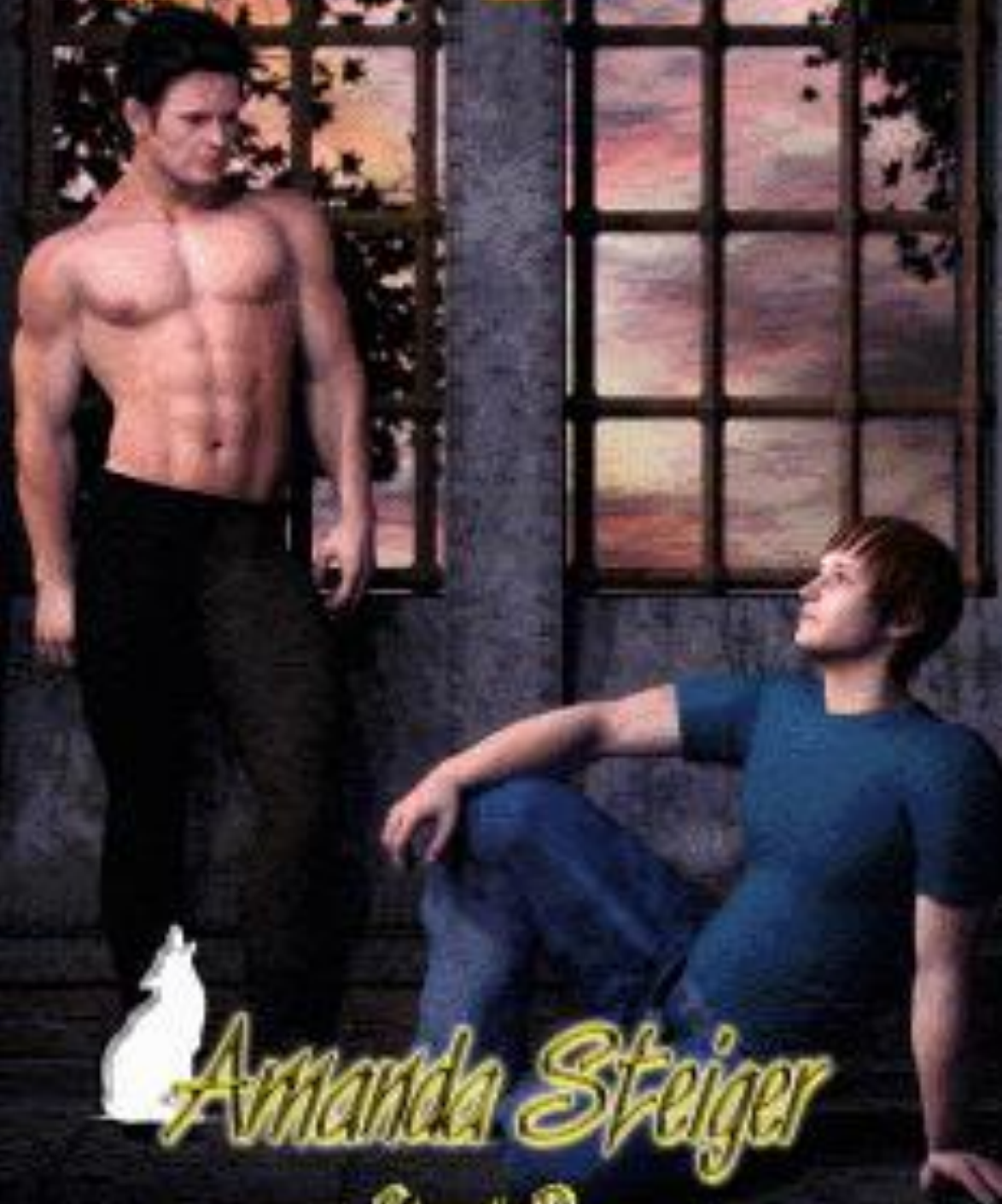


# HALF-BLOOD



Amanda Steiger

Changeling Press

# **Half-Blood**

## **Amanda Steiger**

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## **Half-Blood**

### **Amanda Steiger**

A half-human shifter can't afford to trust anyone. Yet Haden must find a mate or die.

Haden is half-human and half-Folk -- a breed of wolf shifters who must find a bondmate when they reach adulthood... or die of bond deprivation sickness. But after a lifetime of being bullied by his pack and ostracized for his heritage, Haden's not ready to open his heart to anyone. Then he crashes his motorcycle and finds himself in the care of a powerful Folk male who stirs his blood like no other.

## Chapter One

Haden rolled over in bed and buried his face against the pillow. Cold wind whistled through his open window, billowing through the curtains and caressing his naked, sweat-dampened skin. It was thirty degrees outside -- a cold, dark Maine night. The heater in his bedroom barely worked, but in spite of that and the open window, he was drowning in sweat. It poured out of every pore and drenched the sheets. He rolled over again, panting, his brow burning dully with fever.

He knew what it was, of course. The fevers and headaches, though agonizing, were the least serious symptom of bond deprivation sickness. There was worse to come. He was twenty-three -- still young, but past the age when most of his kind had already taken a bondmate.

His jaw clenched, and his hands fisted on the sheets. He'd hoped that he might avoid this. He was half human after all, and God knew his heritage had caused him enough trouble growing up among the Folk. His human blood should be good for *something*, shouldn't it?

So he'd thought... but it seemed that his genes weren't doing anything to cushion the effects of bond deprivation.

"Damn it," he said through clenched teeth. Claws sprouted from his fingertips, puncturing his pillow. He took a deep breath and retracted them.

He was never going to get to sleep like this. He flung the sheets aside, walked into the kitchen and grabbed a beer from the fridge. He chugged it, hoping it would take the edge off his anxiety, but the knot of tension remained lodged in his gut.

His skin tingled, every nerve-ending hypersensitive. His fingers tightened on the bottle and it shattered, glass shards slicing through skin. He cursed and sucked the blood from his fingers. Despite the pain and the cold, sick fear squirming in his stomach, he had a raging hard-on. And he knew from experience that jerking off would only take the edge off for a short while. Then the need would be back, deeper and stronger than before, as if every orgasm fed it -- like trying to slake his thirst with saltwater.

These days, it was always like this. Feelings bombarded him, and he was swept up like a leaf in a river, powerless.

Haden crouched, picked up the bloody glass shards and tossed them into the trash. As he straightened, wooziness hit him like a slap, making him sway on his feet.

He'd long since given up the hope that it was just a persistent flu bug. His body was trying to push him to mate. But for those born of the Folk, the act of mating was binding. And there was no one he trusted that much. Hell, no one he *trusted*, period.

He couldn't take this anymore. He had to get out. Where, he didn't know -- just out.

He threw on a faded leather jacket and a pair of jeans and walked out of the house, into the cool, dark night. Pine trees surrounded his mountain home, spicing the air with their fresh, sharp scent. Through gaps in the trees, he could see the gleam of moonlight on water: the ocean. He'd always found the sound of its waves comforting, but tonight, nothing soothed his jangled nerves.

The house was on his pack's ancestral land. It had belonged to his mother while she was alive. He'd grown up here, with her trying her best to shield him from his packmates' aggression.

There were some Folk who didn't frown on mating with humans and bore no resentment toward half-bloods... or so he'd heard. But they were the rare exceptions to the rule, and his pack's attitude was much more traditional. The typical way of dealing with half-bloods was to kill them immediately after their birth. Only his mother's fierce devotion had saved him from that fate.

Haden stared out at the ocean. His nostrils twitched, sampling the hint of salt on the breeze.

For an instant he thought he glimpsed a shadow moving through the trees and a faint musty scent reached his nose. The hairs on the back of his neck tingled and stood up. "Who's out

there?" he called, making his voice as deep and rough as he could. No response. The scent was gone. A wind sighed through the trees, swaying their branches.

These days he often had the feeling that something or someone was watching him, but it always turned out to be nothing -- a moon-shadow or a bush stirring in the wind. Probably, it was just nerves. But knowing that didn't quiet the restless, itchy, caged feeling crawling around under his skin. And he knew there was only one thing he could do to make that feeling go away.

Haden shuddered and wrapped his arms around himself, suddenly cold.

Mom had always told him that he would one day have to take a mate. That it was the way of the Folk. Her own bondmate had been a human -- one who'd abandoned her and left her to slowly die of bond deprivation. After watching the bond kill the only person he loved, was Haden supposed to accept his fate? Was he supposed to bind himself to one of his packmates, one of those who hated him and would have crushed his infant skull, given the chance? Even if he could find someone willing to accept a half-blood, the thought of being so vulnerable to another person made his survival instincts scream in protest. Surviving meant keeping to himself, keeping out of sight.

His bike was parked in the yard. He started up the engine and sped down the street, his headlight cutting through the fog. Below the road, to the east, the sea lay vast and dark under the starry sky. To the west lay dark forests.

He rode, cold wind stinging his face, not knowing where he was going -- just that he had to get away. Even when it began to rain in icy, stinging pellets, he didn't slow.

Too late, he saw the patch of ice gleaming on the pavement. He hit it, skidded, and spun off the road. Ground and sky flashed past his vision. Then there was a sickening jolt, a blinding flash of pain, and everything went black.

## Chapter Two

He woke slowly, rising through layers of dark fog toward the faint, distant light of consciousness.

The first thing he became aware of was a dull, throbbing pain. It filled his entire body, but seemed mostly centered in his leg and lower back. Fragments of memory floated back into his mind: the dark road, the stinging rain, the lurch in his stomach as his bike careened off the road and into empty space.

He'd survived, apparently. His nostrils twitched. The air smelled faintly of wood, varnish, and cinnamon-scented candles. No harsh chemical sanitizers, which meant he wasn't in a human hospital. Just as well. Humans wouldn't know how to care for one of the Folk; their drugs would probably hurt him more than help.

But if not a hospital, where was he?

He sniffed the air again. Someone was in the room. A man.

His heartbeat quickened. He tried to sit up, and pain ripped through him. He collapsed back to the bed with a groan.

"Easy," said a deep voice. Large, warm hands settled on his shoulders and pushed him gently down.

He gasped for breath, straining to breathe against the pain in his chest. He could feel a tight pressure around his ribs, which probably meant they were wrapped. Broken ribs, then. But there was so much pain everywhere; he had trouble making sense of it. Slowly, he opened his eyes.

He was in a bedroom with wood walls. Heavy curtains were drawn over the window, so only a few thin beams of sunlight trickled through. The four-poster bed currently supporting him looked large enough for three people, and a heavy quilt had been pulled over him, covering him up to his chest.

Slowly, he raised his gaze and met a pair of calm dark eyes.

The man standing beside the bed was full-blooded Folk. He knew that at once... not just from the strong, musky wolf smell, but because the Folk had a certain look, something difficult to pin down, but easily recognizable. It wasn't his size or his crow-black hair or his thick, straight dark brows. It was something about the way he held himself, as if he were at home in the world in a way that no human could ever be. In a way that Haden himself could never be, being -- as he was -- of two different worlds. The man wore a rumpled tweed jacket, which gave him a vaguely academic look but couldn't mask the wildness beneath.

Those calm dark eyes studied him. Haden stared back, making his own expression as blank and inscrutable as he could. His heart raced. If this man had wanted to kill him, he probably would have done so already -- but that didn't mean he was trustworthy. *Reveal nothing*. Of course, the man probably knew what he was already. He could probably smell his tainted blood.

"I don't know how much you remember," the stranger said, "but you had a bad fall. I found you by the roadside. Your left leg was broken in four different places, and you cracked several of your ribs on the left side, as well. You also hit your head. Fortunately there doesn't seem to be any brain damage."

He wondered how the stranger could know that.

As if reading his mind, the man replied, "I questioned you earlier, though you probably don't remember now."

Haden tensed, wondering how much he'd said. He looked down at the quilt covering him, wondering if he really wanted to know what kind of shape his body was in. But curiosity overcame dread. He tugged aside the covers. A heavy cast encased his left leg. He wore only an oversized T-shirt and a pair of boxers. Had this stranger dressed him? At the thought, warmth rose to his cheeks.

"I treated your injuries. All things considered, it seemed wisest to handle this myself." He pulled a chair to the bedside, sat, and smiled, showing one abnormally sharp canine. "You're allowed to speak, you know."

Haden's tongue crept out to moisten dry lips. When he spoke, his voice emerged as a thick, hoarse croak. "How long have I been unconscious?"

"Three days."

He wondered how he'd gone to the bathroom during that time. He decided he didn't want to know. "Does anyone else know I'm here?"

He shook his head. "I wasn't sure who to contact. You didn't have any information on you. Though if I'm not mistaken, you live in that house in the mountains."

Haden didn't reply.

If the man was put off by his silence, he didn't show it. "My name is Richard Thorn. I live about thirty miles from you."

Haden stared at his face -- the large proud nose, full firm lips, and strong clean-shaven jaw. A simple, solid, masculine face. Yet there was a depth to those dark eyes. He couldn't read them. They were like two still, calm pools, surfaces mirroring their surroundings but revealing nothing of what lay below.

"Why did you help me?" he asked.

Richard blinked. "Why? Do I need a reason to help someone who's injured?"

"No one helps anyone for no reason. Anyway, you could have just called 911."

"Humans would pump you full of antibiotics and medications that your system would reject. I couldn't take you to a hospital... and I wasn't sure if the healers of your pack would help you, given their attitude toward half-bloods."

At the word, Haden flinched. He lowered his gaze, embarrassed at his reaction.

Richard's voice softened. "I'm sorry. That was insensitive of me."

"No," Haden replied flatly. "It's just the truth, isn't it? If you'd brought me to them, they probably would have killed me in my sleep and considered it a mercy." His voice trembled. He hated himself for his weakness. Over the years, he'd learned how to bury his feelings, to not give others the satisfaction of seeing his pain... but he was too raw right now, too exhausted to keep his guard up. Tears prickled at the corners of his eyes. He shut them, but to his mortification, a tear escaped and slipped down his cheek.

A warm hand brushed against his arm. "I'm sorry," Richard said softly.

Haden tensed and jerked his arm away. His breathing quickened. "Don't touch me."

The hand withdrew. He kept his eyes tightly shut, heart racing. Richard's skin had brushed his for only a brief instant, but his nerve-endings still tingled. His fingers clenched on the sheets.

He didn't trust the kindness in Richard's voice and eyes. When he'd been younger and more foolish, Haden had fallen for tricks like that. More than once, other pack members had approached him with feigned smiles and seductive words of friendship, but always, always, it had been a trap -- a way to twist the knife in deeper. Always, it had ended in their laughter, and his pain and humiliation.

He didn't fall for such tricks now. He didn't know what this man wanted, but he didn't believe for a moment that he was just doing this out of kindness.

Richard stood. "Would you like anything to eat? I was going to grill some steaks for dinner."

At the mention of food, Haden's stomach gurgled. Richard chuckled. "I'll take that as a yes." He retreated into the kitchen and returned later with two thick, juicy steaks on plates.

They ate in silence, Richard sitting in the chair next to the bed. He'd cut Haden's steak into bite-sized pieces, which left Haden feeling vaguely insulted -- it was the sort of thing you'd do for a small child -- but he had to admit it made eating easier. His left arm, though not broken, was still bruised and tender. Hell, his entire left side ached whenever he moved any part of it.

It might have been easier to eat in wolf-form, but with the way his body was now, transformation wasn't an option.

Once he'd chewed and swallowed the last piece of steak, he looked at Richard and said, "Why have I never seen you before?"

"Hmm?"

"You're a member of my pack, aren't you?"

He shook his head. "I'm not a member of any pack."

Haden's brow furrowed. "You're a stray?" Packs didn't like strays. They were too difficult to control; they endangered the secrecy of the entire shifter community. "So why hasn't anyone tried to recruit you?"

"They did," Richard replied. "When I first moved here. I told them I wasn't interested."

He frowned. "And they what? Just quietly left?"

"No. They tried to use force. I showed them that I wasn't so easily intimidated. After that, they left me alone."

A chill rippled through Haden. What had he done to scare them off? Wounded them? Killed one of them? He wondered exactly how strong Richard was. Most strays were skittish and stayed far away from other shifters. If he was comfortable living next to a pack without fear...

Richard watched him silently. It was disconcerting, the way he watched, as if he could see the thoughts playing out behind Haden's eyes. "I have no desire to harm you," he said. "And as long as you're here, you'll have my protection."

"I never asked for protection." His throat swelled, and his hands squeezed into fists. "I never asked to be saved."

"Would you rather I had left you to die?"

Haden didn't reply. But he wondered. Maybe on some subconscious level, he had been trying to die. He didn't want death, but as far as he knew, it was the only way to escape the bond. What did it say about him, he mused, that the idea of being tied to someone -- of *needing* someone -- scared him more than death?

Richard took his plate from him and carried it into the kitchen. Haden watched him go.

Who was Richard's bondmate? Haden couldn't smell any other Folk in the house, but he *had* to be bonded, didn't he? He was older than Haden, and for the Folk, the bond was as essential to life as food and air and open space to run. It could only be severed by death.

Richard returned and sat next to the bed again. Haden's gaze tracked him.

Damn, he was so big. Broad shoulders, massive chest, thick neck, hands that looked capable of snapping a normal-sized man in half like a twig. Under that tweed jacket, he probably had muscles bulging from every inch of his body. Haden's heartbeat quickened and he averted his gaze, staring at the wall. But he couldn't shut out Richard's scent. Hot and sharp and aggressively male, it filled his nostrils and swam into his blood, into his brain.

Haden had always been attracted to males. Particularly big, strong males. When he'd fantasized, he'd always invented his own lover and his fantasy figures looked disconcertingly similar to Richard. Something about the idea of being held against a broad, powerful chest soothed and excited him. He'd spent so long being harassed by the other pack members; maybe something in him craved protection, someone who would make him feel safe. It shouldn't have surprised him that his body was reacting to Richard now.

But then, his body was so primed for bonding, he probably would have responded to anyone still young and healthy enough to mate. *Like a dog in heat*. He swallowed, all too aware of the warmth coiling low in his belly, the tingling pressure in his balls and cock. He shut his eyes, breathed in Richard's scent, and held it deep in his lungs. That scent affected him like a drug, flooding him with endorphins, making him crave more. He dug his nails into the meat of his palm, trying to distract himself.

Clothes rustled as Richard leaned closer. "Are you all right?" His voice was low, gentle. So deep. It hummed inside Haden's ear, inside his head, his very bones. His cock pulsed and strained upward.

And suddenly he knew -- *knew* -- that Richard was not bonded. Not anymore. It was something in his scent, something Haden's own hormones reacted to. "I'm fine." He forced the words out between clenched teeth.

A large hand settled on his shoulder. "You're trembling." Richard's thumb grazed the side of his neck, the lightest ghost of a touch, and his breath snagged in his throat. What would those callused hands feel like on his cock?

"Told you not to touch me," he murmured.

Richard hesitated... then his hand slipped away. Something within Haden cried out in protest. Touch scared him, yet he craved it. He wanted and didn't want -- God, this was confusing. A faint whimper escaped his throat.

Richard leaned closer, and warm breath caressed the side of his neck. "Haden?"

"I need to be alone." After a moment he added in a shaky voice, "Please."

For a moment, Richard didn't move, and Haden's heart galloped. He didn't dare meet Richard's gaze. He was afraid those penetrating dark eyes would see through his fears into the heart of his want. He squeezed his eyes shut.

Clothing rustled as Richard stood. "If you need anything, I'll be in the other room." He walked away.



Relief and disappointment flooded Haden. He told himself he should be glad that Richard was respecting his boundaries. He just wanted to be left alone. That was all he'd ever wanted... or at least, that was what he kept telling himself.

### Chapter Three

Over the next week, Haden slept a lot, waking only to eat or relieve himself. Though he didn't heal as quickly as one of the full-blooded Folk, his body still mended much faster than a human's, and before long he was able to remove the bulky cast from his leg. He still had to be careful about putting too much pressure on it, but he could move about on his own with a crutch.

Richard's house was situated close to the seaside, surrounded by pine trees. When Richard was there, he was adamant about Haden staying in bed and resting, but when he wasn't around, Haden was free to roam the property. He did laps around the yard, first with his crutch, then without it. Within another few days, he'd probably be well enough to leave.

But then what? Go back to his home and continue living in isolation until he slowly died of bond deprivation? Not much of a life. But what else could he do?

A voice in his head whispered, reminding him that Richard wasn't bonded either. He shoved the voice away. He'd made up his mind on this subject long ago. He couldn't weaken now. Dying now, with his mind and soul still his own, was better than going like his mother, howling and screaming out for someone who wasn't there.

\* \* \*

Richard got home around six o'clock, as usual. Haden was in the bedroom, sitting up in bed. He'd pulled off the covers to expose his left leg, which was now wrapped in stiff bandages instead of a cast, and was rubbing the sore muscles.

Richard pulled up a chair. "That leg is mending well."

Haden paused, studying his face, and finally asked the question which had been itching at the back of his mind. "Where do you go all day?"

"I'm a professor. I teach classes at the university in town."

"Classes on what?"

"Psychology."

Haden's brows knitted. Many of the Folk had jobs working among humans -- it was inevitable, given their relative numbers -- but he'd never met one who was a teacher. "I thought maybe you were a doctor. I mean..." He glanced down at his leg. "You seemed to know what to do."

"Well, I have a doctorate, but I'm not that kind of doctor. I was trained as a healer in my old pack though. I know enough to set broken bones."

Haden wondered why he'd left. But he didn't ask. He'd tried to avoid asking any questions about Richard's past, because he didn't want Richard to ask any about his. "So you teach human psychology to humans," he remarked. "Even though you're one of the Folk."

"Humans and Folk are not so different, beneath the fur. There are some differences, of course. But deep down, we all want the same things."

"Like what?"

"Love. Acceptance. A place to belong."

Haden narrowed his eyes slightly. "And what about you?"

"Pardon?"

"Do you have those things?"

After a pause, he said, "I have my students. I find teaching very fulfilling --"

"Not an answer."

He rubbed the back of his neck and chuckled, a strained sound. "You're right. It's not." He stared down at his feet. "I used to have someone I was very close to. I lost that person. But for now, what I have is enough. I've made peace with things." He cleared his throat. "So, what about you?"

"You mean, do I have a place to belong?"

He nodded.

Haden averted his gaze. "What do you think?"

A long pause. Then, quietly, "I think you're completely alone in the world."

Haden shifted uneasily. "Maybe I'm fine with that. Maybe I like being alone."

"I don't think that's true. And I don't think you believe it either."

His fists clenched on the sheets. "So we should be friends because we're both lonely pathetic bastards? Is that what you're saying?"

"Would it be such a terrible thing, having a friend?"

Richard's scent was becoming more and more distracting. He already had a hard-on. His hands trembled and he shut his eyes.

"Haden?" Warm, callused fingertips brushed the back of his hand, and he tensed. Electricity skittered up the nerves of his arm, and another bolt of heat shot to his cock, making it twitch. He had to choke down the groan that rose into his throat. Richard leaned closer and lowered his voice. "Are you all right?"

Haden jerked his hand away. His pulse drummed in his throat. He shut his eyes, struggling to breathe. Since coming here, he hadn't jerked off once, afraid that even a solo orgasm in such proximity to Richard might trigger the start of the bond. Now, all that pent up desire slammed into him, overwhelming him, suffocating him. He shook, and he wasn't sure if he was shaking with the intensity of that desire or with terror. "I'm fine," he squeezed out between clenched teeth.

Richard didn't speak, didn't move. But suddenly Haden couldn't stop thinking about those large, gentle hands, couldn't stop wondering how they'd feel on his skin. But it wasn't him, he thought. It was just his instincts trying to overpower his mind. And he wouldn't give in. "I need to be alone," he whispered hoarsely.

Silence stretched between them. But Richard didn't move.

"I said --"

"I know what's happening to you. You've been resisting it for a long time, haven't you? Have the fevers started?"

He tensed, but didn't reply. Didn't look at him.

"It'll only get worse, you know," he said calmly. "After the fevers, the pain starts. Emotional and physical. And in the end, you won't be able to resist. Your body will drive you to mate with anyone who's nearby, and then you won't have any choice in the matter. It's better to do it while you can still choose your mate."

Tears of helpless, frustrated anger gathered in the corners of Haden's eyes. "You want to fuck me. Is that it?" His voice emerged raw and hoarse. "That's real convenient for you, since I don't have any choice." His hands fisted on the sheets, trembling. "Is that the reason you helped me?"

"No," Richard said quietly.

"You're lying."

"I won't force anything on you, Haden."

"But you could, if you wanted." He gulped, shaking, staring down at his hands. "I couldn't stop you, could I?"

"I didn't bring you here to force a bond on you," Richard said firmly. "I never intended to take another mate. But you have to choose *someone*. As soon as you're recovered --"

"There's no one." He twisted the sheets in his hands. Tears slid down his cheeks, and he hated it, hated the weakness, the feeling of vulnerability. "There's no one in the world that I trust. No one in my pack who'd even have me. To them, I'm just a mistake. A stain they want to scrub away." His breathing hitched. "I don't know what to do." He pressed his face against the pillow. His shoulders shook in spasms as he sobbed. And he couldn't stop. He'd been fighting his emotions for so long, and that endless, grim battle had left him exhausted. He had no strength left to resist.

Richard reached out and lay a hand against his shoulder. Haden flinched, even as a part of him ached to lean into the touch, to rest his head against one broad shoulder and be sheltered in those strong arms.

"You've been suffering." Richard's hand tightened on Haden's shoulder. "Don't keep putting yourself through this. At some point, you have to bond."

Haden shook his head, breathing hard and fast. "I won't."

"If you don't, you'll die."

"Then I'll die."

"That's truly what you want?" he asked, his tone low and unreadable.

Haden's throat tightened. "I don't know. I don't know anything anymore." The truth was, he didn't want his life to end now. Despite all the pain and anger, a part of him still loved the world -- the open sky, the sweet, deep burn in his muscles when he shifted, the feel of grass beneath his paws and the wind in his fur. He didn't want all that to end. "I don't want death," he murmured. "But I'm afraid."

"Of what?"

"Needing someone that much." He tried to swallow the lump in his throat. "I saw what it did to my mother. When he left... she died slowly, and for the last few weeks all she did was lie in bed crying out for him. She couldn't see anything else. Couldn't see me. The bond destroyed her."

"I'm sorry." His voice softened. "It must have been terrible for you. But it doesn't have to be that way."

"But it can be. The closer you get to someone, the more that person can hurt you. The more they can break you."

Richard gently rubbed his shoulder, and Haden didn't have the strength to pull away. His heart greedily soaked up the touch, even as his muscles went rigid and his instincts hissed at him to recoil.

"Is there no one you'd choose?" he asked, and his deep, rumbling voice resonated in Haden's ears, in the pit of his stomach, in his marrow. "No one at all?"

Haden shook his head. "After my mother died, I was all alone. Who do you think is going to want a half-blood?"

"I'm here," he said quietly, "if you'll have me."

A chill raced up Haden's spine.

A bond went both ways. For Richard, this wouldn't be any casual fuck. Once it happened, he would be bound to Haden's side, just as Haden would be bound to his. "You don't even know me," he whispered. "Why would you --"

"I chose to save you. And when I chose that, I accepted the responsibility."

He tensed. "I don't want to be anyone's charity case. If that's what it's like, you may as well have left me there."

"It isn't like that." His fingertips slid along Haden's arm, and electricity skittered through his nerves. "I chose that responsibility because I *wanted* it. It was selfish of me. I know that. But if the alternative was to let you die..."

"Why would you care?" he whispered. "I'm just a stranger."

"But you're not. I've been watching you for some time now. I've seen you riding down that mountain trail, taking the curves too fast, as if you were desperate to escape something. And sometimes when you went down to the seashore, when you'd sit by the ocean and let the waves lap at your feet... I always stayed downwind, so you wouldn't smell me."

Haden lay motionless, not daring to breathe. *Watching him.* Now that he thought about it, hadn't he glimpsed a huge, dark wolf once, staring at him from the nearby pine forest? Just a flash of fur, gone so quickly he hadn't been certain of what he'd seen. And all those times he'd felt the back of his neck prickle, as if someone's gaze rested on him, he'd dismissed it as his imagination. The idea that Richard had been there all that time...

"Why?" he whispered.

"At first, I watched you out of curiosity. Then -- once I realized how alone you were -- I started to feel protective. So I kept watching you to make sure you were safe. I never got too close. But even so, I could see and smell the changes happening in you. I knew you were approaching the time when you would need to bond. I was watching you that night when you raced down the road, ignoring the wind and rain. And I saw you crash. I knew that if I left you, you would die."

Richard's hand remained on his shoulder, and Haden was paralyzed, helpless; fear stopped him from leaning into the touch, and need stopped him from pulling away.

A part of him wanted to resent the fact that Richard had been spying on him all this time. To tell him that he'd had no business butting into someone else's life. But the thought that kept rising into his mind was that someone had cared that much, that all those long, lonely days when he'd felt like no one would give a damn if he drew his last breath, Richard had been there. Now that he thought of it, the rest of the pack had left him alone for a while now. Was it because of Richard? Had he been protecting Haden all this time, waiting to leap in the moment he was in danger?

He didn't want to acknowledge the tears of gratitude welling in his eyes.

"There was always something about you," Richard said. "Maybe it was just the feeling that you understood it. The pain of being alone."

"Please," he whispered, his voice shaking. "Please. Just don't --"

"Don't what?"

He swallowed, his eyes shut tight. "Don't break me."

Warm arms enfolded him and pulled him close. Richard sat on the edge of the bed, cradling Haden against his shoulder. "I won't," he whispered.

Haden looked up, into those warm dark eyes. Strong fingers smoothed his hair back and wiped the tears from his cheeks. His skin tingled under the gentle touch, and his breath hitched softly. Richard's shoulder was all hard, hot muscle against Haden's, and his smell was like a blanket, enveloping and soothing him.

He wanted it. That scared him, more than anything -- the sheer depth of his wanting. He touched Richard's face, letting his fingertips slide over his jaw, down his throat, where his pulse thudded hot and fast. The primal, sharp scent of Richard's arousal filled his nostrils and pierced his brain like a blinding light. His own body responded; his cock jerked, balls swelling and tightening until he thought they would burst, and he groaned in a mixture of pleasure and pain. Panting, he slid a hand into Richard's thick, dark hair and gripped it. Richard's eyes widened, lust flashing in their depths. His lips parted, revealing teeth grown long and sharp. A swirl of wolf-yellow bled into his inky black irises.

It was the first time he'd seen Richard's control slip, and a shock of mingled fear and desire ran through him. He could almost feel the strength, the raw power crackling in the air around his huge frame.

Warm fingertips touched his face, traced his eyebrows, his lips. One finger lingered on his lower lip, rubbing slowly back and forth across it. Haden felt the touch throughout his whole body. Each gentle stroke pulsed in his cock, and his gaze lost focus. For a moment he thought he'd come just from that simple touch.

Then Richard pulled his hand back, closed his eyes, and took a deep, shaky breath, as if to bring himself under control. When he opened his eyes, they were black again. Gently, he eased Haden onto the bed and straddled him. The dull throb in Haden's leg had receded to the edge of his consciousness. All he could think about was the sheer size and strength of Richard's body. The hot bulge of his erection pressed against Haden's right thigh, and his hard stomach rubbed against Haden's cock, sending a thrill of pleasure so intense that his vision momentarily grayed out. He arched upward, pressing his throbbing cock more firmly against Richard's stomach.

Firm hands settled on his hips and pushed them down to the bed. "Easy," Richard murmured. He was breathing heavily, his eyes heavy-lidded and lust-glazed. "Don't hurt yourself."

A low, whining growl of frustration slid from Haden's throat.

"Shh." Richard kissed the corner of his mouth. "Let me." His hands slid beneath Haden's shirt, over his ribs. His thumbs flicked over Haden's nipples, and they tightened to stiff, springy points. Those warm thumbs caressed them, circled them, tracing the areolas, then slid down over Haden's ribs and along his stomach. The muscles contracted beneath the touch, and a small whimper escaped him. He strained upward and a moment later, Richard's lips were on his, firm and gentle.

A tremor ran through Haden. He had never been kissed, never had the chance. No one had ever gotten this close to him before. Richard's lips moved against his, and he felt the press of sharp teeth against his lower lip. Slowly, Haden's lips parted, and Richard's tongue dipped into his mouth. He tasted of rain and leaves and sea salt, of fresh growing things. His tongue caressed and stroked, making Haden dizzy. His cock strained against his jeans, blood pounding urgently within. His hips began to move again, rubbing the aching bulge against Richard. Again, Richard's hands pushed him down, and one broad palm covered his erection.

The sudden shock of contact made him fall back, mouth open, eyes wide. His vision blurred. He couldn't move, couldn't think. There was only the pressure of Richard's hand against him. His eyes had gone yellow again, wide and feral. They glowed like twin moons. "You want this?" he whispered, and his voice had deepened and roughened.

Haden swallowed. He did want it. God, how he wanted it. Still, a part of him wondered -- was it truly his desire? Or was it just his instinctive need to bond urging him on? The fact that he couldn't tell the difference anymore filled him with a blinding burst of panic. But it was too late to stop. Every nerve, every cell in his body cried out for this, for Richard's hands and mouth on his skin. "Yes," he whispered.

Excitement flared in those brilliant eyes. Pupils dilated, black swallowing yellow. Then Richard's mouth was on his neck, fangs pressing into his skin. Haden gasped. His eyes slipped shut, and a wave of pleasant weakness rolled over him as Richard's mouth worked at his neck. Meanwhile, strong deft fingers undid the buttons of Haden's jeans and tugged them down along with his boxers, freeing the trapped bulge of his cock.

At the first brush of roughened fingertips against aching flesh, the rush of need was so strong that Haden thought he might faint. He panted, fingers digging into the bed sheets, as Richard's fingers curled around him and glided slowly up and down, stroking him from base to tip. His other hand cupped Haden's balls, and his thumb caressed them, rubbing in slow circles.

"More," Haden gasped out. He clawed the bed sheets, ripping them as his nails sharpened. "Please."

Richard lowered his head. His lips parted, showing a glint of sharp white teeth, and his tongue curled out to slide over the head of Haden's cock. The jolt of heat and wetness sizzled

through his nerves. The tongue swirled over and around his head. A drop of precum oozed up and slid down the side of his cock, and Richard lapped it up. One finger traced the crease of Haden's buttocks and slipped between them to press against his rim. Haden felt the muscles tighten reflexively... then they relaxed, and the long, thick finger worked its way into him.

At another time, he might have experienced the unfamiliar pressure and slight burn as discomfort, even pain. Now, the sensations skated over his nerves, setting them alight, feeding the flames of his desire. Richard's lips parted wider and engulfed the first few inches of his cock. The slick, sweet heat flooded his brain, scattering his thoughts as Richard's finger worked its way deeper into him and pressed against something so sensitive that light flashed behind his eyes. Richard's lips glided over him, moist and oh so warm, caressing hard, tender flesh. The gentle, skilled tug of his mouth, the tiny, sharp pain of teeth grazing his skin, and the pressure within his body coalesced into a single dazzling point of pleasure, overwhelming his senses, overloading his mind and body until he couldn't contain it anymore.

He roared, arching off the bed as he came into Richard's mouth. Richard's fingers tensed, digging into his thigh, and he pressed harder against that sensitive spot within. Haden flopped down, panting and damp with sweat as the world slowly settled into place around him.

Richard raised his head, Haden's cock sliding from his mouth, slicked with his spittle. His finger eased slowly out of Haden's body. Strong arms surrounded him, pulling him close, cradling him against a broad, solid chest.

His thoughts spun in circles, colliding with each other and spinning off on tangents. He couldn't focus.

Gentle fingers smoothed hair from his sweat-drenched brow. Concerned eyes -- now dark once more -- searched his face. "Are you all right?"

Haden swallowed, gazing up at Richard. For a moment, he couldn't move. Couldn't speak. He just stared, drinking in the sight of Richard's face. A warm, drowsy bliss rolled through him. And something started to happen within him. Something stirred and fluttered in his chest.

*Richard.* The name pulsed inside his mind. His memories of Richard, starting from the moment he'd first glimpsed his face, began to play through Haden's mind like a slideshow -- slowly at first, then flickering rapidly forward, then looping and starting again at the beginning, over and over. He realized what was happening, and his chest tightened in panic. His eyes slammed shut, but Richard's face still hovered in the darkness behind his lids, burned into his retinas, into his very brain.

It was happening. He was bonding, and there was nothing he could do to stop it. Haden's ragged breathing echoed in his ears, and his heart slammed against his ribs.

Large, gentle hands framed his face. "Haden," Richard whispered. "Are you all right?"

He didn't respond.

"Haden. Look at me."

He pulled his face from Richard's hands. "I need to shower." What he actually needed was to be alone, to get away from the terrifying, powerful feelings flooding his mind and body. He lurched to his feet and stumbled into the bathroom.

## Chapter Four

The hot water beat against Haden's back as he sat, his bandaged leg stretched out on the stall floor. He wrapped his arms around one knee and watched the water run down the drain.

Richard's face flashed through his mind and a wave of dizziness swept over him. His heart beat a staccato rhythm. The back of his head buzzed with a tingling electricity that slowly crept through his skull and into every fissure of his brain. Though he couldn't see or hear Richard, Haden still felt his presence. It was a pressure in his chest, a spear of light piercing his heart, a liquid heat in his veins. When he closed his eyes, Richard's image hovered in the darkness behind his lids. The memory of his voice hummed in Haden's ears and made him weak with pleasure.

He could feel the bond transforming him, weaving its way through him. In all his varied visions of what it might be like, he had never once imagined that it would feel so good.

He tried to fight it. Tried to push back, to maintain some fragile semblance of control over his feelings. But he couldn't.

"Richard," he whispered, and the feel of his own mouth shaping the name sent a thrill down his spine. Those warm, dark eyes, those strong, gentle hands...

Though he'd just come, his cock stirred and began to rise. He wanted to press himself against the solid wall of Richard's chest, to melt into that powerful body.

His nails sharpened into claws, and he dug them into the meat of his palms, clinging to the pain, trying to clear his head. "It's not real," he whispered, trembling. "It's *not*."

There were Folk who believed that every bonded pair was fated to be together, but Haden had always known that to be a wistful romantic fable, nothing more. How could his mother have been fated to bond with someone who would leave her to die? Could fate be so cruel? No -- the bond was just animal need. Richard could have been anyone, anyone at all. How could it mean anything if there was no choice?

He thought about Richard's mouth on him, and a low moan rose from his throat. His cock was fully erect and throbbing.

He forced himself to think through the haze of pleasure, and though the pleasure didn't dim, other emotions jabbed through it like spikes. Fear clutched at his heart with icy claws. His breathing quickened, and he gripped his hair, fingers pressing into his scalp. He clutched the plastic shower curtains with his other hand. *I won't. I won't bond, I won't.*

But all his protests made no difference, and he knew it. It had already happened. He knew in an instant that he would die to save Richard, if it ever became necessary. He wouldn't be able to stop himself; this love would compel him. This overwhelming, gut-wrenching, soul-devouring love.

Tears welled in his eyes and spilled down his cheeks, mingling with the shower water. He bowed his head, hugging his knee.

He didn't know how long he stayed in the shower... but eventually, he heard a knock at the bathroom door, and Richard called out, "Haden? May I come in?"

Haden didn't reply.

A moment later, the door creaked open. "Haden..." Richard pulled aside the shower curtain, and Haden tensed, looking up at him. He tried to keep his expression blank, but he was sure the terror and need showed in his eyes.

Richard stared down at Haden, his brow furrowed with concern. He reached in and shut off the water. "You've been in here a long time," he said. He crouched, bringing himself to eye-level with Haden. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Haden lowered his gaze. He couldn't stop shaking.

"The bond isn't just one-way," Richard said quietly. He reached out, cupped Haden's chin and lifted it. His gaze burned into Haden's. "I feel it too."

Haden blinked. "But you didn't..." He trailed off, embarrassed to admit that he wasn't sure exactly how it worked. Richard hadn't come. Was the physical intimacy enough to trigger a bond, even without that?

"At first I wasn't sure," Richard replied quietly. "I wasn't sure if I was still capable, after all this time. But I..." The muscles of his throat convulsed as he swallowed. "Do you think I'm

not afraid? After what happened” -- his mouth worked soundlessly for a moment -- “the thought of going through it again... the idea of *losing* again...” His jaw tightened, and his gaze jerked away. He released Haden’s chin and rose, turning.

Haden watched him, confused at the sudden change. He suddenly, desperately wanted Richard to look at him. To touch him. Panting, he tried to stand, but his bandaged leg gave out as his foot slipped on the wet, slick tile.

Richard spun around and caught him before he could fall. He pulled Haden against him. “Be careful,” he whispered roughly.

Haden gulped. He could feel Richard’s heart pounding against his as he stared up into those dark eyes. Deep within them, a hint of yellow gleamed. Haden stared, transfixed, as Richard’s hand drifted up to push strands of wet hair from his brow. His fingertips ghosted across Haden’s lips, and his breath caught. Then Richard looked away, his jaw clenching, cords in his neck standing out. He grabbed a towel, wrapped it around Haden, slung an arm around his shoulders, and helped him into the bedroom, where he eased him carefully down to the bed.

He started to straighten, but Haden reached out and caught his shoulder. Richard froze, looking down at him. “I...” Haden trailed off and just stared, unsure of what he wanted to say, just that he didn’t want Richard to leave. Not yet.

Richard lay a hand over his and squeezed. “You need to rest,” he murmured. “You’ve been through a lot today.” His hand slid away, and he stood.

“Wait,” Haden blurted out. “Can you --” His voice wavered. “Can you stay with me? Until I’m asleep?”

Strange, he thought. Just a short while ago, he’d been desperate to get away from Richard -- except he’d really been running from his own feelings. He was too tired to run anymore. He just wanted to rest, to be held, like a child.

Richard looked down at him with an unreadable expression, and for a moment, Haden thought he was going to refuse. Fear fluttered in his chest. Then Richard slid into bed next to him and drew him close. He placed a soft kiss on Haden’s brow. “I’ll stay.”

\* \* \*

Since his mother’s death, Haden’s sleep had often been troubled by dark dreams. But now he slept deeply, soundly, lulled by the steady beat of Richard’s heart.

He woke to the soft touch of sunlight on his eyelids, and the pressure of strong arms wrapped around him. For several minutes, he didn’t move -- just listened to the soft in and out of Richard’s breathing, felt the movement of his broad chest. Tentatively, he touched that chest and felt the firmness of muscles through the thin cotton of Richard’s shirt. Such power in that body. Haden kept himself in shape -- he ran and hiked every day, or had before his injury -- but even so, he felt almost delicate next to Richard.

Heat blossomed in his belly. His cock stirred and rose. *Damn it, not again.* He tried to direct his thoughts away from the overwhelming size and strength of Richard’s body, but that was impossible when he was pressed up against him. His cock tightened and pulsed, the swollen flesh trapped between his stomach and Richard’s. When Richard shifted, his hard abdomen rubbed against it, and a wave of dizzying pleasure rolled over Haden. He’d thought being bonded would dampen the overwhelming need, but it seemed his desires wouldn’t be sated so easily.

*Being bonded.* He’d bonded to Richard last night. He’d handed his heart and soul over to another -- the very thing he’d always swore he would rather die than do. He remembered his mother lying on her bed, a withered husk, cheeks sunken and eyes hollow, as if the absence of her bondmate had sucked the very life out of her body. He remembered the wild look on her face as she cried out to him, oblivious to Haden’s presence, thinking only of the man who would never return, the man who’d infected her mind and enslaved her soul.

Haden began to tremble. His throat and stomach knotted.



A part of him cried out that Richard wouldn't do that, wouldn't leave him. Couldn't. But then, he hardly knew Richard. What reason did he have to trust him?

He couldn't risk it, couldn't face the possibility of abandonment. His mind turned and turned, arguing with itself.

Richard had saved his life, brought him here, taken care of him. He'd shown Haden nothing but kindness. But people could fake kindness. A dark voice in the back of his mind whispered that maybe this was all Richard had wanted -- someone who couldn't say no, someone too raw and desperate to resist. He'd claimed that he didn't bring Haden here to bond with him, but he hadn't wasted much time.

Slowly, he began to extricate himself from Richard's embrace.

Richard stirred, his eyelids flickering open. "Haden?" he murmured. "Are you all right?"

"Fine. Just need to use the bathroom."

Richard's brow creased, and he looked uncertain but nodded.

Haden slipped from his embrace and padded out of the room, down the hall. Twinges of hot pain shot up his leg, but it supported his weight. He could run on it, if he needed to.

He had to get out of here. He didn't know where he would go; his mind was a white buzz of panic. He just had to escape. Had to run.

He slipped out through the kitchen door, dropped to all fours and shifted. It was the first time he'd done it since his injury, and it hurt, even more than usual. Pain seared his left leg, and he let out a choked cry, back arching as muscles and bones rearranged themselves. His skin itched as fur sprouted everywhere, and his teeth grew sharp in his mouth. When it was over, he was shaking and nauseous, and there was a sick, hot throbbing in his leg.

He ignored it and bolted into the forest. Wind streamed through his fur, and his paws flew over the cool, damp ground. It had rained recently, and the fresh smell of growing things filled his nose. A burst of elation filled him -- *free!* -- then, as he ran, an ache began to grow inside him. Richard's face filled his mind. The ache swelled in his chest, and his soul cried out, urging him to return to his bondmate's side. It was like a physical force pulling at his insides, as if a cord ran between his heart and Richard's, and now that cord was stretching painfully, the pull increasing as the distance between them grew.

He tossed his head, as if to shake away a flea, and kept running. Bolts of pain shot up his left hind leg, but he didn't slow.

Someone was behind him. He heard the steady thump of paws on earth. A voice rung out in his mind: *Haden!* Richard's voice. Richard inside his head.

All Folk could communicate telepathically while in animal form, but he'd never experienced another's mind-voice with such force, such resonance. It filled his entire being. The compulsion to turn back grew until each step forward was pain -- a searing, punishing pain. This was the power of the bond -- the power to override his will, his desires.

He kept running. His forepaw struck a root, and he stumbled... and then a huge, black wolf was atop him, yellow eyes burning into his. Haden struggled, yowling. Richard's jaws closed around his throat, and he went limp, trembling.

Richard didn't move, didn't bite, but Haden could feel the pressure of sharp teeth through his fur. He remained still, Richard's warm, furry bulk pressed against his, pinning him to the ground. The deep, commanding mind-voice echoed through his skull: *Haden, you must not run anymore. You're hurting yourself.*

Haden trembled beneath him. *I'm your prisoner. Is that it?*

Richard released his throat but remained atop him. He was enormous -- larger and heavier than any true wolf. Haden remained limp, lost in a sea of black fur, lost in Richard's scent, in his power.

Richard's warm muzzle touched the side of his face. *Do you truly hate me so much?*

Haden's eyes closed. Tears seeped out from beneath his lids, and one slid down the side of his snout, leaving a trail through his fur. *No.*

*Then why do you keep fighting? Why do you push me away?*

*Because I'm afraid.*

*Afraid of what?*

*Losing myself. Being broken.*

A wet tongue caressed his face, lapping up his tears. Richard continued to lick him in long, slow strokes, like a mother grooming her pup. The damp, velvety tongue passed over his eyelid, over his whiskers, over his ears. *I already promised. I won't break you. How can I convince you?*

His mind-voice was low, gentle. It hummed softly inside Haden, and a thousand little tongues licked the inside of his belly. A soft, needy whine escaped his throat before he could stop it. But his eyes remained shut. Memories of his mother's drawn-out death flickered through his mind.

He heard Richard's swift intake of breath. *Oh, Haden...* His voice was soft, gentle, sad. *It doesn't have to be that way. It doesn't have to end in pain.*

Haden's eyes opened. *You lost your bondmate too, didn't you? You should understand the risk.*

*I did. And I do. It almost killed me.*

*Then why?*

*How could I not?* He nuzzled Haden again. Haden's heartbeat quickened and his cock stiffened again, sliding out of its furry sheath. A low, whining growl escaped him.

And he knew he couldn't run anymore. Richard was already inside him, curled around his heart, entwined with his thoughts. He looked up into those luminous yellow eyes, and the last of his resistance softened and crumbled.

Haden shifted beneath him. Richard rose, freeing him, but Haden didn't run; he rolled over, showing his belly. Richard lowered his head and sniffed him from chest to groin, his nostrils twitching delicately. He lingered over Haden's swollen cock... then licked it, a long, wet lick, tongue passing over his furry balls and along his shaft. A tremor ran through Haden. Richard licked him again and again.

Thought slipped away, and animal instinct took over. A haze of pleasure filled Haden's mind. Every nerve in his body was tingling, alive. Fear vanished, evaporated, and in its place was only heat and need. His body and soul craved Richard, and his mind gave in to their demands.

Haden rolled over and lifted his tail, and that long, agile tongue passed over his opening, slicking him with saliva. Richard mounted him, forelegs slipping around him, and Haden felt an intense pressure at his entrance -- something huge and blunt against him. His rim gave way, blossoming open, allowing Richard to slide inside. The huge wolf moved atop him, within him, thrusting deeper and deeper into his tight passage. It burned, but the burn was sweet, addictive. Haden's paws kneaded the earth, and he arched beneath Richard, pushing backward to meet his thrusts. His mouth opened wide as he panted, and Richard growled softly in his ear. Haden felt that growl rumbling in the massive chest. Teeth pressed lightly into the scruff of his neck, gripping him as he pushed and pushed. The ache and slide of flesh within flesh consumed Haden's mind, and the pressure built inside him until, with a ringing howl, he came.

Richard growled and stiffened atop him, his hips pushing forward with one last, stiff jab, and a moment later, Haden felt hot seed trickling deep into his body. Richard pulled out, and they both collapsed on the forest floor, panting. The cool morning mist surrounded them, and the soft music of birdsong washed over Haden. He curled up close to Richard's side, pressing against his warmth. A sleepy contentment enveloped his thoughts.

He could no longer remember why he'd been so afraid of this. Maybe it was just because, as a wolf, it was harder to dwell on the past or future; the canine mind was designed to live in the

moment. Maybe once he returned to human form, all his doubts and uncertainties would come creeping back. In fact, he was sure they would. Such deep-rooted fears were not so easily vanquished.

But for now, breathing in Richard's musky scent, feeling the rise and fall of his side as he breathed, Haden felt safe. And knowing it was just the flood of endorphins released by bondmate sex didn't diminish the feeling.

Richard licked the side of his muzzle and spoke into his mind. *Are you all right?*

*Yes*, Haden replied. He yawned and snuggled closer. *That was good.*

*It was.*

They lay together in silence for a while, curled around each other. Then Richard said, *Your leg is hurting, isn't it?*

Haden hadn't even noticed. But when he focused, he felt the dull throb in his left hind leg. He'd pushed himself too hard, running on it before he was ready. He stretched it and winced. *A little.*

*We should go back to the house. I'll take a look at it.* Richard rose and padded off into the forest. He paused, looking over one shoulder at Haden. After a moment, Haden rose to his feet and followed, limping.

## Chapter Five

Back in the house, they shifted back to human form, and Haden stretched out on the bed. Richard pulled up a chair, sat, and ran his hands gently over Haden's leg, skilled fingers probing here and there. Haden winced. "You should keep off it awhile," Richard said. "The bone is still mending."

"Okay." He stared at the wall, fidgeting. Sure enough, the drowsy post-fuck euphoria was already receding, and he was finding it difficult to look Richard in the eye.

"How are you otherwise?" Richard asked. "Are you --"

"Sore," he muttered. He was a little sore inside, though not as much as he'd expected to be. It had all happened so quickly, and now the memory was a blur of sensations in his mind. Still, just knowing what had happened set his mind and heart awirl with feelings he couldn't begin to name.

He'd let Richard fuck him -- had hoisted his bottom into the air and lifted his tail like any wolf in heat. The memory of how much he'd wanted it, *craved* it, brought a flush to his cheeks. And even now, with his dick sated, he wanted Richard's arms around him, his simple closeness.

"Haden?" Richard's voice was low, gentle... but there was an urgency in it, an uncertainty. And Haden realized, suddenly, that Richard was probably feeling just as vulnerable as he was. He didn't know Haden much better than Haden knew him. He'd taken a huge risk by inviting Haden into his life.

He didn't know how to deal with this bond. But one thing was clear: it wasn't going away. From here, he could only go forward. Slowly, he raised his gaze to Richard's. "I'm all right." He chewed his lower lip. "I'm sorry I ran. I'm embarrassed about it now."

"It's all right."

He paused. Some part of him still resisted admitting that he wanted this. But he couldn't hold back anymore. "Will you hold me?"

Relief flooded Richard's eyes. He nodded, lay down next to Haden, and wrapped his arms around him.

They lay for a while in silence. Then Haden asked quietly, "Who was it?"

"Who was who?"

"Your last bondmate. The one who..." He trailed off, his throat tight. He'd seen what losing a bondmate did to someone. The idea that Richard had endured that same pain -- how had he survived?

A long silence. Then, softly, "His name was Aaron. I was about your age when I met him." A shadow of pain slipped across his eyes. "Folk always say it's a mistake to bond with humans because they themselves can't bond. Because they always leave. I wanted to prove everyone wrong, wanted to show them that love transcended those boundaries."

"He left?" Haden whispered.

Richard shook his head. "He died. A simple flu which turned into pneumonia. His lungs were always delicate." He averted his gaze, staring off at nothing. "Humans are fragile creatures. We often forget how fragile. After I lost him... I don't know why I survived. I was ready to die. I went mad for a while. I ran through the woods in wolf form, like any wild beast. I sickened and weakened, and only lived because my packmates brought me the scraps from their kills. Eventually the sickness passed, and somehow I was still alive. But I couldn't bear to be around anyone. I left my pack. They tried to bring me back, but I drove them away. I drove everyone away."

Haden wasn't sure what to say. The darkness in Richard's eyes made his heart twist painfully. "I'm sorry."

He stroked Haden's hair. "I intended to remain alone for the rest of my life. I decided that I couldn't go through that again -- couldn't risk losing someone precious to me. I was convinced I wouldn't survive it. Then I saw you. And you were alone, too. The more I watched you, the more I felt that I had been meant to find you."

Haden wondered what would have happened to him if Richard hadn't found him. Probably, he would have died by the roadside. And even if he hadn't, bond deprivation probably would have driven him mad by now, turned him into a crazed animal. He slipped his arms around Richard and hugged him. "I'm glad you found me."

Richard hugged him back, resting his chin atop Haden's messy brown hair. Haden tilted his head back, looking up into those dark eyes. Then he pressed his lips to Richard's. His tongue traced their seam, slipped between them, into the hot silk of his mouth. Their tongues met, twined. One broad hand slid down the curve of his spine to rest on the small of his back, and the touch sent a pleasant shiver through him. His cock rose and swelled in response.

There seemed to be no end to the need. He wondered if it would ever be truly sated, or if their bodies would always crave each other, always want more, demand more. Maybe that wasn't such a bad thing. He hooked a leg over Richard's waist, and his cock pressed against Richard's. Hard flesh rubbed against hard flesh, their cocks sliding together, a sensation unlike anything he'd ever experienced.

A bead of precum leaked from the tip of Haden's cock, and his hips pushed forward, rubbing the round head over the taut muscles of Richard's abdomen, smearing a glistening line of fluid over his skin. Richard reached down, and his long, thick fingers curled around Haden's shaft. He stroked it, fingers gliding up and down its length, and Haden pushed into the touch. His hands, meanwhile, slid over Richard's back and shoulders, exploring the rippled muscles. His fingertips encountered the rough ridge of a scar running parallel to Richard's spine, and he traced it, wondering what it was from. He wanted to learn more about him, wanted to know all his stories.

But later. Right now, words would only get in the way.

He slid his hands down to settle over Richard's round, firm buttocks and squeezed. A low, satisfied growl rumbled in Richard's chest. One finger slid down Haden's spine, down the crease between his buttocks, to press against his opening. Anxiety fluttered in Haden's chest, and he

tensed. Richard froze, studying his expression, his brow furrowed with concern. "I'm all right," Haden murmured. They'd done this once already, he thought. It shouldn't be that big a deal.

Of course, he'd been a wolf then. He hadn't been in full possession of his rational faculties. Or at least, that was his excuse. At this point, he was sure the bond had already been cemented in both their minds, but still, doing this in human form felt different somehow. It was easier to remember all the reasons why he'd resisted it for so long. All the fears.

"What's wrong?" Richard asked quietly.

Haden took a deep breath. His dick was pulsing, his entire body aching with need -- as if, he thought, his flesh was trying to make up for all the time he'd spent denying himself Richard's touch. He'd spent long enough resisting his feelings.

It was time to let go.

"Nothing's wrong," he said. "I want this. I want you inside me."

Richard's eyes widened slightly... then grew heavy-lidded, smoldering with lust. He reached over to the nightstand, opened the drawer, and removed a bottle of massage oil, which he squirted over his fingers. Then he slipped one between Haden's buttocks again, circled his tight rim, and rubbed against it, coating it with the slippery mixture. He pressed, and his finger slid in up to the knuckle. Haden shifted, focusing on the feeling. He'd expected his passage to be loosened after the incident in the forest, but he was as tight as if it had never happened. Maybe the transformation back to human had something to do with it.

He felt himself clenching reflexively and forced himself to relax as Richard's finger pushed deeper. His other hand stroked Haden from shoulder to hip, slow, gentle strokes, as if he were petting a cat. He felt himself trembling. When Richard cupped his cheek, he turned his face to lick the broad, rough palm. Usually, the show of vulnerability would have embarrassed him. Now, he felt perfectly comfortable with it. He wondered what that meant, wondered if it should worry him... but he couldn't bring himself to be afraid. They'd spoken mind to mind. He'd felt Richard's concern and love for him. He knew it was real.

The uncertainty faded from Richard's expression, and he stroked Haden's cheek with the backs of his fingers. His other hand moved between his thighs, the heel rubbing against his balls as another finger worked its way past his oiled rim. A sweet, aching pleasure bloomed inside him as those fingertips caressed his prostate... then they opened wide in a scissoring motion, stretching his walls, and he gasped at the burn and sting. Despite the discomfort, he wanted more, and he pushed backward, panting.

Richard's mouth descended on his and he devoured Haden's lips, nipping and sucking. His teeth had grown sharp, and when they pressed into Haden's swollen lower lip, he tasted the hot copper of blood. Richard pulled back, breathing hard. His gaze focused on Haden's bleeding lip. "I -- God, I'm sorry --"

"It's all right." Dazed, Haden licked his lips, and metallic salt burst on his tongue. His heart thumped against his ribs. He leaned upward and kissed Richard again, hard. His lip throbbed under the pressure, but he didn't care.

Richard groaned against his mouth and sucked his bleeding lower lip. His fingers thrust harder and deeper into Haden's body, opening him wider, wider. Then they withdrew, and he squirted lube over his own hand and started to spread it over his straining erection. Haden reached out and gripped his wrist. "Let me."

Richard's breath hitched, and his pupils dilated. He gave a tiny nod.

Haden poured lube onto his palm and curled his fingers slowly around Richard's long, heavy cock. It throbbed in his grip, hot and swollen. Alive. He licked his lips and slid his fingers up and down its length, coating every inch, spreading the slick liquid over the round, bulbous head, down to its base, hidden in curls of velvety dark hair whose texture was almost like wolf fur. His fingers continued to slide up and down, exploring the organ, tracing the thick raised vein

that meandered along the side of his shaft... then Richard's fingers wrapped around his wrist, pulling his hand away.

He gripped Haden's thighs, hoisting them up, and positioned himself, inching forward until the flushed head of his cock was pressed up against Haden's tight rim. His dark eyes burned into Haden's, but he didn't move -- just waited.

"Do it," Haden said.

Richard pushed forward, and Haden blossomed open, his walls stretching and aching as the massive erection slid into him. He groaned, waves of tingling, dizzying pleasure rolling through him as the head of Richard's cock rubbed up against his prostate. Richard's fingers dug into his thighs, and a low growl rumbled up from his broad chest as he thrust, hips jerking forward and back, in and out. Haden's hands fisted on the sheets, and his breath escaped in sharp bursts. His hips arched up off the bed, and his jaw clenched, sweat rolling down his neck as Richard's cock slammed into him again and again. One strong hand released his hip and wrapped around his erection, pumping him in rhythm with his thrusts.

Each time his cock struck that spot, a blinding flash of pleasure went off behind Haden's eyes like a lightning strike. Then Richard's whole body suddenly went rigid atop his. His mouth fell open, and his eyes went wide and unfocused. He felt the hot burst of Richard's orgasm inside his body -- a sticky thickness trickling deep inside him. Richard's fingers tightened around his cock, and the sensation tipped him over the edge. Cum spurted onto Richard's chest and stomach. Richard released his cock but remained buried in Haden's body, panting. Sweat dripped from his broad chest in little warm droplets.

Haden stared, dazed, into those dark eyes. A wave of warm, post-orgasmic bliss rolled through him. He reached up to stroke Richard's jaw, and Richard leaned down to capture his lips in a kiss. Slowly, carefully, he pulled out and stretched out on the bed next to Haden. "Are you all right?"

"Yes," Haden murmured. He hesitated only a moment before slipping his arms around Richard's waist, and those warm, strong arms surrounded him.

Richard buried his face in Haden's hair. For awhile, neither one of them spoke. They lay, skin pressed against skin, breathing in each other's scent.

"Do you resent me?" Richard asked softly.

Haden blinked in surprise and looked up at him. "Why would I?"

"Because you had no choice in this. In this bond."

"But I did. I could have fought you. Could have run..."

"You tried to. And I chased you." Pain flickered through his eyes. "I knew that if we didn't bond, that you'd die. And I couldn't let that happen. I had to save you. But... the truth is, I've always wanted to be by your side, ever since I first saw you. I *wanted* you. Wanted to keep you for my own."

Haden reached up, lay a hand against Richard's cheek, and turned his face toward him. "I wanted you, too," he said quietly. "I was just too afraid to admit it, even to myself."

Richard met his gaze. "Still... I wish you had been able to choose."

Haden quietly studied his expression. He had never believed in fate -- but he believed, maybe, that some things needed to happen. That in his loneliness and despair, he had been bound to crash his bike, that Richard had been bound to find him. And once those events were set in motion, the rest inevitably followed. "Does anyone really have a choice about who he falls in love with?"

"Maybe not. I just want you to know... had there been someone else you wanted, someone you loved, I wouldn't have stood in your way. But knowing you were all alone, I --" His throat worked silently for a moment, and tears glistened in the corners of his eyes. His fingertips touched Haden's lips, traced them. "I couldn't let you die alone. Not you. I just wish that there had been more time. Time for you to decide, to become comfortable with the idea. I feel like I --"

Haden silenced him with a kiss. "I'm tired of looking back. I don't want to keep thinking about the past and wondering how things could have gone differently. I want to live my life now. I want you." It felt so strangely natural, now, to speak those words. "I want you," he said again. "To be with you. To stay with you."

"You do?"

"Yes."

"Then I'm yours," Richard whispered.

Their lips touched, and Haden's eyes slipped shut as he relaxed into the kiss. Richard's tongue touched his lips, parted them, entered him. The sensation unleashed a swarm of butterflies in his stomach, and tiny shivers raced down his spine. "I love you, Haden," Richard murmured, lips moving against his.

"I love you too." He found himself wondering again if it was real -- if it was just instincts and hormones and need, or if he would have fallen in love with Richard regardless of the situation. But maybe it didn't matter. These feelings were here, they were powerful, and they weren't going away. Regardless of how things might have happened otherwise, this was his reality. Their reality.

A warm feeling washed over him, so unfamiliar that at first, he didn't recognize it. He was happy.

## **Amanda Steiger**

Amanda Steiger has lived in the Midwest her whole life, though she enjoys regular visits to other galaxies and dimensions in her mind. She enjoys cold weather, daydreaming, supernatural romance, and anime. She lives with her family and one very spoiled little dog. You can contact her at [sekuiro@comcast.net](mailto:sekuiro@comcast.net).