue the pros and cons for hours. Yes, the big city made it easier to blend in with the populace. But small towns were often less easily accessible. Plus the people were friendlier and more willing to help.

Coming around a bend, Jeb spotted a sign which read Harvest Moon Motor Lodge. He pulled into the parking lot, making sure the truck was parked away from the main office.

The last thing he and Hannah needed was for someone to see her in her present condition and start asking questions.

The office was empty. Jeb slapped the bell for attention. Presently an older woman came out to greet him with a smile. "Sorry to keep you waiting. I was on the Internet. Are you needing a room?"

"Do you have weekly rates?" he inquired.

She gave him a closer look. "Planning on staying a while, are you?"

Jeb gave her his best smile. She seemed to melt from its effect, as he'd hoped she would. "I'd like to think so. I'll be applying for a job over at the mill. Mr. Mallon's cousin from Laughlin sent me."

That bit of news shredded any further doubts she had about him. "Oh! Anson sent you! Well, to answer your question, yeah. With tourist season about over, I can set you up on a weekly basis. No problem." She leaned partway over the counter and spotted the truck in the parking lot. "By yourself?"

"No. I'm with a friend."

"Girlfriend?"

Her tone of voice put him immediately on edge. That, and the smoky smell of something he couldn't identify. Again, truth would always win out, no matter the consequences. Jeb knew from experience that lying often caused disastrous results.

"Yes, ma'am. Is that going to be a problem..."

There was a plaque hanging on the opposite wall. *Given by the Tumbril Harbor Chamber of Commerce to Walt and Wendy Newburg.*

"...Mrs. Newburg?"

The smoky smell dissipated. The warm smile returned. "No. Not that I can see." She pulled a notebook from under the counter and dropped it in front of him. "I'll need you to fill this form out for me. I'll be right back."

He finished furnishing the information she needed as she returned with a key dangling on a short chain bearing the number eleven.

"Eleven's on the end. I thought not having to deal with people on both sides of you would give you a little more privacy. Plus you'll have a little extra room to park."

He paid cash for the week, noticing she didn't charge him for the coming weekend. Rates usually ran from Monday through Sunday, payable in advance. That way if a guest decided to move out on a weekend, the room was already paid for.

Giving her another thank you, he took the key and left the office. No doubt the town would know all about him before he even applied for work on Monday.

"Any trouble?" Hannah asked softly as he climbed behind the wheel.

"No. If anyone asks, I told them you were my girlfriend. Hope you don't mind."

The scent of brightness swirled about her. "No. No argument here," she said with a little smile.

He was too surprised to say anything as he drove the truck over to bungalow number eleven.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Settling**

Hannah waved away his offer to carry her into the bungalow. Jeb watched as she moved slowly under her own steam. Most of the damage was to her face, neck, and shoulders, although he wouldn't be surprised if she had a cracked rib. He followed her with their things.

The interior of the tiny cabin was small but not confining. The bedroom area held a double bed with a quilted cover, a bureau, and a small writing table and chair. One door led to the bathroom with a tub and shower. The second doorway led to the kitchenette. Through the window behind the bed, Jeb could see that the woods came right up to the rear of the cabin. That was good.

He heard a small cry of dismay as he dropped their bags inside the door. Hannah was in the bathroom. Going over to the door, he could see her staring at her reflection in the mirror over the sink. In the glare of the single bulb overhead, her skin was a rainbow of colors, all in the dark scale. He watched as she tenderly touched the swollen areas around her eyes and chin. Presently she cast a tear-filled glance at him through the mirror. Her lips moved, but no words came out. The air was filled with the heavy, inky scent of desolation.

Jeb managed to catch her before she collapsed to the floor. At first she struggled against him, trying to slap away his arms and hands. Giving up, she clung to him and buried her face in his chest. Loud sobs shook her as he held her, letting her finally

come to terms with what had happened. With their present situation. With the uncertainty of her future...their future.

She felt weightless in his arms as he carried her over to the bed and sat her down at the foot of it. Her hands continued to grip his shirt, giving him no choice but to sit beside her.

The smell of sadness continued to surround her, but now he could sense another emotion coming from her. It was tangy. Different. Lightly laced with a sweetness he found he liked. It reminded him of lemonade.

"Oh, God, how can you look at me?" The words were muffled against his chest. Jeb's first reaction was that he might be saying those very same words in the immediate future.

"Hannah?"

The crying lessened. Her breathing grew easier, not as raspy. She allowed him to leave her long enough to get the box of tissues from the bathroom. After she had wiped her cheeks and blown her nose, he gently lifted her chin. "Let me get a good look at what he did to you."

Her eyes betrayed no fear as he lightly ran his fingers over the damage. When she didn't flinch under his scrutiny, he took it for a good sign. So far, there were no broken bones in her face, as far as he could tell.

"Well?"

"Well...I wouldn't pose for any magazine covers for a while," he said with a smile. Hannah snorted softly and managed to grin back. "What about the rest of your body? You were moving slow there. Did he...kick you? Or hurt any other part of your body?"

He wanted to ask her if the man had molested her, but the helplessness in her eyes kept him from doing so.

He watched as she focused on a spot over his right shoulder. He knew she was fighting with herself over how much she should

tell him. After a brief struggle, she turned back to look him in the face.

"I should tell you all of it," she admitted. "It would only be right, since you went to all the trouble of sav-saving me." Her breath hitched in her chest. Tears rose into her eyes again. She sniffed loudly and let them fall.

"Wait. This doesn't have to be done right now." He glanced at his wristwatch. That was another thing he liked about this world. These people regulated themselves with a simple device strapped to their arms. Everything around them revolved around time. Jeb found it very easy to move about on a planet where all he needed was neatly coordinated. "It's almost four, and neither of us have had anything to eat since early this morning. You go take a shower. I'll go get something to eat and bring it back here. Is there anything besides something cold you would like?"

She shook her head. Once. Tiny droplets of soreness tinged the air around her head. "I'll eat anything. I'm not picky," she gave him a small grin, "like you."

He grinned back. "Who, me?"

"Mr. Vegetarian."

"Not by choice, Hannah. My system won't tolerate flesh."

That remark earned him a cocked eyebrow. "You mean meat, don't you? But I've seen you eat eggs."

"It's not flesh. Muscle."

"How about fish? Shrimp and such?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. I've never tried it."

"You've never eaten shrimp or fish? Are you kidding me?"

An incredulous look spread over her face.

"Hannah, look. We have all evening to discuss my eating habits. Let me go and pick up a few things first."

"Here. Let me give you some money." She started to get up and reach for the paper bag she'd left on the small nightstand. Jeb stopped her.

"That's all right. Keep your money."

"No, it's not all right. I can't have you spending your money on me. Let me at least help."

"No." He hoped his tone sounded firm. "It's time someone took care of you instead of the other way around." Another grin managed to take the sting out of his refusal. He stood and patted his pocket, pulling out his truck keys. "Don't open the door for anyone, okay? If it's important enough, they'll come back."

"Okay." She remained on the bed, watching him. Waiting.

It was as if she wanted him to do something. Or say something. Jeb mentally cursed in his native tongue. He was treading water here, totally unprepared for these feelings coming forth in him. And left out in the middle of space when it came to the emotions of others. As he turned to leave, he could see the flash of disappointment cross her battered face, and knew he had been right. There was something she had wanted from him, and he had failed to give it to her.

Damn him for having no idea what it was.

Damn him further for not asking.



## Chapter 6

### Questions

He came for her.

During one of her darkest moments, through the fire of pain and indescribable fear, he had stepped into her world and taken her away from it. Taken her away and promised to keep protecting her no matter what.

*"I'll be here for you until you decide what you want to do with your life."*

There was no question what she wanted to do with her life. Or who she wanted to spend it with. But she was too damn scared to let him know. *Not now.*

*Not now.*

The warm shower felt good. She stood underneath the spray for a long time and let the water cascade over her. The curtain inside the tub was semi-transparent. If he accidentally walked into the bathroom, he wouldn't be able to see anything other than the outline of her body.

Hannah glanced down at the welts on her ribcage and stomach. She knew there were more ugly patches on her back but she couldn't see them. Breathing hurt but it wasn't a sharp pain. She knew what a broken rib felt like, and it didn't hurt like that this time. She'd been lucky.

She touched her cheek. The skin was tight, hot. *How can he look at me when the sight of my own face horrifies me?*

A shiver raced over her body. She felt cold even with the warm water running over her.

Carl would come after her. As sure as Monday followed Sunday, he'd come looking for her. She was his, even without a ring or a ceremony, or the little piece of paper that made it legally official. Of course, she had never held herself out as married. It was difficult to call a man who beat her twice or more times a week her husband.

A real husband wouldn't beat his wife. A wife was supposed to be the love of his life. The holder of his heart and the bearer of his children. Carl didn't want kids. He had even gone so far as to tell her that if he ever found out she was pregnant, he'd personally abort it for her.

Another shiver jolted her violently. The water sliding down the drain near her toes had a slight pinkish hue.

There was very little she knew about Jeb Morr. That was okay. They had time to talk and get to know one another better. *And maybe...*

Memory of his embrace suddenly burst upon her. His warm, strong arms, so long his hands could grasp her opposite shoulders. Her breasts responded to the almost erotic sensation she'd felt at his touch, and her nipples shrank into tight buttons.

She had wanted him to kiss her before he left. Not a big one. A little one would have sufficed. A peck on the cheek. A small show of affection.

No, not affection. She couldn't ask that of him. Not after all he'd done to rescue her. Make that a small show of...friendliness.

She washed the conditioner out of her hair and turned off the water. There were only two towels available, so she dried off first then wrapped her wet hair in the same towel. Slipping on the clean nightgown she'd laid on top of the toilet tank, she walked back into the bedroom to see if he had packed her hairbrush.

She was in the middle of trying to get out the tangles when she heard the key in the lock. Jeb walked in with two large sacks and a smaller one balanced on top. He gave her that wide smile that always melted her insides.

"You look a lot better than you did when I left. How do you feel?"

"I feel better. You were right. A shower helped." She watched him disappear into the kitchenette. From where she sat, she could see him unloading the bags and putting things into the tiny fridge. She recognized a quart of milk as one of items he unpacked. Presently he came back into the bedroom with the smaller bag. The aroma coming from it made her mouth water and her stomach rumble. "What did you get?"

"Chinese."

Hannah blinked. "How'd you know I liked Chinese?"

"Wild guess," Jeb replied. He pulled out various little boxes and covered bowls, setting them on the writing table he'd dragged over beside her. "I bought some plastic utensils, since I didn't know how well stocked the kitchenette was."

"Mmm. I love beef and broccoli, but I don't like the broccoli." She giggled. "Strange, huh?"

"That's all right. You eat the beef, I'll take the broccoli. I was afraid to order anything spicy. I also got a large order of the egg drop soup. Thought we could share. Umm. I got mostly soft stuff in case you had trouble chewing." He sucked his fingers after a little sweet and sour sauce dripped on them. The sight of his lips puckering up and making wet, popping sounds was enough to steal her breath away. Fortunately he didn't appear to notice her stare. "Hold on. I forgot the drinks."

Hannah continued to open the rest of the cartons. "Do we need plates?"

"I don't mind eating out of the same carton if you don't," he called from the other room, then emerged with two large drinks

and two bottles of water. With a flourish, he presented her with hers.

“For my lady, a cool drink.”

“A milkshake?”

“You said you wanted something cold. Well, ice cream’s cold.”

She peered under the lid. “It’s chocolate?”

“Yeah.” He paused. “Did I get the wrong flavor?”

“No! Oh no, I love chocolate shakes. I’m just...”

“Surprised?” Giving her a little wink, he handed her an egg roll. “They’re both vegetable, so I wouldn’t accidentally get them mixed up.”

Tilting her head at him, Hannah questioned, “So being a vegetarian isn’t, like, a voluntary thing with you?”

“No.”

“You honestly can’t tolerate beef? I mean, meat?”

He shook his head as he speared a stalk of broccoli. “I get deathly ill if I eat any portion of an animal, like the muscle or bone, or even skin. Cooked or raw, doesn’t matter.”

“But not eggs?”

“Or any byproduct like milk or cheese. I can sort of ingest meat gravy like this here. Don’t ask why. I don’t understand it myself.”

They ate for several minutes in comfortable silence. Along with the egg rolls, soup, and beef and broccoli, there was fried rice and two fortune cookies. Hannah opened hers and read it aloud.

“*A deep friendship may lead to deeper discoveries.*” She looked up to see his eyes staring intently at her. The flush in her face was inevitable. “What, umm, what does yours say?”

“Open it for me and read it.”

“It won’t come true if I do.”

“Superstition. Go ahead.”

"All right. But remember, I warned you." She picked out the thin white slip of paper and uncurled it. "*Your secrets will be kept confidential.*" Hannah let go with a raspberry. "Hogwash."

She heard him come back with a deep chuckle. "Do you want the rest of that rice?"

"No. Go ahead. I'm stuffed." Popping a cookie bit in her mouth, she sat back a bit and managed to tuck her feet underneath her gown.

She felt comfortable with him. That alone surprised her. But then again, she wasn't surprised. There was a quality, an aura around this man that soothed her. Made her feel protected, like he promised. And while sitting on the bed clad in a thin cotton nightgown should have made her self-conscious, it didn't.

She ran her fingers through her hair. It was almost dry. Jeb saw her motion. "When you're ready to go to sleep, I got some painkillers with a sleeping agent. It should help you get through the night without too much discomfort."

"Thank you. That was sweet of you. In fact..." She sighed, knowing now was as good a time as any. "I owe you an explanation."

"I'm listening."

"Well..." She gave a soft laugh. "You know how they say you leave one bad situation, only to head right back into another one? Well, I literally jumped from the frying pan into the fire."

A look of confusion crossed his face. It was apparent he wasn't aware of the old saw. "What I meant was, my dad abused me, so I ran away from home to escape him. I met up with Carl, and...you know the rest of the story. From one bad relationship to another. That's my story. Zip, close. Short and sweet."

"What about your mother? Didn't she try to stop your father from doing what he did?"

"She ran off when I was ten. Took off one morning for work and never came home. Never called. Never bothered to see how we were doing or how I was—"

Her voice choked on her. Old memories she thought she had burned and scattered the ashes of now sent their ghosts back to haunt her. Without her mother there to take the brunt of Charlie Pitt's anger, the man had turned on her to be his next whipping post.

"How old were you when you ran away?"

"Eighteen. I left graduation night. I hung around long enough to get my diploma, be legally declared an adult, and then I was gone." She took a deep breath. "I was damned and determined not to be one of those dropouts who had to come back later and get her GED just so she could have a shot at a decent future." A slight shake of the head. "Some future. I'd been hoarding money from odd jobs, and from what I could take from Daddy without him noticing. We lived in a little town called Bridgeton, outside of West Columbia. The graduation party was in West Columbia, so I was able to get some high school buddies to give me a ride that far. I walked to Madison. From there, I hitched a ride in the back of a truck full of cantaloupes into Tuton. There's a little eatery on the corner of Main, right there on the town green, called Soup's On. I went in and asked for work. Got hired on the spot. I was there about a year when Carl walked in. He was working rigging then, before he hurt his back on the job."

"And he took you to Laughlin?"

"Yeah." She nodded. "His mother lived there. She was nice to me. Carl told her we were getting married, and I believed him."

Jeb watched as she picked at an imaginary piece of fuzz from her nightgown. "But you didn't get married."

She shook her head. "His mom had a stroke and died right before Thanksgiving. Carl thought he was going to get all this money in inheritance. But after the funeral and all the bills were paid, there wasn't much left. Even after he sold her house." Hannah sighed loudly. This time there was real sadness in the sound. "God, I loved that old house. I begged Carl to let us move into it, but he said he needed the money. We fought. He finally relented. A little. He bought that trailer and the pickup. Things were okay for a while. Then he fell off a platform at work and went on disability." She slid her eyes over at him. "That was a little over a year ago."

"No children?"

The question was like a punch to the gut. A tear fell from her eye before she knew it was there. God, she wanted to tell him all of it, *but what would be the use? Done was done, and it wouldn't do either of them any good to dredge it up.*

A warm hand covered hers where they lay in her lap. His face was so close to hers. His eyes were warm brown pools with little gold flecks in them. Incredible eyes. Sensitive. Full of caring.

"Don't let it fester inside you," he urged.

"I'm...afraid."

"Why?" It was softer than a whisper.

"I want to s-stop hating. I want to stop hu-hurting." The tears were falling faster now. Hannah sniffed.

"Then purge yourself."

She hung her head. There was no way she could tell him everything if she had to see the pity in his eyes. She felt him lean closer, and his shoulder rubbed up against hers. It was enough to ground her. "Carl told me that if he found out I was pregnant, he'd get a h—" The memory burned inside her like a hot brand. The words felt like acid on her tongue. "He said he'd get a hanger and abort it himself," she finally managed to say.

She waited for his response but there was none. A gentle pressure on her hands gave her courage to continue.

"How long has he been beating up on you?"

"Oh...he's smacked me around a little ever since we got to Laughlin. Back then, when his mother was still alive, it wasn't much. A few bruises, but nothing big. Nothing really painful. But after Rona died, he changed. He got more violent. More...unstable, I guess you could say. But when he lost his job and had to go on workman's comp, that was when things got really bad."

"Didn't you tell the authorities?"

"Oh, yeah. Once. Just once. He got arrested. Spent two weeks in county before the judge gave him probation. When he got out, he told me that if I ever turned him in again, or if I went to the hospital and reported him, he would kill me. He told me..."

The memory of that night was still too fresh, too real not to feel the hurt all over again. Leaning over slightly, Hannah pressed her forehead against his shoulder. *Contact*. She needed him to keep her bolted to the ground and surround her with his armor.

"Told you what?"

She shook her head, unable to tell him all the hateful, nasty things he had said that had been meant to demean her. To tear her self-esteem into shreds. To destroy her emotionally as well as physically.

Jeb moved closer to her on the bed. That calmness he exuded gave her strength. "Why did he attack you so brutally this time?"

Hannah groaned, remembering every word Carl screamed at her as he beat her with his fists and the heels of the heavy workboots he used to wear.



"You said you were leaving town and I...I couldn't bear the thought of you going away. It hurt so damn much to even think about it. I decided the next morning I would ask you to take me with you. I was going to beg if I had to. Not so much because I wanted to leave Carl once and for all, but because I thought...I thought..."

"What?"

"I thought...nothing, Jeb. Nothing. It was nothing." She tried to pull away from him, away from his warmth and caring, and those liquid brown eyes that seemed to see everything inside her. He refused to let her go or to move further away.

"He beat you because..."

"Because I talked in my sleep, okay? I called out your name 'cause I must've been dreaming about asking you to take me with you, and it woke him up. He was furious to find out what I planned to do. He wanted to know who you were. He thought you and I had something going on, on the side, but I told him we didn't." She flinched involuntarily from the memory. "Carl never believes what I tell him. That's why he hit me."

Her voice gave out, leaving her with another onset of fresh, wracking sobs. Arms like giant oak tree limbs went around her, drawing her tight against his wall of a chest. Slowly Hannah lifted her arms and twined them around his neck.

There would be no more hitting. No more bruising. No more nights filled with blinding pain and blood. It was over. She was free of Carl. Because they had never married, there was no obligation between them. He had no hold whatsoever on her. Especially on her heart.

Yeah, he would probably come after her to try and get her back. But deep inside, Hannah knew he wouldn't succeed. Jeb wouldn't let him, and the thought of this tall, dark man becoming her absolute protector was like a miracle come true.

*Runner's Moon Book 1: Jebaral*

*"Because I could not bear the thought of him hurting you any more."*

A deep friendship may lead to deeper discoveries.

Oh, God, she hoped so.

## **Chapter 7**

### **Truth**

“What’s wrong?”

Jeb rested his back against the side of the phone booth. He knew his brother would be aware of something not being right, which was one of the reasons he had called.

“Your blood line has been pumping like a Synergian sun crystal for the past two days,” Simolif spoke in their native tongue. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah, I’m okay. But something’s happened I need to let you know about.”

He heard his older brother sigh on the other end of the line. Simolif, or Simon as he called himself on this world when he was in his human guise, was his only blood tie left alive. They were as close as siblings could be, which was an extraordinary circumstance considering the Arra took great pains to keep family members apart.

Unconsciously Jeb glanced at the thin skin covering his inner arm. Sunset was a few minutes away. Once darkness fell, he would have the ability to shed this covering and let his own skin breathe. Fortunately for Simolif, the city where he lived was already dark.

“Did someone see the real you?” Simolif questioned.

“No. Umm...not yet.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“I’m in a little town called Tumbril Harbor. I was promised work here at the lumbermill.”

"You told me your job in Laughlin was coming to an end, but I thought you said you were heading to Clearwater."

"That's...umm, the reason I didn't is why my blood line has been acting so strangely." Pressing his lips together, Jeb informed him, "I brought a woman with me."

There was a pause, a silence that felt curiously odd, then a single word response.

"Oh?"

Quickly he explained what had occurred, and why he had brought Hannah with him to this town. Simon listened carefully until he was through.

"You're developing feelings for this woman," he sensed.

"Yeah."

"That's impossible."

"Believe it. It took me a while to accept it. But now that I have her with me, and I can touch her and smell her... I have never been more certain of anything in my life."

"But she's human. How is it possible?"

"I don't know!" Jeb laughed out loud. His confession was liberating. Saying it aloud, and being truthful with both himself and his brother, gave him an overwhelming feeling of lightness. His admission had rendered him light-headed from the realization he had found his one true other self. It was more than a miracle. It was more than either of them had expected.

Simon tsked loudly, chuckling. "I will send up prayers tonight that you have been blessed."

"Please do," Jeb asked, suddenly sober. "I cannot wait to see what our next step is. There is a major obstacle still facing us, unfortunately."

"Why do you say that?"

"She hasn't seen the real me."

"Yet."

"Yet," Jeb concurred. It was inevitable. Sooner or later, he knew he would either have to reveal himself to her, or she would find out on her own.

"And you think she will turn away from you when she does?" Simon asked.

The remark made Jeb laugh at the irony. "She's just left a man who was a monster to her. What do you think she'll do when she sees the real thing?"

"We're not monsters," Simon said softly but with emphasis. "We just look different."

Jeb disagreed. "You're wrong, my brother. Have you seen the movies? Most of their monsters are horrid-looking creatures with no resemblance to man. And many of them are from space."

There was a sigh of disappointment. "I think you're wrong, Jebaral. And do you know why I think that?"

"You're going to tell me anyway." Jeb chuckled, but felt curious nonetheless.

"Because I hear something different in your voice. You can hide behind that wall of doubt all you want, but I can still hear it, even over this line. Hear it. Smell it. You know she won't turn you away, but you'll have to be careful how you approach her."

There was another long pause, then Simon asked, "Does she really make you happy?"

Jeb groaned softly, unaware of his response. "In ways I can't begin to explain."

"Have you tried to—"

"No," Jeb hastily replied. It was already torture having her touch him, and touching her back, without dwelling on the possibility of making love to her. Besides, neither he nor Simon had any idea if they could manage to perform such an intimate act while still in their human forms. Much less to a non-Ruinos female.

“Why not?”

He laughed aloud. “I want to, Simolif. Oh, dearest heavens, I feel like there’s a planetary rift tearing me apart inside.”

This time it was Simon who groaned. “I envy you. What I wouldn’t give to find a female who would accept me. Tell me more about her. About this Hannah.”

Readjusting his position, Jeb leaned his head back against the glass enclosure. “Her beauty is unsurpassed because of her inner strength. I feel as if she can see right inside me. Not only that, she has all the qualities of a true woman of our kind. She hates but forgives. She’s smart but continues to question. She is a survivor of the first caliber. Most of all, she is willing to give of herself. Give, and give freely. I know if she can accept me, there will be no limits between us.”

The sun was below the tree line in the distance. Already he could feel his body tugging on the pseudo-skin encasing his body.

“Jebaral, you know I have to ask this,” Simon said.

A fist inside his chest began beating against his ribs. It was the one question he dreaded hearing. But it was the one he had to eventually face.

“What will you do if you take her...and there is no consummation? There is no blood line formed?”

Stars were brightening in the eastern sky. A coolness spread over him. It was his body telling him he was finally free of the sun’s restraints. If he wanted to, he could shapeshift now. Or he could keep the façade on for a few more hours if he chose. For the time being, Jeb chose to remain human.

“Jeb?”

“Then I will have no choice but to let her go,” he replied. A bolt of pain shot through him so intense he hissed. Simon would force him to face the reality of his situation. His brother would make him face the truth that maybe Hannah was not the woman he was meant to have.

The pain went through him again, just as hurtful as it had been the first time.

"Jeb?"

"Yeah?"

"How can I ease the hurt?"

Slowly Jeb shook his head. Simon would be able to see how strongly he was reacting to his probing questions. The blood line in his brother's arm was as telling as seeing Jeb himself face-to-face.

"She has to be the one, Simon. I know it. She has to be. Why else would I feel this kind of agony? Or this strong a pull?"

For once, surprisingly, Simon agreed with him. All his life he and his brother had disagreed on practically everything. Their arguments had been forceful but congenial, harboring no hatred or ill will. That was the way it was between them. Jeb couldn't remember the last time when Simon had acquiesced to one of his decisions.

"For the sake of your happiness, I pray she is. Like I said before, I am envious." There was a shifting in the background. "The sun is down," Simon remarked. He had sensed the deepening twilight on Jeb's end.

"Yeah. I need to go back. I got some painkillers with a sleeping agent in them to help her rest."

"You mean to keep her unconscious while *you* rest," Simon teased him. Jeb chuckled. "How long do you plan to stay there in Tumbril Harbor? Tumbril...hmm, tumbril... My memory says that name is a death object."

"It was a cart used to haul prisoners to their death. When the town was first settled, a lot of the lumber the mill produced was shipped overseas to Europe. The townspeople say no one really knows why this place was stuck with such a grisly name when the bulk of its lumber went to build sailing vessels."

Simon laughed aloud. "Only you, brother, would find such a place to settle. Very well, I have the number of the lodge where you are staying. I will let you go so you can revive yourself. One last thing, though."

Jeb smiled. "What?"

"When you finally reveal yourself to her, and you explain why we are here, be sure to let her know that I am the handsome one."

Jeb laughed loudly at the notion, knowing what had made Simon make such a request. "I will promise nothing, brother, until I am certain her body and spirit are mine and mine alone. Then I will let her know of your existence."

The laughter on the other end was his answer. "If that is your decision—"

"It is, Simolif. Accept it or refuse it, but that is my final word."

More laughter followed. The two bid each other a restful night, and Jeb hung up feeling better than he had in the past couple of days.

Without saying as much, Simolif had given him his blessings.

Jeb knew he had found his life's partner. The vessel where his spirit could take refuge, to revive and take comfort in.

But because she was human, he had to be careful how he would approach her with the truth.

The phone booth was a block away from the motel. From where he had been standing, he had watched the neon sign come on and start flashing when dusk had settled. He couldn't see the truck or the bungalow, but the tall pines flanking the rear of the motel were dark and inviting.

It was their first night together. By all the suns in the universe, he prayed it wouldn't be the last.





## **Chapter 8**

### **Indecision**

“Well?” Hannah greeted him when he walked into the bungalow.

Jeb flashed her a smile. She was propped up in bed with her pillow behind her back, and the sheet and blanket in her lap. In the lamp's pale glow her face appeared eerily like a mask. The black and dark purple bruises, plus the swelling, made one side of her face contrast sharply with the other.

“Well, what? Did you take those capsules I gave you?”

She had been watching television when he came in. Clicking it off, she laid the remote on the table beside her. “Yeah. Did you call the mill?”

“Yes, I did. I left a message on their answering machine to let them know I was in town, and that I would be coming by Monday morning to apply for a job there.”

An expression he couldn't identify glistened in her eyes. The scent of worry drifted around her with its apple aroma. Trying to put her at ease, Jeb added, “You know, if this place doesn't work out for us, we can always move on. But not until next Sunday.”

“Sunday? Why next Sunday?”

“Because that's when the next week's rent is due. So until then, you're stuck with me here in this place.”

The remark got the kind of response he wanted. Hannah's worry disappeared with a careful giggle. He didn't miss the hand that suddenly flew to her damaged cheek. “Give the medicine

time to work. You know, if you had let me take you to the hospital, the doctor would have given you a prescription for something stronger.”

“I know.” She nodded slowly. “But I couldn’t take the risk they would try to blame you for this, and I would be out cold or something and unable to tell them differently.”

\* \* \* \*

She watched as he locked and latched the door. That done, he strolled over to the opposite side of the bed and stared out the big window. It was a large one, with two vertical panes and a toggle in the center. Earlier she had opened it and let the two glass panels swing outward. The evening air smelled wonderful. Even now the scent of fresh pine filled the little room.

“Tell me what you’re thinking.”

The moon hadn’t risen yet. The only light on in the lodge was the one on the nightstand near her elbow. Staring at him, Hannah once again marveled at the sight of his strong profile. The thick, black, slightly curly hair. The impossibly wide shoulders with long, strong arms. And his hands. Large hands that had seen a lot of manual labor, but were kept clean. Hannah believed that the true measure of a man could be seen in his hands. How clean they were. Whether or not the nails were kept trim and neat. Jeb Morr took pride in his appearance, she could tell. But not in the prissy way some men did. Mr. Morr cared less about what brand of clothing he wore, and more about his general appearance.

“Jeb?” she nudged. A yawn suddenly caught her unaware.

“You need to tuck yourself in, Hannah.” He smiled at her. “It’s been a long day for both of us.”

“Not until you answer my question.”

He took a deep breath, then let it out slowly. “I’m thinking I’d like to take a walk through those trees.”

“Tonight?” Her eyes widened. “In the dark?”

"The moon'll be up in a little while. There should be enough light to see by. Besides, I'm feeling restless."

She made a little motion with her hands. She understood the meaning of feeling restless. There were plenty of nights when she had either been too scared or too worried to get to sleep, especially when it was after two in the morning and Carl wasn't home yet from the bars. Involuntarily her eyes went to the brown bag still sitting on the floor between the bed and the nightstand.

The sound of movement drew her attention back to where Jeb was heading for the door. "You're really going back out, aren't you?"

"You'll be safe. I won't go far. Just to stretch my legs and give myself some room to think."

She saw his eyes jump to the empty side of the bed before he turned away. All at once she knew why he was being reticent. "Jeb?"

"Go ahead and get to sleep. The more you rest, the quicker you'll heal." Flashing her another quick grin, he exited the lodge, closing the door firmly behind him. Hannah stared at the door.

*"Just to stretch my legs and give myself some room to think."*

No. He had to get away, if only for a short while. He was escaping being with her. Being...in bed with her.

Sliding under the covers, she pulled on her pillow until it was beneath her head. The room was quiet except for the gentle chirping of crickets. Every now and then the wind would caress the trees, sending another wave of pine-scented air through the window into the cabin.

She turned off the lamp. *He would return. His word was good.* And he would eventually lie down beside her. She refused to believe it was her face making him reluctant to join her in bed. There had to be other reasons. Maybe he was ashamed of the fact

he had practically kidnapped her. Or maybe he liked her, just not in *that* way. Romantically.

Memories of the way he had touched her face, with his fingertips stroking her swollen lips with undeniable tenderness, brought a tingling to her toes. Hannah wriggled her feet under the cool sheet. She thought he was going to kiss her right then and there, and she would have let him. Even with the blistering pain in her face, she would have welcomed his soft lips. *Soft and comforting.*

But he hadn't. He had held her. Wrapped himself around her like a big blanket and let her cry until there were no more tears. The man cared for her. She would bet her life on it. Jeb truly cared about her, so what was holding him back from tucking himself in next to her? *Good grief, it wasn't as if I want sex from him!*

The tingling shot up her legs and crashed headlong into the juncture between her thighs. Heat fluttered there, teasing and burning, and creating a moistness that seemed to seep into the sheets. The jolt made her jerk in response.

*Oh, God, who am I trying to kid?* She wanted to make love to him. She wanted his big warm body on top of hers because she knew he would make her feel protected. There was no way she could explain what she knew, but deep inside her soul the act of making love with him would be nothing like it had been with Carl. Which was one of many reasons why she yearned to have him. The simple knowledge that Jeb would never hurt her was enough to win her heart. And the thought she could spend the next eighty years of her life in his company would fill her nights with countless dreams. *So why was he acting almost scared?* Hannah could understand if the man was married, but he was a loner going from town to town, from job to job, like a true nomad. No way was there a Mrs. Jeb Morr—

Hannah gasped as a cold hand swiped over her body, and the chill sank deep inside her chest.

*What if Jeb Morr was acting this way because he was gay?*

Tears welled into her eyes. Hannah turned and pressed her face into the pillow. That would explain everything—his devotion, his slightly standoffish reluctance, and the fact he treated her more like a little sister than a woman he wanted a future with.

It all made sense to her now. If she was to remain with him, it would be as a companion and no more. No sex. No deep kisses. No passionate entanglements.

He had promised to take care of her until she was well, and then she was free to go her own way. Neat. Simple. Without any promises given so they could be broken.

She curled her legs up against her belly and tucked her arms against her chest. Before she was aware of it, she was asleep, as outside the moon peeked through the trees and into the room.

\* \* \* \*

The woods were less than twenty feet from the rear of the motel. Sliding between the trees, Jeb waited until he found a tiny clearing. Once he knew there was no one else about, he shed his clothes and dropped them on the ground.

Naked, he lifted his arms until they were away from his body, and he sighed as the false skin slowly sank into his pores.

The air was cool on his freshly-revealed true self. In a minute or two, after the moist residue of the recede evaporated, Jebaral began running. Pushing himself to go faster, pumping his legs until he was almost a blur, he sprinted through the surrounding forest. Leaves and branches slapped against his impervious hide where his natural covering acted as body armor.

There was nothing on this world, outside of their most fearsome weapons, that could hurt him. He had taken some of the worst torture the Arra could devise and he had survived.

Now he was free from the horrors he and the others had faced when the Arra had landed on his world and captured them. To force them into a life of servitude with whatever race paid the greatest price.

Servitude. Or perhaps worse. There were many races out there for whom the Arra provided flesh for the banquet tables. It was a well-known fact Ruinos had some of the tenderest meat beneath their tough, protective hides, which was why Barandat Vor had been plundered with gusto for the past ten or so generations.

Jebaral shook his head, hoping to clear away the worst of the memories. His people's history was vague now. As a race, they were nearly extinct. He would not be surprised to learn the thirty-one escapees to this planet were the last of their species.

The land dipped drastically, opening up to a small valley. He stopped to survey the beauty spread before him. He loved the way the moon bathed its milky glow over the land. The Earth gave up its secrets to him in ways the inhabitants of this world couldn't begin to understand or appreciate. A big lungful of the night air told him many things. It spoke of creatures large and small scurrying among the foliage and above the trees. There were other humans in the aromatic stream, but they were far away, most of them tucked inside their homes.

Other humans.

*Hannah.*

He turned to glance over his shoulder. Several miles separated them, but he could still feel her. Hear her breathing slow. Smell her sorrow. Sense her worry and unhappiness. She wanted him with her in that bed. It would mean his downfall if he gave in to his urges. To this need flooding every cell in his body. Bowing his head, Jebaral groaned at the impact she had on him.

Of the thirty-one Ruinos who had escaped, eleven were female. They were the sum of a civilization that had once numbered over twenty million.

Of the eleven females, three had been mated and were past child-bearing ages. Four were children, not yet old enough to seek, much less take, a life partner.

That left four females. Four, on whom the fate of an entire race rested. And their future looked even more bleak. A Ruinos female would not be able to conceive until she found her true life partner, and their blood had merged.

On the ship he and all the other males had approached the four females, wondering if they were bonded to one of them. To everyone's disappointment, nothing had developed. And now with the survivors scattered all over the continent—perhaps all over the world by now—it would be a miracle if any of his race managed to reproduce.

Jebaral sniffed as a large, warm-blooded creature ambled by. It also paused and tested the air to see if the strange creature was worth getting alarmed over. A silent war waged. Tensing, Jebaral prepared himself to run again, when the animal huffed irritably and went on its way.

A smile came over his lips. The lesser intelligent creatures of this world were of no danger to him. Only the natives who walked on two legs would ever prove to be worthy opponents.

Soft rain began to fall. Jebaral lifted his face and reveled in the cold mist. It felt good on his true skin.

His thoughts went back to Hannah and of the moment he realized he was bonding to her. His fork had been dirty, and she had reached over to pluck it from his hand so she could get him a clean one. Their fingers had brushed, and he had nearly fallen onto the floor when the emotion slammed into him with the force of a runaway truck. It had been the first time they had touched. The shock had lasted all day and all night, leaving him



stupefied and in denial until he had gone back to the diner the next morning to see if those same feelings came back. They did, and they were stronger.

There was no way he could deny that Hannah was attracted to him. That tangy, lemonade smell surrounded her every time she came over to him. He could hear her heart literally running when she caught sight of him. Or whenever she sat down in the booth across from him to chat for a moment.

She was innocent. Totally trusting. And miserable beyond all description.

Her life essence was pure, which had shocked him. Although she had lived with a man for a couple of years, and they had performed sex numerous times, there was no awakening in her. To Hannah, the act itself was meaningless. Instead, she thrived on the closeness afterwards, on the feeling of being cared for and belonging. Of being held and cuddled, and nurtured.

She had never orgasmed, or else her woman scent would be different from what enveloped her. That fact had driven him to her. It sank into his blood, tainting him forever, and leaving him hungering for her like a starved man.

Jebaral knew that when he took Hannah—

Shock like a surge of lightning exploded inside him. *When I take her.*

He dropped his chin to his chest. He would take her. It was inevitable. The one act would clear up so many things. One night, one joining, and one of two things would happen. Either there would be no blood mating, cleansing his mind and body of his need for her. Or he would never be able to leave her for the rest of his life.

The nerves running up the insides of his thighs began to quiver with anticipation. He felt his manpipe rise and stiffen in the wet, chilly air. It was not uncommon for a Ruinos man to take a female when they both believed theirs was a true joining,

only to find out it was a misconception. Simolif believed his brother's attention toward the woman was one of those false feelings. Yet, for the sake of Jeb's emotions, and their species, they both hoped it wasn't.

He turned and began to race back toward town and the lodge motel. Hannah was asleep now. Her body had finally succumbed to the medication she'd taken. When he returned, he would slip back into the cabin through the window he'd left open and crawl under the covers with her.

They wouldn't attempt a joining tonight. But it would have to be soon. He didn't know how much longer he could keep his secret from her. Or how much longer he could abstain from claiming the sweet promise of her body.

Above the treetops, the moon had risen like a bright coin. It would be full in another couple of nights. A harvest moon, nearly blood-red and pulsing like an imitation sun. Jebaral could feel his blood coursing throughout his body. These next few days would be crucial. By this time next week, either he and Hannah would still be sharing the tiny bungalow, adrift within the sensations of their bodies reawakening, or she would be there alone. Without him. Because if theirs was not meant to be a true bonding, he would not be able to remain with her. Ever.

The thought was enough to make him flinch in pain.

## **Chapter 9**

### **Clue**

“Hey, Jamison.”

Carl looked up bleary-eyed at the man who plopped down on the barstool next to him. As the guy ordered up, Carl turned back to the longneck he had been nursing for the past hour.

With Hannah gone, so was the tip money he used to go drinking. Emmet, the barkeep and owner of the place, was letting him run a tab—for the time being.

“How’s the hand?”

The remark made him lift the cast. “Fuckin’ hurts. What d’ya think?” he muttered. It was bad enough he had no money to get decently drunk. It sucked worse he couldn’t get drunk enough to even dull the pain. The prescription for the painkiller the doc over at the clinic had given him was going to cost over thirty bucks to fill. Carl Jamison didn’t have that kind of money. Not with Hannah gone. He winced and took another swig of his now-warm beer.

“Pretty sorry, that Morr guy running off with her.”

Swinging his eyes toward the man, it finally dawned on him who the guy was. “You knew him?”

Manuel Rosas shrugged. “Guy didn’t talk much. He was a loner, but he did his job and kept in Bennetson’s good graces.” He chugged back a long swallow and smacked his lips when he was done. Rosas was part of the regular construction crew. Had been for the past three years. “I never woulda guessed the guy would have taken her like that.”

It had taken Carl nearly an hour to finally make it over to the clinic to have his hand x-rayed. The prognosis wasn't good. The bones weren't just broken; they had been crushed to the point where two doctors examining the slides were doubtful he would ever have the use of that hand again. Still, they had tried to reset it as best they could since Carl refused surgery. The cast would have to stay on for a full six weeks. After that they would x-ray it again, but there was no telling where they would go from there.

In the meantime, he had refused to file any kind of charges. He had a lot of reasons for not doing so. The biggest one being that if the sheriff did manage somehow to find Hannah, she would tell him about how seriously he'd beaten her up. With a domestic violence charge already on his record, this incident would violate his probation.

Secondly, he wanted a clear shot at Mr. Jeb Morr. If the authorities got to the man before he did, Carl would probably never get the chance to thank Mr. Morr properly for running off with his woman.

Still, his reasons didn't stop him from spreading the news that Hannah had ditched him for the ex-construction worker. In addition, he put out the word that if anyone had an idea where they might have headed, he would be mighty appreciative if they'd let him know.

It never occurred to Carl Jamison that the majority of the townsfolk were reluctant to help him in any form or fashion. Hannah was a sweet girl, and hard working. She had never been one to complain. In the short time the couple had been living in Laughlin, gossip had quickly spread how the man used the young woman as his personal punching bag. The man may have been a native Laughlinite, but most of them abhorred his viciousness.

They would tolerate him, and that was all. If Hannah had run off with another man, God bless her. Jamison deserved it. So let the guy fend for himself.

"You still looking for some word about them two?" Rosas inquired softly.

Carl froze. Dipping his head a bit, he swiveled it in the man's direction. "You know something?" His voice was low, soft, and flat, but definitely curious.

Rosas gave a shrug. "Could be nothing. Could be something."

"Spit it out, Manuel."

"I was in Bennetson's office this morning, getting my insurance changed. The door to his office was open, and I heard him on the phone. He was talking to Tom Mallon. You know, his cousin up in Tumbril Harbor?"

"The lumbermill guy?"

"Right. Anyway, I heard Bennetson say something along the lines of, 'Yeah, he's a damn fine worker. I hated to let him go. I asked him to stay on but he wanted to head up to Clearwater. So I gave him your name in case he made it up your way.'"

"Clearwater?" Carl repeated to make sure he heard right.

Nodding, Rosas took a drink, setting his bottle back on the bar with a thump. "I'm thinking he didn't stop in Clearwater. My guess is Morr drove all the way up to Harbor and applied at the mill like Bennetson suggested. Why else would he be talking to his cousin unless the guy was checkin' out Morr's references?"

In his pain and alcohol-fogged brain, Carl tried to roughly calculate the distance. "What kind of drive would that be? Five hours? Six?"

"Umm. Yeah. Five and a half or six. Sounds about right." Rosas squinted at the man next to him. "You heading up there tomorrow?"

Carl straightened up. "Thinkin' about it."

"Whatcha gonna do if they're there?" the man asked cautiously. Already he was regretting having told the guy, but—hell—Hannah was his woman. His common-law wife. How Carl would handle the situation wasn't his problem.

To his relief, Jamison didn't seem too upset. "I just want to make sure she left of her own free will, and the guy didn't force her or anything. Know what I mean?"

"Like kidnap?"

"Yeah. Like kidnap." Finishing his beer, Carl dropped his bottle on the bar and slid off the stool. "Let her tell me face-to-face that it's over between us, and I'll leave. Plain and simple. It's the least she can do after pulling such a stunt. She owes me that much." Giving the man a weak grin, Carl added, "Thanks, Manuel. I owe you one."

\* \* \* \*

Rosas gave him a little salute with his beer and watched as Jamison left the bar. It was clear by the way the man walked that Carl was nowhere near drunk. In fact, it looked like Carl was walking with a purpose now.

Giving a little belch, Rosas got off of his barstool and headed for the back where the pool tables were located, hoping to catch some action. Carl Jamison never crossed his mind again.

## **Chapter 10**

### **Healing**

He could smell something cooking before he got out of the truck. His stomach fluttered as he detected eggplant and tomato sauce. *Eggplant Parmesan. Damn. How did she know it was one of my favorites?*

When he entered the lodge, the odors hit him like walking into a wall. A silly grin crossed his face as Jeb stood in the doorway to watch her work.

It only took Hannah a moment to realize he was behind her. She glanced up from the salad she had been tearing to give him a wide smile. "How did it go today?" she asked brightly, unaware of the effect she was having on him. She had on a pair of shorts and a t-shirt that almost covered her bottom. Her long legs were bare, as were her feet. Her sunflower-yellow hair was pulled up into a ponytail. And despite the dark bruises and swelling that marred her face, she looked happier and more beautiful than he had ever seen her.

"Great! Mallon phoned Bennetson to check on my references. I was hired on the spot."

A grin turned up the uninjured corner of her mouth. "I figured that was what happened."

"Oh?"

It was taking everything in him not to walk over and pull her against him, and feel the softness of her body along his. She had never been far from his thoughts as he had gone through the workday, learning a new craft, new rules, new responsibilities.

She turned to place the bowl of salad on the tiny table. "Yeah. If you hadn't gotten the job, you would have come and told me. Then gone off to look somewhere else."

"Am I that predictable?" He chuckled.

When she shook her head, her hair swayed behind her in a way he enjoyed watching. "I know practically nothing about you, Jeb Morr, except that you're considerate of others. Now, go wash up. Dinner's ready." She sighed as she glanced over the meal. "It isn't much. I did the best I could with what you picked up yesterday and..." Her voice trailed off as she gave him a wary look. "And with what Mrs. Newburg loaned me."

Jeb froze. "Mrs. Newburg? She saw you?"

Hannah's hand went up to touch her purplish jaw. "I figured it was the best thing to do. I'm sorry, Jeb. Don't get mad at me. But if we're going to stay here a week, chances are she or someone else is going to see me. I figured that if I took the bull by the horns and confronted her, it would save us a lot of explanations in the future." Again she gave him a cautious, almost fearful look, wondering how he would take the news.

Immediately he understood why she seemed ready to bolt for the door. As she had said earlier, she knew practically nothing about him. And the only relationships she had ever been in had been abusive.

Pulling his lips into a smile, Jeb held out his arms to let her know he was not angry. To his relief, she walked straight into his embrace and hugged him. "Tell me what happened," he murmured into her hair.

She moved against him as she cuddled. The scent of tangy lemonade momentarily overrode the mouth-watering smell of dinner. "I wanted to have dinner ready for you when you got home. I called the mill to see when you would get off work. Then I debated on what to fix. I saw the eggplant you'd bought, but I needed cheese and tomato sauce." She shrugged lightly. "I



didn't think it would be wise to walk to the market. That's when I went to the office."

"How did you know Mrs. Newburg was there?" He didn't remember telling her.

"I watched you register us. I could see you through the rear window." Hannah shifted slightly, lifting her arms from where they had gone around his waist. Her hands slid up his back with slow, almost deliberate motions, as if she was seeing what he felt like.

It was then Jeb realized he was holding her for the first time. Unlike the other time when he had carried her to the truck as she fought pain, she was now lengthwise against him.

She was curved in places that notched her almost perfectly along his chest and abdomen. Curves he wanted to touch and explore. It was agony to keep his hands flat against her back and not let them roam. Because he knew that once he started to touch her, he would not be able to stop until he had melted into her body and taken her with his manpipe rapidly growing stiff against her belly.

Hannah moved again, and the feel of her warmth suddenly blanketing his engorged member as she held him tighter squeezed a soft moan from his chest. She lifted her face to look at him. Her eyes were innocent. Questioning. Expecting.

He was not aware of lowering his face until he brought his mouth down over hers.

The fire that raced through his blood frightened him. He had never kissed a woman before, but he had seen it done on their television. Ruinos didn't kiss, yet he had always wanted to try it. To experience it.

Her lips caressed his, filling him with brighter heat. Instinctively he returned the movement, then sucked gently on their softness. She shivered in his arms, sending more sweet, lemony waves into the room.

Her scent was in every molecule of air he drew into his lungs. He breathed her in, tasting her warmth and her essence in the roof of his mouth as though she were an intoxicating drink. A tongue tentatively probed between his teeth. Opening his mouth, he let her explore that part of him that had never before felt a woman's touch. There were tiny aftertastes in her saliva from when she had been nibbling as she fixed the salad. Her breath was a garden of deliciousness. Tongue met tongue, danced briefly, then touched. Stroked. Jeb was unaware he had pressed her closer against him until she moaned into his mouth, a sound nearly identical to the one he had made.

He felt her slowly pulling away, but it was with reluctance. If they didn't stop, there would be no dinner. Instead, it would be the two of them dining on each other throughout the night.

"Jeb." Her voice was deep and guttural. Her breathing was labored. "Thank God you're not gay."

"On the contrary. I'm very happy right now," he argued as his hands slid down to her hips before releasing her. Opening his eyes, he noticed the expression on her face. Without warning, Hannah broke out laughing. "What? What did I do that was so funny?"

The giggles wouldn't stop. "No. You didn't...oh, Jeb. You..." She started laughing again, but this time she gave him another quick hug before completely releasing him and turning back to the tiny range.

"What?" he persisted. Whatever he had done, it had obviously tickled her. In a way, that was a good sign. Still, it would be nice to know what he had done, in case he needed to do it again sometime in the future.

They had spent the weekend in quiet companionship, either watching television or going for long walks in the forest where others wouldn't see Hannah's bruises and come to the wrong conclusion. Often they had held hands, and every time Jeb had

felt a rush of absolute perfection flood his senses. Hannah was the one. He knew it as truth with every atom of his being.

Then, at night, he had made certain she took the medicine with the sleeping agent in it. After that, it was just a matter of waiting for her to fall asleep before he shed his outer layer. Yes, he could have tried to keep his human disguise, but in the past when he had, he had awakened to find himself back in his true form. It was a possibility he could not risk as long as Hannah was unaware of what he was. So he trusted the chemicals in her system to help keep his secret safe.

Shaking her head as she took the casserole dish out of the oven, Hannah gave him another warm look. "Let's eat before it gets cold," she suggested with a smile.

Jeb rolled his eyes, an affectation he knew meant exasperation, and took his seat.

The first time Hannah had cooked for them, he had been both surprised and grateful. By not eating out as much, he would be able to stretch their current monies until his first paycheck. He really didn't want to hit any of his bank deposits unless he was forced to. In the meantime, she tried to make the bungalow as cozy and homelike as possible.

"Now...tell me all about your new job," she demanded playfully.

Briefly Jeb told her what he did. It was all manual labor, but he preferred it that way. What he didn't mention was his Ruinos strength allowed him to lift and haul objects that many times would have required a mechanical loader. Although he would sometimes resort to pulling on a particularly stubborn tree trunk with his bare hands, he did so only when he was certain others would not be able to see him. Needless to say, it was the end results that made an impression with his new boss.

"Mr. Mallon told me if I stayed on until the end of the year, he would see that I got a bonus, plus an increase in pay."

The scent of vanilla came to him. He looked up from his plate to see Hannah staring down at her own half-eaten meal. "Hannah? What's wrong?"

A single minute stretched into eternity. Jeb remained patient, knowing she would tell him why her need swirled around her like a pungent cloud. When she swallowed, it was almost a dry, brittle sound. "You're thinking of staying?" she finally whispered.

"I might. I don't know yet. Depends."

"Depends? On what?" She raised her eyes at him. "On me?"

The door was opening. At any moment Jeb would have no choice but to walk through it and confront her with the truth.

He wasn't ready for it. Not yet. Certainly not now. He wanted a few more days to bathe in her lemonade scent when she knew he was nearby. He wanted to come back to the cabin, which had become the closest thing to a home in more than eleven years, to find her there.

He wanted to come back to find Hannah waiting for him with a smile in her eyes and tenderness shining from her face. To find her lying in bed, asleep but aware of when he joined her because she would instinctively cuddle against him. Or to find her in the kitchen fussing over whatever she was cooking.

It wasn't the right time to tell her about himself, but he could tell her the other truths.

"Jeb?"

"Yeah, Hannah. It depends on you."

She lifted her quivering chin. Despite her disfiguration, the sight of her drawing her courage about her like it was a solid entity sent a rush of protectiveness through him. She was trying to find the words and the strength to be honest with him. The thought made him smile. It was time for him to take her fears away. All of them. Finally.

"This is a good place to live, Hannah. I can already tell I will be happy here. But will you be happy here as well?" He cocked his head at her and gave her time to absorb what he was asking her.

Her jaw dropped as she began to understand what he was saying. "You want me to stay with you?"

Her scent had gone from vanilla to the freshness of clean, spring rain. Jeb took in a lungful, tasting it. Wanting more of it.

"Yeah. I do."

"Why?"

This time his eyes widened. *Why?* That was a question he hadn't expected. Or maybe he had and didn't want to admit it. Again he tried one of those inconclusive shrugs, hoping it would conceal his growing nervousness. "I already told you. I can't bear the thought of someone hurting you again."

The air sparked with a slight acidic scent. Hannah was becoming angry, and he had no idea why.

"You want me to live with you out of *pity*?"

*Pity?* "For heaven's sake, no," he replied sharply. Maybe too sharply. "I want you to stay with me because I care about you. Because I'm hoping there can be a future for us. Together. Because I want tomorrow to be as wonderful as yesterday was. And today."

The sharp scent left as quickly as it had appeared. As a tear appeared on her lower lash and fell onto her cheek, the smell he had been seeking reached outward as if to hold him. That tangy, lemony scent of her love.

"Jeb? Do you..." She tried to take a deep breath, but she was on the verge of crying.

"Do I what?"

"How...do you feel about me?"

Closing his eyes, he clenched his hands into fists. *This time was meant to be. Still, it was so damn hard after years of running and hiding. And being so hopelessly alone.*

"Are you wanting to know if I love you?" he whispered, opening his eyes to see her reaction. "Yeah, Hannah. I do. If what I feel is love, then I love you, Hannah. I'm tired of running. I'm tired of facing each day by myself. I have no right to ask you to stay. I have no right to expect you to share the kind of life I live but I can no longer imagine a day without you. I need your smile. I need to hear your voice. I need to have you with me."

He had no recollection of her getting up out of her chair and walking over to him. There was no memory of her kneeling beside him and putting her arms around his waist so she could press the undamaged side of her face against his chest. He could only remember the moment when her irresistible lemonade smell was everywhere in the room, coating his skin with her acceptance. His arms pulled her tighter into his embrace.

"I love you, too, Jeb," she whispered back. "You don't know how hard I've been praying you would let me stay with you."

"Then stay." He buried his face in her hair where the lemonade smell mixed with the vanilla of her need. Edging around them was the unmistakable richness of her sexual hunger, growing stronger with every passing second. "Hannah."

"What?"

"At this moment, I am very gay."

A shriek of laughter surprised him. Jeb jumped at the sound as Hannah goosed him playfully in the ribs.

"Jeb Morr! I am definitely going to have to teach you about American slang!"

"What? What did I say wrong?"

"Nothing," she giggled, staring up at him.

"Then—"

“Hush,” she ordered sternly, pressing a finger to his lips.  
“Don’t say anything more. Don’t ruin this moment. Just...kiss me again. And this time, show me you mean it.”

## **Chapter 11**

### **Secret**

After supper, Jeb helped her with the dishes. Once everything was cleaned and dried, they sat up in bed to watch television for an hour or so. Now that she knew how he felt about her, Hannah was content to cuddle next to his long frame, resting her head on that perfect spot between his shoulder and neck, and lay there with her eyes closed. Reveling in his warmth and hard body. Listening to the steady beat of his heart. Breathing in his piney scent that surrounded him like it was some sort of cologne or soap he used—which it wasn't. He preferred the unscented brands in his shaving cream and such, and that was fine with her. It allowed his own wonderful body musk to come to the fore.

Yet as comfortable and comforting curled up next to him was, she couldn't stop the growing heat slowly devouring her. A heat from sexual hunger and raw need. Too many times she was forced to curl her fingers into tight fists to keep her hands from roaming over his body. Especially over his flat stomach and the bulge in the front of his jeans he couldn't disguise.

What she couldn't figure out was why he didn't take her to bed and make love to her. The man claimed to love her. Love her enough to want her to stay with him and make a home together here in Tumbril Harbor.

Her thoughts went off in a different direction. Maybe he was one of those old-fashioned guys who believed in marriage before sex. But Jeb hadn't mentioned marriage. And neither had



Carl, and he had given her almost the same line when he had wanted her to go back to Laughlin with him...*and see how that ended up?*

*Yeah, but you were already suspicious of Carl and his temper.* If Jeb had a temper, she had yet to see it. If he got angry, it was slow burning. Goodness knew, if she had confessed to Carl that she had gone out of the bungalow to use the phone and to see Mrs. Newburg, he would have smacked her around for disobeying him. Jeb hadn't. In fact, he had seemed more concerned and fearful than angry.

He shifted slightly, crossing one ankle over the other. She felt a pressure on the crown of her head when he kissed her. Hannah closed her eyes, smiling. He kissed like he was afraid of hurting her. *That was okay...for now.* She could imagine what his mouth would do to her once she was well again.

She wanted him to take her, and claim her, and prove his feelings for her in the most primal way possible. With strength and force, but with utmost tenderness.

Sliding her eyes to look up at his face, he grew aware of her stare and glanced down at her. He grinned. "What?" he asked.

"Nothing. I'm just enjoying holding you."

He gave a little grunt before turning his attention back to the program, but his arm pressed against her a little more firmly. His hand never strayed from her waist, although every now and then his fingers would lightly stroke her above the waistband of her shorts. When he did, she nearly melted. God, what she wouldn't give to have him dip those long, broad fingers between her legs where she was steadily growing wetter and hotter with each passing minute.

She noticed he preferred the documentaries on the *PBS* channels, and the science and exploratory shows more than dramas and silly sitcoms Carl had watched. That was fine with

her. She was learning to enjoy finding out that penguins incubated their eggs on top of their feet, and other stuff like that.

The sun set a little before eight. Jeb liked to keep the window near the bed open. He liked to smell the forest. They could also watch the last rays of the sun glance off the opposite bedroom wall and fade away with an orange goodbye.

As he had the last few nights, Jeb grew more restless at dusk. Tonight was no different. As soon as the show *Denizens of the Deep* was over, he released her, swung his legs over the side of the bed, and began to put on his boots.

"Going running?"

"Yeah." Sitting up, he half-turned and reached over to pat her hand that lay on the coverlet. "Why don't you go ahead and shower while I'm gone? And don't—"

"...Forget to take your medicine," she intoned with him. "All right. But, Jeb? We have a lot more to talk about."

"I know." He nodded. "It can wait."

She sat up, crossing her legs Indian-style. "Yeah, most of it can wait. Just answer me one thing, though, before you leave."

He waited, giving her that patient stare she knew too well.

"When are we going to make love?"

What she didn't expect to see was a flash of real pain in his wonderfully strange eyes.

"Hannah...can we talk about this later?"

"Sure. Of course. I'm just wanting to know *if* we're going to make love. That's all. I don't need a date or a time, or to make any kind of appointment. Just tell me *if* we're ever going to make love because, to be frank..." She reached out to touch his shirt sleeve. Her voice dropped, echoing her need. "...I'm dying to feel you inside me right now."

Another emotion blazed momentarily in his gold-flecked eyes. Desire, mixed with controlled lust. He was deliberately keeping himself on the edge, and again she could not figure out

why. Maybe it was a religious thing. Maybe it was nothing more than a personal thing with him. But at least she had told him she wanted him. The rest would be his decision.

"Yes. We're going to make love. Soon," he added, almost making it sound like an afterthought.

He got up from the bed and walked over to the door where he paused. Turning back to her, Jeb tossed her a feeble smile. "I'm sorry I can't give you anything more definite. But it will happen, Hannah. I promise."

A light bulb suddenly turned on inside her. "Jeb, are you a virgin?" *Of course! It would explain a lot.*

That bubble burst when he slowly shook his head. "No. Why do you need to know?"

"Then...can I ask when the last time was you slept with a woman?"

His grin broadened. "I thought I slept with one last night, or have you forgotten?"

"That's not what I meant, and you know it. If you're not a virgin, when did you last make love?" She squinted at him slightly. "You've only made love to women, right? Not to other men."

The remark had him stiffening his back. "We...no. Yes, I mean..." He sighed and hung his head as if inspecting the toes of his boots. Finally he looked back at her. "It has been nearly ten years since I loved a woman. I have never touched a man in that way, although on my w—in my country, the men have no qualms about demonstrating their affection for each other. Not in that manner, however." He bit his lips, adding, "Why are you asking me this now?"

She was still reeling from the fact it had been ten years since he was physical with another woman. *Ten years? Why so long? Had he been a monk or something before leaving the order?*

There was so much she didn't know about this man she had fallen in love with. Fallen truly in love with, not with the "get me out of here" infatuation she realized she'd felt for Carl.

"I'm asking because you told me you loved me."

"I do," he interrupted.

"Then why are you holding back? Love isn't just an emotion. It's also a physical response two people share. The physical act cements the emotional one. At least it does here in America. I don't know how your values differ where you're from..." Hannah trailed off as it suddenly dawned on her. *Maybe he was reticent because of how he had been raised. After all, he was a foreigner.* It was very likely he believed in courting her in a different manner. "Never mind," she quickly said, pasting what she hoped would look like a warm smile to her face. *Thank goodness it didn't hurt anymore to smile or laugh.* "Go on. Enjoy your run. I'll wait up until you get back."

She could literally see him relax when she backed away from her interrogation. "You need the rest, and I have to be at the mill before seven," he responded. "I won't be long. Don't wait up if you get sleepy."

Before she could say anything more, he slipped out the door, closing it firmly behind him.

Hannah had no idea when he got back to the cabin. After he left, she took her shower and crawled into bed to watch some more television. Unfortunately there wasn't anything worth viewing, so she'd turned it off and slid under the covers.

She was vaguely aware of Jeb coming in and dumping his clothes in the chair by the small writing table. It was a habit of his. Habits she was growing accustomed to. Like the fact he went commando. At least not boxers or briefs. Initially she had been surprised when she had gone to the laundromat to wash their clothes. In the end, she had put it down in the *Odd Because They Didn't Do It Like That In His Country* column and let it go.

He took a quick shower. Very quick. *The man wasted no time dawdling in the bathroom.* While he was in the bathroom, she lay with her back to the door, hoping he wouldn't notice her playing 'possum. She had taken pain medication, but not the one with the sleeping agent in it. For one thing, she was afraid of becoming addicted to it, even though the label assured her she wouldn't. For another, she was curious to know how long he stayed away. *What time did he return?* Having Carl not come in until nearly two-thirty or three most nights, and knowing he would usually find something to get angry about when he did so he could rough her up had left her wary, but not afraid. She knew Jeb would never hurt her. He would never raise a fist to her. Still, she was curious.

When he disappeared into the bathroom and closed the door, she peered at the clock on the nightstand. Eleven seventeen. *Late, but not unreasonably so. That was good.* Jeb was an early riser, getting out of bed before the sun rose. When she had worked at the diner, she'd had to get up even earlier. If Carl had forced himself on her, or put a few more marks on her when he had come home from the bars, it had taken everything out of her to crawl out of bed with barely three hours of sleep and go to work a full eight-hour shift. Many evenings she had gone home and simply turned over her tips to him before he asked, just so he would go ahead and leave. Leave so she could go to bed and rest before he got back home, and the cycle would continue.

Without thinking, she reached down between the bed and nightstand to feel the paper sack still sitting where she'd first put it. She had given Carl all her tips...except for one. She never gave him the five dollars Jeb always left her at breakfast. Sometimes it was a fiver, sometimes five ones. Sometimes bills and coins combined. But always five dollars. Five dollars for a meal that never added up to that much to begin with. It was that money she had started to squirrel away.

At first she couldn't understand why. Maybe deep down, she couldn't bear the thought of giving Carl something that had come from Jeb. Nevertheless, she had taken the money and stashed it in an old sweet potato can that had a plastic lid, and hidden it on the bottom shelf in the back underneath the cash register.

Five mornings a week for five months the money added up. She probably had several hundred dollars accumulated. She didn't know for sure; she had never stopped to count it. Barb was the only other person who knew she had it, which was why she hadn't been surprised when the woman had gathered it up and given it to Jeb when he had told Barb he was taking Hannah away.

The water turned off. A minute later, the door to the bathroom opened. Hannah heard him stop in the doorway and sniff. The room smelled of pine. It was a clean smell she also enjoyed. Not quite like his own personal smell, but close.

Closing her eyes, she feigned sleep as the mattress tilted when he crawled in beside her. A double bed didn't give them much room to stretch out. And Jeb was a big man anyway.

Her mind changed gears as she envisioned what other parts of his anatomy were big. Like that bulge in the front of his pants she had seen on other occasions. The same bulge she had felt shoving into her stomach. The mere thought of him sliding it into her was enough to put a huge smile on her face and a tingle between her thighs.

Soon. *Soon.*

Her eyes opened when the wall of his back touched hers. *If the man didn't wear any underwear...what did he wear to bed?*

Her face flamed. One thing she had quickly noticed was that he always made certain she was asleep when he came to bed, and didn't awaken until he left it. Last one in and first one out, with her blissfully unaware. It was probably another reason why he

insisted on her taking the pain capsules with the sleeping agent. A reason now very clear.

The man slept in the nude.

Hannah stifled the groan rising in her throat. What she wouldn't give to be able to reach over with her hand and run her palms over his hard muscles. Down his waist. Over those narrow hips and thighs before wandering across those buttocks that drew her attention every time he turned his back to her.

He shifted to get comfortable. The bed jiggled in response. A warmth spread across her skin from head to toe. His warmth. He was probably lying on his side, facing away from her. Presently she felt a certain lightness come over him, and she realized he was asleep. Almost instantly, he had gone to sleep. *How was he able to do that?*

Taking a slow, deep breath, she carefully rolled over and opened her eyes. The room was pitch dark except for the pale glow of moonlight filtering through the trees. Jeb was a large, wide figure in front of her. Without thinking, Hannah raised her hand and touched his back. Her fingertips barely grazed the top of his spine. Lightly running over the ridges. The sharp little peaks rose along his spine like thick quills. Or plates.

*What?!*

Hannah jerked her hand upward as she whirled around and searched for the lamp on the nightstand. She fumbled for a second with the tiny pull chain before the forty-watt bulb came on. Squinting against the sudden brightness, she turned back around to see what it was she had touched.

A monstrous creature with shiny, dark green skin reared up to stare back at her. Dimly her mind took in the sight of its bald head and the pointed rows of teeth, and she screamed.

"Hannah!"

She flailed against the beast, but it caught her wrists and held them with long fingers tipped with thick claws. She

screamed again before the creature's other hand clamped down over her mouth. A brief struggle ensued before she could grasp the fact that the horror staring at her with liquid brown eyes was holding her firmly without harming her, or allowing her to inadvertently harm herself.

It was going to eat her. It was going to rip out her throat with those cannibal teeth and devour her alive. Her chest constricted to think this monster had overcome Jeb. Maybe killing him before it sought her out.

Terrified beyond any further thought, she continued to stare into its pain-filled brown eyes. Brown eyes flecked with gold.

"Hannah. Stop! It's me, Jeb!"

The words came out of its mouth; a mouth containing those ungodly sharp little teeth. *With a voice that sounded just like...*

*It had lain down beside her. It had come out of the bathroom after taking a shower, and gotten into bed like Jeb did.*

Her body was trembling violently. She could not think; her mind was focused on the thing that continued to resist her struggling while also maintaining a warm—

*claw?*

—over her mouth.

The pounding at the door distracted her.

"Mr. Morr! Miss Pitt! Open the door! Open the door!"

She swung her eyes toward the portal and tried to warn them about the creature, but the only sound she could utter was the whining in the back of her throat.

"It's okay, Mrs. Newburg!" a voice called out behind her.

Jeb's voice.

"What's happening! We heard a scream! Open this door!" the woman shouted, banging again on the door.

Hannah jerked her head back around, coming nose to nose not with the green-skinned monster, but with Jeb's familiar,



beloved visage. Her eyes flew open as he leaned closer to her face.

"Say nothing, Hannah. If you love me, say nothing. I will explain."

He gave her long enough to reply with a nervous nod. Immediately he released her wrists and mouth, and crawled off the bed.

The pounding came again. "Open this door, or I'll call the sheriff!"

She remained staring at him as he grabbed the jeans he had thrown on the chair and hurriedly pulled them on. She caught a glimpse of his manhood a second before he stuffed it inside his pants and zipped them up as he strode to the door.

The beating on the door continued until he unlocked it and threw it open. Outside Mrs. Newburg and a couple of other motel guests were gathered, wide-eyed and fearful.

"It's all right, Mrs. Newburg. An owl flew into the room and frightened us," Jeb told her calmly. He continued to hold the door open wide enough so they could see inside. See Hannah sitting up in bed with the sheet bunched under her chin. Above the bed, the window was clearly open.

Mrs. Newburg gave him a cautious glare before examining the woman in the bed. "Is that the truth, Miss Pitt?"

Without blinking, Hannah nodded. "Scared the bejeebers out of me. Sorry if I woke anyone."

The motel owner relaxed. It was clear her worst fears had not come to pass, and Jeb had not attacked the young woman as they all had believed.

Jeb continued the charade. "It's gone now. Sorry for the trouble."

Giving them both a nod, the woman said, "Better keep that window closed, or it could happen again." She paused, then added, "You sure no one got hurt?"

"No, ma'am," Hannah quickly offered, glancing at the man—

*a human-looking man*

—who remained by the door but didn't look back at her.

After another moment, Mrs. Newburg nodded and bid them goodnight. Jeb remained at the door until they all had dispersed back to their rooms. Then he closed and locked the door. With that done, he turned to face her. Finally. Yet he remained leaning against the jamb, not coming near her.

A shiver raced through her as her heart slowly calmed. Her eyes never left him.

"When I came to bed, I thought you might be awake, because you tend to dream aloud," he said softly. "You didn't take the sleeping pill, did you?"

"No." She shook her head. Her eyes raked over his figure, and she realized this was the first time she had seen him shirtless. His chest was as broad as she knew it would be. Broad, with muscles that looked like they had been carved into his flesh. Large, dark nipples contrasted sharply against his pale skin.

Pale skin. Not the dark forest green color she remembered seeing.

"What are you?" Biting her lower lip, she added, "I know what I saw, so don't try to lie your way out of it. You're not human, are you?"

This time it was his turn to shake his head and reply, "No."

He made a move away from the door. Hannah's instinctive reaction was to scramble back across the bed to keep as much distance as she could between them. When he saw her attempt to stay away from him, a look of deep pain crossed his face. But instead of rejoining her on the bed as she thought he was going to do, Jeb went over to sit on the chair by the writing table.

"Tell me the truth," she ordered him, her voice soft but threatening. "All of it."

“Very well.” He sighed and looked up at her. The pain was still there on his face. In those beautiful brown eyes with their amber flecks. “But remember this, Hannah. Despite what happens after I do, and what you may think or decide, I will always love you.”

The admission tugged at her heart. She tried to swallow, but tears were threatening to clog her throat. “I’m listening,” she managed to say, pulling the sheet closer to her. It wouldn’t matter now what he told her because her mind was already made up.

She knew what her decision would be before he spoke another word.

## **Chapter 12**

### **Confession**

"Feel free to ask me anything," Jeb insisted.

"Don't worry. I will."

"Where do you want me to start?"

Hannah cocked her head at him. "The beginning is always good. Like, how did you get here? Or have you always been here, living among us?"

"We arrived here on Earth a little more than five years ago."

"We?"

"There were thirty-one of us," he explained. "Men, women, and children."

"Where are they now?"

"I have no idea." He shrugged to emphasize his point. "For safety's sake, we split up. The only Ruinos I know who is nearby is my brother, Simolif."

Her eyes grew wide. "You have a brother? Where is he?"

"In Templeton."

"*Templeton*? Cripes, Jeb. That's not nearby. That's in the next state!"

Somehow he managed a small smile. "In galactic terms, it's next door."

"Simolif?" She tried to say the name the way he had.

"He goes by Simon."

"Simon Morr?"

"Yeah," Jeb nodded.

She gave him another quizzical look. "What's your real name?"

"Jebaral. Jebaral Gitall Morr." He watched as her lips formed his name. Lips that had kissed him. Lips that had clung to his when she told him she loved him. Pain twisted inside him.

"What does that mean?"

"Well...Jebaral is the name my parents gave me upon my birthing. Gitall is my mother's name. Morr is my father's."

"So, Simon's full name is Gitall Morr, too."

"Yeah. Simolif Gitall Morr."

"No other siblings? No sisters? Cousins? Grandparents?"

"No. Just him and me."

"Who's older?"

"He is. By almost two years."

"What about your parents? Where are they?"

"They were killed before we escaped."

She lowered her face as she absorbed what he told her. He continued to stare at her face, hoping for some sign she was accepting what he said. That she wouldn't ultimately reject him as he knew she would. As she eventually would.

"Why are you here?"

This would be the hard part. "We escaped. We killed our captors and fled in a lifeboat. All of us did."

"All?"

"There were over two hundred of us on that ship."

"But you said there were thirty-one of you," she reminded him.

He nodded. "On the Arran ship. We revolted. We all managed to escape...or so I was led to believe. We dodged the Arra for more than two years before arriving in your airspace. By that time our fuel was gone. Our food was gone. We had no choice but to attempt a landing and hope we could assimilate into your world."

"What about the others? The other, uhh, hundred and seventy or so?"

He shrugged. "We don't know what happened to the others. For all we know, we are the last survivors. The last of our race."

"Last race of what? What did you call yourself? Roo-what?"

"Ruinos."

Her eyes roamed up and down his body. "What I'm looking at now, that's not the real you, is it? That...thing...that's what you really are, isn't it?"

"Yes. What you saw is my true self."

She gave him a puzzled stare. "How are you able to do that?"

"You mean, change the way I look?"

"Yeah."

"I don't know. All of my kind have the ability. Of course, there are restrictions."

"What kind of restrictions?"

Somehow Jeb managed a small, humorless chuckle. So far Hannah had emitted a faint, smoky scent because of her suspicious nature. It was a promising sign. "Well, for one thing, there are certain kinds of creatures we can't imitate. Certain life forms that are impossible for us to manipulate. We were very, very lucky to land on a planet where the inhabitants closely resembled us."

"Your real you looks nothing like us," Hannah almost snapped.

"Compared to other species and races, yes, you do." He gave a big sigh. "Imagine the trouble we would have if we tried to look like a jellyfish. Or a spider. There are civilizations out there in the universe that live on gaseous planets that would kill us, even if we managed to change our outer appearance to look like them. To blend in with them. Much less try to live the rest

of our lives among them.” He lowered his head as he recalled some of the life forms he had met. And the difficulties he had faced.

“You guys are stuck here for the rest of your lives?”

His head jerked up. “Yeah.”

“So...what did you mean when you said you were tired of running?”

“I said that?”

“Yeah. At supper. When you told me you loved me, you said you were tired of running,” she reminded him.

He groaned softly, unaware he had done so. “We managed to escape, but the Arra are still out there. Still looking for us. And they won’t stop until they find us all.”

“How do you know that?”

“We don’t. Not for sure. But they have been decimating our species for hundreds of years. Kidnapping us off of our homeworld until there was no one left. A whole race of beings...wiped out.”

Hannah stared in shock to see his hands shaking. She looked up to see he had noticed where her attention had been centered. “Why did they hunt you?”

“One reason is because of our ability to shape-shift. Because most of the time we can blend in with the species of whatever planet we’re on.”

“Why would that make a difference?”

“It makes a lot of difference, Hannah, when you’re sold into servitude.”

She gasped. “Slaves?”

“Or...food.”

This time she turned white. Her eyes became enormous blue circles in her face. “They *ate* you?”

"The Arra find us quite tasty. In fact, we are considered a delicacy. We're as highly prized for our meat as your kind prizes lobster and other rare dishes."

"No!"

"I would not lie to you."

He waited for her breathing to slow and the color to come back into her face. Her eyes remained locked on his hands resting on the back of the chair in front of him, but her gaze was turned inward. After several moments, she sniffed. "How did you know what to turn yourself into when you came here? I mean...how did you become you? The way you look now?"

"It took us a couple of days to come across one of you and realize you were the dominant species on this world." He smiled at her. "It took us by surprise to see all the similarities. After that, it was only a matter of deciding what we should look like. What different attributes we should adopt, like hair color and all." Jeb snorted softly.

"What?" she smiled. For a split second, he felt a spark of hope.

"I need to tell you that we are locked into our forms during the daylight hours. The sun keeps us from changing, whether we are in human guise or not. It's after the sun goes down that we go back to our Ruinos forms."

"Is that why you got restless after dark? Because you wanted to change back?"

"Somewhat," he acknowledged, nodding. "We can't stay locked into an unnatural form. At some point we have to revert back, whether we want to or not. But mainly we change because it feels good to have the wind and rain on our bare skin. Our real skin."

"That's why you wanted me to take those sleeping pills. You wanted me to stay asleep so you could be in your real form at night."



"Yes. Exactly. I would wake up right before sunrise and turn back into my human self, the one you see right now, before the sun locked me into this."

"What if the sun rose before you got to change?" Hannah wondered aloud.

"Then I would be locked into my Ruinos self until sundown."

There was an odd sound in his voice that she noticed. "Has that ever happened to you? Been locked into your real self during the day?"

Jeb nodded in answer.

She lifted her knees, crossing her arms on top of them before resting her chin on her hands. In the meantime she never took her eyes off of the man sitting a dozen feet away. "Jeb...or do I call you Jebaral?"

"I prefer Jeb when I'm human."

"Okay. Jeb. Gosh, there's so many questions I want to ask you, but I don't know where to begin."

Spreading his hands outward, he conceded. "I'll answer as many of them as I can. I won't hold anything back. Not anymore."

"Good. So explain to me one thing."

He waited silently for her to continue.

"I take it you weren't expecting to fall in love with a human, were you?"

A smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. "No."

"But you did."

"Yeah."

"Does Simon know?"

This time he nodded. "Yeah. I called and told him about you."

"What did he say?"

Jeb laced his fingers together. "He said that if I ever told you the truth about me, to let you know he was the handsomer one."

Hannah giggled in response. The crystal scent of fresh rain sparkled in the room, bringing more hope to his parched soul.

"Does he approve?" she asked with a grin.

"Approve?"

"Of me. Of you falling for a human female," she clarified.

"He is skeptical, but he promised he would offer up prayers in my favor."

"He's skeptical? Why?"

Jeb stared at her in disbelief. "Why? Oh, come on, Hannah. For the same reason I was hesitant to tell you about myself from the beginning. Because I'm afraid you'll reject me now that you know the truth."

A moment of silence stretched into the longest minute of his life. Silently he watched as Hannah unfurled herself and got up from the bed. His breathing literally stopped as she approached him, stopping right in front of the chair.

"Stand up."

Slowly he stood. The top of her head barely came to his shoulders.

"Now...change."

"Hannah—"

"I want to see Jebaral. I...I have to see him. All of him."

His fingers felt numb as he unzipped his jeans and let them fall to his ankles. Kicking the pants out of the way, he locked his gaze on Hannah's face.

And changed.

Her eyes widened, as he expected, but the tiny amount of fear he saw in them did not alarm him. It was a natural fear. One of self-preservation.

And a moment later, it was gone.

He sucked in a quick breath as her hand reached out and touched his chest. Her fingers were cool on his burning skin.

"You're warm," she observed, commenting mostly to herself. She placed a palm over his ribs and stepped forward to place an ear against the chest cavity. "One heart?"

"Yes."

Moving back, she stared up into his face. "Your eyes...they didn't change."

"No, they don't. It's the only outer attribute that remains the same."

She squinted. "You don't have any eyebrows or lashes. Not much of a nose, either. Why are your teeth pointed if you don't eat flesh?"

"The food on my world is tough and very hard to chew."

"Kinda like eating tree bark?"

He nodded, smiling. "Kind of."

"And you don't have hair." Her eyes dropped below his waist, then she gasped. "Uhh, anywhere." Her examination of his male reproductive anatomy was not making him uncomfortable. Just the opposite. He could feel himself begin to thicken the longer she gazed at it.

"No. No hair."

Tearing her eyes away, she lifted one of his hands and laid hers on top of it, judging its size. "Oh, Grandma, what big claws you have."

*Grandma?* The analogy eluded him, but he nodded again. "We are a very powerful people. Heavy manual labor is what we do best." She tapped a thick claw with her fingernail. At her inquiring glance, Jeb said, "We're often required to dig in the ground."

"With hands like this, and as big and strong as you are, I would think they would put you in an arena or something like it somewhere and have you fight other species."

"Like your ancient Rome?"

"Uh-huh. Like gladiators."

"It's been done, Hannah," he told her gently.

She glanced up at him in surprise before releasing his hand. Slowly she walked around him, taking in every inch of his sculpted body. There wasn't an atom of wasted flesh on his nearly six-foot-four-inch frame. "Jeb, for a green guy, you're a hunk."

"Hunk?"

"What's this?" he heard her ask just as she touched the bubbling sore on his back. Searing fire exploded inside him, and Jeb jerked away from her touch with a hiss. "Oh, God, did I hurt you?" She peered around his hip and looked up at him apologetically.

He managed to remain on his feet. "I was not what you would call an obedient slave."

"They tortured you?" She peered around from the side once more. "I thought you said you landed five years ago."

"They used an *adjac* on me. Wounds from that device take years to heal." He managed a weak smile. "You should have seen it right after it happened."

She continued examining him; her sharp eyes not missing a thing. "You're completely naked, right?"

"Like the day I was born."

"Then what's this?" She ran her hands over the tough, thicker exterior skin covering his shoulders. To her surprise it reacted to her touch. "It looks like some kind of covering, but...I dunno." Hannah waited for his explanation.

"I guess you could call it natural padding. It's more like body armor. Many times we have to go places where it's very cold but we can't wear any kind of outer garments. The extra skin insulates us." He turned his head to look at her. "It also helps give me a little protection against thorns and rough brush

when I go running. I'm sorry. I can't explain it any further. I don't understand it myself."

"You're covered in welts and all kinds of scars. Especially on your back and buttocks." She bit her lip. "More punishment?"

Jeb nodded silently.

"Would it hurt if I touched them?"

"No. Just the *adjac* wound." To answer her unspoken question, he added, "It will take at least another two to three years before it's healed enough to touch."

Hannah finished her examination, finally stopping in front of him. Laying her hands flat on his chest, she slid them upward until she reached his neck. Without her saying a word, he already knew what she was going to do. And what she wanted him to do. Her lemony scent filled the room with its thick aroma, lifting his hopes into the stars and beyond.

"Kiss me," she whispered against his lips.

His whole body tensed as he leaned over to take her lips. He kept his hands away from her, afraid of touching her, scared she would flinch at the feel of his huge clawed hands holding her. But she had given him permission to have her mouth.

He kissed her, savoring her, letting her taste and explore him as he breathed her odor. Her tongue gently swiped over his teeth and plunged inward to find his tongue. Minute irritation tinged the air. A second later, Hannah pulled back.

"I'm not made of glass, Jeb. Hold me, dammit."

"But—" He sought her face to find her eyes drilling into his.

There was no mistaking the look in them that swept him deep into their maelstrom. Her body pressed hard against his as her voice whispered low and demanding, "I told you I loved you. I don't care what the package looks like on the outside. Inside you're still Jeb Morr. You're still the person who loves me as much as I do you. That sweet, strong, brave man...or alien. Can

you make love in your human self? Or do you have to be your real self?"

"I must be my real self," he murmured, fighting the heavy need quickly overtaking him as he held her tightly against him. "That's why I've held back. Why I—"

"Shh. It's okay. Now that we got the introductions out of the way, show me how a Ruinos male makes love to the woman he wants to spend the rest of his life with."

## **Chapter 13**

### **Tenderness**

If she closed her eyes, she could not tell the difference between when it was Jeb who picked her up and carried her, and when it was this enormous green-skinned being from another world holding her. He still smelled like Jeb; like a warm, pine-scented fire.

Iron-hard muscles took her over to the bed and laid her down on top of the covers. When calloused hands tenderly brushed hair out of her face, she opened her eyes to find him sitting beside her, leaning over her, and scanning her face with serious intent.

“What?” she whispered.

“I cannot believe my good fortune,” he whispered back in a voice filled with emotion. She saw the glitter of tears in his eyes, and she reached up to trap one on her fingertip. Jeb watched silently as she stuck the finger in her mouth. Her eyes widened in surprise.

“It’s salty.”

“Why does that surprise you?” he chuckled softly.

“I dunno. Maybe I thought it was going to be, you know, different.”

“My blood is red, as well.”

She shifted slightly, causing her thin nightgown to pull tighter across her breasts. His eyes dropped to the sight of them. To the view he had of her pale pink nipples trying to poke through the cotton fabric.

"Do Ruinos women look like me?" she asked in a tiny voice. The thin slits in his flat nose sniffed a second before he reached over to run the back of his fingers over her undamaged cheek. She could see desire coming into his eyes. The golden flecks glittered with his growing need.

"In what aspect?" he questioned in return. "Other than the fact they have the same skin color I do and no body hair?"

"Yeah." She nodded slightly. His fingers continued to stroke her cheek, moving down to include her neck and gently grazing the top of her collarbone. She could see his other hand where it lay on top of the headboard, supporting him as he leaned over her. The large hand with its long, thick fingers and enormous claws that almost looked like talons.

He had killed with those hands. He had rendered and shredded his enemies and other victims until the grooves on the undersides of those wickedly sharp tips were coated with dried blood. Yet as he touched her, she felt as safe as a small child in her mother's arms. Hannah closed her eyes to revel in the sensation.

"Do you like that?" Jeb's deep voice rumbled.

"It's nice." In fact it felt so nice, she could purr.

He moved slightly, and then she felt him trying to undo the tiny buttons on the front of her nightgown. She reached up to help him when she suddenly felt cool air rush over her skin. Opening her eyes in astonishment, she found herself looking directly into his eyes; his alien face so close to hers she could lift her chin and kiss him.

"Hannah, I don't know what to do. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Uh-huh. You've only made love to one of your own kind."

"I had a joining of bodies," Jeb quickly corrected her. "If the joining is not meant to become permanent, we go our separate ways."



“Why?”

“Because without it becoming permanent, our females cannot reproduce.”

Giving him a puzzled stare, Hannah asked, “You mean, if you’re not meant to be together, then you can’t have babies?”

He grinned at her, and in that instant she could see vestiges of his human appearance. “Exactly.”

*Which reminds me...*

“Jeb? I’m not on the pill. I mean, you didn’t pack them when you took me away.”

“It won’t matter if we were not meant to be.” He lowered his face before answering her. She could see the top of his skull, the smooth, rich green skin. Impulsively she reached up to touch it.

*Warm. Soft.* The skull beneath was firm. Pulling him toward her, she kissed it. And kissed it again. Oh, God, she could kiss every inch of him.

“If we’re not meant to be? How will you know?” Damn, but her voice wouldn’t stop wavering. Neither would the tears stop stinging her nose.

Beneath her hands, he shook his head. “It won’t matter, Hannah. I’m not leaving you.” He raised his face to look at her. In the soft lamplight, she could see tears running down his cheek. “Maybe it’ll be different because you’re human. But believe me when I tell you, I’ll never leave you, Hannah. I won’t...” His voice cracked, forcing him to swallow before he could continue. “I can’t leave you. You’ve taken too much of my inner self.”

“Your heart?”

“Yes. My heart.”

Reaching up, she brushed away the wetness on those dark green cheeks. “I have never been this happy in my life. I can’t remember the last time I wasn’t afraid of being hit. Pain and hurt

have been a part of my life for so long, I never dared to dream of loving a man who didn't hit me."

"Even if you are not meant to be my life partner, I could never hit you," Jeb promised.

Hannah smiled at him. "I know that. I guess that's why seeing the real you doesn't upset me." Her fingers continued to roam over his head. His small ears were fanlike. At her touch, they spread outward like a flower blossoming in sunlight. "What was her name?"

"Who?"

"The woman you joined with ten years ago."

"Tiron. The Arra tried to force joinings upon us, hoping to increase the population."

His eyes drifted to a spot over her shoulder. Even for a Ruinos, she recognized what he was doing. "Did you care for her?"

"I did. I still do. She was an innocent like me, but I never loved her to the depth I feel for you." His soft brown eyes came back to her. "That doesn't bother you?"

"No," Hannah admitted, surprising herself with the truth. "And do you understand why?"

"Please tell me."

Shifting her body, she reached under her arms and grabbed her nightgown, lifting it over her head. Jeb took it from her hands and flung it over the side of the bed. "There has to be a reason why you're on my world," she said, taking his face between her hands. "There has to be some cosmic reason why you found me in Laughlin. Why we were drawn to each other. I believe it's because we were meant to be together. I believe it's because God chose us to save each other. You saved me from a life of misery, just like I'm saving you from a life of loneliness."

She pulled his face down to kiss him. Jeb ran his hands behind her shoulders and drew her up against him. His mouth

was sinfully addictive. His taste alone could keep her permanently glued to his exotic difference. Even now his tongue was building the embers between her legs into a roaring bonfire.

He began to pull away; she reluctantly allowed him to withdraw from their deepening kiss. "Tell me what pleasures you," he breathed, his voice guttural and so damn sexy. "Tell me where to touch you. How to touch you. Don't hold anything back."

"I will if you'll do the same for me."

She opened her eyes to see the glittering gold flecks literally dancing in his eyes. Oh, he had the most magical, mesmerizing eyes.

"Kiss me all over. Lick me. That'll get us started." She needed to feel his mouth on her, and it was the only thing she could think of. Instinctively she cupped her breasts, lifting the hard, eager tips toward him.

He saw her movement and bent over them. She watched as his lipless mouth closed over the closest pink button. She felt his tongue like spiky velvet flick over it. A rope of pure lust jerked tightly, knotted, and she nearly climaxed when his hands closed over the full globes and squeezed.

When he bent over to take the other nipple in his mouth, she could feel her thighs sliding together as her juices flowed into overdrive. Arching her back she could sense his heat just beyond her reach. The tantalizing feel of his heavy weight was making her crazy.

"Can you lie on top of me?"

She heard him shifting, kneeling above her. The single sheet remained between them as he lowered his body against hers. The thickness rising from his groin nearly speared her.

Hannah recalled the sight of his manhood when he had taken off his pants and changed into his Ruinos form. Slack, it was still larger than Carl had been fully erect. No telling how

much bigger it could get, and she let her imagination run wild with visions of becoming impaled on the steel-hard staff.

As she had asked, Jeb had begun licking her, alternating between his tongue and his mouth. Every now and then he would drop a kiss to her skin, then sniff. He was working his way up to her throat after totally demolishing her sanity with his complete domination of her breasts. Still pulsing in his grasp, they felt plumped and lovingly bruised.

A low moan was wrenched out of her when he lightly nipped the underside of her jaw. Another delicate sniff followed. "Are you smelling me?" she tried to ask. It was difficult to tell if she was able to speak at all. There should be a law against what she was feeling. There was no way on earth to describe the fiery cinders inside her making her writhe under him.

"I'm drowning in the scent of your lust," he growled in her ear. "You smell delicious, all wet and burning. I could dine on you all night."

"Don't let me stop you."

She felt him release her breasts, only to grab her hips. Or so she thought. The sheet was literally ripped away from her trembling body and a second later Jeb had grabbed her thighs and lowered himself back down upon her. Time dropped dead in its tracks when he started from her upper abdomen and worked his way down. As he savored her skin, her smell, and the salty moisture beading on her flesh, those huge hands dragged the tips of their claws over her body. Hannah cried out from the feelings the act ignited in her. Gentle yet demanding. Dangerous but loving. A tear slipped down the side of her face.

She continued to touch his face and head. Her fingers followed the undulating motions as he fed on her. She tried to watch him as he feasted, but too many times the sharp, piercing pleasure washing over her nerve endings was too much to withstand. Her body jerked from the sensations, and she could

feel his manhood press harder against her legs. If she didn't know any better, it seemed to get larger, thicker, and longer with every passing minute.

Jeb moved his hands downward. Hannah gasped as his thumbs reached between the juncture of her thighs and separated them. Wide. Wider. Automatically she raised her knees.

"You're making my mouth water," a voice hovered over her.

"Can you lick me there?" she pleaded softly, her eyes tightly shut as her whole body quivered in anticipation. Carl never put his mouth there, only his fingers.

The world exploded when Jeb dove into her innermost core. Hannah tried to scream, but a hand covered her mouth a split-second before her orgasm erupted. He continued to suck and lick and nibble as wave after wave of pleasure rolled and washed over her like a surging tide. Her swollen nub tingled as the shockwaves continued. It wasn't until after the crests had peaked and were gently coming to a lull that he raised his face from between her legs. Hannah opened her eyes to see him staring deep into her eyes. His mouth and cheeks were shiny with her juices, and he was breathing heavily. Just below his chin she could see down the length of his body where his manhood raised—aimed, primed and ready.

"That was your first," Jeb stated flatly. The gold flecks in his eyes glittered like a thousand stars.

"My...fir—"

She got no further. Suddenly he was over her. His hands no longer held her thighs. Instead they were flat against the mattress on either side of her head.

"I cannot hold back any longer, Hannah. Forgive me," he begged, and a pole of pure satin and steel pierced her.

She cried out, lost in his invasion when his length continued to enter her. At some point she felt him stop and withdraw

slightly before plunging back into her again. Her arms found his neck and locked themselves there. Everywhere his piney, sun-baked scent permeated the room. It was in the sheets, in the mattress...in her skin. Inside her nose. It was in the walls of her lungs, and in the cells of her blood.

She called out to him, but she had no idea what. There was no sense of time or place as his body played havoc with hers, pistoning in and out with increasing speed. She could hear nothing but his heavy breathing and the wet, sucking sounds made by their flesh. There were tears on her face; some of them were hers.

He adjusted himself over her, then reached down with one hand to where their bodies fused. Hannah heard him gasp as a harder orgasm ripped through her and her muscles grabbed him like a vise. This time she had no chance to scream. Perfection so intense ballooned hard and taut, then exploded. Jeb choked on her name as his body went rigid, then shuddered as he emptied himself into her tight channel, buried all the way inside her. His heat was almost enough to singe her skin. Yet, miraculously, he managed not to crush her with his weight.

Sanity and stability gradually made their way back to the present at their own pace. The waves retreated but never completely left. Not while his erection remained thrust to the hilt within her. Somehow she managed to turn her head to kiss his sweaty cheek.

Sweat. The man could sweat like a human. Hannah smiled wearily. It was a nice anomaly to know.

He was also panting. His face was buried in the pillow under her head. The fragile butterfly wing of an ear was close to her lips. "I love you," she managed to whisper into it.

If he replied, she never heard him. She was already deep inside her dreams.



## **Chapter 14**

### **Discovery**

It was the soft stroking of her pubic hair that awakened her. Hannah blinked drowsily against the buttery glow of light in the cabin. She was lying on her side, facing him. He had his head propped on one hand. It was his other hand currently making little twirling motions over her womanhood, tugging gently on the satiny curls. But it was enough to get her attention. She flashed him a weary smile.

“Naughty boy.”

“You fell asleep.”

“You tired me out.” Her statement was immediately followed by a yawn.

“After only two climaxes?” he teased.

Her eyes flew open. “Oh, geesh! That’s right!”

Laughing softly, Jeb reached around her waist and scooted her closer to him. His manhood obediently nestled between her legs. “You never let me finish exploring you. Find out what turns you on, what feels good.”

“And I didn’t get to reciprocate,” she admitted.

It felt odd, lying naked against a hulking, green-skinned but intoxicating alien—a very intimidating and turned-on alien—discussing sex. *No, not sex. Love. Love the way it was meant to be between two people. Physical love that paralleled and reinforced the emotional love.*



It felt odd, but it didn't stop her from reaching down between them to grasp the thick, ridged pole that brought her so much pleasure.

"Roll over on your back," she ordered. He obeyed without hesitation.

Now she could look at all of him without embarrassment. She could study him. Examine him. Fondle him.

The fondling part was what she really looked forward to.

The first time she had looked at him, right after he had changed, she had given him a cursory once-over. Her emotions had been in turmoil as she fought her fear. The fear was long gone now. Their feelings for each other were real and forever. And right now she could delight in learning every detail about this man to her heart's content.

She started at the top with his face and head. Jeb watched her in silence, but with a little smile turning up the corners of his unique mouth. She saw the amusement in his expression and smiled back. "What?"

"Nothing."

And then it hit her. "You did the same thing to me, didn't you?" she demanded with mock irritation.

"You were asleep. I wasn't a bit sleepy. What else was there to do?"

No wonder she woke up on her side, when the last thing she remembered was being flat on her back with him on top and inside her.

"See anything you liked?" she questioned, unable to hide her grin.

"Maybe."

"Bastard."

The remark made him laugh out loud, but he didn't move. Instead he seemed to enjoy her examination.

Her palm skimmed his wide chest. He wasn't a solid green as she'd first thought, but several hues. Mottled, like someone had painstakingly daubed him with camouflage. "You feel like silk. How does a man who's built like you are with all these muscles come off feeling this wonderful?"

"Mmm, genetics?"

"Damn. You don't have nipples?"

"No, but you do. Nice ones, too."

"Yeah, but they're an erogenous area for me." Hannah glanced up into his eyes. "Are there any areas on your body that I can play with that'll turn you on?"

"Trust me, Hannah. When it comes to turning me on, my whole body is one big erogenous area for you to manipulate."

Continuing down his stomach, she noticed various little scars and marks she hadn't seen before. It pained her to see such evidence of what he had endured. And she realized for the first time that they both had been victims of others' cruelty. Whereas her wounds would heal, and the resulting scars hidden inside, Jeb's body would forever bear the testimony of his past life.

A huge clawed hand came down gently over hers where it rested on his belly. "What's the matter?"

"How long were you a prisoner on that spaceship before you escaped?"

He paused in answering. She didn't press. If he could show patience when questioning her, so could she.

"Oh, look! You have a belly button!" She tossed him a wicked grin, then dipped her head toward his abdomen. It was sinful to press her tongue into that puckered groove, but she was dying to know if had the same sexual cord tied between it and his erection as a human male did.

His hand touched her face and tugged slightly. "Careful."

*It did! Great!* She made a mental note.

Now came the interesting part. His male member wasn't flaccid, but neither was it at full alert. Still, its size started her heart pounding. Sliding her fingers around its heavily-veined girth, she heard him gasp at her touch at the same time his whole body tensed.

*Damn.* Her fingers could barely go all the way around it. Looking back up at him, she could see the flecks of gold already shimmering in his eyes. He was growing warmer, and she wasn't surprised when his member swelled in her grasp.

"I didn't know aliens circumcised their young like humans do."

"What do you mean?" Jeb questioned. The brows over his eyes lowered at his confusion—noticeable in spite of not having any body or facial hair.

She gave his staff a gentle squeeze. "You weren't circumcised?"

"I am the way I've always been from the day I was born. I have not been altered or changed in any way."

"Except for the scarring," she added gently.

He nodded to answer her. "Ready for me to turn over?"

"Not yet. I'm not through checking out what I've won."

Jeb chuckled. "What you've won?"

"Oh, yeah. You're my prize. Didn't I tell you? And you're a doozy. A lifetime of unlimited orgasms, and don't you forget it."

The resulting heat in his eyes brought a fine blush to her own cheeks, and Hannah dropped her gaze as his thick rod jerked in her palms.

She started to lay it back down when her eyes suddenly flew open. The blush went from pink to scarlet as she dropped him. "Oh, geez..." Hastily she looked at him, then back down. Jeb's soft chuckle reached her ears.

"Yeah. I know," he said. "Imagine *my* surprise when I had to shape-shift that part of my anatomy."

"You have, uhh...you have three, uhh..."

"Testicles. Balls."

"Why?"

"Why?" he repeated. "I guess for the same reason I have no hair, no nipples, no anus—"

"You don't have an anus?" Hannah took a moment to absorb this new detail. "Then how do you—"

Jeb sat up, propping himself with his arms behind him. The lamplight caused his deep green skin to glisten. "Different but alike, Hannah. Just remember that. We share a multitude of commonalities. And sometimes our differences are so slight, they don't matter."

She nodded, going back to her investigation. His legs were long and muscular, just like his arms. Some more of that natural body armor padded his outer thighs and the backs of his calves. His feet looked human except for the shorter, blunter claws on the tips of his four toes.

"The nails on our feet are more for getting better traction in the dirt. But we'll use them in battle if we're forced to," he explained.

"What did your people do on your homeworld?" She glanced up from his feet. "What was the name of your planet?"

"Barandat Vor. We were an agricultural people. We grew plants. Cultivated vast, enormous woodlands." He raised a hand. "We used our hands to plow the hard ground. We grew strong under the light of our blue sun." Jeb stared at her. "We were a proud people. Generous. Loving. Family-oriented."

"Like farmers on Earth," Hannah sighed. "That's why you enjoy hard work, isn't it?"

He nodded. "My family and I were taken from our home when I was three."

She would forever remember the pain on his face from the memory. "But you said you were forced to join with Tiron ten years ago..."

Slowly the truth began to make itself known like acid on her skin. Tears threatened to close her throat with their bitterness.

"How...how old were you then?" she whispered huskily.

"I was fourteen. I had just reached reproductive age," he whispered.

"Oh, God." Her hands went to her mouth as she stared at him, at the sorrow and pain in his eyes. Warm tears trailed over her fingers.

He was twenty-four. The same age as she was, give or take the difference in time and the number of days in a year on his world. But he seemed older. Or maybe he appeared that way because of what he had been forced to endure.

He had been three when he had been kidnapped. His ship had landed five years ago.

"You were on that ship for sixteen years?"

Jeb slowly nodded.

"But..." She sniffed. Hurriedly she went to the bathroom for some tissues to blow her nose. When she reentered the bedroom, he hadn't moved. "But you told me the Are-Arra?" Another nod. "You said they ate your people. How did you manage to survive that long without being eaten?"

"We were sold as slave labor first. When one of my people became too old to procreate, or too weak to work, they were eaten."

"Oh, God...I'm so sorry, Jeb."

He gave her a forgiving smile. "You have nothing to be sorry about." Holding out a hand, he gestured for her to join him. "Come. I want to make love with you. Let me show you

how to turn on the Ruinos male you claim to want to spend the rest of your life with.”

## **Chapter 15**

### **Blood Line**

“It’ll be daylight soon.”

Her voice was barely audible, even to his heightened sense of hearing. Running his tongue over the back of her neck where he had learned she was sensitive, Jeb smiled when she shivered lightly at his touch. “I still have a few more minutes,” he leaned down to whisper in her ear.

This last time they had ended up on their sides. He readjusted his arms around her waist, keeping her perfectly fitted against him, her back to his front. His manpipe nestled in the valley of her buttocks, firmly but seductively trapped.

The sheet beneath them was slick with the product of their labors, but at the moment neither of them cared. They were tired. A good tired.

“You didn’t get enough sleep,” Hannah murmured.

He felt her lift his arm to examine his hand. She put one of his fingers with its thick claw into her succulent mouth and began to tease it with her tongue. His body immediately reacted, causing her to gasp in surprise when she felt the rod beneath her bottom lengthen in response. Hannah moaned as his erection tried to find its way back between her thighs. Jeb chuckled and ran a thumb over one still semi-erect nipple. She groaned louder and arched her back. Catching her earlobe with his spiked teeth, he was careful to nibble it gently until she tilted her head against his shoulder so he could reach her mouth.

Her kiss was moist and intoxicating. Pulling away slightly, he answered, "I've gone without sleep before. Don't worry about me, Hannah. I will spend all day today reliving last night...and dreaming of what tonight will bring."

She started to say something but he silenced her with another kiss. When they finally pulled apart, she snuggled back into her earlier position and went back to examining the uniqueness of his hand and fingers.

Jeb closed his eyes, pressing his forehead into her wealth of sunny-yellow hair. Last night had brought him more joy and completeness than he had ever felt in his entire life. Within Hannah's orgasms he had experienced the fusing of their two entities. She was his blood mate. His life partner. As incredible as it was to believe, he had no doubts.

"How do you file down these nails when they get too long?"

"Rock is a natural file. Limestone or sandstone works best. Why? Do I need to tend to them?"

"They look intimidating."

"You should see our females if you want to see intimidating."

"No, thanks."

She continued to study his skin and the razor-like ridge that ran along the top of his arm from wrist to shoulder. He had similar ridges lining his spinal path and down the backs of both legs. Fortunately he could control whether they lay flat or rose upward like wicked-looking spikes.

Impulsively she kissed his palm. Hannah's scent of satiation enveloped them both with its papery smell. To Jeb the entire cabin was thick with it. Drawing in a deep breath, he savored her satisfaction on his tongue.

He had to stop trying to place Ruinos restrictions upon their union. He had to cease believing that their being together was an impossibility simply because they were of different races.



There was no way anyone would be able to convince him that they didn't belong together. Blood line or no blood line.

Lifting his knees, he caught the back of her thighs and raised them slightly as he readjusted their position. Behind them he could tell the sun was rising. He didn't have much longer before his body would be locked into form, his skin frozen into shape for the day.

Sighing heavily, Jeb started to move away when Hannah asked, "This is pretty. What are these little sparkly lines?"

"The what?" He felt her fingertips running down the inside of his arm. It tickled, and he grinned. "That's my blood line."

"Huh?" She leaned back slightly to look at him.

"We call it a blood line. It's our link to those we share a blood connection to."

"You mean Simon's?"

He nodded, kissing her temple before she turned back around. "Yeah. It's Simon's. If you watch, you can see his heartbeat."

There was a moment of silence. "Yeah. It's beating a little fast."

Smiling, Jeb explained, "He's moving around. Probably getting ready for the day."

"Do you have one for your parents?"

"I had one for each of them. When they died, their blood lines were absorbed into my body."

"Okay." Her voice trailed away. He began to withdraw from the bed again when she wondered aloud, "So if this one is Simon's, and there's no one left in your family, then the other one is yours?"

Jeb froze.

Hannah felt the change in his emotion. "Jeb?" She rolled over to see his stunned expression. "Jeb, what's wrong?"

He pulled his arm from her grasp and stared at the inner side in disbelief. There, running from wrist to elbow were two thin, iridescent lines. Blood lines.

Two. Each of them pulsing with their own rhythms.

His body began trembling uncontrollably as the truth reached inside his body with warm, fragrant hands.

"Jeb?" Her voice trembled, tears coming to her eyes. Hannah knew something was wrong. Or different. Or very, very right. She just didn't know which.

"Oh, sweetest stars," he murmured. No wonder Simon's heart was beating furiously. He would have the same identical extra line on his inner arm. Proof that his brother and the woman he claimed was his life partner were, in fact, true blood mates.

Irrefutable proof to all Ruinos.

Behind him the sun began to peek through the trees. A ray of light crawled over the window's casement.

Jumping to his feet, Jeb drew himself erect as he assumed his human guise. From the bed Hannah watched in awe, but the scent of her worry continued to powder the room.

Their connection now would only grow. Soon Hannah would be able to sense things from him that she had never experienced. Already she was alert to his reactions. As the sun solidified his body into the features of a human, he could see a curious expression cross her face as she realized he had been locked in.

"What just happened, Jeb?" she whispered, near tears.

"That other blood line isn't mine, Hannah. It's yours."

Her eyes jerked down to his arm, but his human skin shielded the tiny thread-thin marks from view. "Mine?" She looked back up at him. "Is that a good thing? Please tell me it's a good thing."

Throwing his head back suddenly, Jeb let out a jubilant laugh and reached out to enfold her in his embrace. "It's a miracle, Hannah! *Yes!* Yes, it's a good thing. In fact, it's something we never believed could happen, but it did!" He kneeled on the bed and took her face between his hands. "I had prayed I would find my true life partner, my blood mate. When Ruinos believe they are fated, they share their bodies, hoping to see a new blood line form between them. If the line doesn't form, their union was not meant to be, and they part."

"But I'm not Ruinos," she murmured. "How could I form a blood line with you?"

"I don't know, and I don't care!" he cried out, releasing her face and throwing his arms outward. Laughing, Jeb stood up and beamed at her. "It's happened. As impossible as I believed it would be, as impossible as Simolif swore it was..." He stopped aware of the passing time. "Hannah, I need to get ready for work."

Before he could say more, she had jumped out of bed and was heading for the kitchen as she shrugged back into the nightgown he had tossed onto the floor last night.

"Am I going to get one of those blood lines in my arm?" she called from the other room as he pulled on his clothes.

"I don't know. I can't be sure of anything anymore," he admitted truthfully. A quick glance in the mirror told him he needed to run a comb through the tangle of black curls. He threw some cold water on his face to further brace himself, then he went into the kitchen to see what Hannah was up to.

She was buttering toast when he walked in carrying his socks and workboots. Giving him a smile, she nodded. "That unshaven look works for you."

"I didn't feel like appearing clean-shaven this morning. Besides, you ought to see some of the other guys at the mill." He eyed the toast and glass of orange juice.

"You can't go to work on an empty stomach. Besides, you need to keep your energy up," she chided him and grinned as he reached for a slice. She joined him by taking a piece of toast for herself. "Okay. Let's say I don't develop one of those lines. How will other Ruinos know I'm your true life partner?"

"Don't worry. They'll know." He winked at her. "You smell like me."

Hannah paused in her chewing. "Beg pardon?"

"You have my scent upon you. And it's permanent, I'm afraid."

"Oh, great. And I guess Simon will say I stink like you, too?"

"When he finally meets you, yeah. Does it bother you?" He bent down to finish tying the laces on his boots.

"Are you going to call him with the good news you've found your life mate?"

"He already knows," Jeb sat up and smiled. "When you said you saw his blood line pumping furiously, it was probably because he had already seen yours."

She stared at him wide-eyed. "What do you mean, he had seen mine? Jeb, does he have my blood line in his arm, too?"

"Yes, because you have now become part of our family." He leaned toward her. Hannah met him halfway across the table for his kiss. She tasted of strawberry jam, so inviting he had to swipe his tongue over her lips a second time. A soft moan vibrated between them.

Getting to his feet, he started for the front door when Hannah called out, "Will Simon know when we make love? I mean, if he can see our heartbeats..." She left the question unfinished.

Jeb paused with the front door partly open and gave her a loving smile. "Let's just say he might grow suspicious when he sees both of them racing simultaneously." Suddenly dropping the

smile, he added, "There are some other qualities you may start to experience as our mating grows more frequent."

"More frequent?" A blush tinged her cheeks, but there was a sparkle of excitement in her eyes.

He closed his eyes in a vain attempt to temper the rising heat in his blood while his manpipe grew uncomfortably cramped inside the tight confines of his jeans. Hopefully he would be able to cool both by the time he arrived at the mill.

"If you feel anything unusual, don't be afraid, Hannah. We're both treading on ground neither one of us have traveled before. I'll be back this evening at the usual time. Don't worry about cooking supper. I'm taking us out to celebrate." When her hand flew up to her damaged cheek, he tried to reassure her, "You're healing quickly. Don't worry. Oh, and, Hannah?"

She stared up at him, waiting.

"I love you."

He was gone. The door closed before she could respond in kind.

## **Chapter 16**

### **Spotted**

"Barkett's. Will this be a to-go order?"

"Barb. It's me, Hannah!"

She heard a gasp over the line. "Hannah! Praise God, are you all right? Where are you?"

"We're in Tumbril Harbor."

"*We?*" Barb gave a little girlish squeal of excitement. "You mean with Mr. *Playgirl* Playmate of the Year?"

Hannah laughed loudly, knowing the woman would never find out how accurate her teasing description really was. "Yes, I'm with Jeb. And we're doing wonderfully."

"Oh, girl, I can't remember when the last time was I heard you laugh so freely," her friend gushed. "So, tell me what happened. You looked like hamburger meat last time I saw you. I was terrified, but I had a feeling Mr. Morr was your ticket out of here."

"Well, he decided not to stop in Clearwater like he'd originally planned. Mr. Bennetson told him about this lumbermill his cousin runs up here. And Mr. Bennetson told Jeb if he ever decided to come up this way and needed work, to check it out. So Jeb went over there yesterday and got hired on the spot!"

"That's wonderful! Oh. Hold on a sec, sweetie. That'll be fourteen-oh-four. Was everything satisfactory?"

Hannah smiled. *How many times did I work the register and answer the phone at the same time? Too many to count.*

She waited for Barb to finish with the customer and come back on the phone. "You still there?" the woman asked.

"Yeah. I didn't call at a bad time, did I?" She knew it was after the morning rush, but there were always late-risers coming in for brunch.

"Nah. We just have old Mrs. Pierson and a couple of tables of tourists left. After Jeb and you left Friday, I went and told Billy what happened. He hired a new girl this morning to take your shift. So tell me about Mr. Get My Juices Flowing. Is he as sexy lookin' under those jeans and t-shirt as we thought he would be?"

This time a giggle escaped her before she could stop herself. It was all Barb needed to hear. "I'm so happy for you!"

"We talked," Hannah told her. "He told me he loved me, and he never wanted to see me hurt again, ever. Which was why he came for me over at the trailer park."

"And what about you, Hannah girl? You love him, too, don'tcha?"

"Yeah. Very, very, very much."

"Have you two, you know, done the horizontal cha-cha yet?"

"Barb!" Despite the fact the woman was over three hundred miles away, it didn't stop the hot warmth from invading her face.

"Well? Is that a 'Oh, God, yes!' or a 'Just wait, honey, 'cuz it's a-comin'.'?"

Hannah laughed again. "It's a yes, and another yes, and another yes." She had stopped trying to smother the giggles that seemed to overflow from some bottomless pit inside her. Just the mere mention of making love with Jeb was enough to get her feeling all "squidgy" again. Already she could tell her panties were becoming wet at the memory of what they had done last night. And how many times.

After Jeb had left that morning, she had cleaned up the kitchen before stripping the sheets from the bed and taking them over to the motel's laundry room. While they were washing she had gone over to the office and had a cup of coffee with Mrs. Newburg. The older woman's husband had been in the Marines when he was killed overseas. She had continued to run the little business on her own, with the help of a tiny South Korean woman who cleaned the rooms.

It had been a purging of sorts to tell the woman about Carl and his nasty temper. The woman had blanched when she had explained how she and Jeb came to be in Tumbil Harbor. That's when Mrs. Newburg had given Hannah a pat on the arm and told Hannah if there was anything she could do to help, just let her know.

They had talked some more about places where Hannah might find employment until the sheets were finished. Once she'd transferred the clean load to the dryer, she had gone to the phone booth at the end of the block to call the diner and talk to Barb.

"Well, all I can say is it's about time you had some happiness come your way," Barb broke into her thoughts. "So...has he asked you to marry him yet?"

"Not yet," Hannah admitted truthfully, although she knew what she and Jeb shared went far beyond a simple ceremony. *Still...*

Barb must have heard the reluctant pause in her voice. "Don't tell me he's commitment shy."

"No, it's not that," Hannah hurried to assure her. "It's a bit more complicated than that."

Her friend made a rude noise. "And you're buying that line? I guess deep down all men are the same."

"You're wrong there," Hannah quickly corrected her. *Oh, boy, was she wrong.* "Jeb's been a loner all his life. His parents are



dead. There's just him and his brother left. It's...it's been a major adjustment for him just for us to be living together."

"Where's his brother live? Any chance he's been in the diner?"

"Don't think so. Simon lives in Templeton."

"Oh." There was a brief pause while the woman checked out another customer, then she was back. "So how are you doing, other than getting deliciously screwed to the bedpost?"

"You have quite a potty mouth, you know that?" Hannah accused the woman, but laughed anyway. "I'm doing better. Fortunately Carl didn't break any bones this time. I'm almost healed."

"Did Jeb tell you I gave him your tips from the can?"

"Yeah. I still have the paper bag safely tucked away." *In an empty five pound coffee can underneath the kitchen sink.* With nothing to do and time on her hands yesterday while Jeb was out job-hunting, she had finally gotten around to counting the bills. It had come to exactly five hundred and thirty-five dollars. "Thanks, Barb. In fact, I called to tell you thank you for everything, especially your friendship."

"I'd do it all again in a heartbeat, Hannah girl. All you owe me is an invitation to come dance at your wedding."

Giggling, Hannah promised. "You haven't seen or heard from Carl, have you?" she asked, suddenly serious.

"Haven't seen hide nor hair of him. But Duke Murphy was in yesterday at lunchtime and said the guy had been over to the emergency room to have his hand put in a cast. Said Jeb had done a number on it. Well, them muscles weren't just for show." There was a rustle of movement before Barb continued. "Word's out you left him. He's been tellin' everyone you jumped ship for Jeb Morr. Son of a bitch wants everyone's sympathy, but he ain't getting it. Everybody in town knows how

badly he beat up on you, and they're not buying his sob story one little bit."

"Think he'll come looking for me?" Hannah whispered. Even with no one around to eavesdrop, her fear of the man forced her to drop her voice anyway.

The older woman made another rude noise. "Don't see how. Ain't no one here to tell him where you went, even if they knew. And you know me. It would take the devil himself to get me to tell. Look, I gotta go. We're getting more customers in, and Peggy gets squeamish if there's more than two to a booth. Hannah, you get all the loving you can from Jeb, you hear me? And you love him right back. You've waited a long time for that kind of happiness. Don't ever think you don't deserve it."

"I promise I won't."

"Call me back soon?"

"Yeah. I'll keep you up-to-date on what we're doing."

"Atta girl. Talk to you soon. On second thought, call me after he proposes!"

Hannah laughed again. "It's a deal! Bye, Barb!"

"Bye, Hannah girl. God bless ya."

Her smile seemed permanently pasted on her face, she felt that good. Hanging up the receiver, Hannah sighed and stared out at the intersection near where the telephone box was located.

Barb was right. It was time she had someone to love who loved her right back. Loved her enough never to hurt her. Never to raise a fist to her. Never to do anything except make her as happy as possible.

She recalled something Jeb had said to her last night. *Was it after my third or fourth orgasm?*

\* \* \* \*

*"Okay. Now that you've had me, now what?" Every atom in her body tingled from this last release. She couldn't tell if she was tired or*

still ringing with adrenaline. Although she was sore, there was no way she would ever turn away his advances.

Jeb lowered her down beside him on the bed. The moment he pulled out of her, she was already regretting the loss of feeling him thick and pulsing inside her tight channel. Good heavens! Even spent and limp his member was a sight to behold!

"Now that I've claimed you, I will spend the rest of my life loving you, protecting you, and making sure our future is safe and secure for our children." He sealed his vow with a kiss. When he pulled back, he could see her wide-eyed look of disbelief. "Do you doubt my word?" he teased, but half-serious.

"No. I believe you mean everything you said. Except for the children part."

He understood, and cuddled her firmly in his embrace. "There may not be any children," he conceded. "Our anatomies may be too different. Still, that won't stop me from taking you."

"And loving me?"

"And loving you."

"What if I do something that irritates you? Or what if I make you mad?"

His rich brown eyes caught her blue ones and held them fast. "There will be those times. We're two distinct individuals. That alone guarantees we'll have disagreements. Plus we're also two separate species. Our life together won't be perfect. We'll see our share of rough spots, too." His stare intensified until she felt as if she were swimming in twin pools of warm chocolate. His voice deepened until it sounded like torn velvet. "I won't hurt you, Hannah. Ever. It's against everything in me. Your life is now part of mine. I know you're having a hard time believing me, but maybe after fifty years of being together you'll finally wake up one morning and realize I've told you the truth."

\* \* \* \*

The truth.

The truth was she already believed him. No man who took such pains to make her happy, and who was willing to risk his own safety and change his entire way of life to rescue and defend a woman caught up in her situation—that kind of man would not come home from work one evening and begin beating her with his belt. Or whatever object he could immediately get his hands on.

Smiling languidly, Hannah leaned against the booth's plexiglass wall. God, she was getting all mooney-eyed for the man. Not to mention horny.

*Me. Hannah Michelle Pitt. Horny ex-waitress and lover of an alien from another world.*

*No, wait. Scratch that. Not his lover, his life partner. His blood mate. His fated other half.*

*Yeah. That sounded a whole lot better.*

She opened her purse to check to make sure she had her wallet. Jeb had given her some money to go buy groceries. He'd been surprised to learn she could cook. What he didn't know was that her personal menu was quite brief. There hadn't been much need to cook when she had been living with Carl, since he usually took her tips and headed for Buster's as soon as she got home.

But she swore to herself that she would work on her skills. And buy a vegetarian cookbook. That was at the top of her list.

She left the phone booth and walked over to the corner where she punched the crosswalk button on the light pole. It was past noon. She had to think about grabbing some lunch. In all honesty she wasn't that hungry, but it would catch up with her around two or three if she didn't put something in her stomach.

The smile was still on her face. Jeb said there was a little hamburger shack near the mill that a lot of the guys patronized. They had a black bean soup he had enjoyed Monday. But she couldn't expect him to eat out everyday. Maybe she could pick

up something at the market she could use to make lunches for him to take along. Like one of those ready-made salads. Or a fruit tray.

She paid little attention to the traffic coming and going as her mind drifted along another path. The light turned, giving her permission to cross the street. Lighthearted, she stepped off the curb when the grill on a pickup sitting on the other side of the intersection caught her attention. Last August Carl had run their truck into a light pole after a night of heavy drinking. They didn't have insurance at the time, but thankfully the truck still ran. It was just near impossible to raise and lower the hood now.

How odd. That truck had the same dent in the front like theirs did.

And it was a brown truck, too.

*Like theirs.*

Hannah came to a standstill in the middle of the road as she raised her eyes to look at the person sitting behind the wheel. Carl stared back at her in disbelief, his mouth hanging open. Then he gunned the engine.

Sheer terror ripped her feet from the pavement. Panic-stricken, Hannah began running back toward the motel. Behind her a horn blared and kept blaring.

She knew he would follow her, but she had nowhere else to go. Nowhere else but straight to the motel office where she could see Mrs. Newburg sitting in the backroom eating a sandwich and watching her soaps.

"Mrs. Newburg!"

"Hannah?" The woman came out into the office to find her hunched behind the partition where she had the computer. "Hannah! My God, what's wrong?"

"It's Carl! Can I hide in your backroom *please*?"

"Jesus, child, you're as white as snow! Of course. Come on back and tell me what happened."

The woman led Hannah into the rear where her own accommodations were located and helped Hannah to sit on the overstuffed couch.

She wasn't safe. She knew he would have seen her come here. It was only a matter of time before he would stomp into the office and demand to know where she was.

Her body felt like ice. Her hands were so numb they wouldn't stop shaking.

Mrs. Newburg sat next to her and took one of her hands. "Tell me what happened. Did you say you saw Carl?"

Hannah nodded, her head bobbing like she had palsy. "H-he must've found out we came here. I don't know how, but I just saw him."

"Where?"

"At the intersection. I w-was going over to the market, and I was crossing the street, and he saw me."

Fear clutched her heart with bloodied hands and squeezed. She burst into tears from the pain. "What am I going to *do*? He's going to kill me!"

"Where's your young man, Mr. Morr? He at work?"

Hannah could only manage a nod.

"At the mill?"

Another nod. Her voice had given out.

Hannah watched as Mrs. Newburg got up from the couch and walked over to the phone on the wall. Stern-faced, the motel owner punched in a number, all the while never taking her eyes away from the young woman shaking in terror.

"Hello, Carla? It's me, Wendy Newburg at the Harvest Moon. Can you get somebody over here as soon as possible? I think there's a domestic disturbance brewing, and it ain't gonna be pretty." There was a moment's pause, then Mrs. Newburg grinned. "Okay. Fine. Thanks, Carla. See you at church." She

hung up and started to walk back over to the couch when the office phone began to ring.

"Sheriff's office is sending someone over. Shouldn't take them no more than five or ten minutes to get here. Hold on. Let me answer that." She went into the outer office to answer the business phone, leaving the connecting door open.

"Harvest Moon Motor Lodge. Can I help you?" A pause was followed by Mrs. Newburg surprised reply. "Yes, she's right here. Do you want to speak with her?"

Stark black terror washed over Hannah, nearly making her faint, until the older woman stuck her head around the doorjamb and said, "Mr. Morr's on the phone. He wants to talk to you."

Hannah swallowed. "Jeb?"

"Yeah." She held out the phone. "He's still at the mill."

Getting unsteadily to her feet, she made it over to take the phone and pressed her back against the wall, out of sight from anyone entering the front office. "H-hello?"

"Hannah, what's wrong?" The sound of his voice slammed down around her like a steel cage, protecting her even from a distance. She could feel her legs threatening to give way with relief.

"How did—"

"I'll explain later," Jeb snapped. His voice was cold, controlled, but still it managed to convey comfort to her. "What happened?"

"It's Carl. He's here."

"In town?"

"Yes! I was crossing the street to go to the market when I saw him."

"Did he see you?"

"Yes. I know he saw me running over here. He'll be here any moment. Oh, Jeb, I'm so scared!" She couldn't stop her

teeth from chattering. It was like a bucket of ice water had been thrown over her, drenching her down to her bones.

The receiver was jerked out of her hands as Mrs. Newburg took over the phone. "Mr. Morr? I've called the sheriff's department. They should be here shortly. Don't you worry none. I'll help keep her safe." The woman nodded. "All right. If you say so. Here." She thrust the receiver back in Hannah's cold hands. "He wants to talk to you again. I'm going to lock the door in the meantime."

Uncomprehending, Hannah lifted the phone back to her ear. "Jeb?"

"Mrs. Newburg is going to lock down the office until the sheriff gets there. I'm on my way over as soon as I hang up."

"Jeb, no! Won't they fire you for leaving work?"

"Don't worry, *t'korra*. I'll be fine. Just stay put until I get there."

He hung up, leaving her to stare at the white cordless receiver in her hands. Jeb was coming to save her, just as he had promised. All she had to do was remain where she was.

Carl wouldn't be able to touch her. He would never be able to raise his hand against her again. Jeb had promised her, and his word was good.

She started, remembering. He called her *t'korra*. It was a word he had never used before. *What did it mean?*

Somehow the smile had come back to her face. *Did it really matter when he had spoken it with such tenderness?*

Slowly Hannah walked over and sat back down on the couch. It wouldn't be a long wait.



## **Chapter 17**

### **Revenge**

*Jebaral had been devastated when their joining had produced nothing. He had just turned fourteen, and his body had finally developed his third sac. His reproductive sac. The ultimate sign of Ruinos manhood.*

*He cared for Tiron. For years he had watched the Arra abuse her but were unable to bend her indomitable spirit to their will. Because she always fought back, they kept punishing her. Punished her in cruel, agonizing ways. But never with the adjac. The adjac was for those Ruinos who were believed to be a danger to the other slaves and to themselves.*

*Tiron cared for him, although she was almost two years older. Because she was female, the Arra had not put her in the auction grid. They remained hopeful they could get the remaining unpaired females somehow mated and then pregnant. Or else the Ruinos would become a species headed for extinction within a few short years.*

*Over the years, there were fewer and fewer females available who could procreate. The Arra had created an imbalance in the ecosystem when they had first begun netting the shape-shifting race for sale and profit...and food. Their lack of foresight in randomly grabbing from the populace soon had them worried they would run out of the species. The strong, green-skinned beings netted them more profit and wealth than any metal or jewel in the universe. But it had taken the Arra decades to realize there was no way they could change Ruinos physiology when it came to repopulating the race. No matter what type of torture they used to force the Ruinos otherwise.*

*There were Three Rules of Creation that held true for the Ruinos race. Rules that held fast and were unbreakable.*

*The first was that a female could not be raped or forcibly impregnated, whether she was bonded or not. It simply wasn't physically feasible. Still, every now and then, the Arra would capture a male from a race of beings who were similar in build and appearance, and force him to join with a Ruinos woman. Sometimes these forced matings ended in the death of the male. Sometimes not. But every time their experiment ended in failure.*

*The second rule declared that a Ruinos female could not conceive until she found her life mate, and blood lines formed between the pair. Until that happened, her body would not allow fertilization. And even if a life bond was formed, it was still up to the female to decide whether or not she was ready to bear a child. Ruinos decided when they were ready to start a family. It was the only part of creation they could control.*

*Rule three was once a male and female bonded as life mates, they could not be forced to bond with another. Even after the death of a mate, the survivor would never be able to bond again. Life mates were just that—mated for life. They were bonded by blood and something far deeper and more permanent than most races could ever hope to understand.*

*When Jebaral had not sensed the change in him, nor seen a blood line form after he and Tiron had been made to join under the watchful eyes of the Arra, he had promised Tiron he would try to protect her anyway. It was the least he could do.*

*He soon discovered it was a promise he could not keep.*

*Morr had tried to soothe his son. He had told Jebaral that, in most cases, the male and female would know they were destined for each other before a joining ever took place. "You will know, Jebaral. Trust me. It will become very clear to you. Your body and mind will reach out to her long before you claim her. And afterwards, you will be inseparable from her, even if you are far apart."*

*He still hadn't understood, but his father had smiled and told Jebaral he would in time. Tiron wasn't meant to be his blood mate. Yes, Jebaral cared for her, but all Ruinos men cared for their females, whether they were bonded to them or not. The instinctive need to protect their species ran through their veins as thick as blood. Protect and care for them. That was what made them strong. Forceful. And feared.*

*Of all the cruelties inflicted by the Arra, there was one atrocity they finally ceased doing. They never again tried to separate a mated pair. In the past whenever the Arra tried, the results were always catastrophic, and often ended in the deaths of both Ruinos. The financial loss of two healthy Ruinos was not a mistake they wanted to continue making.*

*Not long after his joining with Tiron had come up fruitless, Jebaral had been sold to a race of V'harettin. It would be the last time he would see his parents alive.*

*He spent years digging for korokian ore on the heavy gravity world. The demanding physical labor toned him and shaped him. So that by the time the planet had been leached of all its minerals, the Arra had offered to buy him back. By reselling him they could get four, maybe five times the asking price for the now prime Ruinos male.*

*There were a little over two hundred captive Ruinos on the small transport ship when Jebaral was hauled aboard. All of them were stuffed into small cages where they were expected to live without any kind of privacy until they reached the Arran mother ship.*

*Jebaral had been thrown into a tiny four-by-four-by-six-foot cell that already held another male. It only took the two men seconds before they realized what miracle had occurred, but they waited until the enemy had left the hold before they rejoiced.*

*That other male was Simolif, Jebaral's elder brother, and the only other surviving member of his family. Like him, Simolif had no idea what had happened to their parents. As to why they were on the transport, rumor was that the Jor Pil' Rak had offered untold wealth for a dozen Ruinos males. Once the transport delivered the rest of its cargo to the mother ship, it would head for Iili Pil' Sokk to finish the*

*transaction. There was no avoiding the certainty that both Jebaral and Simolif would be among that dozen.*

*This time, however, there would be no buy-back from the Jor Pil' Rak. It would be a life far worse than what they were made to endure under the Arra. It would also be a short life.*

*Which was why Jebaral and Simolif felt they had no other choice but to attempt an escape.*

\* \* \* \*

Jeb gunned the truck down Mill Road toward town. So much of what his father had told him about knowing his life mate long before joining with her made sense now. He realized Hannah was meant to be his blood mate even before he claimed her. His father had been right; his body had reached for her whenever she came near. His blood sang in his veins whenever he caught her scent.

That was how he had known she was in danger, despite the fact his human skin shielded his blood lines from view. Her fear had covered him like a freezing wet blanket, and his vision had blurred red. Because there was no phone in the bungalow they shared, he had called the motel office, hoping he could reach Mrs. Newburg so she could go check on Hannah.

His relief at being able to talk to Hannah personally had been immeasurable—until she told him Carl had come to town. That Carl had seen her, and now knew where she was living. At that moment Jeb had felt his protective instincts open like an umbrella.

Thank the stars Mr. Mallon had understood Jeb's need to get back to town. Apparently his cousin had let him in on the town gossip, or else he wouldn't have given Jeb the clear order to, "Make sure she's safe. And don't let him get his hands on her again."

Mill Road was wide and well-traveled. Jeb made the normally fifteen minute drive in ten, with the truck's tires

squealing in protest as he turned the corner at the changing light at the intersection leading into town.

As he approached the motor lodge he could already see the sheriff's car parked at an angle to the brown pickup sitting in front of the office. Jeb brought his truck around and braked to a shuddering halt on the opposite side.

They were all standing outside the office. Carl's protests continued to ring in the early afternoon sunshine, but the deputy who had handcuffed him and who was now holding him by the arm was barely holding back his own anger.

Hannah stood in the background, shielded by Mrs. Newburg. She was looking for him when he came around the corner, and a spark of joy ignited inside him to realize she had known when he had arrived. She rushed into his arms before he could say her name. At that same instant, Carl tried to lunge at him.

"That's him! That's the son of a bitch who kidnapped her! Why don't you cuff *him*, you piece of shit!"

The deputy's face grew darker. "I think I've heard enough from you. It's time we took a little ride down to the station."

Hannah's body was trembling so hard she could barely stand. Jeb brushed her hair back from her tear-stained face and asked, "What happened?"

It was Mrs. Newburg who answered him. "This fella tried to break down the door to my office."

"That's attempted B and E," the officer announced with a hefty grin. "You got more than fifty bucks in the till, don't you, Wendy?"

"Sure do!"

"Add attempted felony theft," the deputy snapped.

"When I wouldn't let him in, he started screaming for Hannah to come outside. Started pleading with her to talk. He just wanted to talk." Mrs. Newburg made a gesture toward

Hannah. "I told him no way 'cause I knew he was going to do something bad to her if she did."

"Like kidnapping?" the deputy suggested.

"Or beat her up again like he did the last time. Look at her face!"

The officer whose nameplate read STILES, P. gave a nod in Hannah's direction. "Is this the man who did that to your face?"

"Yes." Her voice was soft but firm. Her grip tightened around Jeb's waist. She knew she was safe now.

"Kidnapping's a felony in this state if you add assault and battery." Stiles grinned.

"I didn't hit her, you moron!" Carl hollered, spit flying. "I haven't touched her!"

"Go on, Mrs. Newburg," Jeb ordered in a controlled voice. It was taking every ounce of control he had not to throw a roundhouse punch into the man's face to shut him up. Instead he kept his fists clenched against Hannah's back and pressed her tighter against him. Still, there was some satisfaction in seeing the man's hand wrapped in a dark blue cast.

"Anyway, like I was saying, he tried to sweet-talk Hannah into coming outside, but I wouldn't let her. Then he yelled and screamed profanity to try and scare her into coming out." Mrs. Newburg went tight-lipped at the memory. "Bastard said he would torch my place if I didn't let her see him."

"Attempted arson." Stiles added. Jeb figured he was taking mental notes. If the additional pressure the deputy put on the man's biceps caused Carl any discomfort, too bad. "Is that when he tried to break his way in?" Stiles asked.

The motel owner nodded. "Yep. That's when he went back to his truck and got his tire iron, and when he smashed the window to the front door."

Jeb turned his head to spot the broken door to the office. The tire iron lay on the ground nearby. Glass shards lay among the pea gravel like glistening raindrops.

"Destruction of property," Stiles noted, still smiling.

Mrs. Newburg looked up at Jeb. "That's when Philip drove up. Caught him red-handed. Cuffed him right then and there, and then you showed up," she concluded. Jeb noticed she, too, was wearing a smug smile of satisfaction.

Jeb started to ask another question but the sound of a second sheriff's car pulling onto the gravel parking lot distracted them. This time it was the sheriff who joined them. The older man had a weathered face, but his eyes were sharp. He took in the scene, read it, then softly ordered the deputy, "Why don't you take this guy down to the jailhouse and give him some time to cool his heels? After I get these people's statements, I'll be over to book him."

The comment was too much for Carl, who had remained silently stewing throughout the entire process. "I didn't do *nothin'* to her!" he yelled, fighting the deputy's iron grasp on his arm as he was half-dragged toward the patrol car. "Hannah! Hannah, you *cunt*! You'll pay for this! You and that boyfriend of yours! You're *mine*, do you hear me? *Mine*!"

He continued to struggle against the inevitable. "That cocksucker broke my hand! He broke my fuckin' *hand*! Ain't you gonna arrest *him* for battery?" He tried to say more but closing the car door effectively muffled his diatribe. They watched as the man tried to beat against the door and window in a vain attempt to escape.

Sheriff Klotsky sighed wearily as he turned back to Hannah. "You okay, young lady?"

"Yeah. Just...frightened."

"And he's not your husband?"

"No!" she snapped suddenly with heat. "If he says so, he's lying. Make him produce a license. You'll see."

Jeb could see the man's eyes taking in the fading bruises. Suddenly the brown eyes locked with his. "Wanna give me the short end of it?"

"I met Hannah five months ago at the diner in Laughlin where she was working. I knew from the start she was in an abusive relationship, but she feared leaving him. Last Friday when she didn't go to work, her friend asked me to go over to her place and make sure she was okay. I had to break in to get to her, but I'm glad I did," Jeb honestly admitted. "If you think this is bad, it was much worse when I found her. Much worse."

Klotsky paused, digesting what he heard. "Did you go to the hospital?"

It was Hannah who stepped in. "I begged him not to take me."

"Why not?"

"I was afraid they would accuse Jeb, and I wouldn't be awake to say differently."

The sheriff rubbed his chin. "So you came up here to Tumbril Harbor. Why?"

"I used to work for B and A Construction," Jeb told him.

"Anson Bennetson's firm?"

"Yeah. He's the one who told me about the mill here. Promised me a job if I ever came up this way." Jeb gave a weak shrug. "I knew I had to get Hannah away from that prick, or he'd eventually kill her. I figured she would have a decent chance here."

"Did you break that man's hand?"

"Yes, I did. He took a swing at me, and I...swung back."

"Sounds like a clear case of self-defense." Klotsky grinned with one side of his face. He tilted his head at Hannah. "I would suggest you put a restraining order on the boy. I can't promise



it'll keep him away, but at least you'll have something in your corner in case this thing has to go to court."

"He's already on probation," she told him.

"For assault?"

She nodded. "He probably has some DUIs, too."

Sighing again, the sheriff scratched his chin. "This keeps gettin' better and better. Okay. I'll call Baine County and see what they got on the boy. What's his full name again?"

"Carl Presley Jamison."

"Right. In the meantime I'll get the paperwork started on that restraining order. You can come down before we close at five and sign it."

"Will he be spending any time in lockup?" Jeb inquired.

"At least twenty-four hours until we can get him duly processed. After that he'll go see Judge Mays, and she'll be the one to decide whether or not he gets to be a registered guest a while longer. Most likely she'll set him free and tell him to get his butt outta town, and don't come back."

"If she does, what's to stop him from coming back here?" Mrs. Newburg asked.

"Then that's when you give me another call, Wendy." He tipped the brim of his hat in their direction. "I'll also have Jimmy's Wrecker Service tow Mr. Jamison's truck over to the impound lot. Just to be on the safe side, though, I'll have one of my deputies keep an extra eye on this end of town if she releases our Mr. Jamison. Ma'am?" He gave Hannah a last look. "I'm sorry this guy managed to track you down. Let's hope we can get this thing squared away before any further damage is done."

"Don't worry," Jeb told him in a dark, cold voice. "I'll make sure he never hurts Hannah again."

The sheriff's eyes narrowed. "You own a gun, son?"

"No."

The man grunted in reply. Giving them a final salute, he got back into his car and drove away. No one spoke until the sheriff had disappeared from view.

"I can get you another door at the hardware store," Jeb said to the motel owner. "Won't take me but half an hour, if that long, to put it on."

"It's not your fault the man went psycho," Mrs. Newburg protested. "I can call Jacob and have him bring a new one over and install it." Giving them a shooing motion with her hands, she said, "Take Hannah home and put her to bed. She looks like she's about ready to keel over."

Smiling, Jeb glanced down at the woman in his arms. Fortunately the color had come back to her face, but she still remained weak in the knees. "That sounds like an excellent idea. But if you won't let me install a new door, at least let me pay for it."

"You won't get any argument from me on that account." Mrs. Newburg smiled warmly.

Lifting Hannah into his arms, he waited until she had nestled her head along his neck and shoulder before carrying her to the other side of the motor lodge where their bungalow sat at the end of the row. He deliberately left his truck parked in front of the office on the off-chance that if Carl managed to escape doing additional time at the local jail and decided to return, at the least the truck wouldn't point to the cabin where they were staying.

Regardless, Jeb knew their troubles with the man were far from over.

## **Chapter 18**

### **Answers**

Jeb lowered her legs long enough to unlock the cabin door, then lifted her back up against his chest to carry her the rest of the way inside. He kicked the door shut with his foot and started to lower her onto the bed when Hannah's arms around his neck tightened.

"No. Don't let me go. Lay down with me for a few minutes, please?"

He didn't need to be asked twice. They were both still struggling with how close Carl had come to taking Hannah away. More than likely harming her. Possibly turning the situation into a hostage situation. All the what-ifs continued to float in the background like ghosts, threatening and frightful.

He stroked her back to help calm her. Or at least he hoped it would calm her. They hadn't had enough time to fully explore each other's bodies, to discover every nuance. Every ticklish spot. Each sensual patch of skin. Such pleasures would take weeks, maybe months to slowly explore. At the moment Jeb was going on pure instinct. He knew stroking the spinal plates on a Ruinos would calm a racing heart.

It wasn't long before Hannah's sweet lemonade smell began to fill his lungs. She lifted her face, silently begging for his kiss. His lips descended upon hers, gently yet urgently. His hand came around to cup one of her full breasts, and he could feel the tip of it begin to poke him in the palm. Hannah moaned into his

mouth, and her sexual hunger flowed from her bloodstream into his.

Reluctantly he withdrew his tongue from her honeyed mouth and nibbled her earlobe. "*T'korra*, I'm afraid I won't be much good to you in this form."

She opened glazed eyes to look at him. "You really can't make love to me like this?"

He laughed softly. "To be honest, I don't know. I've never tried."

"No time like the present," Hannah whispered. Her fingers were already undoing the buttons on her blouse. Jeb took all of two seconds to come to a decision, then rolled over to untie the laces on his workboots.

They shimmied out of their clothing in record time. Hannah cuddled back into his embrace. The feel of her bare skin against his outer layer was new to both of them.

"God, you're so sexy," she breathed. Her moist tongue slid up his throat, sending streaks of white fire over every nerve. The sensation threw him for a loop. In the back of his mind Jeb tried to figure out how he was able to focus directly on the brightness flashing inside of him. Her hand played with his faux nipple, and the jolt to his human genitals numbed him with its intensity. He gasped, then groaned and buried his face in her hair.

All these years he had equated his outer layer of skin to the feeling of wearing a thin glove. Pressure and touch were still there, but a lot of the finer nuances of feeling were gone.

He couldn't have been more wrong. When he was Ruinos he was open to all outside stimuli. Every sound, every smell, every taste and texture were increased a hundredfold. Colors were more vivid. Everything he did was awash in a thousand vibrant pixilations.

Each night he went running through the woods behind the motel, which were so much like his homeworld, he could

sometimes forget he was not back there on that beautiful planet. And each night he let himself be swept away by the explosion of sensations bombarding him. It was as if he could open up his very cells and drink in the oxygen-rich air with its hundreds of scents and sounds.

But come the morning when he had to slip on the opaque covering, too many of those life-giving molecules disappeared. His body glove, as he often thought of it, masked nearly all those extra clues his body needed as a survival tool in day-to-day life. It masked them and muted them.

He had told Hannah he couldn't make love to her as a human. It hadn't been a lie; it had been a guess. For their first joining, he had to be his true self. It couldn't have been any other way. If Hannah couldn't accept him for what he was, there would have been no hope for them. Jeb was convinced if he had not claimed her as Ruinos that blood line in his arm would not have formed.

Now...he was not so sure.

But the belief that there could be no sexual gratification while in his human guise was beginning to fade away under Hannah's eager mouth and warm hands. When her lips latched on to one of his nipples and began suckling, he could feel his human erection arching upward in response.

Exquisite, rolling pleasure plummeted down into his stomach, only to shoot through his veins. He clutched her buttocks and squeezed, massaging the round, pale flesh. Hannah released his nipple and inched her body downward until her groin was even with his. Parting her thighs, she let his manpipe slide between them before closing her legs tightly together. Her hips bucked, and Jeb knew he was trapped within her lusty web.

"How does that feel?" Her voice was rough, straining against the throaty moans she would make every so often.

"Incredible."

He couldn't think. At the most he condemned himself for his stupidity. His outer layer wasn't keeping him from relishing the sensations his life mate was evoking in him. Just the opposite. His human guise was keeping out all the myriad sensations that would have been bombarding him in his true form. Now he could focus on her. On just her and all the sharp, intense pleasure she was wringing out of him.

He could concentrate on just Hannah. On her scent. On the sweet softness of her skin. On the satiny threads of her hair tickling his groin. On the way her fingers found areas on his body he never knew could heat his blood until she touched them.

Giving her buttocks another squeeze, Jeb ground her mound against him. Their hips undulated together, and he felt her tremble against him.

"Jeb."

"Mmm?"

He was lost in her. In her heat. In the power of her love. He could still smell her lemony tartness, but it was not as strong. Instead the scent of her sexual hunger overshadowed everything else.

"What does *t'korra* mean?"

His mouth found her forehead. His tongue lapped the saltiness of her skin as he breathed in the odor of their combined wetness.

"You are my blood mate. My forever. My *t'korra*."

"Can I call you *t'korra*, too?"

Bending down his head, Jeb nuzzled her nose. "You would call me *t'kor*. Your protector. Your life partner."

"*T'kor*." Hannah tried to pronounce it with his accent. Giggling softly, she lifted her arms until they locked around his neck. "*T'kor* Jebaral, I love you." And to prove she meant it, she squeezed her thighs together.

A soft snarl rose from his throat. The pressure on his manpipe sent blood gushing to his brain. His hands shaking, he ran them down her sides, over her ribcage, and stopped when he reached her hips. Flexing his fingers, he suddenly lifted her clear of the bedclothes. Hannah gave a little cry of surprise until she realized what he was doing. Lifting her outer knee, she threw her leg over his waist and waited for the impalement.

Slowly, steadily, he brought her down until he could feel the tip of his erection pressing at her entrance. Hannah wriggled her hips impatiently.

"I want to feel you inside me."

"This is new to me. Give me a moment to absorb it," he whispered. He was throbbing with his own need. His skin felt on fire, burning him, forcing him to seek relief in her moisture. In the wet, slick moisture of her mouth and her womanhood. He could hear himself panting, feel the sweat coating his palms and belly, and he tried to force himself to slow down. *Steady, steady.* Or else he was afraid of hurting this beautiful creature whose life meant more to him than his own.

He pulled her down over him, nesting himself tightly within her, filling and expanding her channel. Fire was shooting through him, arcing in huge flames, licking and burning him. It was too much. Too exquisite. Jeb cried out as Hannah deliberately squeezed him with her inner muscles.

Gathering him to her, she stroked his back until she could feel his breathing slow and his racing heartbeat grow more even. "Whoa, cowboy. What happened?"

"I was wrong." His voice was weak.

"Wrong?"

"Yes. I can make love to you this way. It's just going to be...different."

Hannah giggled. The sound spasmed down to her deepest recesses. He moaned as her silkiness squeezed him, pumped

him. Excited him beyond anything he had ever shared with another female.

“A good different, I hope.”

“What are you doing to me, Hannah?”

“Trying to get pregnant. What do you think?”

His head jerked up. Her loving blue gaze literally stole every other thought in his head. Hannah smiled as warm as the sun. “Well, you did say I wouldn’t be able to have a baby unless we became blood mates, didn’t you?” Jeb continued to stare numbly at her, mute with shock. She gave his shoulders a little shake. “Didn’t you?”

“Y-yes.”

“And my blood line is in your arm now, right?”

“Yes.” He fought the urge to look at the inside of his arm. He wouldn’t be able to see it, but he could feel it. Like a tongue covered in burning crystals running up and down, just under the skin, sending minute shards of magma and ice directly into his brain. Hannah flexed her inner muscles again. The shards looped around and shot straight into his manpipe. His hips jerked once, twice, and he poured himself into her with a sob.

Hannah cradled him through his release. As the last of his shudders came to a halt, Jeb sought her lips. They kissed, tasting and savoring the intimacy. “Are you okay?” she whispered as he finally pulled away. When he didn’t answer, she opened her eyes to see the light in his face glowing brighter. The heat in his eyes turned their golden flecks into live coals.

“I’ve had my prize. Now it’s time I gave you yours.”

He started to pull her up and off of him, sliding his growing thickness out of her. Hannah gasped and struggled in his grasp, but his arms were like solid oak. They held her firmly but without harming her.

With a flick of his wrists, he turned her over, setting her back on the bed on her other side, facing away from him.



"Jeb?"

"I won't hurt you. But what you are going to feel may send you spiraling out into space, just like you did to me," he promised in a voice that raked her lust over molten glass. It was seductive and intense. Hannah could feel every nerve in her body grow tense. She lowered her head and shifted her hips until her buttocks were in the position he wanted them.

Those long, broad fingers dove between the cleft of her cheeks, sliding almost imperceptibly downward toward her entrance. The blunt nails teased her, scratching the tender inner skin as they dropped lower and lower. She moaned and tried to scoot closer to him, but his upper body had her firmly trapped where he wanted her.

He deftly played with the tight little hole of her anus for less than a moment. His interest was further down, in that heavenly musk he had already marked. Fingernails left tiny red trails across the swollen flesh and sent erotic signals to that part of Hannah's brain, leaving her feeling less human and more animal. The pink nub was pulsing, turning red and slick. Jeb ran a thumbnail over it, barely scraping it, and she bucked again at the nerve-searing messages flooding her; a faint whimper escaped her as she clasped the bedsheets with white knuckles.

"Oh, God, I can't take anymore, Jeb!"

"Yes, you can." His voice slid over her like warm syrup.

"No! I can't...Jeb!"

She was crying with frustration as she tried to move her buttocks into position but he held her firm. He ran his fingertips over the hot center of her being. Then, slowly, Jeb slipped a finger into her depths.

Hannah moaned loudly and begged for more. Begged for him. Begged for the release she was dying for.

Another finger went inside her. Then a third. Carefully, he pumped her. With every fiery stroke he titillated the stiff little

nub within her folds until her muscles went rigid. Her breathing came in ragged gasps. Her struggles would have been enough to arouse him back to stiffness, but her responses washed over him like a returning tide. His member lengthened, hotter and harder. This was the first time he had explored that part of her which drove him mindless, and he reveled in her responses.

There was no way to describe the beauty of her body or of the perfection created when their bodies melded. She was a sweetness far greater than anything he had imagined. Far more wonderful than any sensory input he had ever experienced.

His father had been right. The blood bond was more than becoming a life partner. Hannah's life was inseparable from his. Her needs were his. Her passion filled his inner self with the same fire.

He could understand all of it now. Tears rolled down his cheeks with the realization.

Hannah cried out. Her sweat-slick bottom trembled under his hands. Suddenly rising to his knees Jeb pulled her up with him. And before she could comprehend this new position, he entered her all the way with one forceful lunge.

She tried to scream when her body exploded with release. As her inner walls closed over him, Jeb continued to make love to her, pulling in and out as flesh dragged over flesh, over nerve endings that felt like they were frying. In and out, relentlessly pushing himself all the way in until his groin met her dripping entrance before jerking out.

Hannah's cries were of the purest kind; the product of absolute ecstasy. Her fists beat against the mattress with every hard thrust that impaled her.

Like a faint light in the distance Jeb could sense her weariness. Her body was flagging, her responses growing muddy and disjointed. Gradually he slowed down until he reached a

complete stop, withdrawing all the way with one final trembling jerk of his body.

Sated and wholly exhausted, he lowered himself back onto the bed. Rolling over onto his side, he gently tugged on the semi-conscious woman. Hannah fell into his lap without a sound.

Jeb pulled up his knees and wrapped his arms across her chest until he was like a protective ball and she was his center. Kissing her sweaty shoulder, he closed his eyes and gave in to his weariness.

## **Chapter 19**

### **Retribution**

Carl sat in the four-by-six-foot cell, staring at the bars but not seeing them. His thoughts were elsewhere; his vision directed inward.

His hand hurt. He'd forgotten to bring his pain pills, and now he regretted it. But—crap!—he'd been half-asleep when he'd climbed into his truck around four that morning and aimed for Clearwater. Drove like there was no tomorrow for Tumbril Harbor. Prayed all the way up here he'd find the bitch and that walking dildo she'd run off with.

*Son of a bitch.*

Once he reached the harbor's town limits he realized he had no idea where to start looking for them. He vaguely remembered the guy driving a blue pickup but the make of it eluded him. It was an older model; that was all he could recall. Of course he could have gone from motel to motel, hoping to spot a blue truck, and with a little luck find them. But he soon realized there were too damn many blue trucks in Tumbril Harbor.

*Shit.*

While filling up, he'd seen a guy talking on a pay phone at the Gas 'N Go across the street. *They still had pay phones in these dumpy little burls?* Anyway, that had given him an idea.

He still had that picture of Hannah they'd had taken at the fairgrounds a couple of years ago. Back when she was still fresh and innocent. Taking it out of his wallet, he started at one end of

Main Street and walked into every store to show them the photo and ask if they'd seen her.

An hour later, and with no leads to go on, he was ready to take a break and get a bite to eat. That's when he'd climbed into his truck and went in search of the restaurant someone had recommended to him.

The light at the one and only intersection in town had gone yellow when he'd approached it. Any other day he would have run the red. *To hell with it.* But for some crazy reason he had hit the brakes, skidding just short of the crosswalk.

*Just how lucky could one guy get?* There she was, standing at the corner, waiting to cross. Dressed in jeans and that little blue tank top that always showed off her tits. Her hair was up in a ponytail like she always wore it. The side of her face that had been one large bloody mass the last time he'd seen her was looking better. It was still somewhat blueish and lime green, but it was Hannah.

And the bitch spotted him! He had been as stunned as she was when she got a gander at him. And then—*boom!*—she'd taken off lickety-split. Started running as fast as she could toward some motel. He'd hit his horn but she'd ignored him. She disappeared into the motel office just as the light changed.

*Bitch.*

He was quick to turn around and pull into the motel parking lot. Some old gray-haired crone came to the door but wouldn't let him in. She'd locked it from the inside and refused to budge. *What the hell else was I supposed to do?* Hannah was inside and wouldn't come out to talk to him or nothing. The old biddy had left him no choice but to get his tire iron and smash the door in.

*Hey, Hannah is my woman. What right did she have running away from me like she did?*

*And who the hell was this Jeb Morr bastard who had abducted her?*

*Yeah. That's what he did. He abducted her. Broke into my home and kidnapped her.*

After that Jeb guy had crushed his hand and taken off with Hannah, he remembered finding what was left of the door handle on the ground near the open door. It was a little after three in the afternoon. Surprised the hell out of him to realize Hannah had gone with the son of a bitch.

At first he'd thought she'd gone to the hospital, but when he called the emergency room, they hadn't seen her. Neither had the first aid clinic at the other end of town. It had been a relief to find out she hadn't been to either. The last thing he needed was for the cops to haul his ass back to jail because of a stupid little fight.

He'd made it over to the diner to confront that Barbara woman who worked with Hannah, but she wouldn't tell him nothing. It wasn't until he reported the break-in to the police, and they'd come over to check things out, that Monty Allwine next door told him it was some guy named Jeb Morr who had been over that morning and taken Hannah away. Allwine was retired Army, and sometimes did some electrical work for B and A Construction as a sub-contractor. He'd recognized Morr from the job they'd done at the new First United States Bank. He also told Carl that construction at the bank was over, but he had no idea where Morr was, or where the man could have gone with Hannah.

Of course the police said they could probably put out some sort of alert in case anyone saw Hannah, if Carl thought she might be in any kind of danger. But because she wasn't a minor, they told him she had just as much right to pack up her things and run off with the guy as anyone.

Which left Carl pretty much hung out to dry.

Thank God for friends like Manuel Rosas. If the man hadn't put the bug in his ear about what he'd overheard at the

construction office, he would've never been able to figure out where that asshole Morr had taken her.

He flexed the fingers of his uninjured hand. Okay, so he'd gotten a little carried away with the tire iron. *Christ, it wasn't like I was gonna hurt 'em or anything. It was just a goddamn door. Yet here they were trying to make a federal case out of it.*

The door at the far end of the tiny jail rattled, then opened to reveal the figure of the deputy sheriff who had closed him up in here.

"Make yourself presentable. The judge wants to get you taken care of before she goes home today."

"Well, ain't I lucky?" Carl muttered with as much sarcasm as he could muster.

The deputy snorted as he unlocked the cell door. "Better stick that attitude where the sun don't shine, or else you'll be sitting in here for the next ten days until she gets back from the Virgin Islands."

Carl started to make an off-color remark about the judge and Virgin Islands, but decided against it. He didn't know this woman, and she didn't know him. If he had any luck left to him, he could be out on the streets in another hour or two.

And if he was, there was nothing that was gonna stop him from getting what he came here to get in the first place.

## **Chapter 20**

### **Plans**

“How do I marry you?”

Hannah dropped her fork on the floor. Jeb watched as she bent down to pick it up and put it back on the table.

“Sorry. Wh-what did you say?”

“I know on this world when a man and a woman want to show their commitment to each other, they have a wedding ceremony. I’ve seen it on television.” He smiled around his egg salad sandwich. “We don’t have such ceremonies between Ruinos. Once a pair are bonded, it’s pretty evident to everyone.”

“Why would you want to marry me? I mean, you don’t have to. I mean...I don’t want you to feel like...” Hannah toyed with her knife and tried not to look at him. It was clear she was fighting with herself. From her conflicting scents, Jeb could tell she wanted the marriage ceremony but for some reason she didn’t want him to feel obligated. Reaching out, he laid a hand on top of hers nervously fidgeting with the silverware.

“Do you want to get married? The truth now, Hannah. I’ll know if you tell me differently.” He spoke low and soothingly. Obviously what he had intended as a casual discussion had unexpectedly taken a different turn.

She shook her head. The light blonde highlights in her hair glistened in the overhead lights. “Yes, Jeb. I do. Every girl dreams of what kind of wedding she’ll have when she grows up and finds the man she’ll love forever.” Lifting tear-filled eyes,



she continued in the same tone of voice he had used. "But I know most guys don't want to feel tied down. They don't want to be...I guess the word I'm looking for is obligated. They don't want to feel as if they're tied down to just one woman."

"Hannah, I'm not most guys." His brows lowered slightly. "I'm not Carl."

"I know that," she started to protest. He cut her off before she could go any further.

"Then tell me what we have to do in order to get married."

"Not a whole lot, really. You go to the courthouse and buy a marriage license. Then you find a minister who'll perform the ceremony." She made a slight face, her gaze directed down at her half-eaten BLT. There was a pause as he gave her time to say more, but after another minute, it was clear she wouldn't.

"I think the ceremonies I've seen on television were a bit more elaborate than that," he commented.

Hannah picked up a french fry and nibbled on it. "What do you mean?"

Jeb sniffed loudly to make a point, adding a grin. "You're being evasive."

"Stop sniffing me. You mean the fancy white gown and flowers and all?"

"You know exactly what I mean. Hannah...why are you fighting me on this?"

"I'm not fighting you."

"Like hell you're not. When I first mentioned it, your heart started beating faster than a herd of running horses, but your words aren't reflecting what you feel. You say you want to get married, then in the next breath you say it isn't necessary." He leaned over the table to make his next point. "You are in my bloodstream, Hannah. Permanently. It goes without saying I'm not human, so don't try to compare me with the other men

who've been in your life. With those men who've treated you shamefully."

She chewed on another fry. "Weddings cost money."

"*T'korra*, that's not a problem."

At his casual response Hannah stopped chewing. "What do you mean?"

"Exactly what I said. Money is not the issue here. Now...what kind of wedding do you want?"

"For real?"

"Yes, Hannah. For real."

Two teardrops in perfect alignment rolled down each cheek. She sniffed and hurried to brush them away. "Can we invite Barb?"

"Anyone you want."

A twinkle sparkled in her eyes. That lemonade smell he loved was coating her skin. "I want her to be my maid of honor. You're gonna need a best man."

Jeb took a swallow of water and set down the tumbler. "Not a problem. Simon's ready to rip up the road to come meet you."

"Tear up, you mean."

"What?"

"You mean he's ready to tear up the road. Not rip." After she giggled, Hannah added, "The accent gives you away, but your misuse of our slang is adorable."

He smiled. "Give me a few more years." Suddenly serious again, Jeb leaned over toward her. "The day we landed here, we did not believe either of us would find a life partner among the inhabitants. Simolif and I had...we had resigned ourselves to spending the rest of our lives alone. Free...but alone. So tell me what else we'll need."

"Well, most people get married in a church. My mother was Baptist, but I haven't been to a tabernacle in years." Biting

her lower lip, she mulled over this small road bump as the waitress came over to see if there was anything else they needed before leaving their check. Hannah watched her walk away. "Jeb, give me a sec."

She got up from their booth and approached their waitress who had gone behind the counter lining one wall of the café. Jeb knew she was up to something as he watched her speak with the woman.

They had napped for nearly an hour. Since they both had missed lunch, they had gone to the café for a quick bite before he headed back to the mill.

When she returned to their table, there was a big smile on her face. "I asked Melanie if they were looking for help here. I told her about working at the diner in Laughlin, and that I was willing to help in the back, if necessary. She said they were always looking for another waitress, and I should call Mrs. Tulle tomorrow morning. She's the owner."

"Hannah, you don't have to get a job if you don't want to. Trust me, I can take care of you."

"I know that, but I don't want to sit at home twiddling my thumbs and watching soap operas like Mrs. Newburg. I've worked at all kinds of jobs since I was twelve. I'd get bored out of my skull if I didn't have something to do. Besides, I like waitressing. You get to meet all sorts of interesting people that way." She added a wink to her last statement, causing Jeb to chuckle.

He paid their tab and followed Hannah outside to where she was standing on the sidewalk in front of the truck.

"Jeb?"

"What?"

"It makes sense now."

"What makes sense?" He unlocked the passenger door and opened it for her.

"Why you go running at night."

He closed her door and walked around to climb in the driver's side. "Go on. I'm listening."

"You said your world was an agricultural planet, and that your people grew plants and trees and stuff, right?"

"That's right."

"Where did you work before you came to Laughlin?"

"Corinth Point."

Nodding, Hannah looked pleased with herself. "Figures. This northeast section of the state is one giant forest. It reminds you of home."

He flashed her a smile but made no reply and backed out of the parking spot.

She stared at his profile as he drove her back to the motel. "That's why you're green, too. It's natural camouflage. It allows you to blend in with your surroundings."

"Why are we discussing my coloration instead of our wedding?"

"Give me some time. I need to decide what I want. It's not like we're in any kind of hurry...are we?" She turned wide, questioning eyes at him.

Again he didn't answer her, but he could tell she was busy figuring out what she wanted to do. As an added incentive, he repeated what he'd told her earlier. "Don't worry about cost, Hannah. It's going to be your only wedding. And mine." He grinned.

"Can I ask how we're going to pay for it?" There it was again, that apple scent of her concern.

"I have some money in the bank."

The apple aroma grew more distinct. "Would you get upset if I asked how much money?"

Jeb sighed. It would take some time before she could approach him without flinching. Or expecting a caustic comment

or the back side of a hand. Helping her overcome years of domestic violence was not going to be a problem. It was that huge scar on her psyche she would never lose that would forever haunt him.

"Umm. Hold on. Let me find out."

He made a sudden turn into the parking lot of a car parts dealership. Swinging around, he drove back the two blocks to the bank and pulled up next to the ATM machine. She watched as he removed a bank card from his wallet and stuck it in, keying the four digit pin number.

"My code to everything I use is ten twenty-two. Remember that," he told her as he punched the button to request a balance.

Hannah had recognized the familiar blue and green logo on the card. "You use First United States?"

"It's where my accounts are, yeah."

"Why ten twenty-two?"

"It's the date we landed," he replied and handed her the slip of paper.

The numbers didn't register at first. She had to say the amount out loud before her brain would register what she was seeing. "Sixty-four thousand, two hundred eighteen dollars and eleven cents." She nearly gasped. "Sixty-four *thousand*?"

"I've been working for nearly five years while staying at low-cost motels. I didn't need much in the way of material possessions. A new shirt or pair of jeans every now and then. I paid cash for this truck. I have the insurance set up as an automatic payment through the bank." He pulled back out onto the main road.

"Sixty-four thousand *dollars*?"

"I know. I need to transfer some of that over into CDs. Haven't gotten around to it." He glanced over to where she was still staring at the bank slip. "That's what's in the checking account."

She blinked. "Good Lord, Jeb! How many accounts do you have?"

"Six, I think. A couple of savings account and some certificates." He flashed her a smile. "Simolif gets a call every so often from Viharrud. He invests for several of us. Every so often I send him a thousand, and a few months later Simolif lets me know he's holding a check for me." Giving her a quick glance, he added, "We know the importance of money on this world. We know it can buy us security and help when and if we need it. That's why at least a dozen of us work at building up our money. We aren't thinking of it as investments for the future like your race does, Hannah. It's for our protection today."

"My people would collect guns and weapons. You collect money." Hannah slowly shook her head. "I don't think I've ever seen this much money at one time in my life."

"It's yours."

"Huh? What? Mine? You're joking, right?"

"It's all material, *t'korra*. When you've been enslaved for over half your life, you quickly learn what's important. I want our wedding to be everything you've always wanted. Can you plan one for that amount? Or do you think I'll need to cash in one of the CDs?"

A frown suddenly darkened his face as they pulled into the motel parking lot. Hannah glanced up to see why he had suddenly stopped talking and spotted Mrs. Newburg standing out in front of the office. She was flagging them down and looking very perturbed about something.

And it didn't look like good news.

## **Chapter 21**

### **Warning**

"A man who said he was your brother called," Mrs. Newburg hurried over to the truck to tell them before they could get out of the vehicle. "You got a brother named Simon?"

Jeb gave a quick nod. "Did he say why he was calling?"

"Yeah. He wants you to call him right back. Said it's an emergency. He's waiting for you. Said it had something to do with *aura*."

"Thanks, Mrs. Newburg." Jeb pivoted and ran for the pay phone with Hannah close behind.

"Arra? They're those people who captured you, aren't they?" she asked him as she watched him punch a series of numbers into the phone.

The burnt smell of fear drifted over to him. Reaching out, he gave her shoulder a squeeze but didn't answer. His own stomach knotted while he waited for Simon to answer.

"Jeb?"

"What's wrong?" he asked tersely.

"Arra. They know we're here. I got word less than half an hour ago they got Dorrsus," Simolif said.

"Is it a transport, or the mother ship, or just a scout?"

"I don't know," Simon admitted. "It was Prithoven who called me. Dorrsus didn't get to change before daylight—"

"So he was still Ruinos when they found him," Jeb concluded. "Where were they?"

"Further west. In New Mexico." There was a pause over the line, then Simon commented, "We should be rejoicing, little brother. You've found your blood mate."

Already Jeb could hear defeat coloring his older sibling's voice. "Now is not the time to give up hope, Simolif. They may know we've landed here but they don't know where we all are. As long as we take greater care at night—"

"I'm coming to Tumbril Harbor."

Jeb remained stunned for all of three seconds. "No. If we gather, it'll only make it easier for them to find us."

Simon refused to listen. "You have a life partner to protect now. She is my family, too. And that makes her my responsibility as well. You know that. You would do the same if I was the one who had been blessed. Besides, it's only right she gets to see she made the wrong choice," he teased.

The small injection of humor managed to ease the tenseness of the situation for a moment. If truth be told, Jeb was relieved Simon had suggested they join forces. It had been nearly two years since they last saw each other. "When are you leaving?"

"Soon. Today. I should be in your neck of the woods by late tonight if I break a few speed limits."

"Take care, Simolif."

"Don't worry. What room are you in?"

"Eleven."

"See you soon. *Bor thirn.*"

"*Dia thirn.*" Hanging up the receiver, Jeb gave Hannah a small smile.

"He's coming down here?" Jeb figured she had guessed this from what she had heard of his end of the conversation.

"Yeah. The Arra got one of us in New Mexico. Simon will be here by tonight."

"Why? Wouldn't it be easier to elude the Arra if you remained separated?"



"Yes, but there's a more important reason why he's coming," Jeb replied. "Ruinos instinct is to protect family above all. You're part of me and our family. A very important part. He's coming to help me protect you."

Her eyes studied him intently. She smelled of growing fear. "Am I in danger?"

"We hope not, but we can't take that chance."

"Do you think the Arra might start taking people from earth?"

"I honestly can't answer that," he admitted. "But I cannot see why they would. You're not a strong species. Don't get peeved at me, Hannah. It's the truth. Your outer skin is too fragile. There's no way your species would survive the atmospheres and different grades of gravity on the worlds and moons I've seen if you didn't have special equipment. There are many planets where the Arra have chosen not to handle the dominant species. Especially those which would be more trouble to keep alive than they're worth."

"Well, if we're not worth the effort, why would they be interested in me?" she asked. A startled look suddenly overcame her when the answer slammed into her at almost the same time.

Jeb looked at her tenderly. "Yes. Repopulation. The Arra have been trying to keep our race from dying out for years. If you manage to give birth to our child, *t'korra*, that would make any female on this world possible mates to all the Ruinos males left alive. What you and I have done has never before been achieved in the history of my kind."

"So you want me because I might become an incubator for your race?" she asked with a touch of bitterness. It wasn't the truth, and he understood that. Still, it didn't stop her from asking even though she knew he had risked everything for her. And the longer she was with him, the more she felt comfortable enough to challenge him. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean that."

"I know you didn't. You're just as worried as I am. You know I didn't choose you simply to become an incubator. There's every likelihood you'll never be able to have our child. But in the end, that's not what matters most to me. Like I told you earlier, I never expected to find a life partner on this world. The fact I have is nothing short of a miracle."

Taking a deep breath, she let it out slowly as she mulled over this new development. "So what do we do now? New Mexico's over a thousand miles away."

"We don't know if the Arra are here in a transport, mother, or a scout ship."

"What difference does that make? Or does it?"

"It makes a lot of difference. If they're in a transport, all they have to do is set their tracking monitors and wait for night to fall. Then when the monitors locate us, they can swoop down to gather us up. But if they're in a scout, they'd have to report back to a bigger ship first. Scout ships only have a two-man complement. They don't have room to take any extra cargo aboard." Taking her hand, he gave it a squeeze. He noticed how she stared down at it. "The Arra can't track us when we've shape-shifted. We have to be in our real forms for them to locate us."

"But you can't stay in your human disguise all the time, can you?"

"No. We have to let our true selves come forth every cycle. Allow our skin to breathe. Even if I went to sleep as a human, at some point during the night my body would revert back to its normal form."

"You said the sun locks you into your shape during the day. But the moon reflects the sun's rays—"

He saw where she was leading with her question. "It reflects. By then the sun's rays are too weak to affect us."

"Even with a full moon like it'll be tonight?"

"Has to be direct sunlight. The Arra know this, so they usually don't try to track us until nightfall. Dorrsus took the risk of remaining Ruinos during the day...or maybe he didn't have the choice. Either way, we'll never know how the Arra found him. But now they know we've landed here, they'll be out every night until they can account for every one of us."

Reaching out with his free hand, he tucked a loose lock of honey-colored hair behind her ear. "I have no idea if you will show up on their screen, but I can't take that chance."

She gave him a questioning look. "What do you mean?"

"Maybe it would be better for you if—"

"Oh, no, no, *no!* Don't you dare suggest leaving me!" Hannah angrily argued and gave him a little shove in the chest with her free hand.

"I'm not leaving you, Hannah. I could never leave you, even if it means saving my own skin. No. What I'm talking about is taking you where the population is denser. That's why Simolif chooses to stay in bigger cities. He thinks it improves his chances against being discovered."

"And you chose to remain in little one-horse burgs like Tumbril Harbor because you think a small town is the better choice?"

Jeb grinned. "He and I have argued about our choices for years. I think the farther apart we remain, the harder it will be for them to find us. The only thing we've agreed on so far is that by gathering, we're almost guaranteeing the Arra will locate us."

"Then it's dangerous for Simon to meet up with us, isn't it?"

"Yes. But he feels he has to."

"To protect me? Dammit, Jeb, how do you think that makes me feel?" Anger and hurt rolled off her skin. Jeb flinched at the scent. "How am I going to be able to live with myself if the Arra find and capture you, or the both of you, because of me?"

"Don't worry, *t'korra*. If they find me, they still won't be able to separate us."

"Oh, yeah? What makes you so sure?" She sniffed against the tears that threatened to fall.

This time he drew her into his embrace and rested his cheek against her warm hair. "The Arra know a bonded pair cannot be separated. It would kill both of us."

Hannah drew back slightly to look up at him. "It would? For real?"

"Yes, *t'korra*."

She stared up at him a moment longer, then cuddled back against his chest. "Good. Because I don't know if I could survive without you now."

"Should we pack and head for the big city?"

"No. I don't think it would make a difference. What we need to do is prepare in case they do show up here."

"And how do you propose we do that?" he asked curiously.

"Well...seeing as how you got the money, I say let's go buy me a gun. That should be a good start."

"A gun?"

"Yeah. A shotgun for starters. Something with a little kick to it. And then I want you to tell me everything you know about the Arra so I'll know what I'm facing if and when they show up."

"Hannah, are you sure about this?"

"Hell, yeah. It's about time I showed you what the female of my species can do beside being baby makers. It's been a while since I've fired off a few rounds, but I think I can pick it back up pretty quickly."

He could feel her arms snake around his waist. Her hands dipped provocatively inside the waistband of his jeans until they found his butt cheeks and lightly ran her fingernails over their surface. "What are you doing, woman?"

"It's not what I'm doing, but what I hope to be doing." She gave him a heated glance that immediately had his blood come to a rolling boil. "Do you really have to go back to the mill this afternoon? Or can we try blowing your theory out of the water again?"

"My theory?"

"That you can't make love to me while in your human form."

"You liked that, huh?" He grinned down at her. "Better than when I am Ruinos?"

Biting her lower lip, she appeared to be debating with herself. "I don't know. I'm undecided at this point. Guess we're going to have to do it a few more times both ways before I can come to any decision." She gave his rump another scrape with her nails. The muscles tensed at her touch. His hips bucked slightly, and a nice hardness bloomed in the front of his jeans.

"Hannah," he began to moan softly, rubbing himself into her belly.

"Shh. It's still daylight, which means you won't shift. And we're already here at the motel."

"I thought you said you wanted to buy a gun."

"*After* you screw my brains out," she whispered huskily. "Well?"

As if he had any choice in the matter.

## **Chapter 22**

### **Detected**

The full moon rose like an enormous orange chrysanthemum in the eastern sky. Hannah watched the huge orb ascend above the treetops as dusk deepened into twilight. Already the stars had begun peeping between the leaves.

After another quick but lusty session of lovemaking, they had gone to the courthouse so Hannah could finish filling out and signing the restraining order against Carl. Afterwards they went down to the sporting goods store on the square to purchase a rifle. She'd found a nice pump action she wanted, but it would take five days for her background check to clear before she could take it home. Both she and Jeb agreed it may be too late by then, but they had no other choice.

There was a sound behind her. A large green hand with wicked-looking talons rested on her shoulder. Smiling, she reached up to lift the hand to her lips and kissed it.

"I won't be long," he promised, dropping an equally gentle kiss to her temple.

"If you're not back in an hour, I'll start panicking."

He grinned, revealing two rows of sharp incisors. "Maybe I need to start wearing a watch when I go out," he teased.

"Oh, yeah. That would look real cute, Jebaral. I can just picture you now in your Ruinos self with a Mickey Mouse strapped on your arm." Giggling, she hugged him as he reached to turn off the lamp. In the darkness she could barely make out his shadowy form climbing out the window. She waited until he

was far enough away from the cabin before turning the light back on, slowly counting to ten as he had asked her to do.

It was a little after eight thirty. Around a quarter to ten would be a good time to turn the light off again so Jeb wouldn't accidentally be seen when he climbed back into the bungalow.

She discovered she liked watching him change. If she saw him go from human to Ruinos, it didn't bother her to see a tall, naked (and nicely hung) green alien walking around the cabin afterwards. But having him appear from out of nowhere already shifted into his true self still gave her system a jolt of fear. It would take a while longer for her to get accustomed to when he did that.

She caught sight of the clean laundry sitting on the writing table. Those clothes needed to be folded and put away, and there was no time like the present. Turning on the television, she flipped through the channels to find something of interest. Nothing. Not even one of those documentaries about penguins.

Mumbling a choice word under her breath, Hannah dumped the clothes on the bed. There wasn't even a radio to listen to. She made a mental note to ask Jeb to get one the next time he went by the hardware store. It didn't surprise her that he didn't have one of his own. If he wasn't watching television, he was off racing through the forest. Strengthening himself. Taking care of his emotional and mental health, as well as his physical self.

Hannah folded a pair of his jeans. The way he had managed to adjust to her world still astounded her. Sometimes she wondered if she would have been able to cope as well on a planet as hostile and strange.

And then to have found someone to love.

Her face flamed unexpectedly. Okay, she would have to make a slight correction to a previous thought. If he wasn't

watching television or running, he was making out-of-this-world love to her.

\* \* \* \*

*"There's something I'm curious about."*

*Beside her Jeb lifted his face from her shoulder and gave her an incredulous look. "We've just made love twice in the last hour. Once human, and the second time when I was in my Ruinos form. What is left to be curious about?"*

*Smiling softly, she rolled over to face him. Jeb reached up to pull a sweat-soaked lock of hair off her forehead. "It was something you said the first time we ever made love."*

*"Which was..."*

*"You said, 'That was your first.' Did you mean..."*

*"You know exactly what I meant," he murmured. "You had never had an orgasm until then."*

*Hannah reared her head back slightly to get a better view of those beautiful eyes with their scattering of amber crystals. "How'd you know?"*

*"I smelled it on you," he announced simply. "Or rather, I didn't smell it."*

*"Oh, yeah, right."*

*"I could smell Carl's scent on you, but there was no scent of possession."*

*"Carl and I had sex. If that's not possession—"*

*She stopped when he shook his head. "Spurting his seed into you is not possession. It's when you orgasm that your body absorbs some of that essence. Then the scent never leaves you."*

*"If memory serves, my first orgasm didn't occur when you were inside me." She twirled a fingernail down the center of his sternum. The iron-hard muscles quivered at her touch. It hadn't taken her long to discover her Ruinos mate had ultra-sensitive skin. All over.*

*"No, but it prepared your body to accept me. So that the second time you came, you became part of me, just as I became part of you."*

*"And that's why I stink like you now?"*



*"And I stink like you."*

*Hannah paused with her finger just below his navel. Pressing her cheek to his chest, she drew a deliberately noisy breath through her nose. "Umm. Sorry. You smell nothing like me. But I love the way you do smell."*

*"Which is..."*

*"Like the forest. Piney. Earthy. Very masculine. Rather sexy, too, if I might add." Her finger continued its downward quest until it reached the root of his manhood. At that point it moved south toward the tip. However she soon discovered the tip had started to change direction when she found her finger going north. "God, you're insatiable."*

*"Is that a complaint? Remember, I've been celibate for ten years. Hannah?" He lifted her chin until she was looking directly at him. "Hannah, you were my first orgasm, too."*

*The shock on her face was precious to behold. "Now you're funnin' with me."*

*"I told you a Ruinos female could not conceive until she bonded. That's also true for a male. If I didn't ejaculate the first time I made love to you, then I would know our joining was not fated to be a blood bond. But after you had your first orgasm with me, I knew then a miracle was destined for us."*

*\* \* \* \**

*A miracle? Sometimes it felt like more than a miracle. It felt like a dream.*

Hannah glanced around the tiny cabin. This was what she wanted. A cabin, or a bungalow just like this one. Well, maybe a bit bigger. It definitely needed a bigger kitchen. And a bigger bed. And maybe a fireplace. But it had to be next to the woods or in them. That was at the top of the list, so Jeb could always be near that part of her world which reminded him of his own planet.

For herself, she didn't need much to be happy. Jeb made her happy, and wherever they chose to live would be fine with

her. Just as long as she was with him. He made the mornings worth getting up for. And he made the evenings worth waiting for.

She used to hate it whenever Carl came home after a drinking binge and wanted to have sex because he never satisfied her. He'd be sweaty and smelling of booze and cigarette smoke, and the only thing on his mind would be getting his rocks off as quickly as possible. To hell with leaving her on the couch or floor or bed, despising the results, with her clothes only partway off. In the past six months that had been the state of her sex life. And until Jeb came along, it seemed destined to remain that way if she stayed with Carl.

Closing her eyes, Hannah thought back briefly on the way Jeb loved her. He didn't think any of her suggestions were improper or lewd. With his encouragement she felt free to experiment. To explore her sexuality and all the ways they could please each other. There was nothing forced or one-sided.

Jeb also told her he got more pleasure from their lovemaking if she had an orgasm before his. He tried to explain it to her in practical terms, but she had shushed him and shown him a better use for his mouth.

Quickly she put the clothes into the bureau and went to start the water for her bath. She was pinning her hair on top of her head when there came a knock on the door.

Hannah paused in the middle of the bedroom. "Who is it?"

She could tell there was movement on the front step, but no one answered her.

"Who is it?" she called again. Walking over to the door, she tried to look through the peephole but it was blocked. *Crap*. She hated it when people did that. "Jeb? Are you trying to be funny?"

Deep down she didn't think it was Jeb. Still, she debated within herself whether she should open it. If it was Mrs.

Newburg she was pretty sure the woman would have identified herself.

The knock came again. Hannah slipped the chain into the lock for safety's sake, then turned the deadbolt, opening the door half an inch.

The voice came to her before she saw him.

"Hannah, we gotta talk."

Fear clutched her heart with icy hands. She tried to slam the door shut but Carl shoved his good arm and a leg against the doorframe before she could close it. The chain held. A power struggle ensued.

"Dammit, Hannah! Come back here." He shoved again, threatening to pull the chain from the jamb. Digging in her feet, Hannah tried to push against his superior strength.

"Go away!" she cried. She put her whole body against the door and tried to keep him out. But she knew Carl would inevitably force his way inside. He was much too strong. And once he was in, he would make her pay for leaving him. "Get the hell out of my life!"

"God dammit, bitch! I just want to talk to you!" He shoved again, putting his shoulder against the wood. There was a cracking sound as the chain began to give.

"Go away!" Hannah screamed again. She continued to push, hoping to get the door closed enough to get the deadbolt turned. Carl rammed his shoulder into the wood.

There was a louder crack, followed by a splintering sound. Suddenly the chain popped out of door as the lock ripped away from the doorjamb. The door went flying open, throwing Hannah backwards. She shrieked and fell on the floor, to land on her bottom and lower back.

Carl stumbled into the cabin, tripping over the threshold to land heavily on his knees. He uttered a grunt of pain but managed to throw out a hand as he tried to grab one of her

ankles. Hannah kicked back, hoping he wouldn't be able to get a firm grip as she began backing up to get away from him.

The cabin was small. There wasn't anywhere she could go to get away from him. Her eyes glanced at the open bathroom door where she could still hear the water running, but visions of Carl holding her head under the water in the tub like he had done before flashed back to her. This time though he wouldn't let her up. Not after what she had done to him.

That left her with only one other choice.

"Hannah, stop it, bitch!" He lunged for her with both hands. She kept striking out with her feet. One foot caught the hand with the cast and smashed it against the foot of the bed. There was a splintering noise. Carl reared back and screamed. "Fuck you, bitch! You're *dead*! You hear me? *Dead*!"

Adrenalin pumped through her body. She was now fleeing for her life, and Hannah took the only exit she could see—the open window beside the bed. She started to shimmy over the casement when a hand caught the edge of her pants leg. A glance over her shoulder saw Carl slowly getting to his feet. His eyes were glittering with rage. A thin line of spittle was running down the side of his mouth. She tried to kick at him again, but this time he dodged her attempt.

"Going somewhere, cunt?"

He let go of her pants. Hannah jerked her leg free, but it upset her balance. She slammed her thigh against the sill so hard she knew there would be a bruise there before long. Arching her body, she started to slide outside when he lunged for her. His thick fingers managed to latch onto a lock of hair. Giving a yell, he pulled.

Pain sheared through her brain. Screaming at the top of her lungs, Hannah fell out the window to land face-first in the gravel below. Half-dazed, she frantically crawled several feet away on her hands and knees before she struggled to her feet.

Behind her she could hear Carl struggling to get through the window, but his bulk prevented him from taking the same route. Yelling at her once more, he disappeared back into the cabin.

He would be rounding the outside of the cabin at any second. Turning around, she pushed her way through the thick brush and headed directly into the forest, oblivious of the branches and thorns tearing at her clothes and skin. A warmth trickled down the back of her neck where her scalp continued to send little pinpoints of agony bursting in the back of her eyes like miniature fireworks. Jeb was somewhere out here. All she had to do was find him, and she would be safe. He would keep Carl away from her. He would protect her and make Carl leave them alone. All she had to do was find him. Out here. Out in the middle of this huge forest that covered hundreds of square miles in this part of the state. Out here where there were creatures like wolves and bears and God knew what else. Dangerous creatures, but none more so than the man who was determined to kill her if he ever managed to get his hands on her again.

Stumbling and sobbing, Hannah thrashed her way in the darkness, where even the light of the bright harvest moon couldn't penetrate the dense overhead canopy. She wanted to call out to Jeb but she feared luring Carl to where she was. Terrified he would reach her before Jeb could.

Whimpering, she doggedly pushed through the underbrush and thick green growth, and prayed. *Jeb! You knew the last time when I was this frightened. Somehow you knew because you called the office. Can you feel me now? Can you tell how much I need you right this minute?*

*Come to me, t'kor! Come find me!*

*Jeb? Jebaral!*

## **Chapter 23**

### **Hunt**

Carl kept his cast-enclosed hand against his chest. The son of a bitch hurt like hell after Hannah kicked it and smashed it up against the foot of the bed. The bitch would pay for that.

Rounding the side of the cabin, he paused long enough for his eyes to adjust to the darkness. There, right ahead, he could see where there was a small irregular opening in the bushes. Plain as day, even for an inexperienced hunter like himself. Trying to keep as quiet as possible, he plunged into the thicket to follow after her.

He couldn't believe his good fortune. Because the judge had been in a hurry to get her docket cleared as much as possible before she headed off on vacation, she had given him a stern warning, threw a fifty dollar fine in his face, then let him go with his promise to leave Tumbril Harbor within the hour and never return. As they processed him, some woman from the courthouse had dropped off a copy of the restraining order Hannah had signed. After a quick ride to the impound lot to claim his truck, good old Deputy Fife had escorted him to the outskirts of town.

Fuming, Carl had driven over to the little gas station and fried chicken joint at Five Corners, and waited there until he felt it was safe enough to venture back into town. *Fuck 'em*. Order or no order, Hannah belonged to him, and he was damned if he would go all the way back to Laughlin without her.

Imagine his shock when he had driven back to the motel where Hannah had holed up and seen a blue pickup parked in front of the little cabin at the farthest end of the lot. Right up next to the woods. Absolutely perfect. Less chance of someone seeing them unless they drove around to the back like he'd done.

The only thing he had to avoid was coming across that boyfriend of hers, so he had parked his truck out of sight, then hidden himself behind some brush and waited. Waited for Mr. Dildo to leave, or for a sign he had already vacated the premises. At one point Hannah had emerged carrying an empty laundry basket. She'd gone over to the motel office, then come back a minute later with the basket full. He had ground his teeth together when he'd seen the jeans in the basket. Jeans he knew weren't Hannah's. *She was doing the fucker's laundry, for crissakes!*

When it had started to get dark, Carl knew he couldn't stay put much longer. If the guy wasn't going to leave, then maybe he could talk his way inside. Sweet-talk Hannah into letting him in.

*Yeah. That would work.* She had never been able to resist him when he spun sugar out of his mouth. Sweet-talk his way into the cabin and try to sound contrite.

*Yeah, yeah, yeah.* There was the big chance Mr. Dildo was inside with her. And an even bigger chance he wouldn't let Carl get one foot in the door. But it was a risk he had to take. At least he knew if he couldn't get his hands on Hannah this time, there would be other times when he could try.

For a second he debated on whether to wait until tomorrow morning after the guy left for work, or to go ahead and try now. It was a big risk to try again so soon after that fiasco this afternoon, but Carl figured, *What the hell?* They would never expect him to strike now. They would never anticipate him staying in town after Hannah had gone through all the trouble to have a restraining order placed on him. *Hell, the guy had even parked his truck right in front of their place!*

*No. Right now was perfect. Just after dark.* They'd probably had a good supper and were relaxing in front of the TV with their shoes off and their belts undone so their meal could settle. Now was the right time to see if he couldn't catch them off-guard. And hopefully mellow enough to let him in to have his say. The anticipation was sweet enough to make him clench the muscles in his neck when he grinned.

Imagine his shock when he'd knocked on the door and Hannah had said, "Jeb? Are you trying to be funny?"

The fucker wasn't there.

*And then the little bitch had opened the door.*

The bushes and limbs tugged on his clothes. By keeping his wounded hand and arm in front of his face, he finally found a good use for the cast. It kept the brambles and all from scratching him.

Up ahead he could hear all kinds of swishing and crackling sounds. Hannah was leading him right to her with all the noise she made, plowing through the growth like a runaway bulldozer. She also made it a lot easier for him to track her because she cleared the way for him to follow. It was slow going for her, but it would take him half the time to reach her. And once he did, she would have hell to pay.

She left a trail a ninety-year-old blind man could follow. Carl stepped through the broken twigs, his dark grin still pasted on his face. He had thought long and hard about what he would do to her once he had her back in his possession. He had to make her pay for running off like she did. She had to learn that once a man laid claim to her, she was his to do with as he pleased, no matter what the fucking courts said. And no other man better try to say differently.

He'd rented a movie once where this guy had tied up his girlfriend and dominated her with a whip while he alternated between screwing her and making her please him. Hannah



hadn't wanted to watch it, but he'd gotten quite a kick from it. And later, when he had tied her up and wanted do some of the same stuff to see if it was as exciting as it appeared in the movie, she had cried and tried to fight him. Of course he'd ended up winning that argument. He always won arguments.

But thinking back on the fact Hannah had hated him keeping her a virtual prisoner in their bed for those few days gave Carl an idea. If she detested it that much, he wondered how she would feel after a week or so.

*Damn.* His mouth watered just thinking about her all tied up and naked to where he could do anything he wanted. Better yet, belt marks usually faded after three or four days, even on her pearly white skin.

The thrashing sound up ahead was growing louder. Every so often it was punctuated with a soft sob.

Suddenly it stopped. Carl halted abruptly and strained his ears to listen. Hannah couldn't be that much farther ahead. *Ten, maybe a dozen yards, if that much.* Moving slowly he began to inch his way through the brush.

She had collapsed in a tiny open area. Her head was bent over, her back to him, as she fought her fear and exhaustion. Her breathing was loud and ragged, and every so often he could hear her whimpering, calling for Jeb.

Fierce, black anger crawled through him and reflected in his eyes. With a growl Carl pushed through the thin wall of leaves separating them. Hannah glanced up to see him lunging toward her. She screamed and pedaled backwards on her hands and feet.

His free hand managed to clutch the front of her blouse. Without thinking, he swung his cast-covered hand around. It clipped her right above the eye. Hannah jerked back soundlessly, exposing her chin and throat. Carl brought the fiberglass cast down again, and this time it solidly connected with her jaw and

ear. Her struggling ceased almost immediately. She was dazed but not unconscious.

Lifting her up onto his good shoulder, Carl began to carry her back to the motel. He could feel her fists beating futilely against his back, but she couldn't hurt him. Up ahead through the trees he could make out the row of cabins, and just beyond them the neon sign of the Harvest Moon Lodge. *Stupid bitch couldn't even run in a straight line.* She had taken a semi-circular route away from the cabins, but inevitably she would have emerged from the woods near the highway leading in and out of town.

"Carl...please don't." Her plea was barely audible.

"Shut up."

"Carl—"

"I said *shut up!*" he barked, adding a sharp slap to her rear. She jerked and squealed at the impact. He felt her struggle, but he had a good grip on her. She wasn't getting away from him. *Not this time. Not anymore.*

To be on the safe side he continued in the same direction Hannah had been taking, circumventing the motel just in case that boyfriend of hers decided to return before they could reach the truck. This time he had the work of clearing the way for the both of them, but the cast came in handy again, blocking most of the thorns and brambles. Over his shoulder he could hear Hannah sobbing.

"Jeb."

The sound of her crying out her boyfriend's name was the last straw. Carl landed another heavy-handed slap to her bottom in anger, hard enough to bruise. "Zip your fucking mouth, Hannah. Say that prick's name again, and I swear to God I'll—"

"Jeb! *Jeb!*" Her struggling suddenly became more intense. Hannah began to fight him with every ounce of strength she had

left, using her fingernails to claw at his back. Digging into the skin through his thin cotton t-shirt.

They were feet away from the motel's gravel parking lot. If he didn't shut her up, she would rouse the whole damn town. Grunting with anger, Carl pushed past the tangle of blackberry bushes. As soon as he was clear, he threw Hannah onto the pitted tarmac. She landed heavily on her side with a little cry and tried to crawl away from him. The distant glare from the neon sign glistened wetly on the side of her face.

Carl stared at her incredulously. *This was becoming ridiculous. The woman just didn't know when to give up! What do I have to do? Tie her up now?*

"Oh, Hannah, Hannah, Hannah," he crooned. "You know that every time you fight me it's just gonna be that much harder on you." There was a length of good rope in the bed of his truck, but there was no way he would take the chance of getting it and expect her to still be here when he returned.

Sighing loudly, Carl undid his thick leather belt and slid it free from the loops on his jeans. He took two steps toward her when she realized he was coming after her. Her head snapped up. The expression on her blood-drained face was dead. She would fight him until there was nothing left of her. Until there was nothing left of her for him to have.

Smiling at the challenge, Carl hefted the belt with its huge embossed buckle advertising his favorite beer. He took another step toward her when Hannah's eyes widened almost explosively and she screamed.

Screamed a name.

*"Jeb!"*

At the same moment the sound of a deep growl sounded behind him from the depths of the forest. It was a dark sound. A menacing snarl filled with hate so intense it vibrated in the air

around them. And it sounded like nothing he had ever heard before in his life.

Carl whirled around, holding onto the belt. As the creature emerged from the wood, its dark-colored skin reflected black in the pale light. It was an immense monster with two rows of teeth that looked as if they had been filed into points. It smiled at him, and then it growled again.

“Go away, Carl. Go away and never come back.”

*Sweet Jesus! It sounded human!*

Carl knew he had never been the kind of man who thought things through before he acted. He didn't this time, either. Giving a yell of rage and frustration, he twirled the weighted belt above his head like a weapon and started running toward the monster waiting at the edge of the forest.

## **Chapter 24**

### **Allies**

Jeb stared at the man coming at him twirling his belt over his head. Calmly he stood his ground until Carl was upon him. As the heavy metal buckle arced downward, he ducked and nimbly took a step sideways. The buckle sliced air, and Carl went yelling past him.

Quickly he ventured a glance over to where Hannah lay on the tarmac. There was blood running from her scalp above her ear down to her neck. The sight and smell of her pain and worry was enough to make his blood boil with outrage.

*How dare the man come back after he had been served and think he could still take her away!* Uttering a loud growl, Jeb waited until the man charged him a second time. When Carl was within reach, he grabbed the front of the man's shirt and tugged, literally ripping it from his body.

Carl screamed shrilly, dropping the belt as he threw his arms up in front of his face for protection. Jeb lifted him until the man's nose was even with his, and hissed, "Go back to Laughlin and live. Come back here and touch Hannah again, and I will rip your extremities from your body, starting with your dick. Are you listening to me?"

The man's head bobbed up and down like a doll's. The fetid stench of urine filled the air as Carl's bladder emphasized his fear. Wrinkling his nose in disgust, Jeb tossed him away and turned back to Hannah who was struggling to get to her feet.

He had no idea how far away he had been when the first sharp knives of her terror sliced through his body. He didn't need to hear her screams or smell the acrid, burnt scent of her fright to know something was terribly, terribly wrong.

He had been running for miles, cleansing his mind of everything but Hannah. As the fragrant woods flowed past him, his heart had sung her name, and for the first time, he had allowed himself to dream of what their future might hold. Of the possibility of children, and that thought alone had brought a joy he could barely contain racing through his whole being.

With each passing hour and every passing day she was becoming more and more like a Ruinos female in manner and ability. The scarring on her psyche was fading under the balm of his devotion and patience. She was growing more in tune with him, and he with her. The truest bonding. The years would only see their melding blossom further and flourish. Already she could sense things within him without him having to say them aloud.

When her panic slammed into him, he could feel its metallic bitterness eat at his gut. As his feet pounded over the earth, Jeb tried to read the flurry of conflicting waves flooding his mind. Yet above them all was the pain. It was Carl doing things to her. Carl had returned, despite the restraining order, and he was seeking revenge upon Hannah.

If Jeb managed not to kill him, that in itself would be a miracle.

Dropping to one knee, he reached out and grabbed her arms to help her to her feet. She was wobbly and out of breath, but an overriding scent of anger still hung in the air. To his amazement her face was dry. She hadn't cried. Not yet, anyway. The time for tears would come later, when they could console each other with their bodies and gentle words.

For the moment they spoke to each other in silence. Their eyes met, and Hannah reached up to caress his cheek. Her smile of relief mirrored his own.

The sound of a siren pierced the air a split-second before the familiar red and blue flashing lights bounced off their bodies. Carl's attempted kidnapping had been heard by others. Someone had called the authorities. Already they could see someone running toward them with the patrol car right behind.

"Go, Jeb. Hurry," Hannah whispered. He nodded.

"I won't be gone long. I promise." He had no choice but to leave her. If he morphed into his human form, he would still be as naked as he was when he turned Ruinos. On this planet, the sight of bare flesh in public was taboo. He would only be away from her long enough to find a pair of pants. A glance over where Carl remained dazed and unmoving gave him small comfort, but the sheriff would be here in a few seconds to take Carl away. Maybe this time for good.

"Jeb! Go!"

He chanced an extra second to brush her hair away from the streak of blood down the side of her face.

"I'll be all right," Hannah insisted, giving him a little shove. The lights were close enough to reflect off of his forest green hide.

Jeb gave her a nod and got to his feet. He turned to vanish back into the forest when Hannah's blood-curdling scream tried to warn him. He barely managed to dodge the first blast from the nerve gun, but the second one caught him in the hip. Jeb's body went into full rigor as molten fire scorched every cell in his body, and he fell heavily onto his side on the roadway.

He was alive but unable to move, and it was as if time had ceased to exist. He heard Hannah scream his name. He couldn't look at her; his eyes were fixed straight ahead. No sound could pass his lips although he was still able to drag air into his lungs. A

coldness he never knew he could feel clamped down over him as the two formless shapes of the Arra emerged from the edge of the treeline.

“Go away! Go away and leave him be!”

The sound of Hannah’s voice pleading with the continually changing creatures would have been ironic if circumstances had been different. He wanted to tell her there was no pleading with the Arra. *No pleading. No begging. No hope.*

The Arra remained standing side by side, close to where Jeb lay paralyzed and unable to speak. One of them held the little neuro gun in its ever-flowing arm. The other held a short rod with a pointed tip. At the sight of the second weapon, Jeb felt his mind go blank with fear.

Behind him came the sound of footsteps and a car screeching to a stop, the tires crunching on the gravel, then the slam of a car door.

“Hannah!” It was Mrs. Newburg. Jeb could just make out the woman running over to grab Hannah and pull her away from the scene. From the green monstrosity lying at her feet, and the two pus appearing forms hovering nearby.

“Hannah! Come here. Come with me, girl. Oh, dear God, what are those things?”

“Step back, Wendy. I don’t know what’s going on, but I want you to take Hannah back to the office with you and call emergency. Have them send me some backup. Now *go!*” Sheriff Klotsky ordered.

Jeb gave a soft sigh of relief. They would take care of his Hannah. If the Arra had wanted her, they would have made their move by now. No, they had come for him, and at any moment they would take him with them. They didn’t know he had bonded with the woman. *How could they know?* What had occurred between him and Hannah was unheard of. Because of



their bonding, when the Arra took him away, he would die without her.

But Hannah would be safe. And maybe, just maybe, she would manage to survive. She was not Ruinos. Perhaps that difference would be enough to save her life.

"No!" Hannah backed away from them, fighting Mrs. Newburg's insistent urging to leave. To Jeb's amazement and terror, she draped herself over him as if she could further protect him with her body.

She pointed toward Carl. "That son of a bitch tried to kidnap me. Look at me. He tore out my hair, and he struck me with that cast on his hand. I want him arrested. I want you to take him away and let him rot in jail."

"Hannah, listen." Klotsky had his gun out, aiming it at Jeb. He gave her a little "come here" gesture with his free hand. "Come with me. Move slowly. We'll help you get away from that thing."

"That *thing* is the man I love," she spat at them. "It's Jeb. Can't you tell? *Look* at him! Look into his eyes." She pointed a finger at the two whitish forms nearby. "If you're going to shoot, shoot *them*! They're here to take Jeb away. Oh my God, people. *Listen* to me!"

The Arra loved drama. Whenever there was a fight among the species they collected, they would stand patiently nearby and let every bloody scene unfold, never interfering, until it had played itself out. That was why they enjoyed trying to mate the Ruinos with species from other worlds. Too many times the results were too horrendous for words. But then, the Arra thrived on suffering.

A tingling ran up his spine. The nerve neutralizer was starting to wear off. Jeb knew he had to be careful. If he made his move too quickly, the Arra would shoot him again, and maybe take out Hannah at the same time. There was no telling

how brutal the effects of the neutralizer would be on her weaker system. Species had been known to die because the gun had shut down their ability to breathe.

Above everything else, he had to keep her out of path of the *adjac* the other Arra held. If the tip of that weapon touched her delicate skin, it wouldn't stop until it had melted a hole all the way through her body. The pain alone would kill her.

Hannah continued to try and protect him as she argued with the sheriff and Mrs. Newburg.

"He's from another world. Those things over there, they're Arra. They capture races from other worlds and sell them for slave labor. Or they *eat* them! Jeb's people...they're almost all gone now. There's so few of them left. They escaped those bastards and found their way here to Earth. They went into hiding."

"You're delirious, Hannah," Mrs. Newburg's voice soothingly told her. "Come with me. Let me take you over to the office, and I'll fix us some tea. It'll calm your nerves."

"I don't want any tea. I'm staying here with Jeb. *Listen to me!*" She was crying now. Crying tears of frustration, along with her fear.

"He looks nothing like Jeb," Mrs. Newburg tried to argue.

"That's because he's Ruinos. They can shape-shift. During the day they're stuck in whatever form they take, but at night they can shed their outer skin." She ran a hand down Jeb's cheek and neck. A warm teardrop fell above his ear.

*Keep talking, Hannah. Keep the Arra occupied.* He was almost there. Almost to the point where he could move again. Move so he could try to escape and take her with him deep into the forest. Maybe...just maybe they could escape.

*Was it possible to hope?*

"They're all alone on our world. They're frightened and so far away from their home. Can't you see how much a miracle it's

been for them to survive here?" She stroked him again, and this time he could feel the warmth of her hand.

*Soon...*

"I didn't know he was Ruinos when I fell in love with him," Hannah admitted, wiping the tears from her face with the back of her hand. She sniffed loudly. "He's been kinder and gentler and more loving to me than any man I've ever known. He took me away after Carl beat me to a pulp. He brought me here to heal. He took care of me. He fed me. He gave me back my dignity and self-respect. And hope. How could I not love a man who was that caring...no matter what he looked like?"

There was a slight movement in the corner of his eye. When the sheriff finally responded, Jeb knew the man no longer had the gun aimed in his direction.

"So you're telling us those two things over there are here to take Jeb away?"

"Yeah. They're called the Arra."

"What about him?" Klotsky gave a nod in Carl's direction.

"He tried to kidnap me again. Jeb stopped him and was about to take me home when they showed up. And you."

He could smell her worry, pungent like overripe apples. The gravel underneath him irritated his skin. Jeb could feel again. His neurons were back to normal. He could concentrate, which meant he could leap up from where he was and run. From a dead stop to over seventy miles per hour in less than three seconds.

Quickly he took inventory of where his hands were, and knew exactly where to grab Hannah so he could take her with him. All he needed now—

The blaring roar of a motorcycle racing down the road distracted them when the vehicle slid across the parking lot in front of the motel office and began bearing down on where they

were standing at the other end. The engine gunned, and both black-clad rider and machine grew closer.

At the last second before the half ton of man and bike plowed into their midst, Jeb grabbed Hannah around the waist and jumped.

## **Chapter 25**

### **Punishment**

The big Harley gunned straight toward the Arra. The exact second it was between Jeb and Hannah, he grabbed her and launched them out of the way. The motorcycle slammed into the nearest pus-filled creature with the sound of something being sucked into a sea of mud. There were slurping noises as the bike's engines roared. The spinning tires bit into the Arra, dragging its inner organs into the undersides of the cycle, literally shredding the being into soft, foamy pieces.

Someone screamed. Mrs. Newburg.

Quickly Jeb pulled Hannah into the relative safety of the forest's edge as the commotion and confusion continued yards away. "Stay here," he hissed, pushing her down behind a prickly pyracantha bush.

"Jeb!"

"If I don't destroy the Arra now, they'll return with more of them. Trust me, Hannah." He gave her shoulder a squeeze, then ran back to the scene as Sheriff Klotsky popped three bullets into the second Arra advancing toward him.

Mrs. Newburg shrieked and ran to hide behind the patrol car. The wounded Arra directed its attention toward the man with the gun and lifted the neutralizer in Klotsky's direction.

"Duck!"

A split-second after Jeb's warning a bright blue ray of light hit the pavement where the sheriff had stood.

"Use the car door as a shield!" Jeb called to the man. A few feet away the cyclist remained on the bike grinding the remains of the first Arra into a pasty white sludge. On the ground the *adjac* glittered in the moonlight. He swooped down to scoop it up.

There were two more pops as the sheriff fired at the remaining Arra who continued to move toward him. The neuro gun hummed, but the ray glanced harmlessly off the car door.

Without hesitation Jeb raced around to the back of the Arra and aimed himself directly at the creature. He felt his body hit the whitish boil, and he brought the *adjac* down into the monster with both hands. The point of the torture device sliced into the thin membrane of the Arra's skin. Upon contact the device turned black. Instantly the nauseating stench of boiling pus filled the air, and Jeb gagged. But he continued to drag the *adjac* through the thing with all the strength he could muster.

A spark of panic went incandescent in his brain. It was Hannah reacting to something. Jeb refused to let go of the *adjac*, applying more pressure to the insatiable device eating its way through the Arra. If he let go or removed the weapon before the creature was dead, there was a very real chance it would manage to get back to its ship and call for reinforcements.

The Arra had no central nervous system. To kill one, it had to be thoroughly disintegrated until it was nothing more than a wet spot on the ground.

Vaguely he could hear his name being called out. A male voice. The sheriff.

"Jeb! Are you all right? *Jeb!*"

The Arra was slowly beginning to melt. It had been hurt when Klotsky had put five bullets in it. The *adjac* was burning away the rest of its life force. But the neuro gun was still a danger.

“Get the neutralizer!” he shouted, hoping the officer would hear him. “Take it away so it can’t be used against us!”

The creature had ceased firing at the officer when Jeb attacked its back. Rolling steam was rising around them as the Arra boiled and bubbled under the force of the *adjac*. The smell of the monster cooking was worse than anything he had ever encountered. Jeb fought his rising gorge and pushed down harder, keeping the pressure constant. Already he could hear a shrill whine coming from within the creature. It was dying, and it knew it. But it wouldn’t give up. Not yet. Not until it realized it no longer had a chance.

Through the whitish steam he saw Klotsky approach the front of the Arra. The man had his arm thrown over his nose and mouth, but tears poured down his face at the unbelievable stench. Hesitatingly he stretched out with his other hand until he could reach the little round disk. With a backward flick of his fingers, he knocked it out of the thing’s grasp. The neuro gun skittered across the tarmac, coming to rest near the car.

The Arra was melting. Dying. Liquefying. Suddenly it popped, releasing a geyser of fluids and gas. Klotsky jumped backwards out of the way. Jeb let go of the *adjac* and leaped to the side to keep from being coated with the Arra’s scalding remains. The thin, wet sheet of tissue that was left slowly sank to the pavement where every so often a little bubble of air would form underneath the pieces of membrane.

Somewhere in the background he could hear Hannah calling out for him. Her fear remained bright and metallic, piercing his tongue with its harsh scent.

By now the motorcycle had finished its grisly business with the first Arra. The rider gunned the engine one last time before letting it splutter to a soggy-sounding halt. Below the Harley the creature resembled a wet, whitish pool of slime.

“Are there any more?” Klotsky called out.

Jeb's answer was interrupted by Mrs. Newburg pointing a finger toward him and shrieking, "Ohmigod!"

Getting off of the bike, the rider had dragged the pus-covered helmet off his head. Jeb turned around to see his brother in his human guise grinning at him. A moment later, Simolif dropped his skin to reveal his Ruinos self, prompting the woman's cry.

"Are there any more of those things?" the sheriff yelled again, and gave Mrs. Newburg a little shove to hush up her whimpering.

"If there were, they would have all been together," Simolif answered. Giving Jeb a little nod in their direction, he asked, "Friends of yours?"

"Allies." Already his eyes were scanning the brush where he had left Hannah, but he could neither see nor feel her.

*Bad. Very bad.*

And then he remembered her chilling fear. Jeb whipped around to where Carl had been cowering on the ground. The pavement was bare. Which meant the man had taken advantage of their fight with the Arra to run away. And he had taken Hannah with him. That was why Jeb had felt her terror and the reason she was no longer hiding behind the bushes where he'd left her.

"Where's Hannah?" Simolif growled, already sensing what his brother just discovered. He had shed the rest of his slime-coated clothing until he stood fully naked in his true form.

"That son of a bitch has her," Jeb replied. He didn't have to ask Simolif to help rescue her. It was a given. It was the reason his brother had come to Tumbril Harbor in the first place.

He glanced over to see the sheriff speaking into his mic. "Carl has Hannah. We're going after him."

"What can we do to help?"



Pointing at the neuro gun and the *adjac* now pulsing on the ground, he instructed, "Don't touch those. When we get back, we'll dispose of them so they won't hurt anyone."

"A-are you sure there aren't any more of those...things?" Mrs. Newburg stammered.

Simolif nodded. "If there were just two of them, that means they're a scouting party." He gave Jeb a look that spoke volumes. "First Hannah. Then we'll go after the ship."

"Where would the ship be?" Klotsky asked. "Back in those woods?"

"Yeah. Shouldn't be too far. The Arra aren't known for roaming."

"What does it look like?" The man was reloading his pistol. He would help hunt for the ship.

"Trust me. You'll know it when you see it," Jeb stated flatly. He could still feel Hannah's panic, but now it was muted and less horrific. She wasn't being hurt, but she continued to be held against her will.

Knowing instinctively which way to go, Jeb sprinted toward the road with Simolif beside him.

\* \* \* \*

He couldn't get the engine to turn over. Hannah stared as Carl continued to pump the accelerator as he cursed the pickup, banging his undamaged hand against the steering wheel.

She hadn't seen him come up behind her. While she watched Jeb tangle with the one Arra, the unknown motorcyclist continued to grind the other monstrosity underneath the bike's wheels. When he had grabbed her, she had fought him, struggling and screaming for Jeb as she raked her nails over the man's bare chest and face. But he was still bigger and stronger than she was despite his tangle with Jeb. Before she was aware of what he was doing, Carl had twisted her arms behind her back

and wrapped her tightly with his belt. Even now she could feel her fingers tingling as her circulation was being cut off.

Throwing her over his shoulder again like she was nothing more than a sack of feed, he had hurried away from the motel parking lot. Hannah had screamed for Jeb again. She tried to see the outcome of the fight, but she soon lost sight of it when Carl cut through the edge of the woods.

A minute or so later they emerged from the treeline to where Carl had parked the truck at a little roadside rest stop. In the distance Hannah could make out the muted roar of the cycle and the pop of a gun being fired. There was a shriek, and she gritted her teeth in fury.

“Let me go, goddamn you!”

“No way, woman! I’ve been through hell to get you back, and I’m not about to leave this place without you.”

He opened the passenger side door and dumped her into the seat. Hannah had to shut her eyes against the glare of the interior light. By the time Carl stomped over to the driver’s side and opened it, she could open her eyes to glare at him.

God, he was a mess. His face and upper body were covered in bruises and bloody cuts and scratches. He stank of urine. It served him right. Hannah felt no pity for this man she had once thought she wanted to spend the rest of her life with. The once-handsome face no longer looked attractive. Carl Jamison was as heartless a human being as they came.

Another thought went through Hannah’s mind as she watched the man try to start the engine. She smiled at the comparison.

*He was an Arra in human guise.*

Silently she stared at the man sitting less than three feet away from her. Carl no longer frightened her. Yes, he still had the ability to hurt her. Beat her senseless and violate her. It didn’t matter anymore. Somehow deep within herself she knew

Jeb would win against those oily white creatures. And when he was finished with them, he would come and finish up what Carl had started.

*Simply and positively without any doubt.*

Suddenly the motor coughed, then roared to life. Carl gunned it with a heavy foot on the accelerator. Twisting around to glance out the back window, he threw the gear into reverse and began to back up when the truck refused to budge.

“What the...”

Hannah craned her neck to peer out the back window. In the glare of the backup lights, she could see the enormous dark-skinned creature holding the vehicle at bay as it clutched the bumper. It grinned at her, and she could see the rows of gleaming spiked teeth. She grinned back.

Suddenly the truck lurched violently, tossing them in the cab, and the shearing sound of metal on metal raked over her nerves with an ear-splitting intensity. Carl screamed, his eyes riveted on what he saw taking place in the rearview mirror.

“He pulled the wheel off! *The fucker pulled the goddamn wheel off the axle!*”

They landed awkwardly at an angle as Jeb released the truck, and the vehicle settled lopsidedly on the bared spoke.

Before Hannah could grasp the mental image of Jeb tearing the wheel off the truck, he was at her side. A click of the handle told him the door was locked, and Hannah wasn't able to unlock it with her hands tied behind her back. She struggled briefly to show him she was helpless. He gave a shrug and jerked on the handle. The piece of metal popped off in his hand. He stared at the handle, then tossed it away and motioned for her to move back.

She turned her back to the window as his fist plowed through the glass. Bits of safety glass sprinkled them like loose diamonds. Grabbing both sides of the inner frame, he pulled.

The door protested for all of two seconds. With a loud grunt and snap, the truck door tore away from the cab, and the creature tossed it to the side as casually as if it had been a piece of paper.

Leaning toward the opening, she waited for him to pull her from the truck so she could bury her nose in the curve of his neck. He was breathing heavily but he was alive. They had both survived. Overcome with relief, she pressed a kiss to his throat.

"I knew you would come for me. I knew you would defeat the Arra." Cuddling closer, she could feel his arms tightening around her as a chuckle rumbled in his chest. Hannah nuzzled him where she could breathe in his seductive, piney scent.

Except he didn't smell piney.

In fact, he smelled...

...like mint.

Hannah jerked her head back with a little gasp. Her eyes sought the face of the creature who continued to cradle her against his broad chest as more laughter resonated above her head. In the truck's cab light she could tell the Ruinos male holding her had blue eyes. Blue eyes with little greenish flecks.

*Not brown.*

*Not Jeb.*

Her eyes grew round as she realized who was holding her. "You're Simon!"

"I liked it better when you thought differently." He smiled. *Okay, so he looked almost identical to Jeb, but his voice was definitely different as well.*

Hannah tried to look over her shoulder to see if she could spot her mate. She found him standing on the other side of the truck next to the driver's side door as he replied, "Careful, brother. Is she okay?"

"I have her, Jebaral. Do what you must to the *grackfen* who insists on taking her away from you," Simolif said. He took several steps back, but kept Hannah turned so she could watch.

Imitating his brother's method, Jeb punched a fist through the window and twisted the door off the frame. He started to reach in for Carl when the man threw his hands above his head and gave up.

"All right! I'm done! I'm *done*, you shit-faced bastard!"

Sliding out of the seat, Carl kept his hands up. Jeb gave him a sad shake of his head. "Pity. I was really looking forward to tearing you apart at the waist." To add a bit more fear to his threat, he bared his teeth and hissed. The man trembled.

Hannah watched in dismay as Simolif lowered her to her feet and began to undo the belt that tied her wrists together. "You're not gonna let him go again, are you? I mean, what if he comes back again? How are you gonna stop him if he comes back while you're at work, or away?"

"Obviously a restraining order means nothing to you, does it?" Jeb growled softly.

Carl took a step backwards. The man was cowed but still showed defiance. He just would not give up. Not completely.

Simolif spoke up. "She has a point. What's to stop him from leaving and telling everybody he meets about us? He's a danger we don't need."

"Should I go ahead and kill him, Sheriff?" Jeb turned around to address the man and woman emerging from the trees.

Feeling her arms free from the bindings, Hannah rubbed her wrists to help with the circulation and walked over to join her mate. Simolif followed.

Klotsky stopped to look at the young man giving him a challenging stare. "I found the ship those things came in." Giving a wave toward the forest, he told them, "About a hundred feet in that direction. Not far. You were right. It wasn't hard to find." His eyes slid back to Carl. "As for this pup, I think there's about another six or seven laws he's broken since Judge Mays released

him. Mmm, mmm, mmm. She sure isn't gonna be happy to see your boyish good looks back behind bars."

"How long did she say she'd be on vacation?" Mrs. Newburg inquired with a mischievous grin.

"Oh, at least two weeks." Klotsky crossed his arms over his chest. "I'm sure by that time, there'll be a good dozen or so cases ahead of yours, son. So add another two to three weeks waiting for your arraignment. On top of that, you'll have to tack on the time you'll serve as a guest of Russup County. If you're lucky, son, you might get out by your fortieth birthday." He bent over to bring his point home. "Or...then again...maybe not. Not if you keep up that ass-chewing attitude."

Straightening, Klotsky glanced over to the two greenish aliens and the steel-hard blonde standing possessively between them. "What are you gonna do about that ship?"

"I'll go get the weapons and meet you there," Simolif told his brother and vanished into the thicket.

"We're going to destroy the ship and hope it'll be a long, long time before the Arra send another scout to hunt for us." Laying a hand on Hannah's shoulder, he said, "It's over, *t'korra*. Go back to the cabin, and I'll be there as soon as I can."

"No." Hannah shook her head as she clutched his arm. "I'm going with you. We faced this together. Now I want to end this together."

"I wouldn't mind watching as well," Klotsky admitted.

"What about the boy?" Mrs. Newburg asked.

The sheriff answered her by removing his handcuffs from the pouch on his belt and snapping them on Carl's wrists—after threading them through the broken window on one of the separated doors. "If he tries to run, he's gonna have a helluva time dragging that door with him." He smiled.

"Come on. It's time the final credits rolled on this movie."



## **Chapter 26**

### **Future**

Hannah stood by the sycamore where Jeb asked her to remain and watched as her mate emerged from the squatty Arran ship. When they had first come upon it, she had given it a critical once-over and scoffed, "That's a spaceship?"

"A scout ship," Simolif corrected her. Jeb went inside to begin the procedures that would disintegrate it. He took the weapons with him although she had questioned his decision.

"We don't know if there's some kind of tracking device in them. Do you want to take that chance?" He raised his brows at her although he already knew what she would say.

"What are you gonna do in there?" Sheriff Klotsky asked.

"Set the controls on the ship to destroy itself." Glancing at Hannah he ordered, "Stand back by that tree in case there's fallout." And then he walked inside the transmuted vessel. A few short minutes later he emerged and walked over to stand beside her. Silently they watched as black smoke roiled out of the opening. There was a crackling sound, along with several popping noises. Then the whole thing went incandescent with a giant blue-white light and silently collapsed into itself. Before long there was nothing left to show a ship had been there except for the scorch marks on the ground.

"Are you sure they won't come back here?" Mrs. Newburg whispered.

"We don't know anything except they're aware we're here." Taking Hannah's hand in his, he gave it a gentle squeeze,



then turned to face the sheriff. "Thank you for your help in fighting the Arra. Things would have turned out differently if you hadn't."

Klotsky gave a little grunt. "Just doing my job, the way I see it."

Hannah watched as he peered intently into the alien's face. In the brilliant moonlight every nuance and difference between their species could clearly be seen, but it no longer seemed to bother him. It was not surprising to realize that sometimes allies looked less like a person than an enemy. "So now what?" the man asked.

Jeb sighed. "Move on. What other choice do we have?"

"And keep running?" The sheriff snorted. "How long do you think you're going to be able to do that?"

"However long we have to," Hannah broke in. She snaked an arm around Jeb's waist to show her support. "I want to spend whatever time we have together with Jeb...or Jebaral." She flashed a smile up at him. "I don't care where we are, or how often we have to keep moving to stay one step ahead of the Arra."

"Well, it seems pretty stupid to me to turn down an offer of help. Especially someone in your position."

Simolif came up behind his brother. "What offer of help?"

"What are you trying to say, George?" Mrs. Newburg asked.

"I'm just saying that if the man's smart he wouldn't turn down any offer of help." Klotsky scratched the back of his neck. "Despite what you guys look like—"

"Ruinos," Hannah interjected. "They're Ruinos."

"Ruinos," Klotsky repeated. "Anyway, as I was saying, despite the fact you Ruinos look like something out of every kid's nightmare, you're not the bad guys. In fact, I would

consider Tumbril Harbor pretty lucky if you stayed, Jebaral. You and Hannah.”

“The Arra may come back,” Jeb reminded him.

The man nodded. “True, but we beat them this time because of two very important things. First of all they weren’t interested in us humans. They were here only because they wanted you back. They turned their backs on us, and that was where they went wrong.” Klotsky grinned. “We can be a pretty vicious species, too, if I do say so.”

“And the second thing?” Jeb asked.

“They weren’t expecting you to fight back,” Hannah answered. “You had been kept prisoner for so long they never thought you would try to fight them. They brought their torturing devices with them, expecting you to run but not fight back.”

Simolif broke in. “She’s right. They don’t expect us to put up any resistance. And they’ll never expect us to have second-species reinforcements. It’s possible, Jebaral. Being able to exist and live on this world just may be possible now.”

“May I make a suggestion?” Mrs. Newburg broke in. Once she got their attention, she hugged herself and shivered. “It’s getting chilly standing out here in the middle of the woods at night.” She gave a nod toward the Ruinos males and gave them a one-sided smile. “And from the looks of things you’re feeling the cold as well. Why don’t we take this back to motel where I can get a pot of coffee going and you two boys can dress a bit warmer?”

Hannah glanced down and noticed Mrs. Newburg was right. If the Ruinos anatomy reacted in the same way a human male’s did, the cold was definitely affecting their nether regions. Giggling, she gave her mate’s arm a tug and they left the small clearing as the last wisps of smoke rose invisibly into the night sky.



## **Chapter 27**

### **Beering**

"You're shorter," Hannah said to the man who walked by her to get another cup of coffee.

"But I'm still the handsomer one." Simon grinned at her.

Taking in the man's undeniable devastating good looks, she threw her eyes back at Jeb, then back to Simon again. "But you're still shorter," she stated. She didn't argue the fact the man looked like a Greek god, but she still preferred her dark-haired, dark-eyed lover hands down.

They were sitting in Wendy Newburg's living room behind the motel office. For everyone's benefit Simon and Jeb had morphed back into their human guises and both were now wearing a pair of jeans. Although they remained bare-chested and barefoot, Hannah wasn't about to object over the view. Snuggling up next to her mate, she breathed in more of his fresh, piney scent.

"Hard to tell you two are brothers," Mrs. Newburg commented. "You look nothing alike."

"Are we supposed to?" Jeb teased. "Maybe you didn't catch us when we were Ruinos. Simon, let's change so the good lady can take another long look."

Laughing, Mrs. Newburg held up a hand. "No, thank you. Give me a little while to get used to what you really are."

Sheriff Klotsky turned to where Simon was relaxing in the chair by the sofa. "You said you live in Templeton?"

"Yeah. I work construction jobs, mostly. High-rises and office buildings."

"You know you're welcome to move to Tumbil Harbor."

"No, thank you. I like city life. Less stressful," he emphasized with a waggle of his eyebrows at his brother and life mate.

"How long you plan to stay?" Mrs. Newburg inquired.

"Until the wedding," Jeb broke in. He gave Hannah a squeeze around the waist. "Whenever Hannah decides what she wants."

"Oh, I've had that figured out for a while now. I don't want anything fancy. Just you and me and a couple of witnesses in front of the justice of the peace."

He gave her a cautious look. "Are you sure, Hannah? I thought you wanted something a little more elaborate."

"Why? No, let's save our money for a place of our own. You know, I like the sheriff's idea that we stay here where there's safety in numbers. And, Jeb...now that he knows all about you, that's one worry we don't have to deal with."

"How many of you did you say landed here?" Klotsky asked.

Simon answered, "There were thirty-one of us originally. There were over two hundred of us on the ship when we broke free. We have no idea if any of the other escape pods made it to a habitable planet." He gave a helpless shrug. "There's thirty of us now. Maybe less. With all of us scattered as we are, it's a wonder any of us managed to connect. Or stay in touch."

"Well, if you're looking for a place to put down roots," Mrs. Newburg commented, "I know of about twenty-eight acres for sale just outside of town."

Klotsky looked over at her. "You're talking about that parcel right outside Beering, ain'tcha?"

"Beering?" Jeb repeated. "You mean the game preserve?"

Hannah perked up. "What preserve?"

Throwing a thumb over his shoulder, the sheriff explained, "Beering Game Preserve. It's part of the Flatlock National Forest just outside of town. Several thousand acres of government protected land." He turned to Mrs. Newburg. "Is Sid still needing to sell?"

"Last I heard he was."

"Why hasn't he been able to sell it before now?" Hannah asked.

"It's undeveloped. Very much in the wilds, and it abuts right up next to the preserve. You can't farm it, and you'd have to be a real nature lover to build a place on it. Most city folk who look out this way to buy property want something more accessible." Klotsky gave the couple a slow smile. "Sounds like just the place for you, Jeb."

"I'll call around tomorrow and see what I can find out," Jeb promised. To Hannah he suggested, "And your job will be to get us an appointment with the justice of the peace."

Mrs. Newburg waved a hand. "There might be a bit of a problem there."

"How so?"

"How are you gonna take a blood test? Unless you can change your blood like you change your, uhh, skin."

Hannah gave her mate a worried look. "She's got a point. You can only change what you look like on the outside. Not what's on the inside."

"That won't be a problem," Klotsky told them as he rose from his chair with a grunt. "I'm sure I can find a vial of O positive somewhere. It's time Mr. Jamison started making reparations for all the damage he's done." Giving Hannah a wink, he laid his mug on the coffee table and turned to Mrs. Newburg. "It's been a night, Wendy. I'm going to turn in before it gets much later. Mr. Morr?" He held out a hand in Simon's direction. They shook. "Been a pleasure to meet you. Don't be a stranger

around these parts, especially when things start going downhill again.”

Simon laughed. “Don’t worry. Now that my brother has found his life partner, I have a feeling I’ll be making more pilgrimages to Tumbril Harbor.”

Klotsky turned to Hannah, who had gotten to her feet to bid him goodnight. “Hannah.”

She gave him a quick hug and kissed his cheek. “Thank you, Sheriff. For everything.”

He eyed the gauze pad on the side of her face. “I’ll be seeing you around. Jeb?” The two men shook hands. Klotsky sighed loudly. “Remind me not to encounter you in some dark alley somewhere.”

Jeb chuckled. “You know what they say, Sheriff. Looks aren’t anything.”

“Everything!” Hannah giggled. “Looks aren’t *everything*!” She turned to where Mrs. Newburg was watching. “I’m still having a hard time believing Jeb and I have a chance at a future together.”

“We’ll be turning in as well,” Jeb said. “Thanks for *everything*,” he added with a grin.

“I don’t suppose you have an extra cabin I could rent for a few days?” Simon asked.

Mrs. Newburg made an unladylike sound. “With the tourist season over? You can have your pick. Hold on a sec.” She disappeared inside the office and reentered the living room a moment later. “Here. Take number 10,” she said, tossing him the key. “We’ll talk payment in the morning.”

The three of them walked back into the night in time to see Sheriff Klotsky drive away with a wave back at them. Hannah realized Jeb’s arm had never left her waist. It was both comforting and reassuring.

“Well,” Simon began, scratching the side of his nose. “Guess I need to pull the bike over to the cabin. I’ll worry about

cleaning it up tomorrow. Were you going to work in the morning?"

"Yeah," Jeb nodded.

"I want to know if you'll do something for me," Hannah broke in, giving her almost brother-in-law a sweet smile.

Simon noticed the sparkle in her eye. "Anything, Hannah. Just ask."

"I want you to change for me."

He glanced around in surprise. "Here? Now?"

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"I wanna see my blood line in your arm." She grinned.

"Any particular reason why?" he asked, curious.

"Uh-huh. I want to know if you're able to tell when Jeb and I are making love."

Simon glanced up to see his brother's wide smile. "Welllll..."

Hannah gasped, her eyes widening. "You can!" She gave him a hard shove in the chest.

"Why would it bother you?" Jeb asked, nuzzling the side of her head. Her silky hair was beginning to tickle his bare shoulder when she leaned against him. In its own way it turned him on.

"Aren't there any secrets we'll be able to keep?" she asked him.

Jeb made a face. "Not until we get a place of our own. Hopefully like that acreage outside of Beering, or something like it. But until that happens Simon will just have to plug his ears...unless he moves to a cabin closer to the office."

At his insinuation, Hannah gave a little shriek of happiness. The two men laughed at her flushed face, and together they began walking toward the cabins located at the other end of the parking lot.



"You know, Jeb, I'm so envious of you right now I could just split."

"Spit, Simon. The correct word is *spit*. Good golly, you'd think after five years you two would have the language down pat."

"Keep it up, *t'korra*. Language lessons aren't the only kind I can get better at."

"You're also decadent. Running around in the middle of the night in just your birthday suits. What am I going to do with you?"

"You want me to show you *now*?"

"I'll take that as my cue, brother. Good night, Hannah. *F'lis comorrn*, Jebaral."

"*F'lis comorrn*, Simolif."

"Jeb, what does that mean?"

"It says to sleep without fear."

"I like that. Fleas c'mornin', Simolif."

"*Now* who needs language lessons!"

"Good night, Simolif," the couple chorused together, and threesome disappeared into their respective cabins.

Overhead the full moon began to wane as it began its descent in the western sky. Tomorrow was a few hours away, but already it promised a future filled with more hope than despair and more possibilities than impossibilities.

But it was their future and now their moon above their new world and their new home.

And home was a place they had been waiting a very long time to find.

## Epilogue

*'Report.'*

*'Three saleable parcels have been recovered from the third planet. Scouting parties are in agreement that only one of the escape pods managed to reach this system.'*

*'How many more parcels are left to be captured?'*

*'Twenty-five by last count. Two units perished soon after landing. One was unavoidably terminated by one of the scout ships.'*

*'How soon before the rest can be recovered?'*

*Transmission static.*

*'Reply not received. Respond. How soon before the rest can be recovered?'*

*'Timeline undeterminable.'*

*'Explain.'*

*'Two scout ships have yet to report in.'*

*'What was their target area?'*

*'Upper fourth quadrant.'*

*'Have you sent in a recovery crew?'*

*'Yes, but they were unsuccessful.'*

*'So what you are telling us is we are missing four procurers.'*

*'Correct.'*

*'That is unacceptable.'*

*'Agreed.'*

*'Do you need more troops?'*

*'It would greatly help.'*

*Runner's Moon Book 1: Jebaral*

*'Other than needing more procurers to aid in your search, do you anticipate any other difficulties in recovering the remaining parcels once they are located?'*

*'No. None.'*

*'Good. An additional platoon will be sent with the next shuttle. They should reach you within the second spacial month. We expect full recovery of all remaining parcels before the sixth tri-year. Will that be a problem?'*

*Transmission static.*

*'Reply not received. Respond. Will that be a problem?'*

*'It is not anticipated as such. The parcels have been thoroughly dominated. They have no will to resist.'*

*'Good. We will assemble a fresh platoon and send them out immediately. Keep us informed of your progress. We do not need to remind you of the importance of recovering all parcels. Buyers are getting impatient.'*

*'Understood.'*

*'Very good. Is there anything else we need to discuss or clarify?'*

*'No.'*

*'In that case, this transmission is ended.'*

*'Acknowledged. Transmission ended.'*

*Transmission static.*

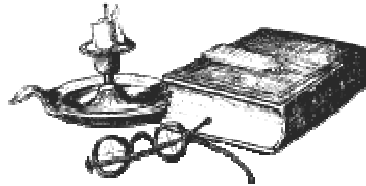
Watch for *Runner's Moon: Tiron*,  
Coming in December 2007,  
from Whiskey Creek Press Torrid

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Linda Mooney lives in a South Texas town about thirty minutes from the Gulf of Mexico. When she's not writing, she's a kindergarten teacher, wife, and mother of two (human boys, not aliens, although there are times that could be debatable.)

You can reach Linda via email, through her web site at [www.LindaMooney.com](http://www.LindaMooney.com).

*For your reading pleasure, we invite  
you to visit our web bookstore*



**WHISKEY CREEK PRESS**

**[www.whiskeycreekpress.com](http://www.whiskeycreekpress.com)**