



Dream Across Time

Bonnie Dee

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Published 2009

ISBN 978-1-59578-505-3

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Manufactured in the United States of America

Liquid Silver Books
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Chapter One

A man's warm, heavy hand slid up Aiyana's spine, gliding over the bumps of vertebrae and coming to rest on the nape of her neck. The hand kneaded her muscles lightly, the blunt thumb digging in and releasing tension.

Aiyana stretched and smiled, luxuriating beneath his touch. She scooted backward until she felt the heat of his chest, his groin, his legs pressing against her. The heat and heaviness of his erection nestled in the groove of her buttocks. She rubbed her bottom against its length.

Missed you. She didn't speak. The man could hear her thoughts as she heard his, inside her mind. You were late in coming tonight.

I've missed you too. He nuzzled her shoulder with his lips.

She tilted her head to the side so he could kiss his way up her neck. Her eyes closed and she pressed into the wall of hard, male flesh behind her. She thrust her breasts into the hand roaming over her chest.

He squeezed one soft mound and the other, rolling her hardened nipples between his fingers. The tugging made her sex clench and wetness moistened its lips. She moaned and shifted, lifting into his touch.

I think about you all the time now. His voice in her head was as warm and rich as honey from the comb. It's getting harder to stay awake during the days, when all I want is to sleep and dream with you.

He moved against her, his heavy cock sliding sensuously between her cheeks. Her anus tensed at the stimulation and her pussy contracted, then opened wide like a hungry mouth desperate to be filled.

His hand slid from her breast down her belly and to her opening. Teasing his finger between her folds, he sampled her wetness.

She thrust onto his searching fingers. I want you inside me now.

So soon? I haven't even kissed you yet. He chuckled against her shoulder.

Yes, now. Before I have to...

"Wake up, Aiyana! I've called you three times already."

The nasal voice was as harsh and unwelcome as the sunlight that suddenly shone in her face. She moaned and rolled to her side, away from the light and the voice that intruded on her beautiful sleep.

A hard hand fell on her bare shoulder—not the seductive hand of her dreams, but a cool, dry, wrinkled hand. "Wake up, girl. There's work to be done."

"Yes. I hear you. I'm getting up."

"What's the matter with you? You've never slept so much before. I'll put molasses on your cornmeal this morning, and you must start eating sorrel to strengthen your weak blood."

"Mm-hm." Aiyana's eyes opened. She stared at the rough bark wall in front of her before rolling onto her back to look at Hausis.

The old woman stood with her hands on hips, her snapping black eyes narrowed.

"You were dreaming ... restlessly."

The sleepy haze evaporated and Aiyana sat up quickly. Was she moaning in her

sleep? Did Hausis guess her dreams were about a nightly visitor? Her cheeks burned and she quickly turned her face away so her long, black hair shielded it. How humiliating that her teacher may have heard her response to the intense sexual dreams. She'd been experiencing them for the past several weeks, and they seemed to be growing stronger and more real every night.

If Hausis guessed at the content of the dreams, she gave no sign of it. "A cleansing steam with sage will drive the spirits from your nightly slumber," she advised.

"I'll try that before sleeping tonight." Aiyana pushed the heavy deerskin cover from her and rose from her pallet. Her naked skin was wet with sweat. Tendrils of hair clung to her damp face. She pushed them back and reached for her dress, sliding the soft deer hide over her head and thrusting her arms through the sleeves.

Hausis handed her a bowl of corn mush with a drizzle of blackstrap molasses on it. "Eat. We'll walk to the far west woods today to gather wormwood for Yarrow's cough. And we need partridgeberry and cohosh to make an infusion for the delivery of Majasi's baby."

Aiyana went outside to relieve herself before breaking her fast. She thought about her nighttime lover as she walked into the woods through the thigh-high ferns. She brushed her hands over their feathery tops and remembered the brush of the man's hands over her bare skin. She shivered and her skin tingled. His touch was powerfully arousing. It brought her to great peaks then sent her plunging into deep valleys.

The dreams were so vivid they must have some significance. Maybe the pale-skinned man represented the husband she had yet to meet. If so, he must be someone from another tribe because he certainly wasn't like anyone she knew.

When she was finished, she returned from the green stillness of the forest to the bustle of the village. Most people were long since awake and moving busily about their daily tasks. Children and barking dogs ran through the camp getting underfoot. Younger women treated hides, tended fires, scolded children or worked in their gardens. The old women sat sewing, singing and gossiping while old men played gambling games, told tales of their youth and offered unwanted advice to anyone who passed within range. Most men were out fishing now that the ice had cleared the river, but some repaired their boats or helped Yannassi build the new lean-to by his wigwam.

Aiyana waved to her friend Majasi, swollen with her pregnancy and waddling from the village well to her lodge with a bucket of water. What would it be like to be a wife and mother and tend the fire in her own lodge? It was sometimes lonely studying the healing arts with Hausis, but at least it was interesting. Aiyana was proud to be learning something useful to help her people. There would be time for a husband later ... maybe even the man in her dreams.

Back inside the wigwam, she closed the birch bark door behind her, returning the room to dimness. As she ate her porridge, her mind inexorably returned to her nightly encounters. She'd never experienced visions as strong as these. Sometimes she woke bathed in sweat with her hand moving between her legs. She'd clamp her lips together to suppress her moans as she climaxed. Even now, thinking about the strange man who touched her in all the right places set her pulse racing.

At first he'd been a vague, shadowy figure, but her dream lover was becoming more real with every experience. And what had begun as pure lust was evolving into something deeper. The mental connection between them was profound since they exchanged ideas

and emotions without the need of speech. Aiyana had often thought how much easier peoples' lives could be if they weren't limited to words that poorly expressed what they meant to tell one another.

The length of the dreams varied. Sometimes only a few precious moments like last night, other times hours of pleasure that increased in intensity until Aiyana felt she was one raw, exposed nerve. When she awoke the physical aftermath of being with a lover lingered. The muscles of her thighs trembled and her sex was tender. Was this really the work of her own hand or did something else happen to her body as she slept?

Her spoon scraped the bottom of her bowl. Aiyana looked down, surprised to find it empty since she hadn't tasted a mouthful. With a sigh, she put her nighttime yearnings aside, washed her bowl and put it away and took her gathering pouch from its peg on the wall. "I'm ready, Hausis."

"About time." Setting aside the leggings she'd been repairing, she stood and grabbed her walking stick and sack. She led the way outside, moving briskly for an old woman. Aiyana was hard pressed to keep up as they walked past the stockade surrounding the village and into the forest beyond.

* * * *

"I want you inside me now," she begged.

"So soon? I haven't even kissed you yet."

"Yes, now. Before I have to..."

"Never gonna let you go. I want to hold you in my arms forever."

Connor jerked awake to the blare of a bad seventies pop ballad. He reached out and hit the alarm clock, returning the room to blessed silence.

"Fuck!" He rolled onto his back and stared at the ceiling through bleary eyes. His balls ached from a morning hard-on that had the sheet tenting above his groin. His chest was slick with sweat and his mouth was hot and tasted like her skin—the dream woman. He moved his tongue against the roof of his mouth and wondered how such a hyper-real erotic dream was possible.

He pushed his hand through the damp spikes of hair that clung to his forehead, and blew out a long breath. What the hell did these dreams mean? Maybe he should start seeing his therapist again and talk to her about them.

They weren't like the ones he'd had after Helen died. Those had been nightmares about the accident mixed with random events that were probably deeply significant but made no sense to him. The nightmares slowly faded as time passed. But the dreams he'd begun experiencing over the past few weeks grew more real and powerful every night.

They were also painfully arousing.

Connor reached beneath the sheets to give himself some relief. He held his cock in his fist, and as he rubbed it his mind drifted back to the woman from the dreams. Last night they'd been interrupted before they began, but other nights their lovemaking had come to fruition.

When the dreams first came, they'd been mostly erotic impulses with a suggestion of a womanly shape, but over time the dreams and the woman had grown more defined. She had long black hair, brown skin that tasted of salt and spices, an angular face with prominent cheekbones and huge black eyes that gazed into Connor's while he pushed inside her. Her body was solid and firm in the dreams now, her arms and legs strong as

they wrapped around him. Her breasts were large and heavy, tipped with mahogany nipples. Her mouth was warm and pliant beneath his when he kissed her, and it was pure heaven when her hot mouth enveloped his cock.

Erotic images tumbled through his mind. In a few brief moments, and with some vigorous tugging, warm bursts of come spilled over his fist. He groaned in relief. Damn, but he wished the dream woman was real! It had been a hell of a long time since any hand but his own had touched his dick. After Helen's death, his libido had been non-existent. He could barely breathe or walk through the motions of each day, let alone get an erection. But now maybe it was time to go on the blind date his friend Wes wanted to arrange for him with his wife's old college roommate.

Connor exhaled, threw off the covers and rose to start his day: a good, long piss, some weightlifting to keep his desk-bound lawyer's body in shape followed by a light breakfast of toast and coffee.

As he ate, he studied the paperwork for the Alexander case. It was a simple settlement with none of the descendants contesting the will. He appreciated when people acted like adults rather than spoiled children after their parents' death. Too often he'd witnessed family squabbles and backstabbing that shook his faith in humanity. It was going to be an easy day in court. Maybe he'd take the afternoon off and play a round of golf. Do him good to get outdoors and breathe fresh air instead of the recycled oxygen in his office at the legal firm. His window on the tenth floor of the building had a great view of the Hudson River, but wouldn't open to let in a breeze.

That never used to bother him. When he was working, his mind was totally focused. He rarely looked out at the flat gray river or the wide expanse of sky and clouds. But lately he'd felt trapped in his office. He wanted to smash through the safety-glass window and fly away across the river.

Definitely golf after court today, and Connor would give Wes a call about lining up a date with what's-her-name, Jan's friend.

Before he left the house, Connor ran a hand over the pewter-framed photo of Helen, which sat on the table in the front hall. It had become habitual, touching the frame before he walked out. Maybe it was time to put the picture away. It had been two years since the accident on their road trip to Tennessee. Maybe it was a little morbid to still have Helen's likeness sitting on the table like a shrine, the first thing one saw when entering the foyer.

He'd think about putting it away.

Connor walked out into the brisk spring air and locked the door behind him.

Chapter Two

Aiyana steeped the blue cohosh tea to give to her friend Majesi, who was only weeks away from her delivery. The cohosh would help speed the baby's birth when contractions finally came.

Majesi accepted the warm cup of tea and sipped it, making a face. "Oh, this is bad."

"You'll be glad later," Aiyana assured her. She sat cross-legged on the floor and tapped a nervous finger against her knee.

"What is it? Something's been bothering you lately." Majesi held the cup between her hands, warming them.

Aiyana shook her head. "Nothing, only a dream I've been having."

"Tell me." Majesi leaned forward, her big belly jutting out in front of her. "My grandmother reads dreams. She taught me a little."

"I've had it more than once. Not exactly the same thing, but the same ... situation. It's very vivid." Aiyana blushed. She couldn't tell her friend the sexual content of her dreams. "Can I ask you something?"

"Of course."

"You're a married woman. When you lie with Askuwhetu, do you... What does it... I mean, do you like it very much?"

Majesi smiled. "Oh! *Those* kind of dreams." She set her cup down and stretched her back making her belly jut out even further. "Sometimes it feels very good and I enjoy it. Other times I don't feel like joining so I tell Asku I'm having woman pains. He's so foolish he doesn't know those only come with a woman's monthly cycle. Right now, we haven't been together because of this." Majesi indicated her distended stomach. "But, yes, sometimes I like it very much."

Aiyana nodded, wrapping the fringe on her dress around her finger.

"Don't worry, sister, your time will come. There will be a special man for a healer like you." Majesi took another sip of her hot tea and pulled a face. "I hope this works as good as you say it will."

"Oh yes, it should make the delivery easier."

* * * *

When Aiyana lay down on her pallet that night, she thought the long walk through the woods that day would make her sleep so soundly she wouldn't have the erotic dreams. A stab of disappointment pierced her at the chance she might not see her lover that night. She needn't have worried. She no sooner lay down and closed her eyes than she fell asleep—and in the dream world the man came to her.

He was much taller than the men of her tribe, with light brown hair cut very short so his neck showed. He gazed at her with eyes like two pieces of blue sky. Usually she dreamed him naked, his skin very pale, smooth and as supple as finely cured leather beneath her hands. But tonight he wore clothes unlike any she'd ever seen before. They were of woven cloth, so fine and light they surely weren't made by human hands.

Aiyana stood before him, running her hands up the front of his blue coat and

touching the collar of his white shirt. She tugged on the colored piece of fabric knotted around his neck. The clothes didn't feel any more ghostly than the man's warm body. Perhaps he wasn't from the spirit world after all.

He smiled at her and reached to loosen the knot and remove the cloth. "You're wearing clothes."

Aiyana looked down and found she was in her best dress. It was a light fawn color with intricate beading and long fringe. Aiyana's mother had made it for her before she left home to take up residence with Hausis and begin training as a healer.

"Yes." She stroked the man's blue coat again. "Your clothes are very strange."

"It's a suit." He reached out and ran his hand down the length of Aiyana's hair, tugging lightly at the thin braid that hung on one side. "Your hair is so glossy." He brushed the backs of his fingers along her jaw. "What's your name?"

"Aiyana." Until now she'd only thought of him as a spirit guest in her head, not real enough to exchange names with.

"I'm Connor." His lips moved and she heard the rumble of his voice, but it was still his thoughts not his words that Aiyana heard and understood.

"Connor. What does it mean?"

"I have no idea." He laughed. "What does yours mean?"

"Eternal blossom."

"Beautiful." He stroked his thumb across her lower lip. "A beautiful name for a beautiful woman." Leaning forward, he covered her mouth with his.

Aiyana closed her eyes and accepted the gift. His lips were warm and soft and pressed firmly against hers. He licked her lips lightly and slipped his tongue between them. She loved the way their tongues tangled with one another like a pair of otters playing on the slick, muddy bank of the river. The idea made her giggle.

Connor pulled away. "What?"

She put a hand to her mouth. "Your tongue tickles my lip."

The sadness haunting his blue eyes disappeared. His smile showed even, white teeth and the corners of his eyes crinkled. "Let's see what else I can tickle." He leaned in to kiss her jaw and nibble all the way down her throat.

She gasped and lifted her chin, wanting more of his tickling touch.

Lightly, he sucked on the skin just over the hollow of her throat. Her pulse raced and she wondered if he could feel her heart beating against his tongue. How could her body respond with such pleasure if the pair of them were simply spirits in a dream world?

One of his hands curled around the back of her neck, the other slid up the front of her deerskin dress to cup her breast through the pliant hide. He pulled his mouth away from her throat and ran his finger over the colorful beadwork decorating the bodice. "Your dress is beautiful, but can you take it off?"

Aiyana laughed. She wasn't offended. It was exactly what she wanted to do. If this was a normal dream, she would have found herself instantly naked, thought becoming fact, but in this dream she had to unfasten the ties on the back of the dress. She lifted her arms and Connor pulled it over her head. She stood nude before him.

She felt no shame or guilt about being naked in front of a man who was not her husband. There was no worry about losing her virginity before marriage. In this place, which was neither earth nor sky but someplace between the two, Aiyana was simply relaxed, happy and eager to share her body with her lover.

Connor gazed at her from her head down to her feet. His blue eyes were as transparent as water. They told her he found her beautiful. He stroked his hand from her throat, over her breasts and down her belly.

Aiyana tugged at his sleeve and gave him a command she would never dare to give a man in the real world. "You too. Take off your clothes."

He unfastened his shirt and shrugged off both shirt and jacket, tossing them on the ground. He removed his leggings, his strange, shiny black shoes, cloth foot coverings and the short pants that covered his private parts. When he straightened, Aiyana examined his nude body as he had hers.

This dream was the clearest yet. Connor was no longer a vague shadowy figure but as real as any person Aiyana had ever known. His shoulders weren't too wide, but they were solid and his biceps were corded with muscle. Her hand itched to stroke the smooth plane of his chest and pinch his pointed nipples centered in small rosy circles. His torso tapered to lean hips and long legs. Her gaze was drawn to the trail of hair that led down from his navel and came to rest on the solid cock that thrust out from a light brown thatch of hair. His penis flushed red and strained eagerly toward her.

Her desire to fondle it was too strong to resist, and since this was a dream she didn't have to hold back. Aiyana reached out and gently took hold of Connor's rigid member, amazed at its warmth and the smoothness of skin like moss over hard stone.

He sucked a hissing breath between his teeth. "Harder," he urged. His eyes were riveted on her encircling hand.

Aiyana obeyed, gripping the pulsing shaft and pumping it. She glided her hand up and down several times, and ran her thumb over the swollen head where white beads of moisture welled from the slit. Dropping to her knees before him, she felt the dry grass crackling beneath her knees. She licked the soft, round head of his cock, tasting the essence of the man before her. The experience was incredibly real. A warm breeze blew strands of hair into her face and she pushed them away. For the first time she was aware of being in an actual place rather than floating in a cloudy limbo.

They were outdoors. Perhaps they'd been there all along but she had been too intent on him to pay attention to their surroundings. Or maybe it was a new development in the course of dreaming. They were on the bank of the vast river, a grassy strip of land with a cluster of trees growing on the left and gray water flowing by on the right. The sound of the rushing river was so loud Aiyana thought she would have noticed it before.

She looked up to find Connor watching her licking his shaft. His pupils were so dilated his blue eyes appeared black. His chest rose and fell and his lips parted.

"God, that feels so good," he murmured—his words foreign, her comprehension of them perfect.

Aiyana turned her attention to rubbing his shaft vigorously with her fist while sucking the head. She fondled his balls with her other hand, cupping the soft sac and gently rolling his testicles between her thumb and fingers. Knowing she could reduce a man to quivering delight with her mouth alone was a powerful aphrodisiac.

Connor groaned and thrust into her mouth, his hips rocking and his legs trembling with tension. He held her head between his hands, fingers threaded through her hair, and he pumped faster. Suddenly he stopped and pulled away. "I'm going to come," he gasped.

Aiyana lowered her eyelids seductively and smiled. "Come then."

He raised questioning eyebrows, two perfect arcs against his light skin.

She nodded and reached for him again. She sucked him deeply and moved her head up and down, bringing him to the edge of orgasm once more.

Connor gripped her head more tightly. His hips jerked as he fucked her mouth harder. He thrust once more and froze. A strangled groan came from deep within his chest. His cock pulsed against her tongue and warm jets of come hit the back of her throat. She swallowed and continued moving her hand until she'd milked the last bit of pleasure from him. Letting his shaft slip from between her lips, she wiped her mouth and sat back on her heels. She cradled his softening prick in her hand, feeling its power dwindle until it was flaccid.

Connor's quivering legs would no longer support his weight and he dropped to his knees facing her. His chest heaved and he gazed into her face with the glassy eyes of a man who was completely sated. He pulled her into his arms.

Aiyana felt hotter and hungrier than ever as she clung to his hot, sweaty body. Her skin prickled all over and her breasts ached as they pressed against his naked chest. She began to wish she hadn't allowed him to release in her mouth, because she wanted him hard again and inside her open, yearning pussy.

After a minute, Connor pulled away. His eyes were clear and blue again—such a strange color, like the waters of the river reflecting the sky on a bright summer day. He smiled at her and her heart leaped.

“Your turn now. I'm going to do things to you...” He left her to imagine what he had in mind. “Lie down.”

She smiled and lay back, gazing at a bright sky and dandelion sun. A few white clouds puffed across the canopy and a light breeze stirred her hair. It tickled her naked skin but didn't chill her. She was completely comfortable lying naked on the soft bed of grass, anticipating the things her lover would do to her. It was a perfect dream.

Connor lifted her arms and placed them above her head, running his hands up their length and pressing her hands together. “Hold them there as if they were tied. Don't let go or reach for me no matter how much you want to.”

She nodded and obediently clasped her hands together tightly. Her body felt like it was covered with licking flames. Her nipples rose erect from her gravity-flattened breasts, and Aiyana squeezed her thighs together in an attempt to ease her pussy's eager pulsing.

Connor rose and stood for a moment, searching for something in the wilderness around him. He must have spotted what he was looking for because he strode closer to the riverbank and plucked a long stalk of wild grass with a plumed head.

Returning to her side, he knelt and brushed the feathery seed pod over her cheek.

Aiyana smiled at the tickling touch. She had a good idea of what he planned to do and shivered in expectation.

Connor trailed the grass down her neck to her chest and swept it back and forth across her breasts, teasing her distended nipples. Aiyana wiggled and moaned. Her breasts, already thrusting skyward, rose even higher as she arched her back. She wanted to bring her hands down and bat the tuft away, but forced herself to keep them clasped above her head. The tickling was frustrating and delightful torture.

Connor played with her breasts until Aiyana was ready to scream, then he stroked the long blade of grass down her belly. Her skin twitched as the plume traced around the dark

thatch of hair at the apex of her thighs. Her torturer's eyes glowed with a mischievous light and a smile tilted the corners of his lips.

After nudging her legs farther apart, he ran the grass blade up the inside of each thigh toward her sex. The stimulation to her already throbbing, swollen genitals was nearly unbearable. She wanted more than that light touch. As old as the earth itself, the need to be entered and filled coursed through her.

She no longer had even the minimal relief of squeezing her thighs together. Her opening yawned wide for his inspection and his eyes devoured every inch of her as he continued to whip the delicate frond over her pussy and up and down each leg. She trembled like an aspen leaf and felt she might explode from the deep yearning towering like a thunderhead within her.

Above her head, Aiyana clenched her hands together so tightly her nails dug into her flesh. She lifted her hips, twisting them right and left in an attempt to escape the torturing blade of grass.

Connor was merciless. "Hold completely still." His voice was deep and commanding and sent an excited chill through her.

Aiyana forced her body to be still, although her skin twitched and trembled. Sweat dripped from her face with the effort to obey his order and her breath gasped between her parted lips.

Finally he threw the blade of grass aside. "Good girl. Now you get a treat." He smiled and bent to lightly kiss her mouth once before turning his attention to her breasts. His hot mouth wrapped around her nipple, sucking it in deeply. The tugging sent a new kind of torture to her crotch. The yearning grew even stronger. She wanted to hold his head to her breast, to feel his silky hair and the hard skull beneath, but still she kept her hands where he'd placed them.

He pulled her nipple with his lips and let it go with a pop. Her breast jiggled and settled back to her chest. He cupped the full mound, fingers plucking at the damp nipple while he kissed his way to her other breast. His lips were like feathers fluttering over her skin and he drew her erect bud into his mouth, sucking it hard and deep.

Her body responded to both his light touch and strong pulling with equal excitement. Her sex was soaking wet and her hips lifted off the ground, reaching for fulfillment.

After loving her breasts for several minutes, Connor released them. He moved between her legs and gazed into her eyes as his face slowly descended toward her pussy. He licked his lips and she suddenly knew exactly where he was going to put his tongue. She sucked in a breath and held it. When he reached her sex and kissed it gently, her eyes rolled back in her head and closed.

Connor parted her feminine folds with his fingers and dipped his tongue between them. He lapped the length of her slit and swirled around the swollen nub of her clitoris before nipping it lightly, making her gasp.

Aiyana arched off the ground as she rose to meet his mouth. Her arms still stretched over her head, fingers digging into the grass and dirt. Her body was as taut as a bowstring.

Connor held her legs apart with a hand braced on each trembling thigh. He delved his tongue deep inside her, invading her and lapping up her juices before returning to stroking the tip of his tongue over her clit. The delicate flicks were a worse torture than the plumed blade of grass. The rhythm he set echoed inside her and roused an answering

rhythm. *More, more, more*, her heart begged with every beat.

Her desire intensified, waves of excitement thrumming through her. The pressure of his hands holding her down, her body helpless beneath his touch, added to her growing pleasure. Suddenly ecstasy burst through her like a tiny bud that blossomed in seconds to a full-blown flower filling every part of her being. Star spangles burst against the darkness of her closed eyelids and she let out a cry of delight. Her body rose off the ground and flew for a moment, floating away with the rushing river.

When the last throbbing star had burst inside her, Aiyana felt herself drifting back to earth. She came to consciousness on the soft bed of grass and opened her eyes.

Connor lay between her legs, watching her face with a smile of satisfaction on his. Aiyana smiled back. She released the fistfuls of grass she had torn free and at last brought her arms to her sides. Reaching down, she caressed Connor's face and his nut-brown hair, so different from the shades of raven-black she was used to. Even the texture of his hair was different, fine instead of thick and coarse. He was exotic and strange with his pale skin and sky-colored eyes.

Connor crawled up her body to lie above her, his weight resting on his arms as he gazed into her eyes.

"Is this real or a dream?" Aiyana whispered as she touched his cheek. Light stubble grazed her fingertips. They'd been together many times over the past weeks, but this was the most real dream yet. Every detail seemed sharper than before. A buzzing fly lit on Aiyana's arm, then flew away. The smell of the river and the earth beneath them filled her senses. "How is this happening, and where is this place?" she asked as if he would have an answer.

"I don't know." He leaned to kiss her lips. "But I don't want it to end. I don't want to wake up."

"What is your waking world like?"

Connor rolled to lie beside her, resting his head on his hand. He smoothed his hand from her throat down to her breasts and toyed with one of her nipples as he spoke. "Much different than this. I live in a small house in the city and work in a tall building helping people with legal problems."

Aiyana tried to translate the concepts into terms she understood. "You have a very large tribe in a very big village, and you're like a chief helping people sort out their arguments?"

He smiled. "Something like that."

"Tell me about your family."

"My parents live in Manhattan, my brother in California and my sister in Connecticut." Connor paused a moment. "My wife died a while ago."

The pain always lingering in the depths of his eyes made sense now. "I'm sorry." She took his hand and held it.

"It's been a couple of years, but I still miss her." He gazed at their joined hands, then looked into her eyes. "Although not as much lately."

She smiled, glad she'd helped him forget his mourning for a while. From losing her father, she knew that sometimes it was hard to let go of the pain and start living again. If it hadn't been for Hausis confronting her and telling her she was wasting her natural talent and must come to her for training, Aiyana might be mourning still.

"What about you?" he asked. "Tell me about yourself and your people."

“My village is in the cradle where two arms of the river meet. I live with Hausis, the wise-woman, who is teaching me the healing art. I help gather herbs, roots, seeds and bark, prepare them for use and learn their properties.”

“You have no one special in your life?”

“My mother,” she replied. “Oh, you mean a husband or betrothed. No. There is no man in my life yet. I’m devoted to my apprenticeship and after that I’ll be a healer. I might never marry.”

“That would be a great loss for the men in your tribe, but wonderful for me. I wouldn’t lose you. We could keep meeting here, wherever ‘here’ is.”

Maybe he was right and it would be enough, but somehow Aiyana doubted that either of them could be content with this half-life for long. “Perhaps,” she said.

A smile that wasn’t really a smile twisted his lips. “At least we’d never have to sleep alone.”

The melancholy look was creeping into his eyes again and she wanted to distract him from his sorrow. “We should swim.”

Connor looked at the wide river flowing past several yards away. “In there?”

“Yes. Where else?” Aiyana stood and offered her hand to pull him to his feet.

“It looks really cold, and deep. Isn’t the current pretty fast? I’m not that strong a swimmer.”

“It will feel good, and if we stay near the edge we won’t get swept away.” She lowered her eyelids and smiled. “Afterward we can warm each other.”

She took his hand and led him to the water’s edge. Aiyana splashed into the shallows, but Connor held back, testing it with his toes. “It’s very cold.”

She tugged on his arm. “Refreshing. Come on.”

At her insistence, he entered the water, teeth chattering and gooseflesh rising on his white skin. “Holy fuck!”

Aiyana dragged him in deep enough that she could feel the current swirling and pulling at her body, shallow enough that she could still keep her feet firmly planted on the ground.

“I don’t like this part of the dream,” he complained, bobbing in the water next to her and moving his arms. “Can we go back to the sex?”

Aiyana laughed and splashed him with water. “Have fun. Play!”

“Oh yeah?” He growled and pushed a wall of water at her with his arm, dousing her head.

She shrieked and leaped on top of him, knocking him backward into the water. They both went under.

The cold water closed over her head and Connor’s arms wrapped around her. He rose up, bearing her with him into the air and sunlight, both of them sputtering and gasping for air.

She threw her arms around Connor’s neck, clinging to his slippery, wet body. His hair stuck to his head, as sleek as a muskrat pelt. Water dripped off his nose and chin. Aiyana licked the falling droplets from his face, tasting the river.

Connor kissed her deeply, possessively, hugging her close as the current swirled around them. He lost his balance and they fell back into the water once more, tumbling and floating in the choppy waves like a pair of fish.

They swam together, splashing and playing until their teeth chattered and their lips

were blue with cold before wading out of the river to lie down in the hot sun and dry out.

"In my time we don't swim in the Hudson. Too polluted," he said. "And this river looks a lot like it. I wonder if it's more a matter of 'when' we are instead of 'where'."

Aiyana was perfectly content lying on her back and slowly warming beneath the open sky. One of Connor's arms was draped heavily over her body. She turned her head to look at him.

He was gazing intently at her, as if memorizing her face. "Tell me more about yourself. I want to know everything about you. What are your people, Mohican, Iroquois?"

She shook her head in puzzlement, not understanding the question. "They are the people—*Kitchawanc*. If you mean my clan, other tribes call us 'the oyster people' because there are many shells on the part of the river where we live."

"Have you ever seen people like me? Light-skinned people with foreign clothes?"

"No, never."

"Could be Stone Age, earlier than European explorers." He spoke as though thinking aloud and his words made no sense. "So your people hunt and fish for food. Do you plant crops, too? Corn, maybe?"

"There are gardens in my village, yes. Aren't there in yours? How would you have food without them?"

"Restaurants and takeout." He smiled and wiped the frown from between her eyebrows with his thumb. "Things are very different where I come from. And I believe what's separating us is a long stretch of time. You see, I've heard about your people, but you can't even imagine mine."

"You live in the future," she said, wanting him to know she wasn't ignorant, that she understood the concept. "There are many people like you there, but what about mine?"

Again he gave her his unhappy smile. "Not so many left. A long time has passed."

Her chest hurt as if he'd told her that her entire village had suddenly died of a fever. She tried to imagine a strange world in which her great-great-great grandchildren all dwindled down to nothing. "What happened to them?"

"They're not all gone," he assured her. "Some live on reservations or run casinos. Some intermarried or became a part of the general population. They changed and left old ways behind." He paused and she felt there was more he wasn't telling her.

But this was meant to be a pleasant dream. There was no point in worrying over a future that might only be part of her nighttime fantasy with no more substance than a puff of air. She smiled at him. "Well, we're both here now. Right at this moment, in this place in time, I have you."

He leaned to kiss her, his mouth lingering on hers in a gentle caress. "And I have you," he whispered against her lips.

Aiyana closed her eyes and leaned toward him, her arms sliding around him, her mouth warmed by his. But no sooner had she kissed him than Aiyana felt his solidity fading like a snowflake melting away to nothing.

Her eyes flew open. The bright day was gone, the sound and smell of the river was gone, and the man's arms around her body were gone. She lay in bed staring at the curved lattice ceiling of interwoven saplings and large squares of bark.

Aiyana put her fingers to her mouth, still feeling the weight and warmth of his kiss, but he had disappeared into the land of dreams once more. Pain cut through her like a

knife, and she knew seeing her lover in her sleep was no longer going to be enough.
She must find a way to conjure Connor into the real world.

Chapter Three

Connor woke to his alarm clock blaring another insipid romantic ballad. He cursed and pounded a fist on the snooze button to end its squawking.

He was exhausted. The night had been far too short and his body felt as if it had really done all the things in his dream. Connor could still feel the impression of Aiyana's mouth and body against his. He clearly recalled the sensation of plunging into the icy river, the soft grass tickling and the sun toasting his skin. His flesh was warm. He rubbed his arm and looked at it, trying to decide if the pink flush was a burn or if he was just overheated from his feverish dreaming.

Whatever was happening to him was more than a dream. Christ, the woman actually had a name now and a life history—Aiyana, an apprentice healer from a tribe of Native Americans.

Connor rubbed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. Maybe he should make an appointment with Dr. Loomis, the therapist he'd seen after Helen's death. The dreams were getting too detailed and real to be normal. Maybe he was suffering some kind of disconnect from reality, a psychotic break that could be dangerous.

He sat up and threw back the covers and stared at his body. It was dirty and shreds of grass clung to his legs and torso, like someone who'd swum in a river and lay in the grass afterward.

Connor reached down and brushed a few blades of grass from his thigh and scratched at a streak of mud. He lifted his hand to his nose to smell the loamy scent of river. He dropped his hand back to his lap and stared at his body in silence for a full minute before he said quietly, "No way." He shook his head to strengthen the words. "No. Impossible."

If anything, he must be walking in his sleep, leaving the brownstone and going out into the city. He could be mugged or arrested while wandering around at night. He should see Dr. Loomis right away.

Swinging his legs out of bed, he walked to the bathroom and straight into the shower to wash away the evidence his mind couldn't comprehend. But as he braced his hands against the wall and bowed his head under the hot, cascading water, Connor relived the dream. He felt Aiyana's thick hair sliding through his fingers, the bumps of the single braid on the left side of her face. He slipped his hands over her smooth skin, heard the sweet, musical notes of her voice. The intensity of her deep brown eyes and her sensuous laughter haunted him. Remembering her hot mouth and passionate kisses made him hard once more.

If only there was someone he could talk to, someone he could tell about this experience who wouldn't automatically judge him mentally unbalanced. Connor lifted his head and let the water wash over his face. A thought struck him and he slapped off the tap. There was someone.

He shook the water from his hair, stepped out of the shower and toweled himself dry. After wrapping the towel around his waist, he got his cell phone from the nightstand and pressed the number for his brother, Matt. He remembered that California was three hours time difference behind the East coast and he stopped the call after one ring. He'd have to

try later in the morning.

Connor moved through his daily routine on autopilot. It was amazing he'd arrived at work without having an accident. In his office, he stood holding a cup of coffee and staring out the window at the slate gray river reflecting a leaden March sky for a full thirty minutes. When he finally sipped from the mug, the coffee was cold.

The river in his dream could have been anyplace. Hell, it was a dream river—it didn't have a *place* at all except in his imagination. But the rolling surface of the Hudson looked so like the water in his dream, he felt positive it was the same.

"Ridiculous. This is fucking ridiculous," he muttered as he crossed to his desk, set down the mug and woke his computer from its nightly snooze. Online, he typed in the words, "Hudson River Valley indigenous tribes" and pressed the search button. He read articles about the tribes that had inhabited New York State; Iroquois, Wappinger, Mohican, Lenape, Delaware, Pavonia, all loosely connected by their Algonquin heritage.

He learned that these tribes believed in equality of the sexes and traced lineage through the mother. Their dome-shaped dwellings were clustered in stockades. Connor mostly knew about nomadic plains tribes like the Sioux from watching too many movies and was interested to learn details about the agrarian lifestyle of the Indians of his own area of the country. They'd planted crops, fished, hunted, traded furs, made pottery and woven baskets.

He looked at artist renderings of busy villages and tried to picture Aiyana living her daily life. He tried to imagine himself in that village, going out fishing every day, mending nets or stalking game in the woods. Hah!

The ludicrousness of the idea he was entertaining overcame him. Connor tapped the mouse, closing the web site. "Jesus, I'm going nuts. None of this is possible. Time travel is sci-fi nonsense and I'm losing my mind."

He stood and paced back over to the window to stare out at the view. The river flowed past, permanent and inexorable ... and the dream seemed real once more.

His cell phone rang and he picked it up, identifying the caller as his brother. "Hey, Matt."

"Connor! I saw that you called earlier. What's the matter? Is something wrong with Mom or Dad?" Matt sounded wide awake for what would only be six-thirty in the morning out in sunny Cal.

Connor was embarrassed that he phoned so seldom his brother automatically suspected a family crisis. "No. They're fine. I just had a question, kind of a weird one. It's right up Dex's alley. Is he there?"

"He's already out in the studio working. He's got a deadline. Is it important?"

Connor bit his lip and thought about the dirt and grass on his legs. "Yeah. I think maybe it's pretty important."

"I'll get him. You can hold or I'll have him call back."

"I'll wait."

"Can I ask what's the matter? Somehow I can't imagine this emergency has anything to do with painting, so it must be Dex's other alley you're talking about. I thought you didn't believe in his psychic gift." Matt's tone was a trifle curt.

"I never said I didn't believe. I was reserving judgment until I had more proof. Now some strange shit's been happening and I think that proof's been dropped in my lap." He laughed. "I'm feeling very flexible about the paranormal right now."

Matt chuckled too. "Connor, you kill me. It takes a slap in the face to wake you up to the possibilities in the world."

Or out of the world. Connor smiled at the irony and changed the subject. "How are you two getting along anyway?"

"Snug as two gay bugs in a rug," Matt said. "Just a second."

There was silence before he came back on the phone. "Okay, here's Dex. You can't swear him to secrecy 'cause I've got to hear more about this mysterious event."

"Matt!"

Connor heard the muffled sound of his brother laughing, then Dex's deep bass voice. "Hello. What's up?"

"I hate talking about this over the phone, but you were the only paranormal expert I could think of that I knew wasn't a sham."

Connor was actually glad of the phone, finding it easier to tell his story without looking into Dex's concerned brown eyes. "It started maybe three weeks ago..."

He quickly related the progression of the dreams from nebulous erotic fantasies to concrete hallucinations culminating in mud and grass in his bed.

"So, what do you think? Ever heard of anything like this? Do you think I've been out sleepwalking or something? Maybe molesting some poor woman in my sleep?" Connor laughed nervously.

There was a long pause. Unlike quicksilver Matt, Dex never spoke without thinking carefully first. "I wish we lived closer. I'd like to do a reading and watch over you when you're asleep. It's hard to say what's going on without seeing you in person."

On one hand Connor was relieved to be taken seriously, on the other he felt embarrassed to discuss the secret nighttime life he'd been living as though it was a fact.

"I've heard of this kind of thing before," Dex continued. "Assuming you're not having a mental problem, I'd say you're encountering a manifestation of another time, or possibly another world. Metaphysically speaking, you're connecting with your soul mate in a paradigm created from your joint psyches."

Connor felt his cheeks burning as though everyone in the firm was listening in on this crazy phone call. He hated psychobabble and now he was square in the middle of it and considering a paranormal love connection as a possible reality.

"Wow, that's..." He had nothing to add.

Dex's laughter boomed. "Sweetie, I know you don't believe in this stuff, but I think you'd better start. Here's what I can do for you. I have an acquaintance in New York, very respected in the paranormal field. I'm going to give you his number and pass yours on to him. Maybe he can help you figure out how to deal with this situation."

"Um, okay. Thanks."

"And meantime,"—laughter still trembled in Dex's voice—"I'd just enjoy the hell out of your dreams as long as they last."

There was a moment's pause before Matt's voice chimed in. "And if you disappear suddenly never to be heard from again, we'll know where you went and wish you well."

"Funny, Matt. Can I talk to Dex, please?"

Connor took down the number, thanked his brother's life partner again, and hung up the phone.

He leaned back in his chair and stared at the aquarium screen saver on his computer, remembering how Aiyana had felt as slippery as a fish when he caught her in the water.

Her wet hair had wrapped around his arm like seaweed and her lips had been damp and cool...

After a few seconds he shook himself from his trance and started to catch up on his wasted morning's work.

By mid-afternoon he'd squared away the paperwork from the Litman case and prepared a brief for the MacDonald's divorce suit. Connor allowed his mind to drift away from the mind-numbing details of civil law and back to Aiyana.

He opened a tablet of paper and did something he hadn't in a long time. He began to draw. Eyes half closed, he guided his hand over the paper, tracing the lines and curves of Aiyana's face and body, recording the way she'd looked rising from the water, her hair slicked flat, droplets rolling from her naked skin. When he was finished with the sketch, he was surprised to find it wasn't bad. He'd captured the strong lines of her face and the essence of her natural grace.

Connor traced his finger across the drawing and longed to touch her skin once more. Was it possible? Could he force one of the dreams just by sleeping?

He leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. One minute ticked by.

Two.

Three. Relaxation wouldn't come. The idea of directed dreaming, that he might be able to bring Aiyana to him any time he wanted was too exciting. Finally, just when he thought he'd never be able to lose consciousness, Connor drifted to sleep.

And he dreamed.

* * * *

Aiyana swept the floor, then sat on it with a mortar and pestle in her lap and ground dried roots into powder. It was a gray, rainy day, too cold and miserable to be outdoors, the perfect time to organize supplies and prepare tinctures and powders. But the quiet work allowed Aiyana too much time to think.

Earlier, Hausis had sat by the low burning fire warming her feet and quizzed Aiyana on the properties of wormwood, gentian, arnica, thistle and witch hazel. She'd recited all she knew about making compresses for burns, chest colds, cuts and inflammation and teas to aid in reducing fever, rheumatism and stomach problems. When Hausis confirmed her satisfaction with a grunt and left the wigwam to go visit one of her friends, Aiyana was left alone with her mortar and pestle. The repetitive chore left her mind free to wander back to her vivid dreams.

Aiyana no longer had any doubt that the dreams were a gift from the spirit world. She wondered what lesson or insight she was supposed to get from them. All she'd learned so far was that she wanted Connor desperately. He stirred a fire in her so intense that her body began to ache at the mere thought of him now.

At first she'd tried to suppress the dreams, sipping black cherry bark tea before bed in hopes it would put her into a dreamless slumber, but now she wanted to find out what herb or root would bring on the dreams.

More than that, she wanted to find a way to bring her dream lover into the physical world. It had to be possible.

She dare not ask Hausis in case her mentor told her it was wrong to experiment with the spirit world. There was only one person Aiyana knew with access to the other side. Only one who might possibly possess the knowledge she sought.

Beyond the stockade, out in the wilderness, there lived a man who had long ago been banished from the village for killing his brother. In the Kitchawanc tribe, there was no sentence worse than banishment and it was reserved for the most extreme crimes. The man named Mahasset was said to possess strong magic, even the ability to commune with the dead. Aiyana knew that people sometimes went to him for secret reasons, bringing goods he could use in payment for his help.

With Hausis busy for the next several hours, this afternoon was the perfect time to go see the man and find out if there was anything he knew that would help her achieve her goal.

Aiyana wrapped herself in her deerskin cloak to repel the rain. She gathered a basket of honey, black walnuts, and various ground roots for the hermit, and set out into the pouring rain to his home in the swamplands near the forest.

Chapter Four

In his dream, Connor walked with Helen on the beach at Croton Point. The Croton River churned white foam at the place where it merged with the Hudson. Oyster shells and gravel crunched underfoot as they strolled along the shore.

Helen looked exactly as she had on her last birthday—her twenty-sixth—two days before she died. The wind whipped her honey-blond hair across her face and she pushed it back with a laugh. Her pale green eyes, the first thing that had caught Connor's attention when he met her, locked on his. "How are you, sweetheart?"

"Better. I still miss you."

"But not as much." She parroted what he'd said to Aiyana and smiled. "That's good. This woman is good for you."

"I hardly know anything about her except that she's from a primitive tribe. Besides, she's only a dream. There's no future there."

"Only a dream, like me?" Helen raised an eyebrow. "Sometimes dreams can become reality if you want them badly enough. I always told you that, remember? But you thought you had to be practical because your dad drilled that lesson into your head—like the way you became a lawyer instead of going to art school. Thwarted dreams. What a waste."

He shrugged and didn't answer. Some things never changed. They'd had this argument before when she was alive.

"Listen." She put a hand on his arm to get his attention, but he couldn't feel her touch, which was ghostly, unlike Aiyana's solid presence in those other dreams. "I know you've blamed yourself for the accident; typical Connor, taking responsibility for something beyond your control."

"I shouldn't have been sleeping," he said. "If I'd been the one driving, it might not have happened."

Helen pushed up the sleeves of her sweater to the elbow, an oh-so-familiar gesture that sent a sharp pain through his heart.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence in my driving skills." Her voice was acidic. "The road was slippery; it was an accident. End of story. If you hadn't been napping, you might have fallen asleep at the wheel and we still would have gotten in an accident. Enough, Connor! No more guilt. Let go and move on. This woman is the one for you."

"How is it even possible? She's not real," he protested.

"She's as real as you or I. And she's a healer. Let her heal you and help you live again. 'Cause, sweetheart, right now you're deadlier than me."

Helen gave a lopsided grin and, like the Cheshire cat, her smile remained after she'd disappeared.

Connor's eyes flew open. He jerked upright in his chair, a spasm of pain shooting through his neck from resting at an odd angle. He wiped a hand across his mouth, catching a dribble of spit at the corner.

"This is crazy. I should be seeing Dr. Loomis instead of a paranormal expert." But despite his misgivings, he picked up the phone and punched in the number Dex had given him.

“Hello?”

“May I speak to Harold Raimer, please?”

“Speaking. May I help you?” The nasal voice had an unmistakable New England drawl that conjured up cable knit sweaters and hot clam chowder.

Connor was taken aback, unprepared to state his case. He’d thought a receptionist would answer and he’d make an appointment for another day. “I—uh ... I’m a friend of Dexter Madison. I don’t know if he’s called you about me yet. My name is Connor Baines.”

“Yes. I was planning to call you. Your story’s intriguing. I can’t wait to hear more. Would you have time to stop by my office later today?”

“Today?” It was sooner than he’d expected. Connor thought of Helen walking by the river with him and of Aiyana making love with him on its shores. “Sure. I’ll make time this afternoon.”

* * * *

By the time she’d slogged through the tall meadow grass and dripping forest to the small hut in the clearing, Aiyana was soaked to the skin despite her protective cloak. Smoke rose from the hole at the top of the dome, showing it was inhabited.

Suddenly nervous now that the moment to confront the magic man was here, she walked to the door of the hut. Water dripped down the back of her neck as she stood outside his dwelling and called the hermit’s name aloud. “Mahasset.”

There was a long silence. The only sounds in the clearing were the singing crickets and tree frogs and rainwater dripping from the branches of the trees.

“Mahasset,” she called again. “I beseech your wisdom.”

There was still no answer.

She brushed an annoying deerfly from her cheek and cried even louder. “Mahasset, please, I need your help.”

The small bark door opened. Dim light from inside framed a thin, old man in the entrance. Long, white strands of hair straggled from his mostly bald crown on either side of his wrinkled face. “Daughter, what do you desire?” His voice was surprisingly strong given the frailty of his appearance.

“Please, Old One, I need advice.” Aiyana stepped forward but kept a respectful distance since he’d not yet invited her into his home. “I have been meeting someone, a spirit person, in the land of dreams. These are no ordinary dreams, and I wish to ... *I need* to bring this person into the world of man. I want to see him under the true sunlight.”

The old man pursed his lips and shifted the blanket on his shoulders. He might have been frowning but it was hard to tell since his face was so lined. But within the nest of wrinkles, his dark eyes were keen. “How do you know this spirit wishes to enter our world? Would you bring him here against his will?”

Aiyana shifted, uncomfortable with the question. She’d been asking it herself. What would Connor do if she were able to pull him from his life into hers? Would he even want to come? Was there a place for him here? “I would ask him first, of course. But do you know a way or do you have the power to make this possible?”

Mahasset stared at the ground for a full minute before raising his gaze. “Come. Sit by the fire. I will think on this.”

Aiyana ducked her head to enter the low doorway. Inside the smoky room was a fire,

a sleeping mat, a stack of pelts and some woven baskets and pots set neatly beside the wall. Traps and tools hung above them. Aiyana politely bowed to her elder, and took a place by his fire. "I brought you something as tribute for your help," she said, setting aside the basket.

The old man didn't acknowledge the gift, merely lowered his old body slowly beside the fire. He gazed morosely into the flames.

Aiyana sat cross-legged across from him, warming her hands and waiting for his response. She knew elders, like Hausis, liked to use silence as a tool, testing a person's resolve. She'd almost nodded off, exhausted from her long walk and from lack of sleep the previous night, when the old man's voice jerked her awake.

"What is he like, this man of dreams?"

"He is called Con Norr." She stumbled over the strange name as she said it aloud for the first time. "His skin is pale like flat bread before it is cooked. His hair is the brown of horse chestnuts and his eyes are blue like the sky."

Mahasset lit his pipe with a coal from the fire. "He sounds very strange and ugly. Why would you want such a foreign creature?"

"He is not strange at all. Nor is he ugly. When we are together, our hearts are one. I understand what he says inside," she tapped her chest, "without speech."

Mahasset snorted. "Young lust. I remember that. It can lead to death sometimes."

Aiyana remembered Mahasset's brother and the story of the love triangle and betrayal behind the killing. "This is more than a desire of the body," she said firmly. "Connor and I have a special bond. If we could only meet in the real world, I know we would be happy together."

The old man smiled indulgently, showing the gaps in his teeth. "A pretty dream. Very well, I will help you bring your desire to pass. Time will tell if it is everything you had hoped for." Without another word he rose and began moving around the hut collecting things.

Aiyana watched him, noting what he gathered in case she needed to replicate whatever magic he would perform.

But Mahasset only brought a dried bunch of sage, rosemary and lavender and a piece of bone to the fire. He lowered himself to the ground with a grunt, his knees creaking and popping as he squatted by the flames. Muttering under his breath, he tossed the herbs in the fire and rubbed the piece of bone with one gnarled old hand. He began to sing, his quavering voice rising and falling, and his eyes closed as he raised a prayer to the spirit world, making Aiyana's request.

The small hut filled with sweet-scented smoke. It coiled through the air, stinging Aiyana's eyes. She blinked, feeling suddenly incredibly sleepy. It was strange since she had used this combination of herbs many times and never known them to have this soporific effect.

The light grew dimmer, the smoke thicker, blacker, and Aiyana saw moving shapes in the cloudy smoke. Beings without definition or form floated all around her. She could sense their presence and guessed they were the spirits of the dead.

Mahasset rubbed the yellowed bone and chanted on. "You honor us with your presence. Please, Great Ones, I beg a favor. In the world of transparent light walks a man. Show this man to us here." He interrupted his request to say to Aiyana, "Now picture him. Fill your mind with his image and show it to them."

Aiyana obeyed, closing her eyes and concentrating harder than she ever had in her life. A detailed image of Connor bloomed in her mind. She focused more deeply, moving beyond the physical to the essence of the man, trying to show what she knew of his spirit.

Nothing happened.

Sweat rose on her brow. The room seemed unbearably close, the smoke choking, but she would not let go of the idea of Connor. She continued to picture him, as Mahasset's song droned on and on.

* * * *

"Amazing!" Raimer exclaimed when Connor finished relating his story, leaving out the sex details but telling his hypothesis about Aiyana belonging to a Hudson River Valley tribe. "And you dreamed about your wife giving her blessing. Do you realize the significance of the place where you talked with Helen?"

"Croton?" Connor shrugged.

"Croton Point has been an archeological gold mine for Native American artifacts. A fortified village was excavated on the plateau above the river and a burial ground is located east of the village. I think Helen may have been showing you that this dream woman is real—or was at one time."

"Great. So, what does that mean? I can only ever meet her in my mind?"

"Do you *want* to meet her in real life?" Raimer pushed his glasses up his pudgy nose and peered at Connor through them. "Or do you want to try to lay her spirit to rest?"

"This isn't a haunting. Or, maybe it is, but not like that. This ghost isn't looking for closure. I don't think," he added, suddenly uncertain about what Aiyana wanted from him. Maybe she'd been disappointed in love during her life and he was fulfilling some need for her. Maybe she did need to be exorcised or laid to rest.

"No," Raimer agreed. "This doesn't seem to follow the classic template." He sat back in his chair, fingers steepled under his chin, his heavy, dark brows drawn together. "From what you're telling me, you may be haunting Aiyana as much as she is you. This is a most unusual psychic event."

Connor stared at the heavysset man in the too-small polo shirt and polyester slacks. Harold Raimer was an unlikely savior and so far didn't seem to be offering any useful advice.

He gazed at Connor with inquisitive eyes. "Do you want the dreams to end so you can get back to 'normal' life?" The man actually made finger quotes around the word normal.

"I..." Connor suddenly realized he didn't. The idea of never seeing Aiyana again was inconceivable. "No," he conceded. "But I can't go on living in dreams, looking forward to the night and drifting through the day. Something has to change."

Raimer nodded. "I have an idea. As I said, I've never worked with anything quite like this before. I certainly wouldn't promise I can bring your girl into the physical world, but I would like to try to reach Aiyana by putting you into a trance."

"Hypnosis?"

"Yes."

Connor wasn't comfortable with the idea of putting himself in a stranger's hands. Hypnosis always reminded him of a school assembly long ago when a kid named George Willis had done the chicken dance while under the hypnotist's influence. Connor didn't

like to lose control. But with these dreams, he was already out of control. He had asked Raimer for help and should probably give it a shot.

"I can film it so you'll have a record of exactly what transpires," Raimer offered.

"What do you think is going to happen?" Connor asked, tapping his fingers on the arms of his chair.

"I have absolutely no idea what to expect. I'll guide you through the process and you tell me what you experience while you're under."

"If it's anything like the dreams I've been having, I'm not sure I want to share. The dreams have been very personal, very erotic."

"I'm not here to judge or to get my kicks," Raimer said. "I'm a scientist."

Without a degree or any valid documentation. Connor sighed. "All right. When do you want to do this?"

"I'm free right now and excited to find out if it works."

"Right now?"

"No time like the present." Raimer rose, dimmed the light, and set up an old model camcorder on a tripod. He ushered Connor to a couch in the room and sat beside him with a penlight.

Connor lay flat on his back, his hands folded over his stomach, feeling anything but relaxed as Raimer pointed the flashlight beam at his eyes.

"Concentrate on the light and listen to my voice." Raimer went through a series of commands, telling Connor to tense and relax different body parts working from his feet up toward his head.

Connor tensed and released the energy from his right arm then his left, doubting he could be put under, although Raimer's voice urging him to relax was actually very soothing. Suddenly his body felt heavy—so heavy he couldn't lift his arm.

His last thought was, *Huh. So this is what it's like to be hypnotized.*

Chapter Five

Aiyana realized she was in a trance as her consciousness rose from her body. She gazed around Mahasset's hut, seeing in all directions at once, then she rose higher, through the ceiling until she could view the land outside of the dwelling, the thick woods and open meadows. She saw her village near the great gray river and the world beyond it, spread out in amazing shades of green and blue.

The earth sparkled with diamond drops of light, all things were outlined in glowing colors, including the myriad of people walking the world. Each one of them was a living being of light, so beautiful Aiyana could have been distracted for minutes or thousands of years simply watching the constant, shifting play of light and shadow as she rested in this space beyond the physical plane.

But she focused her mind on searching for Connor. She'd never had to find him before. They had simply been drawn together in their dreams with no effort. Now she called out for him and cast her all-seeing eye across time and space trying to locate him.

She called him from deep inside, not with the word-name he'd given her, but with the special thing that meant him alone of all the people in the world throughout all time.

At last she sensed his spirit and followed the thin silver thread of his life force like a guideline in a dark cave until it brought her to where he was. Since time and distance made little sense in this great void it seemed nonsensical to think in terms of then or now, past, present or future. What mattered was that she connected with him at a place where he occupied his physical body—a place he perceived as “the present.”

Connor lay on a sleeping pallet of some kind in a strange room full of many objects she didn't recognize and couldn't imagine the use of. His eyes were closed and his body relaxed. A large man with a bizarre contrivance perched on his nose sat nearby speaking to him.

Although the man spoke in a foreign language, Aiyana understood the meaning of his words. He talked slowly and soothingly, putting Connor into a trance as Mahasset had done for her. A blue glow pulsed around Connor's body, and a rose-colored one around the other man. She watched the gently radiating colors and waited for Connor to notice her hovering beside him.

It didn't take long. His spirit eyes opened and he registered her presence. “Aiyana!” He rose from the couch and came toward her, leaving his body behind. “You're here.”

“And you're there.” She pointed to his physical body.

Connor turned to look. “Jesus. I am. Does this mean I'm dead?”

The dark-haired man with the round, clear discs in front of his eyes leaned forward and touched Connor's arm. “Can you still hear me?”

The physical Connor's mouth moved, but the words were coming from the spirit man beside her. “Yes. I'm outside of my body. I can see myself and you and the room. Aiyana is here with me.”

Connor embraced her and his blue aura mingled with her pale green one. Aiyana reveled in Connor's essence twining around hers. When their bodies melded in this space, it wasn't in a solid way like in their dreams. But without hard bodies to distract them, their connection seemed deeper than ever.

“Ask her what she wants,” the man said.

Connor turned to Aiyana with questioning eyes.

“I want you,” she told him. “I, too, have traveled into the spirit world with the help of magic to find you and bring you back with me in your flesh and blood form.” She indicated the thread of her life force leading back to her body in Mahasset’s hut.

It was no journey now. They were immediately in the hut just by turning their attention toward it. Aiyana was getting the knack of traveling in this other world, which wasn’t about time or space, but very much about focus and desire.

“My God, that’s you,” Connor said.

Aiyana’s body lay on the floor by the magic man’s fire. The old man still sat with his eyes closed, lips moving silently. Suddenly he spoke aloud. “Daughter, have you crossed to the spirit world?”

“Yes. I’m here. Connor is with me.” It was odd watching her physical lips move while her essence was apart from it. Rather like a child playing with a doll, making the figure move and converse.

The old man nodded. “Does this man wish to come here?”

Aiyana turned to the beautiful spirit beside her. “Mahasset can help us. He says he can bring your body into the world so we can be together.” Even as she said the words, she felt doubt radiating from Connor.

“How?”

“I don’t know. Mahasset is a powerful man. He knows secret arts.”

“But...” Connor looked back at his own body, lying motionless in another place and time. “I thought you might come with me to my world.”

“Oh.” Aiyana hadn’t considered that possibility. Her aim had been clear and simple, to get the man of her dreams into her life. She hadn’t thought of him as real enough to have a plan of his own. The idea of leaving her tribe, her apprenticeship as a healer, her family and relatives was unthinkable. “Forever?”

“I don’t even know if it can be done,” Connor said, “but I have a feeling if either one of us crosses into the other’s world it will be permanent.”

“I have duties.” Her spirit shivered and her light dimmed with fear as she imagined taking such a huge step as leaving her life behind. “I am training to take Hausis’ place as the healer in our tribe. She is old and her health is failing. I can’t simply leave my responsibilities.”

Connor frowned. “You could be a healer in my time. Herbal medicine is still used, and life is so much easier there. You will see and do things you couldn’t imagine.”

She didn’t know how to answer. Part of her was intrigued by the idea of seeing a new world, but she feared it greatly. It was an enormous sacrifice he was asking of her.

“Connor, talk to me.” The plump man sitting by Connor’s unconscious body touched his arm. “Are you still there? What’s happening?”

“A discussion,” Connor answered shortly. He stroked his hand down the side of Aiyana’s face, trailing streams of blue that blended into her green. “I would offer to come with you, but you must understand I can’t live in your world. What could I do there? I’m not fit to fish and hunt and make things out of leather. That life is too primitive for me to survive.” He spoke gently. “Besides, could you imagine your people’s reaction to someone as foreign-looking as me? How would you explain my presence, my arriving out of nowhere and living with you there?”

Aiyana was angry because he was right. As much as she loved and wanted him, there was no place for him in her world. Because she was angry, she spoke sharply and her aura flashed dark forest green with angry golden sparkles. “You’re not willing to leave your life, but you expect me to abandon mine? It’s impossible.”

For a moment, both were silent, at an impasse.

Connor reached out a hand as if to ward off her decision. “Please, won’t you at least think about it?”

Pain twisted her stomach. “Will you?” she challenged him.

Frustration and sadness warred on Connor’s face. He gestured at the glittering, beautiful world around them. “We could meet in the middle—stay here, incorporeal. It is a heavenly place. Maybe it *is* Heaven.”

Aiyana looked around her. They were no longer in his world or hers but floating in the vast everywhere. Their human bodies seemed far away. Already she’d begun to forget why she’d been so attached to hers. They could exist here in this wonderland together for ... well, if not forever then for as long as this plane existed.

“But we’re not finished there yet.” She turned to look into Connor’s shining blue eyes like stars in his unearthly body. “We have lives to finish before this.” She extended her arm to include the infinite space around them.

He nodded, understanding her quiet thought. Thoughts flew back and forth between them with the speed that only unvoiced words could have. *Could we? What if? Maybe I? I wish I dared.* But there was no solution to their problem.

“I guess we can only continue to meet like before—in our dreams.” The ache of loss that rolled from Connor’s spirit into hers was as heavy as river mud.

If neither was willing to leave a life behind, there was no other place for them to be together, and while the dreams were wonderful and fulfilling in their own way, they weren’t real life. “I think we have to end it,” Aiyana said. “What we have is not a life together. We can’t continue to live only when we sleep. We must ask the gods, whatever they are, to take away this gift, to stop us from sharing the night space any longer.”

Connor didn’t protest or argue. Instead, he slowly nodded. His bright blue aura had darkened to the deepest indigo, and his bright eyes dimmed with the veil of sadness once more. His tight grip on her released and he let her spirit drift away from him.

Aiyana felt herself receding from Connor, following the slender thread that connected her to her solid body. She watched his blue shape slipping through the vastness to become a glimmering point somewhere far in the future. He was gone.

The weight of her despair slammed her back into her body. The sensation of weight and mass were smothering after the freedom of astral travel. She felt she was choking. Her eyes opened and she sat up with a gasp, sucking a deep breath of sage and lavender smoke into her lungs.

Mahasset sat cross-legged by the fire, regarding her with his intense eyes. “Well, Daughter, did you find any wisdom? Love is pain and parting. It’s good that you learned the lesson so young. Now perhaps you can get on with your life without unreasonable expectations.”

Aiyana stared at the hard, old man. Her whole body ached from the sadness in her soul. She rose from the floor and her limbs felt thick and heavy, her body clumsy and awkward.

She bowed to Mahasset. “Thank you, Grandfather, for helping me in my quest.”

He re-lit his pipe, puffing hard to set the embers burning again, and stared into the fire once more, dismissing her with his silence.

Aiyana walked out into the fresh air, laden with moisture in the wake of the spring rain. As she walked toward the village, her thoughts swirled around Connor and the choice they had made. She had no doubt her sleep tonight would be free of dreams, but she didn't think it would be restful. Visions of a barren, lonely future stretched before her.

Already she regretted her decision, but her heart told her it was too late to take it back. She would live the life she had chosen.

* * * *

When Harold Raimer snapped his fingers, Connor's eyes opened. He was fully conscious yet had forgotten nothing of the experience of being suspended on some astral plane. He recalled Aiyana, glowing bright green like a spring leaf, light and ethereal in his arms but more *there* than ever. The sensation of their separate essences flowing together whenever they touched was etched in his mind so strongly, he felt he would never forget it.

"Thought I'd lost you there for a minute." Raimer removed his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose before putting them back on. "You didn't respond to my questions anymore and wouldn't come out of the trance when I tried to end it. What happened?"

Connor felt like a mannequin, stiff and lifeless. How could he be expected to form words? He exhaled deeply. "I saw her. She had some medicine man helping her and wanted me to manifest, or whatever you'd call it, in her time. She wanted me to live there. I wanted her to come here." He paused and breathed in. "As you can see, she's not here and I still am."

"What about your mutual dreaming?"

"I think it's over. We agreed, and I believe whatever power cursed us with this insane relationship is done playing now since we've chosen to give it up."

Raimer sat back in his chair. The stained polo shirt rode up on his hefty stomach. "A *bird may love a fish, but where will they make a home?*" he quoted.

Connor blinked at him.

"One of my mother's Yiddish-isms. My sister dated a black guy and my parents were less than thrilled. But, you know what? He's my brother-in-law now. The family adjusted."

"That's nice. Am I supposed to apply that to this situation somehow?"

Raimer shrugged. "I don't know. The point is that love finds a way, or that's what they say." He paused. "Sorry I couldn't do more to help you."

Connor sat up slowly, feeling every cell in his heavy, earthbound body. "Just having someone to talk to about this was a big help. Thanks."

"Thank *you*. It was a fascinating case."

Connor pulled out his checkbook, but Raimer waived his fee. "Let me know if anything else happens. Would you be willing to sign a release so I could include this case in an article I'm writing for the *Journal of Parapsychology*?"

"Sure, why not?" What did it matter? At least someone would profit from the experience. Connor had gained nothing but a bittersweet memory to carry with him through the lonely years ahead. He now had two lost loves haunting him.

He drove back to his office because he couldn't bear the thought of going home, probably getting drunk and facing a restless sleep with average, pointless dreams. There was always plenty to be done at the office. Work was what had saved him after Helen died, giving some purpose and shape to his existence. He would devote himself to his job again and in time he'd forget about Aiyana's face, her luminous eyes, her full, soft lips, her earthy scent, her soft body and her warm, loving soul.

If he worked hard enough, he could erase all his memories and maybe even convince himself the dreams had never happened.

Chapter Six

“Don’t push yet, Majesi. It’s not time,” Aiyana ordered.

“I need to!” Majesi said through gritted teeth.

“Soon. Just think about your breathing right now. In. Out.” Aiyana smoothed ointment along Majesi’s opening to help it stretch to accommodate the baby’s head without tearing. The dark shadow of its crown appeared and Aiyana’s already racing pulse sped up. This was her first delivery on her own. Hausis wasn’t even nearby this time, and as the actual delivery approached, Aiyana feared a complication. “All right. Now you can push.”

After several minutes of straining and grunting, Majesi gave an unearthly scream and expelled her baby into the world. Aiyana caught the slippery, red creature, unwound the umbilical cord from around the baby’s arm where it had twisted, and tied it off. She cut the cord and presented the little boy to Majesi.

“Ai, he’s perfect. So perfect,” Majesi cooed, while her mother, Helaku, leaned over and examined her first grandson.

As she massaged her friend’s abdomen to stimulate expulsion of the placenta, Aiyana watched the pair of them exulting over the child. Her heart swelled with satisfaction and joy. She’d made the right decision in staying where she was needed. It didn’t matter that late at night she lay wide-awake on her sleeping mat and ached for her lover’s touch. A moment like this made the sacrifice worthwhile.

After removing the afterbirth and cleansing Majesi and the baby, Aiyana finally had a moment to appreciate the newborn. She crouched beside the young mother and examined the squalling creature’s tiny fingers and toes with as much pride as if she’d made them herself.

Majesi couldn’t stop smiling. “Aiyana, thank you. You know how much I feared the pain, but with your help, it really wasn’t that bad.”

Aiyana laughed. Her friend had yelled and cursed through the contractions for most of the afternoon. How quickly a new mother forgot the pain in the joy of holding her infant.

“We must find a husband for you, Aiyana,” Majesi said. “I want you to be as happy as I am. Asku has a cousin across the river. We’ll introduce you to him. He’s a fine man.”

Aiyana was saved from having to answer by the entrance of the proud father, Askuwhetu. She left the happy family to their celebration and walked back to Hausis’ wigwam.

The old woman was suffering from rheumatism and could barely hobble around the room. When Aiyana entered the dwelling, she lay stretched out with her feet near the hot coals in the fire pit. After making her mentor a cup of bloodroot tea, Aiyana massaged her swollen joints, knees, ankles and elbows with pennyroyal. Although her touch was gentle, Hausis complained at the pressure. “Careful, Daughter.”

Aiyana manipulated the woman’s gnarled hands, concentrating on the healing energies flowing from her hand into Hausis’. She thought about the birth and thanked the gods for letting everything go smoothly. Picturing Majesi’s infant, she wondered if she would ever have one of her own. Aiyana tried to imagine what a combination of her spirit

and Connor's would produce? Would their baby have Connor's blue eyes and fair skin or would Aiyana's darkness dominate its features?

"What is it, girl?" Hausis grabbed Aiyana's chin and glared into her face.

"Something's been troubling you for weeks. I don't wish to see your weepy face any longer. It ruins my digestion. What are you unhappy about?"

"Nothing. It's nothing, Grandmother." She scolded herself for dwelling on something that could never be and on daydreams that only caused her pain.

"Have you changed your mind about learning the art? If that's the case, tell me so I can find another apprentice."

"No." Aiyana took Hausis' hand in hers and stroked the soft skin. "I love being a healer. It was wonderful to be able to help Majesi deliver her child today."

"A man," Hausis said with authority. "It's always a man that causes a face like this." Aiyana dropped her gaze. "Ha! I knew it. Who is it? That fine-looking buck Nahamesh?"

"No. It's no one from our village." She should have said it was no one at all, but found it impossible to lie to Hausis.

"Who then? Come on, child. I can see you're desperate to talk."

It was true. The secret had been burning in her for weeks and she'd only been able to share it with Mahasset, who wasn't the most sympathetic listener. She opened her mouth and the whole tale of her dream lover spilled out like the river flooding in spring. When she finished explaining, she looked at Hausis, afraid of the disapproval she might see in the old woman's eyes.

But her white-clouded eyes gave nothing away. "So you went to that charlatan Mahasset rather than come to me, your teacher? Hmph."

Aiyana almost smiled. Instead of expressing amazement or disbelief, Hausis focused on professional jealousy. "I'm sorry. I didn't think you'd want to help me or would even be able to."

Hausis made a scoffing noise. "Do you think that old man knows more than me? Whatever he can do, I can do better. The question is, do you still want your strange white man? Have you made the right choice to stay here or do you wish you'd gone with him?"

"I don't know." Tears prickled her eyes. "I loved every moment we spent together, but I have my duty to the people."

"Child, do you think you're the only person in this village I could train to take my place?" Hausis' tone was as dry as a drought. "Such vanity! There are several girls and boys who show promise and could be trained to heal. Don't let your love slip away because you think you're irreplaceable. The gods offer you a marvelous gift in such an astounding manner and you refuse it? What foolishness!"

Aiyana smoothed the folds of her dress. "The truth is, Grandmother, there is another reason I chose to stay. I was terrified at leaving here and going to a strange world, even with the man I love. It would be like dying and crossing to the other side, never to see my family again."

"The shadow of death looms closer to me every day," Hausis said. "But when my time comes, I will walk through the door with my head up, eager to see something new."

Aiyana sat quietly considering her words. Despite Hausis' cranky, irritable way, sometimes she offered true wisdom. The challenge and adventure of a new world, an entirely foreign way of life, would be exciting. And Connor would be with her. What held her back?

Impatient with her silence, Hausis burst out, "Girl, do you want the man or not?"

The barked question startled an immediate answer from Aiyana. "I do." The truth registered only after the words were out of her mouth. *I really do.* "But, Hausis, he no longer appears in my dreams. I don't know if it's even possible for me to reach him again."

"We'll find out. Build up the fire and gather the herbs Mahasset used. If that old weasel can use transporting magic, I can do it too."

Aiyana did as she was bid and soon a haze of scented smoke filled the room. Hausis chanted, not exactly the same words as Mahasset, but similar enough. Aiyana felt herself entering the same trancelike state. It was easier this time now that she knew what it felt like to separate from her body.

Slowing her breathing, she loosened the bonds chaining her to the physical. After a time, her consciousness drifted up and out of her body. Turning her attention outward, she cast about for Connor's spirit in the enormous ocean of light and among the myriad of shining souls. At last, she located his essence and aimed toward it.

She beheld his physical form overlaid with his spirit which she'd met on this plane. Seeing him after so many weeks of absence, her heart swelled with joy, and the instant she gazed at his beloved, familiar form, she knew with absolute certainty she'd stay with him given another chance.

But Connor was oblivious to Aiyana's presence. She hovered close to him, but couldn't gain his attention even when she spoke to him. He was in his waking world and all she could do was watch as he moved about his dwelling. The rooms were huge and brightly lit, the floors covered with soft matting in various colors, the walls reflecting the same pale colors. Instead of cushions and mats, there were objects covered in more cloth, which she imagined were for sitting or lying on. It was all so strange and interesting that in her fascination at his exotic surroundings Aiyana almost forgot her purpose here was to try to reach Connor.

In what must be his sleeping chamber, he stripped off his clothes. He walked to a smaller room and turned a knob. Water sprayed from the wall. He stepped under the steaming water, letting it course down his glistening skin.

Her body burned hot and she wished she could be under the waterfall with him, gliding her hands over hard muscles and wet flesh. Suddenly she realized she could do that. Connor might not be able to see or hear her, but maybe he could sense her presence if she was very near him and focused on him with all her might.

She moved under the coursing water that passed right through her, and stood beside him. His vibrations hummed alongside hers, like heat for lack of a better word to describe the sensation. She rubbed her glowing astral hands over his pulsing blue light and they blended together for a moment. *Feel me. Sense me. Know me.*

Connor paused in soaping his body. He froze like a dog scenting a rabbit. He said her name softly, "Aiyana?"

Yes! I'm here.

His chest rose and fell. The water beat against his back and rolled down his skin. His eyes were open wide as he looked around.

She yearned toward him, heart fluttering and her aura shining bright with hope.

But he shook his head, cursing, and scrubbed the washcloth over his stomach.

Frustrated by her inability to reach him, Aiyana backed off and continued to watch

from a distance as he rinsed, dried and dressed himself in his strange garments. She was like a ghost to him now. Perhaps it was too late. The moment when they might have crossed over into one another's world had passed. She should let the dream go.

But not without making one more attempt. *Connor! See me. I'm right here. I need to speak with you.* This time he didn't even look up from tying the laces on his black shoes.

A buzzing sound came from the other room. Connor looked at a wide bracelet on his wrist. "Shit, I'm late," he muttered to himself. He rose and went to open the door of the dwelling.

A beautiful woman stood on the other side. Her skin was paler than Connor's, her eyes gray like the river and her hair as yellow as corn silk. She was tall and graceful and the energy surrounding her was the milky white of a pearl.

Connor welcomed her and took her hand.

She smiled and leaned to press a kiss to the air near his cheek. "I'm so glad we could finally get together. I've heard so much about you I feel like we've already met."

"Come in."

She entered the room and looked around. "Your home is beautiful."

"Thanks. I'm not here much so I don't have time to mess it up."

Her laughter was light and not genuine. Aiyana could tell she was nervous. "Jan told me you're a bit of a workaholic."

"An understatement," Connor said.

The woman's teeth were as white as snow against her scarlet lips as she smiled again. "Well, we'll have to see if we can't do something to change that. All work and no play..."

There was nothing to dislike about her, but her laughter made Aiyana feel like growling. *Get away. Get out!* She pushed on the yellow-haired woman's shoulder. The woman blinked and looked around, her hand rising to touch her chest where Aiyana had nudged her.

"Can I offer you a drink?" Connor took her jacket as she slipped it off her shoulders.

"Sure, vodka tonic."

After that, Connor and the woman talked and laughed together. He appeared at ease and content, not aching with the loss of Aiyana as she was for him. Their shared dreams must have been only a distraction for him and now he'd moved on with his real life. The deep connection she'd imagined had only been on her part.

One last time, she feasted her eyes on him, drinking in his form and spirit, his laughter and his voice. She wished she could feel his touch once more before she let go.

The room receded as her spirit followed the connecting cord that led back to her body. Aiyana opened her eyes and looked around Hausis' wigwam. She was back where she belonged, but the familiar space seemed skewed as she adjusted to the difference in view between the physical and astral planes.

Hausis stood over her, peering into her eyes. "Well, Daughter, did you find him?"

Aiyana was disoriented and wished the old woman would step back. Her face seemed huge and distorted. She nodded slowly, her neck stiff and her head like a boulder. "But I couldn't reach him. He couldn't see me." She drew a shaky breath. "And he has found someone else. It's too late."

"Ah." The old woman sank back into her seat beside the fire. For a moment there was no sound but the crackle of the fire and the popping of sparks as a knot in the log

flared up. "Sometimes," Hausis said, "things are not as they seem. I don't believe the gods would bring you and this stranger together if there was not a purpose to it."

Aiyana climbed to her feet, her body feeling as arthritic as the old woman's. "It seems to me many things in this world happen for no purpose. Thank you for your help, Hausis. I must go now and fetch more water from the well." Aiyana grabbed a bucket and left the smoky chamber, unable to bear Hausis' unaccustomed sympathy and well-meaning words.

She walked toward the river that flowed endlessly toward the ocean. The water was cold, gray and restless with hidden currents that swirled deep beneath the surface. She thought her heart was like the river; it would go on pumping relentlessly, beat by beat, as she walked through the days of her life, but it was cold and deep, full of churning secrets which no one would ever know.

Aiyana trudged on, heavy with the knowledge that her dream was truly over this time.

* * * *

Wes could harass him all he wanted, but Connor wasn't going out with Cyndi again. He'd made it through the evening all right and thought he'd managed to show her a pleasant enough time: dinner, movie, drinks and conversation. She was a nice woman, easy to talk to, beautiful to look at, but he simply wasn't interested. At the end of the evening, he bid her goodnight with no intention of seeing her again.

It was after two when he got home, but Connor wasn't sleepy although he was bone-tired. He never slept much anymore. Changing from date clothes into a paint-stained T-shirt and sweats, he removed the dustcover from his easel.

The painting looked like anger. Color roiled across the canvas in thick coils and frenetic waves. The surface churned with desire and despair in shades of black, gray, blue, and purple, punctuated by dramatic scarlet swirls.

Connor stared at the work, trying to decide if it was finished or not. It wasn't that he cared if it was any good; that wasn't why he'd painted it. He was driven to release his emotions onto canvas when he found that even working sixty hours a week wasn't keeping him sufficiently distracted.

Aiyana haunted him all the time. His constant ache for her was different from the pain he'd suffered after Helen's death, but just as lethal. It was the difference between having a loved one torn away from him and giving up love by choice.

He should never have let her go. It was as if he'd been presented with a unique gift and, after tearing off the wrappings, had thrown it away. Why hadn't he taken a chance with her, even if it meant giving up all the trappings of the twenty-first century world? Was his life so wonderful? Was there really anything he would miss, anything he couldn't get along without?

Well, maybe beer. He smiled sardonically as he squeezed a dollop of white paint from a tube onto his palette and swirled it with black. He would miss beer, but probably the Native Americans had some form of fermented beverage.

God, he was doing it again, fantasizing his life in a primitive, tribal village. He'd read everything he could find about the tribes that had lived in the Hudson Valley, and had even gone to the museum at Croton to gaze at artifacts in glass cases. He'd imagined he felt a connection with Aiyana through the bits of pottery and the ancient tools.

Standing in front of a stone mortar and pestle, he'd stared for nearly ten minutes as he imagined her sitting beside a campfire, crushing herbs into powder. What would he, a twenty-first century lawyer, have done as a healer's spouse? How could he have possibly fit into her world? As much as he wanted her, he still didn't see how it could have worked.

Loading his brush with gray paint, Connor attacked the canvas with fury once more. He would paint until nearly dawn, fall exhausted into bed and capture a few hours of sleep before rising to go to the office on a Saturday. That was his life now—work, more work, a little painting and a few hours of sleep that were too short to harbor any dreams at all.

Chapter Seven

Aiyana was wakened from sleep by a voice shouting outside the wigwam door. “Healer woman, are you home?”

Hausis didn’t stir, a silent lump under piles of covers. The old woman had suffered a rough night from the aches in her joints and didn’t need to be roused before dawn for an emergency.

Aiyana rose and went to the door. She didn’t recognize the early morning visitor.

“I come from Wichachnee across the river,” the wild-eyed man said. “My child is sick. The healer in our village has tried everything but my little girl is not getting better. My wife is crazy with fear. She can’t bear to lose another child.”

Aiyana beckoned him into the hut. “What are her symptoms?”

He described a high fever, chest congestion and difficulty breathing. When Aiyana asked what methods their village herbalist was using to heal her, she agreed with the course of action the man described. It sounded like the healer had done everything possible. Aiyana feared there was simply no hope for the girl. Nevertheless, she gathered some supplies and promised to accompany the man across the river in his dugout canoe.

Hausis woke and rose creakily from her sleeping pallet to offer suggestions and advice, but seemed glad Aiyana was going in her place. “Trust me,” she assured the man named Shawsee. “This woman is fully capable of helping you. If there is anything that can be done, she will do it.”

Aiyana was ready in a few short minutes. She wrapped her cloak around her and followed Shawsee into the blustery wind and down to the beach. Climbing into the canoe, she shivered as water chilled her feet despite the repellant leather of her moccasins.

Shawsee pushed the canoe off the bed of crushed oyster shells and gravel into the tossing waves. As he climbed in and paddled away from shore, the small boat rolled and dropped on the wind-whipped waves.

Aiyana gripped the sides of the dugout. She seldom had reason to go out on the water and certainly not on a day when the river was so rough. The canoe cut through the water swiftly under the propulsion of a worried father’s straining arms. They crossed the wide expanse of the river and Shawsee steered the canoe into an inlet. He paddled upstream a ways before docking the boat at the landing near the Teconsha village.

After climbing out of the boat, they followed a path to the stockade surrounding the village. Before they even entered the gate, it was clear they were too late. Women’s keening wails and mournful death chants filled the air.

Shawsee cried out and left Aiyana’s side, running across the compound toward his home. She trailed after him, feeling useless and wishing she’d at least had a chance to try to help the girl, although she guessed there was nothing she could’ve done to save her.

She stood outside Shawsee’s wigwam with the rest of the mourners, joining her voice to the others that sang well wishes for the soul’s passing to the other side. Aiyana closed her eyes and pictured the shimmering otherworld she’d seen in her travels. She knew the little one was in a good place, but that knowledge wouldn’t alleviate the parents’ grief at losing their baby. The parting when a spirit took that journey would always be painful for those left behind.

The tribe continued to keep vigil outside the family's home; new people coming, others drifting away. Aiyana left to find Kranziuk, the village healer.

She was a vigorous, middle-aged woman, who resented the fact the dead girl's family had brought in another tribe's healer. "I told them I was doing everything possible, but no one can ever accept the fact that sometimes it's simply time for a person to cross into the spirit world."

Aiyana murmured agreement. She listened to all the remedies Kranziuk had tried and agreed there was nothing she would've done differently. The knowledge seemed to comfort the other woman, who, underneath her gruff exterior, seemed upset by her inability to save the child.

Throughout the day, Aiyana moved about the village, feeling like an outsider as she tried to soothe the peoples' grief. Shawsee's child had been a beloved child who charmed everyone. Most of the families were related, so nearly every person Aiyana talked with was the dead girl's aunt or uncle. A number of them were Aiyana's relatives as well, intermarriages being common between the two villages.

After visiting several cousins and sharing a meal with them, Aiyana was ready to travel back home. She didn't bother Shawsee, but asked her cousin, Menowee, to ferry her across the river.

The sky was gray with billowing clouds rolling steadily across it. The earlier stiff breeze had increased to a strong wind, which set fleets of whitecaps sailing over the surface of the river and blew Aiyana's hair across her face. She pushed it behind her ears and pulled her cloak tighter around her before climbing into the dugout.

"Are you sure you must go today?" Menowee asked.

"Yes. There's a new baby in our village, and a mother recovering from childbirth. I want to be home in case I'm needed."

The young man nodded and pushed off from the shore. "I'll visit my sister's family and stay the night for I think rain will be coming soon." He paddled a few strokes on either side of the boat, steering it through the choppy water toward the far shore.

The crossing was at a shallow, narrow part of the river and sheltered from the strong pull of the current in the main stream. Aiyana's stomach lurched as the dugout tossed on the swells; rising, falling and drifting sideways at the same time that Menowee propelled it forward.

Rain began to fall from the dead, gray sky and the wind blew even harder. Aiyana's teeth chattered from the cold. Her feet were in icy water at the bottom of the boat and her wet hands gripped the slippery sides. As the boat suddenly dropped from the crest to the trough of a wave, she fought to keep her seat and not be tossed overboard.

"Hold on!" Menowee clenched the paddle and he dug in hard on the left side of the boat just as the current swirled them to the right. The canoe rolled sideways. Water sloshed over the edge and soaked Aiyana's lap.

Then the boat righted and moved forward once more.

Menowee laughed at the close call, glancing at her over his shoulder. "The river god wants to bring us down for a visit today."

Aiyana could tell he was covering up fear with his careless grin. She gritted her teeth and cursed herself for bringing them out into such dangerous weather. Her insistence on going home had put both their lives at risk.

As she thought it, another huge wave hit the boat. The dugout rolled sideways again.

Water rushed up at her, wetting her arm, her shoulder, her side, and she thought, *It will be all right. Canoes are made to roll. It will recover*, just before the canoe flipped.

She had time to draw one breath before her head plunged beneath the cold, murky river water.

* * * *

Connor looked at the brief outlining the division of property in the MacDonald divorce case. Usually he was able to come up with an out-of-court settlement, but Sinclair and Mariana MacDonald were hard cases, intent on suing and counter-suing one another and using every weapon in their arsenals to tear each other down. It was clearly a battle that had been going on throughout their marriage. Both wanted to be the winner at all costs. The case was making Connor's firm, and the opposing legal counsel, a lot of money.

He sat behind the table listening to the opposition drone on, and his leg jiggled nervously. Anxiety had been percolating in his stomach all afternoon—nervousness which had nothing to do with speaking in court. The hair on the back of his neck prickled and he wanted to jump from his seat and run out the room. To do what, he didn't know. *Now. Hurry!* his impulse demanded.

Aiyana's face haunted him, eyes wide and mouth open in a soundless cry for help. Connor shifted in his seat, drawing a curious glance from his client, billionaire businessman, Sinclair MacDonald. Meanwhile, the opposing counsel argued that Mariana MacDonald was entitled to one hundred and fifty thousand dollars compensation for emotional abuse.

Connor believed neither of the MacDonalds deserved anything besides a hard slap in the face and a stint working community service. Their spoiled, selfish behavior made him sick, or maybe it was his lurching stomach. Connor felt queasy, as if he was being tossed on a stormy sea.

Again the image of Aiyana calling for help, wet hair plastered to her head, shone in his mind like a beacon. He had to go to her. Right now!

Connor bolted from his seat, holding up a hand to attract the judge's attention. Surprised faces turned to him as he begged for a recess, citing illness as the cause. It was almost true. He felt as if he might vomit as he practically raced from the room.

In the men's restroom, he sat in one of the stalls and rested his elbows on his knees with his head in his hands. Closing his eyes, he fought to bring the picture of Aiyana into better focus. It was the first time he'd tried to contact her. For the past few weeks he'd struggled to keep her out of his head.

He caught glimpses of her frightened face and felt sharp stabs of her fear. These weren't fantasy images, but real. She was at the edge of his consciousness like an electronic signal fading in and out. He felt he could almost reach her, but he needed help. He needed Harold Raimer to put him under again.

Whatever was happening to her was happening now, which made no sense since she lived in the past, but he absolutely knew that the moment to see her, to *save* her, was now or never. Closing his eyes even tighter, he telegraphed a message. *I'm coming. I'll be there soon to help you.*

He slammed open the stall, then the men's room door, and raced down the halls of the courthouse, drawing curious stares. As he ran, he called Raimer to tell him he was

coming, but there was no answer and he had to leave a message.

Connor cut through traffic and sped down side roads as he drove across town. He parked with one tire on the curb and ran up the stairs to Raimer's door where he simultaneously pounded and rang the bell.

Raimer appeared, rumple-haired and wide-eyed. "What is it?"

"Emergency. I need you to put me under right now."

"I'm working with someone, contacting her mother on the other side."

"Now! I have to help Aiyana immediately. It may already be too late."

Raimer glanced back into the house. "Wait in the foyer. Let me finish with my client."

Several minutes later, Connor lay on Raimer's couch, desperately trying to relax and breathe deeply, but entering a trance when his heart was racing was impossible.

"You've got to relax or you're going nowhere." Raimer held the flashlight, but the hypnotic beam did no good. "Close your eyes and tell me what you saw."

"Her face; she's wet. Screaming. I think maybe she's drowning."

"Okay. Breathe in and out very slowly. Now open your eyes and concentrate on my light. Focus all your attention at that point. Release everything else from your mind."

Connor followed his commands as Raimer went through the litany of tensing and relaxing body parts. His breathing slowed. His heart rate calmed. By increments he began to unwind, and he experienced the rising and floating sensation he had the last time his consciousness drifted away.

He cast his mind outward into the void of space until he felt Aiyana's presence. She was calling to him. He concentrated, following the call, rushing through time, space, distance, and suddenly he was with her.

Her physical body clung to a log floating in a river. Waves tossed her. Rain lashed down upon her and her wet arms slipped as she tried to get a better grip on the log. Her head went under, then broke the surface again and she coughed out water.

A paddle drifted past, and Connor realized that the log was actually a primitive canoe floating upside down.

Aiyana's face was pale, her teeth chattering and her black hair slicked to her head. He could see every detail of the scene, hear the thunder and smell the river water, but he couldn't touch Aiyana. When he reached out to her, his indigo-dark aura passed through her. How could he help her when he couldn't even touch her? "I'm here," he shouted. "Hold on!"

Furious and frustrated at his helplessness, Connor focused all the force of his will on summoning his physical body into this time, this place. He pictured every cell and atom mustering at his command and coalescing around his spirit.

Aiyana's arm slipped and she fell back into the water, the river closing over her. Once more she bobbed to the surface and fought to regain her hold on the upside down canoe. Her fingers scrabbled on the rough bark.

Don't give up. I'll help you. He touched her the only way he could, spirit to spirit. His aura mingling with hers in sizzling warmth she must be able to feel. *Nothing's going to stop me. I love you.*

Like an athlete summoning the last reserve of energy to cross the finish line, Connor gathered every bit of his willpower and pulled the solidity of flesh around him like a cloak.

Suddenly, unbelievably, he was splashing in the water.

And it was fucking freezing.

A wave crested and broke over Connor's head leaving him sputtering and splashing. He kicked his legs and paddled his arms to keep afloat, bumping against Aiyana's limbs and body.

Her head whipped around. Her hands slipped from the boat again and she slid back into the water beside him. She bobbed in the water and stared at him. "Connor?"

His body felt like it was made of lead—or ice. How long did it take for hypothermia to set in? Glancing at the shore, he knew it was too far to swim for. "We have to flip the boat. Help me."

She replied in her own language, spitting out guttural words between chattering teeth. If the freezing river hadn't convinced him he was physically here, their lack of instant communication proved it. In dreams he'd always understood her. Now he had no idea what she was saying or if she got what he was trying to tell her.

The canoe was floating away. He cut through the water toward it with a strong breaststroke. When he reached the canoe, Connor ducked underwater and came up beneath it. He heaved his back against it, while Aiyana supported the outside. And suddenly the boat rolled over and landed with a splash, right side up.

Connor held the dugout steady while Aiyana clambered in. It lurched precariously but remained stable. But when Connor tried to climb in, he couldn't pull his weight over the side without tipping the boat. He'd have to float alongside it all the way to shore. He kicked his legs behind him, pushing the boat forward.

Aiyana leaned over one side and paddled with her arms as best she could. Slowly and awkwardly, they made their way to shore.

Connor's body was so numb he could hardly kick his legs, but the shore was in sight and he wouldn't give in to the lethargy overtaking his chilled body. His legs churned ceaselessly as land grew closer. When he thought he'd reached a shallow area, he felt for the bottom with his foot and touched against muddy earth. Digging into it with his shoe, he pushed off, kicking faster and harder.

At last, they reached the shallows and he slogged through the water, still pushing the boat before him. Aiyana climbed from the canoe and walked beside him the last few feet. They both collapsed on their knees at the water's edge, gasping and shaking.

Aiyana looked over at Connor, her deep brown eyes as piercing as he'd remembered. She said something in her harsh language with a questioning lift on the end of the sentence.

Connor crawled a few feet farther out of the lapping edge of the river. "Don't know how I got here," he said through chattering teeth. "I just knew you were in trouble."

Aiyana pointed out across the water. She said something with the word *Menowee* repeated several times. The distraught look on her face told Connor someone she knew had been in the canoe with her.

"I'm sorry." Connor reached out for her. He pulled her shivering body against him, astonished at its warmth beneath the chilled, wet skin. She was alive and solid and in his arms. But where were they? The pounding of his heart had as much to do with his fear of the unknown as it did with their close brush with death. Had he really crossed over into some ancient time where he'd have to spend the rest of his life?

He kissed her wet hair brushing against his lips and reminded himself that it was

worth it. “We’ve got to get warm. We can’t sit here or we’ll freeze to death.”

“Hai,” she agreed, unwinding her arms from his neck.

Connor staggered to his feet and helped her to stand. They leaned against each other, fighting gravity which wanted to tumble them both back to earth. Connor’s legs shook so much he could barely stand, but he bent down and kissed Aiyana’s icy lips, warming them with his breath. “We made it. We’re alive,” he whispered, kissing her cheek.

Again she twined her arms around his neck and laid her head against his chest. She was just the right height for him to rest his chin on top of her head. He hugged her, then pulled away and slipped his arm around her back.

Aiyana pointed up-river from where they stood and said something. He assumed she was indicating the way back to her village, and they walked in that direction up the gravel beach.

“Hello,” a voice called from the bluff above them. “Are you all right?” Connor shielded his eyes against the sun and stared up at a woman silhouetted against the sun.

“My husband, Robert, called 911. Help is on the way. You almost drowned out there!”

“We’re... We’re okay,” he stammered, thunderstruck and relieved by the revelation that they were in the twenty-first century. He glanced at Aiyana. Her dark eyes were huge. She murmured something. Connor squeezed his arm tighter around her. “It’ll be okay.”

The white-haired woman on the bluff descended the stairs from her property to the river. She’d brought blankets, which she offered them. “What in the world were you doing way out there?” She stared at the dugout at the edge of the water.

“A re-enactment,” Connor blurted, trying to explain the antique boat and Aiyana’s garment. “But we got too far away from land and the canoe capsized.” He pulled the warm blanket around his shoulders.

“Oh.” The woman frowned, but didn’t ask any more questions. “Well, I’m glad you’re both all right.” She smiled. “My name is Mary Weidel.”

“Connor Baines and Aiyana ... Lee,” Connor extemporized. “Thanks for the blankets, but you can cancel that emergency call. We’re fine. If you’ll just let us borrow a phone, we’ll have a friend come pick us up.”

“You should at least have the paramedics check you out. You might have hypothermia,” Mrs. Weidel protested. “Come up to the house before you freeze to death. She ushered them before her, up the steps on the side of the hill.

Connor looked at Aiyana’s shocked face, trying to imagine how frightening it would be for her to find herself among strangers far from everything she knew. And he felt guilty because deep down he was grateful he wasn’t the one who’d fallen into a strange, new world.

Chapter Eight

Aiyana had never felt so disoriented in her life. She didn't know how much was because of the fact she was half-frozen, numb and shaking so hard she could hardly walk. Her weak legs would have given way if Connor's arm wasn't supporting her. But the fact that everyone around her, including her lover, was speaking a foreign language definitely added to her feeling of displacement.

The woman who'd given them blankets never stopped chattering as she walked behind them up the stairs. A man waited at the top of the hill. He had a lame leg and he, too, talked without pause as he led them into his home.

The house was like nothing Aiyana had ever seen. Her eyes darted from one item to the next, unable to settle on any one of the hundreds of strange objects. Her feet sank into a thick, colorful rug. The room was lit with lanterns, and light also poured through windows covered with some clear material that held back the cold wind. Through the largest window, Aiyana saw the sky, the earth and the flowing river at the bottom of the bluff. Looking at the rolling, dangerous water made her shudder.

There was a tug on her arm and Aiyana turned to find the blanket woman talking to her again. Connor pressed his palm against the small of her back, nudging her to follow the woman.

The white-haired lady's babble flowed like the river as she led them to yet another room in the huge house. She gave them big, green pieces of folded fabric, then went away.

Connor said something to Aiyana in his warm, soothing voice. He stroked her face, and gazed at her with his bright blue eyes. He cupped her chin and gave her a soft kiss on the lips. He was real and he was here with her, wherever "here" was. It was all she'd asked for as she was drifting in the water, sure she was going to drown. She'd begged the gods to let her see and feel him once more, and her request had been granted.

As he touched her now, warmth blossomed in her core and radiated outward. She stopped shivering for the first time since she'd crawled out of the river.

The woman returned with dry clothing for them.

Connor thanked her. Aiyana understood that much. He closed the door to the small room behind them and began to strip off his wet clothes.

Aiyana did the same, but suddenly felt shy. It was ridiculous. In her dreams they'd done everything a man and woman could do together. Nudity hadn't bothered her. But now that they were in the physical world, she blushed as she pulled her dress over her head and dropped the sodden garment on the floor with a plop.

Connor's gaze swept over her body, lingering on her breasts with their erect nipples and the tuft of black hair at the junction of her legs. He licked his lips before turning away and drying his hair with the big cloth.

Aiyana understood this wasn't the time or place for them to explore one another's bodies, but she took a good look at his body as he dressed in the old man's clothes: his muscled shoulders, smooth back, flat abdomen and erect penis. Her heart surged with joy at the knowledge that after weeks of silently pining for Connor, he was here and he was hers. As soon as they were alone together in his home, they could do whatever they

wanted and explore each other's bodies as much as they wished.

A smile blossomed on her face as she rubbed her body with the rough-soft piece of material.

Connor glanced up and his eyes locked with hers. The same, dazed, delighted smile turned up the corners of his mouth and made his eyes sparkle like sunlight on water. He stepped toward her, but Aiyana held up a warning finger and shook her head. "Not now. If we start kissing, I won't be able to stop."

He might not have understood her words, but Connor got her message. He nodded and stooped to put on the shoes the woman had given him. "Soon," he said.

Aiyana thought the word must mean "home."

She dried her hair and dressed in the soft leggings and shirt the woman had supplied, marveling at the fine texture of the fabric. The way it brushed against her chilled, sensitive skin made her nipples and her sex ache. She shivered, but not from cold.

When they were dressed, they returned to the main room where the lady waited with a hot beverage for them to drink. She told them to sit on cushioned, comfortable seats in the warm room. After gazing at the fabric covering her seat for a while, Aiyana realized the blobs of color were meant to be flowers. It was cleverly woven fabric and must have taken someone many days to create.

Connor accepted a small square object from the man and spoke into it. Then he talked to the man and woman. Aiyana watched the three pale people discuss something. They appeared to argue at one point, and she wished she could understand what they were saying.

After a long, awkward time had passed, there was a ringing sound and the old man got up and walked to the door to open it. The man with round eye coverings whom Aiyana had seen with Connor during her first out-of-body experience came into the room. He stared at Aiyana with his mouth slack.

Connor rose and said something to the man and the old couple who had helped them. He shook each of their hands.

Aiyana listened carefully and mimicked the words Connor spoke. "Tank you," she said, taking the man's hand, then the woman's. The woman patted her hand and smiled.

When they were outside and she could stop pretending to understand what was being said, Aiyana breathed a sigh of relief. But her relief was short-lived.

Connor's friend led them to a shiny transport of some kind. Connor opened the door for Aiyana to get inside. She understood this vehicle was going to take them someplace, but didn't understand how it was going to do that. After sliding in beside her, Connor fastened a strip of fabric around her waist, took her hand in his and began talking slowly, soothingly. Aiyana could tell he was trying to calm her, but she wasn't even nervous—not until the man got into the contraption and it suddenly made a loud, roaring noise.

Aiyana jumped. Her entire body tensed as the vehicle began to move. She clutched Connor's hand. He smiled and kissed her cheek.

Evidently, this thing was supposed to make the loud noise. Neither of the two men seemed worried. Aiyana tried to close her ears to the deafening sound and force her racing heart to slow down. The land flew past the window and Aiyana's stomach lurched. She squeezed her eyes closed, feeling the motion of speed even without watching the world hurtle by.

She opened them again and gazed out the window. Her stomach settled a little when

she stopped looking at the land close by and stared off into the distance instead. There were many big, square houses, many square, colored boards stuck on long poles, many other traveling vehicles like theirs.

At last, Aiyana was finally able to enjoy the ride. The wheeled vehicle sped along a black path much faster than a deer could run. It was exhilarating.

Connor tugged Aiyana's hand, drawing her attention from outside. He patted the seat, and indicated the vehicle around them. "Car."

She repeated the word. "Cah."

The man with the round things covering his eyes glanced back over his shoulder and said something. Aiyana could see the man's face reflected in a small square in the center of the window. The shiny surface was like the smoothest, stillest pond she'd ever seen. She watched his clear reflection with fascination.

Connor pointed at the man. "Harold Raimer."

Aiyana met Harold Raimer's gaze in the reflective surface as she repeated his name. He smiled at her.

There was so much to see in the world spinning by outside the car that the ride seemed to take a very short time. They stopped in front of a building.

Connor got out, offered her his hand and helped her out of the car. She gazed at the row of tall buildings lining the street. The noise was too loud. She had to cover her ears with her hands to stop some of the clamoring. And the smells were awful. She could barely breathe the choking air.

While the two men talked, she looked at the passing vehicles that were many shapes and colors, and at pale and dark-skinned people walking on the paths beside the street in their strange costumes. Aiyana was observing a mother bending over and giving something to her little girl, when Connor gently tugged on her arm again. He guided her toward another car, which must belong to him.

This time she rode in the front while Connor operated the amazing vehicle. The view of the world, rushing straight toward her through the big window made it even more exhilarating than the last ride.

Her head was throbbing by the time they reached Connor's home. She was overwhelmed and ready to weep. So much had happened so quickly: her cousin's drowning and nearly her own, Connor's sudden appearance and the shift to a completely foreign place. She needed to close her eyes and block out the rushing, colorful world, and she needed a rest from the deafening noise.

Once more Connor helped Aiyana out of the car. With his arm around her back, he escorted her up the stairs to his home. She hardly looked at her surroundings. Her eyes were half closed and she let herself be led like a child to the small room with water in the wall.

Connor stripped off her clothes and his before guiding her under a stream of water in the little stall. The spray felt wonderful, stinging and hot against her skin, warming her chilled body through.

Connor stood behind her and lathered her hair with some kind of lotion. His hands plunged through her hair and massaged her scalp, washing away the river smell and replacing it with the pungent scent of lavender and sage. Her eyes closed as she luxuriated in his touch.

He rinsed the suds from her hair, then began to wash her body with a soft, scratchy,

fluffy thing and a different kind of liquid that also smelled like lavender. Her skin and hair had never felt so clean. Sand and soapwort left residue no matter how much she rinsed.

Aiyana arched her back as Connor rubbed the puff over her skin. Her body awoke beneath the stroking cloth, the heat and his hands touching her all over. An answering heat built inside her.

Connor turned her to face him and pulled her close to his warm, wet body. As the steaming water coursed over them, he nuzzled her shoulder and murmured something that ended with "Aiyana."

She smiled to hear him say her name and she recognized love talk when she heard it no matter how foreign the language. "I love you too. I'm so glad to be here," she replied, tilting her face up and gazing into his eyes through the steamy mist.

Connor's mouth covered hers and his tongue slipped between her parted lips to curl sinuously around her tongue. She threaded her fingers through his wet hair, cradling the back of his neck as she kissed him fiercely. At least this was familiar. No words were needed for them to communicate with their bodies.

Her breasts pressed flat against his chest, warm mahogany contrasting with flushed pink. Her nipples ached at the delicious friction of their bodies sliding against one another. Reaching between them, she held his growing erection, solid and hot. She stroked the shaft and was gratified by Connor's sharp intake of breath.

Aiyana lapped the droplets of water that had collected along his collarbone before she dipped lower and latched onto one of his nipples, biting and sucking the flat disc and hard bud. Water pelted her face as she kissed her way across his chest and sucked the other nipple, and she continued steadily rubbing his cock. It was a pleasure to feel the growing tension in his body as he responded to her.

Connor's hands moved restlessly up and down her back. His hips rocked as he pushed into her hand then he pulled away, looked down into her eyes and said something. He smiled and caressed her cheek.

Aiyana returned his smile and nodded as if she understood.

Connor turned off the amazing spray of water and stepped out of the chamber. He offered her a big, thick cloth and she rubbed the material over her body and wet hair.

They stood gazing at one another, their bodies glowing with warmth from the hot water and from desire. Connor reached out and lifted Aiyana in his arms, one arm around her back, the other supporting her legs. He carried her from the steamy little room into a large sleeping chamber where he laid her gently on the high bed.

Aiyana had never lain on such a comfortable surface. She rolled back and forth a little. Connor smiled and pulled the covers down so she could climb inside. The fine weaving on the smooth, white material beneath the blanket was astonishing. She wanted to melt into the soft bed and never move again. She stretched her arms high above her head, arched her back and smiled at him. "It is good."

Connor climbed onto the bed beside her. He cuddled her close and whispered things she didn't understand. It didn't matter. She would learn his language soon enough, and for now, simply the sound of his warm, deep voice was all she needed.

Then he stopped speaking and started kissing her all over and that was even better.

Her earlier exhaustion was replaced by arousal. Her body swelled and opened under his roving hands and mouth. His pale hands skimmed like white birds over her bronze

skin, touching her everywhere. Aiyana thought the contrast between their skin tones was beautiful.

Connor bestowed soft, wet kisses along the same path his hands had taken: her shoulders, breasts, stomach, hips and thighs. He spent quite some time at her breasts, laving his tongue over her nipples and sucking them in deep. Every tug of his mouth sent a pang of need straight down to her sex. It clenched tight, then opened wide, ready for him.

Moving down her body, sprinkling kisses over her stomach as he went, Connor settled between her legs. He spent several moments simply looking at her pussy, making it ache and yearn from his intense study. He bent and worked his magic with mouth and hands. He petted her pubic mound and teased around her labia with his fingertip before slipping his fingers into her opening. They slid easily on the slippery wetness. He moved them in and out, while he licked her bud, sending hot pleasure radiating through her.

Aiyana sighed in contentment. She rose and fell beneath his touch, pulsing in gentle, slowly increasing waves. The close call with death that day magnified everything she felt. Desire unfurled inside her—rushing, growing and bursting in a sudden hard climax that radiated from her core and consumed her like a forest fire. With a cry, Aiyana arched off the bed. She felt as weightless as cottonwood seeds floating on a breeze as she drifted gently back to earth.

Connor moved to lie beside her and hold her close while she trembled. Tears trickled from the corners of her eyes, slipping down her temples and into her hair. The intensity of the day had finally caught up with her and she couldn't hold them back.

He kissed them away as he brushed her hair back from her forehead and murmured words that sounded sweet and soothing. His language was much softer than hers, rounded like river-smoothed stones rather than jagged and sharp like gravel.

Lying in his arms, she felt a sense of coming home despite being in a foreign world. She also felt Connor's erection pressing into the side of her thigh, eager for release. Reaching down she scraped her fingernails up its length.

He groaned and pushed his rigid cock against her. She turned to lie on her side facing him and guided him to her. Connor moaned softly as he entered her, eyes closing and lips parted in delight. She smiled, happy to be able to give so much pleasure.

Her pussy stretched around him and her yawning ache was satisfied as his hard cock glided up her wet channel. She squeezed her inner muscles tight around him and was rewarded with another quiet groan.

He buried himself deep, then stopped, opened his eyes and looked into hers. They were joined at last. One. Coupling was different here in the physical world, more primitive and limited without the flow of communication from mind to mind, but it was good in different ways. Solid. Real. Vulnerable. Human. And Connor's eyes communicated what his thoughts no longer could. *I see into you. You're special and you're made just for me. I want you with all my heart.*

He moved inside her, pulling out and sinking slowly back in. She wrapped her arms around his back, fingers gripping his shoulders. She threw her leg around his hip, pulling him closer. The head of his cock hit a place inside her and, like flint striking tinder, a flame erupted. Remnants of her orgasm gathered in that spot like bits of kindling feeding a new and bigger fire.

Connor thrust faster, harder, grunting with each push. His back was slippery with

sweat beneath her hands. She slid them down his back and gripped his buttocks, pulling him ever deeper into her body.

His jaw clenched tight and his hair flopped against his forehead with the steady rhythm of his thrusting. He frowned in concentration, eyes closed.

She wanted him to be with her as he came, and she whispered, "Look at me."

His eyes opened and stared into hers, their bright sky-blue had turned to midnight. He remained focused on her as he pumped faster and harder. He gasped, and she knew he was close.

Aiyana tilted her pelvis, reaching for the little bit more that would take her over the edge too. His cock hit the sweet spot inside her with such intensity that desire burst through her like water breaking from a cloud. Her body held his both inside and out as if she would never let go. Her eyes shut as ecstasy flowed through her.

Connor thrust into her and froze, his cock pulsing. "Aiyana," he gasped, and her name sounded like a caress. The awe in his tone made her feel safe and cherished. She smoothed her hands over his back while he shuddered against her, and her contentment was so perfect it almost frightened her. Why had the gods seen fit to bless her so much? What might they demand in payment? The fear of too much good fortune filled her.

For several moments they lay entwined on that big bed amidst rumpled covers, then Connor pulled out. He gazed into her eyes once more, cupped her face and traced his thumb over her cheekbone. He gave her a soft smile and said something.

Aiyana smiled, vowing that the first thing she'd do in this new life was learn the language. It was frustrating not understanding anything, and lovemaking only went so far.

She turned over and he curved around her back, his arm heavy across her body. For the first time on that long, chilly day she was almost too warm. His breath puffed against her shoulder, his heart beat against her back and she fell asleep almost immediately.

* * * *

When Aiyana woke, the room was nearly dark. Although it was a moonless night, a bright light shone through the window. She was terribly thirsty and needed to pee. Connor breathed slow and steady at her back. She rolled over and gazed at his face in the dark. Brushing the hair from his forehead, Aiyana kissed it before slipping from beneath his arm and out of the high bed. She padded across the soft floor covering to the small room where they had washed. Connor had showed her how to use the toilet and she did so, staring in fascination as the water swirled away down the hole.

Aiyana pushed the tap on the sink the way he'd taught her and water gushed into the basin. She plunged her hands under it, watching endless flow. After a minute, she cupped some in her hands and drank, then turned the tap off.

She wandered through the many dark rooms examining all the strange objects she couldn't imagine the uses of. She was eager for Connor to show her what other marvels man had created in the many years since her time. Her throat tightened as the weight of those years lay heavy on her. She would never see her mother again or Hausis, none of her cousins, aunts or uncles, or her best friend, Majesi. What had she decided to name her child? What had he looked like as he grew to be a man? How many generations had passed since the time he walked this earth?

Aiyana pushed those thoughts from her mind. It would make her crazy if she thought

too hard about such things. She was here now, and the world she'd known was far in the past.

Aiyana focused on the room she was navigating in the dark—so many pieces of furniture hiding in the shadows to bump into and all with sharp angles and points to stab a person's shin. She couldn't fathom why one person could need so many objects or so much space for only himself.

There was yet another room off the sitting area. In it was a three-legged contraption on which rested a cloth-covered rectangle. Aiyana pulled the cloth away and her breath caught as she saw what lay underneath. It was a picture of a woman. She looked like the reflection Aiyana saw when she looked in still water. This person was meant to be her. She understood that Connor had painted it with the tubes of colors that lay on a table nearby.

She touched the rough surface, tracing the lines of the nude body, the angles and planes of her face. She'd never seen anything so marvelous. The pictures her people made were flat representations of life—nothing like this portrait brought to life by light and shadow.

Connor's voice came from behind her, making her jump. She turned toward him.

He walked over, wrapped an arm around her waist and dropped a kiss on her shoulder. He spoke to her as he traced a finger along the line of her breast in the painting, then stroked her real breast.

"This is wonderful," Aiyana told him. "You should make more pictures."

Connor took her by the shoulders and turned her to face him. He pointed to himself. "I." He patted his chest in the rhythm of a pounding heart. "Love." He pointed at her. "You."

Aiyana smiled and repeated his words. "I. Love. You."

His language was easy. It wasn't going to be hard to communicate after all.

Chapter Nine

Eleven months later

“Connor, come. Eat now.” Aiyana’s tone was impatient as she called him for the third time.

“Coming,” he answered, but didn’t put down his brush. Leaning toward the canvas, he daubed black beside a dash of green before standing back to stare at it. He was mildly annoyed by Aiyana’s interruption. She knew when he was really into painting he didn’t like to be bothered with meals.

He rinsed the brush and switched to a wider one. Dipping the dry brush, Connor stippled flecks of greenish-white along a tree branch. He lost track of time as he painted lichen on the bark.

“Connor!” Aiyana’s sharp voice in the doorway jerked him from his trance.

“What?” He turned to face her.

“Eat now.” Her arms were folded above her swollen belly and she glared at him with snapping black eyes. Her hair was pulled to one side and braided. The braid lay over her shoulder and breast and ended in a colorful hair tie.

“All right.” He sighed and plunged the brush into the water. He wiped his hands on his paint-smeared jeans and walked toward her. “Coming. Right. Now.” He mimicked her terse speech pattern. Lifting her off the floor, he spun her around.

She put her hands on his shoulders and her scowl turned to a reluctant smile.

“Enough.”

He set her down on the floor and bent to kiss her neck. With an arm around her waist, he walked with her into the kitchen. Connor inhaled the scent of the herbs that hung drying from the beams overhead. Rows of bottles and jars containing homeopathic ointments and infusions lined the shelves on one side of the room. Aiyana had a thriving home-based business supplying her cures to the Natural Health Shop in town. Now that the little store was opening branches in two other locations, her sales would increase.

Connor sat in his chair. “Lunch smells good.”

Aiyana spooned thick, meaty stew into each of their bowls and sat across the table from him.

“You work ... hard today.” She paused between words. It was still a struggle for her to express what she wanted to say and her phrases were stilted, but she got the gist of her meaning across.

“Yeah, this one’s really coming together. I think I’ll be finished soon.” *And thank God, I’ve got a buyer.*

He hadn’t set foot in court or at the law firm since the day he’d walked out of the MacDonald case. He’d been disbarred and could care less, although it was frightening to go from a stable income to erratic sales of his paintings. He and Aiyana had moved from the noisy city apartment to an old farm upstate. She couldn’t take the noise of the city and Connor no longer wanted it either. His creativity was unfolding here. Besides, it would be a great place for a kid to grow up.

“Good. You will paint room for the baby.”

He nodded. "A meadow with flowers and a sunny sky like we talked about."

"And deer."

"Deer too." Connor smiled and took a bite of the delicious hot stew.

"Maybe..." she said thoughtfully, "water instead. With fish."

"I can do that. An ocean or whatever you want. Just let me know, and don't change your mind after I get started."

"No. I don't change my mind." She smiled back at him. "You paint fish and the river. It bring us together."

Connor shuddered, remembering the icy water closing over his head. "No rivers. Ever. I had a tropical sea in mind like in *Finding Nemo*."

It was one of Aiyana's favorite movies and she nodded in satisfaction. "Good. Lots of colored fishes. Baby will like."

"Yes." He smiled at the bulge of her stomach jutting out beneath her swollen breasts like a shelf. She couldn't pull her chair all the way up to the table any more, and she looked adorable waddling around the house.

This life, this marriage, was worlds away from the one he and Helen had shared—completely different but equally satisfying. Helen had been right, Aiyana was good for him. Her solid, earthy soul complemented his changeable, fluid nature.

The past months had been a time of transition as Aiyana adjusted from primitive tribal life to a fast-moving modern world. But she'd patiently, doggedly, learned language, customs and history—although she still struggled with some modern ways of thinking. What seemed logical to her didn't always jibe with what society allowed, and what the modern world accepted, she sometimes found shocking.

Connor's life had changed, too, as he gave up the law and switched his focus to painting. The two careers couldn't be more opposite. He felt as if he'd been wearing the wrong size shoes for so many years he hadn't even realized they pinched his feet until he'd switched to ones that fit him. He loved his art and he loved his new wife. The fact that they sometimes fought only made it clear that what they had together was real—a real life.

Their dreams were over. Reality had begun.

The End

About the Author:

Whether you're a fan of contemporary, paranormal, or historical romance, you'll find something to enjoy. My style is very personal and my characters will feel like well-known friends by the time you've finished reading. I'm interested in flawed, often damaged, people who find the fulfillment they seek in one another. Stop by my web site, <http://bonniedee.com> or my group blog, Erotic Muses at <http://eroticmuses.blogspot.com>. For future updates on my books, join my Yahoo group, <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/bonniedee/>

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