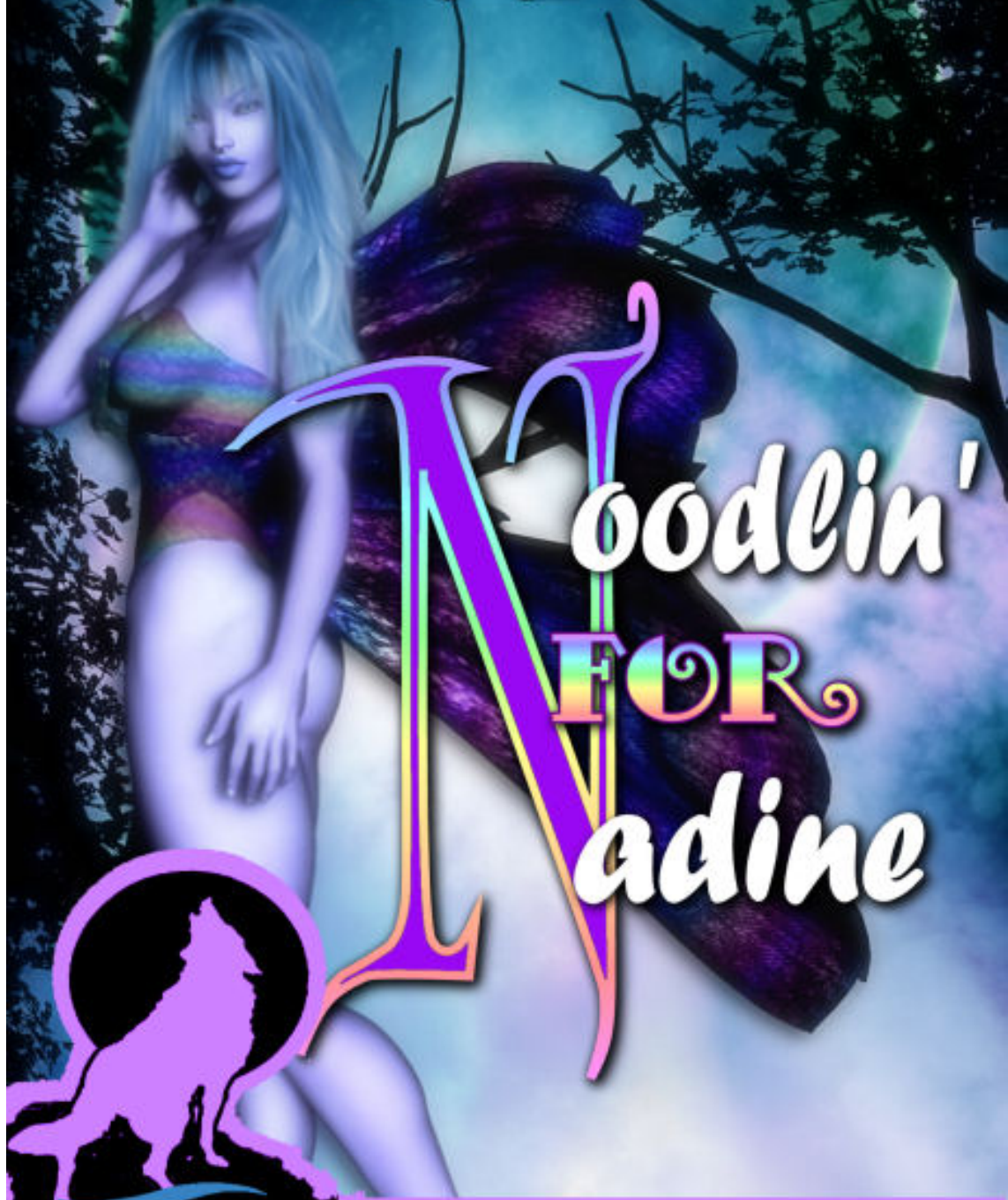


Changeling Press



Woodlin'  
FOR  
adine

Kate Hill

# **Noodlin' for Nadine**

## **Kate Hill**

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## **Noodlin' for Nadine**

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Brady's number one pastime is noodling. He loves the thrill of catching magical catfish with his bare hands. Imagine his surprise when he's feeling for catfish beneath the waters of Hot River and gets a handful of womanly curves instead.

Nadine is just a water nymph lazing about in her favorite underwater cave when she feels a pair of pleasantly rough male hands rubbing her in all the right places. She knows this is too real to be a daydream. It's more like the man of her dreams has found her, but is their love strong enough to cross the boundary between water and land?

## Chapter One

When Brady reached into the underwater cave and felt soft, womanly curves instead of a slippery catfish, he knew something was off.

At first he thought he'd spent too much time underwater this morning and it had affected his mind. He had a water obsession and spent almost as much time in Hot River as a merman or selkie.

Noodling was his passion, but in the magical world noodling -- catching catfish with one's bare hands -- was even more exciting than in the mortal world. In Hot River, which flowed through and connected the entire realm of magic, catfish were enchanted. Those who caught them and managed to hold on long enough would gain the power to breathe underwater for a time, usually a couple of hours. They could swim like a fish and to a man like Brady who revered the water, it was worth the risk.

He proudly bore noodling scars on his hands and arms. Not only did he enjoy the magical rush of swimming freely beneath the waves, but he loved the challenge of overpowering the mighty fish.

When he'd set out after dusk, he thought nothing could excite him more than a night spent on Hot River. He had no idea how exciting it would really be until that moment.

"Dang," he murmured, his hand sliding along soft, womanly curves. Smooth thighs and hips made for a man to hang onto had his heart beating faster. His eyes slipped shut and he caressed a gently rounded, wonderfully feminine belly. His cock twitching and breath quickening, he moved his palms upward. *Oh, baby. Here come the breasts. There have to be breasts.*

Yeah. There were breasts all right. Brady's hands cupped the full, lush spheres. He kneaded gently and stretched his fingers, seeking the tight, straining nipples.

Then a horrible thought struck him. What was a woman doing underwater? Had he stumbled upon a dead body? His stomach clenched and he jerked away, his heart pounding.

He knew what he needed to do, but he didn't relish the idea. Still, if someone was stuck in that cave, dead or alive, he had to find out. He took a deep breath and plunged beneath the surface.

To his surprise, once underwater, he found himself face-to-face with the most adorable woman he'd ever seen. She was very much alive. She had large blue eyes slanting upward at the corners and long, pale blue hair that fanned out seductively around her. Seeing her surprised him so much that he nearly swallowed a mouthful of water.

A smile spread across her full lips and she swam toward the surface, her curvy, supple body brushing against his. Brady didn't hesitate to follow her. He broke the surface, somewhat breathless, not from being under for so little time, but from anticipation and arousal.

"Tell me, Mister, do you make a habit of groping water nymphs?" she demanded.

"I didn't mean to grope anybody. I was just out here looking for catfish and --"

She looked shocked. "Do I look like a catfish?"

"No. Not at all. You sure don't feel like one, either," he said with a little grin that he hoped would relieve some of the tension between them.

For a moment they stared at each other and he thought again how cute she was. More than cute. Irresistible. He'd like nothing more than to feel her again, this time while kissing those pouting lips.

He noted her skin carried a hint of lavender and her eyelashes were dark blue. In all the years Brady had spent along Hot River, he had never seen a water nymph in person. Usually they stayed in the deepest parts of the river, or the most secluded. Even to those in the magical community, water nymphs were considered creatures of fable, as elusive as the Spirit of Hot River itself.

"Well, don't you have something to say?" she asked, lifting her chin slightly. "Or are you just going to stare at me?"

"I'm sorry," he replied. "Sorry for touching you like that and sorry for staring. You're just so --"

"What?"

"Adorable."

She narrowed her eyes at him, then seeing he meant no harm, smiled slightly. "Well. I guess that's not such a bad thing to be." She started swimming away, then paused and glanced at him over her shoulder. "Who are you, anyway?"

"My name is Brady Earl. I work with my cousins, the Princetons, at Wolf Whackers Incorporated. Maybe you've heard of them?"

"Oh yes. They're in charge of creature control in the area of Hot River Campground." She turned around entirely and faced him again. This time he thought he saw interest in her eyes and felt hope kindling. He'd never been with a water nymph before. In fact he hadn't been with any kind of woman in quite some time. Business had been booming at Wolf Whackers since creatures like snake shifters and Wildmen had been moving out of the Wicked Wild and closer to places where decent magical folk dwelled. Any free time he had was spent playing in Hot River. Noodling. Swimming. Resting on a warm rock and just listening to the lapping waves.

Now this pretty little water nymph reminded him of exactly what he was missing in regards to female companionship.

"Mind if I ask your name?" he said, swimming a little closer.

"Nadine."

He smiled. "That's a nice name. What are you doing in this part of the river?"

"I happened to be taking a nap in my favorite cave when you... interrupted me."

This time he laughed out loud. "I like the way you put it. I really am sorry about that. Usually I ask before I grope a lady."

"Glad to hear it."

Again she swam away, but this time toward the riverbank. When she reached shallow water, she stood.

Brady remained momentarily speechless. This lady had a fantastic body. Not very tall, but with curves that sent such a mad rush of blood to his cock that he felt dizzy. Pale lavender skin covered her luscious body and a pretty blue stripe ran down her back all the way to the indentation of her shapely ass. From the base of her spine jutted a long, silky translucent tail tinted a variety of pastel colors. He stared at it, completely enchanted.

"What's the matter? Haven't you ever seen a tail before?" she asked.

"Sure I've seen tails. I've just never seen a water nymph."

"Oh." She grinned. "That explains a lot. Well, take a look if you want. Knock yourself out."

She spread her arms, giving lift to her full breasts tipped with spiky purple nipples. The little thatch of pubic hair between her lusciously rounded thighs was a darker blue than the hair on her head. She spun slowly, letting his gaze linger over every inch of her. As she turned, her tail opened up into a large yet delicate fin all the colors of the rainbow.

"Oh man," he murmured. "I think I just died and went to heaven."

"Funny, but that's exactly what I thought when I dreamed a few minutes ago of a man's hands touching me exactly how I wanted to be touched," she said, her voice just above a whisper.

Brady met her gaze, shocked yet again. Had she really said that?

Just the thought of touching her again had his libido in overdrive. His cock throbbed and his entire body tensed with desire, yet this was more than simple physical attraction. Nadine was a fascinating creature. He never imagined becoming involved with a water nymph, but now that they'd met, he wanted to know more.

"Well... I, uh," he began. "I'm glad you're not mad about it."

"No," she said softly. "I'm not mad."

For a long moment, they stood, staring at each other.



Just when Brady thought nothing in the magical world could surprise him anymore, something like this happened.

Nadine stared at the land man, her thoughts spinning.

Other water nymphs had often warned her about swimming in waters frequented by land dwellers. They had nothing against creatures of the land, but believed they shouldn't mingle. Land dwellers could never permanently be part of the water and water dwellers could never permanently be part of the land. With the water nymphs' romantic nature, the risk of falling in love with creatures of the land was too great. In ancient times, such relationships had ended in heartbreak, which is why the water nymphs had long ago decided to avoid land dwellers as much as possible.

Nadine liked swimming in shallow water, floating on her back and gazing at the sky. She'd been coming to this cove for months, usually late at night, and had never been discovered by the few land dwellers who came here. Werewolves, fauns, unicorns and other magical beasts stopped here to drink and human creatures of magic swam and fished in the water. From beneath the surface or while hidden in reeds she had watched them with interest.

Though she found land men fascinating, she'd never been aroused by one until now. The attraction had begun even before she set eyes on him.

Asleep in the small, cozy cave, she had been dreaming about floating in a tropical sea. In the dream, a gorgeous merman swam beside her and caressed her from thighs to breasts.

She awoke aroused, her clit and pussy aching and her nipples tingling only to find a pair of big, callused yet gentle hands stroking her, the fingers lightly circling her nipples, making them tight with need.

The hands jerked away at the same moment she became fully awake. Her heart pounded and she felt a bit dizzy. Fear mingled with arousal. Who had touched her and where had he gone?

Peering out of the cave, she saw a man's long, muscular legs, dusted with reddish-brown hair. She gazed upward and saw those legs were attached to lean hips, sleek abs and a chiseled chest. From a thatch of curling, dark pubic hair jutted the most fascinating cock she'd ever seen. It was thick, ruddy and well-veined. The mushroom-like head was bigger than that of most water creatures and she longed to explore it in more detail.

She swam out of the cave just as the man sank fully below the surface. To her delight, he was quite handsome with large blue eyes and a sturdy jaw. His rugged features aroused her almost as much as his sleek, powerful body.

At first she'd been worried that the man might have meant her harm with his uninvited groping, but when she saw the utter surprise on his face she sensed he was just as shocked in finding her as she was in being found.

Now that they'd spoken, she warmed to him even more. In spite of his obvious virility, there was something sweet and even respectful about him. For the first time in her life, she wanted to know a land dweller on an intimate level.

She didn't want to observe Brady from a distance, but she wanted to talk to him. Learn about him. Most of all she wanted to feel his hands on her again and this time she wanted to touch him back.

"That's good because I didn't mean to offend you," he continued in his deep, rather husky voice. "I was down here noodlin' and when I stuck my hand in that hole I expected to grab hold of a catfish."

She raised an eyebrow. Men of the land were certainly odd creatures.

"You do this often? Catch fish with your hands?"

"Well... yeah." He offered a lopsided grin and stepped closer to her. He used the tip of his tongue to moisten his lips and she followed the motion, loving the shape of his mouth. He had a well-defined bow on his upper lip and she longed to kiss it. "You know when a land person holds onto a Hot River catfish long enough, we can breathe underwater for a while."

"I'm familiar with catfish powers."

"Yeah. I'm sure you are." He stepped even closer and Nadine's heart pounded.

By the Sacred Shells, he was tall and his body looked so hard. She wondered how his chest felt, if the light spray of kinky reddish-brown hair on it felt soft or coarse.

If he had taken the liberty of touching her, then didn't she have the same option?

She drew a sharp breath and placed a tentative hand on his chest. Though slick with water, it was warm and even more rock-hard than she'd imagined. The hair was surprisingly soft. He didn't move away from her, so she continued her exploration, sweeping her hand across his pecs and trailing her fingertips down the center of his well-defined abs.

Brady leaned the slightest bit closer and the very tip of his cock brushed against her stomach. It felt velvety and she dipped her hand lower so it hovered over his shaft.

Then she quickly moved her hand away and curled it into a fist. Tilting her face up so she could meet his beautiful blue gaze, she said, "I've never been this close to a land man before."

"Then I guess that makes us even."

"I guess."

"Since we are this close, would you like to... I mean, I'd like to know more about you. You're a helluva lot more interesting than a catfish."

She gave a snort of laughter. "Thanks a lot."

"I didn't mean that how it sounded. One thing I'm not is smooth with words."

"It's all right. As long as you're smooth in other ways, we'll get along just fine." She touched his chest again and this time he placed his hands on her hips and tugged her closer.

Nadine gave a little gasp of pleasure as her breasts flattened against his chest. Trapped between their bodies, his cock swelled even more. It felt warm, hard yet silky. It was much thicker than cocks of the mermen and male water nymphs she'd been with.

His eyelids lowered partway and she thought how pretty his long, reddish lashes were. Then he kissed her and sensation overtook her, driving away any thoughts except those of the pleasure racing through her.

Never had she experienced a kiss quite like this. His warm lips moved against hers firmly but gently. She felt the power in his big, sleek body and knew he could probably crush her, but instead he held her tenderly, his callused palms warming her back and moving downward to cup her ass.

He tenderly stroked her finlike tail, exploring the texture of the soft, pliable scales. His touch tickled a bit and she wriggled, her body pressing even closer to his. By the way his cock throbbed between them, he must have enjoyed the sensations.

Brady groaned and broke the kiss. He whispered against her lips, "You are unbelievably beautiful. You feel and smell so good. And you taste delicious."

"So do you." She smiled and stroked his hips, then his backside. Her fingertips traced ridges marring one smooth cheek -- a scar of some sort. She'd have to examine it more closely later.

"Make love to me, Brady. Show me what it's like to be one with a creature of the land."

"Oh, beautiful nymph." He lifted a hand to cup her cheek and gently caress it. "I'm glad this is what you want because I want it, too."

Again he kissed her, this time with his mouth open and demanding. She responded in kind, thrusting her tongue against his and grasping handfuls of the wavy hair that curled against the back of his neck.

Brady's arms wrapped around her, pressing her close to his rock-hard body. Her clit throbbed and ached, desperate for attention.

"Nadine," Brady said. He lifted her in his arms and she clung to his neck. Why did she feel so secure with him? Lust at first sight was common for her kind, but in her heart she knew the connection she felt to this land man was more than that. Yet she couldn't think about it now. At the moment she simply wanted to feel, to experience something she never had before.

He carried her toward the shore, then paused and met her gaze. "Can you leave the water?" he asked.

She nodded and kissed him. "For a little while. Then I must return to it or else --"

"What?" Concern shone in his blue eyes.

"Or else I'll die, just as you would die too long beneath the water."

"But you can breathe up here."

"Only for an hour or two. It's the way of nymphs. Land nymphs can survive in the water for a while, but it can never be permanent."

"Then we must use our time wisely," he whispered against her lips and kissed her again.

On land, he placed her on her feet and walked to his backpack where he removed a towel. He spread it on the ground then knelt beside it and said, "Lie here if you want. I'm afraid it's the best I can do to keep the dirt off you."

"I'm not afraid of a little dirt," she said, playfully wrinkling her nose and settling onto the towel.

He leaned over her, bracing a hand on either side of her head. He kissed her very gently at first, then gradually pressed harder. Nadine relished the feel of his mouth against hers.

Eager to learn all she could about him, Nadine caressed as much of him as she could reach while pinned beneath him. She stroked his shoulders and back, relishing the warmth of his skin and the hardness of the muscles beneath. The soles of her feet caressed his legs and she thrust her hips against him, trying to relieve a sexual ache only he could satisfy.

He groaned with desire and lay closer to her side. Nuzzling her neck, he slid his hand between her legs and stroked. His big, warm hand covered her soft mound and she thrust against it. A shudder of desire tore through her as her swollen, sensitive clit rubbed against his callused palm.

Nadine wrapped her hand around his cock. She squeezed and stroked, learning his size and shape. The tip of her thumb tickled the underside and he groaned again and kissed her.

Their tongues plundered each other's mouths while their hands continued stroking and teasing their most sensitive parts. Brady dipped a finger into her pussy

then rolled the wet digit over her clit. Again he slid his finger inside her, gently exploring while at the same time his thumb stroked her clit, stirring her passion even more.

Her pulse leapt and she panted into his mouth. His breathing grew heavier too, spurred by her hand on his cock. Brady quickened the rhythm of his stroking hand and Nadine's hips kept time.

"Please," she panted against his mouth. She lashed her tongue over his lips, then he captured her mouth with his again and thrust his tongue against hers. The rolling of his thumb against her clit made her entire body catch fire.

Moaning and writhing, she closed her eyes and surrendered to sensation. Brady rubbed her to climax. In the final moments he kissed her harder, capturing her moans and gasps in his mouth.

Nadine pulsed all over. Maybe it was the newness of bedding a land man, or perhaps it was because this particular man knew exactly how to touch her, but she'd never had such a strong orgasm. Brady dragged it out as long as possible, his deft fingers teasing her relentlessly.

Finally she calmed and lay still, listening to the sound of her own breath and heartbeat.

"You're so beautiful," Brady said and began kissing her breasts. His lips pressed against her flesh and he used the wet tip of his tongue to circle her areola. The flesh there was so sensitive and his tongue felt good against it.

His teeth scraped gently over her nipple then tugged upon it.

"Oh, that feels so..." she murmured, her voice fading into another moan of pleasure.

While his lips, teeth and tongue teased her nipple, he continued stroking her breasts. He cupped one and caressed the nipple, then flicked his thumb over it.

Nadine's passion returned in full force. She grasped handfuls of his hair as he kissed his way down her belly. Lifting her legs over his shoulders, he covered her clit with his mouth. For several seconds he remained still, his warm breath caressing her

clit, then he licked her, first lapping her swollen, needy flesh then using the tip of his tongue to tease the underside of her clit.

He flicked his tongue against her, varying his rhythms, pushing her quickly to the edge then slowing his pace to keep her from soaring over it. He must have enjoyed devouring her because he kept up the delightful torment for so long she thought she might die from the most wonderful frustration she'd ever felt.

Finally she could stand no more. Her body straining and hands tight on his hair, she gasped, "Please, Brady. Oh, please let me come."

Moaning in reply, he licked her with fervor and this time he didn't slow down until she cried out in orgasm, her thighs trembling and heart pounding. He kept his tongue pressed against her throbbing clit until she finished, then he lay beside her, his head resting against her shoulder and his hand on her hip.

When she finally opened her eyes, she found him staring down at her with a thoughtful look on his face.

She reached up and caressed his cheek. "What are you thinking right now?"

"I'm thinking how glad I am to have found you. I'm thinking about how beautiful and sexy you are and how I can't wait to get to know you even better."

"Brady." She smiled, genuinely touched by his words and surprised to learn that he felt the same way she did about him. "That's so sweet."

"And I'm also thinking how badly I want you right now," he continued, his voice huskier. He rolled toward her and she felt his erection brush against her.

Glancing down, she saw how thick and hard his cock was. The big, ruddy head looked almost ready to burst and his balls were drawn up tightly in pleasure.

He'd already brought her ultimate pleasure twice and she wanted to repay him in kind.

"Land man, I'd like to learn more about you, too," she said and crawled between his legs. Settling onto her knees, she clasped his shaft in both hands and rolled her tongue over the tip. She took it into her mouth and sucked.

Brady groaned and thrust his hips against her, his fingers buried in her hair. "Oh, that's good. That's real good."

"What else?" she whispered against the crown of his erection. "Mermen enjoy this." She flicked her tongue against the underside of his cock head and he panted hard, his entire body tense.

"Oh, land men enjoy that, too," he gasped.

Nadine smiled slightly and continued licking and sucking him. Just when she guessed by his hard panting and the tension in his gorgeous body that he was about to come, he surprised her by gently pushing her away.

"Enough," he said, his voice raw with desire.

Her pulse racing, she stared at him as he grasped her shoulders and guided her onto her back.

"Yes, Brady. Oh yes," she said, clinging to him tightly. His big, hard body covered hers and he entered her drenched pussy with a slow thrust.

His eyes closed and his neck arched. She felt little tremors of scarcely restrained passion coursing through him and knew it wouldn't be long before he exploded. Or so she thought.

To her surprise, he began thrusting slowly, somehow managing to control his desire so she could once again catch up. It didn't take her long. Everything about this man made her hornier than any creature in the sea.

Soon she hovered on the brink of orgasm. Her legs wrapping around him and her hands stroking his sweat-slicked back, she moaned with need.

Brady's control seemed to snap and he thrust harder and faster.

Orgasm broke over Nadine, this one so strong she practically screamed with passion. He cried out, too, his body tight and straining as he came.

When he finished, he lay with his body half draped over hers. Nadine loved the feel of him upon her, the gentle caress of his breath against her neck and the way his hair-dusted legs felt hard and rough against her smooth ones.



Brady knew he had never enjoyed a woman as much as he enjoyed Nadine tonight. She was exotic, exciting and passionate. It seemed the rumors about sea creatures' lust were true after all. A man could lose himself in a woman like her.

He'd only just met her but he already knew he wanted to see her again.

After a few moments, Brady realized that instead of calming, Nadine's breathing had grown harsher. She pushed herself to her feet and he also stood, placing his hands on her shoulders, noting her pale flesh had grown a darker shade of lavender.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"I have to get back to the water," she said.

He nodded and watched her turn and hurry to the water's edge. She stepped in, her glorious tail fanning out behind her. Before she ducked below the surface, she glanced at him over her shoulder.

"I want to see you again," he called.

She smiled, her full, luscious breasts rising and falling with each labored breath. "Tomorrow night," she panted. "Same time. Same place."

"I'll be here."

She dove beneath the surface and the last he saw of her that night was a flick of her rainbow tail.

## Chapter Two

The following day, Brady found it difficult to concentrate on work. Luckily he wasn't tracking a particularly dangerous creature. Just a unicorn that needed to be relocated to a different part of the forest.

He was partnered with one of his cousins, Oakes Princeton. They met early that morning at the log cabin that served as the main office for Wolf Whackers Incorporated. Hopefully the traps they had set the previous day had worked. Unicorns liked to roam in the late night and early morning hours. With any luck, the elusive yet gentle beast awaited them now, ready to move to a less populated area of Hot River.

Brady stepped into the office and his tall, black-haired cousin, Oakes, looked over at him from where he knelt by the hearth, starting a fire.

"Hey," Oakes said.

"Hi. Want me to put on some coffee?" Brady asked, then yawned.

"No. Tracy is already in the kitchen doing that."

Tracy, the attractive mortal woman who was the mate of all three Princeton brothers, had recently started working at Wolf Whackers Incorporated and was trying to earn the right to use magic. Brady had no doubt one day she would earn some powers. She was certainly dedicated to learning the business of magical beast control, not to mention she was completely loyal to the Princeton triplets and they had lots of powerful friends on this part of Hot River.

Brady yawned again and scrubbed a hand over his eyes.

"What's the matter?" Oakes asked. "Did you noodle all night or something?"

"Sort of."

After leaving Nadine the previous night, he'd been unable to sleep. When he finally drifted off, his dreams were filled with the beautiful water nymph. He'd awakened so aroused that he was forced to masturbate before leaving for work.

Though still tired from his restless night, just thinking about Nadine again made him long for their upcoming meeting.

"Brady, hi," Tracy said, entering the room. She was an attractive lady with brown hair, dark eyes and an admirable acceptance of the supernatural world. "Want some coffee?"

"Oh yeah."

"Tracy, we better take breakfast with us," Oakes said. "I want to check those traps as quickly as possible. Unicorns hate being cooped up and I don't want this one getting too upset."

"I know. They're delicate animals," Tracy said. "The coffee will be ready in a few minutes."

"In the meantime I'll check the truck," Brady said and headed for the door.

"I already did. We're ready to go," Oakes told him and stood.

A short time later, the men made their way through the forest in a specialized truck built to endure the rugged terrain found along certain areas of Hot River. The traps they'd set up the previous day were meant to hold the unicorn without harming it. The first three traps they checked remained empty.

"I think this one has outsmarted us again, Oakes," Brady said to his cousin from where he sat in the passenger seat of the truck.

Oakes, his hands on the steering wheel, said, "I think you might be right. But we still have two more traps to check. This is the area where campers have reported seeing the unicorn, so unless it decided to move along on its own, we're bound to catch it one of these days."

"Oakes, at Wolf Whackers we're all pretty well rounded in our knowledge of magical beasts on land, but I'm pretty weak when it comes to water creatures. Do you know much about them?"

Shrugging, Oakes said, "I know some, but usually water creatures govern themselves. We don't need to get involved unless it's an amphibious beast who's causing trouble on land. What kind of creatures are you interested in?"

"Water nymphs."

Oakes chuckled. "Water nymphs. Having some aquatic fantasies, are you?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" Brady demanded, more irritated from lack of sleep than from his cousin's teasing.

"What's wrong with you today? You've been grouchy all morning."

"Sorry. I just have something on my mind."

"Anything I can help with?"

"Not unless you know about water nymphs."

Oakes glanced at him from the corner of his eye. "All right, Brady. Are you going to tell me what's going on or not?"

"Last night I went noodlin' and --" He paused. Though he wanted to talk about Nadine, the last thing he wanted to do was describe in detail how he reached into an underwater cave and grabbed hold of her gorgeous curves.

"Anyway, there was a water nymph at the cove and we started... you know..."

Oakes grinned. "Yeah. I can imagine. One thing everybody knows about water creatures -- nymphs, sirens, mer-people -- they're very sensual."

"I was going to say we talked," Brady said, annoyed. Yes, Nadine was lustful and with her he'd spent the most erotic night of his life, but it was more than that. He didn't want Oakes to think she was just some one-night fling. He wasn't sure how, but last night they'd made a connection. As long as she wanted to, he intended to keep seeing her. His main worry was how they could really spend time together when she could only stay on land for an hour or two and he certainly couldn't spend his life underwater.

Oakes must have noticed Brady's serious expression because his smile faded and he said, "I didn't mean anything by that comment. It sounds like you like this nymph a lot. Am I right in guessing it's a female?"

"Oh yeah. Definitely female."

Damn, was she female. Just thinking about her rounded hips and gorgeous breasts made his cock ache. He needed to keep focused before he, like a horny youth, ended up with an erection just from thinking about her.

"To be honest I don't know all that much about water nymphs," Oakes said. "I can ask around. Other members of the family might know more. All I can tell you is they usually avoid land creatures, so you're lucky to have come across her at all."

"I sure am lucky," he murmured.

"Sounds like she's something special."

"Yeah. I think she's very special."

"Just..."

"What?"

"Be careful, Brady. Water and land don't mix very well. I don't want you to end up disappointed."

"Thanks for the concern, but everything will work out. And it's not like we're getting married or anything."

Oakes was a nice guy, but he tended to worry about everyone and everything. Unfortunately this time Brady had to admit he was right in his warning. Yet it didn't matter. He had already fallen for Nadine and had every intention of following this relationship as far as it took them.

"Hey, we got him," Oakes said, stopping the truck in a clearing. He pointed to the magically empowered cage hidden beneath a cover of moss and reeds. The gentle brown eyes of a white unicorn peered out at them. "Let's get to work."

Brady nodded and stepped out of the truck. Work was what he needed. Something to keep him occupied until he could see his beautiful water nymph again.

\* \* \*

Nadine spent the day trying to go about her usual routine. She gathered food to store in her home, a nice little underwater cave not far from the caves of several sister nymphs.

When she met her sisters, so they could go swimming together and search for rocks to polish for the jewelry they made and used to trade with other water folk, they knew immediately she was distracted. She finally told them about Brady only to be lectured on the dangers of mingling with land men.

She decided not to discuss Brady with them again, for she had every intention of seeing him again. Most of her day was spent thinking of ways she could spend more time with him. It wouldn't be easy. Without the help of the magical catfish, he couldn't breathe underwater and even using their powers he could only stay under for a relatively short time. Nadine could only survive on the surface for an hour or two. How could they build a relationship like this? What if they fell in love? That wasn't such a far-fetched thought, considering how she already felt about him.

Maybe her sisters were right, but it was too late. Brady fascinated her and she refused to give him up, at least not without a chance.

Of course there was the possibility her feelings were one-sided. Maybe he didn't want to get involved with a water nymph, other than to relieve his sexual urges.

Lying in the same cave she had when he'd found her last night, she told herself it was too soon to think about these things. They had just met. Maybe when he came tonight, if he came, they would find their enchantment had faded.

Then she felt a ripple in the water. Her heart pounded when she saw two familiar hands reaching into the cave.

Her heart pounding, she edged closer to them, allowing them to find her easily. They felt her gently and stroked her belly and hips. Nadine's tail flicked with pleasure as those beautiful male hands cupped her breasts. The callused palms felt wonderfully rough against her nipples.

She allowed him to tug her out of the cave and when she emerged, she found herself staring into Brady's expressive blue eyes. Moonlight shone through the water, making it easy for Nadine to see him. He tugged her into his arms and they held each other for a moment, then he took her hand and used his legs to push off the rocky bottom, toward the surface.

Of course. He needed to breathe.

They emerged together and smiled at each other, Brady drawing several deep breaths.

"I wasn't sure if you'd come," she said.

"Are you kidding? I couldn't stop thinking about you all day."

His words thrilled her and she slipped her arms around his neck and kissed him. He responded enthusiastically, his tongue slipping into her mouth and mating with hers. Their legs, kicking to keep them afloat, entwined and she fanned her tail into the water.

When the kiss broke, they moved to shallower water where they could stand comfortably. Brady gazed down at her, his hands caressing her face, neck and shoulders. Water lapped the tops of her breasts and he trailed a fingertip over them.

Nadine loved how he looked at her. The lust in his eyes made her feel desirable, yet he wasn't leering or disrespectful. There was warmth in his eyes as well. Kindness.

"How was your day?" she asked.

"Good. We had to relocate a unicorn, but it wasn't too bad."

"So Wolf Whackers doesn't just handle werewolves?"

"No. We take care of just about all land beasts. What about you? How do water nymphs spend their days?"

"Looking for food. Making jewelry. Cleaning my cave. It can get so disorganized."

He smiled faintly and ran a fingertip over her upper lip. "Your cave. I'd like to see it."

"You couldn't survive the swim. It's in a very deep lake. Even if you did make it down there, you wouldn't be able to stay long enough to enjoy it, unless --"

"What?"

"With power from the catfish you could probably do it."

Chuckling, he said, "Why didn't I think of that? I think you've got my mind spinning, you beautiful water nymph."

"It's all right, land man. You've got mine spinning, too."

"The problem is, you make all the blood rush out of my head and into other places," Brady murmured and covered her throat with kisses.

Nadine arched her neck back and wove her fingers through his hair. His kisses trailed over the tops of her breasts, then he took one and lifted it partway out of the water so he could capture the nipple in his mouth.

Sighing with pleasure, she pressed closer to him, enjoying each swipe of his tongue and tug of his lips on her nipple. The sensitive flesh tightened and ached. Another wonderful ache started in her clit and spread through her pussy and lower belly.

No doubt he was just as aroused. His stiff cock brushed against her underwater and she could scarcely wait to feel it inside her. In fact...

"Oh, Brady," she said, curling her fist around his cock and thrusting her pelvis against him. "I want you so much. Please."

As if reading her mind, he bent his knees slightly as she spread her legs and guided the tip of his cock to her pussy. He slid into her inch by silken inch. Brady cupped her ass and lifted her in the water. Instinctively she wrapped her legs around his waist and braced her hands on his shoulders.

She opened her eyes and found him staring at her with all the arousal and wonder she felt.

"I never dreamed land and sea could fit together this well," she said, her voice just above a whisper. Sliding her arms around his neck, she dipped her head closer to his and brushed her nose against his.

Brady kissed her. His beautiful blue eyes slipped shut and his tongue thrust between her lips.

Nadine closed her eyes, too, and lost herself in sensation.

The thrill of being locked together was almost overwhelming. Brady's hips thrust and his powerful arms pumped her upon his rigid shaft. Nadine writhed against him, seeking to help them reach the heights of ecstasy they so desired.



It didn't take long for both to catch fire, in spite of the water lapping around them.

"Oh, Brady, yes!" she cried.

"Nadine! Ah, fuck!" he panted.

Orgasm struck them hard. So hard that within seconds they tumbled into the water, panting and laughing in the midst of passion.

Brady stood and held Nadine close. She rested her cheek against his chest and closed her eyes, listening to the quickness of his heartbeat. It soon slowed to normal, but the emotions between them remained strong.

Gazing at each other, the simple joy of the moment faded and Nadine knew he was thinking the same thing she was.

"Brady, what are we going to do?" she asked.

"I don't know," he said and sighed deeply, holding her a bit tighter. "I know it's a little soon and I don't want to scare you off, but I think it's more than sex between us."

"I agree, but how are we going to work this out? I can't leave the water and you can't survive in it."

"What do you want to do, Nadine?" He placed his hands on her shoulders and held her at arm's length so he could meet her gaze. "It seems to me we only have a couple of options. We can either end this now, before it really gets painful, or we can go on and see if land and water have what it takes to survive against the odds."

"For our own good we should stop this now," Nadine told him. He closed his eyes and nodded slightly. Then she added, "But I don't want to."

His eyes flew open and he offered her a sad smile. "Neither do I."

"Then I guess we should use our time wisely."

"It would seem the best thing to do, for now." He brushed a tender kiss across her lips and she embraced him. "Well, Nadine, let's see if I can get me a catfish. I'd like to visit your cave."

They broke apart and Brady waded through the water, searching the small, rocky holes in search of a catfish that would lend him the power to breathe underwater.

He was poised outside a small cave, concentrating intently on his task, when he felt Nadine's hands caress his back and her long hair tickle it beneath the water.

When she began feeling his ass with one hand while her other reached around and cupped his balls, he would have gasped if he hadn't been holding his breath. He'd never been fondled underwater before, but it struck him as both arousing and dangerous. Her hand moved from his balls and wrapped around his cock. She stroked his shaft while at the same time running her tongue along the indentation of his ass. Already his heart beat so hard he knew he'd soon need to surface for air, but at the moment he didn't want to move. This was too much fun.

She continued stroking his cock, every now and then pausing to flick her thumb along the underside. Her lips roamed over his ass, covering it with delicate kisses. When her tongue once again thrust between his ass cheeks and pulsed against his throbbing sphincter while at the same time her hand stroked him faster, his control shattered.

Orgasm shot through him and he fought to hold his breath as he pushed off the river floor toward the surface. He emerged, gasping, his entire body trembling with the aftershocks of the most intense orgasm of his life.

Nadine's head popped up beside him and she asked, "Are you all right?"

"Yeah," he panted. "Just give me a minute."

He managed to swim to the shore, where he lay on his back on the muddy ground, his eyes closed and a smile on his lips.

Nadine washed up beside him and caressed his face.

Taking her hand, he looked at her and said, "That was intense. I've never done anything like that in the water before."

"I have, but not with a land man and not with any male as sexy as you."

He grinned and shook his head. "I was supposed to be catching a catfish."

"Right. Sorry. I got carried away. At first I only wanted a closer look at that rather enchanting scar on your ass. It looks like a bite. How did it happen?"

"Hazards of the trade. About two years ago my cousins and I had to relocate a den of manticores who took up residence in Hot River Campground. I wasn't paying close enough attention and one of the babies bit me in the ass. Needless to say I took a lot of jibes from my cousins over that one, especially from my cousin, Tripp. Sometimes his sense of humor is on the strange side."

"You seem to relocate a lot of beasts. I was under the impression most land hunters killed their prey."

"We're animal control. Not just hunters. Our job isn't to wipe out magical beasts, but to see they live as safely as possible with other folk. Don't water dwellers have something similar to that?"

"Of course. But we also have some mercenaries who'll kill anything for a price."

"I know people like that." Brady shook his head. "It's too bad. Well, I'm about ready to start noodling again. If my charming companion can keep her hands off my ass?"

"I'll try, but it's a terrible temptation." She grinned playfully and rolled off him.

Before she stood, he grasped her by the hips and tugged her closer to him. His hands fondled her breasts and caressed the slight curve of her belly. In between nibbling her ear, he said, "Talk about temptation. I can hardly keep my hands off you."

"I'm glad." She squirmed with pleasure as his tongue tickled her ear.

"But I want to see where you live, Nadine, and learn more about the world below the surface than just how to noodle for catfish. I want to learn all I can about you, whatever you'll share with me."

She turned around to face him, her smile fading as feelings of tenderness overtook her. Stroking his face, she said, "Brady, that's what I want, too, but it won't be easy for us."

"Sometimes what's worth having isn't easy to get. I'm willing to take the chance."

"So am I," she said and kissed him.

This time when Brady went in search of a catfish, Nadine kept a safe distance from him. Still, she couldn't keep from staring at him. She loved his rangy, powerful body, the way he moved and the way his muscles tightened, rippling as he swam.

Finally, he grabbed hold of one of the enormous catfish. Nadine floated nearby, her eyes wide as she watched the man and fish struggle. A silvery haze encircled them - the fish's magic rippling through the water. Finally subdued, the fish relaxed in Brady's grip. After a moment, he released the catfish, for other than the magic, he had no use for it and to kill a Hot River catfish was an insult to the Spirit of the River itself.

Brady turned to her and smiled, swimming toward her and breathing in the water. With the catfish's magic, the water couldn't harm him.

"Can you speak?" she asked.

"Uh... it seems like it." He grinned. "I never tried before. Usually there's no one for me to talk to under here."

"If we go now, I can lead you to my cave. Have you dove deep before, or will the water pressure still harm you?"

"I've gone pretty deep. The magic seems to prevent the pressure from affecting me."

"Then follow me."

She took his hand and her tail swished, propelling them through the water.

\* \* \*

Brady let Nadine lead the way out of the cove and into the open water of one of the deepest lakes in the magical world.

Even though she swam quickly, he sensed she could go even faster but didn't for his sake. Her tail was incredibly powerful, strong enough to do the brunt of the work for both of them. They dove deeper and deeper, through reeds and past underwater mountains.

Even though the water was dark, the catfish's magic enabled him to see clearly and he knew water nymphs had excellent vision even in the darkest underwater caves.

One of the things Brady liked best about the catfish magic was being able to see so many amazing water beasts. In this part of the lake, he saw fascinating sights. They swam by a hippocamp -- seahorse -- herd grazing among the reeds. In the distance a multi-headed sea serpent gulped a school of fish. Nearing the lake's floor, they saw a pair of mermaids who waved to them as they passed.

"They're my neighbors," Nadine explained. "They live a few caves away from me."

Finally Nadine guided him into a cave. They maneuvered through several tunnels until they reached a spacious room with a floor covered in polished, rainbow-colored rocks. There were several trunks along the sides of the cave and a bed of short reddish plants that looked spiky but were quite soft to the touch.

"This is home," Nadine said, offering him a smile.

"It's nice. Real nice."

"Glad you like it." She stretched out on the bed of plants. He joined her, bracing a hand on either side of her head and kissing her. Their legs entwined and she felt his cock stiffen against her.

He trailed his lips over her cheek, then took her earlobe between his teeth and nibbled it gently. He swirled his tongue in her ear and she quivered with desire.

Closing her eyes, she smiled and enjoyed the sensation of his teeth and tongue. Brady took his time kissing the side of her neck. Nadine sighed with pleasure and caressed his arms and shoulders, loving the hard curve of muscle and the sleekness of his skin.

He moved aside and rolled her onto her stomach. With long, gentle sweeps of his hand he caressed her tail. She opened it and his fingertips traced patterns on the delicate flesh.

"Your tail is so beautiful," he said.

Nadine laughed and squirmed.

"What?" he chuckled.

"My tailfin is a little ticklish."

"Really?" She wasn't sure she liked the teasing note in his voice.

Seconds later his tongue trailed over her tail, tracing the little veins beneath the ultra-thin flesh. She giggled and writhed, especially when he slid a hand beneath her tail and fondled her ass while his mouth continued working on her tail.

When her ticklish tail couldn't take another moment of stimulation, he swept it aside and covered her ass with kisses. His hands swept up and down her back and he playfully nipped first one ass cheek then the other.

Again he rolled her over, this time onto her back. He buried his face between her breasts and Nadine wove her fingers through his hair. No one had ever made her feel like this and she wished they could always be together.

Brady took one of her nipples between his teeth and nibbled lightly, then he sucked it deep into his mouth.

She gave a little cry of pleasure and arched against him. His powerful arms wrapped around her and he sucked her nipple harder. Nadine's belly tightened with a sexual need so strong it was almost painful. She had been thoroughly aroused since teasing him underwater and was more than ready for some of that wonderful friction their bodies created together.

He reached down and fondled her soft mound. Two of his long fingers slid inside her and she groaned softly.

"Oh, baby, you're so wet," he said against her ear, his voice husky with passion.

"That's one of the good things about water nymphs. We're always wet, but in this case I'm wetter than usual because I want you so, so badly. Please, Brady." She took his face in her hands and whispered against his lips. "Please make love to me. Make me come."

"Oh, Nadine," he said and kissed her deeply while continuing to explore her pussy. He rolled his thumb over her clit, teasing her to the brink, which wasn't difficult, considering how aroused she was.

Just when she was about to come, he replaced his searching fingers with his thick, hard cock. That single thrust pushed her over the edge and she convulsed around him, clinging to him tightly.

Brady continued thrusting over and over, his magnificent body guiding her toward another orgasm.

It was slower in building, but she had the feeling that when it happened it would be even more intense than the first.

He slowed his movements then sped them up, each time bringing her a little closer to the brink. While his lean hips pumped into her, he pressed tender kisses over her face and neck. His firm lips tickled her eyelids and caressed her forehead and cheeks. Teasingly he nipped her chin. He swept his tongue along the side of her neck and again used the tip of it to tease her ear.

Nadine stroked his back and buttocks, enjoying the feel of his rippling muscles. She used her feet to stroke his calves, loving the roughness of his hair-dusted flesh against the soles of her feet. Her toes wiggled against his legs and her fingers traveled up and down his spine.

"Nadine," he breathed against her ear. "Everything about you feels so good. Your pussy around my cock. Your nipples against my chest. The way your hands feel on my ass."

"I love how you feel, too, Brady. Hard. Strong. When I'm with you I feel safe."

"I'd do anything to keep you safe," he panted, thrusting faster.

She clung to him tighter, trembling with need. She'd never been this aroused before. Every time she was with him, the sex just got better and better. How could it be that she and this land man fit together so perfectly?

Closing her eyes, she gasped and moaned. Her hips kept time with his until his thrusts came so fast and hard that she could only wrap her legs around him and hold on tightly.

That wonderful ache in her clit grew. Her heart pounded and her stiff nipples rubbed against his steely chest. Even the water around them seemed warmer, heated by their passion.

As she neared the edge, she knew by the tenseness in his body that he was almost there, too. His ragged breath hissed in her ear and she clung to his broad, straining back.

"Ah, Brady!" she cried, coming hard.

With a shout of pleasure, he came, too and for several moments after they lay cuddled close.

Then he said, "Nadine, I have to swim to the surface. I think the magic is starting to fade."

Panic almost overtook her. If he lost the ability to breathe underwater now, there was no way they could reach the surface in time, even with the added boost of her tailfin. What if her desire, her selfish need to share her home with him, killed him? "Oh, gods, do we have enough time?"

"Yes. I'm sure we do. But if I wait any longer it'll cut it too close."

"Then let's go." She pushed him off her, grasped his hand and tugged him toward the mouth of the cave.

"Nadine." He pulled her into his arms and gazed into her eyes. "It's all right. If there wasn't time, would I be this calm?"

"I don't want to risk your life."

He caressed her cheek and smiled. "You're worried about me."

"Of course I am. Now please, let's go."

He nodded and brushed her mouth with another kiss before they left the cave.



## Chapter Three

### One Month Later

The chimera growled and tried to claw its way out of the quicksand pit. Its wings, already half buried, quivered with the strain of trying to free themselves.

"Its neck is real strong," shouted Tripp Princeton from where he hung by his legs from a thick branch over the pit, a leather harness in his hands. "Once I get this around his neck I can pull him up and you guys can get the straps around him and pull him out."

Oakes and Brady stood by the edge of the pit, holding the straps Tripp referred to. The straps were attached to the Princeton triplets' truck and the third brother, Jeb, waited behind the wheel, ready to haul the frantic beast out of the quicksand once the straps were fastened to him.

Usually working with his cousins on a challenge like this excited Brady, but today he was too tired. His sole focus was on getting the rescue done as quickly as possible.

Tripp, careful to avoid the beast's ferocious teeth, finally managed to slip the harness around its neck. Muscles bulged in Tripp's arms as he pulled hard on the harness. Sweat dripped down his face and he grimaced, his white teeth flashing against his tanned skin. Slowly he lifted the creature enough for Oakes and Brady to secure the straps around it while standing on a fallen log they had pushed across the pit. It wasn't an easy task, since they needed to avoid the beast's enormous claws.

The log itself began to sink and the men leapt off it.

"Go!" Oakes shouted to Jeb who started the truck and drove forward, dragging the chimera out of the quicksand.

On land, the beast stood for a moment, growling and trembling with exhaustion.

"Move very carefully," Oakes said, his voice just above a whisper.

Brady and Oakes slowly approached the beast to remove the harness. At the moment it appeared docile enough, but once its strength returned it would be deadly.

The men worked swiftly to remove the harnesses. Brady, tired from sleepless nights and his obsession with Nadine, almost didn't move quickly enough when the chimera swung its head toward him. Instead of biting his flesh, the creature snagged his rifle.

"Look out!" Oakes shouted.

Brady leapt back, stumbling over a rock. Tripp, who had climbed down from the tree, caught his arm. Oakes joined them and the three watched the chimera, now free, crush the rifle in its teeth then drop the weapon and spread its massive wings. It rose through the trees and flew off.

"That was a helluva thing," Tripp panted, wiping sweat from his brow.

"Where was your mind?" Oakes asked Brady. "You could have been killed."

"I'm sorry. I don't know what happened."

Jeb, who had stopped the truck and joined his brothers and cousin, said, "Do you feel all right, Brady? You haven't been looking very good."

"It's just --"

"Nadine?" Oakes asked.

"Ah. The mermaid," Tripp said.

"She's a water nymph," Brady corrected.

"If you don't quit spending all your nights with her and start getting some sleep, you're going to end up getting killed. Or worse, killing one of us," Tripp said.

"He's right," Jeb added.

"Are you kidding? I've spent more time in this business than the three of you put together."

"Look," Jeb held up his hands in defense, "no one is criticizing or trying to take away what you've put into Wolf Whackers, but --"

"Have I ever been late for work?" Brady demanded. "This is the first slip I've had in ages. We've all made mistakes before. Dangerous ones. Now you threaten to --"

"Hold it," Oakes interrupted. "No one's threatening anything. We're concerned, that's all."

"This woman is making you crazy," Tripp added.

"It's not her and I don't spend all night with her. I just -- I don't want to talk about this."

"Maybe you should," Jeb suggested. "Maybe we can help."

"How? The three of you have Tracy. What do you know about being separated from the woman you --"

"What?" Tripp demanded.

"Guys, give him a break," Oakes said and placed a hand on Brady's shoulder. "This woman means a lot to you."

"That's the problem. At night when I try to sleep, all I can think about is finding a way for us to be together."

The triplets fell silent and Brady glanced at them, shaking his head. "I can't believe I'm standing here embarrassing myself like this. Let's just drop it."

"Why be embarrassed about finding a woman to love?" Oakes said.

"Hell, we're all in love with the same woman," Jeb shrugged. "You think we don't understand, but we do."

"You bet we do," Tripp added.

"Listen, we'll do some research and if we find a way for water and land creatures to mix, we'll let you know," Oakes said.

"You guys have enough to do with your own lives. And besides, I handle my own problems."

"I thought we were family," Tripp said.

To Brady they were more like brothers than cousins. When he was sixteen, he'd lost his parents and went to live with his aunt and uncle. He found it difficult to deal with his parents' death and caused his share of problems, but the Princetons, especially

his triplet cousins, stood by him. For that he would always be grateful and he had tried to repay their kindness by pouring his whole life into their animal control business.

Brady's brow furrowed. "We are family."

"Then your problem is our problem," Jeb stated. "From now on, we'll be on the lookout for information."

"Hugo might be able to help," Oakes suggested, referring to their older brother. "His wife is an expert on shapeshifters. Maybe she knows some kind of magic that will let one of you shift into another type of creature, Nadine one of the land or you one of the water."

For the first time Brady felt an inkling of hope. "That's a great idea."

"Hugo and Sadie are out on a sabbatical in the mountains of the Wicked Wild, but they should be back any day now. As soon as we see them, we'll ask," Oakes said.

"Thanks," Brady said. "I appreciate it."

Jeb punched him amiably in the arm. "That's what family is for. Now do us all a favor? Take the rest of the day off and get some sleep."

"Yeah. When you're tired you're grouchy as hell," Tripp said. "And lately you've been worse to work with than that chimera."

"I haven't been that bad, have I?"

"Brady." Oakes placed a firm arm around his shoulders. "Just get some rest. We'll drop you off at home."

Shaking his head, Brady walked toward the truck. Strange, but it felt better talking out his problems with the triplets. He should know from experience they were resourceful and if anyone could help him solve his problem, it would be them.

\* \* \*

"Nadine, what's wrong?" Brady asked, placing an arm around her shoulders.

It was dusk and they stood by the edge of the water at the little cove they'd come to call their own.

Summer had started fading into fall and nights were becoming chillier. He felt her shiver and drew her even closer.

"Nadine?" he repeated, brushing his lips against the side of her neck. "I thought you'd be happy about my cousins' suggestion."

"I am." She turned and gazed at him, a hint of sadness in her eyes. "I appreciate that they're trying to help, but I don't think they'll find out anything we don't already know."

"You're not sure about that."

"No, but think about it, Brady. If it was possible for land and water creatures to mate for life, why would the water nymphs have stopped mingling with land men so long ago? Such pairings brought nothing but heartache back then and it's doing the same thing to us now."

Taking her face in his hands, he spoke against her lips, "Knowing you is worth any kind of heartache. I just wish... we could be together more."

"Like a normal couple? We're not, Brady. You're a land man. I'm a water nymph. No matter how much we love each other, we can't become something we're not."

"So are you saying you don't even want to try to find a way? What if Sadie knows something we don't? Can it hurt to find out?"

"Of course not. I just don't want you to get your hopes up."

Her words worried him. Was he the only one so desperate for them to be together that she was simply worried about him getting his hopes up? What about her hopes?

"So you don't care whether or not we find a way to be together?"

"More than anything," she admitted. Closing her eyes for a moment, she shook her head then tugged away from him. "It's not that I don't want to have hope for us, but I'm almost afraid to. I've convinced myself we can never truly be together and I've made myself accept it. Brady." She turned back to him and stared deeply into his eyes. "Since meeting you, I've had no other man. I want no one except you, but I don't want you to feel obligated to me. If you can find a land woman --"

"I don't want a land woman! I'd rather spend my life meeting with you like this than be bound to a woman I don't love."

"That's exactly how I feel."

"Then we can't stop hoping, Nadine. We can't stop searching for a solution."

"You're right." She held him tightly and she returned his embrace. "We can't ever give up."

"Never." He buried his fingers in her hair, guided her head back and kissed her mouth slowly, tenderly. Her tongue met his with loving and passionate strokes that touched his heart and awakened his cock.

He reluctantly moved his lips from hers. Though she tasted sweet and he loved the feel of her tongue against his, he knew how much she liked being kissed all over.

Keeping gentle pressure on her hair so that her neck arched, he slowly covered her throat with kisses.

Nadine sighed with pleasure and stroked his shoulders and back. Brady loved the touch of her small soft hands and the way she gently scraped her sharp nails over his flesh, the sensation not painful but arousing.

He sank to his knees, covering her breasts and smooth, luscious belly with kisses. He loved the shape of her stomach and ran his lips over it for several moments, then teasingly dipped the very tip of his tongue into her navel.

Moaning softly, she arched against him. The sound of her voice combined with the excitement of touching her had his cock rock-hard and ready, but he didn't like to rush lovemaking with Nadine.

Brady took his time, savoring every inch of her. He kissed her hips and thighs and buried his face against her curling blue pubic hair. He nuzzled her in that intimate place and rolled his tongue over her clit.

He licked her until she came, her fingers tight on his scalp and her entire body quivering. Brady steadied her by the hips as she panted and writhed with pleasure.

Arousing her like this had him teetering on the edge. When she finally calmed, he stretched out on his back and beckoned her to mount him, which she did eagerly.

Her smooth, strong thighs and firm, round ass felt wonderful against him, but best of all was the heart-pounding excitement of her tight, wet pussy swallowing his rigid cock.

Their fingers entwined as she rocked upon him, stirring their passion. Brady fought to keep his stimulated body under control, waiting for her arousal to once again catch up with his.

Soon her lovely eyes closed and she arched her head back, her hips gliding faster as she strained to reach her climax.

Finally she cried out in ecstasy and her pulsations hurled him over the edge.

His hips lunged upward and he gasped, "Nadine! My Nadine!"

As they came down from the heights of passion, she curled up beside him, their bodies warming each other against the night's chill.

After a moment, she withdrew from his embrace. "I need to get back to the water for a while."

Brady noticed that excitement or stress affected her ability to breathe on land. After sex or an argument or any burst of intense emotions, she was forced to return to the water much sooner than if she remained calm.

He guessed it was similar to his ability to hold his breath underwater. It was easier when he wasn't excited.

"Do you want me to leave?" he asked.

"No, but I think your cousins are right about you getting more rest at night. I don't want you getting hurt on the job."

"I'm fine."

"So you say." She grinned and brushed his mouth with a kiss.

"Tomorrow night then? The same time?"

"Always."

"I'll leave in a few minutes." He caressed her hair. "I like watching you swim, especially when I can see your tailfin above the surface."

"I'll make sure I give a few good flicks for you." She smiled then waded into the water.

While she dove beneath the waves and swam, Brady pulled on his shirt and trousers then sat on a fallen log to put on his socks and shoes. He'd only tugged on one sock when he heard a loud splash and saw Nadine's gorgeous tail flicking in the water.

He smiled, watching it flow against the waves. As the beating of her tail became frantic, his brow furrowed and he realized something was wrong. Then he noticed another tail -- this one thick and pale green -- swishing above the waves. Nadine's head broke the surface, her face dark purple and her hands clawing at the oversized serpent wrapped around her neck.

Without hesitation, Brady withdrew the knife from his belt and bounded into the water.

Again Nadine and the serpent disappeared beneath the waves. Brady dove under, grateful that night hadn't completely fallen. Just ahead he saw Nadine and the serpent struggling amidst the reeds. He swam toward them and sliced the serpent's tail. Like many serpents along Hot River, it radiated magical power that drained the strength of those who touched it. Already Nadine's struggles had become weaker and Brady felt his strength waning. His heart pounded and his lungs felt ready to burst. Still he fought the serpent until it released Nadine and sank its long, sharp fangs into his arm.

The pain gave him a momentary rush of strength and he grasped the serpent and used the knife to slice its head off.

He needed air quickly, but glancing toward the surface he realized it was too far away. In the struggle, the serpent had dragged him deeper than he'd thought. He swam upward, still weak from the serpent's magic and his arm throbbing with pain from the bite. Then he felt Nadine slip an arm around him. Her powerful tail launched them to the surface in record time and he choked and gasped, filling his aching lungs with air.

Nadine hauled Brady onto shore where he lay trembling, his eyes half closed. Nadine's image blurred, but he blinked, trying to keep her in focus.



"Oh, gods, Brady, you need help."

"My cousins. They need to find the werewolf queen," he said, his voice scarcely a whisper.

"Shh," she said. "It'll be all right. What did you do with your knife?"

"Dropped it in the lake."

"Damn! Brady, I have to cut your arm to suck out the poison. It's important I do that because of this serpent's magic. Are you ready?"

He nodded, at the moment unable to speak. It hurt when she used the sharp tip of a stone to cut his enflamed arm, but he managed to hold still, though he gave a low grunt of pain.

"My truck," he whispered as she worked. "It's about a quarter of a mile away, at the end of the trail. Use the communicator to contact... Wolf... Whackers."

Speaking those words was the last thing he remembered.

## Chapter Four

Brady awoke to the scent of the best barbecue in these parts -- the kind only werewolves knew how to cook. Rather than the cool autumn chill, he felt the warmth of fur blankets. A hand lightly touched his forehead and though it was a gentle hand, he knew it didn't belong to Nadine.

He opened his eyes and found himself staring into the face of an attractive black-haired woman whom he recognized as Cassia, a woman with the magical ability to heal through massage. Though she wasn't a werewolf, she was the mate of Magda, the new queen of a pack of female werewolves in the Wicked Wild. Those wolves were family to the wife of Brady's cousin, Hugo Princeton.

"Hi," Cassia said. "How are you feeling?"

"Better."

"If the Princeton triplets got you to me a moment later, you probably wouldn't have made it. Here, drink this."

Brady sat up and Cassia offered him a mug of water. He drank greedily, then asked, "Did they say anything about Nadine? How is she?"

"Nadine. Your girlfriend," Cassia said. "She's better now."

Panic shot through him. "What do you mean better?"

"After she found your truck and called the triplets for help, she almost didn't return to the water in time. That's what Jeb told us. You see, he wasn't very far from the cove when Nadine put out the call and he gave her a lift on his motorcycle back to the water before she... it doesn't matter now. She's fine. You're fine. And Hugo and Sadie are here talking to Oakes about a possible way to get you two together permanently."

"Really? Where are they?"

"I'll ask them to come in."

Cassia stepped out of the simple wooden hut, located in the center of the werewolf village, which served as her place of healing.

Moments later, Oakes stepped inside followed by Hugo, a lean, black-haired man who resembled the triplets, and his wife, Sadie, a tall chestnut-haired woman. Both were werewolves, but at the moment they presented themselves in their human form.

"You look better," Oakes said.

"Thanks for getting me here," Brady said. "Are you sure Nadine is all right?"

"She's fine. Ask her yourself. She swam down from the cove and is waiting in the brook behind the village."

"We've been talking to her about options regarding your relationship," Sadie said.

"I need to see her." Brady pushed aside the blankets and stood. He was glad to see one of his cousins had remembered to bring his shoes. They sat a short distance away and while he put them on, Sadie continued speaking.

"I don't personally know of any curse that enables a water creature to shift into a land creature or vice versa," Sadie said. "There are water shifters, of course, but all the ones I know of are born, not made."

A sinking feeling weighed upon Brady's heart, but he shook his head and said, "It doesn't matter. Nadine and I belong together, even if it's only under limited circumstances."

"Don't give up hope yet," Hugo told him.

"What do you mean?"

"Come with us. We were just about to make a suggestion to Nadine," Sadie said.

Brady and his companions left the hut and walked through the werewolf village. Several crude huts formed a semicircle on the outskirts, and in the center, fire blazed in a pit, several beasts roasting over it. His stomach rumbled, but at the moment he had more important things on his mind than food.

As promised, Nadine waded in the brook behind the village. Upon seeing him, she left the water and melted into his arms.

"I was so afraid," she whispered, holding him tightly. "If anything had happened to you --"

"I'm fine. Are you?"

"Yes. Your family and friends are just fantastic." She glanced at Oakes, Hugo and Sadie. "I can't thank you all enough."

"You're very welcome," Sadie said. "Now, about the suggestion. This might be worthless and it will probably be dangerous..."

"She's right about that," Hugo said. "But if anyone knows the information you seek, it's Devil Fins."

"Devil Fins," Sadie continued. "An ancient water shifter. Some believe she was the first water shifter. She has lived as a recluse for thousands of years, but when I was younger I sought her out and she accepted me as a student for a short time. I believe if you tell her I sent you, she will talk to you."

"Sadie is obsessed with shape shifting in all its forms," Hugo explained. "She's done some crazy things to satisfy her curiosity."

"If anyone knows a way to help you, Devil Fins is the one," Sadie said.

Nadine and Brady, still locked in an embrace, looked at each other.

"Then we'll go to Devil Fins," Brady said.

Nodding, Nadine whispered, "To Devil Fins."

"I can tell you the way," Sadie said. "If Hugo and I weren't dealing with a pair of out-of-control cat shifters locked in our dungeon, I'd guide you myself, but as it is we shouldn't have even left home today."

"It's all right. We appreciate what you've done," Brady told her.

Again he gazed at Nadine and her beautiful blue eyes, filled with hope, stared back.

\* \* \*

After making preparations, Brady and Nadine followed Sadie's directions to the backwater swamp where Devil Fins resided. Deep into the heart of the Wicked Wild they journeyed, Nadine through a shallow brook and Brady by foot, since the pathway

that wound through the overgrown, twisted trees was so narrow no vehicle could travel there.

Even in daytime it was dark this far into the Wicked Wild and they needed to be on the lookout for many dangers. Snake shifters, Wildmen, and other magical beasts haunted these woods. People who delved into the seediest forms of magic came here to practice, beyond the boundaries of those who kept order in the magical community.

Finally they neared what looked to be an oversized beaver's dam at the edge of a murky body of water. Strangely, from where she swam, Nadine felt a chill in the water, strange for any part of Hot River, except perhaps for the northernmost section that flowed through Old Man Winter's territory.

She surfaced, tugging brownish reeds from her hair, and glanced at Brady who stood nearby on the muddy ground.

"That must be it," Brady said.

"Yeah. Sadie said Devil Fins' home looks like that."

"At least the home is recognizable," Brady snorted. "Devil Fins herself can take a variety of shapes. I --" His gaze flickered across the swamp to where an alligator with strange, glowing green eyes slid into the water. "Nadine, get out of there fast."

She didn't hesitate in pushing herself onto a large rock sticking out of the water and hopping upon several smaller ones toward the shore where Brady tugged her into his arms.

The alligator's head appeared above the water, then the creature rose, shifting into the form of a tall, gaunt woman with greenish skin and stringy mud-brown hair. Dark brownish nipples tipped her pendulous breasts and when she cast Brady and Nadine a sinister grin, her jagged teeth came into view.

"It's been a while since I've had such a delicacy," she said in a surprisingly soft voice, sweet as elderberry wine. "A succulent water nymph and a strapping land man. You look like you'll put up quite a fight, land man. I'll enjoy you very much."

Brady stiffened, his hand hovering over the knife sheathed at his hip, but Nadine took a step toward Devil Fins and said, "Sadie sent us. She said you might be able to help us."

Devil Fins' glowing green eyes narrowed and she seemed to ponder for a few seconds before she said, "And why would Sadie think I can help you?"

"We're trying to find out if there's a way for a water creature and a land man to mate for life."

"Nothing prevents anyone from mating for life," Devil Fins sneered. "All it takes is a promise."

"We want more than that. We want to live together," Brady stated.

Another wicked smile spread across Devil Fins' lips. "That much in love, are you? Willing to risk your lives, are you?"

"Yes," both Nadine and Brady spoke simultaneously and without hesitation.

Devil Fins' eyes widened a bit at the forcefulness of their response. Then she replied, "I see. That kind of sacrifice is hard to find."

"Is there a spell or a curse, anything that will allow one of us to live in the other's realm?" Brady asked. "Can I become a water shifter?"

"Or can I become a land shifter?" Nadine asked.

"No," Devil Fins replied swiftly. "There is no such magic that I know of."

Brady and Nadine exchanged glances. He sensed her disappointment and knew it matched his own.

"But there is one possibility," Devil Fins added.

They turned to her sharply and Brady's heart pounded with anticipation.

"What is it?" he demanded.

Devil Fins folded her arms beneath her breasts and stared at them. "In this life nothing is free."

"Oh. Right. I almost forgot." Brady withdrew a pouch from his pocket. It wasn't filled with money, but with the bones of dead catfish collected from his and Nadine's cove. They hadn't killed the fish for their own selfish purpose, but spent days searching

for ones already dead. The search had taken time, which was why they had needed a week before starting their journey through the Wicked Wild. Even the bones held a certain power that Sadie said was precious to Devil Fins. Gold and jewels mean nothing to her, but the bones of the magical fish would be enough to buy what information he and Nadine required.

Brady held out the pouch to Devil Fins and she snatched it from his grasp.

After examining its contents, she said, "The only chance you have of getting what you desire is to meet with the Spirit of Hot River itself -- if you can. Few who have met the Spirit of the River have survived to tell the tale."

Brady glanced at Nadine. "You're of the water. Do you know how to find the Spirit of Hot River?"

She shook her head, a hint of fear in her eyes. "According to legend, the Spirit of Hot River is everywhere and anywhere, yet to my knowledge no one has ever spoken to it."

"Very few have had the honor," Devil Fins said.

"And I suppose you have?" Brady didn't keep the annoyance from his voice. Just as he had loved Nadine on sight, he loathed this water shifter. It wasn't her unfortunate appearance that repulsed him, for with her ability to change shape, this might not even be her true form, but it was her malice that irked him and the mocking look in her strange green eyes.

"No." Devil Fins' soft voice became softer, but this time he caught a note of awe in it. "I have not. But I once had a teacher who told me the way. She told me not to go there unless I wished to risk everything -- my life and my soul. I have never felt strongly enough about something to risk my immortal spirit."

Brady did. His love for Nadine would be worth the risk, for he knew they were soulmates, meant to be together no matter what the cost.

"Will you tell us how to get there?" Nadine asked with a firmness in her voice he had never heard before. Love for her almost overwhelmed him. It seemed she was willing to risk as much as he was for the sake of their partnership.

"It will come at a price," Devil Fins stated.

"We've already paid you," Brady said. "Quite handsomely. Do you know how hard the bones of magical catfish are to come by?"

"Not me, fool!" the water shifter snapped, baring her sharp teeth. "The Spirit of Hot River will demand a price for what you ask. That is the risk. I'm warning you now so there will never be any question."

"We understand," Nadine said.

Devil Fins stared at them for several heartbeats, then said, "Follow the swamp in this direction." She pointed a bony finger in the right way. "Prepare for a long journey and a variety of climates, for as you know Hot River flows through and connects all the magical community. You must never break with this stream of water. Follow it exactly, no matter where it flows, for it is a magical path that leads to the heart of the river. When you reach the heart of the river, where the Spirit of the River resides, there will be no mistaking it. Every body of water, from the tiniest brook to the massive torrents that run through the oceans of the mortal world, flow from there. The rapids are like nothing you have ever seen, far worse than the most brutal storms in mortal oceans. As you near it, Nadine, you will not be able to swim in the water. It would swallow you and crush your feeble body like the hydra's feet would crush a hermit crab. You must travel the last steps of the journey over land."

"Land?" she breathed.

Brady's brow furrowed. How was that possible?

Devil Fins lifted a hand and said, "Don't worry. The final part of the journey, from water mild enough for you to survive in to the heart of the river, should take no more than an hour. A water nymph can endure land for that long, correct?"

"Yes," Nadine said. "I'll make it."

"At the heart of the river, wait and if the Spirit of the River wishes, it will approach you. I can tell you nothing more."

Brady nodded. "All right."

"Thank you," Nadine said.



Devil Fins nodded the slightest bit, then placed the bag of bones in her mouth. She melted into the shape of the alligator and once again disappeared into the swamp.

Brady and Nadine stood in silence for several seconds, then he said, "I love you and I'm willing to risk myself, but I don't want to risk you."

"But I do." She locked her arms around his neck. Her lovely blue eyes stared into his. "My worry isn't for myself, but for you."

"I want this, too, Nadine. If there is any chance of us living a normal life together..."

"Then we have to take it."

Brady nodded and kissed her, closing his eyes and pouring all his love for her into the kiss. When it broke, he said, "We should prepare for this trip carefully. We'll return to our homes, pack properly and I'll tell my cousins that I'm taking a leave of absence."

"My sisters thought I was crazy to even come here. I'm sure they'll think I've completely lost my mind now, but I don't care. They can't possibly understand how I feel because they've never had the joy of loving a land man."

"Well, this land man loves you very, very much, so I can't help wondering, if I do love you, how can I let you risk your life? No, even worse, your soul."

"We love each other, Brady, but I belong to myself. It is my choice, just as it's yours. Love isn't about one person controlling the other, it's about choosing to share our lives. I won't be content unless I can truly share my life with you."

He smiled sadly. "I know. That's how I feel."

"Then tomorrow morning we'll meet at our cove and begin the journey to meet the Spirit of Hot River."

## Chapter Five

Brady paused by the edge of the river and wiped sweat from his face. He waved to Nadine, who swam a short distance from the shore. She waved back then dove beneath the surface, her beautiful tail momentarily flipping above the water. The current looked pretty rough from where he stood and he wondered how she had managed to swim for so long against it.

They had been traveling for nearly a month. Thankfully some parts of their journey had been hastened by a ride from an oversized winged cat as well as some friends who had met them along the way and offered rides in their cars and trucks. As long as they kept beside the same stream of water that led from Devil Fins' swamp, they would reach the heart of Hot River.

For the past few days, they had followed the river through a tropical jungle. The humidity was almost unbearable, mostly because the closer they got to the heart of the river, the hotter the water became.

Nadine swam to the shore and joined Brady on land.

"The current is getting really strong," she said. "It feels like we're heading toward a waterfall, only --"

"Yes?"

Their gazes locked and he saw excitement and fear in her eyes. "Brady, I think this is it."

His heartbeat quickened and he asked, "Do you want to walk from here?"

"I'll swim a little longer, but if the current gets any rougher --"

He nodded and watched her wade into the water.

A short time later, Nadine once again joined him on the shore, panting from the strain of her swim in the hot, fierce water.

"This has got to be it," she said.

He took her hand and they continued following the river. A steep slope lay ahead and as they descended, their feet slipping against the rocks, they saw the river pouring down an enormous cascade. The heat and steam from the water was now uncomfortably hot and the sound of the violent waves almost deafening.

At the end of the slope, they stopped and stared at the furious masses of water rushing into a central body that churned and whirled with terrifying ferocity.

Brady's pulse raced and he had to admit to himself he was afraid. Glancing at Nadine he saw that in spite of the heat, she had gone quite pale, her skin very light lavender.

"Are you all right?" he bellowed above the roar of the water.

"Yes," she shouted. "This is the heart of Hot River, Brady."

"Yeah. It's amazing."

She smiled tremulously. "That's an understatement."

Hand-in-hand, they stepped closer to the edge, but paused. The spray flying from the river was almost too hot to bear.

Then a powerful yet androgynous voice echoed on the wind, "Water nymph. Land man. Why have you come?"

"Are you the Spirit of Hot River?" Brady called with more confidence than he felt. Even an experienced hunter of magical beasts like himself couldn't help feeling intimidated by a force of nature.

"I am. Why have you come here?"

"We want to spend our lives together," Brady continued, "I want to become a water creature. Can you do this?"

"Can isn't the question. The question is why should I do this?" Hot River replied. "What gives you the right to change your natural state?"

"The right of love, that can be felt by all creatures, regardless of whether they're from the land or the water."

"If he can't become a water creature, then can you give me to the land?" Nadine asked.

The water seemed to churn faster and droplets sprayed them, painfully hot and relentless. Brady resisted the urge to step back. Something told him the River would take it as an insult.

"You wish to leave the water?" Hot River demanded.

"No. I love the water," Nadine admitted. "But not as much as I love this man."

"Interesting," Hot River mused. "Each would give up their very essence for the other. My final demand before answering your question is this: Water nymph, land man, come closer. Step inside me, where all the magic that flows through the world converges."

Brady felt Nadine's hand tremble, or was it his?

"You fear me," the River continued. "Were your words of sacrifice merely talk, or is there meaning behind them?"

Brady and Nadine exchanged glances, then simultaneously ran to the edge of the water and dove in.

Brady felt as if he'd leapt into a boiling whirlpool. Indeed, he had. Water closed over his head, stealing his breath and pounding him from all sides. Still he clung to Nadine's hand and she held on to him just as desperately. It seemed as if they churned forever. Just before he blacked out, the water calmed around him.

He opened his eyes and found himself staring at Nadine who looked just as stunned as he felt, her eyes wide. Though they floated beneath the surface, Brady breathed easily. He kicked his legs and flicked his --

Turning around in surprise, he gazed at the large bluish-green tailfin swishing behind him. His tailfin.

"As a reward for your trust in me and your belief that love is possible, even between such different creatures, I have granted your wish. You are no longer a land man, but a water nymph. You cannot return to your life on the land, but must fully embrace your new one below the surface."

"Thank you," Brady said. Though happier than he could express in words, he felt a slight pang of sadness. There were things about his life he would miss, such as his job at Wolf Whackers.

"Thank you, River Spirit," Nadine said and embraced Brady tightly. "Thank you so much."

Brady returned her embrace. Their lips met in a tender kiss that was soon interrupted by the voice of the River once again.

"I will keep my waters calm until you leave this dangerous territory. Live your new life together well. Water nymph, teach him the ways of our world. Land man, embrace those ways with the same fervor as you embrace your faithful lover."

"I will," Brady stated. "I promise."

"Go now," Hot River said.

They knew better than to disobey and swam off as fast as their tailfins could propel them.

## Epilogue

Hand-in-hand, their powerful tailfins swishing behind them, Brady and Nadine swam toward the surface of the warm water in their cove. They glanced at each other and smiled.

It had been six months since they had met the Spirit of Hot River and to Brady each day was a fantastic learning experience. Nadine taught him everything he needed to know about being a water nymph and he thoroughly loved the lessons, mostly because he adored his mate.

There were pleasures to being a water creature he'd never imagined. He explored the deepest depths imaginable and no matter how cold the weather above, Hot River was always comfortably warm.

They surfaced and saw Oakes on shore. He waved to Brady and Nadine and approached the water.

"How is everything going at Wolf Whackers?" Brady asked.

"Great. How is our sister company, Serpent Slayers?" Oakes asked, a gleam in his eyes.

Now that Brady could no longer work on land, he had taken his animal control skills to the water and opened Serpent Slayers, where water folk depended on him to fairly and efficiently handle problems with aquatic beasts. With Nadine's help and his ability, the business was doing well. He and his cousins had decided to work together to keep the magical world safe and often consulted each other, especially regarding amphibious magical creatures.

"We're doing fantastic," Brady said. "Right, Nadine?"

"Yes, we are." She smiled.

"I sent a message for you to meet me because I wanted to pass on a warning about sirens being spotted in the area. Usually they're seagoing creatures, so when they show up inland we get a little nervous. If you hear anything --"

"We'll contact you immediately," Brady said.

Oakes nodded. "Well, I need to get back to the office. Talk to you later."

Brady and Nadine waved goodbye and watched Oakes disappear down the path through the trees.

"I should swim into open water and see if I can find out anything about the sirens," Brady said.

She slipped her arms around his neck and brushed her nose against his. "Care for some company?"

"From you?"

"No, from Devil Fins," she quipped.

"Oh, well, in that case I'm all for it."

She playfully slapped his shoulder, but he embraced her and as they sank beneath the surface, he covered her mouth in a tender yet passionate kiss.

## **Kate Hill**

What do trips around the world, endless nights of breathtaking sex, and a muscular, 6-foot 3-inch, brown-haired, blue-eyed significant other have to do with Kate Hill? Absolutely nothing, but she can dream, can't she? In reality Kate is a single, thirty-something vegetarian New Englander who loves writing romantic fantasies. Visit her online at <http://www.kate-hill.com>, [www.myspace.com/katehillromance](http://www.myspace.com/katehillromance), or join her newsgroup at [groups.yahoo.com/group/katehill](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/katehill). Stop by Kate's Amazon blog at [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com).