



HIS
OMEGA'S
KEEPER

EVANGELINE ANDERSON
NYT AND USA TODAY BEST SELLING AUTHOR

HIS OMEGA'S KEEPER

EVANGELINE ANDERSON



Evangeline Anderson



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INDEX



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HIS OMEGA'S KEEPER

They came and took us in the middle of the night—kidnapped us and locked us in an attic—me and my stepbrother Jake. They're some kind of cult—the Worshipers of the Moon—and they say that Jake and I are the last of the Royal Weres. We're the last two with the blood of the First Wolf and because of that, we're their only hope.

But now they want me to do things with Jake—things I know I shouldn't do. Things that could get me in a lot of trouble nine months down the line.

It's frightening, but Jake is protective and gentle—he understands what we need to do in order to get free. The only trouble is, our plan might prove disastrous in more than one way.

The cult members keep telling me that Jake is my Alpha and I am his Omega—his to claim, his to take. But when we finally get away from them, we don't dare to tell anyone what they made us do together.

For the penalty for our sins in the Were world...is death.

ONE



“SO A BUNCH OF US ARE HEADING DOWN TO FORT Lauderdale over Thanksgiving break. Think you can come?” my best friend, Ashley asked.

“Yeah, we need more people to chip in on the Airbnb,” Madison, my other best friend, put in. “And you can *certainly* afford it, since your stepfather is Mr. Moneybags, right?”

I looked down at my half-eaten burger and the cold fry I was using to doodle in the congealing ketchup on my plate. I wanted to say “yes.” In the old days, I could have. But it wasn’t the old days now.

“Sorry, guys,” I mumbled, shaking my head, my long, blonde hair swishing around my shoulders. “But I can’t.”

“Why not, Ani?” Ashley furrowed her brow in that cute way that made the guys come running. “Come on—we’re only going to fly down for a couple of days.”

“It’s a family thing,” I hedged. “You know—my mom doesn’t want me to miss Thanksgiving.”

“Oh, that’s okay,” Madison said brightly. “We’re leaving this Friday night and coming back next Wednesday morning. So nobody has to miss turkey day! C’mon—what do you say?”

I looked at my two best friends and bit my lip. We’d been together since junior high and not even college could break us up. In fact, we all went to James Madison University on purpose, so we could stay together. Our plan had been to all get an apartment together and take all the same classes.

Well, we *were* in a lot of the same classes. Unfortunately, the living together part had fallen through when my mom had remarried in my senior year of high school. Now I was stuck in a huge white mansion on Songbird Hill, the fanciest neighborhood in Harrisonburg, Virginia.

Madison and Ashley had been understanding about the living arrangements—they were able to find a third roommate easily enough and were getting along fine. But what they *didn't* understand was why I couldn't hang out with them nearly as often as I had before. Why I didn't come to the parties they invited me to and why I couldn't just fly off to Fort Lauderdale at a moment's notice.

They didn't understand and I couldn't explain—not in a way that wouldn't sound completely crazy, anyway.

“Sorry guys,” I mumbled doodling in the ketchup with my cold fry some more. “I just don't think my mom would like it. She has a bunch of Christmas decorations she wants to hang and I promised I'd be there to help.”

“What? How long can it possibly take to hang Christmas decorations?” Madison exclaimed. “And can't your hot stepbrother, Jake, help out instead?” She licked her lips. “I wouldn't mind letting him help *me*—though not necessarily with decorating.”

Ashley giggled.

“I know, right? I don't understand how in the world you keep your hands off him, Ani!”

I made a face.

“That's disgusting, you guys! He's my *brother*. And besides, he might be good-looking, but he's an annoying asshole ninety-nine percent of the time.”

“He's only your brother by marriage—it's not like you're blood related!” Madison pointed out. She frowned at me. “Though you, *do* have the same freaky eyes. I guess they just look better on Jake because he has black hair and yours is blonde.”

She was right about that. Jake and I—and *my* mom and *his* dad for that matter—all had the same, strange-colored eyes. You read about people having “whisky-colored” eyes or “golden” eyes, which is really just a way to say light brown. But my eyes—and the eyes of everyone else in my immediate family—are kind of a pale gold, with no other color at all in them. It looks weird with my white skin and ash blonde hair but pretty spectacular on Jake, with his raven hair and dark good looks.

So how did my mom end up marrying a man with eyes like hers and moving into his huge house while dragging me with her? You wouldn’t believe me if I told you—I know *I* certainly didn’t believe it.

See, my stepfather, Marcus, claims that he is one of the last of a long ancient line of—wait for it—*werewolves*. I know, right? It sounds *crazy*.

Anyway, he told us that after his wife died, he was afraid that he would never remarry because no one could hold a candle to his “darling Belinda.” He was certain that Jake would be the last of his line, which was a shame, because it’s supposedly the “Royal” bloodline and he and Jake can trace their ancestry all the way back to the First Wolf. (More craziness, obviously.)

But when he saw my mom and saw her eyes, he suddenly knew that he could love again. He was certain she was of the Royal line too—though hopefully several generations removed or something. I think they did blood tests and found out they were fifth or sixth cousins or something like that. Which is kind of gross, but not in any way illegal.

The problem is, once my mom married Marcus, she seemed to swallow the crazy story about him being a werewolf hook, line, and sinker. She even sat me down and tried to talk to me about it after they were first married.

“Honey,” she said to me. “There’s something you need to know—something you have to understand about who we really are...”

She went on and on about how both of us had recessive genes and the same bloodlines as Marcus and Jake and that was why we all had the same pale, pure-gold eyes with no other color at all in them. But when she started talking about “Heat Cycles” and “mating needs” she completely lost me.

“Mom, what are you saying?” I demanded, staring at her blankly. “I mean, it’s like you’re trying to give me the ‘sex talk’ all over again, but this time it doesn’t make any sense.”

“It didn’t make sense to me either, until I met your stepfather, Ani,” she told me earnestly. “Because your father wasn’t a Were, but Marcus *is*. And being around him woke my body up in ways that I—”

“Eww, Mom—please!” I protested. “Look, I’m really happy that you found someone who, er, satisfies you in bed.” Just saying that made me blush, my pale cheeks going hot and bright red. “But please don’t bring me into it. I *really* don’t want to know.”

She had sighed then and run her fingers through her long, ash blonde hair—so much like my own.

“Well, I suppose it doesn’t matter. You’ll probably marry a non-Were anyway—like I did with your father—so your cycle will never become active. I’m sorry if I upset you, honey.”

I wanted to say, *“What really upsets me is this crazy cult you bought into when you married Marcus and then you dragged me into it too! How can you really believe he’s a werewolf, Mom? And a ‘Royal’ one at that? What’s wrong with you, swallowing this insane idea? You were never like this before you met Marcus! He’s changed you!”*

But of course I couldn’t say any of that. The reason being that I had never seen my mom so happy before.

She’d had a really hard life after my dad died and struggled to raise me as a single mom. She worked her fingers to the bone, taking double shifts sometimes just so I could have clothes that weren’t all from the thrift store and nutritious food to eat. I was twelve before I realized that she sometimes went hungry just to make sure I was fed.

So if she wanted to pretend that her new husband was werewolf royalty and she was now the “Alpha’s Omega Bride,” who was I to tell her differently?

After all, Marcus didn’t hit her or shout at her—in fact, he treated her like a Queen—like a *Goddess*. Nothing was too good for her. He hung on her every word and showered her in expensive gifts. After years of barely scraping by, that had to feel good—so let her have some joy in her life for a change.

I just wished she wouldn’t drag me into it.

“What upsets me is having to take Marcus’s last name,” was what I said, instead of all of the above. “Why can’t I keep Dad’s name? I know he died back when I was nine, but I still remember him—still love him. Taking Marcus’s name and letting him legally adopt me...it’s almost like we’re trying to erase Dad from our lives.”

“Oh, honey, no!” my mom exclaimed, shaking her head, her pure-gold eyes going wide. “That’s not what letting Marcus adopt you is about at all, I *promise*.”

“Well, why is it necessary for him to adopt me in the first place?” I had demanded. “I mean, I’m nineteen, Mom. I’m legally an adult—I don’t need to be adopted and taken care of. I don’t need to live in this big-ass mansion with security all around either, for that matter. Why can’t I move on campus at JMU with Madison and Ashley?”

“Because it’s not *safe*.” My mom had taken me by the shoulders and looked earnestly into my eyes. “Anastasia Ellinora Wulven, *listen* to me,” she said earnestly.

The last name was my stepfather’s—the one I’d been forced to take when he adopted me. But when she called me by my full first name like that, I knew she meant business.

“All right, Mom,” I said. “I’m listening.”

“Marcus adopting you and keeping you in the house with the rest of the family, that’s to *protect* you,” she told me. “As long as you have his last name—Wulven—you’re under his protection and everyone knows that. Plus it means that no one can expect anything...unreasonable of you.”

“Unreasonable?” I had raised my eyebrows at her. “What are you *talking* about?”

“Never mind,” She shook her head dismissively. “The point is, there are people out there who...would expect certain things of you if they could get to you. But as long as you’re living here with Marcus and me, they *can’t*. Can’t get to you, I mean. That’s why you have a security detail with you whenever you go out.”

“*Jake* doesn’t have to deal with a security detail,” I pointed out, frowning.

“That’s because Jacob can take care of himself,” my mother said primly. “He and Marcus are both Alphas. Nobody is going to bother an Alpha of the Royal bloodline—not if they want to keep their head firmly attached to their shoulders.”

This rather bloodthirsty idea from my normally pacifist mother had shocked me into silence. I had the mental image of my tall, dark and dangerous stepbrother ripping some guy’s head off and it made me shiver. Because honestly, it wasn’t completely out of the realm of possibility.

There was something about Jake—an air of barely repressed violence, despite his designer clothes and urbane appearance. He *looked* like an Instagram influencer but he *felt* like a thunderstorm about to break at any moment.

Not that I was afraid of him ever hurting me—it wasn’t that kind of violence I sensed in him. But there was no denying he carried an air of menace—of some pent-up force inside himself that, if it were to break free, would be completely deadly.

Marcus, my stepfather had a little of it too, but it was better controlled in him. If you saw him on the street with his salt and pepper hair and his dark, tailored suit, you’d think, “wealthy businessman.” Powerful—possibly a millionaire or a billionaire—and used to being obeyed. But he didn’t have the same fierce, raw energy around him that his son did. For which, I was grateful.

It didn't help that my stepbrother was an asshole almost all the time, as I had told my friends. He was always sniping at me—being so sarcastic and sharp and acting so worldly, like he understood everything and I was clueless—just because he was five years older than me. In fact, the only time in the year since our parents had been married that he *hadn't* been acting like an asshole was when—

“Are you *sure* you can't come?” Madison said, breaking me out of my thoughts of my annoying stepbrother.

“It seems like you can never come with us *anywhere* anymore,” Ashley chimed in, looking disappointed. “It's like you're trying to ditch us, now that your mom is married to a bajillionaire or something.”

“Ashley's right—we stuck with you all through middle school and high school, back when you and your mom were both as poor as church mice!” Madison said. “But now that you're driving a brand-new Tesla and you've got a big, muscly bodyguard following you everywhere you go, it's like you're trying to ditch us.”

“Guys, please! It's not that *at all!*” I protested.

Ashley crossed her arms over her chest.

“Well that's certainly what it *seems* like.”

“Yeah. And where is big, bald, and muscly anyway?” Madison asked. She scanned the small diner we'd decided to meet at, not far from JMU's main campus. “He's usually always with you but I don't see him anywhere.”

“I ditched him,” I muttered. “I wanted some time on my own tonight.”

The truth was, when I had casually mentioned my plans to meet my two best friends for supper, both Marcus and my mother had protested at once.

“Oh no, darling—you mustn't!” Mom had exclaimed and Marcus had said,

“I'm sorry, Anastasia—it's completely out of the question.”

Jake, who was the only one who *didn't* protest, was sitting in an armchair of the vast living room, scrolling on his phone, the light from the antique chandelier glinting on his expensive gold phone case. He didn't even look up as the exchange took place.

My first instinct had been to remind my mom and stepfather that I was an adult and legally capable of going out on my own. But I'm not stupid—I knew if I made a fuss and acted defiant, they would only clamp down hard. I fully intended to see my friends, but I wasn't about to let either my mom or my stepfather know that.

“All right,” I said calmly. “And why should I tell them I'm cancelling?”

“Well...darling...” my mother began, biting her lip.

“It's too near the full moon,” Marcus said firmly. “And you're about the right age to have...problems at that time.”

He was so into his fantasy of being a “Royal werewolf” that he didn't even try to hide it. I didn't have a problem with *that*—it was his idea that I also shared this “Royal Were” blood that bothered me.

I raised my eyebrows at him.

“Problems?”

Marcus had given my mom a look.

“Winifred? I thought you told her.”

“I...I *tried*.” My mother's hands fluttered like white doves near the neckline of her champagne-colored dress. The cost of that one dress alone would have paid the rent on our crappy apartment five times over and left us enough to eat on for a month, back before Marcus had found her and married her.

I sometimes wished he had left her alone, even though I knew that was mean of me. She was so much happier now, living in the fantasy world he had drawn her into. But personally, I needed a little dose of reality—and some time with my friends.

“Look, never mind,” I said, before Marcus could elaborate about the “problems” I might have around the full moon. I didn’t need anymore bizarre explanations of “Were biology” or “Heat Cycles.” I’d had enough of that weirdness to last a lifetime, thank you very much. “I’ll just grab a snack and go to bed early,” I told them.

At this, Jake—who had been looking at his phone this whole time—jerked his head up and studied me with narrowed eyes. I ignored him of course.

“Oh dear!” My mother’s hands fluttered again in agitation. “I’m sorry, Ani. You can go out and meet your friends again after the full moon is over—I promise you can, as long as you bring Branson with you.”

Branson was my bodyguard—Mr. Big, Bald, and Muscly, as my friends called him. Supposedly he was an Alpha Were too, though he didn’t have any Royal blood in his veins. Or at least, he didn’t have pure-gold eyes, which supposedly only “Royals” had.

“It’s fine,” I said coolly. “I’ll call Madison and Ashley and tell them I can’t go because it’s too near the full moon. I’m sure they won’t think I’m crazy or trying to ditch them *at all*.”

Nobody seemed to know what to say to my little jaunt into sarcasm land. Marcus frowned, my mother looked desperately unhappy, and Jake just kept staring at me, giving me that suspicious look from his pure-gold eyes, which looked so much better on him than on me.

“Ani—” my mother began at last, but I was already headed for my room.

“Would you ask the kitchen staff to send me a tray?” I asked, just as though I was used to having a staff, let alone a real kitchen—(for years mom and I made do with just a hotplate and a beaten-up old microwave)—to ask to send me food. “I’ll be in my room, keeping out of the moonlight.”

Of course, later on, after the tray had come up from the kitchen, I shut off the lights and got in bed. Then I waited until

my mom came in to check on me—as she has every night since I was a baby.

She had come to my bedside and put a hand on my forehead—her hands were always cool and comforting to the touch.

For a moment, I felt guilty, but then I reminded myself that I was practically a prisoner here and that my mom was under the cultish influence of my crazy stepfather. I had every right to sneak out and see my friends. So I kept my eyes firmly closed, pretending to sleep.

“Oh, Ani,” I heard her say in a low voice, more to herself than me, since she thought I was sleeping. “Someday you might understand, but I hope that you don’t. I really, *really* hope you don’t have to, sweetheart.”

Then, with that cryptic remark, she shut my door and I knew she wouldn’t be back that night.

I had waited until it got all the way dark—thank goodness it was nearly winter so the Sun set early—and then crept out of bed. I stuffed pillows under the covers (a juvenile trick, I know, but also an effective one) and then put on my boots and jacket and shimmied out of the window. My room was on the second floor of the big old Antebellum mansion, but there was a conveniently placed trellis with ivy growing up it so I was able to get down without a problem.

My new Tesla—a “welcome to the Wulven family present” according to my stepfather, purred as quietly as a kitten as I started it up and drove to the other end of town to Mabel’s Diner (Sausage Biscuits, our Specialty!) to meet my friends.

And *that* was how I had finally gotten to see Madison and Ashley—only to disappoint them with the news that I couldn’t possibly go with them to Fort Lauderdale, where it was still warm and sunny, even in November, while everything was cold and gray in Virginia that time of year.

“It’s all right,” Ashley said, her normally bubbly voice going cold. “Madison and I understand if you can’t come, Ani.

I mean, you can *never* come with us anymore. Maybe we should just stop asking.”

“No, please...” I felt my throat tighten. “Please don’t do that, Ashley. Please, you guys—I swear it’s not like that! I *want* to go with you—you know I do! Try to understand, it’s a *family* thing.”

“A family thing?” Madison raised one perfectly arched dark brown eyebrow. “As in, your fancy new family thinks you’re too good for us? They don’t want you seen with us?”

“That’s not it!” I protested. But the two of them were already getting up and leaving their money on the old-fashioned Formica table.

“We’ll talk to you later, Ani,” Ashley said. “Maybe we can get together after Thanksgiving or something. Maybe after Christmas.”

“After *Christmas*?” I exclaimed, aghast. “But...but what about our traditions? What about baking Christmas cookies together? What about our gift exchange? I’ve already gotten something for both of you!”

Madison looked down her nose at me.

“If you think expensive gifts can make up for always ditching us, think again, Ani.”

“I didn’t ditch you tonight!” I pointed out. “I had to sneak out to get here! If you guys only knew—” I stopped, shaking my head.

“Knew what?” Ashley demanded. “Ani, is there something bad going on? Are they messing with you? Abusing you somehow?”

“No.” I shook my head miserably. I couldn’t tell them what was really going on. Couldn’t admit the embarrassing truth about the weird cult my mom had somehow gotten herself sucked into and tell them how she had dragged me into it with her. How do you tell your two best friends that your stepfather thinks he and his son are the last of the “Royal Line” descended from the “First Wolf?”

It just sounded so crazy, I didn't even know where to start.

"It's...it's just a family thing," I said again, lamely. "Please try to understand. I love you guys, you know that!"

Ashley stooped and gave me a quick hug.

"All right, we love you too, Ani," she said.

Madison gave me a grudging hug as well.

"We *do* love you, but what are we supposed to think? Everything has changed since your mom got remarried."

"I know," I said, my throat tight. "I wish I could explain—I really do. But, well...I just *can't*."

Ashley stepped back and gave me a sad look.

"We used to tell each other *everything*—remember?"

"It was part of our friend-pact," Madison chimed in.

The friend-pact was a contract we had written up in middle school, back when we'd decided we would all be friends for life. And apparently now I was breaking it.

"Come on guys, that was a long time ago," I said weakly.

"That doesn't make it any less important." Ashley frowned, her manner growing markedly cooler. "Look, we'd better get going. We promised Gillian she could have your spot in the Airbnb if you didn't want it. I need to call her and tell her to start packing. Bye."

She gave a little wave, which Madison duplicated.

"See you later, Ani," she said carelessly. "Have a good Thanksgiving."

It was the way you talked to a casual acquaintance—not even a friend. Her words made my heart grow cold, like there was a layer of frost creeping over it.

It felt like I was losing them forever.

TWO



AS I WATCHED MY TWO BEST FRIENDS WALK OUT OF MY LIFE, I wanted to jump up and shout,

“Wait, come back! I’ll tell you everything!”

But I just *couldn’t*. And it wasn’t just the fact that it sounded crazy, I had also been sworn to secrecy by Marcus when my mom and I moved into the big white mansion on Songbird Hill...

My stepfather had taken me down in the basement and—with Jake as a witness—poked my finger with an ancient silver instrument that looked like a cross between an ice pick and a dagger. Then he pricked Jake’s finger as well.

He held my bleeding finger to Jake’s so that our blood could “mingle” as he put it. It reminded me of something I had done with Madison and Ashley when we were kids and wanted to become “Blood sisters forever.”

I might have been crazy, but it seemed to me that when my finger touched Jake’s and our blood “mingled,” I felt a kind of tingle run up my arm. I bit my lip and yanked my finger away from his as soon as Marcus allowed it.

Jake said nothing—just put his hand down by his side and squeezed it into a fist—I could see how white his knuckles were getting in the light of the single candle flame Marcus had lit for this weird little “ceremony.” His jaw was clenched, too

and his eyes were blazing as he looked at me and then looked away.

“Now, Anastasia,” Marcus had said to me. “Your blood is Jacob’s blood and his blood is yours. I am your father by adoption but Jacob is your brother by adoption *and* by blood. Do you understand? He is *truly* your brother—as though the two of you were born of the same parents.”

“Uh, yeah—I guess so.” I was feeling pretty nervous about this whole strange thing. I wondered if all “Weres” as they called themselves, did this kind of adoption ceremony when they welcomed new members into their family. Or was it just some batshit crazy idea my stepfather had come up with on his own? And why was it so important for Jake and I to “mingle” our blood?

“Will you swear to keep our secrets now that you share our blood?” Marcus asked me.

Well, what could I say—No? I didn’t want to imagine the consequences if I did that. So I just nodded and said yes, feeling weirder than ever.

“Good. Give me your fingers—both of you,” he said to Jake and me.

I held out my wounded finger and Jake did as well. Marcus positioned them both over the candle. Then, as our blood dripped into the flame, sizzling and burning, he had chanted this weird, crazy-sounding verse that went something like this:

“Blood of Were and eyes of gold,

Now at last, the truth is told

Blood you share—now family are

Under moon and under star

Sister/brother you are true

Blood is shared between you two

Secrets kept are secrets shared

*Now at last our truth is bared,
Blood of Were and eyes of gold,
Always must our truth be told”*

After that, Marcus had looked into my eyes very seriously—in a way that made me want to squirm and shift from foot-to-foot.

“I hope you know this is a solemn occasion, Anastasia,” he’d said, frowning a little. “It isn’t every day that a new member is inducted into the Royal Line. Besides your mother and myself, you and Jacob are the only ones left. The Line will die with my son.” He looked briefly at Jake. “For there is no other Royal Omega for him to mate with. And since your mother and I married and I have adopted you and given you my name and Jake has mingled his blood with yours, you are legally my daughter as much as Jacob is my son.”

Oh my God, is he serious? This was the second time that he had emphasized that we were now family—by blood as well as by name. This Were-cult thing was getting out of control! I swallowed the nervous, incredulous giggle that tried to bubble up in my throat. It seemed better to say nothing at all.

“From now on, no human must know what you are—what we are,” Marcus had continued, his pure-gold eyes boring into mine. “Our secret must not pass your lips. If it does, I *will* know. The blood you shed will tell me. Do you understand?”

Still tongue-tied, I had nodded. But the giggle had died in my throat—Marcus was deadly serious and the way he was looking at me was scary. Inside I was thinking, “*What the hell is wrong with these people? This is a cult—an absolute, freaking cult. And I’m caught in the middle of it!*”

“Good.” Marcus blew out the candle flame, nodded once, and turned to leave the basement—which had stone walls like a freaking *dungeon*, I swear.

Jake, who hadn't said a word through the entire ceremony, came up to me. I was standing there, staring at his father's back as Marcus ascended the stairs that led up to the more normal parts of the house—the parts that didn't look like they belonged in a movie about Medieval torture techniques.

“What's wrong, little Ani—are you *scared*? Don't worry—you'll get used to the way we do things soon enough.” Jake's deep voice rumbled through me and his mocking words stung.

“Scared?” I snapped. “Why would I be scared? Your father only brought me down in the dark basement, drew my blood, and recited some kind of freaky spell over me to compel my silence and adopt me into the family. What's scary about *that*?”

“Poor little Ani.” His sensuous mouth curled into a sarcastic grin. “All freaked out by the Were Rituals. I promise you, this is *nothing* to what I went through when I was a kid.”

“I'm not a 'kid'.” I lifted my chin, glaring up at him. If only he wasn't so damn *tall*. His broad shoulders and dark hair were highlighted by the light shining from behind him at the top of the stairs, making him look like some kind fallen angel.

Or maybe a monster seeking its prey, whispered a dark little voice in my head.

“Maybe you're not a kid biologically,” Jake said. “But you *are* innocent and very likely to remain that way.” He took a step towards me, looking down into my eyes. “Innocent little Ani,” he murmured in that deep, dark voice of his that seemed to vibrate through me.

He was so close I could smell his cologne—a wild, strong, completely masculine scent that made me think of bonfires and fur and the woods at midnight. I had never smelled anything like it and for some reason, it seemed to *call* to me.

Without knowing what I was doing, I took a step towards him, closing the distance between us. The tips of my breasts were nearly brushing against his broad chest as I looked up into his pure-gold eyes.

I knew that if I took a deep breath in, they *would* brush against him. I also knew that was wrong and that I ought to keep my distance—he was my stepbrother, for God’s sake! And everybody—especially my mom and my stepfather—had made sure to let me know that in my new family, ties of adoption were considered to be the same as ties of blood.

Marcus hadn’t said it out loud during the little “ceremony” we’d just been through, but I understood that having anything sexual to do with my new “big brother” would most definitely be considered incest. It didn’t matter that we weren’t actually blood-related—that was how strong the adoption was.

Not that I *wanted* anything to do with him like that, I told myself. It was just that he smelled so *good*.

I took that deep breath I’d been thinking about and my nipples tingled as they brushed against his broad chest and his warm scent filled my senses. Why was I doing this? Acting this way? I didn’t know.

“What makes you think I’m innocent?” I asked him and somehow my voice had dropped down to a husky little purr which sounded very unlike me.

“What you’re doing right now lets me *know* you are,” Jake growled. Putting his hands on my shoulders, he pushed me gently but firmly away from him. “No Omega female would dare to stand so close to an Alpha male so near the full moon unless she wanted—” He broke off, shaking his head.

“Wanted what?” I asked.

“Never mind.” His voice took on a bitter edge I didn’t understand. “I don’t know why my father bothers to educate you about our kind at all. It’s clear you’re never going to—”

“Going to what?” I demanded, because he broke off abruptly again. What was it he wasn’t telling me? Was it more of the “Royal Wolf, Alpha and Omega” bullshit?

“Nothing. Never mind.” In the dimness, his eyes almost seemed to glow and I could see that his square jaw, covered with dark stubble, was clenched. He looked like he had bitten

down hard on something bitter and didn't like the taste, but he couldn't spit it out for some reason.

"Fine," I said, crossing my arms over my breasts, which were still tingling.

I wasn't about to ask him any more questions. It was enough to know that he had bought into the family cult too, and also thought that he was a "Royal Were." I guessed I couldn't blame him—after all, his father had no doubt raised him within the weird belief system. But it was kind of disappointing—Jake seemed keenly intelligent and I'd thought he was too smart to swallow all this "Werewolf" bullshit.

I sighed and pressed my thumb to the pad of my wounded finger. And then, because Jake was still just standing there, staring down at me, I said,

"I guess we'd better follow your father upstairs."

"He's *your* father too, now, little Ani." His deep voice was more bitter than ever and the muscle at the side of his jaw was jumping with tension. "Which makes you my dear little *sister*. Don't forget it—I know *I'll* never be allowed to."

And with this cryptic remark, he had turned and jogged up the stairs, leaving me in the dark basement to wonder what in the Hell he was talking about and why he was so angry about it—whatever it was.

THREE



I WAS LOST IN THOUGHT, REMEMBERING THE VOW I HAD TAKEN—or rather been subjected to—as I watched my friends leave the diner. There was no calling them back—no explaining all the weirdness at home. As much as I wanted to, I felt bound by the odd basement ritual—bound to secrecy about the strange cult I had been dragged into by my mom.

I called the waitress and paid my part of the bill, watching as she gathered up the money Madison and Ashley had left to cover their dinners. Then I hooked my warm red coat off the back of my chair and put it on, making sure to button it up to my chin. It wasn't complete winter weather yet, but the air outside smelled like snow, which meant it couldn't be far off.

I shivered as I pushed my way out of the glass door with a steaming cup of coffee and a pair of happy, dancing sausage biscuits painted on it. The wind rushed through my hair, swirling it around my head as I walked around the brick building and headed for the parking lot.

I was the only one in the lot—well, as far as I could see—and my white Tesla was sitting at the far end of the parking area, glimmering like a pearl in the darkness.

I looked around, feeling a chill of unease. This was the first time I'd been out by myself, without my bodyguard, since my mom had married Marcus almost a year ago, and it occurred to me that I had forgotten what it was like to be a woman alone at night.

I might not *like* having Branson always hanging around like a silent, muscular giant, but his presence certainly made me feel safer. I made a mental note to sneak away during the daylight hours next time.

I was almost to my car, when a man popped up in front of me, seemingly from nowhere.

I might have thought he was homeless, maybe looking for a handout, but he wasn't dressed in rags. In fact, he had on a suit and tie and his brown hair was meticulously styled. Behind his wire frame glasses, his eyes were a golden-green color. He appeared to be somewhere around 40, I thought, but a very fit 40, like maybe he went to the gym every day.

"Hello, Lady Anastasia." He bowed to me—actually *bowed* like we were at Court together or something—and came up smiling. "It's very good to meet you at last."

"I, uh..." I took a step back, wishing he wasn't between me and my car. "Do...do I know you?" I thought he looked familiar somehow, though I couldn't place where I'd seen him.

"No, but I know *you*," he told me. "I'm Professor Sorenson," he added. "I teach Arcane Studies at JMU."

"Oh—maybe *that's* where I've seen you—on campus." I smiled weakly. Even if I sort of knew him, I still didn't like being alone in the dark, deserted parking lot with him. "Uh, it's nice to meet you," I added. "I don't think I've ever taken any of your classes—I'm a Nursing major. I'm going to work in the NICU when I get my nursing degree," I added.

With a major like that, it was pretty clear I wasn't going to need to take any classes in "Arcane Studies" whatever that was. I hoped Professor Sorenson would take the hint, but he didn't—he just kept talking.

"The NICU, hmm? You must love babies then," he said, smiling broadly.

"I've always loved babies and always wanted to work with them," I said honestly. "That's been my dream since I was little." Again hoping he'd get the hint that I *didn't* want to take his class. But his next question caught me off guard.

“So I imagine you must want babies—children—of your own some day,” he said, as though that was a given thing. “Maybe even very *soon*.”

“Er...I *guess* so—not *too* soon, though. I have to finish my degree first, of course.”

I shifted uneasily, taking a step back from him. It was weird enough to meet a professor from my school in the middle of a deserted parking lot at night—it was even weirder that he was asking about my reproductive plans for the future—the *near* future.

“Good—that’s very good to hear,” he said, nodding. “Now, let me ask you this, Anastasia—what if I told you that any babies you had would be deformed—their blood polluted—unless you chose the right father for them?”

“What?” I took another step back. “What are you talking about? Are you trying to ask me to have your babies or something?” I demanded. “Because that’s really creepy—I don’t even know you!”

Professor Sorenson looked shocked—his gold/green eyes widened behind his wire-rimmed glasses.

“Have *my* babies? Of course not! My blood isn’t worthy to be mixed with the Royal Line! I mean, I’m an *Alpha*, but I don’t have the blood of the First Wolf in my veins. No, my dear, you are a Royal Omega—you *must* be bred by a Royal Alpha in order to carry on your esteemed lineage.”

His voice had assumed a lecturing tone, as though I was sitting in his classroom and he was giving me information that might be on the next exam.

“You see,” he said, “Long ago a prophecy was given by a witch of estimable power. She foretold that the day the blood of the First Wolf vanished from the Earth, the power of all of us regular Weres would be dimmed and diminished and our kind would eventually die out. And we can’t have *that*, now can we?” His eyes gleamed as he asked me the question.

He was crazy—absolutely crazy, I thought, feeling my heart begin to race. Behind his urbane good looks, he was as

insane as my stepfather, Marcus. And clearly, he had bought into the same cultish ideas.

“I...I don’t know what you mean,” I told him, taking another step back. “So just leave me alone!”

“Ah, but I can’t do that, my dear.”

I had backed a good five feet from him by this time—hoping I could get far enough away to turn and run back to the safety of the diner. But suddenly he was right in front of me—right in my face. How had he moved so fast?

“Hey, let go of me!” I gasped as he grabbed me by the arm.

“Not until you understand your duty!” His eyes were blazing into mine like poison green flames. “You *must* be bred by an Alpha of the Royal Line! Do you understand?”

“No! I don’t understand anything you’re saying and I don’t *want* to understand!” I shouted in his face. “What’s wrong with you? Are you a member of the same cult as my stepfather?”

His face hardened.

“No! For your stepfather—the one who should by rights be our king and the Alpha of our pack—has eschewed his responsibilities to the continuation of the Were line. He produced only one son and heir and he shows no signs of making that heir continue the Royal Line as he should.”

“Are you talking about Jake?” I asked, trying to keep my voice calm. Inside I was thinking, *Okay, he’s crazy—completely batshit crazy. Have to get away from him—have to run!*

Professor Sorenson had me by the sleeve of my red winter coat—but he was gripping the fabric, not my arm. My mind was still working like crazy. The inside of the coat was that slick, plastic-y material. It was a bit too big for me too—I *thought* I could slide out of it pretty easily. What if I were to duck and pull away from him, leaving him holding my coat as I ran back to the diner?

“Yes, I mean Jacob Wulven—of *course* I do!” he exclaimed, as though I was being stupid. “It is your responsibility to get Jacob to breed you on this coming full moon,” he said.

There was a fanatical light in his glowing green eyes that scared the hell out of me. He was being serious—he really wanted me to try to get Jake to...

But I couldn't finish the thought—not even in my own head.

“I...I don't know about that,” I said, playing for time. I was getting ready to literally duck and run, though I was trying to be as unobtrusive as I could. Luckily, the coat was big and puffy enough that the movements I was making weren't obvious.

“Well, *I* know!” Professor Sorenson exclaimed, his eyes getting wilder than ever. “For I have studied the Arcane Texts! The prophecy will come to pass if you are not bred this full moon by a male Alpha of the Royal Line. You are the Second Royal Omega the lore speaks of! The Innocent Maiden who must be knotted by the Alpha Heir of the Absent King! You *must* be filled with the seed of the Heir so that your belly may swell like the Full Moon herself and you may continue the Royal Lineage! If you do not, all of our kind shall pass from the Earth and be blown like chaff before the wind!”

Oh my God—he wasn't just crazy—he was absolutely *psychotic*! I tried not to panic—I really did. But I knew if I didn't get away from him, I was going to wind up dead in a ditch somewhere, probably with “arcane symbols” carved all over my naked, mangled corpse.

It was time to go. Ducking my head with a quick jerk, I backed out of the coat and then I was free!

Unfortunately, the crazy professor still had hold of my sleeve—not just the sleeve of my coat, but the sleeve of my oversized sweater as well. When I slid out of the coat, the sweater stayed with it—which meant that when I shed my coat, I also shed my sweater. So there I was, shivering in my white lace bra, half naked in the dark, cold parking lot.

Goosebumps broke out all over my arms and exposed shoulders and chest but I couldn't have cared less. The only thought in my mind now was to run—to get back to the safety of the diner and call my mom to come and get me and take me home.

I turned and started running towards the diner, only to find Professor Sorenson right in front of me somehow, blocking my way.

“Slow. So *slow*,” he crooned, giving me a crazy smile that made my stomach clench like a cold fist. “You really *are* the Innocent Maiden, aren't you? You haven't had your first Heat Cycle yet and you've *certainly* never been knotted and bred. If you had, you'd be much faster.”

“I don't know what you're talking about—leave me alone!”

I tried to dodge past him, but he was there again, between me and the diner, laughing a crazy laugh that made the short hairs on the back of my neck and arms stand up.

“Do you know how long I've been trying to get you alone?” he demanded. “The Worshipers of the Moon tasked me with contacting you *ages* ago, but you always have a nonbeliever guarding you, so I had to keep my distance. But now, I've got you where I want you, my dear, and I'm going to *make* you understand your responsibility, no matter what it takes!”

“Leave me alone!” I pleaded. “I don't understand why you'd want me to be with my own big brother—that's sick!”

He shoved his face into mine and his breath smelled like raw meat.

“It's not sick—it's your *destiny!*” he shouted in my face. “You *must* be knotted and bred by the Heir of the Absent Alpha! You are the Innocent Maiden—the Royal Omega! You must—”

“Get the fuck away from her!” a deep, familiar voice behind me growled.

FOUR



IT WAS JAKE. I HADN'T SEEN HIM APPEAR AND HAD NO IDEA where he had come from. But he shoved me behind him protectively and punched Professor Sorenson—if that was really his name—right in the face.

The crazy man fell down but popped right back up again almost at once. He still had my coat and sweater clutched in his hands and he gripped them tightly as he stared at Jake.

“The Heir of the Absent Alpha himself,” he panted, swiping blood off his face where Jake had busted his lip. “Have you come to claim the Innocent Maiden at last, then?”

“Fuck off with your crazy talk,” Jake growled. “My father and I don't believe your insane prophecy!”

“You should though!” Professor Sorenson exclaimed, clutching my jacket even tighter. “Do you want all of our people to diminish and vanish from the Earth? You should breed her this very night and knot her by the full moon! Do your duty!”

“Fuck you!” Jake growled and punched him again. There was a crunching sound and the Professor of Arcane Studies howled and fell on the ground, clutching his nose.

This time when Sorenson went down, he didn't get right back up again. He looked up at Jake, blood streaming from his broken nose. It looked black in the moonlight.

“Strong,” he muttered. “You've grown so *strong*, Jacob—the blood of the First Wolf flows in your veins! None other could have drawn my blood.”

“Fucking asshole,” Jake muttered, shaking his head. He grabbed me by the arm. “Come on, Ani—we’re leaving.”

“But...my coat! My sweater!” I protested. I had my cards and cash stowed in my phone case, which was luckily jammed into my back jeans pocket, but I was still wearing only my bra and I didn’t like being half naked.

“Give back her clothes! What did you do to her, anyway?” Jake demanded, glaring down at the bleeding professor. “Why is she half naked like this? Were you trying to rape her?”

“No! I would not violate an Omega of the Royal Line!” Sorenson protested. He scrambled to his knees, and then to his feet, backing away slowly. “It would be a blasphemy for any Alpha but the Heir to knot her!” he exclaimed.

“What is he *talking* about, Jake?” I was half-crying now. I hated to be a girly girl, but the whole attack had been *really* upsetting.

“Give back her clothes!” Jake said again, taking a step towards Sorenson.

“No! I may need them if you will not do your duty.” The professor turned and ran then—going so fast he was nothing but a blur. He was gone in an instant, disappearing into the woods at the edge of the parking lot. How could a forty-year-old man move so fast?

I saw that Jake was about to take off after him and grabbed for my stepbrother’s arm.

“No, please!” I begged. “Please, Jake—don’t leave me out here all alone!”

“You’re right.” He looked around the parking lot, his golden eyes narrowed. “There may be more of the crazy fuckers out there.”

But he didn’t seem to see any, because he turned his attention fully to me.

“What the hell are you doing out here anyway, Ani?” he demanded. Taking me by the arms, he gave me a hard shake, so that my teeth clicked together. His eyes blazed with anger.

“Don’t you know how dangerous it is to be out alone on a night like this—when the moon is nearly full? Don’t you know those crazy assholes are stalking you?” he demanded, his voice a low, intense growl.

“No, I don’t know anything except that you and your dad are in some insane kind of cult and apparently there are other people in it, too!” I exclaimed. “Even...even my own mom believes it!”

And then I broke down crying—sobbing actually. I couldn’t help it! My life was spinning out of control and everything was crazy and wrong and everyone around me—even my beloved mother—believed in some insane nonsense that didn’t make any sense at *all*.

“Ani, damn it—don’t cry!”

Jake looked like he wanted to comfort me but didn’t dare. At last he put an arm gingerly around my shoulders.

I shoved it off again and tried to get hold of myself.

“Leave me alone!” I half shouted—half sobbed. I swiped at my eyes, angry with myself for losing control.

“I will when I’m sure you’re okay.”

He put an arm around me again and this time I allowed it. He wasn’t wearing a jacket, despite the chilly weather—he had on nothing but a thin black t-shirt, as though he’d come out of the house on a whim and hadn’t thought to grab his coat. But still, he radiated heat like a furnace, which was nice, considering I was half naked.

“Jake,” I whispered, swiping at my eyes again. “I was... was so scared!”

“It’s okay, little Ani,” he murmured, squeezing me gently and running one big, warm hand up and down my shivering arm. “You don’t have to be scared. I won’t let him hurt you—I won’t let *anyone* hurt you, *ever*.” There was a low, protective growl in his voice that somehow made me feel better.

Even better than the protective note in his voice, though, was his scent. It was the same bonfire and fur in the woods at

midnight fragrance that I had noticed on him during that weird ceremony in the basement, when I had been adopted into his family. I breathed it in and it made me feel safe...protected...*wanted*. It was the best thing I had ever smelled and I never wanted to stop smelling it.

“I...I’m sorry I got angry,” I said, my voice coming out in a croak as I rubbed my wet cheeks with the back of my hand. “It’s just...that was really scary. Who *was* that man and why was he after me?”

“You really don’t know?” Jake pulled away a little to look down into my upturned face. “Your mom didn’t tell you about the Worshipers of the Moon?”

I shook my head, baffled.

“No, who are they. And what do they want?”

“What did he *say* they wanted?” Jake’s expression was guarded.

“He, uh, said a lot of weird things about uh, knotting and breeding and the full moon and Alphas and Omegas and all kinds of things like that,” I told him.

I also remembered that he seemed to think that Jake and I should be doing the dirty, but I didn’t mention that. In fact, just thinking of it made my cheeks get hot.

“Uh-huh.” Jake nodded, frowning. “Yeah, they always say the same thing. They’re crazy.”

“Who’s crazy?” I demanded. “The, uh, Followers of the Moon?”

“The *Worshippers* of the Moon,” he corrected me. “Look, let’s go home before any more of them show up. Do you still have your keys or were they in your coat pocket?”

“I have them.” I disentangled myself from him—though I really didn’t want to, he was surprisingly warm despite the chilly night—and dug them out of my jeans pocket.

“Good—I’ll drive.” He took the keys from me and started towards the Tesla.

“But...but wh-what about *y-your* c-car?” I asked him, looking around the lot for it. My teeth were beginning to chatter now that I was away from his warmth.

“I didn’t bring it,” Jake said, frowning. “Easier to track scents on foot.”

“Wh-what?” I demanded. “Are y-you saying y-y-you r-ran all the way here f-from the house? Th-that’s five m-miles!”

My chattering teeth seemed to catch his attention because he turned towards me, frowning.

“Look at you—you’re shivering!”

“B-because I’m only w-wearing my b-bra and it’s c-c-c-old out here!” I exclaimed.

“That’s right—you haven’t even had your first Heat Cycle yet, never mind...anything else. No wonder the cold affects you so much. Here.”

Jake pulled off his t-shirt and handed it to me. I tried not to look at his broad shoulders and bare, muscular chest leading down to six-pack abs as I slipped into it. He had a little trail of dark hair that led from his belly button down into the waistband of his jeans—I tried not to look at that, either.

His t-shirt was so big on me it fell to my knees, but at least my bra was covered.

Jake nodded—a swift jerk of his head—as though he was satisfied.

“Good, now let’s go home. Like I said, I’ll drive.”

I crossed my arms over my chest.

“I’m not going anywhere with you unless you explain all the crazy shit that just happened to me!” I declared.

Jake glared at me.

“I shouldn’t have to tell you any of this—your mom was supposed to let you know all about it!”

“Well, she *didn’t!*” I flared. “I mean, she told me all the crazy stuff you guys believe—that you think you’re all

werewolves and all that shit. But she never said there was a cult of weird Moon Worshipers following me!”

Jake just stared at me for a moment.

“Wait...you don’t get it, do you?” he asked, frowning. “You don’t understand and you don’t believe—not really.”

“Now you sound like Professor Crazy back there,” I said, glaring at him. “Of *course* I don’t believe you and your father come from a royal line of werewolves! That’s *crazy!* As crazy as all that nonsense Sorenson was spouting!”

Jake shook his head and ran a hand through his hair.

“Goddamnit,” I heard him mutter. “Look, how am I supposed to explain anything to you if you don’t believe the basic facts in the first place?”

I put my hand on my hip.

“You mean the ‘fact’ that you’re a ‘werewolf’ and you can change at the full moon?” I pointed to the moon overhead, which had come out from behind a bank of clouds. It was nearly full, floating like a big white ship through the black sky. “If that’s true, why don’t you change now?” I taunted him. “The moon’s *almost* full, isn’t it? Isn’t that good enough for you?”

“Don’t tempt me to change.” Jake’s voice was a low, dangerous growl. “Not when you’re so close and your blood calls to mine, little Ani. Not when we both know I can never have you.”

I felt a shiver go through me at his words, though I didn’t really understand them.

“What...what are you talking about?” I asked, wishing my voice sounded steadier.

For a moment Jake just stared at me, his pale golden eyes glowing in the moonlight. Then he shook his head and turned away.

“Never mind. Come on—we need to get home.”

This time I went with him without protest. I don't know why—maybe I felt like I had pushed things too close to the edge. What “things” and what “edge,” I didn't know exactly. But I had the feeling of someone who suddenly finds herself teetering on a very high ledge, looking down into a chasm below...and then is somehow able to take that crucial step back towards safety.

Wordlessly, I followed Jake to the pearly white Tesla and climbed into the passenger side.

Maybe I could get him to talk more on the ride home.

FIVE



“TELL ME ABOUT THE FOLLOWERS—I MEAN THE *WORSHIPERS* of the Moon,” I said, after he had started the car and maneuvered it out of the parking lot. “What do they want with me? With *us*?” Because Sorenson had been going on and on about me being the “Innocent Maiden” and Jake being the “Heir to the Absent Alpha” so clearly his cult was focused on both of us, not just me.

“What do you *think* they want?” Jake growled. “They want for us to carry on the Royal Line of the First Wolf.”

Great—more crazy talk.

“Okay,” I said, taking a deep breath. “I’m going to be honest and say that sounds completely batshit insane to me. But I’m *also* going to go along with it, because otherwise I’ll never find out what the hell that man—and his cult—want with me.”

“Didn’t he tell you?” Jake demanded and the bitterness was back in his voice. “They want me to *breed* you, Ani. They want me to get you pregnant with my baby—a Royal heir of the Royal Line of the First Wolf—*that’s* what they want.”

I felt a surge go through my body like...well, I don’t know *what* it was like. I only know my nipples got tight and I had to squeeze my thighs together *hard*. These were parts of me that normally never felt anything, so it was beyond strange that Jake’s words should stir me.

“But...but that’s—” I began.

“Incest? Yes, it is,” Jake cut me off. “Especially after the Blood-Mingling Adoption ceremony my father made us both go through. You couldn’t be more my little sister if we’d been born to the same parents.”

“But we *weren’t* though,” I pointed out. “I’m not *really* your sister, Jake—I mean, not by blood.”

I wasn’t sure why I was arguing this point. It wasn’t like I *wanted* to do *that* with Jake. I had never done it with *anyone*—which was my dirty little secret that nobody, not even Madison or Ashley, knew. And I *certainly* didn’t want my stepbrother to be my first. Still, he was acting like we were blood-related siblings and we *weren’t*.

But apparently, that wasn’t how Jake saw things.

“You’re my little sister,” he said firmly, staring straight ahead at the road as he spoke. “And I’m your big brother. Not your stepbrother—your *actual big brother*. That’s how you’re seen in the eyes of the Were law, Ani, and that’s how I see you, too.”

“If it’s Were law, then why don’t the Worshipers of the Moon see it that way?” I demanded.

“They don’t know about the Blood-Mingling ceremony,” Jake said stiffly. “Though I doubt they’d care, even if they did know. Fucking crazy assholes,” he added in a growl.

“He—Sorenson—kept saying he wanted you to...to ‘knot’ me,” I said in a low voice. “What does *that* mean? I mean, I understand, uh, the ‘breeding’ part, but what’s ‘knotting?’”

Jake shook his head.

“Look, I don’t have time to explain male Were anatomy to you. The main thing you need to understand is that the Worshipers of the Moon are fucking *crazy*. They’re so damn convinced that ancient prophecy is going to come true—so sure all Weres will ‘fade from the Earth’ if the line of the First Wolf is allowed to end—that as long as they’re anywhere around, you’re not safe.”

“So...they think they’re fighting for their very *existence*,” I said slowly. “They think if we don’t...if you don’t—”

“If I don’t breed my own little sister and get her pregnant,” Jake supplied, still looking straight ahead. The muscle on the side of his jaw was clenched.

“Uh, right.” I had that wave of sensation again that made my nipples ache and I had to press my thighs together tightly. Outside the car, the moon was clearly visible, shining down from above the treetops like a giant, accusing eye, looking at us. “Anyway,” I continued. “These crazy people think if we don’t do *that* together, they’re all going to die—right?”

“Essentially, yes.” Jake’s deep voice was terse.

“Damn,” I whispered, shaking my head. “Jake, if they really believe all that, it’s going to make them *incredibly* dangerous!”

“Oh, you *think*?” he growled sarcastically. “Why do you think your mom and my dad forbid you to go out alone—especially at night? That fucking asshole, Sorenson, has probably been stalking you for days, trying to get you alone. And tonight, when you snuck out, you gave him the perfect opportunity! If I hadn’t come when I did—”

“Why *did* you come?” I demanded. “Why did you just *happen* to be there in the parking lot at just the right time?”

“I followed your scent trail,” he said, frowning. “I could tell by the way you were acting this afternoon you were going to sneak out.”

“What? How could you possibly know that?” I asked.

“Because I did it myself, when I was your age, all right?” Jake snapped. “The room you’re in now used to be mine—it’s too damn easy to climb down that trellis and get away.” He shook his head. “Don’t know why your mom lets you stay there. You must really have her fooled into thinking you’re some good little girl who never breaks the rules.”

“I *don’t* break the rules, when I don’t have to!” I exclaimed, stung at his accusing tone. “But I felt like I was being held prisoner in that damn house. Nobody told me there was a crazy cult following me!”

“It sounds to me like nobody has told you much of anything,” Jake growled. “Your mom was supposed to explain all about being a Were and what to expect during the full moon and how you have to watch out for the Worshipers of the Moon and *all* of that shit.”

“Well, she didn’t!” I snapped. “She said I’ll probably marry a ‘non-Were’ and so I’ll never have to worry about any of the crazy shit you guys believe in!”

“We believe in it because it’s *true*,” Jake said tersely. “Look, I realize you weren’t raised in a Were family and you only recently found out about your bloodlines, but you need to respect what you are, Ani. What *all* of us are.”

“I don’t believe any of that,” I told him frankly. “But it’s enough for me to believe that *you* believe it and that the crazy people following me believe it, okay?”

“No, it’s *not* okay.” We were home at that point. Jake drove through the front gates and up the front drive of the big old Antebellum mansion before he parked the car. Then he turned to look at me, an intense look on his face. “Ani, there are things you really need to know. Whether you wind up with a Were or not, you’re one yourself and it’s *going* to affect you.”

“Affect me how?” I scoffed. “Am I going to turn furry and start howling whenever there’s a full moon?”

“No, female Weres don’t shift like male Weres do,” he said stiffly. “But there are other changes that will affect you. Look... you’re virgin, aren’t you?”

“What?” I couldn’t believe he’d asked me that!

“You are, aren’t you?” He shifted forward, looking into my eyes intently. “I can tell it by your scent. You smell...” He inhaled deeply, his eyelids fluttering for a moment, like someone smelling something really good. “You smell *pure*—you’ve never been bred or knotted before by any male, have you?”

I slapped his face.

“None of your Goddamned business!” I snarled, now *thoroughly* pissed off. “How dare you ask me a question like that or start making assumptions about my sex life?” Or lack thereof—but he didn’t need to know that.

Jake put a hand to his cheek, where I had slapped him. His pure-gold eyes flashed but he didn’t retaliate in any way.

“Fine—have it your way. See how you like it when your first Heat Cycle comes on you,” he growled. “Your mom may think she can keep you safe by making my father adopt you and keeping you away from most other Weres, but you’re in the house with two Alpha males of the Royal Line—your body is *going* to react, no matter how hard I try to stay away from you.”

“What are you talking about?” I demanded. “And if you’re really trying to stay away from me, why did you follow me tonight?”

Jake looked away.

“I didn’t want you to get hurt. Look, those people—the Worshipers of the Moon—they caught me once, when I was a few years younger than you are now.”

“What? Really?” I suddenly felt bad about slapping him. “Jake, I’m sorry,” I said in a low voice. “What...what did they do to you?”

“Let’s just say it wasn’t a good time, all right?” His voice was hard and he wouldn’t look at me—he stared out the windshield instead. “My dad had to hire some professionals to get me back, but it took them a while to find me. So those fucking assholes had plenty of time to—”

“To what?” I whispered. My God, what had they done to him? Some kind of torture? Sexual abuse? I suddenly felt sorry for him—which wasn’t an emotion I usually felt for my dark, sarcastic stepbrother.

He shook his head, his jaw clenching.

“Never mind. I just...didn’t want it to happen to you, too—okay?” He looked at me, his eyes blazing. “I want you to be *safe*, Ani. Even if you’re off limits to me, I want to protect

you. You should never have to go through what I did when they took me.” He looked down, his voice dropping to a whisper. “No one should.”

“Jake...” Hardly knowing what I was doing, I reached out to cup his cheek. The stubble on his jaw scratched my palm and I could feel how tense he was, though I was barely touching him. “I’m so sorry,” I murmured. “I didn’t know. If you ever want to talk—”

“Forget it. It was a long time ago and it doesn’t matter.” He jerked away from me and the open, almost vulnerable look in his eyes was replaced by a stony indifference. “Look, you’d better go back to your room the same way you snuck out. Can you climb the trellis by yourself or do you need some help?”

“I can manage,” I said stiffly. Clearly, he didn’t want to talk and this moment of almost-friendship between us was over. Now he would probably treat me like shit for the next six months or however long it was before he let his true self peek out again. This had happened once before, so I wasn’t surprised.

“Good, then go.” Jake nodded at the side of the house where my room was. “Hurry—my dad is probably still up. He never goes to bed before midnight.”

I held out my hand.

“The key? This is *my* car, you know.”

“I’ll park it in the garage for you. That way if my dad comes out, you don’t have to answer questions about why you’re wearing my shirt. Speaking of which, be sure you throw it in the laundry and hide it so neither of our parents sees it,” he instructed.

“Why?” I snapped, running out of patience again. “Are you afraid if they find your shirt in my laundry hamper they’ll think we’ve been screwing around?”

Jake glared at me and for the first time I saw real anger in those pale gold eyes of his—eyes so like my own.

“I would *never* touch you that way, Ani.” His voice was a menacing growl. “*Never*. I told you, I’m your brother and

you're my little sister. It would be *beyond* wrong for anything like that to happen between us. Do you understand?"

"Look, it's not like I would *want* anything like...like that to happen," I said, taken aback by his intensity.

"Good. Because it's never going to," he said shortly. "Now go back to your room. And next time you're thinking about sneaking out and leaving Branson behind, remember that Sorenson and his people are out there waiting for you to slip up. If they catch you again, I might not be there to save you."

Then he faced forward and didn't say another word as I left the car and went around to climb back up the trellis to my room.

SIX



SNEAKING BACK INTO MY ROOM WAS WAY HARDER THAN sneaking out of it had been. It takes some serious upper body strength and a lot of finesse to climb a slightly rickety wooden trellis up to the second-floor level in a house where all the ceilings are vaulted. By the time I crawled through my open window, I was huffing and puffing, even though I consider myself in generally good shape and I was pretty sure I had a splinter in my hand.

A slinky black shape greeted me with a scratchy little, “*Meow*” as I finally got all the way through the damn window.

“Oh, hello, Mr. Binkers,” I muttered. “Keep it down—okay? I don’t want anyone to know I went out.”

My cat meowed quietly again. He used to have a full-throated yowl, but that was before the accident, six months ago. Thinking of that made me remember the only other time my stepbrother had let down his guard around me and acted like something other than a sarcastic asshole.

It had happened when Mr. Binkers—who is normally an indoor cat—took it into his head to go roaming for some reason, which he almost never does. I got worried about him one night after supper when I couldn’t find him. After looking everyplace I could think of in the house—and believe me, there are a *lot* of hiding places for a slinky black cat in this huge old mansion—I decided to search around out of doors.

I found my cat down by the side road, just outside the gates that led into the mansion’s grounds. He was lying on his

side, barely breathing, and when I touched him, my hand came away bloody.

When I tell you I lost it, I mean I really *lost* it. My dad had given me Mr. Binkers as a kitten, just before he'd been killed when I was nine. In a way, I felt like the cat was all I had left of my father and now it seemed like he was dying too—I was losing him, just like I'd lost my dad!

I was sobbing my eyes out when Jake drove up in the sleek new sports car he'd just gotten. He worked in my stepfather's business and did well for himself, even though he still lived at home in the mansion with the rest of us.

The minute he saw me, he got out and ran around to find out what was going on. I was crying so hard, I couldn't explain, but Jake saw the problem right away.

“Come on—get him and let's go to the vet!” he insisted.

When I still didn't move, he scooped up Mr. Binkers in one arm and put his other arm around me. Then he put me in the passenger seat and laid my cat carefully in my lap. He didn't seem to care that Mr. Binkers had gotten blood all over the front of his immaculate white business shirt—he just drove like crazy to the nearest emergency animal clinic and helped me inside.

While the emergency vet was working on my cat, Jake sat beside me and held me close, letting me cry all over him, further ruining his nice clothes. He held me and stroked my hair and murmured soothing nothings in my ear. And when the vet came out with the good news that Mr. Binkers was going to live, he paid the entire bill—which was well over three thousand dollars—and wouldn't even hear of me paying him back.

Jake had saved Mr. Binkers' life that day, I was sure of it. And if my cat walked with a limp and had a scratchy little meow instead of his old full-throated yowl, well, I didn't care about that—I was just grateful to my stepbrother for acting so quickly and being so kind and supportive through the whole awful ordeal.

Strangely, though, my mom and Jake's dad hadn't seen it that way. I remember the worried way my mom looked at us when we walked in the door with Jake's arm around my shoulders. Mr. Binkers was going to have to stay at the vet's for a while, but he was going to be okay. I still felt shaken though, and Jake was still comforting me.

When I explained, my mom's worried look cleared, but she didn't thank Jake and she was quick to get me away from him. And later, I heard the strangest conversation between Jake and my stepfather.

I had been walking down the second-floor hallway—which had a banister around it and a view of the first floor down below—when I heard their voices speaking my name. Quickly, I had ducked into an alcove, wondering what they were saying about me.

“I smelled her when she came in,” Marcus was saying, his voice filled with cold anger. “Anastasia had your scent all *over* her, Jacob!”

“I was comforting her! Her cat nearly died!” Jake protested. “You don't think I did anything, do you? That I would *ever* do anything—especially at a time like that? She was crying her eyes out—I've never seen her look so...so *broken*.”

“Well, you're *not* the one to try and fix her,” his father snapped. “You know she's off-limits. The Blood-Mingling makes her your sister by blood as well as by adoption!”

“I know that!” Jake's voice was fierce. “You made certain you got your Omega but you denied me *mine*.”

“I couldn't help it, son—that's the way Winifred wanted it,” Marcus protested. “She doesn't want her daughter to have to go through what she did when the two of us first met.”

“She's going to go through it anyway—she lives in the house with two Alphas,” Jake snapped. “You really think you can keep her from having her first Heat Cycle by telling me to keep my distance? My scent is still in the air—and so is yours!”

“Yes, but I’m bonded to her mother,” Marcus had pointed out. “My scent shouldn’t stir her like yours would. I’m telling you, Jacob, *stay away from her*. Winifred wants to keep her out of the Were world as much as possible.”

“Good luck with that,” Jake had said flatly.

Then there had been the sound of footsteps and the two men had gone their separate ways.

At the time, I had thought it was just more of the crazy cult stuff they all seemed to believe. But now, lying on the bed and stroking Mr. Binkers, who was doing his level best to purr, I began to wonder.

What had Marcus meant about Jake’s scent “stirring” me and what exactly was a “Heat Cycle?”

“Stop it,” I told myself uneasily. “None of it means anything—it’s all just more of that weird werewolf bullshit.”

But I was beginning to wonder, just a little bit, if there was something to all this crazy talk I kept hearing from everyone around me. *Could* there be something to it? How could so many people have deluded themselves into thinking that werewolves were real unless there was maybe a *tiny* kernel of truth in the whole thing?

I told myself not to be silly—lots of people had convinced themselves that the Earth was flat too, but that didn’t mean it was true. But at the same time, a seed of doubt had been planted. A seed that was soon to sprout and grow, and flourish in my mind, especially considering what happened to me next...

It didn’t happen right away, though. I took a shower and got ready for bed, putting on my comfiest PJs—the warm flannel ones with pink bunny rabbits all over them. My mom had given them to me as a gift last Christmas, and I loved them, even though they looked a little ridiculous.

I climbed into bed and turned out the lights, trying not to think of the strange events I had just been through. At last, using some meditation techniques I had learned when Madison and Ashley and I used to take Yoga together, I managed to

purge the weirdness from my mind at least long enough to drift off to sleep.

I *thought* it was purged, anyway. But the minute I drifted off, what did I dream? It was Sorenson and he was chasing me with a leash and a collar. He was screaming something about how I must be bred and saying he would tie me down so I couldn't get away.

Then Jake appeared and he was really *angry*. His pure-gold eyes started glowing and then he started changing. His face lengthened into a muzzle and his ears moved up to the top of his head and fur sprouted all over his body. Soon, in place of my stepbrother, there was a huge wolf—almost as big as a horse—standing there.

“No!” In my dream, I began backing away. *“No, please, Jake—don't hurt me!”*

The huge, black wolf threw back his head and howled at the full moon that was floating overhead. Then he put his head down and began to stalk me, his golden eyes glaring like pale lamps from his transformed face.

It was a horrible dream—a nightmare really—but I would have traded it for what happened next. Because what woke me up was a hand over my mouth and a voice whispering in my ear,

“Come on, you little bitch! It's time to do your duty.”

SEVEN



I TRIED TO SCREAM BUT I WAS BARELY AWAKE AND I THOUGHT the hand and the angry, unfamiliar voice might be part of my nightmare. By the time I realized I was awake and this was really happening, someone had tied my hands behind my back and shoved something hard and cold between my shoulder blades.

“Feel that, you Royal Omega bitch?” someone—a man, it was a man’s voice—snarled in my ear. “It’s a .44 Magnum and it’ll blow a hole the size of a barn door through you if you so much as twitch a toe out of place. Now fucking *march!*”

His last words were accompanied by a hard shove that nearly sent me to my knees. I staggered and somehow managed to keep from falling. It was dark in my room but from the corner of my eye, I saw Mr. Binker’s green eyes shining from under the bed. Good—at least my cat was safe! But what was happening and where was this man taking me?

“Downstairs,” he hissed at me, as we exited my room. “And don’t bother screaming, girly,” he added, just as I was wondering if I could shout for help and duck away before he could pull the trigger. “All your security is gone and the Absent Alpha and his Omega bitch have been drugged.”

It took me a minute to realize he was talking about Marcus and my mom and then I stumbled over a dark shape in the hallway and nearly fell over again.

“Watch it!” The man grabbed me roughly by the arm and hauled me upright. I stepped over the thing I had tripped on

and my foot landed in a warm puddle of something sticky. Gasping, I looked down and saw something horrible.

Moonlight from a nearby window fell on a still face, the eyes upturned and sightless. Branson—my bodyguard. The thing I had tripped over was his body. And the stuff I had stepped in was his blood.

I let out a horrified sob but my attacker shoved me between the shoulder blades again with the cold muzzle of his weapon.

“No whining unless you want to end up just like him,” he snarled. “Keep it in, girly. I don’t care if you’re royalty—I don’t fuckin’ like weepy women!”

His voice sounded Country, I thought. Living at the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, as I did, I knew there were plenty of mountain men who lived far up in the mountains. Was this man one of them? And if so, what did he want with me? He was talking about Alphas and Omegas and royalty, so did he think he was a werewolf too, like all the rest of them?

Before my terrified mind could find the answers for any of these questions, I found myself being shoved out the kitchen doorway and onto the gravel driveway that led around back. The sharp stones hurt my bare feet and there was a cold wind whipping through the trees.

There was another man and a woman standing there, beside a huge old Lincoln Town Car—an enormous old beast of a vehicle that got something like two miles per gallon and was big enough to nearly take up two parking spots. I knew because my grandpa on my dad’s side used to drive one.

The Lincoln’s trunk was open and there was something in there, though I couldn’t see exactly what.

“Ah, so you brought the Royal Omega! Good work, Tainer!”

The smooth, urbane voice of the second man was familiar, though he wore a ski mask to cover his face. With a sinking heart, I recognized Professor Sorenson. I didn’t know who the

woman was—she was wearing a mask too—it was only clear by her size and shape that she *was* a woman.

“What...what do you want with me?” I gasped at Sorenson.

“Now, my dear—I’ve told you what we want. We only want you to do your duty,” he said gently. “And since you seem to have trouble with that, we’re going to help you along. Get her in the trunk, Tainer.”

He nodded at the other man, who had come around where I could see him. He was still holding a gun on me but when he saw it, Sorenson frowned.

“Put that damn thing away,” he snapped. “You know the Royal Pair are not to be harmed! If you kill this girl, you kill us all!”

“Just had it out to threaten her,” the other man muttered. “It worked, didn’t it? She came right down without a fight.” He was much bigger than Sorenson—a foot taller at least and much broader across the shoulders with a generous beer gut straining his stained t-shirt.

“Don’t let me see it again!” Sorenson snarled. “We’re *not* going to hurt her—she just has to be made to do her duty. Now get her in the trunk!”

“Oh, please!” I said quickly. “I’m horribly claustrophobic! Can’t I please just ride in the car with you? There’s plenty of room!”

“Right—so you can see where we’re goin’? Don’t think so, girly.” Tainer spat something foul on the ground—tobacco juice? I wasn’t sure, I only knew I didn’t want to go in that cavernous trunk.

“Put her in,” Sorenson ordered. “My apologies, my Lady,” he added, speaking more courteously to me. “Your claustrophobia notwithstanding, Tainer is correct, we *must* not let you see our destination. Forgive me.”

And then the huge mountain man scooped me up and dumped me into the trunk of the Lincoln Town Car.

EIGHT



“OOF!” SOMEONE GASPED AS I LANDED ON TOP OF THEM AND the trunk lid slammed closed. “What the hell?”

I recognized that deep, growling voice at once.

“Jake?” I wiggled to make some room, trying to situate myself so we were face-to-face in the darkness. “Oh my God, Jake? Is that you?”

“Who else would it be?” he demanded, his voice a hoarse growl. “Fuckers drugged me and bound me with silver so I couldn’t move. They threatened to blow a hole in your head if I didn’t cooperate.” His voice grew anxious, urgent. “They didn’t hurt you, did they Ani? Are you all right?”

“I think I’m okay.” My voice sounded shaky in my own ears but under the circumstances, I didn’t think anyone could blame me for that. “It’s the Worshipers of the Moon, isn’t it?” I whispered. “But what do they want? Why did they take us?”

“What do you *think* they want?” Jake asked savagely. “Look, I’m going to tell them about the Blood-Mingling ceremony as soon as they give me a minute to talk. I’ll let them know you’re my little sister by blood as well as by name and adoption—so they can’t possibly expect me to breed you. It would be breaking the Unbreakable Laws.”

I shivered at his matter-of-fact words.

“I thought you said they wouldn’t care about the ceremony?”

“They might or they might not—it’s worth a shot though, right?” I thought I heard desperation under the sarcasm in his voice. It didn’t help my mood any.

“Jake,” I whispered. “I’m scared.” I hated admitting it—hated being the girly-girl, as I said before. But I had to be honest. We’d been kidnapped in the middle of the night by a fanatical cult—if that doesn’t scare you, I don’t know what would.

“I told you before, I won’t let anyone hurt you!” Jake’s voice was fierce and his eyes glowed pale fire in the dim trunk.

“Thank you,” I whispered. But how could he protect me if we were both bound and restrained in the trunk of a car headed God-knew-where?

I didn’t know. I only knew I had never been more frightened in my life.

NINE



THE CAR RIDE SEEMED TO TAKE FOREVER, BUT MAYBE IT JUST seemed like that because we were locked in a trunk. We were going up into the mountains—I was pretty sure of that by the tilt of the car and the way I kept rolling into Jake. By about the fourth time I'd done it, he growled,

“Here,” and used his long legs to anchor my own. His arms were bound behind his back too, so there wasn't much else he could do, but I appreciated the effort and not just because it stopped me from rolling around. It was cold in the trunk and Jake, as I said before, put out heat like a furnace.

Carefully, I entwined my legs with his, holding onto him the only way I could, and snuggling closer so that my face was against his broad chest. I breathed him in, taking immediate comfort from his warm, wild scent. What was it about the way he smelled that both called to me and calmed me down at the same time?

“God, Ani...we shouldn't be doing this,” Jake growled hoarsely.

“Shouldn't be doing what?” I asked, nuzzling closer.

“Shouldn't be...all cuddled up together. It's not good for you to be too close to me.”

I thought of how he was always so careful about not touching me too much. In fact, I could count on one hand the number of times my stepbrother had reached out to me on purpose and they mostly included the times when I was upset

and he felt he had to comfort me. Didn't this time count? We'd been kidnapped—I could certainly use some comforting.

“I don't care what your dad said about you staying away from me—because yes, I heard that particular conversation,” I told him. “He's not here to see us right now and I'm scared, Jake—I need to be close to you. So stop worrying about what anybody might think if they saw us—it's just the two of us in here.”

“That's *not* what I'm worried about,” he growled, though I noticed he didn't make any move to get away from me. “It's not a good idea for you to get so close to me and breathe in my scent this way because it might bring on your Heat Cycle.” He sighed. “Which I'm sure is exactly what those fuckers who kidnapped us want.”

“Heat Cycle? That's more werewolf bullshit, right?” I demanded. “Please, Jake—don't let your family's weird beliefs keep you away from me. We need to stick together now!”

“A female Were's Heat Cycle isn't just some ‘weird belief’,” he told me. “And the later you have your first one, the harder it's going to be for you. Most female Weres start their cycles at fifteen or sixteen and you're nineteen going on twenty, Ani. You're going to have a tough first Cycle and there's no way I can help you with it because I'm your brother. I don't want to bring it on by being too close to you.”

“Fine.” I untangled our legs and shoved away from him. “If you want to let some weird idea come between us when we ought to be planning how to get out of this, be my guest.”

I couldn't keep the hurt out of my voice. Couldn't he see that I needed him now? Why couldn't he put aside his crazy belief that he was a werewolf just for a minute and give me the comfort I needed, damn it?

Then it occurred to me that maybe Jake needed comforting, too. After all, he had admitted that he'd been kidnapped by these people before. What had they done to him? His stomach must be tied in knots, wondering what they would do this time.

“Jake?” I said in a small voice. “These people, when they had you before—”

“I don’t want to talk about that.” The words came out harsh and clipped. Then he took a deep breath. “Look, Ani—I’m sorry, but I *can’t* think about that right now. All I can think about is surviving this time and trying to get out of this situation alive.”

“Can we?” I asked. “They’ve got my hands tied with rope. Maybe I could find something sharp to saw through it or something and then I could untie you as well.”

“They’ve got me bound in silver,” Jake said flatly. “There’s no sawing through that or untying it either. Feels like it’s locked in place somehow.”

“We could at least try!” I pointed out.

“Fine, lets get back-to-back.”

If the Lincoln’s trunk hadn’t been so big, there was no way we could have turned over on our other sides. However, it was truly a boat of a car so we were both able to manage, though Jake almost got stuck due to the wideness of his shoulders. Finally we were lying back-to-back and I was able to feel for his hands as he felt for mine.

“I can feel the rope,” he said to me. “I could rip through it easily if it wasn’t for the silver bindings they have on me.” There was frustration in his deep voice as I felt him fumbling in the dark at the rope around my wrists.

“You could rip through it?” I asked doubtfully. I knew my stepbrother was strong—hell, his muscles had muscles—but this was pretty thick rope. It was also scratchy—I could feel it rubbing my wrists raw even as we spoke.

“If it wasn’t for the silver. Here, you feel mine,” he said, pushing his wrists towards my fingers.

I traced the cords around his wrists, which were much smoother than mine. They felt almost metallic and sure enough, I felt some kind of locking mechanism hooked to them. It dangled between his wrists and felt like it had a dial on it.

“Feels a little like a combination lock you’d use at the gym,” I informed him. “There are probably about a million combinations but I’ll at least try.”

I spun the tiny knob this way and that with my fingers with no results. What the hell was this thing? I’d never heard of anyone locking ropes like this before. Or were they more like silver cords? When I touched them again, I felt a tingle run through my fingertips and jerked my hands away. That had been unpleasant—like a low-level electrical shock.

“What is it? What’s wrong?” Jake asked, feeling me jerk away.

I explained about the shocking sensation.

“I don’t know what caused it,” I said.

“I do.” He sounded grim. “Your first Heat Cycle might be even closer than we thought if the silver is affecting you. Silver doesn’t affect immature Weres—females who haven’t had their first Cycle and males who haven’t had their first Shift,” he added, as though that explained anything.

“Let me try again,” I said, ignoring this foolishness.

“No—don’t. The silver might be activating something inside you somehow. And anyway, you could spin that lock for a hundred years and probably never get the right combination.”

Well, he was right about that, but I still missed being close to him—touching him—even if it was only our hands touching. I felt so lost and alone—I wished we could at least hold hands in this horrible situation! But Jake seemed afraid to touch me—afraid to get too close. I wished I could convince him otherwise. How could it hurt just to get a little closer?

Before I could work up the nerve to try and convince him, though, the car jolted to a stop and I heard doors opening.

Apparently we had reached our destination.

TEN



WHEN I GET SCARED I HAVE TO PEE. SO BY THE TIME THE trunk popped open, I was nearly about to burst.

“Get them out,” Sorenson commanded.

This time it was the girl—she had taken off her mask by now—who helped me out of the trunk while Tainer manhandled Jake out.

The girl wasn’t what I had expected. She had an open, dreamy face with big brown eyes swimming behind thick glasses.

“Please,” I murmured to her, hoping to keep it private—just between us girls. “I *really* have to pee.”

Unfortunately, Sorenson had heard me.

“That’s excellent, my dear,” he said, smiling—he had also removed his mask. Tainer had too—he had the face of an ex-boxer with a squashed tomato nose that looked like it had been broken more than once and piggy little eyes that crawled speculatively over my body.

It wasn’t lost on me that the fact that these people felt comfortable enough to take off their masks was a very, *very* bad sign. If they weren’t afraid of us identifying them later, either they were really sure that they could keep us quiet...or they intended to kill us.

No, don’t think that way, I lectured myself. Sorenson told Tainer that he couldn’t shoot me—they think we have to stay

alive or they're all going to die, too. Think positive, Ani! Play their game and maybe you'll find a way out of here!

“Um...it's excellent that I have to pee?” I asked uncertainly, looking at Sorenson.

“It is.” He grinned, nodding broadly. His nose—which I was pretty sure Jake had broken in the encounter at the diner—was already healed up. How was that possible? “You see,” he continued, “We have some tests we're going to need you to take to see if you're ovulating and find out how close your Heat Cycle is to coming on, and they are mostly of the ‘pee on a stick’ variety. If you'd just go with Ophelia here, she can administer one right now. Oh, and please don't try to get away,” he added, as the girl with the dreamy eyes and thick glasses took me by the arm. “*Do* remember that we still have your lover in our custody. You wouldn't want anything to *happen* to him.”

I lifted my chin.

“He's my brother, *not* my lover. And I heard what you said—you don't dare kill either one of us! You think that if *we* die, *you* die.”

Sorenson smiled gently.

“Oh, I never said I would *kill* the Heir to the Absent Alpha—no, no—that would never do! But you must understand, we are interested mainly in his reproductive ability and potential. And there are many, *many* things we can do to him that, while they are *extremely* painful, will not affect his ability to reproduce.”

Jake glared at him.

“You fucking bastards,” he spat. “You didn't get anything you could use from me last time and you won't this time either. Fuck you all—I'm not fucking afraid of you!”

Jake might not be afraid but *I* was—I didn't want him to be hurt!

“Leave him alone,” I said quickly. “I'll cooperate—just don't hurt him.”

Jake frowned at me.

“Don’t worry about me, Ani. If you get a chance, get the fuck away from here.”

“And go where, exactly?” Tainer demanded. “You looked around you any, boy? We’re way out in the back of beyond up here. Ain’t no way she’ll find her way down off the mountain by herself. Specially not in the middle of the night in Winter weather. It ain’t snowed yet, but it’s gonna pretty soon. Can’t you smell it in the air?”

He lifted his squashed tomato nose and snuffed loudly, reminding me of a dog scenting the air.

I didn’t know about the snow, but I had to admit he was right otherwise. There were dense woods all around us and the only way out seemed to be a long, winding, dirt road that twisted into the distance through a dense mass of bare, black branches. They rattled in the cold breeze that suddenly swirled around us, making me shiver despite my flannel bunny pajamas.

“Get her indoors and give her a test,” Sorenson commanded Ophelia. “She is innocent and has not yet had her first Heat Cycle or knotting, so the cold will affect her adversely, though it doesn’t bother us.”

So did *all* of them think they were werewolves, then? Certainly, none of them were shivering even though they weren’t wearing any winter coats. Jake had on nothing but a pair of long black pajama bottoms that fell to his bare feet, but he didn’t seem cold at all, even though he was bare from the waist up.

“Come with me,” Ophelia said quietly. She didn’t yank me around, but she did guide me, pointing out rocks and roots and branches I should watch out for as we walked further down the dirt road. She had a quiet voice and a gentle demeanor—I wondered how in the world she’d gotten mixed up with Sorenson and Tainer.

Around a bend in a road, I saw our destination. It was a big old rickety, two-story house with a chimney on its tattered

roof. The boards it was made of were gray and weathered—it was impossible to tell what color they had once been because all the paint had peeled off long ago.

“What is this place?” I asked her, hating the tremble in my voice and not being able to help it. “Why have you brought us here?”

“This is Tainer’s house,” she said, apparently completely unconcerned about giving me the information. “He’s going to be your host while we help you do your duty.”

“Do my duty?” I demanded, staring at her incredulously. “You mean *sleep* with my *stepbrother*?”

“The Innocent Omega must lie with the Heir to the Absent Alpha and conceive by him that the Royal Line of the First Wolf may be preserved. Unless her belly swells with new life, all Werewolf shall be blown like chaff before the wind and vanish from the Earth,” she said in that slow, calm voice of hers.

She sounded like she was quoting some kind of scripture, I thought, which was frightening in the extreme. If she had just been a hired mercenary, maybe I could have bribed her with some of my stepfather’s money to get me and Jake out of here. But if she was a true believer, drinking the werewolf Kool-Aid, then we were well and truly screwed.

“You don’t really *believe* all that, do you?” I tried, hoping I might get through to her. “I mean, do you *really* think you’re a werewolf or something?”

“I know I am a Were,” Ophelia said calmly.

“So, you turn into a wolf at the full moon?” I demanded.

She shook her head, her straight brown hair swishing around her shoulders.

“Oh no—female Weres don’t shift. Ours is the burden of Heat and Need—it is the male Weres who take fur upon their flesh and run with Lady Moon.”

Wow—literally everything she said sounded like it came from some ancient text of prophecy and lore. She was deep in

the cult—*way* deep. I didn't think I was going to be able to break through to her.

“But—” I began, determined to try again anyway.

“You'll understand after you have your own first Heat Cycle,” Ophelia informed me. “Watch your step, please—some of these are rotten.”

We were climbing the sagging front porch steps to the dilapidated house now and she courteously took my arm and guided me, telling me where to step so I didn't put my bare feet through rotten wood.

I was shivering and also nearly bursting with the need to pee by the time we finally got inside. The front door creaked like a haunted house, I swear. And honestly, *that* was what Tainer's home reminded me of—an old, abandoned place that the kids in any neighborhood would dare each other to go in on Halloween night.

“Come with me please—you'll be staying on the upper level,” Ophelia spoke calmly and graciously—like we were in a high-end hotel and she was the concierge leading me to my room.

We passed through a rough living room of sorts—there was a fireplace with embers glowing red in the grate and a large, worn rag rug on the bare boards of the floor. In the dim light I could see a broken-down couch that might have been maroon once but now was more of a faded brown. There was a rocking chair that looked like it might have been handmade and a banjo propped in one corner.

Seriously, a *banjo*? We were deep in trouble here, I thought. I had seen that old movie, *Deliverance*, as part of a film class I took as a fun extra credit Summer course. I could just imagine Tainer telling someone to, “Squeal like a pig, boy!” while he did unspeakable things to them. The mental image made me shudder.

After passing through the living room—which was, at least, sort of warm—Ophelia led me to a sagging staircase that hugged one wall like a drunk about to fall down.

“Uh, are you sure it’s safe to go up these stairs?” I asked, eyeing them uncertainly. “They look like they’re going to fall over any minute.”

“It’s perfectly safe as long as we go single file and don’t stand on the same step at the same time,” she said calmly. “Come—the bathroom facilities are upstairs.”

I had to admit, those were the magic words. I didn’t want to go any further into the haunted-house-slash-hillbilly-holler that Tainer had set up here, but I also needed to pee so badly my eyeballs were just about floating. Plus, these people had Jake and they had already assured me they had no problem hurting him, so what else could I do?

Reluctantly, I allowed Ophelia—was that her real name, I wondered?—to shepherd me up the stairs. We got to the second floor, but she indicated we should keep going.

“We’ve put you on the attic level,” she said, again like she was someone working in a posh hotel. “It’s a self-contained apartment with its own restroom facilities.”

So up another flight we went until we reached a trapdoor in the ceiling with a long, frayed cord hanging down from it.

Ophelia reached up and grabbed the cord, pulling the heavy old trapdoor down with little apparent effort. She manhandled the heavy wooden ladder that was folded up inside it into position just as easily. Huh. I made a mental note that she was much stronger than she appeared.

“After you,” she said politely, gesturing to the attic stairs.

I *really* didn’t like this. I didn’t like the idea of being shut up in the attic, trapped with my brother, who I was apparently going to be expected to sleep with. We were only a wicked grandmother and some poison-laced powdered donuts away from being in a V.C. Andrews novel!

“Look,” I said, playing for time. “I don’t know if this is the best place for us. I have a, uh, fear of heights, you know? Maybe you could find a room for us that’s a little lower? Like maybe the ground floor?”

“I’m afraid that’s impossible—the other bedrooms are already taken,” she said politely. “But I think you’ll like the attic setup—I cleaned and decorated it myself.” She leaned closer to me as though imparting a secret and whispered, “Between you and me, Tainer isn’t exactly the best housekeeper and I didn’t want the savior of our race to be conceived in filth and squalor.”

The savior of our race? Whoo-boy—she was *definitely* drinking the Kool-Aid.

“That’s, uh, very kind of you,” I said, trying to smile. “But I’m really just not comfortable so high up.”

“Please go up to the attic,” Ophelia said in that calm, quiet voice of hers. “I really wouldn’t want to have to radio Tainer than you weren’t behaving. He’s still holding the Absent Alpha’s Heir. You know—the future father of your children?”

She patted a bulky black walkie-talkie that was clipped to her belt. I hadn’t noticed it earlier, but when she touched it, it let out a static-y hiss, like a sleepy snake that’s been disturbed.

I wanted to protest again that Jake was *not* my lover, but I didn’t want to get him hurt by delaying any longer. Plus, I had to pee so badly now I felt like I was literally going to burst.

“All right,” I said desperately. “I’ll go up in the attic, but can you please untie my hands first? I can’t climb with them tied behind my back.”

“I will untie you if you give me your word as a Royal Were not to try and run,” Ophelia said, frowning a little.

“Absolutely,” I said, not meaning it a bit. First of all, I wasn’t a Were—let alone a “Royal” one. Secondly, I might not run now, but if I saw a chance to get away with Jake, I was definitely taking it.

But Ophelia seemed to take me at my word because she untied the thick, scratchy rope that had been wrapped around my wrists and nodded at the ladder.

“Go ahead,” she said. “I’ll be right behind you.”

Feeling like I really had no choice, I gripped the wooden steps and climbed up into the dark hole above me.

ELEVEN



THE ATTIC WASN'T QUITE AS DARK AS IT LOOKED FROM BELOW. There was another fireplace up here, also filled with dying embers, and a large skylight located on the slanted roof above. It was positioned over a large, four-poster bed with a wooden headboard. The headboard had vertical slats in it but all of them were thick and looked like they were made of solid oak or some other hardwood.

There was a clean white bedspread on the bed and someone—presumably Ophelia—had arranged rose petals in the shape of a big red heart right in the middle of it. There was also a bottle of champagne with two plastic champagne flutes and a plastic vase of fresh roses sitting on a rickety wooden dresser against the wall beside the bed.

“Do you like the decorations?” Ophelia asked, smiling proudly as she climbed up the rickety ladder and stood beside me. “I did them all myself.”

Looks like she's got it all set up like a bridal suite, I thought, looking around. And supposedly, this was the room I would be sharing with my *stepbrother*. I mean, I didn't think of Jake as my *real* big brother the way he claimed to think of me as his real little sister, but this was a lot. Like, *a lot* a lot.

“Um, it's really pretty,” I said, since Ophelia was still looking at me expectantly. “You must have worked really hard on it,” I added. The fact that I was supposed to compliment one of my kidnappers on her design style was *not* lost on me.

“Thank you.” Ophelia blushed with pleasure—a pale pink glow that came over her calm, oval shaped face. “I wanted things to be romantic for you and the Heir, since you’re going to conceive here, in this very room.”

Uh...okay, this was going too far.

“Ophelia,” I said gently. “You know that Jake is my brother, right? I mean, my stepbrother, but still, I don’t *think* of him that way.”

“Oh, that doesn’t matter,” she said, smiling dreamily. “Once your Heat Cycle begins, you’ll be more than willing to let him knot and breed you. Take it from another female Were, once your Cycle starts, you’ll be desperate for any cock at all in your pussy.” She leaned forward, lowering her voice again. “Why, I even let *Tainer* breed me once when I was Cycling! Thank goodness he didn’t get his knot all the way in me, or my belly might have swelled with his child! And I *really* don’t want a pup with a male like him. *Ugh!*” She gave a little shiver of disgust and made a face.

I wasn’t sure *what* to think of that, except that it filled my head with the unappealing image of Tainer with his trousers down around his ankles “breeding” Ophelia, who was at least a hundred pounds lighter and twenty years younger than him. Ugh, indeed.

“Um...Okay,” I said at last. “Uh, can you show me the bathroom now, please? I *really* have to go.”

“Of course—come with me and we can administer the test,” she said, nodding.

There was an enclosed bathroom on the other side of the slanted roof. Ophelia opened a wooden door and let me into a surprisingly spacious area with a sink, a toilet, and a huge old claw-foot tub that looked big enough for two. There were black and white tiles on the floor that were cold under my bare feet.

The white porcelain had some faint rust marks on it but it was clear that someone had scrubbed all the bathroom fixtures until you could almost see your face in them. Ophelia again, I

guessed. I couldn't imagine Tainer getting down on his knees and scrubbing a toilet for any reason.

"It's really nice in here," I said, deciding it would be best to try and keep on her good side. "Really *clean*."

"Thank you!" Ophelia flushed with pleasure. "Now, let's see—where did Tainer put those tests?"

She went over to an ancient looking medicine cabinet—the kind with a mirrored front—hanging over the sink and pulled it open. Inside were a few ancient glass pill bottles that looked like they'd been new when my grandmother was a little girl and a row of pale pink, rectangular boxes.

Ophelia took one of the boxes out and closed the medicine cabinet again. Flipping it over, she read the back, frowning as she squinted through the thick lenses of her glasses.

"All right," she said at last. "Looks like you just need to pee on the end of the stick and then wait five minutes and we'll know."

"Know what?" I asked, frowning. "If I'm ovulating?"

"Actually, yes—but that's not all. This is a three-part test—see?" She opened the box and held out the stick for me to see.

It looked like a regular pregnancy test, (I knew because Ashley had had a pregnancy scare our last year in high school) except it had four little boxes arranged in a row down the white plastic stick, instead of two.

"What are all these?" I asked, frowning at the boxes. The one nearest the part you peed on was marked with a capital C. The next one down had an O beside it, the third one in line had HC and the last one was labeled P.

"The first one is the Control box—that shows you really did pee on the stick and that the test is working," Ophelia explained. "The next box tells if you're ovulating or not, the third box lets us know about your Heat Cycle. The last box tells if you're pregnant or not," she added, smiling. "Hopefully we'll be seeing that one light up pretty soon!"

I couldn't believe she was acting like I was in on this with her—like I was super excited to be getting pregnant by my stepbrother. Which *wasn't* going to happen, I promised myself. But the thing was, she had kidnapped me and now she was pretending like we were best girlfriends.

You'd better pretend too, whispered a little voice in my head. *You probably have a better chance of getting out of here if you have somebody on your side in this mess.*

I thought the voice was probably right, so I arranged my face into an excited smile.

“Wow, that's a pretty cool test—it tells you everything!”

“It sure does—we have them manufactured by a special Were distributor,” she told me.

“Oh, really?” I tried to sound interested but inside I was thinking that somebody out there was making a ton of money selling “special Were pregnancy tests” to all these people who believed they were “Weres.” Probably the same people who sold Furies their costumes. Why do so many people want to pretend they're animals so badly?

“They're accurate right down to the hour—they have to be since Were pregnancies can be detected so early,” Ophelia continued, holding out the pee stick.

“Oh, er, really? Like how early?” I asked, taking it from her and going over to the toilet. I could keep making nice with her but I had to pee before I *burst*.

“This test can detect it almost as soon as the egg is fertilized,” Ophelia said. “Usually it can tell about two hours after you get knotted and breed. Oh—be sure you hold the end in your stream for at least five seconds,” she added.

“No problem,” I muttered. I had to pee so badly by that time, I felt like it would take me five *minutes* to empty my bladder. So I dutifully peed on the stick as Ophelia continued to talk.

“That same manufacturer also makes another test that tells not only if you're pregnant, but also the paternity of your pup,” she said in a conversational tone. “It's really useful for

after Pack breedings—you know, where you get multiple knots in a single night?”

“Uh, no, I don’t know,” I said. Was she saying that these “Were” cult members were into orgies? If so, I *really* hoped I wasn’t going to be asked to participate!

“Oh no—of course you wouldn’t.” Ophelia made a “silly me” gesture with one hand. “You’re the Innocent Omega and must only be bred by an Alpha of the Royal Line.”

“Um, right,” I said, still peeing. I finished up and then handed her the stick, since she was holding out her hand for it. “Uh, now what?”

“Now we wait for two minutes and see where you are in your Heat Cycle.” Ophelia sounded excited. “Oh, I hope you’re in the red!”

“The red?” I asked, pulling my PJ bottoms back up and going to the sink to wash my hands.

“Yes, see—the test is color coded.” Ophelia showed me a complicated-looking set of directions that had apparently come with the kit. Sure enough, there was a colored chart listing for the HC box. It appeared to range from blue to green to yellow to orange to a dark, ominous looking red.

“So...if the HR box comes up red I’m...what?” I asked, frowning.

“Oh, that means your Heat Cycle is in full swing and you’re ready to have your belly filled with life!”

The way she kept talking about my “belly” swelling and being “filled with life” was deeply creepy and disturbing, but I tried not to show it.

“Uh, but what if I’m *not* in the red?” I asked, turning on the water and reaching for a small bar of soap that looked like the kind you got from a hotel.

“Well, then we’ll have to do what we can to *get* you into the red,” Ophelia said, getting a determined look on her face. “There are many things that can make a female Were’s first

Cycle come on, you know. And we're fully prepared to do whatever it takes so you can be bred on the full moon."

I almost asked what kinds of "things" they were thinking of doing to me to get me "in the red" but I was too afraid to find out. Oh God, Jake and I had to get *out* of here, I thought, as I washed my hands in the ice-cold tap water.

I winced as the chilly water and soap stung the red welts the rope had left on my wrists. Ophelia saw me and frowned apologetically.

"I'm really sorry about the rope burns—I wanted to use silver restraints on you, but Professor Sorenson said we only had enough money for one set. They're pretty expensive, you know, since they have pure silver fibers woven all through the silk strands." She shivered and shook her head. "I tell you, just *touching* them drained my strength!"

"Because silver is bad for werewolves?" I asked, uncertainly as I finished washing my hands and began to blot them dry on the nice little pink hand towel that Ophelia had doubtless picked out herself.

She frowned. "Well, not *bad* exactly—it just saps your strength, you know? Makes you as weak as a regular human."

"Uh, I *am* a regular human," I pointed out. There was only so far I was willing to go with this crazy charade that we were all "Weres" here.

"No, you're not—if you were, none of these boxes would be lighting up. And see—they are!"

Ophelia held out the pregnancy test excitedly for me to see. The box at the top, the Control box, had filled in a dark red. The box below it, marked O for Ovulation, was also red, I saw with some unease. The bottom box, marked P for Pregnancy was a dark blue—negative. Not surprising since I was still a virgin. But the box marked HC for Heat Cycle was still a blank white.

"All right, wait for it," Ophelia muttered, talking more to herself than me, I thought. "The Cycle box always fills in last. Come on, red! *Come on red!*"

She sounded like she was cheering for a sports team rather than some weird bodily function, I thought uneasily. I mean, she was getting *really* excited about it.

But a moment later, her face fell and she said, “Awww...” in the same tone you’d use if you dropped your ice cream off your cone onto the street. Or maybe if your favorite team missed a goal or a basket or whatever. I don’t know—I don’t like sports.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, trying to look concerned.

“Well...just *look*.” She sighed as she held out the test again. The HC box was blue. Not as dark a blue as the pregnancy box and there was maybe a *hint* of green in it, but it definitely wasn’t anywhere near the deep red that appeared to mean a positive on this particular test.

I wasn’t sure if I should breathe a sigh of relief or not. According to the test, I wasn’t ready to be “bred” or “knotted” or whatever they wanted to call it so that was good. But Ophelia had said they would do “anything they had to” in order to get me “into the red.” So who knew what lay in store for me?

I really didn’t want to know. I wanted to be back home in bed with Mr. Binkers purring his rusty purr on my pillow and my nice clean sheets tucked in tight and cozy. I wanted this to all be a bad dream that I would soon wake up from. I wanted —

A sudden pounding on the door interrupted my mental wish list.

“Well?” a loud male voice shouted. “Is she ready to be bred or not?”

TWELVE



“I’M AFRAID NOT.” OPHELIA OPENED THE DOOR AND I SAW Tainer and Sorenson standing right outside it. Jake was between them, his arms still bound firmly behind his back. “See?” She showed them the pregnancy test and Tainer scowled.

“Fuckin’ late blooming virgins,” he muttered, staring at me like it was my fault I wasn’t what these people considered “fertile.”

Sorenson, however, only shrugged philosophically.

“We knew this was a possibility,” he said firmly. “Anastasia is the Innocent Omega the prophecy speaks of—it’s not surprising that her Heat Cycle hasn’t started yet. But we have time to get it where it needs to be—we all know how fast the process goes once it’s set in motion.”

This sounded ominous to me—how exactly were they going to “set my Heat Cycle in motion?”

A minute later I got my answer when Sorenson said,

“Strip them both naked.”

“What? No!” I gasped and Jake roared at Sorenson and Tainer,

“If either of you touches her, you die!”

“Now, now—be calm, Jacob,” Sorenson said mildly. “We are perfectly aware that it is blasphemy for a male Were who is not of the Royal blood line to lay hands on a Royal Omega.

That's why we brought Ophelia with us—to help with these kinds of delicate situations.”

“That's exactly why I'm here,” Ophelia agreed calmly.

“Please don't do this!” I begged. But she was already unbuttoning the top of my flannel PJs to bare my breasts. I tried to stop her, knocking her hands away and yanking my top closed again.

Ophelia caught my hands in what felt like an iron grip and gave me a hurt look, like I had betrayed her somehow.

“Now, Anastasia, I thought you were *excited* to conceive,” she said, frowning. “Why are you acting like this?”

Okay, I couldn't keep this charade up any longer.

“Of *course* I'm not ‘exited to conceive!’” I shouted at her. “I'm *nineteen*—I'm not ready to be a mother yet! And Jake's my stepbrother!”

“I'm *more* than her stepbrother,” Jake put in quickly. “My father—the ‘Absent Alpha’ as you call him—had us do a Blood-Mingling Adoption. You know what that means—under Were law, Ani is as much my little sister as if we were born to the exact same parents. If you make us go through with this, we'll be committing Incest—and there is no greater crime in the Were world. Not even murder! It's one of the Unbreakable Laws.”

Wow, I hadn't known all that, but the revelation certainly seemed to give Ophelia and Tainer pause. Tainer frowned and shuffled his feet in their size sixteen clodhoppers and Ophelia looked from me to Jake and back again uneasily.

“Are you two *really* blood brother and sister?” she asked in a low voice.

“Yes, we are,” Jake said firmly. “And you know perfectly well, the only crime worse than a male knotting his own sister is for him to fill her with his seed and make her pregnant. It's blasphemy—debauchery of the highest order!”

The only one who didn't seem put off by this was Sorenson.

“All right now,” he said heartily. “Why have we stopped? I ordered that they were both to be undressed.”

“But...they did the Blood-Mingling Adoption,” Tainer said uncertainly.

“She’s *really* his little sister,” Ophelia added.

“Don’t be ridiculous—of course, she’s not!” Sorenson said, frowning. “The Absent Alpha has made a false ceremony and a false adoption. He has vacated his position as the head of our people, which means he has lost his ability to do any ceremonies of power. The adoption he performed is null and void—it doesn’t count!”

“That’s a lie!” Jake growled. “My father is a *very* powerful Alpha and his power doesn’t depend on serving your crazy cult as your leader! I felt the tingle in my veins when he brought Ani into our family and caused us to mingle our blood together—the adoption was a binding one. She *is* my little sister and if you force us to do this, we’ll be committing incest!”

“You know who else committed incest?” Sorenson asked, raising his eyebrows. “The ancient Egyptian pharaohs. They married brother to sister for generations to keep their bloodlines pure—some even say that the First Wolf was descended from them.”

“All that inbreeding is why they ended up with so many kids with deformities,” I snapped. “You know they did CAT Scans of King Tut’s mummy and found out he had all kinds of problems? He had a club foot and a twisted spine and buck teeth and—”

“Oh, come now, my dear,” Sorenson interrupted me in a condescending tone. “You’ve only had a *single* drop of each other’s blood—your child will be healthy and strong.” He raised his voice, speaking to both Ophelia and Tainer. “What matters now is the prophecy,” he told them. “If these two do not breed—if the Innocent Omega does not bear the child of the Alpha Heir in order to carry on the line of the First Wolf, all Werewolf will wither and die—we shall dry up and blow away like chaff before the wind!”

“Oh please—what bullshit!” I exclaimed. But it was clear that Tainer and Ophelia were back under Sorenson’s spell.

“He’s right—they *got* to breed,” Tainer muttered, glaring at Jake and me.

“Or we are as chaff before the wind,” Ophelia murmured reverently. She went back to unbuttoning my pajama top.

“Please!” I said urgently. “You can’t listen to him—he’s clearly crazy!”

“You *must* conceive,” Ophelia told me earnestly. “If you’ll only let us help you, it can be a *beautiful* experience, Anastasia. When your Heat Cycle reaches its peak and the Breeding Fever takes you, you’ll feel nothing but desire and joy to let your big brother knot you and fill you with his seed.”

I very much doubted that, but she had already proved she was much stronger than me. In fact, she was almost freakishly strong, considering her size and shape. I mean, she didn’t look like a bodybuilder or anything, but she certainly had the strength of one!

Having no other option, I let her remove my PJ top, though I couldn’t meet Jake’s eyes while she did it. I stood there with my arms crossed over my bare breasts as she grasped the stretchy waistband of my flannel bottoms and then pulled them down too. I stepped out of them without a word, feeling like a freak or an animal at the zoo, with everyone staring at me.

“Get your filthy eyes off her, you dog,” Jake’s deep voice was angry and possessive and I realized he was talking to Tainer.

“What? Ain’t never seen no Royal titties before,” the mountain man protested. “Royal pussy, neither!”

“The Royal Omega is not for you, Tainer,” Sorenson reminded him. “You are privileged to be part of this special moment, but you must never interfere with her.”

“I know that!” Tainer snapped. “But just lookin’ isn’t interferin’!”

For myself, I kept my eyes on the ground as Sorenson and Tailer stripped Jake too, pulling down the black sleep bottoms he had on and tossing them away.

I don't want to see, I told myself. I'm not going to look. Not going to look...

“This is bullshit,” Tainer snarled, when we were both naked. “Look at ‘em—they won’t even *look* at each other! How you ‘spect ‘em to fuck if they won’t even look?”

“They must be made to come together,” Sorenson said thoughtfully. “What the Omega needs is skin-to-skin contact with the Alpha Heir. She needs to feel his body against hers and breathe in his Alpha scent. That will surely bring her Heat Cycle on.”

“That’s exactly what she needs!” Tailer sounded excited. “Make him suck her titties! Or make her suck his cock—down to the root, the knot too!”

I felt sick. Was this what was going to happen? Were Jake and I going to have to put on some sick sex show for these perverted, crazy cultists? Oh God, how was I going to get through this?

“No, there’s no need for such extreme measures. Not yet, anyway,” Sorenson said. “Ophelia, open the skylight. Have you chained it in place like I said?”

“Yes, Professor Sorenson—it will only open about six inches. Not enough for anyone to get out,” she said, going obediently to do his bidding.

“But enough to let the cold night air in,” Sorenson said.

As he spoke, a gust of chilly Winter air swirled in through the raised skylight making me shiver as my bare skin broke out in a rash of goosebumps. Tainer might have been right about snow coming after all, I thought miserably.

“Now,” Sorenson said. “Strip all the blankets off the bed—leave nothing but the bottom sheet for them to sleep on.”

“But Professor! I worked so hard getting the decorations just right!” Ophelia protested. “The rose petals for the heart

—”

“Your decorations can be recreated once these two give in to the attraction between them,” Sorenson said soothingly. “But first we must bring them together and get the Omega’s Heat Cycle to activate.”

Ophelia didn’t look happy about it, but she did as he asked, stripping the white bedspread and sheet off the bed, leaving only the fitted sheet on the mattress.

“Now what?” she asked, turning to Sorenson with the bundle of bedding in her arms.

“Yeah—now what?” Tainer demanded.

“Now we leave them,” Sorenson said. “Though first we must cuff the Heir’s hands to the headboard. Ophelia, do you have the silver cuffs?”

“I do, Professor. They’re downstairs.”

“Good—get them. Oh, and take their clothing as well—we can’t have them dressing again once we’re gone.”

Tainer swept up my flannel PJs and Jake’s pajama bottoms and deposited them on top of the pile of bedclothes Ophelia was holding. She nodded her thanks and then maneuvered down the attic stairs, taking all the sheets and covers with her, leaving me feeling very alone and naked with three men—even though one of them was Jake. I was still trying not to look at him—since he had his hands tied behind his back, he couldn’t exactly hide his goodies the way I was doing my best to hide mine.

“I don’t know what you think you’re going to accomplish, Sorenson, but I’m not going to touch her,” he growled at the crazy professor. “You can leave us here all night and Ani will still be an untouched virgin in the morning.”

“If you won’t touch her at all, I’m afraid she’s going to be a *frozen* virgin,” Sorenson said mildly. “Are you really going to deny her your Alpha Were warmth just to prove a point?”

“You bastard!” Jake sounded both angry and defeated. “This won’t work, you know. We’re not going to fuck just for

your amusement!”

“If it was *amusement* we wanted, we wouldn’t have gone to all this trouble,” Sorenson said, sounding less than perfectly calm for the first time. “You need to breed the Omega to ensure our very *existence* as a people, Jacob! Please consider that and stop being so *stubborn*.”

“Your prophecy is a load of bullshit,” Jake growled. “And you’re all insane!”

“You can think what you like.” The calm was back in Sorenson’s voice. “It’s not your thoughts we need here, Jacob—it’s your seed. You *will* knot and breed the Omega before you leave here and she *will* bear your child, ensuring that the line of the First Wolf does not die from the Earth.”

“You’re sick,” Jake spat. “All of you. She’s my *little sister!*”

“Nevertheless you will breed her,” Sorenson said serenely. “You and I both know that when a bitch comes into full heat, her scent is irresistible. And we both know that the blood of the Royal Line calls to others of the same blood. The two of you won’t be able to resist each other once Anastasia’s Heat Cycle is in full swing.”

At that moment, Ophelia came back up the stairs. She had a set of silver handcuffs in one hand, which she handed to Sorenson—who promptly handed them to Tainer.

“Put them on him and cuff him to the headboard with his arms over his head,” he commanded. “Be sure the silver never leaves his skin, put on the first cuff before you remove the other silver bindings.”

“I know what I’m doin’—don’t need you to tell me,” Tainer muttered. He grabbed Jake by the arm and dragged him over to the bed. And though Jake fought him grimly, it really did seem as though something was sapping his strength. Tainer got him in place on the bed with a minimum of difficulty, despite the ugly names Jake called him. Then he looked at Sorenson.

“You want me to cuff her right beside ‘im?” he asked, his eyes glowing as he raked them over my bare body.

“No, you will never lay hands on the Royal Omega’s flesh,” Sorenson said sternly. “Not even to move or position her—that is why we have Ophelia here.”

“Should *I* cuff her, then?” Ophelia asked, raising her eyebrows.

Sorenson shook his head.

“No—there is no need to restrain the Omega. She isn’t strong enough to get out or do any harm. And she will find herself drawn to the Alpha Heir—first for his warmth, and then for his scent and the touch of his flesh against hers.” He looked up at the skylight. “The light of Lady Moon will help to bring them together as well.”

“Keep her away from me!” Jake snarled, which really kind of hurt my feelings, though I understood his sentiments. “I’m telling you, I’m *not* breeding Ani!”

“Not tonight, perhaps, but you will eventually,” Sorenson said, sounding extremely sure of himself. “Come,” he told Tainer and Ophelia. “Let us leave them alone. They’ll come together more easily without us watching.”

“Aww, but I *like* to watch!” Tainer protested.

“We’re not here for you to get a peep show,” Ophelia told him, frowning. “We’re here so our race doesn’t die from the Earth! Come on—Professor Sorenson says we have to go so let’s go!”

There was a lot of muttering from Tainer at this, but eventually he went down the attic stairs, which creaked alarmingly under his weight. He was followed by Ophelia and Sorenson went last.

“You know,” he said, as he was about to climb down the wooden ladder. “If you’d just get over the idea of your union being ‘wrong,’ you two could actually enjoy this act. You were meant for each other—meant to find each other. No others of the Royal Line exist—well, other than your parents, who are a

lost cause. Your blood will draw you together and your breeding will be unmatched ecstasy.”

“I’ll pass, thanks,” I said, but I was already shivering and rubbing my arms with my hands, while still trying to keep my breasts covered.

“Have a good night’s sleep,” Sorenson said. “We’ll see you in the morning for another test to see if spending the night in each other’s arms helps ramp up your Heat Cycle, Anastasia.”

“You’re crazy!” I threw at him. “All of you—completely certifiable!”

My only answer was a soft laugh from Sorenson and then he shut the trapdoor leading up to the attic with a resounding *boom*. There was a soft *click* and the single overhead bulb which lit the attic went out, leaving me alone with Jake in the darkness.

THIRTEEN



“N-NOW WHAT?” MY TEETH WERE BEGINNING TO CHATTER BUT I didn’t want to admit how cold I was already getting.

“Now you’d better find a way to get warm,” Jake said flatly. “Try the fireplace—is the fire still alive? I can see some glowing coals.”

I walked over to the fireplace with quick, mincing steps, since the floorboards were icy under my bare feet. There were, indeed, a few glowing coals, but they didn’t give off much heat. Also, there was no poker to stir them around or anything else I could use for fuel anywhere. I thought that Sorenson had probably thought it was a bad idea to leave anything that could be used as a weapon, like an iron poker or a length of firewood, out for us to find.

I huddled near the fireplace for as long as I could, but pretty soon the last glowing red ember winked out and I was left staring into the darkened grate.

“It’s no good,” I said, coming back to Jake, where he lay cuffed to the headboard of the bed. He was lying in a pool of silvery moonlight and I couldn’t help thinking that he looked positively mouthwatering. I mean, I knew I wasn’t *supposed* to think like that about my own stepbrother, but seriously, his broad chest and six pack abs and long, muscular legs were highlighted by the moonlight and shadows, making him look like some perfect sculpture carved by a master artisan.

“See if you can find something to wrap around yourself,” Jake suggested. I noticed that he was avoiding looking at me,

though his eyes would dart towards me and then away again from time to time. They glowed gold in the dim room.

I searched but found only an empty closet without even an old moth-eaten sweater inside. I had been hoping for an afghan or even a towel, but there was nothing.

Nothing in the bathroom, either and by that time I was getting extremely cold.

“J-jake, I c-can’t take m-m-much m-more of this,” I told him, my teeth chattering. If only the wind wouldn’t keep gusting down through the skylight! I needed to close it, I decided. If I didn’t, I was seriously going to freeze to death.

“What are you doing?” Jake demanded, as I climbed up on the bed and reached for the opening above it.

“T-t-trying to c-close this d-damn thing,” I replied. By now I was shivering so much I could hardly make my lips work right.

“Stop that—you’ll freeze to death!” Jake protested.

Looking down at him, I saw that he was once again trying hard not to look at me. I supposed I must present quite a sight—standing naked on the bed right over where he was lying. He was probably getting the same kind of view those pervy upskirt videos they upload to porn sights show.

But I couldn’t afford to be embarrassed about showing him my naked body—this was literally a life-or-death situation. I knew if I didn’t manage to get warm somehow, I was for sure going to freeze to death tonight—I really needed to get the damn skylight closed!

At last I managed to find the metal prop that held it in place. It was attached to the window itself or I would have tried to twist it off and keep it to use as a weapon. As it was, I felt lucky just to get the damn thing to fold back into its place so that the skylight closed with a soft *thump*.

The wind stopped whistling through the room and I collapsed on the bed and curled myself into a ball, shivering helplessly. I wasn’t far from Jake—I was so cold I could actually *feel* the warmth his big, muscular body was putting

out. But he had made it abundantly clear that he didn't want me anywhere near him, so I made no move to get close to him. I just lay there with my teeth chattering, trying desperately to get warm on my own—which wasn't happening.

“Ani?” Jake sounded worried. “Ani, talk to me. Are you all right?”

“J-j-just f-f-f-fine,” I got out at last and then couldn't say anymore, because my teeth were chattering so fiercely.

“Bullshit,” Jake said harshly. “You're shivering so hard you're shaking the whole damn bed!”

“W-well what am I sup-p-posed to d-do?” I demanded, turning over to face him, though I stayed curled on my side. “I c-c-can't get warm and you d-d-don't want anything t-to d-do with m-me!”

Jake frowned. He had turned on his side so he was facing me, his arms still cuffed over his head.

“Ani, try to understand...” he began.

“What I understand is th-that I'm going to be f-f-freezing to d-death tonight because you d-don't want me n-near you,” I snapped.

He sighed deeply.

“It's not that I don't want you near me—I do. Probably *too* much,” he added in a mutter, as though to himself. “But this is wrong—wrong for us to be too close to each other! You heard Sorenson—the combination of my scent and the light of a nearly full moon could bring on your Heat Cycle. In fact, that's exactly what he wants!”

“All I h-heard was a b-bunch of b-b-bullshit,” I snarled. “C-cult n-nonsense.”

“It's *not* nonsense. It's...oh, Hell,” Jake growled and shook his head. “Fine—come here and lay against me. But *only* until you warm up—they you have to scoot away again.”

I wanted to tell him not to do me any favors and stay exactly where I was—but the cold wouldn't let me. I couldn't

remember the last time I'd felt so frozen and the temptation of curling up next to his big, warm body was too much to ignore.

Wordlessly, I scooted over to him and pressed my face against his broad, bare chest.

Jake made a little hissing noise and jerked when my super cold body came into contact with his hot one.

"Jeeze! Is that your nose or an ice cube?" he complained. "You really *are* half-frozen."

"S-s-sorry." I started to pull away again but he shook his head.

"No, come back, little Ani," he murmured, nodding at me. I had the feeling he would have gathered me into his arms if he could—but of course he couldn't, since his hands were cuffed over his head. He had been also lying on his side, but now he turned over on his back so that more of his big body was exposed. "Wrap yourself around me," he told me. "Take as much heat as you need to warm up."

Once again, the cold wouldn't let me argue. I scooted close to him, pressing my bare breasts to his side and wrapping my arms and legs around his long, muscular form. Was it awkward? Hell, yes. Did I care? Hell, *no*. At that point I was so cold I didn't care what I had to do to get warm again—including pressing my bare body against my stepbrother's with complete abandon.

I pressed my face against his skin and breathed him in, taking comfort in that bonfire and fur in the forest scent that he always seemed to carry with him. Was this what Sorenson had meant about his scent "calling" to me?

No, I decided uneasily, that was just more bullshit. It was probably just my stepbrother's cologne or deodorant I was smelling. Or else, he just had a really good personal smell—some people did. It was no big deal, really it wasn't.

The main thing now was to warm up and that was exactly what I did.

"Mmm..." I moaned softly, as I snuggled against Jake's supine form. "You're so *warm*."

“It’s the Were blood,” Jake said, his voice slightly hoarse. “Our bodies self-regulate our temperature so we can’t freeze. Do you think you’re warm enough, yet?” he asked abruptly.

“Just a few more minutes,” I begged. “Please, Jake—you’re so warm and I’m still *freezing*.”

“It’s not good for you to be this near me for too long,” he warned me. “Believe me, Ani, if your Heat Cycle comes on —”

“Will you stop talking all that Were bullshit for just two seconds and let me enjoy cuddling you?” I demanded crossly. “You’re like a big, warm, muscular teddy bear. I’d like to enjoy this experience instead of feeling guilty—okay?”

“A muscular teddy bear?” To my surprise—and possibly Jake’s too—I heard a low rumble of laughter coming from him. It shook my entire body, but in a good way.

“A *warm* muscular teddy bear,” I told him. “The ‘warm’ part is what counts. The muscles are nice too, though,” I added, running a hand over his chest. It was like stroking warm, living steel I decided. Very, *very* nice.

“You’re incredibly soft,” Jake murmured, his voice going low.

“Gee, thanks—I know I don’t have bench-press-a-truck muscles like some people, but I try to keep firm,” I protested.

“I meant it as a compliment, Ani,” he said softly.

“Well...thanks, I guess.” I shifted against him. “Jake, we *have* to get out of here, you know.”

“I know.” His voice was suddenly serious. “I just don’t know how yet. But I’ll think of a plan, little Ani—I promise I will.”

“You sound like my mom,” I told him, snuggling closer. “Back after my dad died, when we were so poor we had to live in a one bedroom studio apartment and we were living on mac ‘n cheese and ramen noodles, she used to promise me all the time that she was going to get us out of there.” I sighed. “I just didn’t know that the way she’d do it was to marry your dad.”

“My father loves her more than his own life—more than *anything*.” There was that faint, bitter tone in Jake’s voice again. I looked up at him, frowning.

“You resent her, don’t you? My mother.”

“Of course not,” he denied—too quickly, I thought. “She makes my father very happy. After we lost my mother, I never thought he *could* be happy again. I’m glad for him that he found his Royal Omega.”

“Then why do you sound so bitter when you talk about them?” I demanded. “Why do you look away when she talks to you and leave the room when she comes in, if you possibly can?”

I had noticed all these things in the year we’d been living in the mansion together, but I didn’t understand them. My mom is one of the sweetest people you’d ever want to meet—I just didn’t get why someone wouldn’t love her.

But Jake only shook his head.

“You’re imagining things,” he growled. “Maybe I just don’t want anyone trying to take my mom’s place. I miss her, the same way you miss your dad, you know.”

“How old were you when she passed?” I asked quietly.

“Fifteen.” The raw pain in his voice was impossible not to hear. “She got a rare form of cancer—there’s no cure. My dad spent millions flying her around the world, taking her to the best clinics and the most renowned doctors but it didn’t help... she died anyway,” he finished in a low voice.

“Aww, Jake—I’m so sorry,” I murmured, nuzzling my face against his shoulder. “My dad was hit by a car when he was changing a tire that blew on the Interstate,” I offered. “It was instantaneous. I still remember my mom’s face just crumpling when the State Trooper came to the door to tell her the news.”

I shook my head and realized that my eyes were stinging. I blinked rapidly, trying to push back the tears. That old memory hurt—a *lot*. The pain in my mom’s face and the way she cried and cried, as though she would never be able to stop. It had been so frightening to realize at such a young age that

anyone you loved could just be snatched away in an instant with no rhyme or reason or explanation. That they could be here one moment and gone the next with no possibility of ever coming back.

“Hey...you crying, little Ani?” Jake’s voice was gentle.

“No,” I denied and then sniffed.

“You are—I can feel your tears on my chest.” He sighed. “God, I wish I could get my arms free to hold you.”

“Thought you didn’t *want* to hold me,” I muttered.

“I want to *comfort* you,” he rumbled.

“Like you did when Mr. Binkers was hit by a car,” I said, and sniffed again. “You were so nice to me that night—I really felt like we’d turned some kind of corner in our, uh, brother-sister relationship. But then you went right back to being an asshole again.”

“Because I couldn’t risk getting too close to you again,” Jake said.

“Because your dad told you not to?” I asked, looking up at him.

He nodded shortly.

“That and I didn’t want to risk pushing you into your Heat Cycle. It was my understanding that your mom wanted you to avoid ever having one, if you could.”

“We’re close right now,” I pointed out. “I mean, *way* closer than ever before, which Sorenson is sure is going to bring us together. But I don’t feel a *thing*.”

Which was maybe not the *complete* truth. I had warmed up some now and I couldn’t help thinking that Jake’s bare, muscular body felt really nice against my own. But that was as far as it went. And just *noticing* your stepsibling wasn’t a crime, was it?

Jake only grunted at that, which was an aggravating kind of non-answer.

“Sorenson is so sure he’s going to push us together, but we’re just laying here talking and neither one of us has gone crazy with lust yet,” I went on, determined to make my point. “I mean, it’s not like I’m humping your leg or anything, right?”

“*Actually...*” Jake shifted a little and I could feel his hard, muscular thigh rubbing against the soft mound of curls at the top of my pussy. The feeling sent a shivering tingle through me and for a moment I was hyperaware of the way my nipples were rubbing against his warm side as well.

Then I pushed the feelings aside and told myself I hadn’t had them at all.

“That doesn’t count,” I said crossly. “I’m just getting warm right now—I can’t help it that we’re pressed together. It was this or freeze to death!”

“I know, little Ani, but you should really move as soon as you’re warm,” Jake told me.

“I will,” I promised. “But I’m not warm yet. It’s really *cold* in here.”

“Mmm-hmm,” was his skeptical reply, but I noticed he didn’t ask me to move again.

“Tell me a story,” I said, trying to change the subject. “Tell me about the most exciting place you ever went. Your dad is rich—you must have traveled all around the world, right?”

“I did,” he admitted. “Mostly after my mom got sick, though.” He sighed. “But I still have some good memories—times when she was in remission and we could actually travel for fun. I remember one time in Istanbul, we went to the public bathhouses and soaked in the hot mineral water for hours. Afterwards, we went walking in this huge open square and found a vendor who was selling this amazing pastry.”

“Oh, I *love* pastry—tell me more,” I urged him.

“So, it was made on this roller on a stick, is the best way I can describe it,” Jake sounded thoughtful, as though he was trying to bring back the memory in detail. “He dipped the roller in this huge vat of batter and then put the stick over a

charcoal brazier and rotated it until that layer of batter cooked and then he dipped it again and repeated the whole process. By the time he was finished and had sprinkled the whole thing in sugar and cinnamon and nuts, it was about twice as long as a roll of paper towels and almost as thick.”

“Oh my God—that sounds *amazing*,” I said dreamily. “Did you eat the whole thing?”

Jake laughed.

“Of course not! The three of us—my mom and dad and I—shared it, but we still couldn’t finish it all. We wound up feeding bits of it to the pigeons that were all over the place.” He sighed. “I guess that’s one of my happiest memories—I think I was ten or eleven then.”

“It sounds wonderful,” I sighed. “I’ve never been outside the US. Not even to Canada or Mexico. There was a class trip to Europe my last year of high school, but I couldn’t afford to go, you know?”

“I’m sorry you grew up with so little,” Jake murmured. “That’s not right, Ani.”

“It’s okay,” I told him. “It made me stronger—and brought my mom and me closer together.” I sighed wistfully. “Actually, I have to admit, I resent your dad just a *little*. My mom and I have always been so tight, but ever since he came into her life, it’s like...we’re not even on the same page anymore.”

Part of that was the fact that she believed all the crazy Werewolf bullshit, of course. But part of it was also because she was so in love with Marcus it was like she couldn’t see anybody else.

“Don’t blame her for being distracted.” That hint of bitterness had crept into Jake’s voice again. “That’s what happens when a Were finds their perfect soul-mate—the one they are meant to be with for life. They...*lose* themselves in each other, you know? I remember my parents were the same way. I mean, they never neglected me and they were always there for me, but they were *more* there for each other. It was

like they lived in their own little world—a world that nobody else could ever really enter.”

“Yes, that’s it exactly!” I exclaimed. “It wasn’t like that when my mom was with my dad—they loved each other but it wasn’t like *that*. But once my mom got with Marcus, well, it’s like he’s the only one she can see.”

“Believe me, my father feels the same way about your mother,” Jake said dryly. “He’ll do things for her he wouldn’t do for anyone else—even if they hurt other people in his life.”

“What do you mean by that?” I frowned, looking up at him.

But Jake shook his head.

“Never mind—it doesn’t matter,” he said shortly, which I took to mean that the subject was closed.

“Have you thought of a way for us to get out of here, yet?” I asked, changing the subject to a more relevant one. “I mean, not that I’m rushing you or anything, but these people seem like they’re on a schedule and I’d like to get away before the full moon.”

“If I could just get these damn silver cuffs off, I could kill every one of them with my bare hands.”

Jake rattled the handcuffs against the bed frame, his voice a low, bloodthirsty growl.

“Whoa, there,” I said. “I didn’t say I wanted to *kill* them—I mean, they’re horrible people but they’re in a cult, you know? They’re *brainwashed*. You saw the way Sorenson manipulates them—I really don’t think this is their fault.”

“You’re more forgiving than I am,” Jake said, and his voice still sounded angry and growly.

“I guess so. But then...I’m sure you have more to forgive,” I said hesitantly. “Jake, when they captured you before...what did they do to you?”

He sighed and I felt his big body go hard and tense. Then he blew out a long breath and seemed to relent.

“They milked me, mostly,” he said in a low voice.

“Uh, sorry—what?” I wasn’t exactly sure what he was saying.

“Jerked me off and saved the seed I shot,” Jake said harshly. “They had some crazy idea that maybe they could use it to impregnate some other poor Were girl they were watching who they thought might have Royal blood lines.”

“Did she?” I asked. I was trying to sound calm, but secretly I was horrified by what he’d told me. So the Worshipers of the Moon *had* sexually abused him before. No wonder he hated them so much he wanted to kill them!

Jake shrugged—as well as he could with his arms cuffed over his head.

“Don’t know. My dad’s people got to me before they could catch her and try to impregnate her. I’m assuming since they captured you and me, it didn’t work out.”

“I’m so sorry they did that to you,” I whispered, rubbing my cheek against his chest again and putting my arms as far around his big body as I could to give him a comforting squeeze. “This must be so hard for you, but at least you have someone with you this time.”

“I’d rather be alone.” Jake’s voice was distant, remote.

“What?” I looked up at him, frowning. His face was like a marble statue in the moonlight. “How can you *say* that, Jake?”

“Because I don’t want to hurt you, all right?” He looked down at me, and the icy façade broke. For a moment, I could see the agony in his eyes. “I don’t want to do what they want me to do to you, Ani,” he whispered hoarsely. “I could never forgive myself if I did.”

“Jake, no—you can’t think like that.” I pushed myself up and cupped his cheek, looking into his eyes. “Look, we’re in a bad position right now and we’re not in control of anything,” I told him, hoping my voice didn’t tremble too much. “But I want you to know that whatever they make us do to each other, it’s not your fault—or mine either,” I added.

“You say that now, but how are you going to feel if they make me touch you? Or rape you?” His voice had gone hard and cold again and his face was remote.

“Look, it’s not going to be like that. It won’t...” I swallowed hard. “It won’t be rape—I won’t *let* it be.”

“You’re a virgin, Ani,” he said harshly. “And I’m your big brother—it can’t be anything *other* than rape.”

“Yes, it can,” I protested. “Jake, if...if they make us do that, I won’t fight you. I...” I licked my lips, which were suddenly dry. “I’ll do my best to be...to be open to it. I mean, I never imagined my own stepbrother being my, uh, first but I know you won’t hurt me...will you?” I couldn’t help adding in a small voice.

“Oh, baby...little Ani...” Now it was his turn to sound like he might be crying. He squeezed his eyes shut and I felt wetness under my fingertips, where I was cupping his face. “Never, Ani,” he managed to say in a choked voice. “I would *never* hurt you. But we can’t do that together—it’s *wrong*. I can’t even *explain* to you how wrong it is.”

“I’m just saying if they *make* us,” I said earnestly. “I won’t blame you. And I hope you won’t blame me.”

“I would never blame you,” Jake said bleakly. “But I would sure as hell blame myself.”

“No—neither one of us is playing the blame game,” I said sternly. “We’re in a sticky situation, but we’re going to get out of it. And for now, all we’ve got is each other so we have to stick together, okay?”

Jake nodded.

“All right,” he said in a low voice.

“And that means no more pushing me away,” I told him. “I need you, Jake—we need each other if we’re going to make it through this and find a way out of here.”

He sighed deeply.

“You feel warm enough now—I ought to tell you to scoot to the other side of the bed. But I guess that counts as ‘pushing

you away.”

“Yes, it does,” I said, frowning and pressing even closer to him. “So don’t even say it, I need to be near you tonight, Jake. And whether you admit it or not, I think you need to be near me, too. We *need* each other.”

“I just don’t want us to start ‘needing’ each other in any other way,” he said darkly.

“We won’t,” I assured him. “Now why don’t we try and get some sleep? We’ll both feel better in the morning if we do.”

Jake made a noise that seemed to mean ascent and I settled my cheek on his broad chest again. I breathed in his comforting scent and soaked in his warmth, cuddling close, holding him the way I wished he could hold me.

I decided then and there that I didn’t care what they made us do—I wasn’t going to let it get between us. I was feeling closer to Jake than I had since he’d helped me save Mr. Binkers—he was a good big brother—he *really* was. And I didn’t want him to feel guilty for anything he might be forced to do to me...or I might be forced to do to him.

With that thought firmly in mind and Jake’s warmth to comfort me, I finally drifted off to sleep.

FOURTEEN



“RISE AND SHINE, LOVEBIRDS! IT’S NEARLY TEN O’CLOCK!”

A woman’s voice trilling through the air woke me up—well, sort of. I’m a pretty sound sleeper. Still, I at least started to stir. I wondered, sleepily, why half of me was so warm and the other half was so cold and stiff. The warm half was lying against something firm that seemed to be moving up and down.

Still trying to work out what was going on, I ran my hand over the thing I was laying against. It was moving slowly up and down and it smelled really, *really* good. It was also extremely toasty, which was nice because my room had somehow gotten really cold overnight.

I’ve always been a heavy sleeper and very slow to wake up. Feeling like I was still dreaming, I continued to run my hand down the warm, breathing pillow I was lying on. It was mostly smooth but then I felt a scratchy little trail of hair. Intrigued by the texture, I let my fingers keep traveling until I found a bigger patch of hair. There was something long and hot and hard sticking out of it...what was that?

My eyes still closed, I explored this new shape, sliding my fingers up and down its length until the pillow I was laying on made a low, groaning sound and shifted around.

“Ani,” a low, sleepy voice said. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“Hmm?” It sounded like Jake, but why would my stepbrother be in my bedroom? And why did his voice sound

so close—almost like it was right under my ear?

“Well, good—I see you two are getting along a lot better now.”

It was the same voice that had woken me up—familiar and unfamiliar at the same time. I peeled open an eyelid and saw a girl with long, straight brown hair and mild brown eyes swimming behind thick glasses looking down at me.

“Hmm?” I mumbled again. I felt like I ought to know her name—she looked familiar but who was she?

She made me pee on a stick, a sleepy voice in my brain suggested. But why would she do that?

“It feels good to take your lover’s shaft in your hand, doesn’t it?” the girl said, smiling gently at me. “And see how hard he is for you! Tonight you may even feel him inside you, filling you with his knot!”

“His...what?” I mumbled, uncertainly.

“The part you’re touching right now,” Jake’s voice said in my ear. “Wake *up*, Ani! If you keep this up, I can’t be responsible for what happens next!”

The hard, warm pillow under me moved around and I was forced to open both eyes to see what was going on. First I looked up and saw Jake staring down at me with an unreadable expression on his face. Then I looked down to the long, hard, hot thing I was holding in my right hand. It had a broad, mushroom-shaped head on a long, thick shaft. And down at the base of the shaft there was an extra swelling that seemed to go all the way around it. What the hell was I looking at?

Sudden realization washed over me—oh my God, it was his cock!

I jumped up, suddenly fully awake and completely humiliated. It takes a lot to wake me up completely, but finding myself juggling my stepbrother’s junk definitely did the trick.

“Oh Jake, I’m so sorry!” I exclaimed, feeling my face get hot with shame. “I swear I didn’t mean to! I was having a

dream, er, I mean, I thought *this* was a dream. I mean, I was still asleep—I didn't meant to grope you, honest!"

Then I realized that, in addition to touching my stepbrother in a very inappropriate way, I was also stark naked in front of him. This hadn't seemed like a big deal the night before—mainly because it had been so dim in the room he couldn't see me. Also, I had been freezing, so I didn't care. But this morning sunlight was pouring through the skylight and I was acutely aware that I didn't have a stitch on.

"I'm really sorry," I told him again, as I covered myself with my arms and hands as well as I could. "Really, *really* sorry."

"Don't be ashamed of handling your lover's body," Ophelia protested, when Jake didn't answer. "It's a natural part of conception, you know."

"I am *not* conceiving by *anybody*," I told her. "Especially not my stepbrother!"

She looked taken aback.

"Well—and here I thought you two were finally beginning to see the light!"

"You're asking us to commit incest," Jake said flatly. "There's no light to see."

Ophelia huffed.

"Well, as long as you choose to focus on *that* rather than the continuation of our species, I suppose you're *going* to be grumpy." She looked at me. "It's time for another test. Let's see how your Heat Cycle is doing today."

"Hey, I'd like a bathroom break too," Jake complained, frowning. "And what about a drink of water or some breakfast?"

"One thing at a time," Ophelia said primly. "My first duty is to the Royal Omega."

She beckoned me off the bed and led me into the bathroom again. There I peed on another stick test and watched uneasily as the little boxes lit up, one by one. The control box was red,

the ovulation box was red, the pregnancy box was blue, and the Heat Cycle box...well...

“Yellow!” Ophelia crowed. “Professor Sorenson was right—putting the two of you together under the light of Lady Moon is working!”

I got an uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach. Was I *really* getting closer to some strange state of hyper-fertility like they all seemed to think? But no—that was crazy, wasn’t it? I tried to push the idea out of my head, but somehow, it was getting harder to do.

Next, it was Jake’s turn. But Ophelia wasn’t taking any chances with him. Before she un-cuffed him, she made sure to put the silver ropes around his arms again—though at least she kept his hands in front of his body instead of behind this time. She used the same cuffs to lock me to the bed where Jake had been and also held a gun on him—presumably the same one Tainer had been using the night before. She handled the gun with a skill and competence that made my heart sink and kept Jake in her sites the whole time he was in the bathroom.

When he came back, she cuffed him to the bed—sitting up this time with one cuff on his right wrist and the other cuff around the thick wooden strut of the headboard, which appeared to be solid oak. I was free again, but where was I going to go? I wasn’t leaving without Jake and I didn’t feel brave enough to rush Ophelia while she was holding that huge gun on us. Still, maybe I should try to work up the nerve...

“Jake,” I muttered, while she disappeared for a moment down the attic stairs, promising to bring us some “brunch” in a moment, “Maybe I should rush her when she comes back up. She seems to be alone in the house—maybe Tainer and Sorenson are at work or something.”

“No! You’re not taking any chances with that gun she’s got,” he muttered back.

“She won’t shoot me,” I argued. “She thinks I’m ‘Royal.’ She won’t dare.”

“She might not *try* to shoot you but a lot can go wrong when there’s a loaded gun involved,” he argued. “I don’t want you to risk it, Ani!”

“But if she’s the only one in the house—”

My speculation was ruined by the sound of heavy tramping coming up the wooden ladder. Tainer’s balding head appeared and then his thick torso and I saw that *he* had the gun this time.

“Well, well—Ophelia tells me you two are gettin’ close to fuckin’ already,” he purred, coming over to the bed. “And who could blame you, after sleepin’ buck nekked together last night.” He leered at me as I tried to cover myself. Then he turned his attention to Jake. “Tell me, boy—did you slip it in her? Just a little bit? Nobody would blame you with a fine piece of ass like that!”

“You sick fuck, she’s my *sister*,” Jake growled. “And you’ll stop looking at her if you know what’s good for you.”

He pushed me behind him—as much as he could—and shielded me with his body.

“Fine then.” Tainer smirked. “Ophelia’s bringin’ the two of you some kinda ‘lovers’ brunch’ she whipped up. After that, we’ll see if we can’t get that yellow box on the pee stick to turn orange—or maybe even *red*.”

I felt a shiver of unease go through me. Where was Ophelia? And where was Sorenson, for that matter? Though he was clearly the mastermind of this crazy cult, he also acted as a moderating influence on the big hillbilly. I hated to think of what Tainer might get up to without anyone to tell him “no.”

My thoughts were interrupted when Ophelia appeared again, this time carrying a heavily laden tray. How in the world she managed to get it up those steep stairs without spilling anything, I had no idea. But somehow she brought the whole thing up into the attic without a single spill.

“All right now,” she said, her brown eyes brimming with excitement. “We’ve got Eggs Benedict and some yummy

waffles, orange juice, coffee with cream and sugar, some maple syrup...”

She went on like that, naming off things on the breakfast tray and I thought again that she reminded me of someone working in a high-end boutique hotel. She was treating Jake and me like a couple on our honeymoon and she was so excited to make this a “romantic” experience—as if kidnapping and forced breeding could be romantic.

Once she finished explaining the tray, she set it carefully on the bed between us and clasped her hands together under her chin.

“Now, you two have a wonderful brunch! Is there anything else I can get you?”

“The key to these handcuffs?” Jake said, deadpan.

Ophelia made a reproving face at him.

“Now, you *know* we wouldn’t have to cuff you if the two of you would just do your duty! Eat up—you’re going to need your strength for the breeding to come.”

She and Tainer left us alone then—I guess they figured we couldn’t get into much trouble with Jake cuffed to the bed—and we were able to eat.

It was actually really good food...not that I had much appetite for it.

“Jake...” I said in a small voice, as I picked at the cooling waffles with their drizzle of real maple syrup and fresh berry compote. “What...what do you think they’re going to make us do after this?”

“I don’t know,” he said in a low voice and looked up at me. “But I’m afraid you’re not going to like it, whatever it is.”

“Remember what we said last night,” I reminded him. “Neither one of us is to blame, right? And we’re not going to get mad or hate each other or let anything they make us do, drive us apart. Right?”

“What if they make me touch you?” he asked in a low voice. “How will you deal with that, Ani? You’re so innocent

—have you ever even had a boyfriend before?”

“I’m not *that* innocent,” I protested. “I dated a few guys in high school. I even had a steady boyfriend for a while—his name was Cliff.”

“Oh, yeah?” Jake raised an eyebrow at me. “And how far did you let him go?”

I started to tell him that was none of his business...except in a weird way, it kind of *was*. Jake was trying to find out how much experience I had—trying to find out what he could expect and how the two of us could get through this.

“I...I let him touch me. Under my bra, I mean,” I said in a small voice. It was kind of embarrassing to admit this to him. “But only for a minute—that was all I could stand.”

Jake raised his eyebrows.

“That’s it?”

“It didn’t *feel* right, okay?” I snapped. Then I took a deep breath, trying to calm down. “I can’t explain it—it just felt so *weird* to let him touch me like that. In a...in a sexual way, I mean. I never even wanted to hold his hand or kiss him, let alone do...anything else. I don’t know why.” I shrugged.

“I do,” Jake said in a low voice. “It was because he wasn’t a Were.”

I thought about telling him to stop with the Were bullshit, but then I sighed. Everybody but me believed this stuff here—I was going to have to get along to go along if I wanted to make it through.

“All right,” I said at last. “I’ll bite—how could you possibly know that?”

“Because a Were female—especially an Omega—often doesn’t enjoy the touch of a non-Were. Your mom being the rare exception, since she married your dad,” he added. “But the touch of a human just feels *wrong*.”

“Well, if I believed in all this Were stuff, that would certainly explain my advanced state of virginity,” I said lightly. “Because none of the boys I dated in high school or college

have ever felt *right* to me. I never wanted to be near any of them the way I wanted to be near..." I hesitated, trailing off as I felt my cheeks get hot.

What I'd been about to say was that I never wanted to be near any of them the way I so desperately wanted to be near Jake. For some reason, his big, hard body just felt *right* against mine. The scent of his skin called to me and the touch of his body against my own felt like coming home. I knew that was wrong—he was my *stepbrother* for goodness sake! But I couldn't help the way my body reacted to his, or the way that I felt when I was with him.

Jake gave me a wary glance and took another bite of his Eggs Benedict, washing it down with a swig of orange juice.

"I know what you're thinking, Ani, but your body only reacts to mine because I'm an Alpha of the Royal line and you're an Omega with Royal blood," he murmured. "It's nothing more than that—I swear."

"Sure. Right." I looked away and bit my lip. "So I guess I *am* pretty innocent after all," I admitted.

"Just a sweet little virgin, who's never been kissed," Jake teased gently. "At least, not by the right male," he added.

I arched an eyebrow at him.

"I hope you're not implying that *you're* the right male?"

"Of course not." He frowned. "I'm your *brother*."

"Yes, and I'm your little sister. Except I'm *not*—I didn't even *know* you before a year ago," I pointed out.

"That doesn't matter." Jake set his jaw in that stubborn way he had. "According to Were law—"

"I know, I know—according to Were law, I'm your *actual, factual* little sister," I said and yawned theatrically. "Tell me something I *don't* know, why don't you?"

"Ani, this is no game!" Jake insisted. "Do you know what the penalty for incest is? Do you have any idea—"

“Well, well—are you two lovebirds done with your fancy fuckin’ brunch?” Tainer’s coarse voice interrupted us.

I realized that I’d been leaning closer to Jake, looking into his eyes as we talked. Now I instinctively ducked behind him—as much as his cuffed arm and the headboard would allow, and watched mistrustfully as the huge mountain man climbed back up the ladder and into the attic. Ophelia was right behind him, a bright smile on her face.

“Did you enjoy your brunch?” she asked, beaming at both of us. “I hope it was to your satisfaction.”

“Well *I* hope it was to their fuckin’ satisfaction, *too*,” Tainer drawled. There was an ugly grin on his face and he had the gun in his hand again. “Because play time is over—now it’s time to get down to business.”

FIFTEEN



“WHAT DO YOU WANT? JUST LEAVE US ALONE,” I SAID, TRYING to stay behind Jake as much as I could and cover my exposed breasts with my arms and hands at the same time. I had my legs tightly closed, hiding my pussy as well.

“Can’t leave you alone or you’ll never get nowhere,” Tainer said. “He pronounced “can’t” as though it rhymed with “paint,” setting my teeth on edge.

“That’s a double negative,” I pointed out. “By your own admission, what you just said was that you ought to leave us alone and we’ll get somewhere.” Which had been Sorenson’s theory—where was he, anyway? I absolutely hated the charismatic cult leader, but I really wished he was here now to rein Tainer in.

The hillbilly’s forehead creased for a moment, as he apparently tried to figure out what I had said, but then he shook his head, like a bull shaking away an irritating fly.

“Nevermind your fancy talk—you’re as bad as the Professor,” he snarled. “Always tryin’ to explain things. Well, here’s an explanation for you—if you two don’t fuck, we’re all gonna *die*. So get to fuckin’!” And he waved the gun at us.

“Tainer, you can’t do that!” Ophelia exclaimed, aghast. “Professor Sorenson says that’s not how it works. Anastasia has to be brought into her Heat Cycle *gradually*.”

“Well, she’s actin’ a little too gradual for me,” Tainer snarled. “I wanna see ‘em *breed*.”

“It won’t do any good for the Alpha Heir to knot her *now*,” Ophelia said, looking exasperated. “It has to be done under the light of the full moon for the prophecy to be fulfilled and a good strong pregnancy to take!”

“Well, they at least need to get *closer* to fuckin’,” Tainer exclaimed. “What do *you* wanna see ‘em do, ‘Phelia? C’mon—you know you wanna see ‘em do *something*.”

A romantic, dreamy look came over Ophelia’s open, mild face.

“I’d like to see them kiss,” she said softly. “Not a rough, angry kiss like you get sometimes when everybody’s getting rowdy under the full moon. But a sweet, gentle, *romantic* kiss. You know?”

It was all I could do not to roll my eyes. Clearly Ophelia had been watching *way* too many Hallmark movies and now she wanted a live action recreation of one.

“You heard the lady.” Tainer gestured at us with the gun. “Go on—kiss.”

I looked at Jake and he looked at me. As erotic orders went, this was a pretty mild one, but who knew where it might lead? Still, we couldn’t exactly say no—Tainer had the gun trained on us. At least he was no longer ordering us to “get to fuckin’.”

“All right,” Jake said, frowning at them. “I’ll kiss her. Just stop waving that damn gun around—it’s not a toy.”

“Boy, I know my way around guns, don’t you fear that I don’t,” Tainer snapped. “No go on and kiss her before I decide to ‘play’ with this here trigger a little. You can still fuck if I blow one of your knees out,” he added meaningfully. Then he looked at me. “And you, little miss Royal bitch, you better do a good job for ‘Phelia here. She’s been waiting on you two hand and foot and she wants a good show!”

“Don’t listen to him,” Jake murmured, catching my eyes with his. “Don’t look at him—at either of them. Look at *me*, Ani.”

I did more than look at him. Turning my back to our audience, I took his face in my hands. His morning beard scratched my cheeks as I looked into his pale, pure-gold eyes, so like my own. My heart was pounding as I leaned towards him.

“Only because we have to,” Jake murmured, looking into my eyes.

“Only because we have to,” I repeated breathlessly. And then I pressed my lips to his and kissed him.

It was, as Ophelia had requested, a soft, gentle, romantic kiss. It was also, I was ashamed to admit, the best kiss I’d ever had in my life.

Jake had teased me about having “never been kissed” but that wasn’t true. I’d been kissed before—plenty of times. Well, maybe not plenty, but enough to know I didn’t like it much. I always felt like whoever I was kissing somehow had the wrong kind of mouth. That his lips were too dry or—God forbid!—too *wet*. That his mouth was too big or too small. That he used too much tongue or—but no, I never felt like a guy didn’t use *enough* tongue because I had never wanted *any* guy’s tongue in my mouth before.

I wanted Jake’s.

As his mouth met mine, I had a feeling of rightness than I can’t quite explain. It sounds cliché, but it really felt like we were two pieces of the same puzzle and we just clicked right into place. His mouth felt *perfect* against mine—hot and sweet and he was gentle and slow, unlike most of the other guys I’d kissed, who always seemed to be in a hurry to ram their tongues down my throat.

Not Jake. He kissed me softly and slowly for a long, long time. His free hand, the one that wasn’t cuffed, came up to cradle my neck and cheek and he brushed his thumb over my cheekbone as he slowly took my mouth with his own.

I took him right back, unable to help myself. After what felt like a million years, I dared to part my mouth and lap

delicately at the seam of his lips. I felt him hesitate for a moment and then his lips opened, inviting me in.

I slipped my tongue into his mouth, carefully at first, not sure if this was really all right. Jake met me and sucked the tip of my tongue, inviting me further in, inviting me to explore him, to *know* him the way I had never known anyone else.

No boy had ever kissed me like this before. And maybe that was part of the difference—Jake was a man and he knew how to take things slow, how to be gentle. He let me taste him and then he tasted me in return, slowly slipping his tongue between my lips and exploring me the way he had allowed me to explore him.

He tasted of orange juice and heat and warm, wet desire and I completely lost myself in him. I forgot that he was my stepbrother—forgot that we were being forced to do this. I forgot everything except that for the first time in my life, it felt *right* to kiss someone—and I never wanted to stop.

At last, though, after what felt like a million years, but was probably more like ten or twelve minutes, Jake drew back, panting.

“There,” he said, his voice low and hoarse. “We kissed. Are you satisfied?”

Feeling half dazed, I turned my head to look at our captors—I had forgotten all about them in the deep *rightness* of the kiss.

“Oh...” Ophelia had her hands clasped under her chin. She looked for all the world like a woman watching the most romantic movie ever. “Oh, that was *beautiful*,” she breathed.

“Yeah, it was all right—but it ain’t enough to turn that box from yellow to red,” Tainer said. “Suck her titties.”

“Excuse me?” I exclaimed, covering my breasts protectively.

“You’ve got to be kidding,” Jake said flatly.

“No, I ain’t.” Tainer waved the gun at us. “Go on—you heard me. Suck her titties.”

“But do it softly and gently,” Ophelia put in. “Make it *romantic*.”

Well, so much for hoping she would stop this in its tracks—clearly she was into it now, I thought. I looked at Jake, biting my lower lip.

“I won’t do it if you don’t want me to, Ani,” he said in a low voice. “They can shoot me if they want—Weres regenerate quickly.”

“No!” I exclaimed, my eyes going wide. “No, Jake—I don’t want you getting shot!”

“I don’t want to do something you don’t want me to,” he argued.

“It won’t be so bad,” I said, avoiding the idea of whether I “wanted” him to or not. “As...as long as you’re gentle,” I added. “I’ve never...no one has ever done that to me before.”

“I know, little Ani.” He cupped my cheek in his big, warm hand. “My innocent little Ani.”

“Get on with it!” Tainer demanded. “We ain’t got all day!”

“All right, all right—I’m the Innocent Omega, remember—don’t rush me!” I snapped at him. Then, as I had before, I turned away from him and Ophelia and looked only at Jake. Raising myself up on my knees, I presented my bare breasts to him. “I...I’m ready,” I whispered.

Jake still looked like he might refuse but Tainer was clearly getting an itchy trigger finger. Deciding not to wait any longer, I cupped my left breast and pressed the tight, pink nipple against his lips.

Jake made a sound that was almost like a groan and then his lips parted and he was sucking my nipple into his mouth.

I moaned softly as I felt him circle the tight, pink bud with his hot tongue, going around and around the turgid peak until I felt like my whole body might melt from the pleasure.

As I’d told him, I had never let another guy do this to me—I could barely stand to let anyone touch my breasts, let alone kiss or suck them. But again, it was different with Jake.

The way he was gently nursing my nipple was sending sparks of pleasure down my spine and straight to my pussy. As he sucked harder, I could actually *feel* myself getting wet and swollen between my legs—a sensation I frankly had never experienced before. Not with another guy and not by myself either. I honestly, before that moment, had never been aroused before—not in any significant way, anyway.

This is what all the songs and books and movies are about, I thought, as Jake switched nipples and began sucking the left one. He cupped my right breast in his hand and began to thumb the nipple as he sucked and lapped at my aching left tip, sending more jolts of unexpected pleasure through me.

I swear I had never felt like this before in my life. I hadn't understood what all the fuss about sex was. When Ashley had her pregnancy scare, I couldn't understand why in the world she would risk unprotected sex with any guy. It seemed so stupid to take such a huge chance for something that was—frankly, in my limited experience—rather unpleasant.

I had tried masturbating before, but had given it up for lack of interest. My body just didn't seem to react to sexual stimulation—it was boring.

It was neither unpleasant nor boring with Jake. To the contrary, I felt as though my body was coming alive—lighting up like a candle wick that's been lit for the very first time.

I found I was moaning but I couldn't seem to help it. I wove my fingers through Jake's thick, black hair and pressed my breasts forward, into his face, begging for more.

“Jake!” I half-whispered/half-moaned. “Oh God, yes...that feels so good. So *right!* ”

Jake suddenly pulled away, panting.

“There,” he said harshly. “I did what you wanted. Now leave us alone.”

I was panting myself—I wanted to ask why he'd stopped, but he wouldn't look at me.

“Smell her scent!” Tainer sniffed the air like a hungry dog. “She's gettin' hot all right—she's gettin' ripe and ready to be

bred!”

“Shut up,” Jake growled. “I told you, I’m *never* breeding my little sister.”

“You don’t seem to mind suckin’ her titties, though, do you?” Tainer taunted him.

Feeling embarrassed, I squeezed my thighs together. Could they really smell that I was turned on? Why had I acted like that? What was happening to my body? I could still feel the tingling in my nipples where Jake had sucked them and my pussy was throbbing between my thighs as it never had before. This was getting *scary*—what was wrong with me?

“Just leave us alone,” Jake said, glaring at Tainer. “I’m not...not sucking Ani’s breasts any more just so you can get off on it.”

“Fine.” Tainer grinned at us, an expression that showed he had several black and rotten teeth. “How bout we let little Miss Royal Omega do the sucking instead?”

“*What?*” I demanded, feeling suddenly cold. “What...what are you talking about?”

“Talking about *you* suckin’ *him* for a change, little girl,” Tainer sneered. He waved the gun at me. “Go on—what you need to really get your Heat Cycle started is a taste of your man’s seed.”

“Oh, but *that’s* not very romantic,” Ophelia objected—apparently this was her only objective now. She made a face. “BJs are just *gross*. ”

“Now, that’s just not true,” Tainer said, frowning.

“Yes, it is!” Ophelia put a hand on her hip. “All that gagging and drooling and choking—*disgusting!*”

I thought that she’d probably been watching too much porn meant for men. I had seen my fair share of porn—Madison and Ashley loved to giggle over it when we spent the night at each other’s houses. But what they really liked was porn made especially for women. In those shots, there was usually none of the “gagging and drooling” as Ophelia had put it. It was

much more artsy and slow when the woman was in charge and the man wasn't ramming his shaft down her throat.

I had never had much interest in those scenes before. Now, however, I actually found myself thinking about them. What would it be like to take Jake in my hand...in my mouth? I had been trying not to stare at him all this time, but I couldn't help noticing he was really big. Also, that swelling at the base of his shaft—was that his “knot?” I was strangely curious about it and part of me wanted to touch it again.

“I still think BJs are gross,” Ophelia said, interrupting my thoughts. “What if he touches her instead—you know, while he looks into her eyes.” Her own eyes were soft and dreamy behind her thick glasses as she spoke—clearly she was weaving Jake and me into her own private fantasy world.

“Touches her *how*, exactly?” Tainer demanded. “Like fondles her titties some more? Cause we already seen that.”

“He can touch her down there—between her legs,” Ophelia said dreamily. “I bet she's never been touched there before—she's been waiting for her Alpha. And now he's finally here, but he's not going to just shove it in—no—he's going to take things slow and break her in *gently*, you know?”

She sounded like she was describing a fantasy she'd been elaborating on for years, I thought. But the idea of having Jake touch me “there” didn't make me upset, anymore than the idea of sucking him had. In fact, my heart sped up at the very thought and my pussy throbbed even harder, until it felt like a second heartbeat between my legs.

“Make you a deal,” Tainer said, speaking to Ophelia. “First he touches her, then she blows him. How does that sound?”

“Well...all right. But only if he's gentle,” Ophelia specified. “*No* gagging or choking or drooling—those are a huge turn off!”

“We're not some kind of live sex show put here just for your entertainment, you know,” I said, hoping my voice would come out normal.

“Yes, but somebody’s gotta make you two get closer and Sorenson’s too much of a pussy to do it right,” Tainer snapped. “Now go on—get after it.” And he waved his gun at us.

But Jake shook his head.

“No—no absolutely not. Nothing below the belt,” he said and I thought he sounded like he meant it. Was this what he had been telling himself—that as long as we didn’t touch below the belt it was okay? It was a nice way to ease his conscious, but it was liable to get us killed, or at least very badly wounded.

“I said do it!” Tainer’s voice had dropped to a menacing snarl. “Go on, get a handful of that pussy and stick your fingers up in her, boy. Do it now!”

“Jake,” I said urgently, when he wouldn’t look at me. “Jake, please!”

“No.” He shook his head. “They can’t make me do that—they can’t make me hurt you like that. I won’t do it, Ani!”

“Jake, look at me.” I was still on my knees and I took his face in my hands. Staring into his eyes, I murmured, “Remember what we said. That no matter what they make us do, we won’t be mad and we won’t blame each other.”

“But Ani...I can’t,” he whispered desperately. “I mean, I shouldn’t...shouldn’t finger your soft little pussy against your will!”

“It’s *not* against my will,” I said firmly. Then, my heart beating like a drum, I took his free hand and pushed it between my legs.

At first Jake’s hand was a fist that he refused to unclench.

“Jake, please,” I whispered and rubbed against him, letting his knuckles graze my swollen pussy lips.

His eyes widened as he looked into mine.

“God, Ani—you’re so *wet*,” he murmured.

“I know.” I bit my lip, feeling the heat of shame climb my cheeks. “It, uh, really affected me when you, um, sucked my

nipples,” I admitted. “But this is okay, Jake—really it is. I won’t be mad at you—I swear I won’t.”

“God, I shouldn’t!” he groaned. But then his hand was uncurling and before I knew it, he was cupping my pussy gently in his palm. He raised his eyebrows at me.

“You’ve never...?”

“Never,” I whispered, biting my lip. “You...you’ll be my first.”

“I shouldn’t do this,” he whispered and then I felt two long fingers slipping into my slippery inner folds.

“Oh, *Jake!*” I gasped, throwing my head back as he began to caress my inner pussy. I could feel the tip of one finger sliding around and around my throbbing clit. This was another part of my body which had previously been mute. Nothing I had tried on my own had ever had any effect—not even the vibrator Madison had given me as a joke gift last Christmas. But Jake’s touch acted like a jolt of adrenaline—he woke up that part of me, which had been asleep my whole life.

“Gently, little Ani,” I heard him murmur as he continued to stroke me with his fingertips. “We’ll take it slow and easy.”

“I...I can’t. Can’t take it easy,” I whispered. I was trembling all over at that point and I felt like there was a wire inside me—connected deep in my belly somewhere. That wire was tightening with every gentle stroke of Jake’s fingers inside me. It was getting closer and closer to snapping and I didn’t know what I would do if it did.

“Feel inside her!” Tainer demanded. “Fingerfuck her!”

“Shut up—he’s doing a perfect job as it is!” Ophelia insisted.

But Jake’s fingers were already sliding down to the entrance of my pussy.

“God, little Ani—so wet and hot,” he murmured, looking into my eyes. “Can you let me feel inside you?”

I bit my lip.

“As...as long as you’re careful.”

“I will be,” he promised and then one, long finger was slipping into my pussy mouth and sliding inside me.

He couldn’t get very far. I was, after all, a virgin, so I still had a barrier there. I winced a little, as Jake probed very gently at the sharp little pain, pressing against it caused.

“Well, what are you waiting for—I said finger fuck ‘er!” Tainer demanded.

“No—she’s a virgin. I won’t take that from her,” Jake growled. “Shoot me if you want, but I won’t do it.”

“Don’t stop touching her, though!” Ophelia protested—which was exactly what I wanted to say myself, but didn’t quite dare to. “Go on—touch her. She’s close—make her *come*.”

Jake looked into my eyes.

“Do you want to come, little Ani?” he murmured hoarsely. “Do you want to come while I pet your soft little pussy?”

I felt like I was melting from the waist down. The way he was looking at me—the way he was talking to me as he touched me...it was all too much. And yet, all I wanted was *more*.

Slowly, I nodded. I couldn’t bring myself to ask for what I needed with words, but I thrust my hips forward, begging mutely for what I so desperately needed.

Jake seemed to understand at once. Holding my eyes with his own, he slid his fingers back inside my slippery folds and found my clit again.

I gasped and trembled as he began to circle the sensitive little button with his fingertips, shooting sparks of exquisite pleasure through my entire body. God, how could such a light, delicate touch bring such intense sensations? And how was it that this part of my body, which had never felt anything at all before, was now lit up like a Christmas tree?

“You feel it, little Ani?” Jake murmured, watching my face as he circled my throbbing clit with his finger. “You feel it

building?”

“I...I feel *something*,” I admitted, because the wire was tightening in my belly again. “I don’t...don’t know what it is, though. I...I’ve never felt anything like this before,” I admitted in a trembling voice.

“You’re going to come,” Jake told me in a low voice, holding my eyes with his. “Haven’t you ever come before?”

I shook my head, biting my lip.

“I...I don’t know. I don’t think so. How will I know when it happens?”

In the porn movies that my two best friends liked to watch, the women always moaned loudly or gasped and begged when they finally came. But who knew if that was real or not?

“You’ll know,” Jake said confidently. “Just relax and let it happen, baby.” He kept looking at me, holding my gaze with his pure-gold eyes. “It’s all right to come—I’ll be with you the whole time.”

As he spoke, I felt the wire in my belly finally snap and pleasure like nothing I had ever felt before poured through me.

“Oh!” I gasped, bucking helplessly against his hand. “Oh, Jake...*Oh Jake!* I feel it! I think I’m coming! I am—I’m *coming!*”

“That’s right, little Ani,” he growled softly, never breaking eye contact. “That’s right, just let it go...let yourself come for me while I pet your soft little pussy.”

I couldn’t have stopped myself if I’d wanted to. I had never felt anything like this before—this intense, overwhelming pleasure that filled me to the brim and then overflowed, leaving me drowning in its intensity.

“Oh, Jake!” I gasped again and then I was kissing him and he was kissing me back as he continued to stroke between my legs, riding out my very first orgasm ever with me.

He kept it up until, at last, I gasped and sagged against him, laying my head on his broad shoulder and panting to try and catch my breath.

“Never...never felt anything like that,” I panted, feeling my whole body tremble against his. “Oh, Jake...oh, *God*.”

“Just breathe, baby—*breathe*.” He withdrew his fingers slowly and wrapped his free arm around me, holding me close, letting me catch my breath. “Can’t believe you’ve never come before,” I heard him murmur.

“Never,” I whispered. “Never...” I had no more words then, it was all I could do just to catch my breath. Finally, though, I was able to sit up again and look into his eyes. “Jake —” I began. But Tainer interrupted me.

“Okay, enough of this touchy-feely shit,” he announced. “Now it’s time for you to blow him.”

SIXTEEN



THE SOFT, OPEN LOOK LEFT JAKE'S EYES AT ONCE AND HE glared at the big hillbilly.

“No,” he said. “Absolutely *not*.”

“You keep sayin’ that and sayin’ how you don’t wanna do what we want you to do, but then you don’t seem to mind it once you get goin’,” Tainer pointed out, grinning maliciously. “I don’t think you’ll mind this much either—ain’t no man in the world gonna turn down a blow job. ‘Specially not from a pretty little thing like that.” He nodded at me. “Just imagine those soft, pink lips wrapped around your cock...that pretty little tongue lickin’ your knot...Mmm-*mmm!*” He rubbed the bulge in his crotch with the hand that wasn’t holding the gun. “Just thinkin’ of it has me hard as a rock!”

For myself, I felt suddenly naked and exposed. Once again, I had forgotten about our “audience” while Jake had been touching me and I had really let it all go. I couldn’t believe I’d had my first ever orgasm from my own stepbrother while our kidnappers looked on. I could have faked it—instead I had completely lost myself in the experience of looking into his eyes while he pleased me so gently. What was *wrong* with me?

I had no answers but I’d had my first orgasm and now it seemed I was going to give my first ever blow job, because Tainer was still holding the gun on us.

But when I turned to Jake, he was guarding his crotch with his free hand.

“No,” he said, glaring at Tainer. “I don’t care what you say or do, you can’t make Ani do that! You can’t force her to...to suck her own brother! It’s fucking *wrong*.”

“Then how come it feels so fuckin’ *right*?” Tainer sneered at him. He looked at Ophelia, who was frowning and biting her lip. “Phelia, hold the gun on him while I cuff his other hand. Can’t have him coverin’ up the royal jewels like that!”

“I’m not sure about this,” she objected, even as she took the gun and kept it aimed at Jake and me.

“Well *I* am,” Tainer snarled. “You already got *your* show—now it’s time I got *mine*. Besides, you know there’s nothin’ in the world gonna bring on her Heat Cycle like swallowing a bellyfull of an Alpha’s seed.”

“You...you want me to *swallow* it too?” I asked uncertainly. To hear Ashley and Madison tell it, swallowing was *gross*. They both agreed it was always best to spit—or better yet, pull off just before the guy you were blowing shot his load—though how in the world you could tell he was about to shoot, I had no idea.

“Sorry, my Omega.” Ophelia sounded apologetic but firm. “But Tainer is right about one thing, at least—swallowing your lover’s seed is a *really* good way to bring your Heat Cycle on track. Don’t worry, though,” she added brightly. “It’s not so bad! I’ve swallowed lots at the Pack breedings—male Weres have seed that tastes really good!”

“Yeah, little ‘Phelia here can give you a few pointers on giving a good blow job,” Tainer put in. Smirking at her, he added, “She sucks like a fuckin’ vacuum cleaner!”

“That’s enough of that,” Ophelia snapped. “Hurry up and get his arm out of the way so she can reach him!”

Tainer came over to the bed and yanked Jake’s free hand away from his crotch.

“You Royals are s’posed to be so much *stronger* than the rest of us Weres,” he remarked, sneering at Jake. “With your blood of the First Wolf and all. Guess you’re not so strong now, are you?”

“You fucking coward,” Jake snarled. “Take these silver cuffs off me and try my strength for yourself!”

“Not a chance,” Tainer told him. “Sorenson had us buy these high-content silver bindings for a reason—he said there was no other way to keep the Royal strength in check.”

“Coward!” Jake said again, but Tainer was already cuffing his other hand to the headboard, which left him naked and vulnerable, unable to cover himself.

The big mountain man stepped back and took the gun from Ophelia. He waved it at me.

“Go on, girly—get suckin’.”

“I...” I licked my lips, which were suddenly dry. “I’ve never...never done this before.”

“And you don’t have to do it now!” Jake said urgently. “Don’t do it, Ani—you don’t have to!”

“Oh, yes you do, girly,” Tainer snarled at me. He took aim at one of Jake’s knees. “Like I said, I’ll blow out one of his knees. Or maybe take a hand or a foot. He don’t need none of those body parts for fuckin’.”

“I’ll do it, I’ll do it!” I protested quickly. Moving in front of Jake, I tried to shield him with my body, as he had shielded me. “What I meant was, I just...don’t know what I’m doing,” I said.

“Just be sure you don’t use your teeth,” Ophelia said helpfully. “Guys don’t like it when you scrape them with your teeth. Use your lips and tongue. Oh, and don’t forget to lick the knot—Were males *love* that,” she added.

“They...do?” I looked at Jake for confirmation, but he was shaking his head.

“No. Ani, don’t do it!” he insisted. “You don’t have to do this! I don’t want you to be forced into it!”

“It...it’s going to be okay,” I told him, trying to make myself believe it. “And...and I promise not to use my teeth,” I added, thinking he might be worried about my inexperience.

He gave a harsh laugh.

“You think I’m worried about you using your *teeth*?”

“Well, I—” I began.

“*Do it!*” Tainer snarled. “I’m gettin’ tired of this back and forth bullshit!”

Not knowing what else to do, I leaned over Jake and took his shaft in my hand for the second time that day—though the first time, I had been half asleep and hadn’t known what I was doing.

This time, however, I was fully aware of what I was about to do and I felt a strange mixture of fear and excitement twisting my belly.

Despite Jake saying he didn’t want me to do this, his cock was rock hard. It almost seemed to throb in my hand when I wrapped my fingers gingerly around him. His wild, masculine scent was stronger here—it almost seemed to call to me. His shaft felt like a warm iron bar but the skin was silky—as soft as rose petals.

As I stroked him up and down, Jake let out a low groan and I saw a clear droplet forming on the slit in the middle of the broad, mushroom shaped head. Was that his precum? I thought it must be. I wondered if Ophelia had been telling the truth when she said that male Were’s had cum that tasted really good.

Hesitantly, I leaned over and lapped away the little droplet. Jake stiffened and his big body tensed at the touch of my warm, wet tongue against the sensitive crown of his cock. I lapped him again, sweeping away more of his precum. Ophelia hadn’t been lying—it was warm and salty-sweet, something like salted caramel, I thought.

It just so happens, I *love* salted caramel.

Leaning further down, I carefully took the broad head in my mouth as I continued to stroke his shaft. I made sure to keep my teeth away from him as I swirled my tongue around and around, making him groan again.

“Ani, baby, *please*.” His deep voice was filled with tension. “Please, you have to stop or I’m going to...or I won’t be able to help myself.”

“You better not fuckin’ stop!” Tainer growled and Ophelia said,

“Stroke his knot and squeeze it very gently—that will help him come.”

Slowly, I stroked down to the thick swelling around the base of his shaft. It was sort of medium firm when I first started touching it. But after I stroked it for just a moment, it began to grow—to *swell*.

My God! I thought, as I watched it get bigger and bigger. *Is that supposed to fit inside me? Are they crazy? There’s no way that would work, even if I had some experience—which I don’t!*

“Ani! Ani, please—stop!”

Jake’s voice was a low groan and when I looked up to the head of the bed, I saw that his eyes were tightly closed and his head was turned to the side. His hands, which were cuffed over his head, were squeezed into fists and he was breathing hard, his broad chest rising and falling rapidly. He didn’t look like a man enjoying himself—he looked like someone enduring torture!

The sight ripped at my heart and I remembered how Jake had said the Worshipers of the Moon had “milked” him for his seed. Was this what they had done? What they were forcing me to do now? Was I bringing back bad memories of his past abuse?

The thought made me feel terrible.

“No,” I said, sitting up and releasing his cock. “No, I can’t do this anymore!”

I started to turn away, but then I felt something cold and hard pressing against the back of my head.

“Fuckin’ *suck* him!” Tainer growled at me. “Suck him until he comes in your mouth and then swallow his seed—

every fuckin' last drop, you little Royal whore!"

"You...you won't shoot me," I whispered, but my lips were numb as the muzzle of the gun nudged me right behind the ear again. "You think you'll all die if I die," I reminded him.

"I'm sick of this teasing," Tainer snapped. "Maybe I don't give a shit if we *all* die. Maybe I just want to see you give your pretty Royal brother there a blow job!"

"Tainer, no!" Ophelia objected, but her eyes were wide and frightened behind her thick glasses. "What are you doing? The entire future of our race rests on these two!" she exclaimed.

"They're gonna finish," Tainer snarled and the cold muzzle pressed painfully hard against my skull. "They're gonna finish or one of 'em is gonna die!"

The muzzle left my head abruptly and then Tainer was jamming it against Jake's temple.

"You wanna suck him or you want me to blow his brains out, all over this pillow, girly?" he demanded, glaring at me. His small piggy eyes had gone wide and crazy—he was insane, I suddenly realized. Completely batshit *crazy*. No wonder he had been attracted to this weird cult!

"No!" I gasped, but Jake said,

"Do it." He opened his eyes and looked up at Tainer. "Go ahead—or are you too chickenshit to finish what you started?"

"No, Jake—don't talk like that!" I gasped. "Look," I said to Tainer. "Look, I'm doing it—I'm *doing it!*"

Leaning over again, I took Jake's shaft by the base and sucked as much of it into my mouth as I could. Clumsily, I bobbed up and down, trying to take as much as I could, even though I nearly choked myself on his girth and length.

"No, no! Stop it—Tainer get away from them!" Ophelia begged. "What's wrong with you? Are you going to your dark place again?" She rushed up beside him and tugged gently at the hand that was pointing the gun at Jake's temple. "Come away from the dark place, Tainer," she said softly. "Come

away—everything is going to be all right. Just let them finish on their own. Just let them *finish*.”

Slowly, she dragged the big mountain man away, but I didn't dare stop sucking. I was crying now—filled with fear that either Jake or I was going to die—or maybe both of us. Tainer was crazy and we had been left practically alone with him. He was going to shoot one or both of us—I was certain of that.

There were tears running from my eyes as I continued to suck. The pleasure was gone from this act. Though I still loved Jake's scent and the feel of him in my hand, I just wanted it to be over.

How can I end this? I thought. How can I make him come?

And then I remembered Ophelia saying something about squeezing his knot.

Carefully, I wrapped my fingers around the broad swelling—it was hotter than the rest of his shaft, I realized—quite a bit hotter, in fact. Ducking my head, I sucked as much of his shaft into my mouth as I could and squeezed gently but firmly.

“Oh, God...Ani!” I heard Jake moan. And then I felt his thickness flex and grow even thicker and something hot hit the back of my throat. Salted caramel again. I swallowed reflexively. And then another shot...and then another and another. I swallowed them all, until my belly began to feel positively full. Was this normal? For him to make so much, I mean?

I didn't know—I only knew that I didn't dare stop swallowing and withdraw until there was no more left to swallow. Only then did I let his thick shaft slip from between my lips and lay there panting, my head pillowed on his muscular thigh.

“Ani...” Jake's voice was low and broken. “I'm so damn sorry. I...I tried to hold off.”

“Ain't no holding off when a pretty little Royal whore is suckin' your shaft.” Tainer sounded positively gleeful now—almost manic. “Do it again!” he demanded, waving the gun in

my face. “Suck ‘im again—I wanna see you go for round two!”

“But—” I began weakly.

“What’s the meaning of this?” a new voice thundered through the attic room. “Tainer, what in the hell do you think you’re doing?”

SEVENTEEN



LOOKING PAST TAINER, I SAW THAT SORENSON HAD HIS HEAD and shoulders poking up out of the trapdoor. His scholarly face was twisted in anger as he pointed at the loaded gun Tainer had pointed at my head.

“Oh, Professor Sorenson!” Ophelia gasped. “I tried to stop him—I swear I did! But I think he’s gone to his dark place!”

“Tainer, put down that gun *at once!*” Sorenson growled, his greenish-yellow eyes flashing angrily. “How *dare* you point a weapon at the Royal couple?”

Tainer blinked, the wild light slowly fading from his piggy eyes.

“I had to make ‘em get together, Professor!” he protested. “Your way wasn’t workin’. I had to get her to drink a bellyful of his seed so she could be fertile by tomorrow night!”

“You fool—you might have ruined everything!” Sorenson finished climbing into the attic and stormed over. He wrenched the gun out of Tainer’s hand, which caused me to wince, and then pointed a finger in the big hillbilly’s face. “They have to come together *naturally*, in order for the Royal Omega’s Heat Cycle to come up in time for her to breed under the full moon,” he snarled. “Holding them at gunpoint and forcing them to perform could actually set her Cycle *back!* It’s not just a hormonal connection—it’s *emotional* too! Don’t you understand?”

“Don’t know nothin’ about that,” Tainer growled, though he had a hangdog look on his slab of a face. “I was just tryin’

to help.”

“No, you were just trying to force the situation. But it can’t be forced—this is a delicate relationship!” Sorenson snapped. He pointed at the trapdoor that led out of the attic. “Out! From now on, the only ones allowed up here are Ophelia and myself!”

“Aww, but *Professor*—” Tainer began, sounding like a whiny child.

“*Out!*” Sorenson thundered, his eyes flashing. “You’ve done enough damage! *GET OUT!*”

With a last, sullen look at Jake and me, Tainer turned and left the attic. I heard his steps thudding heavily on the wooden stairs and then fading out of sight as he stomped down the hallway.

Still breathing hard, Sorenson turned to Ophelia.

“Couldn’t you stop him?” he demanded, glaring at her. “I thought you said he was stable enough to be involved in this?”

“I thought he *was*,” she protested. “And anyway, we needed a place that was way out of the way and he’s the only one who had one! Please, Professor—I’m *sorry!*”

“You get out, too,” Sorenson directed her. “But first, bring back the sheet and blanket that goes on this bed. Let us help the Royal Pair retrieve their dignity.”

“Yes, Professor.” Ophelia nodded and scurried away. I thought Sorenson was going to leave too, but then Jake started talking.

“You think you can cover up what just happened by tossing a blanket over us?” His deep voice was raw and he glared up at the cult leader. “That fucking crazy asshole just forced Ani to suck my cock and swallow...swallow my cum!” His voice faltered but then came back stronger than ever. “You think she’s ever going to get over that? You think *either* of us will?” he demanded.

“My deepest and most abject apologies for that unpleasantness, Jacob,” Sorenson said earnestly. “I promise it

will not happen again. From now on, Tainer will be forbidden to come up here.”

“Too late. Damage has been done.” Jake turned his head away. “Fucking crazy assholes,” he muttered, his voice thick with emotion.

I had a lump in my throat too. What we had done—what *I* had done—just felt so *wrong*.

At that moment, Ophelia came scurrying back up the stairs, with a thick pile of blankets.

“Here we go, here we go!” she chanted, as she began to spread the blankets over our naked, shivering forms. “There—good as new!”

I had moved away from Jake by that time—he didn’t seem to want me near him and I guessed I didn’t blame him. The blankets—which all smelled like they had been freshly washed and dried—were a welcome relief from being naked all the time. But I still felt horrible.

I curled on my side, facing away from my stepbrother and waited for Sorenson and Ophelia to leave.

“Come, my dear,” I heard him murmur. “Let us give them some time to collect themselves.”

It wasn’t until I heard the muffled *thump* of the trapdoor closing that I let myself cry. And even then, I tried to keep my tears quiet. What had I done? I had hurt Jake exactly the way he’d been hurt and abused before, and he would probably never talk to me again—not that I blamed him.

I just wanted to die.

EIGHTEEN



THERE WAS SILENCE BETWEEN US THE REST OF THE DAY AND when Ophelia appeared with a supper tray filled with dainty gourmet sandwiches, neither of us ate very much. Jake wouldn't look at me, even when I offered him a roast beef on rye—which I happened to know was his favorite—and he didn't say a word when I asked if he wanted something else instead.

All of this just made me feel worse, of course. Like I had abused him in the worst way possible and now he was making me pay for it.

Ophelia gave our almost untouched tray a worried look when she came back to collect it and shook her head. She had me come into the bathroom and pee on another stick. Her face fell when she saw that the Heat Cycle box had gone from yellow back down to green—a definite regression.

“Oh, *no*,” she whispered. “The Professor was right! You're Cycle's going in the wrong direction.”

“Maybe you shouldn't have forced me to molest my stepbrother then!” I snapped at her. “Or put on a damn creepy sex show at gunpoint.”

“That wasn't me—it was Tainer!” she protested. “I was just trying to get the two of you to get a little *romance* started. If the two of you could just come together and see the beauty in your relationship—”

“Right, because it's so beautiful and *romantic* for me to abuse Jake the same way you bastards abused him when you

kidnapped him before!” I snarled. “He probably *hates* me now—and I don’t blame him after what you made me do to him! Now go away and leave us alone!”

Abashed, Ophelia took the mostly untouched tray and left us alone in the attic again. I huddled in on myself, wrapping a blanket around my shoulders and feeling completely alone. I had meant what I said—Jake probably hated me. He wouldn’t talk to me—hell, he wouldn’t even *look* at me. He gave every indication of a man who hated my guts and even though I knew it wasn’t true, it felt like this was all my fault.

The sound of Ophelia’s footsteps faded below as I stared at the opposite wall. The sun was going down, marking the end of our first full day in this hellhole with no end in sight. And then Jake’s voice—low and soft—murmured,

“I don’t hate you, Ani.”

“What?” I turned my head to look at him and saw that he was twisted towards me once more. Ophelia had uncuffed his right hand so that only the left was cuffed to the bedstead and he was looking at me with an unreadable expression in his eyes.

“*I said*, I don’t hate you,” Jake told me. “In fact, I’ve been lying here thinking that *you* must hate *me*.”

“*What?*” I glared at him. “What are you talking about? *I’m* the one who...who sucked you off when you didn’t want me to!” I had to force the words out.

“You had a gun to your head,” Jake pointed out. “And besides, *I’m* the one who sucked your nipples and fingered your pussy until you came. If anybody molested anyone, *I* was the one who hurt *you*.”

“You couldn’t help any of that,” I objected. “Like you said—they had a gun on us! Look...” I wrapped my blanket more firmly around myself and sat up so I could look in his eyes. “I think we’re forgetting what we promised ourselves last night—that no matter what they made us do together, we wouldn’t hate or blame each other.” Reaching out, I cupped his scratchy cheek. “I don’t blame you, Jake,” I said softly. “You...you *had*

to suck my nipples and...and finger my pussy.” I felt slightly breathless, remembering how intense the pleasure of his touch had been. “I could never be mad at you for something someone else *made* us do.”

“Maybe I’m mad at *myself*.” He looked away and muttered savagely, “I should have found a way to break free before they got a chance to make us do those things. This is *my* fault—I’m too damn weak with this silver on me.”

“You can’t blame yourself,” I told him. “And what difference does silver make?”

“It weakens a Were—especially one of the Royal Line. Weakens us and stops us from Shifting.” He shook his head and glared balefully. “If I could just get these damn silver handcuffs off, I’d be a thousand times stronger and I could access my fur form. And once a Royal Shifts, no other Were has a chance.”

“Oh, okay,” I said flatly. Why did *everything* have to come back to the Werewolf myth?

“You don’t believe me—you *still* don’t believe. Well, look! I didn’t want to have to do this before, but damn it, you have to know the truth!”

Jake held out his free hand—his right one—and stared at it fixedly.

“Jake,” I began. “Whatever you think you’re doing, I—”

But then I stopped abruptly.

Because his hand had begun to change.

NINETEEN



FIRST IT SPROUTED BLACK FUR—AS BLACK AS THE HAIR ON HIS head. Then the fingers began to shrink and his fingernails turned into claws—actual *claws*. In the space of half a minute, Jake’s right hand had turned into a huge, black paw that looked like it belonged on a dog, or maybe an enormous wolf.

“Jake?” I whispered, looking up at him in awe. His face was damp with sweat and he was breathing hard, in gasping pants.

“You know...how hard...this is?” he gasped. “Go on—touch it.” He went on, because my fingers were hovering close to the enormous black paw. “Can’t...hold it for long.”

I stroked the paw, covered in silky fur, and looked from it to him and back again. Could it be that the whole werewolf thing was *true*? Could Jake *actually* turn into a wolf during the full moon? Well, to judge from this one paw, he could.

“I don’t understand—why didn’t you show me this earlier?” I whispered.

He shook his head.

“Couldn’t...” He dropped his head, panting and the wolf’s paw turned back into a large, well shaped hand I was cupping in my own much smaller ones. “You have any idea how difficult even a partial Shift is with silver on?” he asked. “Couldn’t have done it all if we weren’t so close to the full moon.”

He nodded up at the skylight, where the sun was now completely gone and the silvery moon was beginning to rise.

I felt stunned.

“So it’s true,” I whispered. “All of it’s *true*.”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to *tell* you.” Jake was getting his wind back now and he sounded mildly annoyed. “You thought my dad and I were crazy, didn’t you?”

“Yes, I did,” I admitted. “And my mom, too.” I put a hand to my cheek. “Oh my God—all that stuff she tried to tell me, all the crazy stuff Sorenson and Ophelia have been spouting about my ‘Heat Cycle’—that’s all true too, isn’t it?”

Jake nodded and gave me a sympathetic look.

“You okay? I know it’s a lot to take in all at once.”

I shook my head.

“I was just so sure all of you were all crazy.” I blinked and was surprised to find my eyes filled with tears. “I thought my *mom* had gone crazy—I’ve been so *worried* about her.”

“She’s not crazy,” Jake said grimly. “She took to being a Were right away—took to her roll as the First Royal Omega, Bride to the Royal Alpha like she’d been born to it.”

There it was again—that hint of bitterness in his voice when he talked about my mom. I really didn’t understand that—but I didn’t have time to worry about it right now.

“Okay,” I said. “I believe you can turn into...something.”

“A Wolf,” Jake said, giving me a level glance. “I turn into a big black Wolf—about as big as a small horse.”

“That big?” I widened my eyes at him.

He shrugged, his broad, bare shoulders rolling with the motion.

“I’ve got the blood of the First Wolf in my veins—we both do. Anyway, in my fur form, I have *immense* power. If I could turn, I could rip Sorenson and the other two to shreds.” He raised an eyebrow at me when I was silent at this. “What—no protests? You seemed pretty unwilling to let me kill anyone last night but you don’t seem to be putting up a fight today.”

“That was before Tainer held a gun to my head and made me hurt you,” I said in a low voice, hanging my head. “Made me bring back the trauma you went through last time you were kidnapped by these assholes.”

“Hey, look at me, little Ani.” Jake reached for me and tilted my chin up so that he was looking into my eyes. “You didn’t hurt me or force me, okay?” he said softly. “I was upset because I thought *you* would feel like I was forcing *you*.”

I shook my head.

“I never felt like that. I mean, if Tainer hadn’t had a gun on us, I might even have...” I bit my lip, keeping the words back. Had I really been going to say I might have *enjoyed* what we had done if we hadn’t been forced to do it at gunpoint?

Of course you enjoyed it—you came, didn’t you? Came for your own stepbrother when he stroked your pussy and sucked your nipples, whispered a guilty little voice in my head. I tried to push it away. None of this was my fault, I reminded myself. I wasn’t going to let these circumstances turn me into a victim!

“Ani?” Jake asked softly. “What were you going to say?”

“Nothing.” I dropped my eyes again, feeling my cheeks get hot. “Nothing, I...I just think we need to remember none of this is our fault.” I waved a hand, indicating the situation we were in.

“True.” Jake nodded. “But the fact is, nobody else in the Were world is going to see it like that if Sorenson and his band of freaks actually succeeds in making me get you pregnant.”

I bit my lip, feeling a flood of emotions rush over me.

“How can we stop them, though?” I whispered. “Sorenson’s all about letting us take our time right now, but you can bet tomorrow night during the full moon, he’ll act just like Tainer did.”

“I’m afraid you’re right,” Jake said grimly. “I won’t have any choice but to knot you and if I do that, well...”

“I’ll get pregnant for sure,” I whispered.

“If you’re Heat Cycle is anywhere near where it was earlier, yes,” he said shortly.

“But...” I cleared my throat. “What...what do you mean you’d have to... to ‘knot’ me?”

“You saw the knot at the base of my shaft,” Jake said, frowning. “That’s meant to tie a Were and his mate together during breeding and it almost always *ensures* conception—at least in those of the Royal bloodline. Regular Weres can and do have ‘knotting parties’ where everyone in the pack breeds with everyone else and they usually only have a few pregnancies occur when they do. But Weres that have the blood of the First Wolf are much more fertile.”

“*God.*” I put a hand to my forehead. “I’m just not ready to be a mom yet, Jake! I mean, I just started college and I’m nowhere near my Nursing degree yet!”

“I know, I know.” Jake raked his free hand through his hair. “But early motherhood isn’t the only consequence if the rest of the Were world thinks we committed incest. We...” He shook his head.

“What? *What?*” I demanded.

“Nothing,” Jake said. “I just can’t get you pregnant—I *can’t* knot you, no matter what happens.”

“You couldn’t anyway,” I pointed out, feeling my cheeks get hot again. “I mean, I’ve never seen any, uh, male equipment outside of porn, but you seem like you’re kind of on the large side, Jake. And your, um, knot...” I motioned with both hands. “Well, there’s just no *way* it would fit inside me. I mean, that thing is *huge.*”

Especially when it swells up, I thought, remembering how it had gotten so much larger and hotter before he started coming down my throat. Which was a thought that made me blush all over again, especially since I could still taste the salted caramel flavor of his seed on the back of my tongue.

“It would fit,” Jake said flatly.

“What? How?” I asked, looking at him uncertainly.

“All male Werens make a compound in their precum that helps a female open for them,” he explained briefly. “So unfortunately, my knot would slide right in if they forced me to...” He cleared his throat. “To breed you.”

“Which they’re going to, tomorrow night at the full moon. Which is why we *have* to get *out* of here!” I said, feeling slightly ill. I didn’t know if I believed my tight, virgin pussy could really open wide enough to take his large shaft and enormous knot, but I thought it was better if we didn’t find out.

“If I could just get these damn silver cuffs off!” Jake jerked at the cuffs which rattled uselessly against the headboard. “I’m as weak as an ordinary human with them on and there’s no way I can make a complete Shift with silver touching my skin!”

“Well, there’s no way we can get them off you and there’s no way *they’re* taking them off,” I pointed out. “Unless...” I paused, my mind churning at about a million miles a minute.

“Unless what?” Jake demanded. But I shook my head, holding up a hand to stop him.

“Wait,” I said. “Wait, I’m *thinking*.”

To Jake’s credit, he shut up and let me think. After a moment, I had the rudiments of a plan—not a very good plan, maybe, but a plan nonetheless.

“Okay,” I said. “What if we could somehow convince Sorenson and Ophelia that they *didn’t* have to chain you down?”

“What?” Jake’s brow knit in confusion. “What are you talking about? How would we do that?”

I took a deep breath.

“We’d have to convince them that we’re into all this. All this...breeding and knotting and conceiving stuff. Think about it,” I hurried on, as Jake opened his mouth—doubtless to protest. “Ophelia keeps saying that they wouldn’t *have* to chain us up if only we would agree to ‘do our duty.’ So what if we convinced her that we were into each other—that we

wanted to do what...what they want us to do?" The words almost stuck in my throat, but I got them out somehow anyway.

"And how would we do that?" Jake asked flatly.

"We'd have to be enthusiastic," I said. "You know, hugging and kissing each other—that kind of thing."

"Well..." Jake seemed to be considering it. "I guess I *could* tell them I was worried that the silver might inhibit conception and that we didn't need it anyway, since I'm, er, eager to knot you."

"You'd have to sound a lot more eager than you do now," I pointed out.

"I think I can manage," Jake said, frowning. "The question is, can *you*?"

"I can do it." I lifted my chin. "I was a drama kid all through high school— don't worry about me."

"All right." He nodded thoughtfully. "So starting tomorrow morning, we act like we're into it. Like we've 'seen the light' and we agree that I need to, er, breed you in order to fulfill the prophecy and avert disaster."

"Yes, exactly." I nodded. "But not all of a sudden. I think we should act like we're kind of ashamed of ourselves, but we can't help it and can't keep our hands off each other."

"That *would* add some realism." He nodded thoughtfully. "Let them think they've gradually convinced us. Or maybe that they've convinced *you* and I'm just along for the ride to help you with your Heat Cycle, because I don't want you to be hurt."

I nodded again. "Yes! And the minute *we* convince them to take the silver cuffs off you..."

"I'll change into my wolf form and rip their throats out," Jake growled and I swear I saw murder in his pale golden eyes.

"Er...just one question," I said timidly. "When...when you change..." (Which I was still trying to wrap my head around.)

“When you do, will you still know me? I mean, if you’re a giant, bloodthirsty wolf? Would you...will you come after me, too?”

Jake got a horrified look on his face.

“Come after you? *Never!*” he exclaimed. “Listen, little Ani...” He cupped my cheek again, looking earnestly into my eyes. “I would *never* hurt you. I’m completely lucid and sentient in my Wolf form—even if I can’t speak, I can still think and reason and understand. I would never hurt you, you *have* to believe that.”

“Okay,” I said softly, nodding. “I believe you.” Though the idea of him turning into a giant black wolf still seemed farfetched—despite his display with the paw—it was still good to know that if he *did* turn into a wolf, he wouldn’t hurt me.

“Good.” Jake sighed and patted the spot on the bed beside him. “Now come here. We need to cuddle.”

“We do?” I raised my eyebrows at him, even as I scooted over to his side of the bed.

“Yes, we do,” Jake said firmly. “I hate to do this, but we’ve got to raise your Heat Cycle up again—just a little bit. Ophelia is never going to believe we’re suddenly into each other if the box comes up green again the next time you take a test.”

“You have a point.” I bit my lip as I looked up at him. The natural light had faded from the room and now only the silvery moonlight poured down on us. “Do you think we need, er, skin-to-skin contact?” I asked in a small voice. “I mean, should we, um, cuddle naked?”

“Well, since we don’t have any clothes on, I don’t see any alternative.”

Jake shifted around so he was lying on his left side, his left arm over his head where it was cuffed to the headboard. He pulled open the blankets that covered him with his right hand and nodded at me.

“Come here, little Ani,” he murmured. “Let’s cuddle like we did last night. Hopefully it will raise your Heat Cycle just

enough to make this little charade we're going to be playing out believable.”

“Hopefully,” I echoed, as I left my own blanket behind and scooted under his. We were chest to chest and this time when I pressed my bare breasts against him, he didn't try to scoot away. Of course, this time I wasn't a freezing cold block of ice, either. I was actually quite toasty from being wrapped up in a nice warm blanket and so was Jake.

I scooted a little closer, breathing in his scent that smelled like comfort and safety and home and felt something hot and hard and stiff branding my lower belly.

“Sorry,” Jake muttered, and started to shift away.

“No, don't go.” I put my arms around him and pulled him close. I even threw a leg around him, which pulled our pelvises closer together too. Then I could feel the hot, hard, length of his shaft branding not only my lower belly, but rubbing against the soft curls at the apex of my pussy mound too.

Jake must have felt it as well, because he shifted again, uncomfortably, though he didn't try to get away.

“Ani,” he murmured. “We need to be careful here.”

“How?” I asked, widening my eyes at him. “How can we be careful when the only way to raise my Heat Cycle is rub together like this?”

“Well...not exactly like *this*,” he murmured and tilted his hips, which made the base of his shaft slide lower, until I could feel it right against my pussy lips. Of course, having my thighs parted so wide, with one leg over him, opened my outer lips too, so that when he nudged against me, he was almost nudging *into* me, if you know what I mean.

“I...I think we *should* rub together exactly like this,” I contradicted him, somewhat breathlessly. “I mean, what better way to convince the other, er, Weres that we're into each other than for me to have my, uh, scent all over you—right?”

“You have a point,” Jake acknowledged. He shifted his hips again, pressing inward, and suddenly he was pressing

against my clit. A bolt of pleasure shot through me, making me gasp.

“Oh, *Jake*,” I moaned softly and shifted forward, wanting more of the addictive pleasure that flowed through me at his touch.

“God, little Ani,” he growled. “Your soft little pussy is so hot and wet. I can feel it against my shaft.” He rubbed against me again, pressing deeper this time and sliding up and down so that his long shaft gave my aching little clit a nice, slow massage.

“Oh!” I was panting now and part of me felt guilty, like we shouldn’t be doing this but I didn’t want it to stop.

“I shouldn’t be doing this—you’re my little sister,” Jake growled, at least partly echoing my thoughts.

“But we *have* to,” I reminded him, ignoring my own inner voice of guilt. “We need to get my Heat Cycle up and also spread my scent on your skin and your scent on mine, remember?”

“Right, I guess so.”

He didn’t sound too convinced, but he didn’t try to get away again either. Instead, he did another long, slow slide of his cock over my open pussy, caressing my inner folds and my aching clit at the same time with his thick length. This time I was sure I felt the head of his cock sliding over my slippery inner cunt as well, but since he didn’t slide it down to the mouth of my pussy, I didn’t think it was a problem.

But to be honest, it felt so good I could hardly think at all.

“Is this too much?” Jake murmured, sliding up and down my open slit again, his eyes holding mine in the moonlight. “You seem like you’re getting kind of, er, worked up, baby.”

“Because it feels so *good*,” I admitted, panting a little. “I don’t understand it—*why* does it feel so good when you touch me? How come having you near me wakes me up? I mean, I never even came *close* to any kind of sexual pleasure before you touched me. Why is that?”

“Could be because it’s the touch of another Were and up until now you’ve only ever been with human males,” Jake rumbled softly, sliding against me again. “And it’s also possible that my blood calls to yours—since we’re both of the Royal line.”

“Whatever it is, it feels *amazing*,” I whispered, breathlessly. “I feel like I’ve been asleep all my life and you came along and woke me up!”

“I’m glad I can give you pleasure, baby—though I really shouldn’t.” He got a guilty look in his eyes and started to withdraw again. But I clamped my leg around his hips even tighter and wouldn’t let him go.

“Wait!” I begged. “Just...just a little while longer, please Jake! Tell me...tell me again about how you could possibly fit inside me,” I went on, wanting to keep him talking so that we could keep rubbing together. “I mean, you’re so *big* and I’m so small, er, down there.” I gave a little nod down to where we were pressed together.

“I told you, it has to do with the compounds in a male Were’s precum,” he growled softly. “You know—what I’m rubbing against you right now?”

Because he actually was. Somehow the angle of our hips and pelvises had changed and now it was the tip of his cock that was sliding across my slippery folds, not just his shaft.

“So...if you were...were going to put it in me...you would rub against me a lot? I mean, right here?” I demonstrated by reaching down and fitting the broad head of his cock to the mouth of my pussy.

Jake froze, frowning at me.

“Be very, *very* careful, Anastasia. You don’t know how close you are to having me inside you!”

“Don’t be silly,” I scoffed. “I’ve seen how big you are—there’s no way you’d fit in me. I’m *way* too tight.”

As I spoke, I pressed him up against me, actually allowing the broad head to nudge into my slippery, open pussy mouth—

but only a tiny bit. Because honestly, I really *was* too tight to let more than just the very tip of it inside me.

“You’re too tight now, but I’m leaking my precum right inside you, baby,” Jake warned. “That’s going to make you very *accommodating* in just a minute, if you know what I mean.”

“Would you make me pregnant if you slid inside me?” I asked, feeling a bit anxious. “I mean, I’ve heard there are sometimes a few sperm in precum so technically if a girl is really unlucky—”

“You don’t have to worry about that,” Jake said soothingly. “I can’t get you pregnant unless I knot you. I could put my cock inside you—almost all the way in—and fuck you and come in you too, and as long as I kept the knot outside your tight little pussy, you *wouldn’t* get pregnant.”

“Really?” I looked at him with wide eyes. “But... how can that be?”

He shrugged.

“It’s just the way it works with Were physiology. No mating knot, no baby. It’s only when the male’s knot swells inside a female Were’s pussy and ties them together that her body releases an egg to be fertilized.”

“So...even though that test said I was ovulating...?” I began.

“With Weres, ovulation means your body is *ready* to release an egg—not that it already has,” Jake explained.

“Oh, okay.” I nodded. “So...*this* is safe?” I asked, nudging forward just a little bit.

I’d only meant to let the tip of his cock kiss the mouth of my pussy a little more deeply. So imagine my surprise when the broad, plum-shaped head actually slid all the way into my tight little virgin pussy channel! I could actually feel it pressing against my maiden barrier. It almost seemed as though my body *wanted* him to break through and fill me completely with the rest of his long, hard shaft.

And his knot, whispered a naughty voice in my head. *Don't forget, you have to have the knot in you to get pregnant!*

“Ani, what have you done?” Jake’s voice was low and harsh and he was holding completely still inside me. “This definitely is *not* safe.”

“But...but I thought you said you can’t get me pregnant unless you knot me?” I murmured. Though we were in a very precarious position, I noticed neither one of us was trying to pull away.

“I can’t, but if I move even a *little* bit, I’ll be taking your virginity,” Jake growled. “And that’s not mine to take. I’m your brother—not your mate or your lover.”

“If the Worshipers of the Moon have anything to say about it, you’ll be all three,” I pointed out.

“Which would be really, really *wrong*,” Jake rumbled in a forbidding voice. “God, I can’t believe I allowed this to happen!”

“You didn’t,” I pointed out. “It was an accident. Honestly it was—I didn’t really think *any* of you could get inside me,” I added. “I didn’t expect you to just, uh, slip in like that.”

“Even though I literally *just* explained how it could happen?” he growled.

“It just didn’t seem *possible*.” I shrugged, which had the effect of moving him inside me, just a tiny bit. I winced at the sharp little pain it caused as he nudged harder against my maiden barrier.

“Be careful!” Jake exclaimed. “I need to pull out of you, Ani—I never should have allowed my shaft to enter your pussy in the first place.”

I sighed, because it actually felt pretty good. But I couldn’t admit to that, or ask him not to go when he slowly slid out of me. He didn’t even rub against my clit as he did it, either—he just left me hanging.

“*Jake...*” I protested. I felt so sexually frustrated I thought I might scream. Now that this part of my body—my sex drive

I guess—had woken up, it didn't seem like it wanted to go back to sleep again.

But we seemed to have crossed a line somewhere and Jake refused to play the little rubbing game we'd been playing before. Instead, he turned me over so that I was lying on my side and my back was to his broad chest.

“Time to get some sleep, little Ani,” he rumbled in my ear. “We have a big day tomorrow.”

I sighed, feeling like my entire body was one throbbing ache of sexual need. But there didn't seem to be much else I could do if Jake was no longer playing along.

“All right,” I whispered, snuggling back against him so I felt his still-hard shaft branding my ass. “I'll try to get some sleep.”

“You do that, little Ani.” I felt his lips on the top of my head as he gave me a chaste kiss, and then his arm around me as he held me close to him.

But it was a long, long time before I could drift off and it wasn't just because I was thinking of our plans for tomorrow.

I also couldn't stop thinking about how good his body felt against mine, and how I never wanted to stop touching him.

TWENTY



“RISE AND SHINE, SLEEPYHEADS!”

It was Ophelia’s voice again. But this time her words hadn’t woken me up—her tread on the wooden ladder that led up to the attic room that was our prison had done that. The minute she started climbing, I woke up right away—which isn’t usual for me at all. Maybe it was because of the way I’d been up half the night thinking, but I felt like we had to put our plan in motion at once.

Quickly, I took Jake’s big hand and arranged it over my bare breast. Then I pushed my ass back against him and felt the long, hard length of his shaft against my naked skin. Carefully, I parted my legs a little bit so that it was between my thighs, the broad head poking at the lips of my pussy. There—we were in the right position.

I felt Jake stiffen against me and he muttered in my ear,

“What the hell are you doing, Ani?”

“The plan—remember?” I hissed back. “Just try to look natural.”

Since he’d had the head of his cock all the way inside me the night before, I didn’t think it was a stretch just to have it between my legs. I still throbbed with desire when I thought of how it had felt nudging against my virgin barrier—everyone said the first time hurts horribly but I couldn’t help wondering if that would be true if Jake was the one I was giving it up for.

Then I gave myself a mental kick—what was wrong with me thinking this way about my own stepbrother? Of *course* I

wasn't giving him my virginity! That was exactly what we were trying to avoid here! And in order to do that, we had to make this look convincing.

The two of you are looking awfully *cozy* this morning," Ophelia remarked, as she came up to the bed where we were still lying on our sides, pretending to be mostly asleep.

"Oh, uh..." I yawned, acting like I was still sleepy, and made sure to drag the covers down, away from the front of my body.

"Oh, *my*," Ophelia murmured, her eyes going wide as she saw the way Jake was cupping my bare breast in his big hand. "You two *are* looking cozy."

"Hmmm?" I stretched again, parting my legs a little. Jake, to give him credit, played his part as well. Nudging his hips forward, he allowed the head of his cock to barely part my pussy lips, rubbing against my inner folds which were still slippery and wet from the sexual frustration of the night before.

Ophelia's eyes got even wider.

"Did the two of you *sleep* like this last night?" she demanded.

"Like what?" I mumbled sleepily. Tilting my pelvis back, I rubbed my open pussy against the head of Jake's cock, moaning softly as it slid over my swollen clit. I admit, I didn't have to fake the moan—it felt really *good* to have him touching me so intimately, even if it was kind of awkward to do it in front of an audience.

"Baby, come on," Jake rumbled, pretending he was just coming awake himself. "Ophelia's here—time to wake all the way up."

"Huh?"

I opened my eyes fully and looked up at her uncertainly. Then I made a big show of looking down at myself to where Jake was cupping my breast and the head of his cock was sliding just inside my pussy lips to caress my slippery inner folds and throbbing clit.

“Oh, my God!” I gasped, parting my legs wide for a moment and looking down, as though I couldn’t believe what was happening—which of course, gave Ophelia an even better view of my stepbrother’s thick cock nudging inside my pussy.

For a long moment, I just lay there, watching as Jake slid the broad head of his shaft up and down my slippery folds, caressing my clit with every stroke. Once he even nudged just the tip of his cock into the mouth of my pussy before pulling out to rub against me again.

“Mmm, baby,” he growled softly. “You feel so nice and *wet* inside.”

“God, Jake—be careful!” I moaned and scrambled for the covers, as though I was finally fully awake and was desperate to hide the way my stepbrother was touching me so intimately. And of course, he didn’t stop touching me. In fact, I could feel him tugging lightly at my nipple and kneading my breast as he continued to cup me.

“Hmm,” Ophelia remarked. “I guess I don’t have to ask if the two of *you* had a good night.” She winked knowingly.

“We didn’t...we would never...” I began, acting as though I was horribly embarrassed.

“Hey, it’s okay,” Ophelia soothed me. Her eyes were soft and eager behind her thick glasses. Clearly, this was what she had been waiting for. “You don’t have to feel ashamed to let your lover touch you,” she said gently.

“But...but he’s not my lover—he’s my *stepbrother*,” I protested. “Only...” I ducked my head, as though I couldn’t look at her. “Only it feels so *good* when he touches me,” I whispered. “I...I’ve never felt this way with any man before—*ever*.”

“It’s because Jacob is the only man in the world who is exactly *right* for you,” Ophelia said. “He’s your Fated Mate because you’re both of the Royal Line. Of *course* your body cries out for his. The two of you can’t *help* yourselves. You shouldn’t even *try*.”

“I don’t know about that,” Jake murmured, but then he started kissing my neck.

I moaned and turned over, arching my back to bare my breasts for him.

“Jake,” I begged softly. “My nipples feel so tight and *achy* this morning. Please, can’t you kiss them just a little—like you did last night?”

“I shouldn’t,” Jake protested, but he leaned down and sucked one nipple into his mouth as he continued to toy with the other one with his free hand.

“Yes, you *should*,” Ophelia assured him earnestly. She was drinking all of this in and I couldn’t help thinking we were putting on a *really* good act. Though to be honest, it wasn’t much of an act for me. It felt incredible to have Jake’s hot mouth on my bare breasts—I didn’t even care that we had an audience—I just wanted *more*.

“She’s my little sister,” Jake objected weakly, letting my aching nipple slip from his mouth so he could talk. “I shouldn’t be sucking my own little sister’s nipples like this.”

“She’s not *really* your sister—Professor Sorenson says it was a false adoption,” Ophelia told him. “Besides, she’s entering her Heat Cycle—her body *needs* yours. Don’t deny her what she needs when you’re the only one who can give it to her!”

“She’s right, Jake—I *need* you!” I moaned. Kicking off the covers entirely, I took his free hand from my breast and pushed it down between my legs. “I need you to touch me again—like you did yesterday,” I told him, looking into his eyes. “I...I need you to pet my pussy. Please, Jake—I’m *aching* for you.”

Again, very little acting was required on my part. My body really *was* aching with sexual tension. It was like I had been saving it up in a locked room all my life and the moment Jake came and unlocked the door, it had all come rushing out to swamp me at once!

“I shouldn’t though,” Jake protested again, and I had the feeling that he wasn’t acting much either. He really *did* feel guilty because of that damn Blood-Mingling Adoption ceremony my stupid stepfather had made us go through.

“Yes, you should,” Ophelia told her, before I could answer. “Go on, Jacob—spread your lover open and stroke her. It’s what she needs.”

“Please, Jake!” I begged again, spreading my legs so that he could feel the heat and wetness of my pussy opening under his fingers. “*Please!*”

“Well, if you *really* need it, baby,” he agreed with gruff reluctance.

“I do!” I told him, looking into his eyes. “I need you to spread open my pussy lips and pet inside me, Jake,” I moaned. “Pet my clit and make me come.”

“God...” His voice dipped to a growl and I could tell my dirty talk was getting to him. “All right then, baby—but just a little bit,” he told me.

And then he was spreading open my outer pussy lips, just like I had begged him to, and sliding his fingertips gently around and around my swollen clit.

“Oh, Jake!” I gasped, bucking my hips for him. “Oh, yes... that’s just what I need. *Yes!*”

“Help her come,” Ophelia offered from the sidelines. “That should raise her Heat Cycle and get her ready for your knot inside her later tonight.”

Jake frowned at her, though he never stopped touching me.

“Shouldn’t do that—shouldn’t breed my own little sister!”

“Anastasia *isn’t* your sister,” she told him sternly. “She’s your Royal Omega and she *needs* you, Jacob.”

“She’s right! I do—I need you. Oh, Jake, I’m so *close!*” I moaned. “Please help me...” I looked up at him, gripping his broad shoulders as I writhed under him. “Please, Jake—*make* me come.”

His pale golden eyes softened as he looked into mine.

“All right, little Ani,” he murmured. “All right, just relax and I’ll help you come.”

“Just don’t stop touching me!” I begged, bucking my hips. I had that tight, wire-about-to-snap feeling in my belly again. “Don’t stop, Jake—just keep doing what you’re doing! Just keep petting my pussy!”

“All right, baby. All right.” His fingers kept circling my clit and then, suddenly, I was *there!* I moaned his name helplessly as I arched my back and pleasure rushed through me in a warm, intense wave. It was the orgasm I’d been craving since last night when the head of his cock had accidentally slipped into my slippery pussy mouth and finally I had it!

But though I felt like I was exploding from the inside out, I still wanted *more*.

“I want you inside me!” I begged Jake. “Please, Jake—can’t you put your cock inside me—just a little bit? I need to feel it in me!”

Jake frowned and drew his hand away.

“Can’t do that, little Ani. You know I can’t take your virginity!”

“You might have to,” Ophelia interjected.

Jake and I both looked up.

“What?” I asked breathlessly. “I mean, what are you talking about?”

“Well, as your Heat Cycle progresses, your pussy is going to feel more and more empty and longing to be filled,” she lectured me. “And you know,” she said to Jake. “Since the Royal Omega is a virgin, it would be much easier for her if you took her gently at least once before you knotted her tonight. You know that knotting and breeding can get kind of rough,” she added, wincing a little in apparent sympathy with the ordeal poor virginal me was going to have to go through.

“It...it can?” I asked uncertainly.

“Don’t worry about that,” Jake told me. “It’s not going to happen—I’m *not* going to breed you...I don’t think,” he added in a low voice, as though to himself.

I thought he was doing a pretty good job of acting like a man whose certainties are crumbling—I just hoped it was fooling Ophelia.

She certainly looked thoughtful as she surveyed the two of us.

“Are you ready to get up and have your first test of the morning?” she asked me, smiling. “Or do you need a little more time in your lover’s arms?”

“I...I think I’m okay...for now, anyway,” I said.

“Good. Then let’s go into the bathroom,” Ophelia said.

TWENTY-ONE



OPHELIA LED THE WAY INTO THE BATHROOM AND THE MINUTE she closed the door, she leaned back against it and grinned at me conspiratorially.

“So, the two of you certainly seem to be getting along *much* better than you were last night,” she said, knowingly.

“I...I guess we are.” I hung my head, still pretending to be embarrassed and ashamed. “I...we can’t seem to help ourselves,” I murmured, as though I was confiding in her. “I mean, last night, Jake was just warming me up and his, uh, you know, *almost* slipped right inside me!”

“Yes, it *looked* like he was about to slip inside you when I came to wake you up this morning,” Ophelia murmured, grinning at me. “Tell me—did it feel good?”

“It did—it felt *amazing*,” I admitted in a low voice. “I don’t know *why* I wanted to let him do it so bad. I...I even spread my legs for him and let him press just the tip of his, you know, his shaft all the way inside me,” I added, playing it up a bit.

Ophelia frowned.

“I thought you said he just *almost* slipped inside you. How much went in?”

“Well...it was just the head,” I murmured, twisting my fingers together. “That’s not so bad—is it?” I asked, looking up at her imploringly. “I mean, he took it right back out again. Well, after a few minutes, anyway,” I added. “Though I really didn’t want him to. Take it out, I mean. But I’m still a virgin.”

“Of course you didn’t want him to take it out—your body is crying out to be knotted and bred,” Ophelia lectured me, as she opened another pink box and took out another pee stick pregnancy test. “Your womb is *longing* to be filled with his child.”

“But I’m so young,” I protested. “Too young to be a mom!”

“You seem like a very mature person to me,” Ophelia said. “And I’m sure the Alpha Heir will make a wonderful father. He’ll help you raise the baby.”

“But I shouldn’t get pregnant by my own stepbrother—should I?” I asked pleadingly. “I mean, even though my body really *wants* to and I really wish I would have let him put his cock all the way inside me instead of just the head,” I added.

“He’s your Fated Mate—it’s *right* for him to breed you,” Ophelia said, handing me the test. “Just as it’s right for you to spread your legs for his shaft and his knot and let him fill your womb with life. For in so doing, you Royals will give life to all of us other, ordinary Weres.”

“Tell me more about the prophecy and what the, uh, Royal Weres are supposed to do,” I said, as I peed on the stick. “I’m not sure I really understand it.”

Ophelia went into a long explanation that sounded like the plot of some dystopian novel and I listened dutifully, trying to look extremely interested and concerned.

“So...you’re all going to *die* if Jake doesn’t get me pregnant?” I asked at last, when she finally ran out of steam. “That’s terrible!”

“Yes, we fear it greatly!” Ophelia’s brown eyes were wide behind her thick glasses.

“I don’t blame you,” I told her. I hung my head. “I guess... I guess I’ve been kind of selfish, not wanting to let Jake breed me,” I admitted. “I just didn’t understand how high the stakes were.”

“They couldn’t possibly get any higher,” Ophelia told me. “But I’m glad you’re finally beginning to understand why

allowing the Alpha Heir to fill your womb with life is so important.” She shook her head. “I just wish he could understand it as well.”

“I’ll tell Jake everything you said,” I promised. “Maybe I can make him understand. But, well...” I bit my lip, as though I wasn’t sure about something.

“Yes?” Ophelia urged. “What is it? Do you have another question?”

“Well, *kind of*,” I said. “See, I heard my mom and Jake’s dad talking about, er, conception—you know, getting pregnant? Anyway, my mom has this silver necklace she always wore that my dad gave her—my human dad, I mean.”

Ophelia looked aghast.

“She wore a *real silver* necklace?”

I nodded. “Uh-huh. Anyway, it upset Jake’s dad—I mean, the Absent Alpha. I heard him tell her that it would ruin any chance they might ever have a baby. Of course, they’re both kind of old for that and my mom doesn’t think it would be possible,” I went on. “But still, that’s what he said.”

“He did?” Ophelia looked worried.

“I nodded. So I’m just wondering...would Jake even be *able* to get me pregnant if he was still wearing those silver handcuffs you have on him? Or would having silver touching his skin inhibit conception, like my stepfather said?”

“I don’t know,” Ophelia said slowly. “But I’m sure Professor Sorenson wouldn’t order us to use anything on the Alpha Heir that might hurt the chances of fulfilling the prophecy.”

“Oh, okay.” I shrugged. “Well, I guess maybe I was mistaken. Or maybe it’s just something to do with the Royal line—my stepfather seemed to know all about it.” I frowned. “Professor Sorenson doesn’t have any Royal blood, does he?”

Ophelia frowned.

“No. No, he doesn’t.” She shook her head and I hoped that I might have planted a tiny seed of doubt in her mind. The

next minute though, her face cleared as she looked down at the pee stick I had handed her.

“Oh—look at this! Your Heat Cycle is yellow verging on orange! In fact, it really is almost *completely* orange!” she exclaimed and grinned at me. “I bet you’ll be in the red for tonight! Just in time to get knotted and bred!”

I bit my lip. Oh, joy—it seemed that all of the “cuddling” between me and Jake had actually worked a little *too* well.

What was I going to do if my Heat Cycle really *did* kick all the way in and we couldn’t get the silver cuffs off Jake?

I simply had no idea.

TWENTY-TWO



“WELL? HOW DID IT GO?” JAKE MURMURED TO ME, WHEN I came back to the bed.

“Yellowish-orange,” I murmured back. “Ophelia is over the moon.”

Indeed, the Were girl had already clattered down the attic stairs, presumably to show the improved pee test to Sorenson.

“Orange?” Jake raised an eyebrow at me. “Your Heat Cycle really *is* ramping up.”

“Yeah, I guess it is,” I admitted. I wished I could dismiss this as a lot of nonsense talk, but since he had showed me his “partial shift” where he turned his hand into a wolf’s paw, I couldn’t do that anymore.

“We’re going to have to be careful,” Jake said, frowning. “I think all this ‘pretending’ we’ve been doing for Ophelia’s benefit is moving things along.”

“I think we might have to go even further, though,” I told him. “Though I’ve tried to plant some ideas in her head about getting rid of the silver.”

I gave him a quick rundown of the little story I’d told the Were girl about my mom and her silver necklace and how Marcus had told her to throw it out because it would inhibit conception.

“I told her I thought it had to do with the Royal bloodlines,” I finished. “And she *seemed* to swallow it, but then she looked at the test and got all excited about *that*. Oh,

and I also pretended to believe their crazy prophecy and told her I would try to get you on board with it too.”

“Good work, Ani!” Jake gave me an admiring look. “That’s a lot to cover in one bathroom break.”

“All in a day’s work,” I said modestly and then gave him a serious look. “Jake, do you think this is going to work? I mean, are we going to be able to convince them to take those cuffs off you so we can get out of here?”

He looked thoughtful.

“If it was just Ophelia, I’d say yes, one hundred percent. Because she *wants* to believe.”

I snorted.

“What she *wants* is her own live-action Hallmark movie that’s rated X instead of G. And in her mind, we’re the stars of the show.”

“True.” Jake nodded. “So it’s easy to sell our ‘conversion’ to her. Sorenson, however, is another story.”

“How can we convince him?” I asked.

Jake shook his head.

“I don’t know. I don’t know if he’s as credulous as Ophelia. And of course, Tainer is just fucking *crazy*,” he added darkly.

“Let’s try not to think about him,” I said. “We haven’t seen him yet today—let’s hope we don’t.”

“Fingers crossed,” Jake said dryly. He cocked his head to one side. “I think Ophelia’s coming back up. And she may be bringing Sorenson with her.”

“Okay,” I said. “If you think of a way to convince him, just go with it and I’ll follow your lead. But if I think of a way, you have to follow mine.”

“Agreed.” Jake nodded. “You’ve come up with some good ideas so far. Hopefully he’ll believe the ‘silver inhibits conception’ idea you started with Ophelia.”

“Hopefully,” I agreed. And then we both fell silent as two sets of footsteps began to climb the ladder.

TWENTY-THREE



“So...I UNDERSTAND THE TWO OF YOU ARE GETTING A LOT *closer* today than you were yesterday,” Sorenson said, looking speculatively from me to Jake and back again.

“We can hardly help it,” Jake growled, glaring at the other man. “The things you forced us to do yesterday, combined with sleeping naked together under the nearly full moon, have really ramped up Ani’s Heat Cycle.”

As he spoke, I scooted against him so that my back was to his chest. Taking his free hand, I brought it around me and placed it firmly on my breast.

“Jake still doesn’t believe in your prophecy,” I told Sorenson. “But *I* do. I think it’s *awful* that the regular Weres are all going to be wiped out if the two of us don’t do our duty and breed.”

Sorenson’s eyes narrowed and he looked at me skeptically.

“That seems like a pretty quick turn around, if you don’t mind me saying so, Anastasia. You went from being a skeptic to a believer in less than twenty-four hours.”

“Ophelia explained everything to me really clearly,” I said, making my eyes wide and innocent. “I don’t want to be a mom yet, but I *also* don’t want all the regular Weres to die, either. So...” I cleared my throat. “I...I’m willing to let Jake breed me and...and get me pregnant.” Just saying it made my stomach do a little flip, like a thousand butterflies had just taken flight in there, but I tried not to show it. *It’s an act*, I reminded myself. *Just an act!*

“Hmmm...” Sorenson frowned at me and then he looked at Jake. “And what are *your* thoughts on breeding your ‘little sister,’ Jacob?”

“That it’s fucking wrong,” Jake said, glaring at him. “But Ani’s Heat Cycle is getting out of control. So who the hells knows what I might have to do in order to help her?” He shook his head. “I guess I’ll breed her and knot her if I *have* to, but it won’t do you any damn good. I mean, I could knot her all night long, but she *still* won’t get pregnant by me.”

“I beg your pardon.” Sorenson frowned reprovably. “If her Heat Cycle is high enough—which it very nearly is—and you knot her and fill her with your seed under the full moon, she cannot *help* getting pregnant.”

“No, she won’t,” Jake said flatly. “Not if either one of us is wearing any kind of silver next to our skin, she won’t. Silver inhibits conception in Royal Weres.”

Sorenson’s frown deepened.

“That’s a lie! I would have known something like that—I have studied the Royal Family in all its aspects for *years*.”

“Yes, but you’re on the *outside* looking *in*,” Jake pointed out. “You don’t know the secrets passed down from Alpha to Heir—why would you? They’re *secrets*.”

“Why would you tell me this?” Sorenson demanded. “When you *don’t* want to breed the Royal Omega?”

“Oh, I want to breed her, all right—I just know that I *shouldn’t*.” Jake squeezed my breast gently, making me moan. “Besides, I’m not telling you for me—I’m telling you for *Ani*. She believes your crazy prophecy and now she *wants* me to get her pregnant.” He shook his head, as though I was nuts, but he didn’t stop touching me.

“I do...I really do.” I turned my face up to look at my stepbrother. “I know you’re not a true believer, Jake, but these people are going to *die* if you don’t put a baby in me,” I said pleadingly. Then I looked at Sorenson. “And I *know* I can’t get pregnant if either one of us is touching anything silver. So how can I help save the regular Weres?”

Sorenson frowned and shook his head.

“I don’t know about this...I must do some research.”

“Don’t take too long,” Jake told him. “The full moon is tonight. If you want me to breed Ani and get her pregnant in order to circumvent the *dire* warnings of the prophecy, this is the only shot we’ll get.”

Sorenson scowled.

“Yes, Jacob, I’m well aware of that. But you’ll forgive me for thinking that your motives are less than pure. Only yesterday you were so *against* breeding the Royal Omega and now you’re not only willing but *eager*.”

Jake shrugged and squeezed my breast.

“It’s what Ani wants. She always did have me twisted around her little finger.” He started to drop a fond kiss on the cheek but I turned my face up to his and caught his kiss on my lips instead.

“Oh, Jake,” I moaned, and kissed him more deeply. “Please, breed me—I need your knot in me! *Please*.”

“All right, baby—I told you I’d at least *think* about it,” Jake murmured, kissing me back as he fondled my breast. “Just try to relax and I’ll help you come again in a little while.” His hand slid down between my legs and he cupped my pussy.

“That feels good but it’s not enough,” I told him, spreading my legs for him. “It’s *never* enough. I need you to knot me Jake—I *need* it.”

“Professor please—can’t you see they’ve had a change of heart?” Ophelia pleaded on our behalf. “Anastasia understands now and Jacob loves her and he’s willing to give her what she wants and needs. Just *look* at them—they can’t keep their hands off each other!”

Sorenson shook his head at the two of us, still moaning and kissing on the bed.

“I must consider this,” he said at last. “I will return.”

Then he turned and left the attic, tromping down the folding stairs in a way that seemed extremely unpromising, to me at least.

TWENTY-FOUR



“WE’RE GOING TO HAVE TO GO FURTHER TO CONVINCING HIM,” I told Jake, as I took a bite of scrambled eggs. Ophelia had prepared another brunch tray for us and, for the moment at least, we had the attic to ourselves while we ate.

“How far are we talking about?” Jake asked, frowning.

I took a deep breath, trying to think how to say it. I had been considering this as I toyed with the ham and eggs and French toast with real raspberry syrup and cr me fresh. I knew what I *thought* needed to happen—I just didn’t know if Jake would go along with it.

“Well?” he demanded, frowning at me. “You’re planning something, Ani—something you think I’m not going to like. Stop trying to think of a way to sell me on it and just *say* it.”

“I think...” I swallowed hard as I looked up at him. “Jake, I think you’re going to have to fuck me,” I managed to get out.

“*What?*” He looked at me blankly. “What are you talking about? That’s what we’re trying to *avoid*, Ani!”

“I don’t mean tonight under the full moon,” I told him. “I mean, a little later on today. Look, think about it,” I went on quickly, before he could object. “If we let Sorenson see that we’re willing to go *that* far together, surely he’ll believe we’re willing to take it a step further and let you knot me too.”

“You’re talking about me taking your virginity,” Jake said darkly. “I won’t do that to you, Ani. I *won’t*.”

“You *have* to,” I argued. “There’s no other way! Look, I’m not saying you should knot me, Jake. Just...just enter me and maybe...maybe come in me.” The words were sticking in my throat, but I got them out somehow anyway. “When Sorenson sees we’re willing to do that, he’ll believe you when you say you’ll go further.”

“And what makes you so sure this is going to work?” Jake demanded.

“Because after you do it, I’ll moan and cry that it isn’t enough—that the silver is making me need more because it’s interfering with the sensation or keeping my needs from being satisfied or something like that,” I told him. “You know I can put on a *very* convincing act.”

“Well...you’re a pretty good actress, I’ll give you that,” Jake growled. “I would have believed you really wanted me to touch you and make you come earlier if I didn’t know better.”

“And *I* would have believed you really *wanted* to touch me and make me come,” I said lightly. A part of me couldn’t help wishing that we weren’t acting—that all of this was real. But I knew better than to wish that, especially knowing how Jake felt about our familial relationship.

He looked at me seriously now.

“Are you *sure* you want me to do this?” he asked quietly. “For the rest of your life, you’ll remember it was your own brother that took your virginity.”

“*Stepbrother*,” I corrected him. Reaching up, I cupped his bristly cheek in my palm. “At least...at least I know you’ll be gentle with me—right?”

His eyes softened.

“Of course I will, baby. It’s just...this is so *wrong*. If anyone ever found out—”

“They won’t,” I said quickly. “You and I will take it to our graves, okay?”

Reluctantly, he nodded.

“All right, then. We’ll try it. But only because if we don’t get out of here, they’re going to make me take your virginity *and* do a whole lot worse to you tonight.”

It was on the tip of my tongue to say that it wouldn’t be so bad to really let him breed me. My body certainly wanted his now that he had awakened me sexually. But I kept the words between my teeth, knowing I couldn’t say them. Thanks to that stupid adoption ceremony, Jake felt like what we were about to do was a sacrilege—one he was only willing to put up with to avoid committing an even bigger blasphemy.

Sadly, I was never going to change his mind. So I kept my thoughts to myself and took a drink of orange juice.

Things were about to get interesting.

TWENTY-FIVE



“JAKE PLEASE...*PLEASE!*” I THRASHED ON THE BED, ARCHING my back and moaning for all I was worth.

“Be still, baby. Take it easy—*please!*” Jake pleaded. He still had his left hand cuffed to the headboard, and he was leaning over me as I moaned and begged and thrashed—I hoped convincingly.

Suddenly feet came pounding up the stairs and Ophelia stuck her head out of the trapdoor. There was a worried expression on her face.

“What is it? What’s wrong?” she demanded.

“I don’t know—I think maybe she’s going into Extreme Royal Heat,” Jake said, glancing up at her. “She’s been crying and saying she feels empty inside and begging me to breed her—I don’t know what to do!”

“Well, you can’t breed her fully *yet*—we have to wait for the full moon!” Ophelia said, frowning anxiously. “Still, maybe if you just filled her with your shaft...”

“Damn it, I don’t *want* to take her virginity,” Jake protested and I knew he was telling the truth—no acting required.

“You might not be able to help it.” Ophelia frowned at me in concern. “Extreme Royal Heat, you say? I’ve never heard of that.”

“It only happens to Royal Omegas,” Jake told her. He went back to stroking my hair from my face as I moaned and cried.

“Jake, *please*,” I begged him. “Please, just do what she said—put it in me! I need to be filled up—I need to feel you inside of me!”

“I shouldn’t,” Jake muttered and I could hear the real reluctance in his deep voice.

“You *have* to,” I whispered, frowning up at him. “She’s *watching*.”

Jake seemed to have an inner struggle with himself. Then, reluctantly, he nodded.

“Okay, baby. All right, little Ani,” he murmured, cupping my cheek as he propped himself on his elbows above me. “Spread your legs for me—I’m going to give you what you need.”

“Thank you, Jake,” I whispered, opening my thighs wide for him. I won’t deny, my heart was pounding like a drum but I was acutely aware that Ophelia was watching us like a hawk and I knew she would report back to Sorenson about everything she saw.

“All right, baby—just relax,” Jake murmured. “I’ll be as gentle as I can.”

As he spoke, he stroked my hair and looked into my eyes. I found myself falling into those pure-gold depths as I opened myself for him and felt the blunt head of his cock sliding over my slippery inner folds.

By now, I was almost used to the exquisitely pleasurable sensation. Only this time, when Jake finally allowed the broad head of his cock to slip inside me, I knew he was about to go further. I wanted him desperately, and yet I was afraid. For a moment, I tensed up.

“No, don’t do that—don’t get tense, Ani” Jake murmured, still stroking my hair. “Just try to relax. I’ll make it quick. On the count of three, all right?”

I took a deep breath and nodded.

“All right.”

“Count with me,” Jake told me. And we counted together. “One...Two...*Three*.”

There was a sharp, pinching pain—almost a tearing inside me. It brought tears to my eyes and I gave a little gasp as every muscle in my body seemed to tighten at once.

“Hey, Ani...little Ani...” Jake crooned softly and I saw that his own eyes were bright as well. “I’m sorry,” he whispered hoarsely, shaking his head. “I’m so sorry, baby. I shouldn’t have.”

“It’s all right,” I whispered to him and trying to blink the tears away. “No guilt, remember? And no blame. We...we’re doing this together, Jake.”

“Together,” he echoed and leaned down to kiss my face, gently kissing my tears away. He dropped a last kiss on my mouth and looked at me again. “Do you think you can go on? Is the pain gone now?”

I wiggled experimentally. The sharp pain seemed to be over with. The loss of my virginity had really been no worse than a shot—and the pain appeared to have been as fleeting too.

“I *think* so,” I said carefully. “You feel, uh, really big inside me, Jake,” I added, rather breathlessly.

“I’m only halfway in,” he murmured. “Do you want me to pull out?”

“No, no!” I said hastily, and then remembered I was supposed to be putting on a show for Ophelia, who was still watching anxiously from the trapdoor. “Please, don’t pull out,” I begged him in a louder voice. “I want more of you in me—fill me all the way up! Please, Jake.”

“If that’s what you need, baby,” he murmured. “But stop me if it hurts or you don’t like it,” he went on, in a lower voice, meant only for me. “I’ll never hurt you—I swear it.”

“I know you won’t.” I reached up to cup his cheek, thinking how kind and considerate he was. “You...you can try going deeper now,” I told him.

“All right.” Slowly, Jake pushed deeper into me. And to my surprise, I could feel my inner walls opening to take him. Me, the girl who was so tight she couldn’t even get a finger inside herself was now accommodating a cock that would have made a porn star blush! How was it possible? It must be the chemicals in Jake’s precum, I decided—they were certainly working miracles for me!

At last, I felt something brushing against the mouth of my womb.

“That’s it, baby,” Jake murmured to me. “That’s me, all the way inside you—except for the knot.”

“It...it feels really good,” I told him—which, by the way, was absolutely *true*—again, no acting required. “But I feel like I need *more*.”

“Don’t knot her!” Ophelia called, looking worried. “Not until the full moon!”

“But I need *more!*” I cried fretfully. “Somehow this isn’t enough!”

Jake looked at me seriously.

“Do you want me to try fucking you, baby—breeding you just a little bit?”

I nodded, nibbling my lower lip.

“Yes, Jake please—fuck me!” I begged. “Maybe it will make me feel less empty inside.”

“Okay, I’ll be gentle at first,” he promised me. “Just spread your legs wide and I’ll fuck that sweet little pussy for you.”

“Yes, Jake,” I moaned submissively. I opened my legs even wider, trying to be open enough for him as he drew almost all the way out of me and then thrust back in.

Both of us moaned when he touched bottom inside me and I felt the thick bulge of his knot pressing dangerously close to the mouth of my pussy. I tightened my inner muscles around him instinctively, trying to close myself enough to keep it out—I didn’t *really* want to get pregnant by my stepbrother! But I could tell that if he had wanted to put it in me, he could have.

He was consciously keeping it out of me to avoid knocking me up. Or “swelling my belly with life” as Ophelia would have put it.

Speaking of the Were girl, she was still watching with wide eyes as my stepbrother began a slow but steady rhythm inside me. I moaned softly every time he hit bottom inside me and I felt that thick knot pushing at the mouth of my pussy. It was incredibly sensual to lie there, spread out under him, giving myself so completely—allowing him to open me and know me as no man had ever done before.

Jake seemed to be as affected by the experience as I was.

“Little Ani,” he murmured, as he stroked gently in and out of my tightly stretched pussy. His eyes held mine with every thrust and I thought I had never been through any experience half as intense as this one—lying open under him, taking him into my body as he made love to me for the very first time.

“Jake, oh Jake...” I whispered. Feeling lost in the moment, I reached up to stroke his face. “You’re so big inside me and it feels so *good*,” I told him, honestly. “I...I’ve never felt this way before. So *open*.”

“I’ve never felt anything like it either,” he confessed hoarsely. “God, you’re so beautiful, lying there letting me take you. Love the way you feel around me, baby. Love to be your first.”

“I’m glad you’re my first too, Jake,” I whispered. And then, because I knew that Ophelia was still watching, I added in a louder voice, “But I still need *more*.”

“You need to come in her,” Ophelia directed, frowning in concern. “Maybe some of your seed will help put out the fire inside her.”

“You could be right,” Jake said, but he wasn’t looking at her as he spoke—he was looking at me. “Ani,” he murmured. “Are you all right with me coming inside you? Can you let me fill your soft little pussy with my seed? It might help that empty feeling inside you.”

“I...think so,” I said. Biting my lip, I added in a whisper, “And you’re *sure* you can’t get me pregnant?”

“Not unless I put my knot in you,” Jake promised. “It’s perfectly safe for me to come in you as long as I don’t knot you.”

“All right then,” I whispered. “Do it, Jake. Come in me.”

“Only if you come with me.” He frowned. “Damn—wish I had both hands free so I could touch you. Can you touch yourself, Ani?”

“I...I don’t know if it would help,” I said hesitantly. “It never has before. I mean, it’s never felt like much of anything when I, er, touch myself.”

“That was before,” he reminded me. “Your body’s awake now—it knows what it needs. Go on, baby—reach down and touch yourself. I don’t want to come until you do.”

Hesitantly, I slipped a hand in between our bodies. Finding the place where we were joined, I slipped my fingers into my pussy lips and began to stroke my clit in circles, just as Jake had done the two times he’d made me come.

To my surprised pleasure, it worked! Before Jake, I’d had nothing but numbness and a distant, dull buzzing sensation down there. But now the pleasure zinged through me as I stroked my clit. It sent electrical currents through my whole body, making the feeling of Jake filling me even *more* intense.

“Does it feel good, baby?” he murmured, watching my face as I stroked myself. “Does it feel good when you pet your soft little clit while I fill your pussy with my cock?”

“Yes!” I moaned, loving his dirty talk. “Yes, Jake, it feels so *good!*”

“Keep doing it then, little Ani,” he rumbled. “Keep petting that soft pussy. And let me know when you’re ready to come so I can fill you up.”

The thought of him coming inside me was somehow incredibly erotic—it felt risky even though Jake had promised me he couldn’t get me pregnant if he didn’t knot me. But

maybe it was the risk that made it feel so good. I kept touching myself while he stroked inside me and before I knew it, I was right on the precipice and ready to jump.

“Jake!” I moaned. “Oh God, I’m close—I’m so *close!*”

“Come for me, then baby,” he growled, stroking deep inside me as he held my eyes with his. “Come while I fuck you—while I fill you up!”

“Yes, Jake! Oh, God—*yes!*” I gasped and then I was coming—coming harder than I ever had before.

I could feel my inner muscles contracting, squeezing all around Jake’s thick shaft as he pierced me to the core. And for a moment—just a moment—I thought I felt the thick swelling of his Mating knot starting to slip inside me.

But then Jake pulled back incrementally and began to come—jetting spurt after hot spurt of his seed deep in my pussy, bathing my hungry womb which seemed to soak up the deluge eagerly and beg for more.

“Jake...*JAKE!*” I moaned, scratching his back and bucking my hips up to meet him. I definitely wasn’t acting—the pleasure was *intense*—almost overwhelming. “Oh my God, more—please, *more!*”

He pulled back, a look of almost pain on his face. I wondered distractedly if he had some kind of blue balls. He had come in me but he hadn’t knotted me—did knotting give an extra layer of sexual release for male Werens? I didn’t know.

“I can’t give you any more, little Ani—not unless I knot you,” he told me. “Didn’t being fucked help any at *all?*”

“Some,” I admitted, wiggling under him. “But even though you’re inside me, I still feel so *empty*. It’s like something is coming between us—keeping me from the abundance you’re trying to give me,” I added, hoping I sounded convincingly culty.

“It’s these damn silver cuffs,” Jake muttered, as though to himself, but plenty loud enough for Ophelia to hear. “How am I supposed to ease your Royal Heat Syndrome if they keep me in silver like this?”

“I don’t know. I only know I need you—need *more*,” I moaned.

Jake cursed and slid out of me. He rolled on his side, shaking his head.

“I’m sorry, baby,” he told me. “But there’s only so much I can do.”

I rolled on my side, sobbing as convincingly as I could, covering my face with my hands as though I was inconsolable.

“Is she all right?” Ophelia, who had been watching the show from the trapdoor, finally approached us. She put a hand on my shoulder but I shook it off and kept crying.

“I told you—it’s the Royal Heat Syndrome,” Jake told her, frowning. “It happens sometimes to Royal Omegas. She needs me to breed her under the full moon in a special way—and it’s impossible to do that with silver on.” He rattled the silver handcuffs against the headboard angrily.

“Professor Sorenson is doing some research right now,” she said anxiously. “I’m sure he’ll have an answer for you soon!”

“Not soon enough,” Jake growled. “Just look at my poor little Ani—she’s in agony!”

He gathered me close to him and I turned over so I could press my face to his chest and breathe in his spicy fur and bonfire scent of his skin. Actually, it felt really good to be close to him now—really *right*. I wondered if our lovemaking had tied us together somehow...or if I was just feeling emotional because I’d had sex for the very first time.

“Ani, *shhhh*,” Jake murmured, stroking my trembling back and shoulders. “Try and relax, baby...just try and relax. Hopefully when the moon rises, they’ll let me breed you right.”

“Jake...” I whispered and nuzzled against his broad chest as he pulled me closer to him. My inner thighs were sticky with his seed and I knew I should ask for a bathroom break to go clean myself up, but I didn’t want to just yet. I felt safe in Jake’s arms—complete in a way I never had before. He might

be my stepbrother, but he also felt like my lover now, my protector.

My Alpha.

The word rose unbidden to my mind and I wondered what was wrong with me. Only recently, I hadn't believed in any of this "Werewolf crap" but now it felt like a part of me—like I really *was* a Royal Omega who needed her Alpha desperately.

"Just try to take it easy," I heard Ophelia say. "I'm sure everything will be all right."

I ignored her and pressed closer to Jake. He was the only one I wanted to be with—the scent of his skin and the feeling of his big, hard body surrounding mine was all I cared about. I wanted to sink into him and be one with him forever. I wanted...

Wait a minute.

I stopped myself, cutting off that crazy train of thought. What was *wrong* with me, thinking like this? Jake was my stepbrother and as soon as we got out of this, (if we got out) we were going right back to our previous relationship. I needed to be careful and not catch feelings for the one person in the whole world who was completely off limits to me.

Still, I couldn't make myself pull away from him and Jake didn't seem to want to put any distance between us either. He held me close to him, rubbing my back and dropping gentle kisses on the top of my head. His display of tenderness deserved an Oscar, I thought, wishing it was real.

But it could never be real between us, I reminded myself. This was all just a show—just an act. I needed to keep that in mind or I was going to be in deep trouble sometime in the future...

TWENTY-SIX



AT LAST, OPHELIA LEFT AND JAKE AND I WERE ALONE. HE pulled the blanket over both of us and looked down at me anxiously.

“How do you feel, Ani? I mean *really*?” he asked, his deep voice filled with concern. “Did I hurt you?”

“Only at first,” I assured him. “And the pain only lasted a minute. After that, um...” I bit my lip. Should I tell him how good it had been for me? How intense? Would that freak him out? I might, I thought. Because we were only supposed to be pretending.

“After that, what?” Jake asked, raising his eyebrows at me.

“Um, after that it didn’t hurt anymore,” I said, not meeting his eyes. “It felt, um, pretty good, actually.”

“For me too,” he said, surprising me. “But it shouldn’t have,” he added, frowning. “I never would have gone that far with you if it wasn’t necessary to convince these idiots we’re really sold on their prophecy.”

“Oh, of course not!” I hastened to agree. “Let’s hope Sorenson will swallow all that stuff about the, uh, Royal Mating Syndrome.”

“That’s Royal *Heat* Syndrome,” Jake corrected me. “And it’s not actually a thing—I made it up.”

“Really?” I looked at him in surprise. “You just came up with it on the spot?”

“Uh-huh.” He nodded. “It’s complete fiction but I’m hoping Sorenson won’t realize that.”

“What is it though?” I asked. “I mean, what are you going to tell him it does?”

“I’m going to tell him it’s when a Royal Omega goes so deep into her Heat Cycle that she has to be bred or die,” Jake explained.

“Makes sense.” I nodded. “But...what’s the cure for it, though? Or is it fatal—according to you?”

“It *can* be fatal.” Jake frowned as he continued to make up details. “The only cure is a good, deep knotting and there can’t be silver anywhere near either the male or the female Were when it happens.”

He stirred against me and that almost pained expression came over his face again. I wondered once more if he was suffering in some way because he *hadn’t* knotted me. Was it unusual for an Alpha to make love to an Omega *without* knotting her? Did it cause some kind of problem for them?

I wanted to ask but I wasn’t sure if I should. I tried to think how I could phrase the question.

“Jake,” I began hesitantly. “Um, is what we did *normal* in the Were world?”

He frowned at me, his brows drawing low on his forehead.

“What we did? Absolutely *not*.”

“No, not that again!” I said impatiently. “Yes, I know by Were law we’re technically brother and sister and we shouldn’t have done what we just did. I’m not *talking* about that.”

Jake shook his head.

“I know you’re new to the Were world, Ani, but you’re taking what we just did *way* too lightly. If you only knew the penalty for incest...”

“Tell me then!” I demanded but Jake shook his head.

“No. I don’t want to upset you. Anyway, what were you talking about—what was your question?”

“I just wanted to know if the way you, uh, you know, made love to me without knotting me is normal. Not that it was really *making love*,” I went on quickly. “Maybe ‘had sex with me’ would be a better way to put it. But anyway, you came in me but you didn’t knot me. Is that normal? For a Were, I mean?”

Jake looked away and I had the feeling he didn’t want to answer.

“It’s not uncommon for regular Weres, no.”

“But what about Royal Weres?” I persisted. “Ones who have the, uh, blood of the First Wolf?”

“Well...” Jake sighed. “It’s not usually a problem, since, unlike regular Weres, Royal Weres mate for life and have only one partner.”

“So Royal Weres are monogamous and regular Weres aren’t,” I murmured. I remembered the casual way Ophelia had talked about the orgy-like Pack breedings where everybody apparently fucked everybody else indiscriminately and shuddered. It was fine for her—and for the regular Weres, I decided—but it just felt *wrong* to me. In fact, the idea of making love with *anyone* but Jake felt wrong, but maybe that was just because he had been my first.

“Typically, Royal Weres find their Fated Mate through breeding and when they do, they knot them,” Jake explained. “The Fated Mate is the one a Royal Were is meant to be with his or her entire life. Not being able to knot your Fated Mate can cause pain.”

I looked at him, my eyes wide.

“Are...are you saying I’m *your* Fated Mate, Jake? And that’s why it hurt you to make love to me without...without knotting me?”

“Of course not!” he denied quickly. “How could you be my Fated Mate, Ani—you’re my *sister*. Such a thing would be impossible.”

But I noticed he wouldn't meet my eyes as he spoke.

"Jake—" I began again, but just then we heard footsteps below.

"Quick!" he muttered. "Start moaning—they'll never believe you've got Royal Heat Syndrome if you don't act the part!"

"Oh! *Ohhhh!*" I moaned, arching my back and clawing at the sheets.

Just as I was working myself up into a real moaning panic, Sorenson entered the attic through the trapdoor.

"It's all right, baby—it's all right!" Jake pulled me to his broad chest and comforted me, just as he had earlier when Ophelia had been watching. Speaking of the Were girl, she was right behind Sorenson and she had a worried look in her mild brown eyes as she studied us.

"Professor, just look at her!" she exclaimed. "I told you—she's in trouble!"

"We'll see about that." Sorenson still looked skeptical.

"Can't you see she's in pain?" Jake demanded, rubbing my back and glaring angrily at the cult leader. "I need to breed her the right way—*without* silver!"

"Yes, well I heard you've already bred her once," Sorenson said, raising an eyebrow at us. "That is, if what Ophelia told me is correct. Tell me, Jacob, did you really fuck your 'little sister?'"

Jake flushed, his face going red as he glared at the other man.

"I *had* to," he growled. "Thanks to everything you've made us do together! It brought on her Heat Cycle so badly she's now in full blown Royal Heat Syndrome."

"Oh, so now you expect me to believe that you're *fully* willing to knot her and get her pregnant?" Sorenson demanded. "Well, I'm not sure I believe it—I've done my research and I've never seen anything in the texts about any

‘Royal Heat Syndrome.’ And even if it were a real disease, I don’t think the Royal Omega really has it.”

“Then you’re studying the wrong texts! Are you willing to bet Ani’s life on your little theory?” Jake demanded, and I moaned loudly to back him up.

Sorenson shook his head.

“I think you just want me to take the silver cuffs off so that you two can get away. I’m more than aware that if you weren’t wearing silver, your Wolf would be three times as strong and twice as big as any of ours—even Tainer’s,” he said. “So please don’t think you can fool me—you can knot the Royal Omega with silver on just as well as you can without it.”

“No, I can’t!” Jake ground out. “You don’t know what she needs! What *all* Royal Omegas need. For all your studying and scholarship, you know fuck-all about the actual Royal mating practices!”

“Is that right?” Sorenson crossed his arms over his chest and raised an eyebrow at Jake. “And what are these ‘Royal mating practices’ that would keep you from wearing silver in order to knot and breed your Omega?”

“I have to breed her while I’m in my fur form, all right?” Jake growled. “If I don’t, she could die from Royal Heat Syndrome—which Ani *is* suffering from, whether you want to believe it or not! Also, breeding her in fur form is the only way she’ll get pregnant and that’s what you want, right? For me to get her pregnant?”

Ophelia gasped and Sorenson gave us a grave look.

“If you’re telling the truth, this is a dark secret indeed. You know that knotting and breeding a female while the male is in his fur form is a serious offense! It’s one of the Unbreakable Laws.”

“Yeah, well so is incest but you haven’t let that stop you from putting me and Ani together and forcing her Heat Cycle into overdrive,” Jake snarled. “I’m telling you the truth—that’s the way Royals procreate. It’s one reason our line is dying out—most males aren’t willing to do it and most females don’t

want to take it. But Ani has no choice—not if she wants to live!”

“Please, Jake,” I sobbed, right on cue. “Please, I need you *in* me!” I had no idea what he was talking about when he said he’d have to breed me in his “fur form”—I really hoped it didn’t mean what I thought—but I had to keep playing my part to hopefully get us out of here.

Sorenson watched us, pacing back and forth in front of the bed while he stroked his chin thoughtfully. I kept moaning and panting and Jake kept rubbing my shoulders and back and trying to comfort me.

“All right,” Sorenson said at last, coming to a halt. “You’ve convinced me—but we’ll be doing this on *my* terms.”

“What fucking terms?” Jake demanded. “Take the silver off me now so I can knot her and ease her pain!”

“No.” Sorenson looked up at the skylight, gauging the light outside. “No, the two of you are going to have to wait until the full moon—I don’t think the Royal Omega will die of neglect by then—especially since you’ve already bred her once.” He looked at Ophelia. “You’re *sure* he bred her? He filled her with his shaft *and* his seed?”

She nodded.

“I saw the whole thing—he did everything but knot her.”

“Very well.” Sorenson nodded and looked at Jake. “Breed her some more if you need to, in order to ease her pain. But *don’t* knot her until the moonrise—we’ll have a special ceremony then and you’ll learn my terms for removing those silver cuffs.”

Then he turned and left us, beckoning Ophelia to come with him. With a last anxious glance at us over her shoulder, she followed him down the wooden ladder, leaving us alone again at last.

TWENTY-SEVEN



“WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR YOU TO BREED ME IN YOUR ‘FUR form?’” I asked Jake, the minute their footsteps receded down the hallway. “Is it really a thing that Royals do?”

“No, of course not—*no* Weres do it—at least they’re not fucking supposed to. But I had to find *some* reason to make him take these damn cuffs off.” He rattled the silver cuffs against the thick wooden headboard impatiently.

“But...what does it mean?” I asked uncertainly.

He sighed and raked his free hand through his thick, black hair.

“What do you think it means, Ani? It means I would be breeding you after I Shifted into my Wolf.”

“But...but that’s bestiality, isn’t it?” I asked, looking at him with wide eyes.

Jake sighed.

“Not exactly, since I’m completely sentient in my Wolf form—my body changes shapes but my mind remains the same. But it’s still considered a type of blasphemy since Weres believe that the ‘fur form and the flesh form shall not mix.’ It’s grounds for serious punishment.”

“Really?” I raised my eyebrows at him. “But from what Ophelia told me, it sounds like the, uh, regular Weres have orgies all the time. And if that’s happening under the full moon, aren’t there some, uh accidents?”

“A male Shifter is *always* in control of his Wolf,” Jake said firmly. “Having an ‘accident’ like that will get a male banished from the pack. It’s basically considered rape.”

“Rape?” I squeaked, looking up at him. “Why?”

Jake frowned.

“Because a male Were’s equipment is so much larger in that form. It can be... a problem. Even when a female is already stretched to receive the Were’s human equipment, she’s not often prepared for a sudden, intense size increase like that.”

I thought of how big he already was...and then remembered that he’d told me his Wolf was the size of a small horse. Wow—that *would* be a problem, even with the compounds his body made to help me open up!

I swallowed hard.

“But you told Sorenson you were going to do it to me? Going to, uh, breed me in your fur form?” I said, uncertainly.

Jake scowled at me.

“I’m not *actually* going to do that! Please—give me some credit, Ani.” He cupped my cheek in his free hand and looked into my eyes. “I *care* about you,” he said softly. “I would never hurt you or degrade you like that. But I had to tell Sorenson something that would make him remove these damn silver cuffs. The minute he takes them off me, I’ll Shift and we’ll get out of here. And that’s *all* that’s going to happen.”

“All right, Jake,” I said, meeting his eyes with my own. “I trust you. And...I care about you, too,” I added, and then felt my face go hot with a blush. “Not that I’m falling for you, or anything,” I added quickly, looking away. “I mean, that would be *crazy*.”

“It would be *deadly*,” Jake said quietly. “Ani, when we leave here, we *must* go back to our former relationship and nobody can know what had to happen between us. *Nobody*. All right?”

“Of course!” I said quickly. “I understand. I mean, your dad and my mom would have a fit if they ever found out.”

“They must *never* find out.” Jake looked at me intensely. “*Never, Ani.*”

“All right, I already agreed,” I said, frowning. I knew that my mom would be really upset and his dad might even disown him. Of *course* we weren’t going to tell them!

Then we heard footsteps in the hall downstairs again that sounded like they were getting closer.

“Quick,” Jake murmured. “Start moaning again.”

“Ugh, all right.” I put a hand to my throat. “I’m getting so scratchy from all the moaning and crying though. Couldn’t we try something else?”

“Try what?” he demanded. “She has to think you’re having Royal Heat Syndrome!”

“What if you get on top of me and we pretend you’re uh, helping me feel better?” I suggested. I’m a good actress, but I really *was* getting tired of moaning and crying like I was about to die. It takes some doing to work yourself up like that and it’s mentally exhausting.

“Helping you feel better?” Jake raised an eyebrow at me. “You mean breeding you again?”

I shrugged, biting my lower lip. I was ashamed to admit I really *wanted* him to make love to me again. It was wrong to want that—wrong to do that, I told myself. And from the look on Jake’s face he wasn’t going to go for it.

“Maybe we can pull the covers over ourselves and pretend you’re uh, breeding me,” I suggested. “Or you can lay on your back and I’ll sit on you and pretend you’re, you know, up inside me. What about that?”

He nodded reluctantly.

“All right, but hurry. I can hear her coming!”

I could, too. The light footsteps which I knew as Ophelia’s by now were climbing the wooden staircase.

“Here, lie back,” I instructed him. Jake did, his left arm cuffed above his head.

As soon as he was in the right position, I threw a leg over his hips and pulled the sheet around my lower half. Then I braced my hands on his lower abdomen, (taking time to admire the tight, muscular six-pack as I did) and began to act like I was riding him and taking great pleasure from the experience.

The only problem was, it wasn't much of an act. Because of the way he had filled me with his cum earlier, I was still incredibly slippery inside. And it seemed like Jake was ready to go again, too. Because when I sat down on him like that, I could feel the hard ridge of his cock sliding between my pussy lips to rub against my sensitive clit.

“God, Ani—be careful!” Jake growled softly. “You're right up against me!”

“I know, I didn't mean to!” I exclaimed, though honestly it felt *really* good. “I'll move,” I told him. But just as I was trying to reposition myself, Ophelia's head popped out of the trapdoor and I saw her looking in our direction.

Of course, there was nothing I could do then but keep grinding on Jake and pretending he was inside me.

“Oh!” I moaned, as I rubbed myself against him, my bare breasts swaying with every “stroke,” “Oh, Jake, *yes*—fill me up! Breed me again—I need you to!”

“Gonna breed you as long and as often as you need me to, baby,” Jake growled, playing his part. He put his free hand on my hip and watched me as I swayed above him. “Gonna fill you with my seed and make you feel all better inside, I promise.”

“Nothing but your knot in me can make me feel better,” I told him. “But this helps, Jake—it really does.”

Actually, I was getting hotter and hotter, since I was actually rubbing against him. My clit was throbbing as I ground against his hard shaft and I was actually starting to feel kind of close to coming. I reflected, a bit distractedly, how

quickly I had gotten used to feeling pleasure in this part of myself where I never used to feel anything at all. In fact, I wasn't just used to it—I was afraid I was beginning to *crave* it.

“Well, I was just coming to check on when you two might want your supper tray, but I see you're busy right now,” Ophelia said, smiling at us.

“Later,” Jake told her, shooting her a glance and then looking back up at me. “We're busy right now—I'm trying to help Ani deal with her Royal Heat Syndrome!”

“All right—just be sure you don't knot her yet. I'll check back in a little bit,” Ophelia murmured, but her eyes lingered on us for a while longer. To her, we were probably the best live-action sex show ever, I thought. Finally, though, she ducked back down through the trapdoor and left us alone again.

“She's gone,” Jake told me. “You can get off me now.”

I made a little noise of frustration in the back of my throat. Of course I knew I ought to climb off him at once. We didn't have to touch intimately—especially *this* intimately—with Ophelia no longer watching.

But I was *close*, damnit! I had been rubbing against Jake's thick shaft for several minutes now. My pussy was throbbing and my clit was aching with the need to come.

“Jake,” I said desperately, looking down at him. “Please, can't I...couldn't I just...just stay here a minute longer? In case she, uh, comes back up?”

Understanding filled his eyes as he looked up at me.

“You need to come, don't you baby?” he murmured.

Biting my lip, I nodded, feeling my cheeks heat with embarrassment.

“I...I don't know why but I do,” I admitted. “And I'm just so *close*.”

“It's your Heat Cycle,” Jake told me. “It's really ramping up now—of course you need to come.”

“I’m sorry,” I whispered. “This...this is all new to me. I never, uh, needed to come before this. It’s like now that my body is all woken up, it’s *hungry*.”

“Don’t be ashamed and don’t apologize.” Reaching up, he cupped my cheek with his free hand. “It’s okay, baby,” he murmured. “Go on, just take what you need. Here—I’ll even help you.”

And with a long, slow thrust, he rolled his hips up, sliding his thick shaft against my open pussy, giving me that extra little bit of friction I’d been yearning for.

“Oh, Jake!” I moaned, rolling my own hips to keep time with him. “Oh, yes—that’s exactly what I need! Yes...yes!”

I squeezed my eyes tightly closed in pleasure but then I heard Jake say my name.

“No, little Ani,” he growled. “Look at me—I want to see it in your eyes when you come on my cock.”

Moaning, I opened my eyes and stared into the pure-gold depths of his gaze. As before, when he had taken my virginity, the intensity of looking him in the eyes was almost too much.

“Ride me, baby,” Jake told me and his hand drifted from my cheek to my breast, which he cupped before beginning to gently tug at my sensitive nipple. “Fuck yourself on me—it’s okay.”

God, I loved it when he talked dirty to me! I did as he said, sliding up and down the length of his thick cock, moaning when the thick knot at the base bumped over my aching clit and then gasping with pleasure when I felt the broad head slide down to lodge briefly at the mouth of my pussy on my upward slide.

I was close—so *close*—and then suddenly, it was too much. Looking into Jake’s eyes, I began to come.

“God, baby—I can feel you coming,” he growled, his eyes never leaving mine. “Wish I was inside you, feeling you squeeze me like before!”

The minute he said that, I had a craving so strong to feel him inside me, it was nearly unbearable. In fact, it *was* unbearable. With a low moan, I rose up and reached between us to fit the broad head of his cock to the mouth of my pussy. Then I sat down on him again—this time for real. Yes, *this* was what I needed, I thought as I felt my inner walls contract, squeezing tight around the thick girth of his shaft. This was *exactly* what I needed.

“Ani!” Jake’s eyes went wide. “Be careful! Don’t let my knot slip in! If you keep this up, I’m going to come too!”

“Come in me, then,” I moaned. “You told me to take what I need—well I *need* this—I need *you*, Jake. Need you inside me, filling me up!”

“God, baby...” He shook his head. “We have no excuse this time—there’s nobody watching—I shouldn’t do this.”

“Please, Jake!” I begged, riding him harder. I didn’t know why but it felt really, *really* good when he pressed against the end of my channel as I was coming. “Please, I *need* you!”

“God, baby—why can’t I say no to you?” he groaned and then he was spurting inside me for the second time that day, filling me with his seed as I moaned his name and rode him hard—though I was still careful not to let his knot enter me. Some part of me wanted the knot deep inside me—wanted it desperately—but I knew I couldn’t let it happen. If I did, I risked getting pregnant and I wasn’t ready for that.

When we both finished coming, I collapsed on Jake’s chest, panting.

“Thank you,” I whispered, trying to get my breath back. “Thank you so much—that was just what I needed!”

“You’re lucky you can’t get pregnant unless I put my knot in you,” he growled hoarsely, stroking my hair away from my face. “You’d be in trouble otherwise, little Ani. I think I’ve pumped about a gallon of cum into you today.”

“I know,” I admitted. “And I’m sorry.”

But I wasn’t moving off him. I wanted to feel him in me, filling me, for as long as possible. Jake didn’t make me get off,

either. He was still hard though only halfway in me, due to the way I was sprawled on his chest.

“It’s all right,” he murmured, stroking my hair. “I told you to take what you need. I just...didn’t think you’d need this.” He gave a little twitch of his hips which nudged his thickness briefly deeper into me.

I moaned softly.

“Why does it feel so good? Isn’t it supposed to hurt or chafe after a while?” I asked.

Jake shook his head.

“Not with Weres—our bodies are adapted to long breedings—we have to be, because of our knots,” he told me. “Your soft little pussy will keep making lubrication for hours—for as long as I’m inside you, actually. Not to mention the fact that you’re all slippery with my seed,” he added.

“I like having your seed in my pussy,” I admitted softly. “It feels *really* good. Almost as good as it feels when you, uh, touch bottom inside me.”

“You like that, baby?” He raised his eyebrows at me. “You like it when I press my cock deep inside you—all the way to the end of your pussy?” He demonstrated by lifting his hips and thrusting deep into me, as though to illustrate his point.

Though I had just come really hard, his action still made me moan with desire.

“I really *do*. I *love it*,” I told him. I frowned thoughtfully. “I’ve heard that a lot of girls don’t like that, though—they say it hurts. But I just want *more* every time I feel you so deep inside me. Why is that?”

“That’s your body wanting to be knotted,” Jake murmured. “Here—I’ll show you—sit up on me again.”

I did as he asked, loving the feeling of his thickness pressing deep inside me once more. God, what was going on with me? Was it my Heat Cycle? Whatever it was, I felt like I was insatiable! Also, how could Jake keep going and going

like this? Was it a Were thing, him staying hard even after he came? It must be, I decided.

“Feels good, right?” Jake murmured, looking up at me as he thrust a little deeper in me. “But it would feel better if I knotted you—which I’m absolutely *not* going to do,” he added, frowning.

“But...why?” I asked, grinding on him a little. “Why would it feel better?”

“When a male Were’s knot slips all the way inside your pussy, it causes the head of his cock to press *hard* against the mouth of your womb,” Jake told me. “And a female Were’s womb is always thirsty—at least during her Heat Cycle.”

“It is?” I asked, looking up at him.

Jake nodded.

“Mmm-hmm, just like your little pussy is thirsty right now and drinking it all in. Notice how almost none of my cum has leaked out of you? Have a look and see.”

I moved the covers and looked down to where we were joined. Sure enough, though it felt as though he had filled me to the brim several times, there wasn’t any wet spot where I had lost any.

“God, that’s a hot sight,” Jake growled and I had to agree with him. My little pussy was stretched as wide as it could go with his thick shaft buried to the root inside me. Only the thick, red knot was still outside my pussy mouth. I couldn’t help wondering what it would feel like to have it inside me, but I resisted the urge to settle lower on him and try to make that happen.

He’s your stepbrother; I reminded myself. You can’t get pregnant by your own stepbrother!

“So...what happens when a girl gets knotted?” I asked breathlessly.

“When a female Were is being knotted, the mouth of her womb will open up and actually *suck* the head of the male’s shaft,” Jake told me. “That helps him to release the most seed

and also helps it to go straight into her womb. With a really good knotting, she won't release any of the seed—her body will absorb it all.”

“That sounds kind of strange,” I told him, frowning a little.

Jake shrugged.

“Don't ask me—it's Were physiology. Supposedly it increases the chances of conception.”

“Mmm...I can see how it would,” I murmured, shifting against him to feel him go deeper inside me. For just a moment I felt the thick, red knot start to slide in deeper.

“Stop, Ani!” Jake warned me. “Whatever you do, *don't* let me knot inside you! In fact, it's probably time you got off me now.”

“What if I just lay against you again? Like this?” I lay down on his chest, humming contentedly and let his shaft slide about halfway out of me.

“Ani...” Jake's voice held a note of warning.

“Oh, come on, Jake—your knot can't get into me this way,” I pointed out. “And it feels...comforting.”

“All right.” Jake sighed. “But no more breeding or coming—just relax and talk to me.”

“Okay,” I agreed, snuggling against him. I can't explain the feeling of warmth and closeness I got, being so close to him. And I won't lie—part of that was the fact that he was still inside me. I thought again of how I had ignored this part of myself—the sexual part—all my life, but now that it was awake it seemed to want *all* my attention.

Then I lost myself in the pleasure of just being close to Jake—just feeling warm and safe in his arms. As long as we could do this, I thought drowsily, I didn't care what happened next.

But I'm sure I wouldn't have thought that if I'd had any idea what was going to happen that night...

TWENTY-EIGHT



“ALL RIGHT, GET ON YOUR HANDS AND KNEES—BOTH OF you.” Tainer waved a pistol in my face, making me wince away from him. This was the first time we had seen him since Sorenson had banished him downstairs and I was *not* happy to renew the acquaintance.

“Get that gun out of our faces!” Jake snarled, pushing me behind him. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

“The gun is a regrettable necessity, I’m afraid, Jacob,” Sorenson said loftily. “You don’t think I’ll just take the silver off you and *trust* that you’ll behave, do you?”

“Look, I’m not trying to get away, am I?” Jake demanded. “Ani *needs* to be knotted and bred—I’m not going anywhere until I do that.”

“Heard you’re gonna knot her in your fur form,” Tainer said, still holding the gun on us. “Always wanted to do that to a bitch. Didn’t know you Royals was gettin’ all kinky up there in your palace.”

“My father’s house is *not* a palace,” Jake said, glaring at him. “And ‘we Royals’ do what we have to in order to survive.”

“Well now you’re going to do what *I* tell you,” Sorenson said, frowning at both of us. “So listen up—this is how it’s going to go: First, Jacob, you will enter the Royal Omega and fill her with your shaft and your knot. Only when your knot is firmly seated inside her channel, will I remove the silver cuffs so that you may change into your fur form.”

“I can’t Shift while I’m *inside* her!” Jake looked aghast at the idea.

“You’ll have to or I’m not removing the cuffs!” Sorenson said, frowning. “You *say* she needs to be bred and the only way to breed her is in your fur form, so *that’s* the way you’re going to breed her!”

Jake and I exchanged a glance and I bit my lip. Oh God, what had we gotten ourselves into? And at the same time, how could we get ourselves out of it without doing what Sorenson demanded?

You can’t, whispered a little voice in my head. *You’re going to have to do this, Ani—there’s no other way.*

I could see that Jake was about to refuse, but then they would just make him knot me the regular way and I would get pregnant for sure! If the silver didn’t come off, he couldn’t Shift and if he couldn’t Shift, we were stuck here for God knows how long. They might keep us for weeks or even months, making Jake knot and breed me over and over again until they were sure I was pregnant and it was too late to do anything about it but have the baby.

“I won’t Shift while I’m inside her—it’s too traumatic!” Jake exclaimed, interrupting my frantic thoughts.

“Then you won’t Shift,” Sorenson said firmly. “I don’t believe you really need to, anyway.”

“Yes, he does!” I heard myself say. Both men looked at me and I felt my cheeks go hot. “That is, I *need* him to,” I amended. “But maybe...maybe he could wait on the, er, the knot until after he finished his, uh transformation? I’m afraid if he shifted with the knot inside me, it would tear me up. I need time to get used to him in his, uh, fur form,” I told Sorenson. “Before...before he knots me as a Wolf,” I added in a low voice.

Sorenson looked thoughtful.

“I think that sounds reasonable,” he said, nodding. “He can put his shaft inside you and *then* Shift. But the minute he finishes Shifting, he *must* knot you.”

“I can’t—” Jake began but I shook my head.

“Jake, you *have* to,” I told him. “Please—I *need* you in me!”

To be honest, this wasn’t far from the truth. My Heat Cycle was going into overload and despite the fact that we’d spent most of the day making slow, leisurely love, I felt like I needed more. Because yes, even after I had promised Jake we wouldn’t do *that* anymore, we had ended up doing it again and then again and *again*. Jake never seemed to get soft and I never stopped needing him. He filled me over and over, though every time he swore was the last.

Finally, Ophelia had brought us a supper tray, which interrupted our marathon lovemaking session. After we had finished eating, she had taken me into the bathroom for a “Cleansing Ceremony.” This mostly consisted of her having me take a bath in some sweet-smelling herbs and washing my hair with some special shampoo that smelled like lavender and vanilla.

She had dried it afterwards and then gave me one last stick to pee on. When the Heat Cycle box came up bright red, she pronounced me “Ready to Conceive,” which made me shiver uneasily. If Jake really *did* get his knot into me tonight, I might very well get pregnant with my stepbrother’s baby—a “Royal Child,” as Ophelia put it. Or “The Savior of our Race” which was another phrase she liked to throw around about the baby that Jake was supposed to plant in me.

Anyway, the whole ceremony had taken time and by now it had been three or four hours since I’d last had Jake inside me. I hated to admit it, but I was beginning to feel like I really needed him badly. Even if Tainer hadn’t been holding a gun on us, I would have begged my stepbrother to breed me. Maybe not in his fur form, but I definitely needed to feel him inside me.

Jake was looking at me uncertainly and I gave him a significant look. We *had* to do this—it was the only way.

“Very well—if we’re agreed, then we will move off and give you some room,” Sorenson said to us. “But remember,

please, that Tainer will be holding the gun on you the entire time. He assures me that he's a good enough shot to hit a non-vital area that will not impede the Royal breeding."

He and Tainer and Ophelia—who had been standing in the shadows—all stepped back to the other end of the attic.

"Aw, I wanna see 'em do it!" Tainer complained.

"They are not here to put on a show for you—they're here to save our race by creating the next Heir to the Royal Line," Sorenson said severely. "You're close enough to keep them in your sites, are you not?"

"Yeah, I guess so," Tainer muttered.

"The two of you on your hands and knees," Sorenson called to us. "Jacob, when you have entered the Royal Omega fully, *except* for your knot, tell me and I will come and unlock the cuffs."

I looked at Jake and he looked at me. Without a word, we got into position with him behind me, both of us on our hands and knees. Well, *I* was anyway. It was more awkward for Jake, since his left hand was still cuffed to the headboard. Still, I could feel him behind me, his muscular chest against my bare back. It had been so long since I'd had clothes on it almost felt normal to be naked.

"Ani, I'm not going to do this to you—not going to Shift while I'm inside you." His breath was warm and ticklish on the side of my neck as he murmured the words in my ear. "I'm going to pull out the moment I start to turn."

"Do you think you can?" I murmured back.

"I'll have to." Jake's voice was grim. "Because I won't do that to you, baby—I won't hurt you that way," he added, his voice going hoarse with emotion.

"I'm betting Tainer is going to be distracted by just seeing you, uh, inside me," I murmured back. "He wants to see us put on a show—so we will. Pretend like you're fucking me really good and deep—like you have to do it to get me ready before you can Shift. And the minute he drops the gun even a little..."

“I’ll jump him. All right.” Jake said. “Then let’s go—I’m gonna have to fuck you hard, baby—we’re going to have to put on the show of our lives.”

“I can take it,” I told him, hoping I was telling the truth. “I’m not afraid, Jake.”

“I’ll be as careful as I can,” he promised me. “And don’t be afraid of my Wolf after I Shift. Remember, I’m sentient in my fur form—I can understand you just as well as I can in my human form, though I won’t be able to talk to you.”

“I understand,” I murmured. “I—”

“What’s takin’ so damn long?” Tainer demanded. “Go on and shove it in ‘er!”

“Come a little closer if you’re so eager for a show,” Jake growled. I knew he was trying to get the big hillbilly close enough that he could jump him the minute he shifted forms, but it still made my skin crawl to think of Tainer watching us do this.

Still, he had watched us do other things, I reminded myself. I needed to forget about him and just concentrate on Jake and what was about to happen between us.

The bed was positioned directly under the skylight and the moonlight was a silver square that covered the bed and bathed Jake and me in silver. To me, it felt like a spotlight, shining just on us—a mute witness to what was about to happen. The Weres called it a blasphemy—would it really be that bad?

Before I could even try to answer my own question, I felt the blunt head of Jake’s cock nudging between my spread thighs.

“You ready, baby?” he murmured.

“More than ready,” I told him. “Go on, Jake—put yourself inside me.”

With a movement that was, by now, quite familiar, I felt the broad head pushing into the mouth of my pussy. I moaned in pleasure and relief as Jake pushed deeper into me, filling me

completely so that he was seated all the way inside my channel.

Well, all except for the knot, which I could feel just outside my pussy. I wiggled a bit, trying to get used to the feeling of him inside me all over again. God, he was so thick!

It's all right, I told myself Everything is going to be okay. Just relax, be calm...

“All right,” Jake growled at Sorenson. “I’m in her—all but the knot.”

“Very good,” the cult leader purred. “Tainer, please keep them in your sites as I unlock these cuffs,” he went on.

“I got ‘em. One wrong move and somebody’s gonna get aerated.” Tainer came around to the side of the bed, still holding the gun. I turned my head, not wanting to look at him while I was in such an intimate, vulnerable position. I could feel Jake inside me, behind me—tense—waiting for what came next.

Sorenson dug a little silver key attached to a long chain out of his pocket and came around the back of the headboard. Stooping, he unlocked the cuff from Jake’s left wrist and took a quick step back.

“Now *Shift*,” he commanded Jake. “If he doesn’t, shoot him—someplace non-lethal, of course,” he added, speaking to Tainer.

“Wait a minute,” Jake protested. “I have to breed her a little first—get her warmed up.”

Gripping my hips harder, he pulled all the way out and thrust back into me—*hard*. Then he did it again...and again and again.

I moaned, not having to fake the painful pleasure. He was filling me so hard—so *deep*. Deeper and rougher than he had ever taken me before. With every thrust I could feel the thickness of his knot nudging the mouth of my pussy, *almost* slipping in. Oh God, if it slipped all the way inside me...if it tied us together...

“Holy shit—he’s fuckin’ her *hard*,” I heard Tainer mutter. “Lookit him go, fuckin’ his own little sister!”

StepSister! I wanted to correct him, but I couldn’t speak at that point—couldn’t do anything but spread my thighs and hang my head, trying to be open enough as I submitted to Jake’s rough thrusts inside me. He was taking me so *hard*...

And then I felt a sharp pain and I couldn’t help myself—I cried out.

“Jake please—it *hurts!*” I gasped. Despite all the compounds I’d had from him earlier, it seemed that something had torn somehow. The stinging pain was *intense*.

Jake froze in mid-thrust and went tense behind me. Then he leaned down and murmured,

“Gods, I’m so sorry, little Ani. I never meant to hurt you.”

I wanted to tell him it was all right, that I loved the feel of him inside me no matter what. But I couldn’t seem to speak... and then he pulled out and began to change.

TWENTY-NINE



IT HAPPENED REALLY FAST...AND YET IT SEEMED TO LAST forever. First the smooth chest at my back was suddenly covered in soft, dense fur. I felt it brushing my bare skin and a ripple of goosebumps ran over my flesh. The weight above me shifted subtly, getting much heavier and I felt the thickness that had just recently been filling me rubbing against me instead. I could feel it growing too—getting huge—and I had a moment to be thankful that Jake wasn't still inside me and to hope that no one had noticed he had pulled out.

Luckily, it seemed they were too distracted by his transformation to notice that his shaft was rubbing against me rather than actually in me at this point.

“Holy shit,” I heard Tainer mutter. “He actually did it—Shifted right inside her! He’s fuckin’ her in his fur form!”

“Oh *my!*” I heard Ophelia breathe in a kind of horrified yet extremely aroused kind of way. “I can’t believe they’re doing that! I wonder what it’s like?”

“You wanna find out, ‘Phelie?” Tainer smirked at her. “I’ll fuck you in fur form—always wanted to do that to a bitch.”

Sorenson was the only one who didn’t seem either horrified or titillated.

“Now the knot!” he commanded Jake. “You must knot her and fill her with your seed!”

Oh God—they were going to see now—were going to notice he wasn’t still in me—I was sure of it. And Tainer was going to shoot Jake or me or both of us!

“Don’t worry, baby—I’m hiding everything with my tail as much as possible—just pretend I’m still in you.”

The surprise of what I heard nearly drove the fear out of my mind—it was his voice! But he had told me he wouldn’t be able to talk in his fur form. Then I realized that I hadn’t heard the voice with my ears—Jake had somehow spoken *inside* my head. Then I heard him again.

“Moan some more—arch your back and put on a show,” he directed me. *“Tainer is watching—hopefully he’ll forget he’s supposed to be aiming at us!”*

“Jake! Oh, please!” I moaned loudly. I moved under him, feeling the thick, dense fur rub along my spine as the enormous shaft rubbed against my pussy. If he put that thing inside me now, he would really hurt me—rip me apart—I knew it!

“Put the knot in her!” Sorenson was demanding, oblivious to my pain. “You must knot her in order to fill her womb with life—in order to carry on the line of the First Wolf! The Royal Omega must conceive by the Alpha Heir tonight!”

“Yeah—knot ‘er good!” Tainer exclaimed excitedly. He took a step forward—presumably to get a better look—and I saw the gun barrel drift down and to the side.

Jake must have seen too because I heard him say, *“NOW!”* in my head.

I felt him crouching for a leap and I collapsed on the bed, huddling into myself, trying to make myself small.

It was just as well that I went down because Jake jumped over me—a huge, dark, shaggy shape in the moonlight. I saw the silvery light shining on a pair of jaws with teeth like daggers and then the gun went off with a deafening *bang* and a flash of light that blinded me.

I lay there, stunned, my ears ringing and the brightness of the gunshot still clouding my vision. Where was Jake? Had he been shot? What was happening?

Then my hearing came back and I blinked, trying to clear my vision.

“Stop him! Shoot him!” Sorenson was shouting. “Shift, damn you, Tainer—Shift or he’ll kill you! He’ll kill us all!”

But it was too late for the big hillbilly. I watched in numb silence as the huge, dark shape—a wolf as big as a horse—sank its teeth into his grizzled throat. He was trying to Shift—fur was starting to cover his body. Before he could completely transform, however, Jake’s Wolf ripped out his throat in a bloody spray of droplets that were black in the moonlight.

I gasped and huddled lower in the bed. Oh God, it was like a nightmare! What was I going to *do*?

Then someone was grabbing me by the hair.

“Professor, what are you doing?” I heard Ophelia gasp. “He’ll kill you—he just killed Tainer, oh my God!”

“Come here and help me—I’m taking the Royal Omega hostage!” Sorenson shouted at her. “He won’t dare to touch us as long as we have her!”

He yanked harder on my hair and I gasped and kicked out at him.

“Let me go! Let me *go!*” I screamed.

Jake’s Wolf must have heard me screaming. He finished with Tainer, dropping the limp form on the floor with a *thud*, and turned his head towards me and Sorenson and Ophelia. His lips curled back from bloody fangs when he saw what was going on and his eyes glowed a pale gold. A low growl was rising in his shaggy throat. It rolled from his dripping muzzle like ominous thunder.

“Here—take her,” I heard Sorenson say to Ophelia. They were both behind me, so I couldn’t see them—I only felt them grabbing my hair. “I have to Shift!”

“There’s no way you can take on a Royal!” Ophelia objected. “His Wolf is twice the size of yours, Professor!”

Sorenson didn’t answer. The next time I saw him, he was in his fur form too. He leaped around to the front of the bed, guarding me like some kind of a prize as he growled at Jake.

But, as Ophelia had pointed out, Sorenson's Wolf was barely half the size of Jake's. It was like a Pomeranian challenging a Pit bull. He must be crazy, I thought, to take on someone so much bigger than him!

Jake gave him a single warning growl and then charged. I saw him catch the smaller Wolf by the throat and Sorenson let out a garbled howl.

"Bastard!" I heard Jake thinking. *"Kidnapping fuck! How dare you hurt her? How dare you threaten the woman I love? How dare you threaten my Fated Mate?"*

I couldn't hear any of what—if anything—Sorenson was saying or thinking in his Wolf form so I assumed that the strange mental connection only existed between me and Jake.

I turned my head, unable to watch, as the big black Wolf's jaws closed hard over the throat of the other animal. There was a sickening *crunch* and Sorenson's Wolf went limp, its final whine cut off abruptly.

"Oh, God!" I moaned and buried my face in my hands, not wanting to look.

"How could you?" Ophelia whispered from behind me. Then her voice grew louder. "How *could you?* I trusted you—both of you! Don't you care that our entire race is going to die out because of your selfishness? Don't you give a damn about anyone but yourselves? You Royal *bastards!*"

I turned my head to look at her and saw that her cheeks were shiny in the moonlight. She was sobbing and shaking her head, looking like a woman betrayed.

Jake's Wolf growled and took a step towards her, but I shook my head.

"No, Jake—not her," I told him.

"There will be trouble if I let her go," he predicted, still speaking in my head.

"Let her go," I said firmly. "She's not guilty of anything but being sucked into a cult. With Sorenson..." I almost said

“dead” but then couldn’t get the word out. “With him gone, she’ll be all right,” I told him.

Jake growled again, taking another menacing step towards the weeping Ophelia, but this time I thought he was just warning her away from me.

“You’d better go,” I told her. “Run while you can! I’ll hold him back as long as I’m able.”

Ophelia pointed a trembling finger at me.

“This isn’t over,” she said. And then she turned and stumbled towards the trapdoor, sobbing as she went. I heard her clattering down the wooden ladder and then her footsteps running down the hallway downstairs. I listened for a moment until the front door banged distantly and a motor started—she must be driving away.

I bit my lip. The last of our kidnappers was gone now, leaving me alone with the huge black Wolf in the moonlight.

THIRTY



NOW THAT I WAS ALONE WITH JAKE'S WOLF, I COULDN'T HELP feeling nervous. Yes, I could hear his voice in my head but what if I was imagining it? What if I was going crazy from all the stress of this awful night and now that everyone else was gone the Wolf would tear my throat out, too?

I shrank back from him as he approached the bed. The Wolf seemed to see the fear on my face, because he whined sadly and came to a stop at the foot of the bed.

"What is it, little Ani?" I heard him asking in my head. *"Do you hate me now? Fear me? I'm so sorry for what I did to you—I don't blame you if you can't forgive me."*

"I...I'm afraid I'm going crazy," I whispered in a small voice. "I keep thinking I'm hearing you in my head, but what if I'm not? What if I'm just losing it from all the stress?"

"You're not crazy!" Jake protested.

"Then how can I hear you?" I demanded. "I thought you said you wouldn't be able to talk to me in your, uh, fur form?"

Jake didn't answer my question, though I had a strong feeling that he *did* know the answer. Instead, the big black Wolf came closer to the bed. Very deliberately, he wiped its muzzle on the sheets, cleaning away the blood as best he could. Then he laid his head on the side of the bed and looked up at me, giving me sad eyes.

"Please don't hate me," I heard Jake's voice say. It sounded hoarse with emotion. *"I never meant to hurt you!"*

“You didn’t hurt me!” I objected and then I moved to get off the bed and realized that wasn’t strictly true. There was a sharp little pain between my legs that hadn’t been there before. At first, my confused and traumatized mind couldn’t think why that would be. Then I remembered the rough fucking he’d given me to distract our captors and the sharp little pain I’d experienced near the end.

“*You’re hurt!*” The big Wolf looked at me anxiously.

“No, I’m not,” I denied again. But when I moved, I couldn’t help the small moan that escaped me.

“*Let me see!*” the Wolf that was Jake commanded.

I started to part my legs, but the huge black Wolf was intimidating—though he had Jake’s eyes and I could hear his voice in my head, I *still* had a hard time wrapping my mind around the fact that they were actually the same being.

“Could...could you please change back into Jake? I mean, back into your, uh, human form first?” I asked hesitantly.

The Wolf made a little chuffing sound of worried impatience.

“*It’s really hard to Shift back to human form so soon after Shifting to my fur form. Hold on—I’ll have to get out of the moonlight to do it.*”

He was just backing into the shadows—which made him look even more scary—when the front door of the old house banged open loudly and we heard a voice shout from below,

“Everybody freeze! We’re here for the Royal Heir and his sister, the Royal Omega! Come out and give them up or die!”

THIRTY-ONE



“OH MY GOD!” I GASPED, LOOKING AROUND WILDLY. THE sound of boots clattering down the wooden hallways of Tainer’s house drifted up through the attic trapdoor and I knew we didn’t have long before the soldiers were here.

“*It’s my father’s men!*” Jake exclaimed in my head. The huge black Wolf backed further into the shadows and seemed to shimmer for a moment. When he came back into the moonlight, he was Jake again, naked and with blood still smeared in the corners of his mouth, but definitely my stepbrother.

“I...I thought you said it was hard to change back?” I said, looking up at him.

“It’s amazing how panic gives you strength,” he said dryly. “Now listen to me, Ani—go in the bathroom and wash my scent off you and out of you *right now!* Then find something to wrap up in. Here—this should do it.”

He handed me one of the sheets from the bed, shoving it in a wrinkled mass into my arms.

“I don’t understand.” I shook my head. “You want me to take a bath? *Now?*”

“Yes, *now,*” Jake insisted. “You have to get every trace of my scent off your skin or they’ll know right away what we’ve been doing!”

“Look, Jake...” I ran a hand through my hair. “I know that my mom would be really upset and your dad would be really

mad, but it's not like we could *help* it—I mean, they *made* us. We—”

“Ani, listen to me.” He grabbed me by the shoulders and stared intently into my eyes. “The penalty for incest in the Were world isn't shunning or banishment or being grounded to your room for a couple of weeks. The punishment for incest for Weres is *death*.”

“*Death?*” I squeaked, staring at him, wide-eyed. “Are you *serious?*”

“Do I look like I'm kidding?” Jake said flatly.

“N-no,” I stuttered—I had never seen him more grim, not even when Tainer held the gun on us and forced me to go down on Jake and swallow his seed.

“They can't know—they can't find out. *No one can,*” Jake told me. “Not if we both want to live. So get in the bathroom and wash my scent off you *now!*”

He pulled me off the bed and gave me a little shove towards the bathroom. Downstairs, I could hear the booted feet getting closer—there wasn't much time.

I ran into the bathroom and locked the door. Twisting the taps on full, I jumped into the bathtub. There was no time to wait for the water to get warm so I began scrubbing my skin in the freezing cold stream, shivering as I did.

Get rid of his scent...get rid of his scent...how do I do that?

Plain water wasn't going to do it. Frantically, I grabbed for the bottle of lavender-vanilla shampoo Ophelia had used to wash my hair. I squirted a big glob of it into my palm and began to rub it all over my body—my breasts and torso and most especially between my legs.

I felt a stinging sensation as I scrubbed between my thighs and had to bite my lip to keep back a gasp of pain. Had Jake's shaft wounded me in some way when he was in his fur form? I didn't know and I had no time to find out. I kept scrubbing grimly, despite the stinging, trying to make sure that any of

Jake's essence that might still be on or in me was washed away.

Long before I felt completely clean, I heard heavy feet on the wooden ladder that led up the trapdoor and then loud, angry voices.

"Hey, it's me! It's Jacob!" Jake shouted and I could almost picture him holding his hands over his head.

"Jacob Wulven? Last living Heir of the Royal line of the First Wolf?" someone demanded.

"Didn't I just say so?" Jake snarled. "Don't point that fucking thing at me! If my father hired you to find me, he's going to be pretty damned angry if you shoot me instead of bringing me home safe!"

"Lower your weapons, a low, commanding voice said. "That's the Heir—I can tell by his scent. What happened here?" he asked, apparently talking to Jake. "And where's your little sister??"

"What do you *think* happened here?" Jake asked, avoiding the question about my whereabouts. "I Shifted and killed them."

In my mind, I pictured him pointing to the two bloody corpses—one human and one Wolf.

"And your sister?" the deep voice persisted. "Where's the Second Royal Omega?"

"In the bathroom, washing the blood off her," Jake told him. "She was kind of in the line of fire, so to speak when I ripped the first one's throat out. Got it all over her."

"Is she well? Unharmred?" the voice asked.

All this time, I had been washing the shampoo off my skin and drying off quickly with a towel. I wrapped the wrinkled sheet around my body toga fashion before I opened the door.

"I'm fine," I said, lifting my chin and trying to look unfazed. "Jake killed our kidnappers before they could really do anything to me."

I hoped my voice sounded strong and convincing. The room was filled with men in combat gear and all eyes turned towards me as I exited the bathroom.

“Where are your clothes?” the one with the deep, grating voice—a grizzled looking veteran who sounded like he smoked three packs a day—demanded.

“Do *you* take a bath in your clothes?” I countered, frowning haughtily at him. I was a Royal Were, I reminded myself. I was going to act like Royalty and dare them to question me.

It wasn’t lost on me that I might be acting for my life.

“Leave my little sister alone,” Jake growled at him. “She’s been through a fucking lot these past few days.”

“Oh yeah?” The grizzled guy narrowed his eyes at Jake and then looked at me. “What *exactly* has she been through? We know what the Worshipers of the Moon wanted from you two—we know all about their crazy prophecy that the line of the First Wolf must be continued.”

For a moment, a look of guilt crossed Jake’s face and I could see him trying to think how to respond.

“Yes, well, *we* know all about it, too,” I said, taking another step forward. “They’ve been doing nothing for the past few days but preaching to Jake and me non-stop, trying to indoctrinate us into their crazy cult. I’ve been bored *stiff*.” I yawned elaborately and then glared at the veteran guy. “What took you so long to come for us anyway?”

He stiffened, put on the defensive by my demand.

“We started searching as soon as the Royal Alpha called us,” he said, frowning. “But that wasn’t until twenty-four hours after you went missing, we estimate. Your parents were drugged, you see, Miss Wulven,” he added, speaking to me with considerably more respect, now that I had asserted my “Royal” lineage. “As soon as they woke up, they realized what had happened and called us. We’ve been tracking you ever since.”

“Well thank goodness you *finally* got here—though you’re a bit late,” I said, frowning at him. “Jake had to do all the dirty work, as you can see.” I pointed to the corpses on the floor and shivered dramatically.

“Yes, Miss Wulven. We’re sorry about that,” the grizzled veteran guy said. “We came as soon as we could.”

“Well now you can take us home, at least,” I said. “Is my mother, the First Royal Omega all right?” I added, a bit anxiously.

“She’s very well, just worried to death about you and your big brother,” the veteran said.

“Good.” I nodded regally. “The sooner I get home to her, the better. Take us right away!”

“Er...” The grizzled veteran coughed. “Would...do you want to get dressed first, Miss Wulven? It’s, uh, kind of cold out there.”

“No,” I said coolly. “My clothes were absolutely covered in blood—a complete loss. I’d rather go in a sheet and be a little chilly than put those gory things on again.” I shivered again, dramatically.

Jake caught my eye and I saw him give me a look of admiration, I let the corner of my mouth twitch up in a bare half-smile but inside I felt more like crying than laughing.

Tonight had been a *lot* and I knew I was probably going to break down later or maybe even have some kind of horrible PTSD from everything Jake and I had been through. But right now I had to hold it together, just a little while longer. Just until we could get home.

“You heard my sister,” Jake told the combat squad. “We need to get home to our parents. I’m sure our father and mother will be anxious to see us.”

The grizzled guy nodded his head respectfully.

“Yes, your Royal Highness,” he said, in a tone that was quite different from the one he’d first used to address Jake. It was a good thing my “haughty, Royal brat” attitude had

worked. “We’ll see that you get home immediately. Private Rames!” he barked at one of the men, who jumped to attention.

“Yes, Sir!” he said, snapping a salute.

“Bring the Royal Heir and the Second Royal Omega back home to their family compound at once!” he barked. “But first...here, Miss Wulven.” Turning to me, he shrugged out of his combat jacket, which was camo and starched stiff. “Put that on over your, uh, sheet,” he told me. “I can come get it later when I brief your father, the Royal Alpha.”

“Thank you,” I said, nodding my head graciously. “That’s very kind of you...”

“Oh, Sergeant Sterns. At your service, Miss Wulven.” He nodded respectfully to me—a motion that was almost but not quite a bow.

“You’re most kind, Sergeant Sterns. I’ll be sure to tell my stepfather, the Royal Alpha, when I see him again,” I told him.

I slipped the camo jacket around my shoulders. It smelled like about a thousand cigarettes and some sharp aftershave that nearly burned my nose. Still, I put it on anyway. It was probably good that it smelled so strongly, I reasoned with myself. It would cover any lingering trace of Jake’s scent on my skin.

“Are you ready to go?” Jake asked. He had found a towel to wrap around his own, lean waist. I knew the cold wouldn’t bother him, since he was a Were, but would it bother me? I hadn’t actually been knotted, but he *had* bred me a bunch of times. Also, my Heat Cycle had gone into the red—which meant I was still feeling pretty uncomfortably horny—or I would be later, once I’d had time to process everything. Did that make me a full-blown Were?

If it did, I’d better pretend otherwise, I told myself. If my mom and Jake’s dad realized that I was a full-blown Were, they’d put two and two together and it wouldn’t be good for either of us.

“The penalty for incest is death.” Jake’s words still rang in my head. I couldn’t believe that my mom would let anyone kill me because of something that wasn’t my fault, but I wasn’t so sure about my stepfather. Marcus was a stickler for obeying the rules—and making sure everyone else obeyed them too. Would he really try to kill me if he found out that Jake and I had slept together? And would my mom go along with it?

I wanted to say I was a hundred percent sure she wouldn’t—she was my *mom*, after all. But I couldn’t help feeling like I was only about ninety-nine percent sure. She and Marcus were so close they finished each other’s sentences at times—maybe they were “Fated Mates” as Jake had said. Speaking of that, hadn’t I heard him thinking of *me* as his Fated Mate during the altercation with Tainer and Sorenson? Had I really heard that or had I been imagining it? And what did it mean if I *had* heard it?

“Excuse me, Miss Wulven, but if you’d like to come this way, I’ll drive you and the Royal Heir home.”

The voice of the private who was taking Jake and me broke through my chaotic thoughts and I realized that it was time to go.

I took a last look around the attic. Someone had turned on the lights, so the moonlight no longer seemed so bright or overwhelming. I tried not to look at the mangled corpses in the corner or the bright red blood drying on the wooden floor. Instead, I looked at the rumpled bed where I had spent some of the worst...and best hours of my life.

For a moment I saw myself, lying on my back under Jake as he looked into my eyes, caressing my hair and murmuring softly to me as he took my virginity... I saw myself curled up with him, naked in the cold, drawing heat from his big, muscular body to survive... I saw myself riding him, my breasts swaying with every thrust as he filled me with his shaft and I cried out at the intense pleasure he gave me...

I saw all of it...and then locked it away in the back of my mind and told myself I must never think of it or speak of it ever again.

Because if I forgot and let those memories out...they might get me killed.

THIRTY-TWO



“ANI, DEAR—ARE YOU *SURE* YOU DON’T WANT ANYTHING ELSE to eat? This rare roast beef the kitchen staff made is really amazing. And roast beef has *always* been your favorite.”

“Thanks, Mom, but I’m not very hungry tonight.” I tried to smile naturally at her across the table, but couldn’t quite manage it. These days I was almost *never* hungry. Not for food, anyway.

It was three weeks since we’d been rescued and we were all sitting down for a dinner like a normal family—only I felt *anything but* normal.

I still had considerable stinging where Jake’s shaft had torn me while he was taking me so hard, for one thing—it just didn’t seem to be healing—but that was the least of my worries. My breasts and nipples ached all the time. Also, my pussy felt swollen and hot and my clit seemed to throb between my legs like a second heartbeat.

I was pretty sure it was my Heat Cycle ramping up again. It had never been satisfied last time—I had never been knotted and now my body was letting me know it. I didn’t remember much of what my mom had tried to tell me about a female Were’s Heat Cycle, but I *did* remember her saying that it wasn’t like a period. It could come on any time of the month and it didn’t considerately wait four weeks to come again like a regular period either. It could come at any time and stay for any length of time and it generally didn’t go away until a female Were was knotted.

Of course, this was hell on female Weres that had no mate, which was probably why the regular Weres had “breeding parties” amongst themselves. It allowed the females who were having a hard time, to get their itch scratched and also promoted the birth of more Weres.

Unfortunately, I wasn’t a regular Were—I was a Royal. Which meant that my Heat was more intense. Also, I had no male to help me with it. And worst of all, I couldn’t let anyone know what was happening to me.

I was afraid if I confided in my Mom, she would want to know what had started my Heat Cycle in the first place. Since, from my understanding, if I had been left strictly alone and not bothered by any male Weres, I should have been able to go on leading the sexless existence I’d had before I was kidnapped. If I told her I was having my Heat Cycle, she would want to know who started it—and all eyes would turn to Jake, no matter what I said.

So I was keeping everything inside and trying to act normal, but I wasn’t sure how much longer I could keep it up. Even though I said nothing, I was fearful of being “smelled out,” by my stepfather, especially. I had been wearing a ton of strong perfume and using a highly-scented, floral body wash to try and literally throw him off the scent, but I still saw him sniffing suspiciously anytime I was near him.

Which meant I went out of my way to keep my distance—because there had already been way too much suspicion against both me and Jake.

The day after we’d been brought home, after she hugged me and cried and told me how glad she was I was safe, my mom had taken me aside. She had asked me *delicately* if anything *bad* had happened to me during my time being kidnapped. “Anything bad involving your brother Jacob,” was how she had put it.

I had denied that anything “bad” had happened between us steadily, though it killed me to lie to my mom. But I just didn’t dare say to her what had really occurred—what Jake and I had

been forced to do in order to get through that dark time together, locked in the attic.

Instead, I stuck to my story about constant indoctrination. I told them that Sorenson and Tainer had lectured us day and night, showing us films about the end of the world and reciting the crazy prophecy about how all the regular Weres would die if the Royals didn't continue the line of the First Wolf.

According to this version of the story, Jake and I had been kept cuffed to the headboard of the bed so we couldn't touch because they wanted to convince us first that it was our "duty" to be together. Luckily, we had been able to persuade them that we were true believers and then Jake had Shifted and torn out both their throats before we had to "prove" our belief—that was my story and I was sticking to it!

Jake and I had decided not to mention Ophelia, after a quick, whispered conference in the back of the car on the way home. In our agreed-on fiction, only the cult leader and his mountain man sidekick had kidnapped us. They had taken us to Tainer's house together and had taken turns haranguing us about their "end of the world" prophecy. But though we pretended at the end that we agreed with them, nothing else had ever happened between us.

After I repeated this over and over to my mom, she finally seemed to believe me. My stepfather, Marcus, had been much harder on Jake, however. He had grilled my stepbrother for hours on end on several occasions, asking questions like what *exactly* we had done and why the damn sheet I'd worn home that night smelled like both of our scents.

Jake had stayed strong, though I could tell it killed him to lie to his dad. They'd had a very straightforward relationship up until the kidnapping and now there was a schism between them, because I didn't really think that Marcus completely believed that nothing had happened between myself and Jake.

However, Jake admitted nothing. He said of *course* the sheet smelled like both of us—they'd made us live in the same room and sleep in the same bed. And all we had done was listen to crazy—and rather boring—lectures presented by

Professor Sorenson and watch the weird movies he showed us to try and prove his theory and convince us the prophecy was true.

At last, his father seemed to accept that Jake was telling the truth—*mostly* anyway. But I still felt his sharp eyes on us anytime my stepbrother and I were in the same room together. Which meant we had to keep a strict distance between us.

And let me tell you, that distance was *killing* me. Because, during those days and nights in the attic, it seemed as though my body had grown addicted to Jake's. I missed his touch and the feeling of his big, muscular body surrounding mine. I missed his fur and bonfire scent and the deep murmur of his voice in my ear.

And yes, I missed having him inside me. I felt as though there was an empty spot between my thighs—a void that grew hungrier every day. As the moon waned and then waxed again, growing fuller every night, I felt sometimes like I might *die* if I couldn't feel him filling me again, thrusting in me...coming in me...making me his.

I told myself over and over I had to stop thinking like this—had to stop wanting him. He was my stepbrother—my *real* brother in the eyes of the Were law—and we were never going to be able to be together.

But though I knew that in my head, my heart and my body refused to listen. I yearned for Jake as I had never yearned for anyone before and yet, I couldn't show it. I had to be cool and distant with him and he was the same way with me.

Sometimes he was so remote I wondered if what had happened between us had all been a dream. After all, we had agreed that we were only acting—what if that was all it was? What if he didn't actually give a damn about me? What if I was crazy in love with him and he couldn't care less about me—about *us*?

There is no "us" I reminded myself for the five hundredth time as I accepted another serving of roast beef from my mother, just to make her happy, after she offered it to me yet again. And the way that Jake—who was sitting across the

large, ornately carved dining room table—was completely ignoring me seemed to support that idea completely.

“Your father and I are going out tonight,” my mom said, breaking into the monotonous, repetitive circle my mind had fallen into. “We’re going to see a movie for the first time in *ages*.”

For the first time since the attack and kidnapping, you mean, I thought but didn’t say. She and my stepfather were always going to plays and movies and charity balls and musicals—it was like she was trying to make up for the years when we were so poor we couldn’t even afford to see a matinee showing of anything.

Jake frowned at his father.

“Will you be taking guards with you? I hope you know you’re probably still a target. We *all* are.”

“Actually, we’re *not*,” Marcus said firmly. “I’ve had some investigation done and I have some very good news for all of us. With Sorenson gone, the Worshipers of the Moon are scattered and leaderless. Also, their appointed date of total destruction has come and gone and all of the regular Weres have *not* been “scattered from the Earth and blown as chaff before the wind,” so it’s hard for them to get new converts to believe their nonsense.”

I shivered at the sound of the crazy prophecy that Ophelia and Sorenson had repeated over and over. I wanted to forget all about it and here was my stepfather, bringing it up again!

“Does that mean it’s safe for me to go out too?” Jake demanded. “Because I’m tired of being cooped up in this mausoleum—I need to get out of here!”

“And where do you propose to go?” Marcus asked, frowning at him.

Jake shrugged. “I heard the local pack is having a group breeding tonight. Thought I might go down and sew some wild oats.”

His words stabbed me like a blade to the heart, but Marcus nodded his approval.

“Good—it’s about time you got out a bit. Yes, it should be safe to go but please be sure you wear the mask I got you. We don’t want any of the local bitches coming after you for child support if you knot them.”

“I’ll be careful,” Jake promised, grinning. “Nobody will know they’re getting a *Royal* knotting.”

He laughed and Marcus joined in, laughing as well, though he was usually pretty solemn. My mom frowned and admonished them for introducing an “off-color” subject at the dining table. And as for me, I sat there frozen with a full plate I hadn’t touched and an aching heart that felt like it was breaking in two.

Of course Jake and I had never promised to be exclusive with each other and I knew we could never be together again, but the idea of him going down to the local pack grounds and knotting some Were slut was enough to make me furious and horribly depressed at the same time.

“Ani?” my mom said. “Anastasia?”

“Huh?” I looked up, realizing that she’d called my name several times.

“I *said* would you like to come with Marcus and me to the movie?” she asked, giving me an anxious look. “I know you probably don’t want to stay home alone in this big house after...well, after what happened. Maybe you should come with us—it would be good for you to get out and get back to normal.”

“No thanks,” I said and tried to smile. “I wouldn’t want to ruin your date night. Besides, I have a lot of work to catch up on. I have some midterms to make up online.”

Marcus had gone to JMU and talked to all my professors, explaining what had happened and had gotten all of them to agree to let me complete the semester via computer. I suspected he might have made some small “donations” in order to make that happen but hey—what’s the point of being richer than God if you can’t bribe people into doing what you want, right?

“Are you *certain* you’ll be all right alone here?” my mom asked anxiously. “I hate to leave you all by yourself!”

“Are you kidding? With the increased security around here, I *never* feel alone,” I told her. Which was true, there were armed guards everywhere now and a brand-new computer surveillance system at all the doors and downstairs windows.

“She’s right, darling. The new security system is absolutely *impregnable*.” Marcus took my mother’s hand in his and, looking deeply into her eyes, brushed her knuckles gently with his lips.

“Oh, well then...” My mom’s cheeks flushed softly as she returned his loving gaze and they got lost in each other for a long moment, forgetting that Jake and I were even there at the table with them.

Fated Mates, I thought. *Alpha and Omega—they were meant for each other.*

I felt a burst of jealousy at the thought. Why was it that my mother had been allowed to find her perfect, Fated Mate and I was denied the right to find mine?

Well, it sounds like your “perfect mate” is going to go down to the local pack grounds and knot everything that stands still long enough to be knotted, whispered a little voice in my head. *So maybe he’s not so **perfect** after all.*

“Well, I’m headed for the pack grounds,” Jake said, rising from the table, right on cue—almost as though he’d heard my bitter thoughts.

“Have fun, son.” Marcus gave him a fond grin. “And don’t forget that mask!”

“You know it!” Jake grinned back. And then, without so much as a glance in my direction, he sauntered out of the dining room. After a moment I heard the front door slam and a moment after that the sound of his car engine roaring to life.

He’s really going, I thought, feeling sick. And that same little voice whispered, *He’s really going to cheat on me.*

I couldn't sit there one minute longer—I *couldn't*. I needed to go upstairs and scream and cry into my pillow and try to deal with the horrible waves of my Heat Cycle, which were tearing through me, making me feel empty and void inside.

“Can I be excused?” I asked, pushing my plate away. “I'm really full and I have a lot of studying to do.”

“Oh, well—I guess dinner is over anyway,” my mom said, sighing.

“We'd better get going if we're going to make that movie, darling,” Marcus murmured to her.

I turned away before my mom could ask me again, one more time, if I was *sure* I didn't want to go with them. I didn't. I couldn't stand to see them cuddling and making eyes at each other and reveling in their perfect love when the only man I cared about was driving away from me right now, intent on having sex with strangers.

I ran up the stairs and barely made it into my bedroom before the tears came.

THIRTY-THREE



I CRIED FOR WHAT FELT LIKE HOURS, BUT WAS PROBABLY MORE like thirty minutes, before I heard the light tapping at my windowpane.

My heart froze in my chest and I curled into a ball on the bed.

They're back! I thought, terror gripping my throat like an icy fist. *Oh my God, the Worshipers of the Moon! They've come to get me again!*

But just as I was about to have a full-blown panic attack, I heard a deep, familiar voice hissing softly,

“Ani? Come on, Ani—let me in!”

“Jake?” I jumped off the bed and rushed to the window. Throwing it open, I looked down and saw Jake flat against the wall, clinging to the trellis. “Oh my God, you nearly gave me a panic attack!” I told him, frowning.

“Sorry—not like I could come knock on the door to your room,” he rumbled, looking up at me. “Come on, let me in before the damn guards see me!”

I crossed my arms over my chest.

“Why should I? Don’t you have better things to do—like finding some slutty Were girl to knot, down at the local pack grounds?”

“Give me a break,” Jake growled. “I had to say *something* to throw my dad off the scent!” He inhaled deeply. “And

speaking of scents, I can tell your Heat Cycle is ramping up again. Let me in so I can help you.”

I bit my lip and took a step back from the window.

“So...you didn’t go anywhere near the local pack grounds tonight?”

“When would I have time?” Jake demanded as he climbed in the window and shut it behind him. “They’re over an hour away. I only stayed out of the way until I was sure my dad and your mom were gone before I came back.”

“Why would you do that? Why would you sneak up here when we’re supposed to be staying away from each other?” I asked, taking another step back.

I wanted so badly to hug him—to throw my arms around him and press my face to his neck and breathe him in. But he’d been so distant and cold the past three weeks, I didn’t know what reception I would get if I did that. So I kept my distance.

“Why do you think I came?” Jake growled. “Like I said, I can *smell* your Heat—and I’m pretty sure my dad can too. Or he *would* if you weren’t always wearing so much perfume.” His nose wrinkled.

“I didn’t know how else to cover it!” I flared defensively. “Or even how to deal with it! This is only my second Heat Cycle, you know, and it’s making me *crazy!*”

Jake stepped forward and took me by the shoulders. Looking down at me, he murmured,

“I know it is, baby—I can see it in your eyes every time I look at you.”

“Look at me? You *never* look at me...or talk to me...or even acknowledge my existence,” I whispered, my voice trembling. “I mean, I know we have to pretend we never, uh, got close when we were kidnapped, but sometimes it feels like we’re complete *strangers*. Do you really have to ignore me *completely* in order to throw our parents off the trail?”

Jake looked down at his feet, as though he couldn't meet my eyes.

"Sorry, little Ani," he murmured. "I guess I thought maybe...maybe you'd rather be strangers, considering..." He cleared his throat. "Considering what I did to you."

"What?" I stared at him blankly. "I don't understand, Jake. Everything that we did was done out of necessity." Well, except for that last day making love over and over—the memory which still made me ache. But for the most part, we had been forced into the intimacy we shared. How could that be his fault?

"Before I Shifted." Jake lifted his eyes to mine and I saw shame and regret and guilt all warring in their pure-gold depths. "I took you too hard, Ani," he said harshly. "And I *hurt* you."

Oh, now I got it. He was still feeling guilty for yet another thing that wasn't his fault.

"You *saved* me, Jake," I said earnestly. "You saved us *both*. If you hadn't distracted Tainer and the rest of them when you did, who knows what would have happened? They probably would have forced you to knot me and I'd be pregnant right now and we'd both be screwed—both literally *and* figuratively!"

He looked at me intently.

"So...you don't hate me for what I did?"

"No!" I exclaimed. "I lo— I mean..." I coughed to cover my confusion. "I mean I care about you a *lot*. Way more than I probably should," I amended quickly. Had I been about to tell my stepbrother I loved him? That was crazy, wasn't it? After all, we had only been pretending back in that attic. Right?

"I care about you, too, baby. And I'm sorry for what I had to do to you—so damn, *sorry*." Jake pulled me close to his chest and wrapped his arms around me.

I pressed my face to his chest and breathed him in, inhaling the familiar fur and bonfire scent I had been craving so badly. God, he smelled so good! Like home and safety and

warmth. Just filling my lungs with his warm, masculine fragrance seemed to help with my Heat Cycle—at least a bit. I felt it ease just a little as he held me and I wished he would never stop.

Jake seemed to feel the same way about me—at least if the way he was hugging me so tightly was any indication. Not that I was complaining—I wanted to sink into him and never let him go.

“Are you sorry for *all* of it, or just the part where you, uh, hurt me?” I asked, looking up at him after we had stood there holding each other for at least five minutes. “Because I’m not sorry for *any* of it—not a bit,” I went on. “I was dead before I met you—I felt *nothing*. You woke me up, Jake—woke up my body, my desire.”

Jake sighed and a troubled look came over his sharp features.

“I’m your big brother, Ani—I shouldn’t have been the one to awaken you.”

“Please stop with that ‘brother and sister’ crap,” I said, frowning. “There’s no blood relationship between us! And yes, I know that’s not how the Were world sees it, but *I don’t care*. All I know is that I can’t stop thinking about our time together and wishing...wishing we could do it again.”

“We can’t though, baby—you know that,” Jake murmured, shaking his head.

I took a step back from him, my heart sinking.

“What? But I thought you said you could help me with my Heat Cycle? What are you doing to do if we don’t do...*that*?” I demanded.

“Well, first of all, I can heal you,” he murmured. “Since I’m the Alpha who injured you, I’m also the only one who can heal you.”

“Heal me?” I asked, nibbling my lower lip. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

Jake gave me a level look.

“You know exactly what I mean, Ani. I hurt you when I took you too hard—you admitted it yourself. I felt it when it happened and I smelled blood afterwards. *Your* blood.” He nodded to the place where I was squeezing my thighs tightly together. “So take off your jeans and let me see.”

I looked at him uncertainly. I knew it was foolish to feel shy around him, considering everything we had done together in the attic, but I couldn't help it. I'd spent the last three weeks feeling completely ignored by him, it was hard to open up to him now.

“I...I'll be fine,” I told him. “Really, Jake, it doesn't hurt so much anymore.”

“It doesn't have to hurt at all if you'll just let me heal you,” he said. “Look, Ani...” He cupped my cheeks in his big, warm hands, and tilted my face up so he could look into my eyes. “I just want to help you, baby,” he murmured. “I just want to right the wrong I did to you. Please, can you let me do that?”

The soft, tender tone in his voice and the sincerity in his eyes won me over.

“All right,” I whispered. “I...I guess I can let you at least look.”

Jake nodded, releasing my face.

“Thank you,” he murmured. “For trusting me, even after what I did to you.”

I wanted to tell him he hadn't hurt my body nearly as much as he'd hurt my heart, but I bit back the words. Mutely, I unfastened my jeans and shimmied out of them. Then I lay on the side of my bed, wearing only the red cashmere sweater my mom had given me for an early Christmas gift and my white lacy panties.

Jake knelt beside the bed and pulled me closer to him, so that my lower legs were hanging off the side of the bed. He ran his big, warm hands up my thighs in long, soothing strokes until he finally reached my panties.

“Can I take these off, baby?” he murmured, looking up at me.

Biting my lower lip, I nodded.

“Thank you,” Jake said softly. Gently, he tugged down the lacy little underwear, revealing the little patch of golden curls at the top of my mound. He put both hands on my knees and urged my legs apart, not stopping until my thighs were spread wide, allowing him to see my naked pussy completely.

I felt my insides clench in a combination of anxiety and desire. Even back in the attic, he had never done *this* to me—had never gotten so close and looked at me so intimately. What if he didn’t like what he saw? What if he thought I was ugly down there or gross or weird or—

“God, you have such a beautiful little pussy,” Jake murmured, looking up at me.

“Um, I do?” I squeaked, my voice going high and uncertain.

He nodded.

“So soft and sweet and your scent calls to me—you’re deep in need, aren’t you?”

Unable to deny it, I nodded.

“I don’t have any of those tests Ophelia used on me, but I’m pretty sure I’m in the red,” I admitted.

“I know you are,” Jake murmured. “Well, maybe I can help you with that as well as healing you.”

“You can?” I asked hopefully. It would be wonderful to finally ease the constant, painful desire and get off the emotional rollercoaster my Heat Cycle caused. It was like being on your period and having horrible sexual cravings at the same time—absolutely no fun, especially when I didn’t have anyone to help me with it.

“I *think* I can,” Jake told me. “I can’t promise to stop your Cycle completely because I can’t knot you—you know that. But hopefully I can back it down for a while.”

“How?” I asked, propping myself up on my elbows to look down at him.

“Like this,” Jake said. And spreading my pussy lips delicately with his thumbs, he opened me and placed a gentle kiss on my wet folds.

“Oh!” I gasped. “Oh, Jake! What...what are you doing?”

“Healing you.” He looked up, his lips shiny with my juices. “The same compounds that help you stretch for me can also heal your wounds,” he explained. “And since you and I have been so...intimate, my body makes more of them when I breathe in your scent. Do you want me to go on?” He raised his eyebrows at me inquiringly.

“Y-yes, please,” I stammered. “If...if you really want to, I mean.”

“Of course I want to—I want to do so *much* we can’t and shouldn’t do,” he murmured. “But at least I can do this—at least I can heal you.”

“All right, Jake...” I relaxed back on the bed, though I kept my eyes on him. “I trust you—go ahead and...and heal me.”

“Thank you, baby,” he murmured. “Spread your legs a little wider for me and let me in. Need to really bathe that soft little pussy with my tongue in order to be sure you’re healed. Okay?”

“Okay,” I whispered and parted my legs even wider, opening myself completely.

Jake seemed to like what he saw because he gave a low groan and pressed forward again.

This time he didn’t just taste me—he traced my pussy with his tongue, slipping it gently inside me and bathing the small wound he had made in his fur form.

I moaned softly and tried to hold still, but somehow my hips kept twitching as he licked me. His tongue felt so soothing, so *right*. But though the aching pain which had been with me for so long was finally easing, I couldn’t help feeling like I needed something else...

At last, he sat back and nodded in apparent satisfaction.

“There, baby—you’re all healed,” he murmured.

“Thank you, Jake.” I shifted my hips again, restlessly. I was trying to sound grateful, but the ever-burning desire inside me had been made much, *much* worse by the feel of his tongue sliding inside me and his hot breath on my inner thighs.

He looked up at me.

“Oh, I’m not done yet, baby. Still need to help back down your Heat Cycle.”

“How...how will you do that?” I whispered.

Jake’s pale gold eyes were suddenly half-lidded and his voice went low with desire.

“By licking you, baby—by eating your soft little pussy until you come all over my face. Come as many times as you need to in order to feel better.”

“Oh, Jake...” I nibbled my lower lip, feeling my whole body tense with need at his words. “I’ve never...no one’s ever done that to me before,” I admitted.

“I know it, little Ani,” he murmured, stroking my inner thighs gently. “You were an innocent virgin before me. I never should have done what I did to you.”

“You didn’t have any choice,” I pointed out. “Please, Jake, I don’t blame you—I’m just...I’m not sure what to expect.”

“Nothing but pleasure, sweetheart,” he murmured, stroking my thighs again. “Just relax and let me taste you...open yourself up and let me make you come.”

“I...I’ll try,” I whispered.

“I’ll be gentle,” Jake promised. “Just relax, baby.”

Then he bent his head between my thighs and licked me again.

But this time it was different. Before, he’d been trying to heal the little hurt place. This time, he bathed my entire pussy

with his tongue, lapping me from bottom to top like I was an ice cream cone in danger of melting on a hot day.

I was melting, all right—melting under my stepbrother’s tongue! I moaned and bucked my hips up as he lapped over my aching clit. God, that felt good! I’d never had any idea that *anything* could feel that good! Once again I felt the familiar sensation of a wire tightening in my belly, a wire that would snap if only he would keep on doing what he was doing...

I didn’t need to worry—Jake didn’t seem to have any desire to stop. In fact, with a low groan, he wrapped his arms around my legs and pressed forward again, burying his face between my thighs and lapping hard and long before circling my throbbing clit with the tip of his tongue.

“Jake!” I gasped, bucking my hips again. Somehow I found I had woven my fingers through his thick, black hair and I was tugging him closer, needing more...*more*.

Jake seemed to understand what I needed, because he lapped harder, sucking my clit between his lips and teasing it relentlessly as sparks of pleasure rushed through me, making me feel like my entire body was igniting.

“Jake!” I moaned. “Oh, God, *Jake!*”

It felt so good, so right to have his tongue on me, in me, but somehow I needed something else—something more *intense*.

Jake seemed to know exactly what I needed. The next moment, I felt two long fingers slipping deep in my pussy. He found the end of my channel and pushed hard, simulating what would happen there during a knotting, I guessed.

It turned out to be *exactly* what I needed. With a cry, my back arched and I began to come, waves of pleasure washing over me as Jake continued to lick and kiss and suck my pussy as he fingerfucked me until I saw stars and nearly fainted from the pleasure.

It was *perfect*...and yet deep inside, I still wished for something else...

THIRTY-FOUR



I DON'T KNOW HOW MANY TIMES JAKE MADE ME COME THAT night—I lost count after a while. I only know he was tireless in giving me pleasure. It was almost like he was *trying* to wear me out—maybe trying to satisfy my Heat Cycle without actually knotting me.

If that was his purpose, he succeeded—to a point. After he finally sat back for the last time, panting, his chin and lips shiny with my juices, I no longer felt the deep, aching void inside me. But there was still an ache in my heart when I looked at him—a deep yearning I had never felt for any other man before.

“Jake,” I murmured, reaching for him. “Come here—hold me for a while.”

“Do you feel satisfied, baby?” he asked, laying on the bed beside me and taking me in his arms. “Was it enough?”

“It was,” I assured him and then kissed him. I could taste myself on his mouth and soon Jake was kissing me back, passionately, running his big, warm hands all over my body and making me feel hot and bothered all over again.

“Jake...” I moaned, between breathless kisses. “Make love to me, *please*.”

He pulled away, frowning.

“Ani, you know I can't do that.”

“You don't have to knot me,” I said quickly. “Just fill me up. Please—I've been feeling so *empty* inside.”

He shook his head.

“I’m sorry, baby, but I can’t—I can never do that again,” he said gently. “Filling you like that is *wrong*. And besides, it will spread my scent all over you and our parents would know what’s been going on.”

“Nothing’s been going on up until now and it’s been driving me *crazy*,” I protested. “Jake, what if...” I stopped, not sure if I should go on.

“What if what, baby?” he asked, frowning.

“What if we ran away together?” I asked in a rush, deciding to risk it all. “I mean, to someplace our parents could never find us? We could make a whole new life in a place where nobody knew us. We could—”

But Jake was already shaking his head.

“I’m sorry, Ani, but we can’t do that,” he said gently and there was a regretful look on his face.

“Why not?” I asked. “Is it because you don’t really feel anything for me? Because I know we said we were just acting back in the attic, but I can’t help myself, Jake—I have *feelings* for you! And it’s not just a crush or an emotional attachment because you’re the one who took my virginity or even trauma bonding because of what we went through together. It’s none of those things—it’s real and it’s true and it’s...” I wound down because he was shaking his head, a sad look in his eyes.

“We can’t do it because it’s *wrong*,” he repeated gently. “If we hadn’t been through the Blood-Mingling Adoption ceremony, the two of us running off together might be defensible. But it’s just not—I’m your brother!”

“I don’t see it that way!” I argued. “There’s no blood relationship between us!”

He ran a hand through his hair.

“Yes there *is*. The droplets of blood we mingled during the ceremony—”

“Don’t mean anything to me!” I exclaimed, starting to cry, though I really didn’t want to. “Just like *I* don’t mean anything

to *you*. That blood mingling shit is just an excuse for you to keep from any kind of commitment—admit it!”

“That’s not true. Ani, look at me...” He took my face in his hands, looking intently into my eyes. “Ani,” he said softly. “I have feelings for you, too.”

“What?” I whispered through my tears. “Jake...what are you saying?”

“I said, I have feelings for you. *Strong* feelings.” Gently, he brushed the tears from my cheeks with his thumbs. “And not only that, I think you’re my Fated Mate.”

“How...how would you know that?” I whispered.

“You could hear my voice when I was in my fur form,” he said simply. “That would be impossible unless we were fated to be together.”

“But...but then why can’t we run away?” I begged softly. “That stupid ceremony—”

“Is a binding contract,” Jake finished for me, sadly. “I’m sorry, baby, but I just can’t go against everything I’ve ever believed is true and right. I *can* promise you I’ll never bond another female to me,” he added. “If I can’t have you—and I *can’t*—then I don’t want anyone.”

“I feel the same way!” I whispered. “Oh, Jake, if only you could just get over that stupid ceremony!”

“Try to understand, baby,” he said earnestly. “It would be like running away to get married and have kids with my own little sister. Because you know if we left together, I would eventually knot you.”

“I know,” I whispered, feeling the place between my thighs clench tight with need. “But Jake, would it *really* be so bad?”

“It’s the worst kind of blasphemy—a taboo no Were can break on pain of death,” he said solemnly. “I’m sorry, baby, but even for you, I just *can’t*.”

“Why?” I said desperately. “Why is it so *wrong*?”

Jake sighed unhappily.

“I’m pretty sure it goes back to the First Wolf. Some of his original descendants bred together and the children they had were...monstrous.”

“Monstrous? How?” I demanded.

He shook his head.

“Deformed, crazy, killing machines. You know those old movies about the ‘wolfman?’”

I nodded.

“I guess so.”

“Well, those were based on sightings humans had of the inbred Wolves,” Jake told me. “They killed so many people, the humans found out about us—this was back in the Middle Ages, in Europe somewhere,” he added. “Anyway, the Weres almost died out because the humans went after them—after *us*.”

“Wow,” I whispered. “I didn’t realize.”

“Because you weren’t raised as a Were,” Jake said grimly. “But it’s drilled into every Were kid’s head from the minute they can understand it. After the Were massacre was over, the survivors made the rules against incest—*any* kind of incest,” he went on, frowning. “They’re called ‘The Unbreakable Laws.’ So please don’t say again that we’re not blood related—by Were law, we *are*. So we *can’t* run off together, Ani—we just *can’t*.”

“But, Jake—” I began, but just then we heard the sound of a car coming up the front drive.

“Quick!” I gasped. “They’re back!”

Jake was already at the window, making sure the coast was clear.

“Take a shower,” he said to me. “Wash my scent off you. There’s not as much as if I’d filled you, but there’s still some—enough to detect.”

“Where are you going?” I asked him as he started climbing out the window.

“I don’t know.” He looked unhappy. “I parked around the back—I’ll probably drive around for most of the night so my dad doesn’t get suspicious.” He sighed. “And I’ll have to find a place to wash your scent off my skin too—though I don’t want to.”

“I don’t want to wash yours off either,” I whispered. I loved his warm, fur and bonfire smell—it made me feel safe and protected to wear it on my skin like some forbidden perfume.

“You have to though—it’s the only way to be safe,” he warned me.

“When can we do this again?” I asked him, going to the window to watch as he climbed over the edge.

Jake was straddling the window sill, about to climb down. He took my face in his hands and looked at me earnestly.

“I should say ‘never,’ but I don’t know if either of us could stand that, baby,” he murmured. “For now, we just have to stay away from each other for a while.” He looked into my eyes. “Just remember, even when it seems like I’m ignoring you or I don’t care, that’s not the case. But I have to pretend—we *both* do.”

I shook my head.

“I can’t live like this! Pretending we hate each other, ignoring each other, when all we really want is to be together—it’s horrible!”

He sighed unhappily.

“I don’t like it either, but what else can we do?”

It was on the tip of my tongue to say, “run away together!” once more, but he had already made it clear he wouldn’t do that. He might have feelings for me, but he wasn’t willing to go the extra mile—wasn’t willing to break the taboo that was carved in stone in Were culture. It seemed like we would be stuck in a kind of limbo forever.

Except forever only lasted until the next day...

THIRTY-FIVE



I WAS SITTING AT THE DINNER TABLE THE NEXT NIGHT, LOOKING at emails on my phone, which I held discretely under the table. My mom’s rule was “no phones at the table” but as long as I wasn’t super obvious about it, she usually left me alone.

Madison and Ashley had been sending me pictures of their trip to Florida, maybe as a way to make me feel better. Word had apparently leaked out about the abduction and both of them had wanted to come see me. I had refused all visitors, however, because I was afraid if I saw their familiar faces, I might spill the secret that was burning inside me.

I wanted desperately to talk it all out with someone who could offer some sympathy but you know what they say, “once two people know a secret, it’s not a secret anymore.” Or something like that. Anyway, I just knew I didn’t dare to see them.

So I stayed in my room, but I *did* read their emails with a sense of longing and nostalgia. Back when they’d asked me to join their trip, I had been innocent of the Were world and its workings. Now I knew much more than I wanted to—and I loved a man I could never have.

It was enough to make me utterly miserable, though I tried not to show it. Instead, I kept my face blank as I scrolled through my emails, looking at the pictures of my two best friends in their bikinis laughing and playing on the beach.

Then a new email popped up. I didn’t recognize the email address and I was about to swipe it off to Spam-land, but the

first line of print caught my eye.

“This is what you get for being selfish!” it read.

A cold fist squeezed my stomach as I opened the email. It had a video embedded in it. Making sure the sound was turned all the way down, I clicked the little arrow in the middle to play it.

What I saw made my blood turn to ice in my veins.

Oh my God! Oh, no—OH NO!

I jumped up from the table suddenly, gripping my phone to my side.

“Anastasia?” My mother looked up anxiously. “Are you all right, sweetheart?” she asked.

Marcus and Jake looked up too and I saw suspicion in my stepfather’s eyes and concern in Jake’s.

“Sorry, I...I don’t feel so good all of a sudden,” I blurted. “I think I’d better go.”

“Well, if you don’t—” my mom began, but I was already leaving the table and bolting up the stairs to my room. This was bad—this was really, *really* bad and I had no idea what to do.

THIRTY-SIX



ABOUT FORTY-FIVE MINUTES LATER, THERE WAS A DISCRETE tapping at my windowpane. When I saw Jake’s face behind the glass, I pushed up the window and beckoned him inside.

“Hurry up!” I begged him. “And come see this—it’s really bad!”

“If it’s the same thing I got on my phone, I can imagine,” he said grimly, climbing in.

We sat, side-by-side on my bed, and I showed him the video—this time with sound, though I had it turned way down.

It was me on my hands and knees, completely naked with Jake naked behind me. The room was dark but the moonlight created a brilliant pool of light around us—it reminded me that I had felt like the two of us were in the spotlight at center stage or something.

At any rate, it was certainly bright enough that when the picture zoomed in on Jake entering me, it was plainly visible. And then it showed him fucking me—*hard*. There was no doubt what we were doing together—no doubt we were committing what the Weres considered incest, even though there was no true blood relationship between us.

The camera pulled back a moment and then, a moment later, Jake Shifted into his Wolf. Every detail had been lovingly captured from the expression of pained ecstasy on my face when he filled me so full of himself to the complete transformation from human to fur form. If you hadn’t been there and didn’t know that he had pulled out at the last minute,

you would have sworn that he had Shifted inside me—that he had changed to his fur form while he was fucking me. That was certainly how it looked on the video, anyway.

Someone had documented our sins and now they were sending them out over email.

“Yeah, that’s what I got all right,” Jake said shortly, when the clip ended. “It’s clearly the two of us—we can’t pretend it’s not.”

“Ophelia,” I said, feeling sick to my stomach. “She must have been filming us! What are we going to do?”

He shook his head.

“It depends on if she just sent it to us...or to anyone else. It’s damning evidence that we committed incest—and that I raped you in my fur form.”

“But you didn’t!” I protested! “You pulled out before you Shifted! None of it was your fault, Jake and you *didn’t* rape me!”

“Try telling that to my father,” he said in a low voice. “If he saw this, he’d disown me formally and then probably have me tried, convicted, and executed for breaking both of the Unbreakable Laws.”

“But it’s not your fault!” I cried again. “You didn’t—”

“That’s not how he would see it,” Jake interrupted grimly. “Listen, Ani, I think the two of us had better get out of here. Is there anywhere you can go? Anyone you can hide with?”

I felt my heart sink. He wasn’t talking about running away *together*—he was just talking about running away.

“I can probably hide out with either Madison or Ashley for a while,” I said uncertainly. “But what about you? Where will you go?”

He shook his head.

“Don’t know. If this gets out, I’ll be a fugitive in the Were community. And this is the kind of thing that follows you—I’ll probably have to leave the country.”

“Without me?” I cried, feeling my stomach twist into a knot. “Please, Jake, if we’re going to go, let’s go together!”

Jake gave me an agonized look.

“Baby, if I’m alone with you too long, I’ll break the Laws for real. I won’t be able to help myself—keep myself from knotting you and breeding you! And if you get pregnant with my baby—”

“It won’t be some kind of abomination,” I protested. “We’ve only had two drops of each others’ blood!”

“I know it won’t be a monster,” Jake said. “But it will still be a child of incest—an outcast from all Were society. And *you’ll* be an outcast too—I can’t do that to you, Ani! I don’t want people to look at you and see some dirty, disgusting thing. You don’t deserve to be reviled and hated for this.” He pointed at the screen of my phone, where the vid of the two of us was playing over and over again on a loop. “But I *do*,” he whispered and a look of self-loathing came over his strong features. “After what I did to you, the way I hurt you...”

“No, you don’t!” I protested. “Jake, please—”

But at that moment, the door to my room was smashed open. To my horror, I looked up and saw Jake’s father standing there. Behind Marcus were two heavily armed Were guards.

Marcus held up his phone, which had the same video playing on it.

“Tell me this isn’t you,” he said to Jake and his face was horrified—as though he’d seen a picture of Jake killing a baby or torturing animals or performing some other unspeakable act. “Please, son—tell me it’s some kind of manipulation.”

Jake stood, lifting his chin.

“I can’t,” he said quietly. “It’s me and it’s Ani and none of it is her fault—it was all me, every bit of it. She was an unwilling participant.”

“What?” I exclaimed, jumping up. “Jake, no—!”

“Don’t try to save me, Ani.” He shook his head. “Please, don’t.”

Marcus's eyes went cold.

“Are you telling me that you not only committed incest, you also raped your little sister in your fur form?” he demanded.

“No, he didn't!” I protested. “It wasn't like that! We were forced to do those things—it wasn't Jake's fault!”

“That's not how Were law works, young lady.” Marcus glared at me. “When a Were breaks the Unbreakable Laws, he must be punished.” He looked at Jake. “You know the punishment is death.”

“I know,” Jake said bitterly. “I might as well die—you ensured that I could never have a life when you denied me my Fated Mate, Father.”

Marcus's face paled but his face didn't lose its expression of grim determination.

“You cannot claim your own sister as your Fated Mate,” he said stiffly.

“She is, though—she heard my voice in my fur form,” Jake told him. “If you hadn't performed the Blood-Mingling Adoption, I could have claimed her.”

“What's done is done,” Marcus said harshly. “Guards, take him.”

The guards rushed into my room and grabbed Jake by the arms. They had silver cuffs around his wrists before I could even blink.

“No, wait!” I was still in shock, but starting to cry. “Listen, it wasn't Jake's fault—you can't do this! Don't do this—Jake, I love you!” I cried as they dragged him away.

He turned his head and shot me a regretful look.

“I'm so sorry, baby,” he rumbled. “Forgive me!”

“There's nothing to forgive!” I cried, but they had already dragged him out of the room.

I ran up to Marcus, who was still standing in my doorway with an unreadable look on his face.

“Let him go!” I begged. “Let the two of us go away somewhere together—please! He didn’t do anything wrong and you heard him—we’re Fated Mates!”

“You are also brother and sister in the eyes of the law,” Marcus said severely. “Jake must be punished for what he did.” He pointed a finger at me. “And don’t think that you can escape punishment yourself, young lady. Since you’re so hot to be knotted and bred, you’ll be claimed by whichever Were wins you at the local pack grounds tomorrow night.”

“What?” I exclaimed. “But...but you can’t do that to me! You can’t just give me away to some strange man! I’m in college—I’m going to be a *nurse*.”

“Your life as you know it is now over,” Marcus spat at me. “You’ll breed brood after brood of some common Were’s pups and tend his house and keep out of the sight of decent people! And that’s still better than what you deserve, after you tempted my son into breaking the Unbreakable Laws with you!”

“I didn’t temp him!” I protested. “We were forced together by Sorenson and his crazy cult—why can’t you understand that?”

Marcus gave me a withering look.

“Don’t lie to me, you little bitch. You were already tempting my son, long before the two of you were kidnapped! He even came to me and begged me not to do the Adoption ceremony.”

“Well then maybe you should have *listened!*” I shouted in his face. I tried to barge past him, but Marcus planted a hand in the center of my chest and shoved me backwards so hard I fell sprawling across my bed.

“Not so fast, young lady,” he snarled. “You’re staying right here until it’s time to go to the pack grounds tomorrow night.”

“You can’t keep me in here!” I flared at him. “And my mom will never let you just give me away to some random Were!”

“Your mother has no say in this matter,” Marcus said grimly. “*I* am the Alpha of this household and I judge matters

of punishment and retribution here.”

“So you’re going to kill your own son for something that isn’t his fault?” I demanded.

My stepfather closed his eyes briefly, as though what I was saying to him had finally struck home. But when he opened them again, their pale gold depths were as cold as ice.

“He must die for what he did,” he said in a voice with no inflection at all. “He has broken the Unbreakable Laws of our people. His actions are monstrous and must be punished.”

“No, *you’re* the monster.” I pointed at him with a shaking finger. “What you’re doing now might fulfill the Were Law, but it’s cruel and unnecessary and evil!”

Marcus only stared at me.

“Tomorrow night,” he said. “Jacob will be executed at the same time you are being brought up as a prize at the pack grounds.”

Then he slammed the door behind him and I heard a click as it locked.

THIRTY-SEVEN



THERE WAS NO GETTING AWAY.

Two guards were stationed outside my door and another was pacing below my window, so I couldn't use the trellis either. Someone had swiped my phone, too, probably in the scuffle of grabbing Jake, so it was impossible to call or text for help.

I tried sending a message on my laptop, but someone—doubtless Marcus—had changed the WiFi password. I was absolutely stuck—a prisoner in my room—and there was no getting out.

When I finally accepted that, I lay on my bed and cried. Mr. Binkers, who had been hiding under the bed during all the shouting and screaming, came out and sat on my pillow.

I know some people say dogs are the only animals that care if you're upset, and cats don't give a damn, but that wasn't true of Mr. Binkers. He curled his soft body around my head and purred, his rusty purr doing his best to comfort me.

I appreciated his effort, but nothing could make me feel better now. I was devastated at the idea of losing Jake—my one and only Fated Mate—the man I loved, I now realized. He was going to be executed at the same time I was being given away to some strange man I didn't even know! I could barely wrap my head around either fate, though I thought I would rather be executed with him than be forced to go with a stranger.

I was lying there, all cried out and feeling hopeless, when there was a soft tapping at my door and my mom came in.

“Oh, sweetheart!” she exclaimed, giving me a distressed look. “Are you all right?”

“Am I all right?” I croaked incredulously. My throat was hoarse from crying so much. I swiped at my red and swollen eyes as I looked up at her. “No, Mom, I am *not* all right,” I told her. “Because *your* husband is about to kill the man I love and give me away to some stranger so I can have his babies and never leave his house the rest of my life!”

“Oh, sweetie, you don’t mean that!” she said anxiously. “You *couldn’t* love that horrible Jacob—not after what he did to you!”

“We were being held at gunpoint!” I shouted at her—or tried—my voice broke in the middle and the last word came out in a hoarse whisper. I cleared my throat and tried again. “It wasn’t Jake’s fault—none of it!” I told her. “He tried to protect me—he was the only one who kept me sane while we were locked in that attic together!”

My mom shook her head.

“No. No, I can’t believe that,” she protested. “Marcus told me—”

“Marcus is being completely unreasonable!” I snapped. “He keeps going on and on about the ‘Unbreakable Laws’ and how we must be punished for our crimes. Mom, he’s going to kill his own son if you don’t stop him!”

“I *can’t* stop him, Ani! He’s the Alpha—I’m only the Omega!” she protested, wringing her hands. “Oh, I was afraid something like this was going to happen! That’s why I asked Marcus to do the Adoption ceremony—to keep Jacob from hurting you!”

“Wait a minute—you’re the one who made him do that damn ceremony?” I demanded.

I didn’t want to believe it but then I remembered Jake saying something about that as well, back when I still thought

he and everyone else in the family was crazy for thinking they were “Royal Weres.”

“You *did* do it, didn’t you?” I said, looking at my mother. “You made it so Jake and I would *never* be able to get together!”

“I didn’t trust him!” she cried, squeezing her hands together so tightly the knuckles went white. “I thought he would hurt you! And I didn’t want you to have to go through a Heat Cycle like I had. When I went through my first one, after meeting Marcus, it was *terrible*. I didn’t *want* that for you, sweetheart! So...” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “So I told Marcus I wouldn’t marry him unless he made it impossible for you and Jake to ever, er...be together.”

“How could you do that?” I cried. “I’m the last female with the blood of the First Wolf and he’s the last male. We *belong* together—the same way you and Marcus belong together. I’ve seen the two of you look at each other—you’re so in love you can’t even *think* of anything or anyone else. Why did you make it impossible for Jake and I to have that kind of relationship? Why did you ruin it for us before it could even get started?”

My mom was crying openly now and I was sobbing again too.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered through her tears. “I never dreamed you’d want anything to do with him. And then when Marcus told me what he did to you on that awful video someone sent him—”

“That wasn’t Jake’s fault!” I cried. “He’s never been anything but good and kind and protective of me! I love him and now he’s going to *die*.”

My mother swiped at her eyes and shook her head.

“Honey, please—he broke—”

“If you say he broke the ‘Unbreakable Laws’ I’m never going to speak to you again,” I told her.

“But he *hurt* you,” she protested.

“Not on purpose,” I told her, swiping at my tears. “And he healed me afterwards. You don’t know how bad he felt—he *hated* himself. And now I’m never going to see him again. Instead, I’m going to become the property of some stranger, like we’re living in the Dark Ages or something.”

“Marcus has assured me he’ll make sure a good man gets you,” my mom said anxiously.

I gave her a disgusted look.

“Listen to yourself, Mom. I know you love Marcus, but are you really going to sit by and do nothing while he kills his own son and has your only daughter sent away to belong to a stranger the rest of her life? Are you really going to stand by and watch all that happen and do *nothing*?”

My mom had been sitting on the side of the bed but now she stood up and wiped the tears from her eyes.

“It’s Were Law, Anastasia,” she said, a resigned look coming over her face. “I’m sorry—I can’t do anything about it and neither can you. We have the blood of the First Wolf—we must uphold the Law.”

“Screw the First Wolf and the Were Law,” I whispered. “If that’s how you feel, then I never want to see you again.” I started crying once more. “In fact, I know I *won’t* see you again. Marcus says whoever gets me is going to keep me locked up, barefoot and pregnant where ‘decent’ people can’t see me. So I guess this is goodbye.”

A stricken look came over my mother’s lovely face.

“Oh, Ani...” she said and leaned over as though she would hug me.

“No.” I shook my head and pulled away from her. “No, you don’t get to hug me. You denied me my Fated Mate, even though you found yours. And now you’re refusing to help either Jake or me. As far as I’m concerned, you never get to hug me again.”

Then I turned my back on her and waited until I heard the door shut quietly behind her. I could hear her sobbing softly in

the hallway, which made me cry harder too. I really was on my own if even my mother wouldn't help me.

What was I going to do?

THIRTY-EIGHT



THE TRIP TO THE PACK GROUNDS WAS A LONG ONE—OVER AN hour—and half of it was over rutted dirt roads that led into a dense forest. I watched the shadows of trees pass, my head bumping against the back of the seat cushion as the truck I was in lumbered onward.

The guards driving the truck were a couple of regular Weres who also doubled as security at our house. I knew they wouldn't help me—they looked at Marcus like he was God himself—anytime my stepfather said “jump” their only question was, “how high?”

I had never felt so miserable and low in my life. I wondered if Jake was already dead or if they were waiting until the moon rose to execute him. Would he really die at the same time I was being given away to my new Alpha—whoever that might be? Would I be raped as he was bleeding out from a bullet to his head or his heart?

I tried not to think that way, but the morbid thoughts kept creeping into my mind anyway. And to make matters even worse—if they could *be* worse—my Heat Cycle had come back. To add to my sorrow and anger and misery, my body was insisting that it *had* to get bred. It was a terrible combination, as I'm sure you can understand.

Finally, we reached the pack grounds, which appeared to be a large clearing in the middle of the forest. There were already lots of other cars and trucks parked there in rutted, dusty rows that looked like they had been worn into the road over many years.

“This is it,” the guard who was driving said, as he pulled into an empty spot. “Time for you to get out now, girly.”

He turned off the engine and came around to drag me out of the truck. His hands on me were rough but I didn’t complain—I no longer cared what became of me. In fact, I thought I might kill myself when this was all over with—hopefully before whichever strange Were won me, claimed me by taking me to his house and raping me.

“Be more careful with her!” the second guard protested as the first one yanked me out of the truck. “She’s still a Royal Omega—there’s only two of them in existence, her and her mother!”

“She’s the one who’s responsible for the death of the Alpha’s Heir,” the first guard growled, glaring at me. “A fine young male, cut down in his prime because she tempted him to break the Unbreakable Laws!”

I gave him a withering look.

“I don’t suppose you’ve heard of the phrase, ‘blaming the victim,’ have you?” I said icily. “Jake and I were *kidnapped* and forced to do things together. It wasn’t *his* fault or *my* fault—it was that crazy cult, the Worshipers of the Moon.”

“Shut up, slut! He’s dead because of you!” The first guard backhanded me so hard I saw stars and heard ringing in my ears. The pain in my cheek was fierce and I could feel a warm trickle of blood coming from the side of my mouth but I didn’t care about any of that.

“Is he...is he already dead then?” I whispered, blinking back tears.

“The orders were to kill him as soon as we left with you for the grounds,” the second guard said flatly. “So yes, Miss Wulven—I’m afraid he is.”

I hadn’t thought I had any more tears in me, but my eyes were stinging fiercely as I nodded.

“Thank you for telling me,” I whispered.

“Never mind your fake tears!” The first guard dragged me through the parking lot, yanking me upright when I stumbled over ruts and tree roots. I was wearing a pair of silver sandals that laced up my calves and a thin white dress that came down to my knees. I had not picked this outfit—it had been chosen for me. “Sacrificial raiment” were the words I heard Marcus use when he ordered one of the maids to put it on me.

I shivered in the thin dress and summery sandals. I still had not been knotted and so the cold still affected me. Well, it wouldn’t affect me much longer, I thought grimly. Not if I had my way about it and could find some weapon to off myself. Maybe there would be a loose gun lying around somewhere—that didn’t seem unlikely considering where we were and the demographics of the locals.

At last we got through the parking lot area and I found there was grass under my feet again. Looking up, I saw we were in a large clearing. It was better than the rutted dirt of the parking area, but also worse because it was filled with Weres.

Now, I suppose that Weres must come from all walks of life, but from where I was standing, this seemed to be the same kind of crowd you’d find in a really rough country-western bar at the end of a hard-drinking, three-day weekend. They were wearing mostly denim and leather and they were mostly men. I saw a lot of tattoos and a lot of beards—really long, untrimmed ones—and most of them had bottles in their hands.

Honestly, they looked like a lot of bikers—and not the sexy kind you find in romance novels—the hardened, tough kind that look like they would be happy to carve out your kidneys and serve them to you for lunch.

The guards dragged me around the edges of the rough-looking crowd until they came to a kind of stage—a broad wooden platform at the far end of the clearing.

“C’mon, slut—up you get,” the first guard snarled in my ear as he dragged me up the rough wooden steps.

There was a low murmur among the Weres as I was pulled up onto the stage and I felt all eyes upon me.

There was an older man there, waiting, with a long salt and pepper beard and bushy sideburns. He also had hair the same color growing out of his ears and his nostrils—a fact which made me vaguely nauseous when I noticed it. However, the top of his head was as bald and shiny as a billiard ball.

“Is this her?” The man on the stage asked.

“The Second Royal Omega, right here,” the first guard confirmed. “You got the crowd all ready to fight for her, Curly?”

“Oh, yeah!” The old man nodded eagerly. “They been pushin’ and shovin’ for the past hour. I was gettin’ worried you boys might not come after all. Thought the Royal Alpha might have changed his mind—her bein’ his stepdaughter and all.”

“Are you kidding? This little whore is responsible for his Heir getting executed!” the first guard growled. “He’s not changing his mind—she deserves everything she gets and then some!”

“Well, she’ll get it all right,” Curly said, giving me a narrow-eyed glance. “We got some pretty tough customers here—lot of out-of-towners. Some of ‘em even came from out of state for a chance at her!”

“That right?” the second guard asked. “Didn’t know the Royal Alpha opened it to all comers.”

“He said anyone who was strong enough to win her could have her,” Curly informed him. “*And* he said he doesn’t want them to go easy on her once they got her.”

Great—Marcus was practically *begging* someone to rape me, I thought dryly. So much for his promise to my mother than he would pick someone “gentle.”

Some of the numbness that had flowed into my veins seemed to leak away. Of course I didn’t want to live if Jake was already dead, but I didn’t want to die horribly either. Ideally I could just grab someone’s gun and shoot myself—only I didn’t see any opportunity to do that yet. I was keeping my eyes peeled though—it looked like Curly was wearing

some kind of pistol on his belt. I wondered if I could get it away from him...

My wondering was cut short when Curly grabbed me by the arm and pulled me roughly to center stage.

“All right now,” he bawled, making me wince and wish I could cover my ears with my hands. “It’s time for these here festivities to start! We got a Royal here—the Second Royal Omega. She’s the last female of the Line of the First Wolf and tonight she’s up for grabs!”

The assembled crowd let out a huge, hungry, wolfish howl that made my blood run cold. Oh God, they were *eager* for me—I’d be lucky if they didn’t tear me apart!

“Wait now—just wait!” Curly called out, making a motion with one hand to quiet them down. “You haven’t heard what she’s accused of yet. This little gal has got herself some serious sins to pay for—if she didn’t, ya’ll wouldn’t be gettin’ a chance at a Royal—you know that!”

The crowd quieted considerably and I could feel their eyes boring into me.

“The Second Royal Omega is charged with breaking both of the Unbreakable Laws,” Curly bawled out. “First, she seduced her own brother into fucking her and second she got him to fuck her in his fur form!”

There was a low gasp from the assembled men and someone called out,

“Does that mean whoever gets her also gets to fuck her in his fur form?”

Curly shrugged.

“According to the Royal Alpha, you can do whatever you want with her! He doesn’t want whoever gets her to go too easy on her, seein’ as how she got his Heir killed.”

There was a lot of noise from the crowd—mostly boos and other unfriendly sounds. Well, so much for “Unbreakable Laws,” I thought sourly. Clearly whoever got me was going to be able to do whatever he wanted with me and that wasn’t

going to be a pretty scenario. I eyed Curly's pistol again—if I could just get my hands on it, I could shoot myself before any of them could get me.

I didn't have any illusions about taking the pistol and somehow getting free of the clearing. There were too many men here—several hundred at least—and all of them could turn into wolves. There was no way I could outrun a wolf pack and I would much rather die from a self-inflicted gunshot than being torn apart by their sharp teeth.

“All right now,” Curly shouted to the crowd. “If you're a single male in want of a mate and you think you have what it takes to win this little lady, step up to the front of the stage down here.”

He gestured to the ground right in front of the stage and the crowd started rippling, like a pond that someone had thrown a lot of pebbles in.

I swallowed hard when I saw what was happening. Some of the biggest, toughest, meanest looking men I had ever seen were pushing their way to the front. One of them had a handlebar mustache and was built like a bear. Another had a huge, green dragon tattoo curling around both his biceps—easy to see since he was wearing a sleeveless, wife-beater type t-shirt.

There were a lot of other contenders too, but these two caught my eye—mostly because they were bigger and looked meaner than any of the other men crowding the front of the stage.

“All right now,” Curly instructed them. “The rest of you who aren't in the running, make a ring around the outside of the pack clearing. And I want all the contenders in the middle.”

Once again, the crowd moved to do as he said. I wondered if he was the pack leader—the Alpha of the regular Weres in these parts? I also wondered if he was ever going to take his hand off the butt of his gun. If I could just hook it out of its holster...

Before I could finish the thought, the crowd of Weres had finished forming up as Curly had directed them. Once everything was said and done, there were only about ten men left in the center of the ring—two of them being Dragon Tattoo and Mr. Mustache, as I had christened them in my head. They still looked like the two meanest to me, but the other eight weren't exactly small. Any one of them could snap me in half like a twig, I thought, feeling my stomach clench with anxiety. I didn't see a single one of them I wanted to end up with.

“All right now, look around you, boys,” Curly instructed them. “If you don't think you can take the heat, there's no shame in duckin' out now. Or, if you're standing outside the ring, thinkin' you can take these boys in the middle, well come on in. This here is gonna be a battle royale and the winner takes all—meaning the Royal Omega here!” He pointed at me and then waited to let the men decide.

After a moment one man—who was slightly smaller than the rest of the behemoths who had stepped into the middle of the ring—shook his head and left the center to go back to the surrounding ring of Weres. There were some boos and jeers from the men around him but Curly called on them to “Shush.”

“Ain't no harm in backin' out,” he bawled at the crowd. “A man's gotta know his limits!”

“Well, my limit is Double Dragons, over there!” one man shouted from the side, which brought a burst of guffaws. I supposed he must be talking about the guy with the Dragon tattoos on his arms.

“All right then, anybody else want to back out?” Curly asked, eyeing the nine remaining contestants. If not, ya'll can start fightin' and whoever's left standing at the end is the winner.”

“That's gonna be *me*,” the Dragon Tattoo guy growled, pointing at his chest with his thumb.

“You think so? Come get some, then,” Mr. Mustache growled.

The two men started toward each other but Curly bawled,

“Wait now—wait just a minute before we get started! Ya’ll haven’t heard the rules yet!”

I winced again—I was definitely going to die deaf in one ear—the right one, since I was standing on his left side.

“Hurry up with the rules, then,” Mr. Mustache growled. “I can’t wait to take that pretty little piece of Royal ass off in the woods and knot her good!”

Ugh—*disgusting*. My stomach did a sick flip.

“Rules are this,” Curley went on, shouting so loudly you’d think he had a megaphone, though he didn’t. “It’s a free-for-all and the last man standing is the winner. But no weapons and no Wolves—got it?”

“Aww, you don’t have to say that part about the Wolves, Curly,” someone objected. “It’s almost a week until the full moon. Ain’t nobody here strong enough to Shift when it ain’t a full moon night!”

“Still, though, I have to say it,” Curly said sternly. “Now, if we’re all clear on the rules and regulations, let’s get to fightin’!”

The men began squaring off against each other and I wondered which of them would win. Every single one of them looked extremely unpleasant—not to mention considerably older than me. These were all hardened men in their late thirties and forties, I estimated, and most of them had been in plenty of fights before. I didn’t see a single nose among them that didn’t look like it had been broken at least once.

And then, just as the punches were presumably about to start flying, a loud voice shouted,

“Room for one more?”

I frowned, scanning the crowd to see who it was coming from. Then I saw him—a tall, muscular man wearing a mask that covered his entire head. The mask was shaped like the head of Anubis, the Egyptian god of the Underworld—a black jackal with a narrow muzzle and sharply pointed ears. Since he

was bare-chested, wearing only tight black jeans and the mask, he really *did* look like Anubis, I thought.

“Who’s that?” Curly demanded as the new man pushed his way through the crowd and came to stand in front of the stage. “Who’re you, stranger?” he demanded.

“You don’t need my name,” the new guy growled. The mask, with its long, dark muzzle and pointed ears, seemed to be well molded to his face—I wished I could see his eyes but he was too far away from me. “I heard the invitation was open to all so I came,” he said. “I’m here to claim the Royal Omega as my mate.”

“Well, I’m afraid you got a little competition, son,” Curly cackled, pointing to the other nine contestants. “You sure you wanna throw your hat in the ring?”

“Start the fight,” was the new man’s only response. “I heard your rules—no weapons and no Wolves,” he added.

“All right then!” Curly nodded. “Let it be known that whoever is the winner of this battle royale is the rightful owner and mate of this female.” Here, he pointed to me. “To do with as he wishes, for the rest of her natural life,” he added. “Now let the fighting *commence!* That means go—fight!” he added, when several of the contestants looked confused.

Well, it commenced, all right. In the blink of an eye, the entire center of the clearing was a brawling, bloody mess. I stood there, my hands clenched into fists and watched as men I didn’t even know punched and hit and kicked and gouged each other—all for the pleasure of having me to do whatever they wanted. If this was the Were world, I didn’t want any part of it! It was sexist and disgusting and I hadn’t missed a thing by being raised in the human world, I decided.

It didn’t take long for some of the men to drop like flies. None of them were a match for Mr. Mustache or Dragon Tattoo guy—well, except for Anubis. Despite wearing the mask which should have restricted his vision, he seemed to be able to see around corners or something. Every time someone threw a punch at him, he ducked easily out of the way. And the punches he threw himself were landing with deadly precision.

I'm not saying he never got hit or kicked at all—he took a few blows—but fewer than most of the other men and the one time he got knocked down, he jumped right back up again.

Mr. Mustache and Dragon Tattoo guy seemed to realize that Anubis was an actual threat, because I saw them stop what they were doing and nod at each other. Wait—what was going on, I wondered? Weren't the two of them rivals?

Apparently not—or not at the moment, anyway. I gasped as I saw Dragon Tattoo sneak up behind Anubis while he was busy with another contestant and grab him by his muscular arms. As soon as he had Anubis's arms pinned behind his back, Mr. Mustache landed a solid punch to the masked contestant's midsection.

Well, it must have been like punching iron because Mr. Mustache made a face and grabbed for his wrist. Holding his hand up in front of him, he let out a low groan—it appeared to be broken.

“What the fuck?” Dragon Tattoo demanded, speaking to Mr. Mustache.

“Think he broke my fuckin' hand!” Mr. Mustache answered. “What the Hell?”

“Hey, what did you do?” Dragon Tattoo snarled, gripping Anubis more tightly.

Anubis didn't waste time talking. He simply rammed one foot backwards, into Dragon Tattoo's knee. There was a sickening crunching sound I could hear from the stage and then the big Were's knee was bending backwards in a way that looked extremely unnatural. He groaned and fell over, clutching at the misshapen joint.

“My knee! Holy shit, my fuckin' *knee!*” he wailed.

The rest of the contestants—there were only three left now—had started to take notice. They stopped fighting each other and stood there staring warily at Anubis.

“What the fuck *are* you?” I heard one of them mutter.

“The winner of this match—unless you’d like to go some more?” Anubis took a threatening step forward and the three of them scattered. He turned back to the stage, stepping over the bodies of the fallen men, headed straight for me.

He was the winner and I was his prize.

THIRTY-NINE



I FELT LIKE SOMEONE HAD DUMPED AN ENTIRE BUCKET OF ICE cubes into the pit of my stomach. Who or what was behind that Anubis mask? What man was strong enough to incapacitate so many others with hardly any apparent effort?

As Anubis climbed the steps to the stage, I had a bad feeling I was about to find out. He was so tall, with a broad chest and shoulders and big, strong-looking hands. But it was the mask I was mainly focused on—the muzzle had been molded so it appeared to be snarling and the black, pointed ears reminded me of a Doberman Pinscher. The way he was stalking towards me, so silent and menacing, was damn scary too.

“I claim this female,” he said, in a voice that was low and distorted by the material of the mask. “This Omega will be my mate and I will care for her all the days of our lives.”

“Well...” Curly didn’t seem too happy about this, but it was clear that Anubis had won the battle royale fair and square. “I guess—” he began.

And that was when I saw my chance and grabbed his gun out of the holster at his side.

“Not another step,” I said, pointing it at Anubis’s broad chest.

Anubis held up his hands and Curly stood there gaping like a fish, clearly befuddled by my unexpected actions.

“You’re mine,” Anubis said to me. “Come with me—you won’t be sorry.”

“I’m *already* sorry,” I said. “I’m sorry for all of this and for what happened to Jake. I...I’m sorry, so sorry he’s dead.” My voice trembled on the last word and I had to take a deep breath. “But I’m not sorry enough to let some stranger take me off in the woods and rape me to death,” I told Anubis. “I’d rather die first.”

I reversed the gun, no longer pointing it at his chest. Instead, I put the cold metal barrel to my temple.

“No!” Anubis shouted. Reaching up, he caught the mask he was wearing by its stiff, pointed ears and ripped it off.

My mouth opened into an O of surprise and the gun sagged in my hand.

“Jake?” I whispered. “What...how...?”

“It’s the Heir! The Royal Heir!” Curly bellowed in that megaphone voice of his. “What the Hell are you doin’ here, boy? I thought you was executed for sleeping with your sister!”

“I’m not dead, as you can see,” Jake said grimly. “And I won the fight—she’s mine to take.” He strode over to me and looped an arm around my waist. From the corner of his mouth he muttered, “*Get ready to run!*”

“What?” I asked stupidly. I was still in a daze—still disbelieving that he was standing here beside me, not dead in a pool of his own blood somewhere.

“They’re not going to like this,” Jake murmured.

And sure enough, a moment later, the Weres in the clearing began to mutter amongst themselves.

“Wait a minute—if he’s the Alpha’s Heir and she’s the Second Omega then *she’s* his little sister!” somebody shouted.

“And he’s her big brother!” someone else proclaimed.

Great—it took a minute for the regular Weres to get it but once they did, they didn’t like it a bit.

“I thought the whole reason he was getting executed and she was getting punished was because they broke the

Unbreakable Laws together!” someone shouted—I think it was Mr. Mustache. He might have a broken hand, but there was nothing wrong with his mouth. “You can’t let them leave together, Curly!” he shouted. “They’ll just commit more incest! You can’t let him have her!”

“But he won her!” Curly had a helpless look on his face and I still had his gun, which I now pointed at him again.

“We’re going,” I said. “We’re walking out of here and you’re going to let us.”

“Ani is mine,” Jake growled, his eyes flashing. “Nobody is going to stop me from taking her—nobody!”

And then, before anyone could say anything else, he began to Shift.

I gasped as I saw him rip out of the tight black jeans and turn into the enormous black wolf I remembered from that night in the attic. Everyone else was staring too and I remembered one of the Weres saying that no one could change until the full moon. Well, apparently that didn’t apply to Royal Weres.

“Lookit him—I always heard the Royals were bigger in fur form but he’s fuckin’ huge!” I heard one of the other Weres’ whisper in awe as they all stared up at Jake’s Wolf.

“Fuckin’ big as a horse,” someone else agreed and I saw they were spellbound, staring at the enormous black wolf. But how long would that last?

Then the Wolf crouched low beside me and I heard Jake’s voice in my head.

“Get on my back,” he said. “We’re getting the Hell out of here!”

FORTY



WHEN I WAS YOUNGER, MY MOM GOT ME A SCHOLARSHIP TO A horse-riding camp several summers in a row. I loved the horses and tried to ignore the rich kids the camp catered to. But it was worth putting up with the bullying and teasing I got about my sometimes ragged clothes, just to be able to swing up on a horse's back and feel like I was one with the animal as it cantered and trotted and sometimes even galloped.

Well, riding a horse-sized wolf is nothing like riding a horse. A horse has a solid, steady pace—a kind of rhythm you can learn and understand. With Jake's Wolf, I felt less like I was riding and more like I was flying.

I wrapped my arms around his shaggy neck, (I left the gun behind—I was afraid I would shoot either him or myself)—and held on to his lean flanks with my knees. Then, after making sure I was centered and secure, Jake took a running leap off the stage.

He sailed over the heads of the men nearest the stage and landed lightly on the ground in an open spot in the clearing. The Weres all around him just stared at us for a moment—clearly shocked to see this. I was pretty sure that none of them turned into Wolves anywhere near as huge as Jake's.

But then Curly bellowed—"they're getting away! Get them!"—and the spell they'd all been under was broken.

Hands reached out for me, trying to grab my hair...my dress. I gasped and pressed closer to Jake who took off again, with another giant leap into the forest. Then another and

another until I really felt like I was flying as I tried to hold on to his shaggy fur and not fall off.

“How...how much further, Jake?” I panted in his ear.

“Gotta keep going until we lose them and they can’t track our scent,” his mental voice said in my mind. *“A little further, Ani—can you hold on?”*

“I can hold on,” I assured him grimly. “As long as you don’t feel like I’m, uh, tearing your fur out?” I was a little worried about that, since I was gripping handfuls of his thick, lush coat so tightly.

“You’re not hurting me—just hang on tight,” Jake told me. And then he leaped again, going from tree to tree in the forest as though he was trying to keep one step ahead of the enemy pack. It occurred to me that he was leaping rather than running because he was hoping to throw them off the scent by leaving gaps in our trail.

It must have worked because though I could hear them at our heels for a while, the sounds eventually got fainter and fainter until the only thing in my ears was the whistling of the wind and the huge Wolf’s panting.

At last, we came to a small clearing in the woods where someone had parked a plain black SUV. I recognized it as one of the vehicles our security team used—nothing fancy or flashy like my Tesla or Jake’s sports car or my mom’s Mercedes, but efficient and dependable. It was a good choice for a getaway vehicle but I still had one question—how in the Hell had he gotten away?

The huge Wolf came to a stop and shimmered and I found myself straddling Jake’s hips instead of riding his Wolf.

“Oh!” I looked down at him, surprised even though I had seen him Shift several times now.

“Sorry...” Jake was panting, trying to catch his breath. “Just takes...a lot of energy to Shift...when the moon isn’t quite full,” he finished at last as he set me gently aside and scrambled to his feet.

“I heard the other Weres saying they couldn’t do it at all,” I said, watching as he went around and groped under the tire well of the back right tire and pulled out a set of keys. “But you can?”

He shrugged as he popped the SUV’s trunk and pulled out a change of clothes.

“One of the perks of being a Royal and having the blood of the First Wolf in your veins, I guess,” he said, pulling on a new pair of jeans and a clean white T-shirt.

“But how did you get away?” I asked. Going to him, I reached up and took his face in my hands, studying his eyes. “I can’t believe you’re *really* here,” I whispered. “I thought you were dead. Are you *sure* it’s really you?”

“Of course I’m sure, baby.” He chuckled softly and put one big warm hand over my smaller, colder one as he looked down at me. “And if you’re wondering how I escaped and got out here, you can thank your mom. They were keeping me locked in the basement until the execution. But she stole a guard’s keys and let me out before they could come for me.”

“Oh my God!” I put a hand to my mouth. “And I was so *angry* at her the last time I saw her, because she admitted she was the one who told your dad to do the Adoption ceremony—she refused to marry him until he did it!”

“I know it,” Jake said grimly. “But I don’t blame your mom. She didn’t know what she was asking for or what it might do to us—my father *did* know and he did it anyway. He was in such a hurry to get his Omega he didn’t care if I found mine.” He smiled gently as he looked into my eyes. “Which I have.”

I shook my head.

“I don’t understand. I thought you said—”

“I said a lot of things,” Jake told me. “Come on—let’s get in the car and make some more miles before we stop. I’d like to be out of the state by morning if we can. Plus—you’re freezing.” He nodded at the way I was still shivering in the thin white dress.

I nodded and got into the passenger side seat of the SUV. Jake got in the driver's side door and turned on the heat. I was grateful for the warmth, which almost immediately made me drowsy.

"Jake," I murmured as he drove over the rutted dirt road until we came to a paved one. "Where are we going?"

He gave me a sidelong glance.

"I thought it was obvious—we're running away together. Just like you wanted."

"Do you really mean it?" I whispered, almost afraid to let hope in.

"Of course I do—I'm here, aren't I?" He sighed. "Of course, I was hoping we'd have the element of surprise on our side and nobody would know I was the one who took you—that's why I wore that damn mask my father gave me when he was trying to get me to go out to the local pack and forget about you—but this can work too."

"I'm so sorry," I told him earnestly. "I thought...I thought you were dead." I could barely squeeze the words out. "And I...I thought I'd rather die than go with some stranger and be ___"

"I understand," Jake said quickly. "Listen, baby—why don't you rest? I know of some nice little cabins just over the state border where they take cash and don't ask questions. We'll get there before we stop and then we can decide what to do and where to go next."

"I'll go anywhere, as long as I'm with you," I told him. Though I was pretty sure he only meant we would be traveling together and not as a couple. He was so dead-set against breaking the damn Unbreakable Laws there was no way he would offer me a deeper relationship.

Still, for that moment, I was content and extremely grateful. I was safe with Jake instead of being mauled by some strange Were and we were on our way out of here.

Before I knew it, I found myself yawning. I didn't mean to but I was completely exhausted. I'd had no sleep the night

before and I had been crying and frightened and horrified and freaked out and every other negative emotion you can think of and I was *worn out*.

With the heated air from the stolen SUV's heater blowing on my finally warm body, I finally dropped off.

FORTY-ONE



WHEN I WOKE UP, SOMEONE WAS LIFTING ME OUT OF THE CAR seat and cradling me close to his broad chest. A warm, familiar scent like fur and a bonfire in the forest at midnight filled my nose and I felt safe and content.

“Mmm,” I murmured, snuggling against him. “Where are we?”

“Those little cabins I told you about,” Jake rumbled softly. “Come on, let’s go inside—it’s getting close to dawn.”

He carried me into a little cabin which was set back among a grove of dogwood and maple trees and laid me gently on the bed.

“There’s a bathroom if you need it,” he told me, pointing to a small room across from the bed. “Or you can just go back to sleep.”

“No—I have to go,” I mumbled. I got up and went to the bathroom, which was decorated in cheery yellow tiles. I had a pee break and then noticed there were some nice, fluffy looking towels on the rack beside the tiny but functional shower stall.

Right at that moment, a hot shower sounded wonderful. I gave the water a try and was delighted to find that it came out steaming. Stripping of the “sacrificial raiment” with a shiver, I left the white dress and silver sandals in a heap on the floor. Then, twisting my hair into a loose knot at the top of my head, I stepped into the shower.

There was a fresh cake of plain Ivory soap on the little soap stand—old fashioned but nice, I decided. Normally I wouldn't use anything so plain, but after weeks of trying to cover my scent with the strongest soaps and body sprays and perfumes I could find, the plain Ivory was refreshing.

I lathered up and scrubbed myself all over, washing away the grime and terror of the night and reveling in the feeling of being both clean and safe.

At last I felt better—warm and soft and clean—and I put back the soap and turned off the water. I dried myself thoroughly and then looked around for something to wear. Some fancy hotels offer you a nice robe to wear, but this little cabin obviously wasn't anything like that.

I thought about putting the white dress back on, but I couldn't bear to. I didn't want to wear anything that reminded me of how close I had come to either becoming the property of some strange Were or killing myself to get away from that awful fate.

In the end, I kicked the discarded garments into a corner and wrapped up in one of the fluffy white towels. Then, feeling a little self-conscious, I slipped back into the bedroom.

Jake was lying on his back on the bed, wearing only his jeans, apparently asleep. The sun hadn't quite come up and the room was in semi-gloom. I settled carefully beside him, trying not to wake him up, but then his deep voice rumbled beside me,

“Feeling better, little Ani?”

His use of his old nickname for me made me smile.

“Much better,” I told him. “But *you* must be exhausted. I thought you were asleep—I was trying not to wake you up.”

“Couldn't go to sleep until I knew you were okay,” Jake murmured. “Come here, baby—let me hold you.”

“I've only got a towel on,” I warned him. “I, uh, couldn't stand the idea of putting back on that horrible sacrificial dress they made me wear.”

“Of course not. I don’t mind—come here.”

And then he was tugging me to him, wrapping one long arm around me and pulling me close to his side.

“Oh, Jake,” I whispered, cuddling close to him and putting my head on his broad chest. “It’s so good to be close to you again!”

“I feel the same way, baby,” He stroked my back and shoulders gently. “Missed you so damn much these past few weeks.”

“It’s been terrible—wanting to be close to you and pretending we barely noticed each other at the same time,” I told him, nestling closer.

Somehow my towel fell open and then my bare breasts were pressing against this side but Jake didn’t say anything about it, so I didn’t bring it up either. I just pressed my face to his neck and breathed in his Alpha scent, loving the feeling of being close to him for the first time in weeks.

I couldn’t help noticing that this closeness was doing something to me, however. During all the craziness at the pack grounds either my Heat Cycle had shut itself down, or else I was too busy with everything else going on to notice it. Now, though, it was definitely ramping up again. Maybe because of being so close to Jake and the feel of his bare skin against mine or maybe because of his scent or maybe a combination of the two.

I didn’t know why, but it felt so good to be with Jake, I didn’t care—didn’t want it to stop. I knew that in a few minutes he would probably push me away to keep us from doing what we shouldn’t, but for now, I just wanted to be near him.

“Mmm, baby,” he murmured after a moment. “You’re starting to smell kind of hot over there.”

“Am I?” I asked innocently, pressing closer to him. Any minute he was going to push me away—I just knew it! And I *so* didn’t want him to.

“Yeah, you are.” Jake turned his head to look at me, his eyes glowing a pale gold in the dimness. “Are you feeling in need? Is your Heat Cycle ramping up?”

I bit my lip and looked down, unable to meet his eyes.

“Yes,” I admitted. “But please, Jake—let me stay in your arms just a little while longer! It feels so good to be close to you and you don’t have to do anything else—just *hold* me.”

“I love to hold you, little Ani,” he murmured. “But I don’t want to *just* hold you—I want to give you what you need to. Tell me—what *do* you need?”

I shifted against him, filled with uncertainty. It seemed like he might be willing to help me out but how much should I ask for? I knew he wouldn’t knot me—but would he be willing to do something else?

“Maybe...maybe if you just *touched* me,” I whispered. “I mean, without the towel.” I shed it completely at this point, pushing it over the edge of the bed and getting even closer to Jake. “Would that be all right?”

“Mmm, more than all right. Lay on your back, baby—let me touch you.”

I did as he said, my whole body tingling with need as he propped himself up on one arm and leaned over me. Gently, he began to stroke one big, warm hand down my bare body. He stroked my arms and shoulders and the tops of my thighs and then back up to my trembling belly, but somehow he always seemed to avoid the areas I needed him most.

Then, finally, he cupped one of my breasts and massaged it gently. He tugged lightly on the nipple, sending sparks of pleasure straight down between my legs and making me moan. But still I needed *more*.

“Please, Jake!” I gasped at last, wiggling desperately against him. “Please, that’s not where I need you the most!”

He gave me a half-lidded smile and tugged my nipple once more.

“Oh no? And where is it that you need me, baby?”

“Here!” Taking his hand, I brought it between my legs. Shamelessly, I spread my thighs so that he was cupping my open pussy which was hot and wet and ready for him.

“God, baby,” Jake groaned as his long fingers slipped into my folds. “You’re so damn wet down here!”

“I can’t help it!” I whispered, looking up at him. “Please, Jake—my Heat Cycle has been horrible lately! Please, can’t you help me with it like you did before?”

“And how do you want me to help you?” he murmured, stroking lightly around my aching clit with his fingertips.

“Oh!” I gasped as pleasure forked through me like lightning. “Like that! And...and *other* ways!”

“What ways are those?” Jake wanted to know. “You know the only thing that’s going to really help is if you get knotted, baby. You need a Were’s knot to fill you up and his seed deep in your pussy to ease that ache you’re feeling.”

I felt the breath nearly stop in my chest. Was he really offering me *that*? But surely not, I thought—I knew how against it he was.

“I know you don’t...don’t think we should do that together,” I told him, my hips jerking as he stroked my sensitive clit. “But...but maybe you could just...just put it inside me? Just a little, Jake? Like we did before—remember?”

“How could I forget?” he growled softly. “So you want me to put my cock inside you and fill your tight little pussy but not actually knot you?”

“Like you did before,” I said again, breathlessly. “Please, Jake—I promise I’ll be good—I swear I won’t try to get the knot in me!”

“Well...” He seemed to deliberate for a long moment—a moment in which he continued stroking my clit and driving me closer and closer to orgasm. Finally, he nodded. “All right, if that’s what you want, I think I can give it to you. Spread your legs wide for me, baby and let me in.”

Moaning eagerly, I did as he asked, opening my thighs wide in submission.

Jake slid out of his jeans and then he was naked between my thighs—just as he had been in the attic, only this time there were no silver cuffs to hold him down or keep him back, I thought.

“Easy now, little Ani,” he murmured as he rubbed the broad head of his cock over my warm, wet folds. “It’s been a while since I’ve been inside you—let’s loosen you up some, okay?”

I knew it was a necessary step since he was so big and thick, but I couldn’t help moaning and wiggling impatiently as he stroked the head of his cock over my sensitive flesh. I wanted him inside me so *badly*—the empty void was back and it seemed like it would never be filled!

Finally, however, Jake fit the head of his cock to my pussy mouth and gave a long, steady push.

As his thick girth stretched my inner walls and I felt him entering me at last, I threw back my head and moaned in pure ecstasy. *Finally*, the empty place inside me was being filled! Finally, the horrible void inside me was being satiated!

And then, I felt Jake bottom out inside me and the head of his cock was giving the mouth of my womb a deep, hard kiss.

“Is that how you like it?” he murmured, looking into my eyes. “Is that how you *need* it, baby!”

“Yes!” I moaned, rocking up to meet him, wishing I could feel the thick knot that was pressing at my pussy mouth entering me as well. “Yes, please, Jake—inside me! So deep inside me!”

He gazed into my eyes and rumbled,

“You know...I *could* go deeper.”

I looked at him, shocked.

“You don’t mean...you don’t mean that,” I whispered, shaking my head. “You said you couldn’t knot me—you said it was incest—the Unbreakable Laws...”

Jake shook his head.

“Fuck the Unbreakable Laws—I’ve decided I don’t care about any of that anymore, baby,” he said firmly. “We’re on our own now—we’re going rogue. We can’t do that successfully unless we’re truly a team—truly mates. And to do that, I need to knot you.”

My heart fluttered in my chest and my inner walls clenched in anticipation.

“You mean it, Jake?” I whispered. “You really will do it? You really will knot me?”

He didn’t answer with words. Instead, looking into my eyes, he began fill me more deeply.

I moaned as I felt the thick knot at the base of his shaft breach my entrance and push slowly but steadily into my pussy. The pressure at the end of my channel increased—as did the pleasure. I had the feeling that something was about to happen—something important there was no coming back from.

“It’s all right, baby—it’s all right, little Ani,” Jake murmured, his voice tight as he continued to press deep inside me. “You’re going to feel it in a minute. In just a minute it’s going to happen.”

“What’s going to happen?” I asked breathlessly and then I felt it—felt something opening up inside me.

It was like a flower unfurling at the end of my channel and suddenly I remembered what Jake had told me about the mouth of a Royal Were’s womb opening to suck the head of her mate’s cock and thus increase the chances of conception.

It hit me then, that I might get pregnant that night—pregnant by my own stepbrother. It was what I had been trying to avoid for weeks—months—and yet somehow, now I couldn’t seem to make myself care.

“Oh, Jake...” I whispered, looking up into his eyes.

“You feel it?” he murmured, stroking my hair. “You feel yourself opening for me baby?”

I nodded.

“I feel it. Oh God, I really *feel* it.”

“Then feel *this*,” Jake murmured.

And with a last quick thrust, I felt the thick knot at the base of his shaft slip all the way into my pussy mouth.

Now, at last, I felt the sensation I had been seeking ever since my Heat Cycle first went into the red—complete and total penetration. Jake was in me to the literal hilt and now I felt the knot begin to swell, expanding to tie us together, and I knew he would remain in me for a long...long time.

Jake seemed to read my mind because he murmured,

“Better get used to it, baby—we’re going to be tied together for hours.”

“That’s fine with me,” I moaned as he began a kind of slow grind inside me.

Knotted as we were, he couldn’t exactly thrust, but the deep grinding motion gave me incredible pleasure. It also pressed our pelvic bones together and I discovered he was in the exact right place to rub against my throbbing clit.

“Oh God, Jake—that feels so *good!*” I moaned, wiggling against him. “But...are you sure you don’t mind knotting me?” I asked in a low voice, still having a hard time believing it.

He rumbled laughter.

“It’s a little late for me to be having second thoughts, don’t you think? Now that my knot has swelled to fill you, we’re going to be here at least a couple of hours—maybe all night.”

“That...that long?” I asked breathlessly.

“Uh, huh.” He ground against me again, rubbing my clit as he did so and making me moan. “But I need to ask you a question, Ani.”

“What?” I whispered, gasping as more sparks of pleasure flashed through me.

“How do you feel about getting pregnant?” Jake asked me seriously. “Because you know, there’s no birth control in the world that will work for a female Were when she’s on her Cycle. Mainly because the only thing that can ease your Heat is to feel your male’s seed being sucked into your womb. And that means you’ve got a good chance of conceiving.”

I bit my lip.

“I...I understand that,” I whispered as he rubbed against my clit with steady, rhythmic grinding motion. “And...it’s a chance I’m willing to take. Please Jake, just keep breeding me—I *need* you to,”

“I know you do, baby.” He stroked a strand of hair out of my face and bent to kiss me. “Just keep your legs open wide for me and I’ll breed your soft little pussy all night if you need me to.”

“Yes, Jake!” I moaned and began to come.

I could feel my inner walls contracting around him—milking him for his seed, urging him to fill me with his cum. And at the same time, I could feel the mouth of my womb sucking eagerly at the head of his cock, almost like a second mouth inside me. My body was begging him to come in me—begging him to fill me up.

It didn’t take Jake long to comply with my body’s mute request. With a deep groan, he pulled me even closer to him and I felt his thick shaft swell even thicker within me.

“God, baby—you feel so good,” he murmured in my ear. “Feels so good to finally knot you—to finally fill you completely with my seed.”

“Yes, Jake—fill me!” I moaned, scratching his back and bucking my hips up to get him even deeper in me—if that was even possible. “Fill me up and make me yours—make me yours *forever!*”

“Forever,” he growled softly, looking me in the eyes. “You’re mine, An.i—you’re my Omega and I am your Alpha and I claim you *forever.*”

And then I lost myself in the pleasure he was giving me and couldn't think anymore. I only knew that we were together now and we weren't going to let anything—no stupid laws or ceremonies or anyone else's opinions—tear us apart again.

EPILOGUE



SIX MONTHS LATER I AM LOOKING OUT THE WINDOW OF OUR little beach bungalow, watching the silvery-blue surf roll across the golden sands. Jake is down there, catching us something for supper and when he sees me watching him, he waves.

I smile and wave back with one hand while I caress my softly rounded belly with the other. We aren't sure exactly when I conceived, but it might have been the very first night he finally knotted and bred me.

Of course, there has been plenty of knotting and breeding since then, too. It seems like my body is trying to make up for starting late because my Heat Cycle just won't quit. Even now that I am pregnant, I want Jake every day and he makes love to me often, spilling his seed in my pussy as I moan his name and scratch his shoulders in endless pleasure.

I hadn't thought I was ready to be a mother, but I know that Jake is going to be a great dad, so I no longer fear motherhood as I did before. Of course, the regular Were community would consider this child an abomination, but Jake and I know better. The ultrasounds I've had in the small, but well-staffed clinic on the elite private island we now live on, all show a healthy baby boy.

Luckily, Jake had put aside some money and made very wise investments in the years he worked at his father's firm. So, though we aren't super wealthy like his father was, we're comfortable and well established. We were able to buy the little bungalow outright and we spend our days getting the

nursery ready and planning for the baby. After he is born, I might go back to Nursing school—I haven't given up on that dream—it's just been deferred for a little while.

Of course, it makes me sad to think of having a baby without my mother near to help me. I've forgiven her for her part in trying to keep Jake and me apart. She really didn't understand what she was doing when she made Marcus promise to do the Adoption ceremony. She was only trying to shield me from the same pain she herself went through, starting her Heat Cycle so late in life. And she hadn't trusted Jake.

I only wish she could see him now—a devoted husband and father-to-be. Because yes, we got married in a little Catholic church not long after settling on the island. Jake told me he wanted our son to have a stable foundation and he wanted to tie our lives together legally as well as emotionally and spiritually. I used my biological dad's surname during the ceremony and nobody suspected a thing. Now my last name is Wulven all over again, but this time, I don't mind.

There are no other Weres on this tiny island, for which I am grateful. Jake made sure of that before he moved us here, knowing that we would both be infamous in the Were world now—the Royal Couple entwined in an incestuous relationship that is forbidden by all the Laws of the Were people. Jake covered our tracks completely, so that neither Marcus or anyone else could ever find us.

I sometimes wonder if Jake will ever forgive his father the way I have forgiven my mother. Honestly, I don't know. Maybe Marcus thought he was doing the right thing, but in the end all he did was lose his son and any chance he ever had of seeing his grandchildren. Maybe that's punishment enough.

I dream of someday seeing my mom again, but for now I am content. Jake and I have a connection deeper than anyone could ever imagine. We are Fated Mates and we strengthen our bond every time we make love. We might never leave this island and that would be fine with me.

Do I regret anything that had happened—any of the trauma we went through together? No, I have to admit I don't. Jake is my best friend, my lover, and my husband but he couldn't have been any of those things to me if he hadn't first been my stepbrother. If it wasn't for the sinister cult that kidnapped us and the time we spent in the attic together, we might never have found each other.

I don't think of him as my stepbrother now—I don't have to. He is my Alpha and I was his Omega—together we are complete and we share a love that will last forever.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thank you to all my regular readers for taking a little journey with me down a road we have not traveled together before. You know that I love writing my Brides of the Kindred series for you, but sometimes I need a little break to write something completely different. I appreciate those of you who took a chance on a non-Kindred book. And for new readers who have NOT read any of my Kindred series, well, what are you waiting for? *Claimed*, the first book in the series is [free everywhere](#), so please go check it out.

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Thanks for being such an awesome reader!

:) Hugs, Evangeline, January 2022

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Contains *Bridging the Distance*, *Loving a Stranger* and *Finding the Jewel*

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ONE HOT HALLOWEEN

Contains *Red and the Wolf*, *Gypsy Moon* and *Taming the Beast*

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OUTCAST
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SECRET THIRST
SEX WITH STRANGERS
SHADOW DREAMS
SLAVE BOY (M/M romance)
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[WHEN MR. BLACK COMES HOME](#)

[WILLING SUBMISSION](#)

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YA Novels

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Evangeline Anderson is the *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author of the *Brides of the Kindred*, *Alien Mate Index*, *Cougarville* and *Born to Darkness* series. She is forty-something and lives in Florida with a husband, a son, and two cats. She had been writing erotic fiction for her own gratification for a number of years before it occurred to her to try and get paid for it. To her delight, she found that it was actually possible to get money for having a dirty mind and she has been writing paranormal and sci-fi erotica steadily ever since.

You can find her online at her website www.evangelineanderson.com

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