



Mandy M. Roth

LAST
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By

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Dedication:

Mom, you have a way of seeing the real me and I want to say thanks for not being freaked out by what you've found. I may be odd, but I'm yours and you've always embraced that.

Prologue

I dug my fingernails deep into Trevor's shoulders. He cried out as he finished in me. He pulled out slowly, and kissed my neck as he took his condom off. I tried to make it seem like the experience had been equally as thrilling for me, but in truth, it hadn't. He wasn't a bad lover, on the contrary he was the best I'd ever had, but my feelings for him had

changed. No longer the naïve girl from the Midwest, I didn't hang my hopes and dreams on those of a man. If anything, Trevor had taught me that I could be on my own and make it.

My mind raced with thousands of ways to tell him that this just wasn't working out. I thought about using the 'we should just be friends bit', but wondered if the irony would be lost on him. After all, he had been the one to use that on me five months earlier. It was in the height of his just needing space days and I'd been kicked aside--again. He hadn't stayed away long. No, he'd been back in my bed within two weeks of breaking it off. Sowing his wild oats had taken less time than he'd thought, or so it had seemed. He claimed that he didn't use our 'time outs' as free fuck moments with his model co-workers, but I wasn't buying it. Normally an insatiable man, Trevor always seemed so sated after our tiny break ups.

At first, I thought that I couldn't go on without him in my life. Now, I wondered if it wasn't the other way around. He was the one who called all the time now. He was the one left wondering what I was doing when I didn't answer my cell phone by the third ring. It felt good, to a point, to have the shoe on the other foot, but I couldn't do it anymore, regardless of how sweet revenge really was.

"I love you, Rayme," Trevor murmured as he rolled over.

Patting his arm gently, I turned away from him. I couldn't tell him that I loved him too, it would be a boldfaced lie, and I'm sure that he'd sense it. Once, I think I may have been close to loving him, now he provided more of a comfort zone for me than anything else. That wasn't necessarily bad, just not what I was looking for in a man. I kept a steady stream of girlfriends around for that very thing. They required little to no maintenance and would rather die than fuck around on me. They also never freaked out about tampons in the trash, and that in itself was priceless.

I felt the tension of the day slip out of Trevor's shoulders, and heard him snoring softly. Counting to one hundred, I climbed carefully out of his bed, and searched around his room for my clothing. I managed to find everything but my bra. I'd make do somehow. Besides, according to the pictures of the models on the magazine covers, going natural was all the rage.

Models, the very thought of Amazonian women with breast implants and four hundred dollars shoes made my blood boil. Every time I flipped through a magazine, I tried to guess how many of them my boyfriend had

screwed. The numbers I came up with were staggering. Served me right for dating a male model. When he wasn't primping, he was thinking about primping.

I dressed quietly next to the bed, every now and then glancing over at Trevor lying there, just to be sure he didn't catch me. His slender body was so long that his feet just missed hanging off the end of the bed. His blonde head of hair covered his face enough that I couldn't tell how soundly he was asleep. Creeping towards the door, I held my breath, not wanting to say good-bye to him, but not wanting to stay either. I wanted to play the coward and disappear. As wonderful as a girl-power moment sounded, I didn't have the stomach to look him in the eye as I crushed his world like he'd done mine so many times before.

I wasn't worried about what he'd think when he woke up in the morning. He knew that I had an early audition. This one was for a part that would require the blending of Thai dancing and ballet. I'd studied all forms of dance and felt most confident in my Eastern styles. The fact that my skin was olive never hurt when auditioning for parts like this. It did come into play when I'd been cast as a back up in a Swedish play. I spent the entire time powdered to the hills and ended up a sticky mess at the end of each show.

Yeah, there was nothing quite like keeping time when sweat soaked powder dripped into my eyes. After a rather nasty break out, I vowed never to do that again.

I'd been in the city now for nearly three years. My twenty-fourth birthday approached fast. In my mind, I'd already had myself headlining my own Broadway show by now. It's not like I was getting any younger. My name wasn't in lights, hell, it wasn't even in small print on the playbill.

I'd wanted to be one of the greatest dancers New York had ever seen. No, that hadn't happened. Still mainly in the chorus, I danced in the background and watched as someone else stole the spotlight. I told myself that as long as I was paid that it didn't bother me--I lied. Lying to myself should have been a good indicator to get out of Dodge, but I'd never been one to take a hint.

"It's all about who you know," my mother had said to me before I left for the city. I told her that she knew nothing about the world of dance and that I didn't care that I went against her wishes. She'd refused to pay for college when I told her that I was studying performing arts, and she'd never once come to any of my shows. She insisted that I'd never make it

as a ballerina, funny thing was, I never claimed to be one. I studied more modern forms of dance, but my mother would have to know me to know that.

My mother and I had never seen eye to eye. I was her mistake, her accidental pregnancy resulting from a chance meeting in a bar in New Mexico. Her short little stop to visit with a friend had left her with an eighteen year obligation--me. The only information she had to give me when I asked about my real father was that he was part Native American, or at least that's what she thought he was. She had no name and couldn't even tell me the city she'd been in at the time.

Yeah, she was a real help.

My mother married when I was seven. Barton was a good man. He treated me well. He treated his biological children better though. Who could blame him, they all matched. My mother with her head of sandy blonde hair and blue eyes, and Barton with his matching blue eyes and even blonder hair looked like the poster family for Mattel. Yes, they had produced two of the most beautiful girls ever, Cindy and Jessica. I called home to talk to them as much as I could. They were good girls. Cindy was heading into eighth grade, and Jessica was entering fifth. Our age differences prevented us from being too close. I felt more like their aunt than their sister, and I looked nothing like them. My light olive skin, dark brown eyes, and straight black hair were a far cry from their Californian surfer looks. Most people assumed that I was Italian or maybe Mexican when they saw me. I didn't correct them--it was none of their business.

I locked Trevor's door on my way out, and headed down the hallway. I checked my watch, and found that it was almost ten. I could still catch a taxi, and make it to bed by eleven if I was lucky. I didn't want to blow this audition. I needed the work. My rent was due, and my roommate had just informed me that she was moving to Las Vegas to dance in a show there. I told her that she'd most likely end up in feathers and fishnet stockings, but she didn't care, she'd had enough with the job market around here.

Pulling my sweatshirt over my head, I yanked it down tightly over my face. It was long enough to cover my hands, and I was happy about that, considering how cold the night was. I blew two quick breaths into my cupped hands and walked on. I knew that I'd have better luck catching a taxi down the block. Trevor lived tucked back in a ways, not too many cab drivers ventured down that far. They stayed where the tips were good.

Who could blame them?

I noticed the same group of teens that had been hanging out on the corner for the past few weeks walking towards me. The first time I'd seen them at night, I'd been a little nervous. Now, after a few weeks of walking past them, I was used to them. They stuck to themselves, and rarely moved off the street corner. They hadn't bothered me and I hadn't bothered them, it seemed like a good arrangement to me.

I watched my feet as I walked. It was an old habit that I'd been trying to break since my move to the city. Glanced around for signs of any yellow cabs, I found none. Of course, having one available when I needed one would have made my day a bit better and we couldn't have that, could we? It would leave me with fewer things to complain about, thus putting a kink in my sarcastic wit.

I could feel the heavy weight of a pending thunderstorm all around me. The season was right for one and the bizarre shifts in temperature throughout the day had been making the weathermen go mad with severe storm warnings. He seemed to take great pride in breaking into every show I tried to watch.

I'd be lucky to find a cab. Oh, well, if all else failed, I'd make it to the subway and take that. Riding the subway was my least favorite way to get around the city. Nothing compared to that high of sitting next to a man who had never heard of a modern invention called a shower, or trying to play 'guess that smell' on the six.

I preferred walking, but female and alone at night in the city didn't add up to anything good. My guess was that short of carrying a wad of hundred dollar bills, I was breaking every 'stay safe' rule around. A blinking sign would have cost me too much, so that was out of the question.

A smashed tin can flew past my head, and startled me. The hair on the back of my neck rose and adrenaline kicked in. Spinning around, I found myself surrounded by the group of teenagers from the corner. I tried to do a head count, but my nerves got the best of me and I lost count around twelve. None of them looked a day over eighteen, and all of them looked anxious.

Never a good mix.

I glanced behind me to see if there was anyone around to help me. No one was there--I was on my own.

Guess those 'stay safe' rules had some merit.

I turned to run, and was caught by two of the boys instantly. I struck out at one and he punched me in my stomach. Pain radiated through my abdomen and I screamed out as another one grab me by my long hair, and yanked me backwards. I clawed at one's eyes, and ripped a handful of hair out of another. They screamed obscenities at me as they continued to try to pin me down. I knew if they managed to get me down and into the secluded alley, my chances of coming out of this alive were slim to none.

I kicked out and one of them grabbed hold of my foot and twisted it. Hot searing pain shot up through my leg. My mouth formed around a scream that remained lodged in my throat. The combination of terror and pain had stolen my voice. All that I had left were tears, and they flowed freely from me.

Another blow hit me in my face, and I had to spit the blood out that welled up in my mouth to keep from choking on it. The hot, coppery liquid continued to flow regardless of how many times I expelled it from me. In an instant, the attackers were on me, pinning me down on the ground and gathering around me. Stuck on my back, and at the mercy of gang members, I found my voice. It was faint, but there. With a force I didn't know I possessed, I screamed out. A boot to the side of the head silenced me.

"Come on man, hurry up...we ain't got all night!"

"No, man ... we gotta do this right. He'll check her ya know, he'll want to make sure ... If you want in then...." Their words began to blend. I wasn't able to make out what they were saying. I felt removed from myself. Fear took over and I could no longer think clearly.

A dark haired boy leaned over me, and tried to pull my sweatpants down. I kicked and hit at him in an attempt to keep him at arm's length. Someone yanked my wrists back, and I lashed out at them with my good leg. My heart pounded so hard that I could hear it in my ears. The rhythmic thumpty-thump served to temporarily drown out the cries from the others. They'd been yelling to get things moving along faster. Apparently, my murder wasn't going fast enough for them.

I heard someone screaming and prayed that they would bring help. Hope rose in me, and for a brief moment I thought that my savior had come, before the awful realization hit me that that someone screaming was only me.

I kept kicking my dancer strong legs out at them. Several of them flew off me, but not before they'd managed to rip my sweatshirt open. Not having a bra on left my breasts fully exposed to them. The shock of what was about to happen to me sunk in and, without thought, the need to survive prevailed. I kicked out again, and my leg was met with a thud from a wooden bat that appeared in one of the boys' hands. There was a sickening thud, followed closely by something in my leg popping. White hot pain tore through my body and vomit rose in my throat.

Screams tore free from me as I cried out for help that never seemed to come. The bat boy took two more full wind-ups, then blows, before I felt nothing. As sick as it seemed, it was truly a blessing.

Someone's fingers wrapped deep into my hair and slammed my head against the pavement. My vision blurred, and I could feel the inside of my head rattle. I tried to push myself up and off the ground, but I had nothing left in me. I heard something growling, and the boys pulled away from me. I struggled to get my swelling eyes to open. When I did, I wasn't sure if I had a concussion or not, because I thought I saw one of the boys fly past me with his arm bent at a funny angle.

Growls sounded all around me. It was as if I'd been dropped into the center of a kennel at feeding time. One by one my attackers piled up before me, each broken and bruised, but from what I could gather, alive.

It was a shame, really.

Lifting my head, I felt a wave of nausea sweep over me. I tried to focus, but I couldn't make sense of the furred creature I was seeing. Was it a dog? Was it a wolf? It was massive, bigger than any dog I'd ever seen. Its shiny amber coat reflected the dim streetlight and made it seem almost supernatural. For a few minutes, I was sure that it was a figment of my imagination, but it moved towards me. I drew in my breath, expecting it to be my last. The animal's snout nuzzled my cheek, and I waited for it to go for my throat. It licked my forehead and nudged me gently.

My gaze fell onto its paws, and I saw blood. It'd been injured in the fight with the boys. I reached out towards it, and slid my hands softly over its wounds. The dizziness that had been threatening me moments before

returned. I tried to hold onto it, and felt its paws shift into human hands under the weight of my fingers. Darkness swallowed me whole, and I welcomed it.

Chapter 1

I glanced at the back table. It was filled with guys I'd never seen before. Regulars were what we lived for and all these fresh new faces piqued everyone's interest. I wasn't sure how they'd managed to get six grown men into that booth. In theory, the booth was for groups of five or more, but I'd never seen it work with any degree of success. Somehow, they'd managed to pull it off.

Interesting.

I did a double check to make sure I had my pen and order pad with me. Angie was supposed to take that table, it was in her section, but she'd asked me to do it. She'd gotten as far as their drinks and decided that she'd had enough. I couldn't blame her. I'd overheard the short dark haired one asking if she was on the menu.

No, none of these men were regulars.

I wasn't so sure that Vinnie, the owner, was going to be all right with these guys being in here. The bar was his baby. He'd even named the damn thing after himself. He'd given me a job two years ago, when I needed it most, and had always been there for me. My co-workers had become like an adopted family over the years, and I knew them well enough to know that they didn't like this kind of riffraff in here.

I hadn't planned on waiting tables at a bar. No, once I'd had a dream of being a dancer. I had come to the city to make it happen. Things had been slow at first for me, but eventually I landed a part in a Broadway production. Soon after, I landed a few more paying jobs. On my way

home one night, after an opening, a group of teenagers attacked me. Later in court, they claimed to have been only trying to scare me, for some sort of gang initiation. Yeah right, they successfully managed to scare the measly twenty-two dollars I had out of my bag, and leave me beaten and broken on the street. I spent two weeks in the hospital. The doctors were concerned about internal bleeding, a possible skull fracture, and didn't want me putting any undo strain on my shattered leg.

I bent down and rubbed my knee out of habit. Every time I thought about that night, I was reminded of how they had stripped away my chances of making it as a dancer. When the paramedics arrived, they found my leg broken, protruding outwards, and my kneecap smashed to pieces.

A wooden bat will do that to you if you're not careful.

Four surgeries later, I was left with thick scars, and my own personal weather prediction tool. Yeah, my knee hurt like hell before big storms. I'd all but given up watching the news, I was better at telling the forecast than their meteorologist.

I looked down at myself. I almost never wore anything that showed my scars. My black jeans didn't show the old injury, and after endless hours of physiotherapy I no longer walked with a limp, and I no longer danced. That's how I ended up working at Vinnie's. I had no desire to go back home to hear my parents say 'I told you so', and I couldn't make a living dancing. That left me little choice. The bills didn't stop coming; in fact, they only increased.

As I approached the back table, another group of men entered the bar. I slowed my pace, and watched the men at the table shift in their seats. They were uneasy about the new arrivals, and frankly, I was too. A short man with slicked back dark hair motioned to a large black man next to him. "Terrance ... get us some more seats."

I watched as Terrance walked over, picked up another table, and carried it over to where his friends were seated. The act of moving a table with a solid steel base didn't seem to faze the man. I opened my mouth to object to them rearranging the bar, but thought it wasn't worth the effort. Maybe if I was lucky, they'd stay and stack all the chairs up real nice on the tables after they left. Nah, probably not.

I stood in awe of the fact that they'd managed to squeeze even more people into the back corner. These weren't small men. It was like a clown

car, only bar style. The thought of red noses and face paint made me smile.

I shook my head, pulled my pad out, and walked towards them. The slick-haired guy, who reminded me of a greaser from a fifties movie, rubbed his narrow chin and looked at me. He looked like a rat. Everything about him gave me the creeps. He had one of those stares that made you feel like something was crawling on your skin--just under the surface. Images of worm-like creatures filled my mind and it was all I could do to not scream out. I wanted to wipe my arms to be sure that I was free of anything, but didn't.

Good girl, don't want them to think you're a loon.

"Hey doll face, where's Blondie?"

I knew he meant Angie. She had a head of short, bleached out blonde hair, and a nice set of breasts to go along with that. It almost seemed to be prerequisite for girls with supermodel figures to have the stunningly white blonde hair to go with it. The boobs seemed to be added perks--pun intended. No part of Angie fit the ditzy blonde mold, though. She was going to school for child psychology, and was waiting tables to work her way through it.

"She's backed up ... I'll be taking over for her. What can I get you guys?"

He looked at my chest. After working in a bar for almost two years that didn't surprise me. What did catch me off guard was the way his eyes lingered over my throat, and how his tongue flickered out over his almost non-existent lower lip.

"Rayme," he motioned to my nametag. "Is that your real name?"

No part of me wanted this man knowing anything about me, but I didn't want to cause any trouble. I sensed that these guys were on edge enough without me adding to it.

"Yeah."

He looked over at his companions. "Why don't you come on over here ... Ray-mee?" He said my name slowly. I took a step back, and he let out a howl, making me jerk and nearly drop my order pad.

"You're afraid of me," he said.

"Do you want to order anything to eat or not?" I was angry and scared, but unwilling to let on to that. If this guy wanted to send someone screaming away in fright, he'd picked the wrong girl. I'd stared hell in the face and lived to tell.

"Mighty sure of yourself, aren't you, Ray-mee."

"Dag," a stern voice said from behind me. It ran over my skin and my eyelids fluttered of their own accord. I turned around slowly and found myself looking up in the face of an incredibly handsome man. His eyes were dark brown, almost as dark as mine. Streaks of yellow highlights danced through wavy brown hair that hung just past his shoulders. His jaw line was hard and squared. I saw the muscles in his neck tightening as he looked past me at the weasel behind me. His gaze shifted and I realized that he now stared at me. I did my best not to look like a lovesick puppy. Somehow, I don't think it worked.

"Shit, Maxim, I was just playin' with her, and she knows it, don't ya' honey?"

Maxim, the hella-hunk, continued to stare at me. "Was he bothering you ... Ms.?"

"Rayme ... just Rayme, and," I turned towards the weasel--his gray eyes dared me to contradict him. "I ... umm ... no ... he's fine ... umm...."

I turned and walked away, completely disgusted with myself for succumbing to Dag's show of power. I'd had enough of this shit for one night. If they wanted to order, they could do it at the bar. I wasn't paid enough to stand around and feel threatened by some wanna-be hardasses.

Heading towards another table, I caught my foot on the corner of one of the newly moved chairs. I staggered forward, my long black hair spilled down and around me, acting as a curtain, and rendering me temporarily blind. As I put my arms out to try to break my fall, two large hands grab my shoulders, and yanked me upwards.

"There you go," Maxim said as he steadied me. Our eyes locked, but neither of us spoke. I thought I saw little specks of blue and gold rising up through his brown irises, but he blinked and looked away. It took me a minute to realize that he was still holding onto my shoulders. I looked down at his large hands--tiny white scars covered the back of them. They

seemed so out of place on a man so perfect. I touched one lightly. He jerked his hands away and looked at me with wide eyes.

"Sorry ... umm ... sorry," he stuttered.

"I ... err ... thanks," I mumbled equally as tongue-tied. I wanted to say more to him. I wanted to run my fingers over his hands. Hell, I wanted to run my fingers over him, I wasn't picky. Hard up was hard up, regardless of which way you looked at it.

Without warning, Maxim turned and headed out of the bar, followed closely by several of the men from the booth. I had to stand firm for a minute to keep from running after him. He'd managed to stir things deep within me that hadn't been stirred for years, and he'd done it all by just standing near me. I closed my eyes and tried to push the strange meeting out of my head. Gathering myself up again, I headed towards the bar, and someone grabbed my backside. Turning around, I found Dag standing dangerously close to me with his hand planted firmly on my rear. I wanted to bash him in the face with my elbow and watch the blood gush from his narrow nose. I didn't, that was his one freebie.

"Let's go, we do not need any trouble here," Terrance said, his voice polished and having a bit of an old world feel to it. He put his hand on Dag's shoulder and led him towards the exit. Dag turned and winked at me. I shuddered.

Chapter 2

"Rayme, you ready to go?" Angie asked.

I put the last tray of clean glasses away, and looked over at the stack of plates. I'd promised Jimmy, our bus boy, I'd help him out tonight. He had to be up early to take his mother in for more tests at the hospital, and working until three a.m. would make it hard for him to function. I had

agreed to stay after and make sure all his work was done. I still had a few more things to take care of before I could go.

"No, go ahead ... I'll lock up."

Angie poked her head back into the kitchen. "You're joking right?"

"Angie, it takes me less than a minute to get home." I laughed. She always worried about me. There was no point. Vinnie owned the surrounding four buildings, and had rented an apartment to me shortly after I started working for him. My walk home consisted of leaving the bar, and walking across the parking lot. It was hardly life threatening.

"No way am I leaving you in here alone. Move over, I'll help."

I stepped aside and let her help me put the remainder of the clean dishes away. The two of us finished the job in half of the time it'd have taken me to do it. I hit the light switch, grabbed my jacket, and followed her out the door.

I gave a little tug to make sure the door had locked, and moved up close to Angie. "It's freezing out here."

She pulled a pair of mittens out of her coat pocket. "I know, we're two days into October and already it feels like it might snow. If this keeps up, we'll have a blizzard for sure by November. You're one minute walk home will be pretty hard through eight feet of snow. I can just picture you trying to hike your way to work. Maybe you could get a bobsled? I think your cat would love a team of dogs hanging around the place."

"I don't doubt that you'll want to stand by and supervise me the whole way. You could carry my flag and cheer for me. No, wait, you'd be there with a med kit to patch me up when I fell on my ass."

"You know it."

I laughed and walked with her over to her beat-up old blue sedan. I was impressed that it started on the first try. Normally, the thing needed at least three tries before it even thought of clicking over. Many a nights, Angie ended up sleeping on my couch because her car wouldn't start. It didn't bother me. I always crossed my fingers that the thing would give out. I liked the company.

"See ya tomorrow," she called out as I walked towards my building.

This was our normal routine. The two of us walked out to her car together every night, she started it up, and then sat to make sure I made it home all right. Once inside, I'd look out the window to watch her drive away. It'd been working out great for us for the past two years. It was always nice to know that you had an extra set of eyes, just in case.

Fishing my keys out of my coat pocket, I put them into the old brown door. I turned and made sure to lock it up again, and headed down the hall to my apartment door. I pulled out another key and used it in my very blue front door. After my ordeal in the alley two years ago, I'd taken to having multiple locks on all my doors.

A girl can never be too safe.

I flicked the stairway light on and headed up. When I got to the top I opened the third and final door to my home. Vin had been a stickler on getting all new locks and extra doors. When I had first looked at the place, the only door it had was the exterior door to the parking lot. Vin had the other two installed right before I moved in. He knew about my past and worried about me.

The lower portion of the building was a Laundromat. Vin owned that as well. That was handy for me, I didn't complain. I knew that he only charged me a third of the apartment's worth, he acted like a father to me, and I knew why. His daughter, Maria, would have been about my age, and Vin had always told me how much I looked like her. I took that as a complement because from the photos I'd seen of Maria, she was beautiful. She had been murdered ten years ago. No arrests were ever made in the case. Needless to say, Vin had a soft spot for me, as I had for him.

Tossing my keys on the table next to the door, I glanced out the window and watched Angie drive off. I put my coat up on the hook. I heard my cat, Henry, meowing. I bent down and stroked his black coat.

"Did you miss mommy?"

He purred as I picked him up and carried him out into the kitchen. I set him down on the floor and filled his bowl up with food. Not that he needed fed again. I'd done it before I went to work. Henry was grossly over weight, and I knew that it wasn't healthy for him, but he was my buddy, and he liked to eat, so I gave in.

Call me a sucker, but a man totally devoted to me got whatever he wanted and Henry knew that.

I headed back to the bathroom to get cleaned up. Normally I took a shower after I got off work, but tonight I felt like a bath. I'd worked an hour past my normal time, and the tension from the weasel Dag still hadn't left my shoulders.

Chapter 3

I heard the phone ringing and ran out to get it. Sliding across the floor in my purple fuzzy slippers, I damn near hit the wall. Sometimes, I wondered how I used to be so graceful. Now, I was lucky not to break my neck answering the phone.

"Yeah?"

"I don't think he's going to leave her. He told me that he was going to for sure this time, but I don't know...." Fawn continued on her with her sob story. I would have paid more attention to it, but I'd been listening to the same story for the last eight months. I had no idea why she seemed to latch on to unavailable men, but she did. Fawn's House of the Other Woman seemed to be open twenty-four hours a day. Somehow, I'd managed to pull clean-up duty with her--again.

I tried to dodge talking to her about her love life, but she worked with me at the bar, and that made it almost impossible not to discuss it with her. I did my best to calm her down, which was good considering that all I wanted to do was hang up on her. Needy people bothered me and Fawn was their poster child.

"What happened with Peter now?" I asked.

"Sam, not Peter, I haven't been dating Peter for awhile now."

"Right, sorry ... okay, what did Sam do?"

"It's not so much that he did anything, but when I discussed having a baby with him, he got all weird, and then when I got up this morning he was gone, can you believe that? He was gone! I drove past his house a few times and his car was there. I can't believe that he'd go back to her."

I listened to her whine some more before I finally broke in. "Fawn, the man's been married for over ten years. He has four kids. Leave it alone. You don't want him--if you had him, you wouldn't trust him. You're a fad, a phase, he'll be done with you soon and back with his wife before you know it.... And, why in the hell would you start talking about babies with the guy? Is your new goal in life to be a single mother? With your salary from the bar, I'm sure you'd do just great."

She cried harder. I didn't really care. My sympathies didn't extend to husband-stealing home wreckers. I counted to ten, and then hung up. She'd call me back later. She always called back. She was like a telemarketer, if she had your number, you could expect at least three calls a week from her. I wondered if it'd be possible to get my number removed from her list too--probably not.

The phone rang again. The machine picked it up. I heard my voice greeting the caller and then Angie talking. I picked it up. She'd called to confirm that I'd heard the latest saga in Fawn's life. She shared my opinion that the girl was a co-dependant loser. Problem was, she was also our friend on some weird level. I wasn't proud of the fact, but it was still true all the same.

"So, what time do you have to be in?" Angie asked.

"I'm not going in till' ten tonight, and then I'm off for a few days."

"That's right. Are you really going to go see your mother, or are you planning on pulling another one of your famous 'visit the cabin' and call it good routines?"

I didn't answer right away. I wasn't sure what I'd do. I'd been planning to head out and see my mother for several months now, but each time I decided to go, I chickened out. The last time I'd seen my mom, I was in the hospital recovering from the attack. My stepfather hadn't come. I didn't expect he would. My mom had stopped in, brought me some flowers, and made sure she said 'I told you so', about moving to the city.

They called once a week, and kept asking me to come out and see them. I was sure that it was so they could rub it in some more about me working as a waitress. My mother would never be caught dead in a bar, let alone work in one. No, she was a model upper class socialite, who was embarrassed to have such a free spirited daughter. How easily she liked to forget that I was conceived after a night of heavy drinking in New Mexico.

Vinnie had insisted I take a couple of weeks off to go visit them. He was a strong believer in keeping families together. We had argued back and forth for several days before I gave in and decided to take a week off. If all else failed, the family cabin was only about two hours away and it'd be nice to just go there and relax a bit. My mother had been generous enough to furnish me with a set of keys, although I was betting that it was Bill's idea to give them to me.

"So, what's the plan for today?" Angie asked.

"Ah, well since its almost noon, I'm going to head down to the Diner and get some lunch, then I might go shopping. I feel like spoiling myself, and spending money I shouldn't. Want to come?"

"I'd love to ... tell you what, I'll meet ya' down at the Diner, give me about thirty minutes to get there."

I went into my room to get dressed. I didn't actually have a closet. I had another small room off mine that had my dresser and a wardrobe in it. The place was huge and since I was the only occupant, I had free reign over the entire level. It worked out nice. I walked over and opened the walnut wardrobe and looked around. I decided on a white blouse, a pair of faded blue jeans, a dark gray wool sweater, and a light gray newsboy cap. I loved to wear hats. It sometimes took some coaxing to get my all my hair to stay put long enough to get one on, but I managed.

I had to dig around to find a matching pair of black boots. Owning so many, they tended to get jumbled up in the basket I kept them in. I did a quick check in the mirror, and headed out towards the door.

Henry waited for me by the front door. He hated to be left alone. I couldn't say I blamed him. I made sure to turn the radio on low for him, and grabbed my purse. On my way out the exterior door I noticed something was different with it when I went to lock it. Something had scraped the heck out of it. Running my fingers over the gauged wood, I tried to reason what could have done it. The marks were too deep to be a

rat, but not deep enough to be a knife. My guess was it was a dog. I hadn't seen any strays running around lately, but the evidence was clear on my door, and I was beginning to think I could smell urine.

Great, just what I needed, a rabid dog, marking its territory.

I shook my head and headed down the street towards the Diner. Shopping would make it all go away--it always made everything better.

Chapter 4

I pushed the door open and walked in to find a table. Melvin waved at me from behind the counter. I'd been coming in long enough for him to know me, making him extended family now, whether he liked it or not. He was a sweet older man in his early sixties. The Diner was his pride and joy and had been in his family now for two generations.

"What can I get you today, Rayme?" he asked, his New York accent prevalent.

I found a spot near the window, and sat down. "Only coffee, I'm waiting for Angie."

He nodded and brought a cup over to me. I thanked him, and began making my cup of coffee into a caffeinated liquid dessert. I added three creams, and four packs of sugar. It now officially fell in the realm of a baked good. It was perfect, just the way I liked it.

I watched out the window for a sign of Angie's car. She wasn't one to be late. I sat quietly and worked on my second cup of coffee. Melvin kept a steady stream coming my way. That's why I loved him. But, I had to be careful or I'd end up bouncing off the wall from a sugar overdose. Better yet, I'd end up having to stop and pee at every shop we stopped at. That'd be just great.

I looked out at the people of the city, going about their day. The number of people in the city always amazed me. Everyday I struggled to find familiar faces. I watched as the red-haired old woman with the little white dog walked past. She came by everyday before two o'clock. I always wanted to go out and ask where it was she was going, but I didn't. It was more fun to guess.

I saw the 'weird guy' with the bald head and army coat. He normally stood on the sidewalk for a while mumbling to himself before he continued down the street. He seemed harmless enough, but every now and then, some testosterone ridden young punk would push him or take a swing at him. I found myself secretly hoping the crazy vet would knock them on their ass.

Was it wrong to root for the weird guy?

I looked up and saw a man wearing blue jeans, a white shirt, and a black leather jacket standing half way down the street. His brown hair was pulled back from his face, and his brown eyes were looking in my direction. It took me a minute to recognize him in the daylight, it was Maxim, the man from the bar last night. He caught me staring at him, and I looked away quickly. My face flushed. Suddenly, I felt like I was twelve again and embarrassed to be caught looking at a cute guy. I did my best to look like I was busy, and then thought I'd be sly and glance in his direction. He was gone.

I was seriously bummed out to not find him there. This was new to me. I hadn't looked forward to seeing a man in nearly two years. I should have been elated by this newfound feeling, instead I was confused. His friend, Dag, had managed to creep me out, but Maxim hadn't. In fact, I was the one who did the freaking out with him. That was a first for me.

My cell phone rang, and I fished it out of my purse to answer it. It was Angie calling to let me know that her car wouldn't start. She was having her boyfriend come over and take a look at it. She offered to take a cab to come shopping with me. That seemed silly to bother with, so I made her promise not to. She agreed and I told her that I'd talk to her later at work. I didn't mention seeing the hot guy from the bar last night, although I'm sure Angie would have been all ears for that.

I walked up to the counter to order something to eat. Melvin turned, saw me, and gave me a nod. "Hey, I guess Angie's not going to make it," I said, leaning over to look at the specials board. Not that I needed to, I knew his specials by heart now. It was just habit that kept me looking at

them. "I'll take the pancakes and sausage." I think he left the breakfast ones up just for me. I was a late riser because of my work schedule and I loved breakfast.

"What about your friend?" Melvin asked, looking behind me. I turned around and glanced at my table. Maxim, the hella-hunk, was sitting there smiling at me. I blinked twice to make sure I wasn't dreaming and then turned back to Melvin.

"Umm ... I'm not sure, let me go find out what he wants."

Let it be me ... let it be me.

"Hey, hope you don't mind," Maxim said, as I approached the table.

I sat in the seat across from him and searched around for his buddies. I didn't mind him here, but I did mind Dag. That little weasel turned my stomach, and after the attack, I followed my gut instincts. They told me he was nothing but trouble.

"I'm alone," he said.

"And you read minds too, how convenient."

"No, you seem anxious, and I noticed you looking around. I just guessed that you were checking to see if any of the others were with me."

"Ahh," I said, leaning forward to take another sip of my coffee. "So perceptive, but not a mind reader, it's a start. You can stay."

He flashed a set of white teeth at me and looked over at the specials board. "What do you recommend?"

"Guess, Mr. Perceptive."

He leaned forward. I could smell the scent of his aftershave, mixed with ivory soap. My inner thighs tightened, and liquid pooled in my panties. I'd never had a man's scent make me horny before. I really needed to start dating again. This had to be the first sign of sex withdrawal. Maybe they had a group for that. I could stand in front of a crowded room and announce that I hadn't gotten laid in over a year. Maybe, they'd hand out condoms after a certain number of days as a reminder that I wouldn't be needing them.

Maxim grinned at me and I wanted to lick his dimples. "Let me seem ... you'd recommend coffee sweet enough to rot my teeth and...."

I nodded and let out a tiny laugh. He did a tiny hand gesture signifying that he was trying to read my mind. I decided to help him out, and told him I ordered pancakes. He did the same. For a second or two it was awkward, no one said anything. The food bit had only lasted so long, and then we were left sitting across from one another with nothing to say.

Finally, I broke the ice. "How'd you become friends with those guys?"
Yep, that's me. I'm nothing if not to the point.

Maxim shifted in his seat. His wide shoulders moved around slightly and he seemed unable to get comfortable. It was plain to see that he didn't care for my icebreaker. Still, it beat just staring at him, or did it? "Well, saying that they're my friends is a stretch, you could say that we're sort of family."

I thought about the large black man named Terrance and inwardly laughed at the lack of resemblance. I didn't say anything because my co-workers had become like family to me, and we looked nothing alike either.

"How'd you get the scars on your hands?" I asked. He pulled his hands off the table from my line of sight. Great, I was batting a thousand in the small talk category with him. If I pushed harder, I might cement the fact that he'd never ask for my number. "I'm sorry, I just...."

"No, its fine, I got them helping someone a couple of years ago, that's all."

Melvin brought our food over and saved the day. He gave Maxim the evil eye, no doubt trying to look menacing for my sake, and slammed the plate down in front of him. Melvin had never seen me in his diner with a man before. He acted protective and that was fine by me.

Maxim and I talked during our meal about our interests. We didn't have too much in common. He wasn't much into watching movies or reading books, and he had little interest in plays. He said that his work kept him busy, and that he didn't get much free time to take up any new hobbies. He did confess to liking to paint and draw. I thought that was a step in the right direction.

"I've been here for two years and I don't remember seeing you before," I said.

"I used to live around here, years ago, but, like I said, work has kept me pretty busy. Now, I'm back, and I'm hoping to stay awhile."

"What brought you back?"

"Work."

"What is it that you do?"

"I'm self employed." That didn't really answer my question, but it was all he offered up, so I took it. "What about you?"

"Well, I thought that was obvious. I'm a waitress."

He moved his plate aside and looked at me. "No, what do you really do?"

"I'm a dancer ... was a dancer." I heard myself blurt it out and had no idea why I did it. I hardly knew the guy and here I was giving him my life story.

"Was?"

I thought about the last night that I worked as a dancer. I remembered leaving Trevor's apartment and walking to find a cab. The only ride I got that night was to the hospital in the back of an ambulance. I shook the image from my head, and pulled my purse up to dig my wallet out. Discussing this any further with him seemed pointless, hot guy or not.

"I've got to go," I said and stood.

Maxim rose to his feet quickly. "Hey, wait, I'll walk with you. I promise not to ask any more questions about why you don't dance anymore."

I looked at him, and tried to read his chiseled face. He seemed sincere, and it was broad daylight out. I planned to hit some local shops, all the people there knew me, if he tried anything I could get help. Plus, I'd been taking self-defense classes for the past two years. I hoped to never have need of the skills I learned there, but I would use them if I had to. It was a shame that I hadn't thought to take those classes when I first arrived in the City. They could have changed my life.

I nodded at Maxim and watched him scramble to follow me. Waving good-bye to Melvin, I headed out the door, hoping that I'd made the right choice by letting Maxim come too. Letting a man into my life seemed scarier than facing a gang of thugs again.

"It's cool out here, isn't it?" I asked. The sun was deceiving. I thought it would be warmer out than it was. I pulled my newsboy hat out and put it on. Maxim looked down at me and smiled.

"So, Rayme, that's not a common name."

"Oh, and Maxim is?"

"Ya' got me, and Max is fine."

Chapter 5

It was strange having a man tag along with me while I shopped. At first, I was hesitant to linger too long in any one store. I'd had enough men come in and out of my life to know that most did not have a strong affinity for shopping. If anything, shopping seemed to be right up there with castration on some men's lists. Max didn't seem to share that opinion. A few questioning glances were cast in my direction when I found a sale on patchwork velvet jackets, but that was it. But really, who could pass up the chance to get a hip jacket for eight bucks? I know I couldn't.

Maxim did make several snide comments about my lack of actually purchasing anything in most of the shops we stopped at, but that was it. I explained that part of the fun of shopping was looking for great deals, not actually buying something. He took my word for it and let it be.

Smart man.

I also managed to find a sweater and a pair of pants that I liked. I didn't try them on because he was with me, but I was pretty sure they'd fit. If

not, I'd have another excuse to hit the stores again, and if I was lucky, Maxim would join me. By the time we finished my feet hurt, I was starving, it was pushing seven, and the day had flown by.

"What now?" he asked.

Was he joking?

I'd already drug him around the city to every one of my favorite spots and he still wanted to keep going. Perhaps, he'd been Genghis Khan in his past life and this was his penance--shopping with me.

Hey, I know when I'm torturing people.

I looked at him and laughed at the sight of a manly man carrying a pink bag. He'd volunteered to carry it two blocks back and I'd taken him up on it. Turning down hunky help just wasn't in my nature. "You can't be serious?"

"Yeah, what do you want to do next? You said you didn't have to work until ten."

"Don't you have something you need to get done today?"

"Already did it."

He walked closer to me. My arm brushed his and I drew my breath in. He had a way of shaving the years off me, leaving me feel like a giddy schoolgirl, and I liked that. Feeling carefree and youthful again was fine by me. It wasn't often that I got to pretend that life wasn't harsh and that my dreams hadn't been crushed.

We approached my building, my insides tied into a knot. I wasn't scared of Max, but I wasn't stupid either. I didn't really want him to know where I lived right now. My knee ached and there was no way I could take another step without a pain killer. I also needed to change my shoes, and drop my packages off before I could do anything else. I'd go barefoot before I took another step in the boots of death.

"Well, I guess I could meet you at Vinnie's in about an hour. We could hang out a while before my shift starts." It was lame and I knew it, but it was all I was willing to offer a guy I hardly knew.

"Sounds good," he said. I took my bag from him and watched him walk towards Vinnie's. I didn't expect him to wait for me for the next hour, but that looked like what he planned on doing.

Turning, I walked towards the brown door. I pulled my keys out and went to unlock it. My fingers were so cold from the autumn air that I dropped my keys. I bent down to pick them up, and was struck by the smell of urine again. It was stronger than it had been before. I wrinkled my nose up and made a mental note to bring a bucket of water out and scrub down the doorway.

"Hey, I almost forgot...."

Startled, I dropped the keys again and flung around with my leg extended, ready and willing to kick a would-be attacker in the head. Max caught my foot inches from his face, and looked down at me. "I wanted to give you my number, just in case you couldn't make it. I didn't think ... sorry ... I hope I didn't scare you. Umm, nice move."

He dropped my foot and smiled at me. I felt like a heel for almost kicking my date for the day upside the head, and I had no clue what to say to make the situation less weird. There weren't too many ways to break the ice after nearly knocking your date's teeth out, so I decided that silence was the best answer and bent down to grab my keys. The strong odor of urine hit me again.

"God, I swear when I catch the dog that did this I'm going to ... well, I don't know what I'm going to do, but I'm sure he won't like it. It'll involve a pair of scissors and a certain part of his anatomy that he seems all too willing to aim at my front door."

Max grabbed my wrist before I put the key in the door. I looked up at him, wondering if I should attempt to kick him in the head again or see what he was up to. I went with the wait and see approach. He stared at the claw marks on the door. "Have these always been there?"

"No, I found them this morning, along with the wonderful smell. You like? I'm calling it eau de stray. I'm thinking that I could market it to all the winos to enhance their already enticing aroma. Could be all the rage--there could be people lined up for blocks. Imagine how many stolen shopping carts could be recovered." I put my hands up and laughed. "Just kidding ... hope you don't mind politically incorrect gals."

Max looked around the parking lot frantically. I looked too, and saw nothing. "Do you live alone?"

I froze. Every alarm in my body went off. I didn't want them to be, I didn't want to worry about Max. He was the first guy in the city that I liked right from the start. Trevor hadn't even earned that honor. It had taken me weeks to warm up to him and look where that had gotten me.

Nearing twenty-seven, and by no means old, I felt like my chances of finding the 'right one' were dwindling fast. Maxim and I had jelled. Part of me wanted to believe that he could have been the one. Now, with the creepy 'do you live alone', all I wanted to do was run.

I backed up from the door and looked at him. My face must have shown my concern, because he put his hands up in the universal 'I'm harmless' pose. If that was only true. The man was pure muscle and if he wanted to do me bodily harm then there'd be little I could do to stop him. Sure, I could slow him down, but really--taking on a man his size and with his speed was downright insane.

"No, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you, Rayme. I just wanted to know if anyone else was around in case this ... dog," he put a lot of emphasis on the last word, "comes back around. I should have known that would come off wrong. I just ... shit, forget I asked."

"Hey girl!" I heard Angie's voice. It seemed like the voice of an angel in the midst of chaos. I turned to see her getting out of her boyfriend, Derrick's, car. I'd forgotten that she was due in early. She looked at Maxim, and then back to me. Her face told me that she had a thousand questions, but I knew she'd wait until we were alone to ask them. Or, at least I hoped she would.

"Ang, you're early."

"Yeah, I wanted to spend a little time with you, sorry about the car thing. I did want to spend the day with you, I swear. I ended up listening to Fawn drone on about still married guy number four billion for the greater part of the day." She looked back at the car she'd arrived in. "Oh, I'm borrowing Derrick's until mine gets fixed. So, am I interrupting anything?"

Max looked at me and handed me a piece of paper. "Here's my number. I'm guessing that I'll be taking a rain check on tonight." He backed away,

slowly. The idea of never seeing him again scared me more than he did and I wasn't willing to risk it.

"Max." I said. "Would you like to come in?" He looked shocked. Angie looked even more shocked. I gave her the 'call me in a half hour to make sure I'm not dead' face, the one that we'd perfected over the course of our friendship, and watched her gawk at me. I wish I could have seen the look on her face as Max and I entered the building. I'm sure it would have been priceless.

I tried to flick the hallway light on. It didn't work. That was odd. A wave of nausea hit me as we walked in from the heavy smell of ammonia in the hall. It smelled like a port-a-john.

Always good for real estate value.

I walked up to the door at the base of the stairs and saw another huge claw mark down the center of it. Backing up, I ran into Max. He put his hands out and took my keys. I didn't argue with him. Something seemed off and if a huge, hunky guy wanted to take the lead, I'd let him.

He gave me a questioning look and moved his body in front of mine. I pulled my cell phone out to call the police. He shook his head no. We walked to the top of the stairs and I saw another tiny gash on the last door. Max put the key in and opened the door slowly. I heard a loud screeching sound and saw a black blur flying out at Max. His arms went up and he caught it in mid-motion. It let out an ear-piercing screech I recognized immediately.

Reaching out, I snatched a very pissed off Henry from Max's hands. I tried to calm him down, but ended up having to put him in the extra bedroom. He didn't seem too fond of Max. In fact, he made several more attempts to attack him before I slammed the door shut. I hoped that my cat was a bad judge of character.

I came out and found Max looking around my living room, peeking out my windows. "It's another parking lot," I said. The view sucked, but the place was huge. I wasn't going to start complaining now. Plus, I paid next to nothing for it, so I was a happy girl.

"Yeah, I was just checking ... I wanted to ... umm, yeah." His gaze raked over me, and his face looked so serious. My stomach twisted into another knot. It seemed to be the day for developing an ulcer. "I'm not sure you

should stay here tonight. You mentioned that you might go and see your parents. I think you should. I think you should leave now."

I didn't realize that I had backed up until I hit the wall. I turned to see how far away from the phone I was. Max made a move towards me and I ran for the phone. Beating me to it, he grabbed my arms. I screamed out and kicked him hard, but he didn't let go. Pain radiated up my leg as if I'd kicked a brick wall instead of a man.

"Rayme! Stop! I'm not going to hurt you. Christ, I'll go, it's just I think you would be safer somewhere else. That's all, baby, I swear!"

I stopped struggling and looked up at him. This had gotten so out of control and I couldn't even pinpoint when it had all happened. "It's not a dog is it?"

"No."

"What is it?" I heard myself ask him, but in my heart I knew what it was, I'd seen something like it before, the night I was attacked. Sinking down to the floor, I put my head down to fight the wave of tears that were threatening to overtake me. Max put his hand on my shoulder and I didn't push it off, kudos for me. I took a couple of deep breaths and stood up. Wiping the corners of my eyes, I looked at him. I knew that I looked like a nut case, but I'd played the victim once already and it nearly cost me my life. I wouldn't do it again. If it meant I'd have a few minor break down sessions then so be it.

"So, do you know what almost got in here?" I wanted to hear him say it. I'd waited two years for someone to give it a name--to validate it for me.

Max leaned back against the wall and it was his turn to take a breather. "Not, what ... who." He put his hand out to me, and I felt compelled to take it.

I turned and grabbed the phone to call the police. If some sociopath was trying to get in, then they needed to know. Max took it from my hands slowly. "What are you planning on telling the authorities? I don't think they'll view the scratches on the door as a threat. They'll probably send animal control out to patrol the area. They'll chalk it up to some stray dog and leave. It's not a stray dog, and I think you know that."

I looked into his dark eyes and knew that he told the truth. Shit, double shit. This was far from what I needed. After a millisecond of thought, I

decided that what I truly did need was a drink. I turned to head to the kitchen and fix us one. After my evening, I knew that I needed one, and I'd bet that he did too. I hadn't thought to ask him what he wanted. Stopping, I turned around and he ran right into me. A nervous laugh came from me, and a matching one fell from his lips. I found myself staring at his mouth, wondering what it would feel like on mine. I had to fight to pull my eyes away. A piece of his long, wavy, brown hair came undone from his tie and fell across his eyes. Reaching up, I pushed it back for him. His hand came up and met mine. I leaned in and let the attraction I felt for him take over. I moved my lips towards his and he bent down to meet mine.

Maxim's lips were so soft and warm that I drew him in closer to me to take pleasure in them longer. He pushed his tongue into my mouth, and I welcomed it. My stomach was full of butterflies as we stood there tasting each other.

Yep, he had a way of shaving ten years off me in an instant.

I was suddenly giddy and nervous, much like I'd been in high school around boys. Carefree, and willing--willing to let this man have his way with me.

He caressed my face. I tugged on his lower lip gently, and he made a tiny noise that sounded like a strangled cry. He moved his hands around my waist. Pushing his black jacket back, I grabbed handfuls of his t-shirt. His warm hands slid up the back of my sweater, onto my sides, and upwards.

I tugged at his jacket to get it off. I couldn't get enough of the feel of his arms, chest, neck, and mouth. He stroked just under my bra line. He hadn't tried to touch my breasts yet, and I was surprised to find myself disappointed. There was no denying how psychically attracted to him I was. Any woman in her right mind would want him, and I was no exception. He was sex incarnate and I was hard up--never a good combination.

The phone rang, and we pulled away from each other quickly. The heightened mood between us simmered down and the thought of selling my soul to rejuvenate it crossed my mind. Looking over at the phone, I thought about letting it just ring, but was pretty sure that it was Angie. If I didn't answer it, she'd have half the city's police department outside my door in two point two seconds. I pushed past Max to pick it up. He let out a small cry of frustration and let me pass.

"Hello?"

A low growling sound came at me from the other end, and it sent chills up my spine. I turned and looked at Max, his face was tight and his brown eyes were hard. The man had to have amazing hearing. I wasn't about to question him on it, at least not quite yet.

Another growl sounded from the other end of the line. "I see you...." The voice was muffled and sounded animalistic.

My nostrils flared with anger. Whoever this was, thought he was funny. I found the situation to be anything but humorous. I found it terrifying. Flashes of the night in the alley, with the gang of boys flooded my mind. "Don't fucking call here again!"

Maxim touched my shoulders and it helped to calm me down. It was amazing how soothing just a touch could be. I refrained from telling the jackass on the other end all the different ways I hoped he'd die and settled on slamming the phone back on its cradle. I was unable to control the shaking in my hand, and brought it to my mouth. I spun around in a daze, looking to do something, anything. My heart raced and I needed to move, to go, to get away. Anywhere. Somewhere. Nowhere. I wasn't picky. I just needed to move.

Max grabbed hold of me and pulled me to him. "Its okay.... It's okay," he said, stroking the back of my head with his hands and rocking me gently. He made me feel safe, and I'd never felt safe in anyone's arms before. This was a new type of experience for me, and I wasn't sure how I felt about it. I should have been pleased, but now I felt as though the bottom would drop out on me at any moment. Relying on me was one thing, relying on another was an entirely different matter.

The phone rang again. I jumped, but didn't move to answer it. The thought of dog boy being on the other end caused me to lose my nerve. The machine picked it up, and I heard Angie's voice. "Rayme? Hon, are you there? Pick up or I'm coming over. If you're in the middle of anything kinky you'll be sorry. Oh, by the way I saw the guy you were with ... you better be doing some kinky shit, and I want a full report ... it's about time you got back on the old sex bandwagon again ... ooo, he is a fine one to hop on too, isn't he--I'll need a size report. My guess is he's a big one, and he'll make you scream...."

I snatched the phone up and knew that my face was at the very least three shades of red. Dying on the spot would have been too easy and I never did anything the easy way. "Angie, hey, I'm here."

"Is he still there?"

I looked over at Max. He tried to be polite and give me my privacy, but I had a feeling that he heard the entire conversation. The fact that his face was as red as mine said a lot.

"Yes."

Angie giggled. "He's hot, why the hell have you been holding out on me? When you snag a babe-a-licious one like that, you dish baby, you don't hide him away for me to stumble upon in a parking lot!"

"Did you sleep with him yet? I'm not trying to be weird, but girl let's face it, you're some score ... I mean, Trevor's still trying to hook back up with you, and he's a friggin' model. Sure, he's an ass, but that doesn't change the fact that he's a model. Umm, did I forget to mention that he was just here looking for you again?"

"What did you tell him?" I asked, suddenly feeling the weight of the day settle into my shoulders.

"That you were on a date. He completely flipped out and wanted to know when you'd be home. I did sort of leave out the part that you and Mr. Hunky are already home. Anyway, Trevor did his auto-flex again. I think you're right, it's involuntary. How often do you think he checks out his abs in the mirror?"

"You know, I still get goose bumps every time I see him in his undies on a billboard. Tell me that's his real package and not some new camera angle. Oh, I wonder if the sexpot you've got with you is hung like a horse, too. Is he?"

"Angie!" I looked over at Max, as he flipped through one of my magazines on the coffee table, and smiled.

"You did sleep with him, didn't you? I'm so excited for you. Trevor is an asshole and you needed to find somebody else, and after the whole ... well, you know. Gawd, Rayme I'm so happy for you. I want a full report tonight. You are coming in tonight, right? No, wait, do you need me to tell Vinnie that you're sick, so you can ... you know?"

Fearing she'd ramble on forever, I cut her off and told her I'd see her later. I put the phone down and walked over to sit by Maxim on the couch. He looked so rugged and manly against my soft white couch. That'd be hard for most men, but he pulled it off nicely. I'd found the couch at a scratch and dent store, they claimed that it was last season's model and sold it to me for a fraction of its worth. Seeing Max surrounded by white made him appear almost angelic. I'd have gladly paid full price for the thing just to see Maxim sit on it again.

"Sorry about that. She was just...."

Maxim moved down for me to sit near him. "She was just checking to make sure you were all right." I felt two inches tall and wanted to crawl under the coffee table and disappear. "That's good that you have someone like that. She's a good friend. One question ... who is Trevor?"

"You heard that?"

"She's a really loud talker." he said, tight lipped.

He had a point. Angie did tend to scream just about everything she said. Still, it was odd that he'd overhead that from across the room. "He's nobody."

"Really? Then why is he hanging out at the bar and wanting to know when you'll be back from your date?"

"I don't know. He does that sometimes."

"Are you still sleeping with him?" Maxim asked, his tone low and face even.

"I don't see how that's any of your business." It fell out before I could take it back.

"You're right. I'm sorry. I'll go."

"Maxim, wait. I'm not."

He put his hand on my knee, and I drew it away. I didn't like anything or anyone touching that knee. It had phantom pains, and having it touched reminded me too much of that horrible night two years ago. Trevor hadn't understood why I changed. He hadn't been able to cope with the new me. To be perfectly honest, I had trouble coping with myself.

Max stood up abruptly and went to the other chair. He looked hurt, and I figured out that by pulling my knee away, he had taken it as a sign that I was no longer interested in him. He couldn't have been more wrong if he tried. Tackling him and smothering him with kisses could have proved my point, but I held back. It was our first date and all.

"No, it's not you. It's me. I, umm, don't particularly like having my leg touched, sorry."

He stepped back towards me, and sat down. "Why?"

I tried to pull my pant leg up high enough to show him, but it stopped just short of the start of my scars. I surprised myself by wanting to share them with him. Only the people closest to me knew I had them. Making a habit of showing my battle wounds off to strangers wasn't a hobby of mine. I couldn't explain it, but I needed to include Max in this part of my life.

I stood up and unbuttoned my jeans. His brown eyes widened, and I laughed. "Easy boy, I'll show you why," I said, pulling my sweater down to cover my lower half and eased my jeans down. I was very happy that I hadn't worn granny undies, but wasn't planning on showing him the satin ones I'd chosen either. It was just nice to know that if he caught a peek of them, they were sexy.

When I got my pants down to about mid-thigh I heard him suck in his breath. I knew how bad my leg looked. I saw it everyday. I was always reminded of it. Glancing down, I tried to see it for the first time again. A long, thick, pinkish-white scar ran across my knee, and two smaller ones radiated out from it. It looked like someone had taken a meat cleaver to me, but in reality, my leg had shattered and protruded forth. It was amazing that I could walk, and I had to remind myself of that every time I looked at it. Not that it helped much.

Max's hand reached out towards my leg. I pulled back, but then stopped and let him closer. This was a first for me. Trevor hadn't even been allowed to linger near my scars. I'd taken to hiding my lower half under the sheets during acts of passion. Max was truly privileged, I just wondered if he realized how much.

His fingers barely touched my scars, as he traced the edges of them. His soft touch was oddly erotic, and I was embarrassed to be turned on during a moment such as this. "What happened?"

"Oh, nothing much, just your everyday run of the mill evening. Until a group of teenagers out to have a good time, and trying to get into some gang, attacked me. Apparently, one of them thought it'd be fun to mug a girl and then beat her to death with a bat. I'm not sure how I made it out alive. I still believe that I had help from the most unlikely source ... a wolf." I glanced at the floor nervously, hoping that he missed my confession. "Anyways, the doctor told me that the paramedics had to restart my heart when they found me on the scene. Fun, huh!"

Looking up at me, his face paled. His gaze traveled back down to my leg. Wiping his palms on his pant legs, he looked around the room. This was obviously a stressful situation for him. I'd dumped too much of my baggage on his lap.

I pulled my jeans back up and went out to get him a glass of water, silently cursing myself for laying all that on him the first day I met him. Now, I was that girl, the one with all the emotional and physical baggage.

Oh, God I was turning into Fawn!

I handed Max the glass and turned to walk towards my room. "I didn't mean to ... freak you out. I don't know why I felt like I needed to tell you about it."

"When did it happen?" he asked, so softly that I almost didn't hear him.

"Two years ago. They prosecuted the kids behind it. They'll be out of jail in a few months. They were lucky they were all juveniles--the big leagues frown upon attempted murder and rape. You should have heard them all going on about wild animals running loose in the streets. Most of them are under a doctor's care. A few of them even look catatonic. I hope that they keep pumping the little bastards with whatever sedative they used. It's the only satisfaction I get."

Max stared at my wall. He seemed fixated on a picture of a honey-colored wolf that I had hanging near my bedroom door. Not surprising, it so didn't fit in with my décor. I had seen it at an odds and end shop down the street and had to have it. The man who sold it to me told me that 'the wolf was my spirit guide and that I was born to be a leader among them.' He also went on to tell me about how my path in life would forever be changed and how I would 'walk along side the wolf.'

I didn't know what the hell the man was talking about so I paid him, smiled, and left. I thought about calling someone from the state hospital, but let it go, the guy was crazy, but harmless.

The awkward silence stretched on between Maxim and I. Finally having had enough of it, I stood up and headed out to the kitchen to fix myself another drink. Diet soda and rum was my drink of choice. I had a soft spot for it, and really felt like I needed one. Under the circumstances, I needed two.

Glancing at the clock on the stove, I wondered how best to get the night to end. I'd ruined my chances with Max by pushing to far and sharing too much. I was confident that I wouldn't be seeing him again anytime soon, and I couldn't blame him. It was a shame too. I really enjoyed his company and had never felt that passionate when I kissed a man before.

"Well, I should probably get cleaned up for work," I said, hoping this would afford him an opportunity to bow out gracefully from my evening of tell-alls.

I wiped the counter tops down out of habit, not necessity, and waited for a response. Walking back out into the living room, I found his glass of water sitting on the end table, but he was gone. The front door was slightly ajar, and I walked over to it to check for him. So much for needing to bow out gracefully.

Great, I am Fawn!

Chapter 6

"So ... dish it out girl, I'm dying here," Angie said, as she stuffed her tray full of extra napkins, popped an olive in her mouth, and headed towards one of her tables.

"Nothing happened, really."

"Rayme, you're not serious. The guy looks like an underwear model. If you don't want to do him, I will."

Laughing at her, I walked away with my own tray full of drinks. I doled out the beverages to their rightful owners, and turned to take the next table's order. I stopped dead in my tracks when I saw who was there.

Dag, the weasel from the night before, sat with his arm over the back of the chair, grinning at me. He only had two additional guys with him this time, as opposed to the group of six he had with him prior. One of the two men was pleasing to the eye, but had an air of danger about him. The dark black braid that he sported looked like it could double as a weapon. If he was one of Dag's friends then he was most likely packing some sort of protection. They didn't seem the type to travel unarmed.

I tried to push these thoughts out of my head. I wasn't okay with the fact that I stereotyped a guy I'd never met before. I got that enough, as it was, on my own, projecting that onto someone else wasn't right.

The other man with Dag looked as though he hadn't seen a bath this century. His hair was long and shaggy, and I think brown, though that could have just been dirt. His clothes were as ragged as his hair. I wanted to point him in the direction of a garden hose and a bar of soap to save all the other bar patrons the misery of having to sit in his general vicinity. I didn't.

"Come on Ray-mee, don't be shy, my friend here won't bite ya'," Dag said, and then burst into laughter. A set of incisors that rivaled a dog's, flashed in his mouth so fast that I wasn't sure if I'd actually seen them. I would have looked harder, but Dag reminded me of a drowned rat. His slicked back black hair, pale skin, and beady eyes seemed like the human equivalent of a mutant rodent. Maybe the all powerful creator knew ahead of time what kind of personality the guy would have and handed him matching teeth to complete the varmint ensemble. I didn't like him one bit, and didn't care if he knew it.

"What can I get for you?" I asked.

"What can you get for me? Let me think.... How about a piece of your nice ass? Mmm, yeah, that sounds good, and can I get that would a side of pussy?"

"Get out."

His eyes widened, and looked at his friends. "Did she just tell me to get out?"

The scraggly haired one nodded and snorted. The dark-haired man looked at me and gave me a look that spoke volumes. He was warning me not to push Dag. I wondered if it came to it, would he step in and stop Dag from doing anything stupid? Probably not. He turned to Dag. "Perhaps we should take our business elsewhere."

The dirty one laughed harder at that. He looked like a jiggling pile of rags. Dag reached over and smacked him off his chair. The man ended up flat on his back, glaring up at me. I backed up, mainly to avoid having him touch me. Dag then glanced over at the other man.

"I think I'll have a drink here, Vince, and I think you'll keep your damn mouth shut." He looked up at me. "As for you, Ray-mee, we'd like a round of beers."

I turned as fast as I could and headed up to get their order filled at the bar. The sooner I gave them their drinks, the sooner they'd go. Vinnie kept a firearm behind the bar, but Jobe, the new bartender was barely legal and I doubted that he had much in the way of experience with a pistol. I gave him a nod and hoped that he'd take it for what it was worth, a warning.

Angie waited at the corner of the bar for me. "Hey, don't look now, but there's a hot guy in the corner watching you."

Maxim? I turned fast expecting to find him waiting with flowers and an 'I'm so sorry' look. I stood very still and let my eyes try to soak in what they were seeing. There, sitting in the booth was a man who looked to be around thirty, with dark black hair spiked just an inch or so off his head, and wearing a black Armani suit. I'd spent enough time watching the rich come to the shows while I danced to learn to spot a designer wardrobe. As if that wasn't enough, his squared face, and wide, brooding forehead gave him an air of mystic. The mystic was slightly clouded by the shimmer his skin seemed to hold. I wondered how often, if at all, the man got out into the light of day. Regardless, he had a great moisturizer, that much was for sure.

He turned, caught me staring at him, and tipped his head towards me. Sky blue eyes found me and made me feel as if I'd been caught peeking at a dirty magazine. Color swept through my cheeks and I did my best not to trip over my own two feet. Forcing a large smile on my face, I headed in his direction--pad in hand, ready to do what I do best--take orders.

"Hi, can I get you tonight? Err ... I mean, what can I get for you tonight?"

He glanced at my nametag and then, to my surprise, didn't linger long over my breasts, which was a favorite thing of mine for men to do.

"Rayme, that's a lovely name. I haven't run across that one before." A polished British accent formed every word with the utmost care.

I'd never really gotten how some women could be on the verge of an orgasm based solely off of their proximity to a gorgeous man, but was beginning to understand it as his voice wrapped around me. Sure, I'd been around men from other countries before, I wasn't that sheltered, but this one was different.

"I say ... you are a quiet one ... hmm." The words rolled off his tongue.

I had to fight back from letting out a sigh and going weak in the knees. Repeating the words, I am not twelve in my head did seem to help a little-not much, but a little. "Sorry ... umm ... Mr...."

"Most address me as Jovan. I would like very much to have you do the same."

"Alrighty then, Jovan. What will you be having this evening?"

He began to answer me, but a loud noise from behind me sounded him out. I spun around to find the dirty pile of rags with his nasty hands on Angie's breasts. The scattered mess of broken glass and the smell of beer told me that she'd dropped her tray because of this, and the look on her face said that she was scared. She attempted to push dirty-boy away with little to no success. I turned to excuse myself from Jovan, but he was gone. I dropped my notepad and ran to help Angie.

"Get your hands off her!"

Dirty-boy kept his paws on Angie, but turned his head towards me. "You gonna step in and take her place?"

"No, but I am going to give you a head start before I..." My threat went unnoticed. His hands dropped away from Angie, and he lunged at me with a speed I'd never seen before.

I dropped low to the ground and swung my foot around, effectively sweeping his legs out from under him. He sprang up and off the floor with such agility that he seemed to be part tiger. His hand came out and

he tried to grab my throat. I brought my hand down, knocked his arm away, and made sure to bring my foot up fast and hard into his pelvic region. Pain radiated through my leg, but I didn't waver. He clutched himself and lurched backwards, letting out a growl that sounded so much like a dog that for a moment I was sure a pack of strays had wondered in.

The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end and the room suddenly felt several degrees cooler. A cross between whispers and chants flew at me from every direction. The sound faded in and out. Was it my imagination?

I wanted to run, but I wanted to hit rag-boy one more time, so I gave in and did it. I kicked up fast and hard and managed to catch the edge of his jaw. This sent him tumbling back and over an empty table. I had about three seconds to pat myself on the back before something seized hold of my hair. The terror of my ordeal in the alley came flooding back long enough to cause me to freeze.

Bad mistake.

"Ray-mee ... now why'd you go and do that? Spoilin' a boy's fun ... that's a bad girl, you should be punished now," Dag said, his voice low, almost a whisper.

A cold wind blew past me and the bizarre chants began again. "What?" I did my best to make out what they were saying. All I got out of it was creped out.

Dag didn't seem to notice the strange sounds, that or he just didn't care. Clueless or careless, hmm, neither one would surprise me out of him.

A rough tongue that felt like sandpaper licked my cheek. "Mmm.... I can taste your fear, and I like it." Dag's breath was hot and putrid.

"I wouldn't do that if I was you," the dirty man said to Angie as she went for the phone. Angie knew the drill--if you had a problem you called the police, period. I scanned the room hoping to find a Good Samaritan, but found no one, and I do mean no one. The bar was deserted except for the five of us. Last I recalled, we'd had a decent crowd, something was off, very, very off.

"Sir, leave her. She is nothing to you. Why risk the wrath of human law for one such as her?" Vince, the smooth talker appeared behind the dirty-man.

Dag let out a growl. "Never question me again or it will be your end. Do you understand me?"

Vince nodded then turned to Angie. "Put the phone down." She did as she was told.

"Where the fuck did everyone go?" Dirty-boy asked, sounding as confused about the bar being empty as I was. That was both good and bad. If the bad guys didn't know what happened, then we were all screwed.

Vince looked at Dag and in turn, Dag tightened his grip on my neck. His hot breath pushed out and over my ear. "What'd you do? Where are the rest of the people?"

As much as I would have loved to take credit for running off our only prospects for help, I couldn't. I stood silent, unwilling to provoke Dag any further. He apparently didn't like my lack of response, because he yanked my body around and glared at me.

"Answer me, bitch."

"Now, Dag I do not think that calling such a lovely creature of beauty names is very polite. I think you will agree with me on this matter. Will you not?" I'd only met him briefly, but that clean, clear accent could only belong to one man, Jovan.

Dag's eyes widened and he released the death grip he had on my hair. I fell backwards and a cool hand grabbed my arm. Regaining my balance, I turned to look at the person who helped me. Deep blue eyes locked on me and my insides tightened with a combination of fear and lust. Jovan stood there steadying me with one hand and had the most amazingly calm look I'd ever seen on a man. A grin spilled across his face that said more of what he was thinking than words ever could. It was the look of a man who was used to getting what he wanted, and heaven help me, I wanted to give him whatever he asked for.

"Jovan ... I, umm ... err ... what brings you to town?" Dag stumbled over every word. It was clear that he was afraid of Jovan, why, I wasn't sure. He and his posse had Jovan grossly out numbered. Perhaps Brits had gotten a bad rap over the ages. Maybe they were really vicious killers--nah.

I expected Jovan to let go of my arm and address Dag. He didn't, instead he pulled me closer to him and lifted my hair back, inspecting my neck with a pair of ultra-cool hands. His fingers danced over my skin, near my collarbone, and stopped. He turned and looked at Dag. "You've marred her beautiful skin. She now wears your handprint. That is not acceptable behavior."

"Humph," Dag said.

"Care to share something with the rest of the group?" Jovan had an interesting way of making his question into a demand without raising his voice. I was impressed.

Dag shuffled and shifted his weight to his other foot. If I didn't know any better I'd have sworn that he looked like he was about to wet his pants. "No ... Jovan it's just that I ... ahh...."

"What he's failing to tell you is that he put enough pressure on her neck to snap it, yet it did not break," Vince said. Dag let out a growl, but Vince didn't waver.

Jovan turned and looked at me. "Really? This is most curious. What are you?"

"Umm, I'm a Rayme?"

He smiled and took a step closer to me. "Curious."

"Not really, but you keep saying that, maybe Brits have lower standards for excitement. You all do get into dog shows, don't you?"

This left Jovan laughing. He had a laugh like none I'd ever heard before. It had a life of its own. I could have sworn that it wrapped around me and even managed to move my hair. Angie let out a sigh and I looked over to find her staring dreamily at Jovan. Her eyes looked glassy and her movements seemed odd. She reminded me of old sci-fi movies where the victim is under the influence of a trance. Maybe she found Jovan even more attractive than I did. I wasn't sure how that was possible, but something was up, that was for sure.

"Leave now, and forget that any of this has occurred. You will go home, soak in a warm bath, and wake tomorrow, refreshed and believing that you had an ordinary night at work," Jovan said to us.

I was about to laugh in his face when Angie nodded and headed towards the door. "Ang?"

Everyone but Angie turned to look at me. "Ha ... looks like your mojo didn't cut it with this one. Can I have another go at snapping her neck?" Dag's creepy little voice chimed in from the sidelines.

Jovan turned and glared at him. Dag shrank back against the bar and remained silent. Wish I had that power over him. Jovan glided towards me and put his hand out to touch my face. I jerked back from him. Something wasn't sitting well with me. Sure, he'd scared the goons off me, but how the hell did he manage to do that little parlor trick with Angie?

"I mean you no harm," he said. I let out a nervous laugh. He frowned a bit. "Trust me Rayme--had I intended to hurt you, you would not be standing here now."

"I'm sorry, but was that supposed to reassure me? Because if it was, I think you need to work on your delivery a bit more."

Vince's eyes almost popped out of his head. He looked like he was waiting for Jovan to blow. Jovan looked at me and laughed from the gut again. "Oh, I am growing very fond of you little one. It has been some time since I've laughed this much." He now stood directly in front of me. If either of us took another step, we'd bump into each other. He had me by at least a foot. He wasn't an extremely bulky man, but you could tell that he was very toned under all that Armani. "You are something Rayme. I would like to get to know you better."

He leaned down and brushed his lips over my cheek. I inhaled, took in the scent of expensive cologne and let out an audible sigh. He laughed softly in my ear as he planted a kiss on it. "Would you be so kind as to accept an invitation to dine with me tomorrow evening?"

"You're trying to pick me up while we're in the middle of ... this." I motioned around the room. I wasn't even sure what to call what was going on with Dag and the other men.

Jovan turned his face from me and looked at the other men. "Leave now and never set foot in this establishment again. Am I clear?"

I heard a collective "yes," and then the bell for the door. Jovan turned back to me. "Now, that is settled, they are gone. Where were we?"

I tried to peer over his shoulder, but the difference in height prevented me from seeing anything but him, not that I was complaining any. "I remember now, I was requesting the honor of your company," he said, smiling at me.

Oh, he definitely had mastered the art of sweet-talking. "I would, but.... I'm heading out to see my family for a couple of nights."

"I see." He didn't pull back from me. "Promise that you will call when you are ready to see me again."

"Yeah, I guess I could do that."

He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a business card. He artfully held it pinched between his first two fingers. "I look forward to hearing from you."

I took it from him and glanced at it. It only had his name printed on it, Jovan Shepard. "Is this a joke? How am I supposed to reach you without a phone number?"

His lips curved into a devilish smile. "Say my name and I shall come."

Great, a rich nut-job, just what I always wanted. "Yeah, I'll be sure to do that."

He pulled back from me and walked towards the door. I thought that would be the end of our strange meeting, but he turned to me before he left. "Sweet dreams, Rayme."

Chapter 7

I heard something moving off to my left and spun around in the darkened room. It was familiar yet foreign all at the same time. As far as I could

tell, I was alone, but I couldn't shake the feeling that someone was watching me, waiting in the shadows for me.

"Hello?" I heard the echo of my voice bouncing back at me. That was never a good sign.

Something brushed past my arm and sent chills up my spine. I screamed out and spun around, ready to fight if need be. The darkness that surrounded me was so great that I was unable to make out my hand in front of my face let alone whatever else was there with me. Something touched my back, and then my shoulder.

Hot breath blew onto my neck and my body reacted with a full body shiver. A cold hand touched my cheek and I jerked back into what I thought was a brick wall. I screamed out, I didn't care how much like a typical damsel in distress I sounded. I'd rather be one of those than dead.

"My dear Rayme, why do you run from me?"

I knew that voice. "Jovan?"

I heard his sexy laugh and knew that it was him. Somehow, this information did little in the way of calming my nerves. I felt his hand on my face again and tried to back away. Light came from all around us. It wasn't bright, but it was enough to finally see. There before me was Jovan. He was out of the Armani suit I'd seen him in earlier and in a pair of black slacks, and a white shirt. If that wasn't enough, he was also sporting a rather large top hat. I wasn't sure if he was going for an eighteenth century look or if he was trying to look like a cake topper, either way, he looked stunning.

I drew back from him as he extended his arm out to me. I looked around to get a better idea of where I was. The last thing I had remembered doing was climbing into my bed exhausted. Somehow I'd ended up here.

"Not somehow ... it is a dream, your dream to be exact," Jovan said, as he stepped closer to me.

It seemed so real. I began to protest, and then thought about the fact that he'd just answered a question that I'd never asked aloud. It made sense that I was dreaming. I had to be dreaming, if not, that meant that I'd gone crazy and that was something I didn't want or need. I had enough issues to date, I sure didn't need any more.

Jovan's smile widened. It wasn't friendly so much as it was sensual. He was one of those men who could make your knees weak with just the slightest glance on his part. He was strikingly beautiful. I had to give him that, but maybe a little too pretty. His moisturized skin and manicured nails said that he spent more time pampering himself than I did and that could be bad.

It was my turn to smile. "I think I recreated you a little too well, I'm impressed with myself."

His eyes shone with a deeper knowledge. "Would you rather I wear flannel and abstain from grooming myself? I could try to look like Morton, Dag's friend from the bar. The dirty one you disliked so very much." His long fingers moved towards my face. "Is that the type of man that you prefer?"

His hands were so cold, yet smooth, that I found myself standing before him with my head tipped to the side and my eyes slightly closed. I thought about what my kind of man was. I wanted someone who was strong, both physically and mentally, caring, easy to talk to, fun to be around, and of course--toss your legs in the air at the drop of a hat for em' sexy. I thought of Maxim, and how he seemed to fit all of those things. Why wasn't I dreaming about him?

Jovan's hand pulled away from my face. "You think of another."

It was a statement and a question wrapped all in one. I'm not sure why I felt the need explain myself to a man I'd recreated in my dreams, but I did. "Yeah, I'm thinking of someone else. I thought that we might have had something, but he just sort of walked out on me. It never really got off the ground."

Jovan circled me slowly. Once he'd completed one full rotation, the temperature around me dropped. He reached his hand out to me and I took it out of both fear and desire. He brought my hand to his cool lips and peered over the top of it at me. His blue eyes grabbed my attention and demanded that I stay focused on him, as if I could think of anything else with a hot stud like him on my arm.

"I want you, Rayme."

I let out a giggle, it was immature and entirely inappropriate, but it was all I could come up with at the moment. His lips moved up to my wrist. He kissed it gently, and then moved to my elbow, upper arm, neck, before

stopping at my ear to nibble on it. I melted under his cool touch. He blew across my cheek and my legs gave out. I grabbed his shoulders to keep from falling, and his hands wrapped around my waist. He held me to him and looked down at me with a gaze so penetrating that he should have been able to see right through me, maybe he could.

"Remove your clothes, and let me see your glorious body before I claim it as my own." He pulled back from me slightly and seemed to be waiting for me to follow his command.

"Great, just my luck, I dream of a sexy guy, ready and willing to please me, and then go and turn him into a control freak."

His right eyebrow rose. "How is it that you are able to resist me?"

I let out another small laugh. "Trust me buddy, it isn't easy."

He brushed his hand through the air before my face. The already cool room dropped to freezing. "Disrobe and accept me." His tone was stern, and his voice deeper.

I took a step back from him. "My, they do have a funny way of raising boys in England. They must have left out that oh, so important part about foreplay and being ... I don't know ... cordial to a potential lover."

Jovan seized hold of my arm and pulled me to him. His lips pressed against mine quickly. His tongue forced its way into my mouth. I wanted to object, but my tongue answered his every move, leaving my body reacting to his. My hands moved under his jacket, and I made an attempt to get his shirt untucked. He had snaps and buttons everywhere. I'd put him in clothes that were very authentic, and I was anything but a history buff. Sure, I wanted a handsome well-versed lover from the past as much as the next gal, but wow, this was even too much for me.

"You still want me even though I have no power over you?"

I really did have to fight the urge to yell, "well duh?" I nodded at him. What would it hurt, it was only a dream. He pulled my hand to his lips. "Would you want me if this was real, or would you seek the hand of your other suitor?"

Other suitor, that meant two--right? Hell, I didn't even know that I had one, let alone two. "What, you mean Max?" As soon as his name fell from my lips, the whispers and chants I'd heard in the bar returned. Jovan

looked around and pulled me closer to him. I let out a small cry of fright and he stroked my hair.

"Ah, do not fear my little priestess--it is only your power that calls you. I knew there was something different about you, but I had no idea that it was this." His words did little to reassure me. "Rayme, as much as I would love to explore every inch of your body and to know the pleasure of your touch I must go. The sun is rising and my strength is going. Until tonight my love."

Chapter 8

I woke to find myself dripping with sweat, and to the sound of my phone ringing. I fumbled around until I found it. "Yeah?"

"Lovely way to answer the phone, Rayme, really.... I know that I raised you better than this," my mother's high pitched, made for complaining voice, rang out in my ear.

I rubbed the sleep out of my eyes and did my best to be nice to her. "Sorry, mom, I worked late last night, and I had ... umm ... a hard time sleeping."

"Are you taking those pills I sent you? I don't know why I'm even bothering to ask, it's not like you'd do anything I'd recommend."

"I'm going to stay at the cabin for a few days."

My mother fell silent for a moment. "Really, Rayme, that's good to hear. I've been telling you for months now that you need to get out of that dirty city for a while and relax. You are going to think about the job offer here, aren't you?"

I had to fight back a moan. The job offer she referred to was teaching dance to elementary school children full-time. I wanted to move home

and do that about as much as I wanted to spend an evening at the movies with Dag. I sucked it up and lied. "Yeah, that's why I'm going up to the cabin. It will give me some time to think about things. Bill won't mind, will he?"

My mother made a strange noise. It was a half-choke, half-laugh. "Of course he won't mind. Darling, he's been after you to take the damn thing since you decided to move a state away. We never use it and it just sits and goes to waste. I told him to sell it, but he refused, he knows that you like it, so he won't let go of it."

I didn't know what to say. Bill had always been good to me, better to me than even my own mother. A few months after my attack, I found out the real reason he didn't come to see me, he couldn't handle seeing me broken. He'd always wanted me to think of him as my father, I couldn't. We worked around the obvious, the best we could. It was all anyone could really expect.

"Stop by if you get a chance. I'm assuming that you won't though, so don't worry about me, I'm used to never getting to see you."

"I've got to go, Mother, my phone's beeping."

"Very well, call me when you get settled in."

I hung up and lay back in my bed. I should have felt bad for lying to my mother about getting another call, but I didn't. I was angry for not thinking of that sooner. I rolled out of bed and began packing my bags for a week at cabin. The nice thing about going up there this time of year was that I didn't have to worry about how I looked in a swimsuit. It was too cold to do any swimming. I packed two bags full of clothes and called for a cab.

Henry ran out and I snatched him up and put him in his carrier. He didn't like being in it, but he couldn't stay home alone, so he'd have to deal. My phone rang and I debated on whether or not to pick it up. I grabbed it and waited, afraid that at any moment I'd hear something growling on the other end. I didn't hear growling, but what I did hear was worse. It was Fawn crying, again.

"What's wrong now?" I asked.

"Rayme, I just got a call from Sam. He and his wife are back together."

Now, there was a shocker!

I listened with half an ear as she went on and on about having lost the latest love of her life. I heard her mention something about coming over to see me and I focused my attention back on her.

"No, Fawn you can't. I'm leaving. I'm going up to the cabin for a week."

"Rayme, what am I supposed to do with myself?" She asked. I heard her start to cry again and then she suddenly stopped. "I could get your mail for you and water your plants."

I glanced over at my solitary houseplant, an aloe plant and shrugged. If it made her happy and shut her up then I was in. "Sure, sounds good. You know where I keep the extra set of keys at the bar, right?"

"Yes, and I'll take good care of everything, I promise."

"I know you will, Fawn."

I heard the taxi honk. "I've got to go, I'll call you tomorrow."

Chapter 9

I could have made a new car payment by the time I was done paying cab fare, but I didn't own a car and couldn't see the sense in buying one. I saved a ton of money walking, and rarely had to take a cab anywhere. I lived so close to my place of employment that a car wasn't practical.

I set my bags down on the porch and fished my keys out of my pocket. It was both liberating and strange to be at the cabin. I needed to get away from the bizarre occurrences at home, that much I was sure of, but I wasn't sure if running off to a secluded cabin was the right answer.

I unlocked the door and chocked on the dust floating in the air. My mother was right. They never did use the place. I looked down at Henry. "First things first, buddy. You need to do your job, while I get some firewood."

I let him loose to kill mice and put my bags in on the master bedroom's bed. I grabbed my dark gray sweater and put it on. It always seemed cooler near the lake. I saw Henry darting down the hallway in hot pursuit of his dinner, and laughed. At least one of us was happy with my decision to come out here.

I loaded the wheelbarrow up with wood from behind the shed and tried to push it back up to the cabin. I made it about halfway before it tipped over and I fell on my bad knee trying to stop the load of wood from tipping out. I cried out and rolled onto my back. I tried to sit up, but it hurt too much. I gave up and sat there for a minute, hoping that the pain would go away. It didn't.

I watched as the rest of the sunlight slipped away and darkness fell. I had tried several more times to get up, but failed miserably. I was about to crawl when I heard the sound of the chanting voices, and a slight breeze blew past me. I strained my neck to try to see if anything was near me. There was nothing.

I closed my eyes and tried to will the sound away. The second that my eyelids closed, I saw visions of wolves all around me. Each wolf blended with the next, until only one stood before me. The honey colored wolf took a step towards me. I began to back away, but it came right at my leg and nudged it softly. He seemed harmless. More like a large dog than a predator. I bent down and patted his head, only this brave because I knew that I was hallucinating, most likely from the pain. The wolf licked my hand and I smiled.

"You're a good boy, huh?"

He nudged at my knee once more, before finally putting his front paws up on my shoulder and pushing me down. He licked my face and his rough tongue tickled my neck. I put my hands in his fur and pushed on him gently. "Stop," I said, laughing hard.

He licked me again, and then moved down towards my leg. He bit down hard, and I screamed out. Instantly, though, the pain was gone. He backed away from me. There was no blood in his mouth, and none on me. It was

as if he'd never touched me. He made a move to come near me again, but then backed away and moved slowly to my feet.

"Easy, now," I said, hoping to avoid a repeat biting. I knew it wasn't real, but that hadn't made it hurt any less.

"Rayme?" I heard Jovan's voice.

The wolf growled and I turned, expecting to find Jovan, I found no one. I looked back at the wolf, but he was gone now too. I moved my hand up and found that I now held Jovan's card in my hand. I glanced down at it and smiled. "Jovan Shepard."

My eyes flickered open. It was now pitch black out, and I was still lying outside on the ground. I heard the phone in the cabin ringing, and just lay there desperately wishing I was telepathic. Hey, I would have settled for one of those necklaces with the button that alerts medical personal that you're in need of help. I'd always laughed at their hokey commercials, but I wanted nothing more than to be wearing one at the moment.

I sat up and found that my knee didn't hurt as bad anymore. It wasn't great, but I could at least bend it slightly and that was a start. I rolled over and pushed up and off the ground. I used the tipped over wheelbarrow to help balance me, and stood there hobbling on one leg. Suddenly, the cabin looked very far away. I was happy that Bill had installed security lights around the property a few years back, or I would have been trying to navigate in total darkness.

I tried to take a few steps and found that I had to keep stopping and doing my best tightrope balancing act, minus the rope, and minus the skill. I heard a car pulling down the lane and wondered who was here. I crossed my fingers and wished on all that was lucky for it not to be my mother. A black car pulled in, and I watched as a tall man stepped out of it. He looked in my direction. I looked harder and couldn't believe my eyes.

"Jovan?" I called.

He looked in my direction again and then looked surprised. "Rayme, what in the world are you doing out there, and why are you standing on one foot?"

"What are you doing here?"

"Your friend, Angie, gave me directions here. I explained that we had a date tonight and she seemed all too eager to get me here. She even offered to drive me," he said, walking closer to me.

That sounded just like something Angie would do. She'd made it her life's mission to see to it that I found a man. I'd have to remember to thank her double for this. Normally, I would have been mad that she'd sent a man I hardly knew out to see me. Right now, I didn't care if he was Jack the Ripper. If he could help me back into the cabin, I'd be eternally grateful.

"Rayme, are you hurt?" he asked, looking at me and then the tipped over wheelbarrow.

"Well, kind of, I was stupid and I tried to move too much wood. It tipped over and I tried to catch it. I came down hard on my bad knee and...."

"Bad knee?"

I put my hand out to him. "I'll tell you about it if you'll help me out here."

He smiled wide. "I would be happy to."

Jovan took my hand and then moved his arms under me. He swept me up and off my feet before I even had a chance to protest. "You should eat more. You weigh nothing."

"I think I love you." The second I said it, I regretted it. It was meant to be a joke, but I wasn't sure how Jovan would take it. He smiled wide at me. His pale skin looked almost purple in the moonlight. I reached up and touched his cheek. He stopped walking. "You're so cold."

His mouth opened, and then closed. I was shocked to find that someone as suave as he was at a loss for words. He brought my body up closer to his and I moved my hands around his neck.

"Jovan, put me down, I'm too heavy for you."

He let out a soft laugh. "I've told you before that you weigh nothing. I moved you to be closer to me, that is all."

I had to fight a sigh off. I didn't want to be Fawn. I didn't want to fall all over every man I met, but Jovan made it hard not to like him. He carried me up and onto the porch, but stopped at the front door.

"What's wrong?"

He gave me one of his sexy smiles and tipped his head. "I like to think of myself as a gentleman, and you have not given me permission to enter."

I did sigh this time. "You're kidding right? You're holding me in your arms for Christ's sake. Yes, please, by all means go in."

He nodded and carried me into the tiny cabin. It was dusty and all the furniture was still covered in sheets. Jovan looked around and I could tell that he wasn't into rustic living. My cheek rubbed against his suit and I wondered if the man only owned designer suits. It was beginning to look that way.

He stood me up and made sure I was balanced before taking a step away from me to pull the sheet off the couch. A cloud of dust shot into the air and surrounded us. I laughed and then sneezed. Sneezing standing on one leg is never fun. I lost my balance and tipped to the side. Jovan spun around and caught me. We looked like we'd planned it, and he held me in the dip. I slid my arms up his shoulders and his face moved closer to mine. I couldn't stop looking into his blue eyes.

His lips moved closer to mine and my brain told me to turn my head, but my body disagreed and I met his cool lips. The kiss was chaste at first, then I parted my lips slightly and Jovan's tongue slid in. The room seemed colder than it should, and I could hear the faintest sound in the background. It was muffled, and sounded a bit like people chanting, or singing.

Jovan's arms wrapped around me tighter and he lifted me into the air. I pulled back from him and noticed that we were both covered in a thin layer of dust. I laughed and he glanced at me and laughed too. He hugged me tight. "Oh, Rayme, it has been a long time since I was happy."

I wasn't sure how to respond to that, so I just leaned up and kissed the tip of his nose. He laughed harder and his voice wrapped around me again. I was suddenly very cold. "Jovan?"

He stopped laughing and looked at me. Something moved across his face, maybe recognition and he set me down on the couch. "Sorry," he said, softly.

He went to pull away from me, but I grabbed his hand. "No," I looked down at the dusty wood floor. "If you're an insane superhuman murderer, I'm going to regret bringing this up, but did you do that? Did you make the room cold?"

"Rayme," he said my name lightly, almost as if he was surprised by my asking him this.

"Seriously, Jovan, I felt this at the bar last night, and I felt it again tonight with you. What's going on?"

"I'm not sure what you're talking about," he said, looking at me with the best poker face ever.

"I like you, but if you're not going to be honest then you need to leave. I appreciate your help tonight, but I won't put myself in a position to be hurt again."

"Again?" he asked bending down to me.

"Two years ago I was the victim of an attempted murder at the hands of a group of teens wanting to get into a gang. I was in critical condition, and it wasn't pretty. I was left with scars all over my right leg, and now I'll never be able to dance again."

Jovan moved his hand over my knee and let his fingers rest gently on my jeans. "That is why you were hurt so when you fell tonight." I nodded and he frowned a bit. "You're not telling me the whole story. What are you leaving out?"

I exhaled and bit at my inner cheek. I'd never told anyone the whole story before, and I wasn't sure what made me decide to tell Jovan. "Make sure you have your keys ready so you can get out of the crazy lady's house quickly," I said, trying to move away from him slightly. He touched my hand and smiled. I continued. "The only reason I'm alive is because something saved me. I say something because what I saw doesn't make any sense, yet I know it was real."

"What did you see?"

"Here's the part where you run. I saw a wolf, and I felt it change into a man beneath my hands."

Jovan never flinched. He didn't so much as blink. I dropped my head back on the couch and exhaled. It felt good to finally say that aloud. Jovan rose to his feet and walked away. "Thanks for helping me tonight, and before you go, know that I'm not crazy."

He looked back at me and grinned. "I'm not leaving. I'm going to get you a glass of water."

"What?" I asked, more surprised by the part about him staying than the water.

"Trust me, love. You are going to need it," he said, his accent even thicker than before.

Chapter 10

"You're a what?" I asked. Needing to hear him say it again, just to make sure that I heard him right.

"I'm an Omnimorpheleon."

"An omnimorph-whatus?"

He laughed slightly. "Omnimorpheleon, a demon that can change shape at will."

"So, you can become like a bat or something?" I asked, unsure I wanted an answer.

He shrugged. "I guess. I have never tried it. It is too stereotypical."

"Right ... and we would be stereotyping what, then?"

His gaze shifted and I had a feeling that I wouldn't like what he was about to say. "Omnimorpheleon are closely related to weres and vampires. We are a blending of the two--a super race of supernaturals if you will. That is why we are often called the guardians or masters. They say that the powers that be created us to keep the supernatural population in check. We are feared by weres and even by vampires."

"Ooo, you can turn into a wolf or a bear or something really cool like that?" I figured that I might as well play along.

"Yes, I can. Unlike normal weres, I am not controlled by the moon. While most weres can shift at will, they are forced to shift during full moons. I am not. I am not limited to one shape either. I can be an animal, another person. It matters not what I chose, only that I have touched it at least once before."

Sounded reasonable enough if you were insane. "Okay, then how does the vampire thing fit in?"

"Each Omnimorpheleon has a strong trait. Mine is that of a vampire. My normal form is what you see before you and in this form I am considered a vampire. I cannot go into the sunlight and I require blood to survive. In my other forms I can withstand direct light, but it takes a great deal of my energy to sustain that shape in those conditions."

"So, you're a not human."

He laughed. "I am not human, no."

Yep, I heard him right. I just had a hard time believing that he was crazier than I was. I took another sip of water and tried to sit up. Pain shot through my leg and my knee began to throb. I reached for it and closed my eyes, trying to think the pain away. It didn't work.

"May I?" Jovan asked, moving closer to my leg.

I shrugged my shoulders. "Sure, just as long as you aren't planning on draining me of all my blood, then be my guest."

He laughed softly and tried to take my pants off. I grabbed his wrists. "Excuse you."

Jovan looked up at me with a look that made me want to melt. The man may be delusional or simply trying to humor me, but there was no

denying that he was gorgeous. It dawned on me that I tried to stop a beautiful man from removing my pants. I hadn't had sex in well over a year. I'd thought that Maxim and I were going to, but I'd scared him away before we'd gotten the chance. I was plainly hard up, and Jovan seemed more than willing to give it up, so it seemed logical to let things progress. We could deal with the 'Omnimorpheleon thing' come morning.

I pulled his wrists to me and in doing so brought his face closer to mine. I lifted my lips to touch his. He came close to kissing me, but stopped. "You would still have me kiss you even after I told you what I am?"

I let my tongue run out along his lips. His mouth dropped down onto mine and my body reacted with shortened breaths. I let him pull my shirt and sweater off, and he helped me get his jacket and shirt off. He picked me up and looked down the hall of the cabin. "I would rather make love to you in a bed, but if you would prefer the dusty sofa then...."

"No," I said with a hint of laughter in my voice. "The master bedroom is at the end of the hall."

His lips met mine and he carried me back to my bedroom. I wasn't sure how he navigated without watching where he went, and I didn't care, just so long as we got there. Jovan laid me down on the bed, and set my bags down on the floor. "Are you planning on staying here forever?" he asked, plopping the heavier of my two bags down.

"I had been thinking of staying for at least a week."

He unbuttoned his pants and slid them off. I put my hand up to stop him. "Wait a minute. You haven't seen the whole show yet. You may not be interested once you've seen my leg."

His pants dropped away and he was suddenly nude in front of me. My eyes lingered over him. I'd never seen a man who wasn't circumcised before. It was definitely different looking. I tried to move my eyes elsewhere, but I was drawn to that dark patch of black hair between his legs and the cock that lengthened by the second. I tried to sit up and go to him, but he shook his head.

He moved closer and worked my pants off me slowly. He was extra gentle when he reached my mid-thigh. I knew that he saw my scars now, but his face held no shock or horror. My pants fell to the floor and Jovan

moved back up my body slowly. His eyes met mine. "You are beautiful, Rayme."

"Yeah, right," I said lightly.

Jovan stopped above my bad knee and put his head down. He kissed along the edges of my scars. I wasn't comfortable with him doing that and tried to pull away. He reached his hands under me and held my body in place. He kisses moved up my inner thigh and I closed my eyes and let him explore me with his tongue and fingers. He spread my legs further and let his tongue flicker over me. His cool tongue inched over my swollen clit and I let out a tiny moan.

I reached out in an attempt to hold onto anything, but came up short. I did manage to find the sides of Jovan's head and held onto him, careful not to dig my fingernails into his smooth skin. He drove a long finger into my tight channel and I cried out as my abdomen tightened. He sucked gently on my nub, encouraging more cream to flow freely from my body. I contracted on his fingers as my legs tightened and my body jerked with its orgasm.

He pulled away from me slowly, smiling up at me with a grin that said he was far from finished. His rose-colored tongue ran out and over his lips. "Mmm," he said, softy.

He moved up me slowly, kissing the curves of my side as he went. When he pulled my nipple into his mouth I pushed my body against his and winced as pain radiated through my leg. He let my nipple slide slowly down his lip and he smiled. "I can take the pain away, if you let me."

"What, is it an Omnimorpheleon-vampire thing?" I asked, jokingly.

"Yes, muuuwwhahahahaha ... let me suck your blood and be mine for all eternity," he said in a deadpan B-movie voice. He laughed as he moved his body over mine. The tip of his cock pressed against my entrance and it took everything in me not to scream at him to enter me. "Say, yes, and I'll make it go away."

"I won't have to go on a liquid diet and stay inside all day, will I? Oh, God, I won't have the urge to change into a dog and lick my balls, will I? Not that you'd understand how that sounds gross. You are male after all."

His laughter engulfed me and made another orgasm sweep through my body. He thrust into my heated channel during the height of the orgasm

and I suddenly felt like I was melting into him. The merging of our bodies sent me over the edge and I screamed out as he pushed into me. He was cautious around my leg, and this was still the best sex I'd ever had. A deep throaty laugh came from him as he kissed my lips. He pulled back from me and his jaw dropped open a little and I could see the strain in his face to maintain control. He slowed his movements, almost to a stop, and looked down at me.

"Let me take your pain away, Rayme."

I nodded, and he pumped the length of himself into me so hard that it teetered on the verge of being painful. He kissed hard along my shoulder, stopping at the base of my neck, and applying pressure. I felt a sharp, white-hot pain and then nothing other than Jovan's body thrusting into mine. I held onto his body, pulling on him as he continued to send shockwaves of pleasure throughout my body. My pussy was so damp from him bringing me to peak repeatedly that our bodies made wet slapping noises as we continued to merge.

The temperature around us dropped dramatically. Jovan didn't move away from my neck, he continued kissing it, sucking on it softly. His body stiffened and he pushed one final time into me and allowed himself to release what he'd been trying so desperately to hang onto. He moved his lips away from me and licked my collarbone softly.

His mouth found mine and he kissed me hard. He tasted coppery--metallically. His body shook slightly as he finished. I wrapped my legs tightly around him and found that my knee no longer hurt.

I looked up into Jovan's blue eyes and smiled. He kissed my forehead gently and eased himself out of me. He moved his body next to mine on the bed and tried to wrap me in his arms. I propped myself up on an elbow and tipped my head to the side. "You don't have to do this."

"I do not have to do what?" he asked as he tried again to pull me close to him.

"You don't have to snuggle with me. I'm fine. I don't need comforting."

He looked a little taken aback, but pulled me to him all the same. His body was warmer now, and he wrapped himself around me so that our bodies were pressed tight together. He was a good deal longer than I was, so my feet only came to his mid-calf. I moved my foot over his leg and was amazed at how good my knee felt.

"How'd you do that? How'd you manage to make the pain go away?" I asked. He smiled at me and gave me a wink. "Oh, I get it. It's an Omnimorpheleon thing, again."

He pulled my hand to his chest. "How did you do this?" he asked, putting my hand flat on his chest. His heart beat rapidly. "How did you manage unlock what no woman has before--my heart?"

I laughed his comment off. He was a smooth talker. I'd bet he said that to all the girls. He ran his hand up my arm and into the back of my hair. He pulled on my hair tie and my hair fell loose. He pulled long handfuls of silky, black hair up into the air and let it cascade down slowly, over our bodies.

"Why do you always wear your hair up? It is so long and so beautiful. You should let it down more often. I'm having a dinner party tomorrow night and I'd like you to wear it down for that. It will look lovely with the dress I have for you."

I pulled back from him. "You're not serious are you? Come on, who are we kidding here. I'm not expecting to ever see you again. This was good ... no, this was wonderful, but don't play games with me. We're both adults here. Let's just enjoy the night and take it for what it was, a one night stand."

Jovan tipped his head back and let out a long breath. "You are a very independent woman. I'm not sure if I like or dislike that about you. I did not come here tonight to pleasure myself for a night and leave. I came to spend time with you. You piqued my curiosity at first, but now it has turned into something more for me."

"Come on, Jovan, just stop. You wear Armani and drive around in foreign sports cars. I take cabs and work at a bar. We are polar opposites. The sex was good, really good, and I thank you for that, but that's it."

"What if I refuse to accept this? I have never had a woman deny me before. How is that you are able to with ease? I can offer you the world, yet you choose not to accept it."

I rolled away from him and tried to get up. He seized hold of my waist and pulled me to him. He wasn't so much spooning me as he was holding me captive to listen to him. I attempted to wiggle free, but he seemed to be exerting no effort, yet pinning my body so I could not move. "Jovan, stop it."

"I will stop when you listen to what I have to say. I have been alive a long time and I have never fallen victim to a woman before, and I am not proud of the fact that you have indeed stolen my heart, but I will not stand idly by while tear it to pieces." His breath was hot on my neck, and the entire time he scolded me I thought about touching him and being with him again. He pressed his body closer to mine and I could tell that he was just as ready for round two as I was. "I can sense your desire for me. I intrigue you."

"So does silly putty. What's your point?"

He slid himself between the backs of my legs and found my dripping wet channel. He pressed the head of his cock into me and kissed my ear. "Let me love you, let me take care of you."

"I don't need a keeper," I said, point blank.

"What do you need then?"

I pushed my hips back and his long cock slid deep within me. A moan escaped my throat, and I reached back and held onto to Jovan's head and he eased himself the rest of the way into me. "This will do for now."

He licked the edge of my ear. "Hmm, yes, for now, but you need to understand that I'll never leave you. You are stuck with me now."

Chapter 11

"Thanks," I said, handing the cab driver his money. I turned and balanced three bags of groceries artfully. I set them down on the porch and fished my keys out of my pocket. I wanted to be inside before the threatening storm hit. I'd been eyeing the sky the entire way back from the market and was sure I'd end up wet.

I picked up two of the bags and pushed the third one in with my foot. I made it in just as the phone rang. I set the bags down and ran to get the phone. "Hello?"

"Hey girl, spill it. What's going on? Did you get some?" Angie asked.

I let out a small laugh. "Yeah, you could say that, and thanks for sending a man I barely know up here. I really appreciated that."

"That's what I was calling about.... If you liked gift number one then you will love gift number...."

There was a knock at the door. I turned to see Maxim standing there rubbing his hands together, he waved at me quickly and shrugged slightly. "Angie, what did you do?"

"I was hoping that I timed my call right. I take it that my second gift to you just showed up. I hope he's as yummy in bed as he looks like he could be."

"Bye, Angie."

I hung the phone up and went to the door. Maxim shifted slightly and looked a little nervous. "Sorry about the other night. I had to go take care of a few things. I came past yesterday morning, but you were gone. I stopped by the bar and Angie told me that you were up here. I thought I'd come up and surprise you. I hope that's all right."

"You certainly are a surprise."

I glanced towards the back hallway and back at Maxim. I had to hand it to him, he had impeccable timing. Two days ago, I would have given anything to have him hunt me down, now I just wanted him to go. I looked back at him and forced a smile onto my face.

"Can I come in?" He asked, looking past me. His eyes narrowed slightly. He turned and looked out at the black car still parked in front of the cabin. "I didn't know that you drove an Aston Martin Vanquish." He said, his jaw coming out slightly.

"I don't," I said.

He nodded slightly. "I see."

"Rayme?" I heard Jovan call my name and turned around slowly.

Jovan leaned against the wall with a sheet wrapped around his lower half. He had it hung so low that it just barely covered his penis. "Maxim, I didn't know that you were back in town. How nice to see you again," he said, looking past me at Max.

I turned around and looked at Max. His eyes narrowed and his face reddened. "You two know each other?" I asked.

He looked at me with anger in his eyes. "I know him, although not as well as you do."

"I'm sorry. I didn't think I'd ever see you again. I thought that I scared you away." Why I felt the need to justify myself to a stranger was beyond me. I did it all the same.

"Is there a problem?" Jovan asked, moving forward.

"No," I said shaking my head.

The already dreary sky turned darker, and thunder crackled around us. I jumped, but Maxim never flinched. He turned around on the porch and stormed off towards a silver Range Rover that was parked behind Jovan's car. I ran out the door behind him. "Maxim, wait."

He spun around just as the rain began to pour. "I'm sorry that I showed up on your doorstep, unannounced. You were obviously busy."

I reached up and touched his arm. Maxim jerked his arm back so fast that I lost my balance and slipped off the bottom step. My right leg twisted and I caught my knee on the corner of the stair. It felt as though someone had taken a sledgehammer to it. I fell onto my side and brought my knee to my chest. I gritted my teeth together and waited for the shooting pain to subside. Maxim seemed frozen for a minute.

"Rayme," Jovan said, appearing suddenly next to me. He picked me up in his arms, and his sheet fell away. The rain was almost horizontal and was hitting me in the face, stinging slightly and taking some of my focus from the pain in my leg.

Maxim followed us onto the porch and reached his hand out towards Jovan. "Is she okay?"

Jovan didn't answer him as he carried me into the cabin. He put me down in the chair and rolled my wet pant leg up. He didn't have to go far to see

the problem. My ankle was swollen and I knew that my knee matched. I'd done too much to it in too short a time. I didn't think that even Jovan could fix this. He looked up at me and tried to smile.

"I've got a bottle of pain killers in my bag. Could you bring them to me?" I asked.

He looked back at Maxim and then at me, and nodded. He rose slowly before me. I had forgotten that he was naked. My eyes went to Max. He just stood there glaring at Jovan. He looked down at me and made a move to me.

"I'm fine," I said, harsher than I had intended.

"I'm sorry, Rayme."

"Goodbye, Max. It was nice to meet you."

I looked away from him, and hoped that he would take my hint and just leave. The screen door slammed and I looked back up. He was still standing there, shaking his head no. He looked back at me. "I'm not leaving yet." He looked down the hall. "Do you know what he is?"

"Sure, he's an Omnimorpheleon." I said, with as much laughter as I could muster considering my leg hurt.

"And that doesn't bother you?"

"Could we continue this conversation after I take my pain killers, I'm not sure I can stand it otherwise." I stood up and swallowed hard to keep from vomiting, the pain was so bad. "You're just as crazy as he is." I put my hands up and hobbled towards the front door. The more I moved, the better my leg felt. I glanced down, lifted my pant leg, and saw that the swelling was already beginning to go down.

Jovan appeared behind me, wearing his dress slacks, and holding my bottle of pills. "You should really sit down."

Maxim looked over at him. "You bit her...claimed her."

"What?" I asked, feeling incredibly out of the loop.

"You fucking claimed her." Maxim said, storming towards Jovan.

Jovan stood there smiling. "I told her that I could take the pain away, and I did."

"Was that before or after you fucked her?"

"During, but I really don't see how that's any of your concern," Jovan said with a smile on his face.

Maxim spun around and looked at me. "How could you let him touch you? You know what he is. It doesn't bother you that you slept with a shape shifting corpse?"

I tried to speak, but was cut off by Jovan. "Does anyone else smell wet dog?"

Maxim lunged at him and growled. My eyes widened as I watched fur cover Maxim's arm. His fingers stretched out and long claws shot out of the ends of them. I screamed out for Jovan to be careful. Jovan turned and looked at me. His face was horribly twisted. His eyes were dark black and huge fangs showed when he opened his mouth.

I turned and ran as fast as I could for the door. I hit it full force and took my time down the wet steps until I hit the ground. I took off in a full body run in the direction of the road. I was surprised that my knee didn't just give right out on me. It seemed to be holding together well, a little too well, especially considering I'd just twisted the hell out of it.

There was another flash of lighting and followed by thunder. I screamed out and turned, convinced that Mother Nature was after me as well. I ran to the end of the lane and saw the road up ahead. There were headlights coming down the road. I stepped out and the car slowed to a stop. The window came down. "I need help, there's two ... there's two things fighting back there. I don't think they're...."

"Human?" The voice asked. The figure in the passenger seat leaned out so I could see him. The weasel I'd come to loathe stared me in the eyes. "Nice to see you again Ray-mee."

I turned to run, but Dag was out of the car and had a hold of me before I could get more than a few steps away. He yanked me by my hair and spun me around. I brought my closed fist out and caught him in the gut. He loosened his grip on my hair, but didn't let go. "Those things that were fighting didn't happen to look like this, did they?"

I looked up to see his pale, pointing face sprouting fur. His shoulders widened and his nose spread before moving outward. I screamed as his bones twisted and cracked. His laugh sounded strange, half man, half beast. I pulled free of his grip and ran. "We stopped by your house to say hi, and were disappointed that you weren't there to play with us. Your little friend wasn't very cooperative with us, at first."

I stopped running and turned to look at the half wolf, half man that stood before me. I thought of Fawn and how she'd promised to bring in my mail and water my plants. Shaking my head, I walked backwards. "No ... no, you didn't. No."

Dag laughed. "Oh, wouldn't you like to know? Wouldn't you all like to know?" He asked motioning towards the car. Vince, Terrance, and Morton stepped out. Morton licked his lips, and I watched his mouth spread to an impossibly large size.

Terrance sniffed the air. The rain beat down off his bald head and made him look as menacing as the other two things. "I smell the King."

Vince sniffed too. "As do I."

Dag moved towards me. His body reshaped itself. He was still ugly even in human form. "Fuck the King, I want her." He walked closer to me and I ran backwards carefully, trying to avoid falling on the slippery pavement. Dag's head bent down and he smiled. "That's it, run, I love a good chase." He snarled and I turned and ran. I raced towards the wooded lot that ran behind the cabin. I ran hard and fast through the thick trees and brush.

I couldn't hear anything over the storm, but I was sure that they were still following me. Looking back, I caught sight of a black blur. I ducked down, but was too late. Something sharp caught my stomach. For a minute I felt nothing, I clutched myself and warm liquid ran out and over my hands. I didn't need to look down to know that it was bad.

Strong arms snatched me up. I looked up to find Dag holding me. His gray eyes fixed on me and he smiled wickedly. "Thanks for the chase. It made me even hornier. I can't wait to lick the blood from your body while I fuck you."

Terrance appeared next to us. His eyes were wide. He yanked me from Dag's arms and pulled me close to him, blocking the rain from my face.

Dag's laughter filled the air. "You actually care for her."

Terrance looked down at me and his eyes closed slightly. "She is hurt. It is bad."

"I don't give a shit if she's dead, I'm gettin' a piece of that...."

Terrance turned to him and growled. He pulled me closer to him. "You are not going to touch her."

"Oh, you think you're gonna' stop me?"

"Yes, I think that we will prevent you from doing our future Queen any more harm," Terrance said. "Vince."

Vince appeared out of nowhere next to me. He lifted my hand away from my stomach and sucked his breath in. "She is human, she will not survive this. How did it happen?"

"I tried to get to her before Dag did, but I was not fast enough. The ground was wet and I slipped, she twisted.... I couldn't get to her in time...." He put his head down more.

Vince looked down at me and then back to Terrance. "The King will want to say his goodbyes to her."

"What do we do about him?" Terrance asked tipping his head in the direction Dag had been standing.

Vince looked over and then back. "He is a coward, he ran away. Now that he knows that we are loyal to the King, he will not try to stand against the two of us. Come my friend. Let us get her to the King."

Vince's long black braid fell into my face as he took me from Terrance's arms. I let my eyes close slightly. That was a huge mistake.

"You did what?" Maxim's voice boomed through the darkness at me.

I opened my eyes to find that I'd been stripped of my clothes and was lying on the porch. Jovan's face appeared above mine. "She wakes."

Everyone stopped shouting. Maxim's face appeared next to Jovan's as he dropped down to his knees. "I'm sorry," he said softly, brushing my hair back from my face.

I tried to tell him that it would be all right, and that he had nothing to be sorry for, but I couldn't get anything out. I was so cold. There was no pain, just cold. "Rayme, can you hear me?" Jovan asked. I blinked, and he nodded. "You are dying. We have called for the paramedics. Once they arrive they will take you, but you will most likely die from this. There is a hole all the way through you, do you understand me?"

"God, she doesn't need to hear this." Maxim said, pushing down towards me. Taking my head in his hands, he rocked softly and whispered that it would be okay. It wouldn't and Jovan knew that.

Jovan looked down at me and our eyes met. I found my voice, but it was faint. "I'm ... cold."

He nodded. "I know, you're in shock, I need you to try to understand what I'm about to say. We have the power to save your life. The paramedics do not. If we do, your life will never be the same. Do you understand what I am offering you?"

"No! We can't do that," Maxim said.

Jovan ignored him and focused on me. "It has to be your choice, Rayme. Do you wish for us to save you at any price, or do you want us to stay out of it and let you die."

"She's not going to die. She's going to be fine," Maxim said, his voice was strained and he was on the verge of tears.

Vince soft voice moved over me to Maxim. "My King, I can feel her spirit slipping away. She will be dead before the ambulance arrives. I suggest that you either say your goodbyes, or allow the Dark Master to sire her."

Maxim lifted his head and screamed out. Jovan put his hand on him to calm him down. Maxim looked from me to Jovan and then spoke softly. "She died in my arms once before and the paramedics brought her back, they can do it again."

I thought about what he said, as he picked up my hand and ran my fingers over the scars on his hands. "You gave me these, remember, in the ally, two years ago. I changed back, from the wolf, next to you and you scraped my hands open, our blood mixed and I believe that it saved your life."

"We can both offer her our own version of immortality. I do not know if it will work, but there is a chance that they will cancel each other out and prevent her from fully turning into either one of our demons," Jovan said, touching Maxim's shoulder.

"Or she could be left a bigger monster than the both of us." Max looked at me. "Jovan's right, the decision has to be yours."

"Do you want us to save your life?" Jovan asked.

Vince spoke again. "Just do it, Dark Master."

"I will not let anyone touch her without her permission," Jovan said, moving his body over mine.

I touched his arm and he looked at me. "Yes," I said.

"You understand what you may be?"

"Yes,"

Jovan didn't waste any time. He bit his own wrist and put it to my mouth. I tried to push his arm away, but Maxim grabbed me and held me down. Jovan's cool blood ran down my throat fast, and I choked trying not to swallow it. Maxim leaned over me. "Mine is a little more painful, I'm sorry."

I blinked at him and coughed slightly. He shook his head and in an instant, his mouth was wide and full of teeth. He sank his teeth into my shoulder and I cried out. Jovan held my hand and kept whispering softly to me. The last thing I heard before I fell into the darkness was Jovan telling me that he was sorry.

Chapter 13

I opened my eyes and found Maxim lying next to me. His bare arm was draped over my body. I turned my head and found Jovan lying on my other side. I touched his arm, but he didn't budge. Maxim's arm shifted.

"Hey, you, you're awake," he said, softly.

I touched Jovan again, he didn't respond. "Maxim, he's not moving."

He leaned over me and poked Jovan hard in the ribcage. I batted his hand away from him. He laughed. "He's dead, Rayme, he can't feel it."

"Jovan!" I grabbed for him. Maxim caught my arm. "No, Ray, I didn't mean dead like in a grave, I just meant dead like a Omnimorpheleon, the sun's still out and he used a lot of his strength to help you last night."

I reached out and let my hand slide over Jovan's bare back. I could sense him. I knew that he could feel me touching him and that he liked it. I let my head fall back onto the pillow. Maxim pulled his arm away from me slowly. "You've fallen in love with him, haven't you?"

He began to roll away. The sheet pulled off him and I saw that he was completely naked. The sight of the hard edge of his hip and his rounded, firm, ass cheeks that were now exposed me took my breath away. Jovan's body moved slightly next to me and I knew that was his way of telling me that he was still there. Maxim leaned back and pulled the sheet off me. I didn't bother to cover myself. What was the point? He'd seen me at my worst.

He reached out and touched my stomach. My breath was caught in my chest and Maxim looked up at me. "Did you feel that?"

I nodded. He touched my stomach again and I looked down to see that there was no sign of it ever having been injured. I put my hand on his. "How?"

His fingers laced in mine and he pulled the sheet down further. "Look," he said nodding in the direction of my leg. I sat up slowly, and just sat there staring at myself, unsure if what I saw was real or not. The long thick pinkish scars that had covered my entire right leg were all but gone. Now all that remained were very thin, very faint, whitish lines where the scar had once been.

"What am I now? Am I an Omnimorpheleon, or a straight werewolf? What kind of monster am I? This is a dream, isn't it?"

Maxim leaned down and kissed my knee. "You're whole again, and that's all that matters."

Tears welled up and I couldn't hold them back any longer. I wasn't sure what I was crying about, anything, everything that had happened recently. Maxim sat on the edge of the bed and put his hand on my leg. My body responded to his touch, and heat flared through my skin and to his hand. He pulled his hand away slowly and the heat rose up, leaving my leg, and following his hand. I put my hand out and touched his. The heat jumped back onto me.

"What is that?" I asked, completely in awe of what was going on.

Maxim closed his eyes slightly and looked hurt. I reached for his face and he pulled away. "Please don't make this any harder than it already is, Rayme."

"Maxim, what aren't you telling me?"

Terrance came bursting into the room. He looked at Maxim and then at me. I grabbed for a sheet to cover myself. Maxim didn't bother to shield himself. Terrance dropped down onto his knees before me. "My Queen I have come to offer my life to you for causing you pain. My foolishness allowed Dag to deliver a fatal blow to you, and for that I give you my life."

I looked at Maxim and then back to Terrance, who was still on his knees with his head bent down. I turned and made sure that Jovan was covered, and then looked at Maxim. "What's he talking about?"

"He's a warrior, and one of my most trusted guards. He is offering you his life to try and right the wrong he did to you."

"Yes, my Queen. We found out that Dag was headed here, to you, and Vince and I had sworn to protect you. I should have grabbed you before Dag did. I slipped and he beat me to you. I never thought he would harm you, much less force you to surrender yourself to the Dark Master."

I looked at Maxim and mouthed the words "Dark Master?" He pointed at Jovan. I laughed a little, which was probably inappropriate, but this was just ridiculous. "Terrance please get up. I don't want your life ... your apology is more than enough for me. I know that your intentions were honorable, and please stop calling me your Queen."

"But, you are my Queen. You are the woman that my King," he looked at Maxim, and Maxim nodded, "has chosen as his mate. It is my fault that he is forced to share you with the Dark Master."

"Terrance, get up, this is ludicrous."

He rose and nodded to me. "Yes, my lady."

I looked at Maxim. "Spill it, now!"

"Terrance, please return to Vince and see what he needs of you. Your Queen wishes to spare your life. She is merciful."

"Thank you," Terrance said as he left the room.

Maxim sat down and put his hand over his eyes. He was stressed, that was easy to see. "I'll try to make this as short as possible. I'm the head of the Lycanthropes. I am their King, as was my father, and his father, and so on. As King, I am required to choose my Queen. Normally, this would be a Lycan, and you very well may be now, but I chose you."

"Oh God, you gave up your chance at happiness to save me last night?" I was mortified at what he revealed.

He put his hands out to me. "No, not last night, I picked you two years ago. I heard the call of my mate, and I answered it. That's how I found you."

I shook my head slightly. It was insane, yet it made sense. I remembered seeing a honey-colored wolf. It had saved my life--he had saved my life. I

looked up at him. "I could hear something calling me, too. I can hear it sometimes around you and Jovan. It sounds like people chanting. What is that?"

Maxim nodded. "That's not surprising. Jovan is called the Dark Master by my people. Each Omnimorpheleon is different. He has the ability to shift into every kind of supernatural creature. It is a rare gift among Omnimorpheleons, and is reserved for 'royalty' so to speak. So, you are tied to two Kings. The spirits call to mates and help them find one another. They apparently decided to give you two. I've never heard of this happening before, but with them, anything is possible."

"But, I'm not.... I wasn't like you, or like Jovan, how was I able to hear the spirits too?"

"Jovan told me that he picked up on your power. You are a priestess. I'm guessing that the Native American blood in you contributed to that."

I had nothing to offer. Everything was happening too fast. I was afraid that if I took the time to blink something else would happen.

The phone rang and I looked at Maxim. "Gee, do Kings answer phones?"

He winked at me. "They do for their Queens." He picked up the phone and I laughed. His face changed slightly as he spoke to the person on the other end. He looked over at me. There was something there, something I couldn't put my finger on. Maxim hung up the phone and moved over towards me.

"Rayme," he said my name with so much tenderness that I knew that the bottom was about to drop out on my world. Something horrible had happened and I knew it. I could read the crease in his brow as worry, and his eyes held pain, not for himself, but for me.

I sat up slowly and he reached for my hand. "What's wrong?"

"That was Angie, Fawn and Vinnie are dead."

Chapter 14

Maxim held my hand. I glanced up and found Terrance looking at me again. His eyes darted away quickly. Maxim touched the back of Terrance's seat and spoke softly to him. "Old friend, she is fine now, don't worry."

Terrance nodded and looked forward. Vince hadn't said a word since we'd gotten into Maxim's SUV. It was refreshing not to have someone staring at me. I was beginning to get a complex. I closed my eyes and thought about Fawn and Vinnie. It didn't seem real. They couldn't be gone. I'd just talked to Fawn the day before and Vinnie was due in this week to check on the bar. I turned and gazed out the window, hoping beyond hopes that I had finally run out of tears.

My thoughts went to Jovan. He'd been unable to come with us because the sun was up. I wanted to have him hold me now, more than anything. It was strange how needy I'd become. I'd only just met Jovan, yet I felt like I needed to be touching him at all times.

Maxim's grip on my hand tightened. "You're thinking of him, aren't you?"

I didn't answer him, and he didn't ask again. He did move closer to me and pulled me into his body. I was resistant at first, but he kissed my head and whispered to me. "I'm here for you. Let me try to help you get through this. Can you do that? Can you open your heart to me, too?"

I closed my eyes and let my cheek rest softly on Maxim's shoulder. I wasn't sure how to respond to his questions. I had thought that I had opened my heart to him, and he'd left me standing in my apartment without so much as a goodbye. He kissed the top of my head with a little more force than the last time. I could feel the muscles in his body tightening. I touched his leg and patted it gently.

He let out small laugh. "That's the nicest turn down I've ever gotten."

I looked up into his dark brown eyes and searched for any sign of what he was thinking. "Maxim, it wasn't a turn down, it was more of a moment of reflection for me. I'm still confused about why you walked out on me. I felt something that night with you, and for a little while, I thought you felt it too, but then you left. You didn't even shut the door behind you." I

didn't even go into the fact that he was a werewolf. That alone, could explain away any of my oddities.

He moved his arm off me and put his head down. His wavy hair fell into his face and shielded his expression from me. Terrance turned around and looked at Maxim, and then at me. "The night that you question him about is the night he called an emergency Lycan meeting to announce that he had found his mate, our Queen. He was beside himself with excitement. He had been forced to leave town the morning after he found you in the alley two years ago. His father's sudden death kept him away...."

"Terrance, that is enough," Vince said in a stern voice, never once taking his eyes off the road.

Terrance looked at Vince and then back to me. "No, I believe that our Queen needs to hear this. She needs to understand that Maxim left to start the proceedings for taking her as his wife. He has loved her since he saved her from the thugs that Dag tried to recruit into the pack."

It was Maxim who scolded Terrance next, although his voice was nowhere near as calm as Vince's had been. "Terrance, enough!"

"I have never disobeyed you or your father, Maxim, but I did walk by your side for the last two years and watched you think only of the one you found in the alley, broken and near death, wondering if she lived, and if you would know her if you saw her. She had been beaten so badly that you weren't even sure what color her hair was, yet you knew that she was to be yours. Now that you have found her again I do not want to...."

Maxim screamed out a cross between a growl and a snarl. Vince slammed on the brakes and we came to a screeching halt. Vince looked at Terrance. "Get out."

Terrance nodded and opened the door. Maxim jumped out too. I knew this was going to get ugly fast and it was all because of me. I opened my door and climbed out against my better judgment. Maxim stormed towards Terrance, and I ran around to put my body in front of Terrance's. He was so much bigger than I was that he made me look like a child. He put his hand on my shoulder and spoke as soft as his deep voice would allow. "My Queen, do not anger him on account of me. I was wrong to disobey him."

"Move, Rayme," Maxim said.

The wind caught his hair and blew it back from his face. His dark eyes swirled with yellow and blue. They looked more wolf than human now. He looked past me at Terrance. He looked more hurt than angry, but I bet that his wrath would be the same regardless what his feelings were. I wasn't about to stand by and let him punish a man who had my interests at heart.

"Maxim," I said, putting my hand out and touching his chest. I took a step closer to him. He tried to side step me and go for Terrance. I moved quickly and pushed my body firmly against his. "Please Max, don't."

He looked down at me and something in his face changed, he looked angry now and it wasn't directed at Terrance, it was aimed at me. "It's true. All of what he says is true. I've been in love with you, or the idea of you, for two years now. When you showed me your leg, and told me how it'd happened, I looked up and saw the picture of the wolf on your wall, and I knew that you were the one, Rayme. I knew that you were who the spirits led me to. It's ironic that the same night I figured that out and was so excited to announce it to the Lycan's, I end up losing you."

I stood on my tiptoes and grabbed the back of his head. I pulled him to me and didn't give a second thought to the wolf trying to push through. I put my lips to his and let my tongue enter his mouth. I was greeted with sharp teeth to start with, then they slowly shrank back. Maxim's arms wrapped around me, and he ended up having to bend down to me. It wasn't the most comfortable kissing position, but we weren't complaining.

The more I kissed Maxim the more I smelled Jovan's cologne. I began to feel guilty about kissing Maxim. I was about to pull away when I was suddenly surrounded with a cool energy. It danced on my skin and soothed me. I knew that it was Jovan and that he wasn't angry with me for Maxim.

Maxim pulled away slowly. He licked his lips. "I taste Jovan."

My eyes widened. "You've tasted Jovan before?"

Maxim's face turned slightly red. "Let's just say that Jovan has been known to try to make the most of an opportunity, male or female."

"You two had...."

He didn't let me finish. "No, but he has been known to 'plant one on me' during ceremonies. We're just supposed to kiss cheeks and be done, but Jovan always tries to ... well, you know. I truly believe that he does it just because he knows how much I do not care for it. It is so very like him to push the envelope."

I thought of Jovan being bi-sexual and wasn't sure how I felt about that. It should have bothered me more than it did, but it didn't. I laughed softly and hugged Maxim. "It's weird, but I could have sworn that he was here with me, and that he wasn't angry at me for kissing you."

Maxim pulled my hair back from my face and tilted my head up more to him. He kissed me gently on each cheek and then smiled. "When you agreed to let us save your life, Jovan gave you his blood. He bit you once before, when he helped your leg heal, and that combined with his blood allowed him to share his essence with you, his power."

I thought about what Maxim was saying. "Does this mean I'm an Omnimorpheleon now?"

He looked up at the sun and back down at me, answering my question. "Rayme, I had to bite you too, and there's a good chance that you'll shift during the next full moon. We don't know for sure, but it would stand to reason that you've already been carrying my blood in yours for the past two years. You were destined to be my mate even before that, so there are higher powers at work here, Jovan and I both believe that you are a Lycan now."

I couldn't breathe. I felt like someone had set an anvil on my chest and then proceeded to hop up and down on it. Maxim pulled me close and I was sure that if he hadn't been holding me that I would have passed out. I kept telling myself that I agreed to let them save me at any price, but now that there was a very real possibility that I might walk on all fours once a month, I wasn't so sure it was worth it.

"Rayme?"

I reached for Maxim. "Oh, God, Max I might be a wolf."

He let out a small laugh. "I know."

It dawned on me that I was crying about being a Lycanthrope on the shoulder of their leader. I shook my head and wiped my face off. "So, does it hurt?"

"Does what hurt?"

"The change, does it hurt when you shift?"

He kissed my lips softly, and pulled back, cupping my face in his hands in the process. "Yes, until you learn to control your beast it will hurt."

A nervous energy came over me. I wanted to jump, run, whatever, just so long as it involved moving. My skin itched and I brought my hand up fast. Before my eyes, fur sprouted over it as my fingers lengthened. Contrary to what Maxim had told me, it didn't hurt, but I screamed all the same. He grabbed my hand and brought it to his lips. In an instant, it was back to normal.

"Ohmygod," I panted.

Maxim looked down at me and smiled slightly. "You changed and the full moon isn't here yet. Guess, you got a hefty dose of Jovan's gift too."

He tried to kiss my hand again, but I pulled away. This was all too much, too soon. "Am I dead now?"

He looked stunned at first, but then he laughed. I didn't find my concerns funny, but I let him go. "You want to know if you're completely like Jovan. No, I don't think so. You're out in the sunlight and you're warm. My guess is that your base form has remained human, but you can shift into whatever you like. Plus, I can hear your heart beating."

"Jovan's heart beats."

Maxim stopped laughing and looked at me. "What?"

"Yeah, after we ... umm ... just trust me, I know that Jovan's heart beats."

Maxim didn't ask me any more questions about that. He let it go. He did tell me that he'd not punish Terrance for telling me the truth. I was relieved, but I think Terrance was even more relieved. I glanced at the truck and saw that both Terrance and Vince were back in their seats, with their eyes forward.

"They're loyal to you aren't they?"

Max took my hand. "Yes, and they're loyal to you now, too."

"Maxim, I can't be a Queen of anything, I'm a nobody. I wasn't born into this, you were."

He pulled my hand to his lips and kissed it gently. "You are my mate, my Queen, and I hope the mother of my children."

"Children?" I was a little shocked by that being thrown in there.

"I'm not asking you to agree to that right now, I'm happy with you even wanting to be near me. I thought that being with Jovan would make you never want to be near me again. He's well known for his ability to woo women. He's never committed to one in all the years I've known him, but they still follow him around. It's almost like once they've had a taste of Jovan, they can't be happy with anyone else. He's had a few commit suicide, you know?"

I stood there, shocked by what Maxim was telling me. Jovan was a playboy. I knew that, but somehow hearing it said aloud made it hurt more. I turned away from Maxim and headed back to the truck. He caught hold of my arm and turned me to him. "Rayme, what's wrong?"

"Nothing," I said, trying to sound as convincing as possible. "I just want to get this over with. Vinnie was like a father to me, and Fawn was my friend."

"Of course, come on let's go."

Chapter 15

I sat on the curb with my now cold cup of coffee and watched the police hustle around the parking lot. Angie had put a closed sign on the bar door and had waited for me to get there before heading home to shower and change. She told me that a passerby had found the bodies near the entrance to my apartment building. They had been mauled. The police were blaming this on strays and had issued warnings all over the

television and radio stations to be on the alert for a pack of wild dogs. Maxim had shifted uneasily when they mentioned this, but no one seemed to notice.

I still couldn't believe that Fawn and Vinnie were gone. The detective that had interviewed me had told me that Angie had identified their bodies already, and had suggested that I leave it at that. "You wouldn't want to remember them this way, trust me," he had said.

I was surprised that Vinnie had listed me as his emergency contact. I knew that he had no family left, but I still felt honored that he'd chosen me. Maxim had already called and began making funeral arrangements for Vin. He had also told the police detective that he would cover the cost of Fawn's services as well, regardless of what her family decided on. It was a generous offer, but it was a burden that I didn't think he needed to take on.

Maxim sat down next to me on the curb and put his arm around me. "When they're done with the bodies, they'll be picked up. The funeral home will call and let me know when the services will be. Fawn's family is too upset to deal with this right now, so they are leaving it in my hands. I've spoken with her mother and I'm having her family flown in tomorrow morning."

"How'd you get a hold of Fawn's family?" I asked.

He nodded in the direction of another detective who had arrived shortly after us. "Kenston, is one of my people. He put me in touch with her family."

"Max, I can't let you do this. This is too much. I keep thinking that I'm going to wake up and find that this has all been a bad dream. People like you didn't exist in my world and I was happy in my ignorance."

He pulled me close to him. "This happened because I didn't kill Dag two years ago when I should have. I'd suspected that he'd been the one recruiting kids off the street and turning them into Lycans, but I didn't have any proof. I called my father to discuss it with him. He was murdered twenty-four hours later."

I didn't even want to think about Dag's involvement in my attack. I hated him enough without adding that to it. I'd never wanted to kill a person before, but I was willing to make an exception for him.

"This isn't your fault, Max, and I can't let you pay for all this."

"Rayme, money isn't an issue for me. Let me do this, please. I have to."

Chapter 16

"Tell me again how you managed to convince Vince and Terrance to stay behind."

Maxim glanced over at me as he drove. "Vince was easy. I just told him to find Angie and watch over her. Terrance took some convincing. I think we've found your personal bodyguard. I was going to select one at our announcement dinner, but I think both you and Terrance have already done that for me. He'd give his life for you, and he's an excellent warrior. I couldn't ask for anything more."

"Wait," I asked. Trying to follow the conversation, but getting hung up on his customs. "What announcement dinner?"

"You don't have to worry about that now. I've put it on the back burner, indefinitely."

I glanced out the window and watched the last of the day's sun setting. The more I thought about what Maxim had said, the more it seemed to eat at me. I tuned back to him. "Uncle, tell me about the dinner."

Seeing him smile warmed my heart. I wanted to touch him, but I was a good girl and kept my hands to myself. He glanced over at me and took a deep breath in. "Well, it's customary for a leader to bring his bride-to-be before his pack so that they can see her, welcome her, and learn her scent." His eyes darted away slightly at the mention of them learning my scent. Sure, it was a little odd, but not much surprised me anymore. "I would have had you sit by my side and greet the Lycans, and then...." He stopped suddenly.

I touched his leg. I know, bad girl, but I couldn't resist it. "And, then what?"

"Then we would have retreated to our private chambers and I would have made love to you. We would then return to the Lycans so that they would now associate your scent with mine, thus cementing our bond and making you my mate, my wife ... in the eyes of the Lycans at least."

"Wait, you said it's customary for leaders to bring their mate before their pack, but when you talk about us you say Lycans as if it's more than just a pack."

Maxim pulled the truck over on the side of the road and put it in park. He reached out and took my hand in his. "There are hundreds upon hundred of packs in the Lycanthrope community. Each one has a leader, an Alpha. There is one person that is the head of all of the packs, regardless of the pack's breed."

"When they call you the King, they really mean the King don't they?" I asked. He shrugged and nodded his head yes. I tried to let it all sink in. It was a little overwhelming. This was too much. I couldn't live up to a King's expectations. I couldn't even keep a struggling actor/model happy. Trevor and I had had more trouble in our two-year relationship than I cared to think about. I wasn't worthy of Maxim, or Jovan, for that matter. I was out of my league and I knew it. I pulled my hand out of his and turned towards the window.

"Rayme?"

"This isn't going to work. I'm not cut out for this," I said, wringing my hands together to try to keep my nerves under control.

"We'll get through the change. I'll be there with you, so will Jovan." He rolled his eyes as he said Jovan's name.

I shook my head. "No, you don't get it. It's not just that, it's all of this. I can't be your significant other. You need to find somebody worthy of you. I can't be your Queen--I can't be your anything."

"It's a little late for that. I shared my blood with you two years ago, and started the process. When I bit you, I finished it. What I did is even more binding than the announcement dinner. We are already a joined union. The blood of the wolf runs through you. You saw proof of that when your hand changed, and I could smell my scent all over you when it happened."

You are already my partner, whether you choose to accept it or not. I can never take another. I will never be allowed to mate with a woman so long as you are alive. In the eyes of the Lycans you are their Queen and my mate."

He moved closer to me and put his hands on my shoulders. He tried to pull me closer to him, and I did my best to hold back. He was a little more persistent than I thought he'd be and ended up face to face with me. His lips touched mine and I felt a sharp pain in my back, and then another in my chest. A flash of cold air surrounded me and I pulled back away from him. "Jovan!"

Maxim looked like I'd slapped him. He jerked away from me and grabbed the steering wheel. "We have a moment together and you throw him in my face. I'm trying to get used to the idea of sharing you with him, but you're not making it easy on me. I'm not a man who shares well, Rayme."

Another pain ripped through my chest. The cold energy around me dissipated quickly. I clutched my chest and Maxim grabbed me. "Rayme?"

"Jovan ... I think something's wrong with Jovan."

Something moved over Maxim's face. He slammed his foot down on the accelerator and we sped off towards the cabin. I grabbed his arm. "What's wrong with him? Oh, God, I can feel him dying."

"He's already dead," Maxim said coldly. "He's been dead for centuries. He just has the luxury of still being able to walk around."

I screamed out as I felt the last of Jovan's power tear away from me. "Jovan!"

I beat Maxim out of the car. He snatched me up around my waist and lifted me off my feet. "Rayme, no, let me go first."

I fought with him to put me down. He set me back behind him, and put his arm out to keep me from running past him. He rushed into the cabin, followed close behind by me. We ran through each room, looking for signs of Jovan, there weren't any. Maxim went into the master bedroom and sniffed the air. He pushed past me, ran down the hall, and out the back door. I ran behind him, he was faster than I was, and pulled ahead of me quickly.

He ran towards the edge of the property, where the woods butted up against the water's edge. Maxim disappeared into the darkness. I followed him in, and found him bending down on the ground over something. He put his hand up. "No, Rayme, stay away. You don't want to see this."

I pushed past him and covered my mouth to hold in my scream when I saw Jovan's body. He had two stakes rammed into his back, and two more lying on the ground next to him. There was blood everywhere. His naked body was covered in it. Maxim tried to pull me back from Jovan, but I refused to move.

"Dag's men must have struck before Jovan was up for the night. There's no way that they could have taken him if he was awake. He would have shifted and destroyed them all, but in vampire form ... in broad daylight, he didn't stand a chance," Maxim said softly, his head bent down. He looked at the sky, slowly. "They were hoping that there would still be enough sun out to burn him, they were wrong. My guess is the forest protected him from being ashes, but I can't say that it did him any favors."

"Get them out of him!" I screamed, pointing at the stakes in Jovan.

Maxim nodded, reached down, and pulled the stakes out of Jovan's body. A sickening sucking noise sounded as the last of the wood was drawn from his body. I had to fight the vomit down that wanted desperately to rise.

Maxim rolled Jovan over slowly. His body was limp. Maxim looked over at me and shook his head. That small gesture told me more than I could handle. I screamed out and dropped to the ground near Jovan's body. Maxim eased him down, and came around, putting his hand on my shoulder.

"He can't be gone. Omnimorpheleons live forever, right? You guys are more than human, right? He can't be gone. Jovan, please...."

"Rayme, there are things that can kill us."

"He swore that he'd never leave me, he asked me to let him love me and I did. He said he'd never...." I slammed my hands on Jovan's cold chest. The sound of chants filled the air around me, but I didn't back down. Fuck being a supposed Priestess. None of that mattered, only Jovan did. "Damn you, damn you, you lied to me!"

Jovan sucked in a quick breath and his eyes flickered open. I screamed, and fell away from him, unsure of what was going on. Maxim dropped down next to me. He put his wrist to Jovan's mouth and let out a small gasp when Jovan bit into him. They stayed like that for a few minutes before Maxim pulled his arm away, reached down, and picked Jovan up. He lifted Jovan's large frame as though he weighed nothing.

I followed close behind Maxim, trying my best to see in the darkness that had surrounded us. I held the door to the cabin for him. He put Jovan on my bed and I sat down next to him. I touched Jovan's chest. It was smooth again, no sign that only moments before he'd had stakes rammed all the way through his body. His hand found mine and his long, cool fingers held me tight.

I looked into Jovan's blue eyes and let out a half cry, half sob. "You're alive."

He smiled. "I wouldn't go that far." His voice was weak, but there.

I leaned forward and kissed his lips, shaking the entire time. Jovan touched my cheek and I pulled back from him. He took my hand in his and put it on his chest. "Here, feel what you do to me." I felt the tiny rhythmic thumping of his heart beating. There was no stopping the tears that ran down my cheeks. I'd thought that I'd lost him only to feel what Maxim had thought impossible, Jovan's heart beating. I used my free hand to wipe my face and did my best to regain my composure.

Maxim appeared next to me. "May I?"

I looked down at Jovan and he grinned and lifted our hands for Maxim to feel for himself that his heart truly beat. Seeing Maxim's hand on Jovan put me right back on the verge of tears again. "You two are turning me into a weepy mess."

"Yes, but what are you turning us into?" Jovan asked.

I didn't answer, because I didn't know. It was their job to stump me and scare me, not the other way around. Right?

"Can you shift my friend?" Max asked.

Jovan shook his head. "No, not yet. I am too weak."

Chapter 18

Maxim snuggled closer to me and I smiled. I ran my hand over Jovan's chest again--just to make sure he was still breathing. His hand moved up to mine. He caressed the back of my hand gently, letting me know that he was still with me. It was strange to be sandwiched between two men, but I was getting used to it. I wasn't so sure about it, but Maxim had refused to leave my side, and I wasn't about to leave Jovan's side, so we'd ended up sharing a bed to get some rest. I wasn't sure what time it was. I didn't think we'd been asleep that long.

Jovan pulled my hand to his lips and I moved closer to him. I needed to be closer to him, but I wasn't sure that was even possible. Jovan turned to me and put his lips on mine. He'd sensed that I needed him, and he was giving me what I had to have--himself. His tongue moved into my mouth and my eyes rolled back with pleasure. His hand moved up and under my shirt. He cupped my breast.

"We can't," I said softly, trying not to wake Maxim.

"We can't what?" Jovan asked, touching my cheek lightly.

I glanced down at his hand. "If your hand's there, whose hand is...?"

"Mine," Maxim said, his voice so deep that it roused my body.

Jovan leaned his head up and looked at Maxim. They had one of those moments that I would never understand, I was a woman and I couldn't possibly get it. Jovan's blue eyes found me and he let his fingers run down and over my neck. "Say the word and we will stop."

I turned my head to Maxim. He was propped up on one elbow with his hand up and under my shirt. "I can't, we can't. We have to be able to function together after this. I can't have anyone upset ... I can't ... can we?"

Maxim kissed my lips and pulled on my bottom lip as he drew back from me. "Rayme, you belong to us. We can share you now, or later, but in the end, it's still the same. You are Queen to two Kings. Jovan is right, you say no, and it ends."

He was right. The two of them held some sort of power over me. Just being near them left me in a state of need. Giving in seemed so much better than fighting it. I was tired of fighting. I just wanted to be loved and to have someone take care of me for a change. It seemed as though I would be getting that in stereo.

I gave in and reached down, pulling my shirt over my head. I suddenly had more help than I needed. Hands stroked me, caressed me, and articles of clothing flew about. Left in the center of two very nude and very gorgeous men, I wasn't sure what to do. I went with who I was more comfortable with, Jovan. I went for his mouth, but he turned my body towards Maxim. "He saved my life tonight, he could have had you all to himself, but he saved me. Show him that you can love him too."

It wasn't hard for me to show Maxim that I could love him too, because I already did. Somewhere in the insanity that had become my life, I had fallen in love with two men. I reached out and touched Maxim's face. I pulled Maxim to me and he pressed his naked body against mine. Jovan moved in behind me. My body was suddenly on sensory overload. Every bit of my skin tingled and reacted to their touches. Maxim's fingers found me damp and ready for him. I licked his lips and cried out as he found my moist clit and worked it with his thumb as his finger still moved deep within me.

Jovan moved my hair out of the way and planted tiny kisses on my shoulders. I turned my face towards his and kissed him. I looked back at Maxim. I wasn't sure how this should work. I went with what my gut told me and it told me that I wanted to have Maxim in me, now. Turning my body away from Maxim, I moved over Jovan.

"Can you sit up?" I asked, unsure if Jovan was as fine as he claimed he was. He nodded and sat up slowly.

I put my hand out to Maxim, he took it and I guided him up to his knees, behind me. "What do you want?" he asked, with a slight smile. He knew exactly what I wanted. He just wanted to hear me say it aloud.

"I want to taste him," I said touching Jovan's cool flesh.

"And?" Maxim asked, running his hands up my sides.

I looked down, slightly embarrassed to be so free with my wants and desires. Maxim pulled my chin up to him. "What does my Queen want?"

"She wants her King to make it official."

Maxim's hands moved down my body, and stopped on my hips. "It's already official."

"Then just fuck me."

Both Jovan and Maxim let out nervous laughs. I leaned forward for Maxim to be able to enter me and licked along Jovan's lower abdomen. I kissed the base of his cock and cupped him in my hand. I let my tongue run along the side of his shaft and Maxim pressed against my opening as I took Jovan's thick cock into my mouth. Maxim pushed into me and I cried out with Jovan still deep in my mouth. Jovan's moved his hands into the sides of my hair, and Maxim's held my hips as he thrust his dick in and out of me.

I wrapped my hands around Jovan's cock and worked the slippery shaft as my head moved up and down. I looked up and my eyes met Jovan's gaze. His mouth was slightly open and he rocked his hips gently under me, bringing him deeper into my mouth. Maxim grabbed my hips and rammed his body into mine. I was sure that he would break me in two if he wasn't careful, but it felt too good to have him stop.

Maxim called my name out and I pulled away from Jovan long enough to back at him. His face showed strain, he was trying not to come as he pumped into me slower now. His thumb found my ass and he worked it inside my tight rosette. It was so carnal, so unlike me, that I jerked away at first, before relaxing. The feel of his finger in my ass and his cock buried in my pussy was almost too much. His eyes met mine. The strain

of trying not to finish yet was evident in his voice. "I can't hold it much longer. I want to finish in you--can I give you my seed?"

I rubbed the ruddy head of Jovan's shaft as I smiled at Maxim. "I'm on the pill."

It was Jovan who laughed. "Oh, my beautiful one, you have much to learn about us. If a child is meant to be then it shall be. No manmade contraceptives will stop that."

I looked up at him. "You and I...we..."

He smiled and winked. Maxim clutched my hips and drove his body into mine. I contracted around him as my body hit its orgasmic peak. I felt his hot semen shoot into me. He tried to pull out, still coming. I reached back and held him to me, letting every last ounce of him remain inside of me. He let out a sound that told me he was content and laid his body against mine.

Jovan took my hands and pulled me up towards him. Maxim withdrew from me, but stayed close to my back. I climbed onto Jovan and he positioned himself under me. I slid down onto him. I was still dripping wet from Maxim finishing, so Jovan went in with ease. I leaned down on him and let my body lie against his. We kissed and I knew that of the two, I loved Jovan more, not much more, but enough that he'd always hold a special place in my heart, and that scared me, because of the two, Jovan was most likely to hurt me.

"Ah, my sweet Rayme," Jovan said softly as I sheathed him completely within me.

I rode Jovan's body with a fury I never knew I possessed. Maxim continued to rub his body against my butt and back. I screamed out as another orgasm hit. Jovan cried out as well and I felt him releasing himself in me. With each pulsating jerk that Jovan's cock had, a wave of cool power washed over me. The feel of his magic running through me freed me. It opened me to him in a way I'd never experienced before and I knew that I had not only let him love me, but had fallen for him as well. I leaned in close to his ear and whispered to him. "I love you."

"I love you, too," he said so quietly that I almost didn't hear him.

Maxim grabbed me around the waist and lifted me off Jovan. I screamed out as he tossed me onto my back on the bed. He crammed his dick in me fast. I cried out and reached for Jovan.

Jovan leaned up on one arm and smiled at us. "Oh, Rayme, I forgot to mention that we have incredibly good hearing, and I believe that wolf-boy here is letting his alpha side come out and play. You see, he will not leave here tonight until he knows that he's in your heart too."

My eyes widened as Maxim ground me into the bed. He was strong and there was so much power behind each thrust that it was starting to cross the line from being fun. Jovan touched Maxim's arm. "Careful my friend, she may still break as easily as a human. We do not know how much, if any, of us she carries within her now."

"I have seen her change. She is one of us now."

"Still, be gentle with her."

I looked up at Maxim and felt a tear run down my cheek. He stopped, and tried to pull out of me. "No," I said clutching onto his arms. "Just not so rough."

"Rayme, I can't, I didn't mean to...."

I put my finger to his lip and moved my hips under him. I ran my fingers down his arms and found his hands. It took some working, but I managed to get him to stop supporting his weight on his arms, and just hold my hands, lie on me, and make love to me. Each stroke made my inner thighs quiver and shake.

Jovan's face moved close to mine. I went to kiss him, and Maxim growled out. He looked down at me with the eyes of his wolf and tipped his head back. I was suddenly surrounded by heat. It was almost too hot to breathe, and Maxim and I were the source of it. Each time Maxim entered me, I cried out louder. His head was still arched back and I could see the veins in his neck. I wanted to run my tongue over them, I wanted to taste his skin, smell his scent, bath in it. I put my lips to his salty skin and licked along his collarbone until I came to the beating vein. Something dark swept over me and I wanted to do more than just lick his skin, I wanted to sink my teeth into him, mark him, and make him mine. I did. I bit down on him and felt my teeth breaking the surface of his skin. He cried out, but I didn't ease up on him, I applied even more pressure.

His blood welled up in my mouth and I let the metallic warm fluid move down my throat.

I closed my eyes and smelled nature. The fresh smell of the earth surrounded me as I drank Maxim down. His body convulsed on top of me and I could feel his hot come deep within me. I eased up on his neck and released him slowly. I licked along the tiny puncture wounds on his neck and he looked down at me. His hand came to my mouth. His fingers touched my teeth and I slid my tongue to them. I felt the tiny fangs and I pushed at Maxim to get him off me. I didn't want to hurt him again.

"It looks like you may have found another trait that is shared with Jovan," Maxim said, still inside me, but looking over at Jovan.

Jovan was lying on his side, looking more than content. He had enjoyed the show. He smiled at me and then let an eyebrow rise when he looked at Maxim. "Are you so sure? Do you not smell that?"

Maxim took a deep breath in and then nuzzled his face down into my neck. His head shot back up and his eyes were like the wolf again. I screamed out and he blinked them back to their normal brown. He bent down to kiss me, but I turned my head and tried to push him away.

"Get off! I don't want to attack you again," I said.

"You're a Lycan too, Rayme, some part of you holds the wolf. I can smell it, and I've seen it. Besides, you didn't hurt me, you marked me, the same way I marked you. You made me yours and for that I am grateful. It is what a mate does. It is a sign of love."

I didn't know what to say. I wasn't sure what I had expected, but this wasn't it. I let Maxim hold me, and reached out for Jovan's hand. I needed to feel him. I needed to touch him and have him tell me that everything was going to be all right. His hand clasped around mine and I held on to him for dear life. Maxim slid to my side and I turned my body to Jovan's, allowing Maxim to snuggle in behind me. Jovan leaned forward and kissed me gently.

I looked up at Jovan. I had to see his face. I needed to see if he still felt the same way about me that I did for him. I wasn't sure I could lose him now, not just emotionally, but physically as well. His touch kept me grounded, and without it I'd be lost. Something passed over his face and he let go of my hand.

"Do you mind if I shower?" he asked.

"Of course not."

I watched Jovan pull away and walk to the bedroom door. His pale white skin reflected the moonlight from the window. He never turned and looked back at me and my chest tightened at the reality of being another one of Jovan's women. Maxim had warned me, and I'd fallen prey to Jovan all the same. I was a fool, and acting this way made me think of Fawn again. As much as I'd disliked her neediness, I'd ended up being the same way. I could only hope that Jovan wasn't married with four children.

Chapter 19

"Maxim." I touched his arm gently as I spoke to him. I wanted to ask him if he knew where Jovan had gone. The sun was out and I was concerned for Jovan's safety. He stirred slightly and then pulled me into his arms.

"Good morning," he said, sliding his body over mine.

I laughed and rolled my eyes. "Oh, no you don't. I'm sore."

He leaned down and kissed my lips. He wasn't there long before he was pulling away and heading downwards. I grabbed his hair to prevent him from dropping any lower. I knew that if he touched me I wouldn't be able to resist him. He laughed and tugged on my nipple with his teeth. I arched my back and his hands slid up and under my arms. He moved his body up and he eased his hard cock into me. I was tight, and still sore from the night before, but my body was wet and willing to accept him.

Maxim made love to me gently. I wrapped my legs around him and let him work his Lycan magic on me again and again. Each orgasm was more intense than the one before it. When he was finished he pulled out slowly and moved next to me on the bed. I was drenched in the fluids of

our lovemaking, and felt no need to wash myself. I liked knowing that he'd marked his territory. He tried to draw me into his arms, but I sat up.

"No way, I'm getting a shower before you touch me again. You aren't ever satisfied. If I don't get cleaned up and eat soon, you'll never let me."

"What can I say? I can't get enough of you. I'm in love and it feels great."

I tossed my pillow at him as I walked away. "Let me get cleaned up and I'll make you some breakfast."

"Sounds good," he said, rolling off the bed and getting to his feet. "I'll bring in some more wood for the fireplaces. You were shivering last night."

I wasn't cold so much as I missed Jovan's touch, but I wasn't sure how to tell Maxim that. If he thought that bringing in more firewood would help me, that was fine by me. I turned to head to the bathroom and Maxim came and wrapped his arms around me.

"It's not just you, Rayme. He does this with every woman."

I almost pretended like I didn't know who or what he was talking about, but it was pointless. He knew that I was upset about Jovan, so why bother lying. I put my head back against him and exhaled. "It sounds stupid, but I thought I was different for him... I thought..." I stopped. Saying that I thought that Jovan loved me too would be too difficult for Maxim to hear so I left it alone.

"If it's any consolation, I thought you were different for him too."

I rubbed my head against his warm chest and let my eyes close. "You're too good to me. I don't deserve you."

"You say this, yet you still can't find it in your heart to love me," Maxim whispered more into my hair than to me.

I spun around and pushed my finger into his chest. "Don't you dare stand there and tell me that I don't love you. My stomach's in a knot because of what I've done here."

He looked towards the bed and back at me. "Rayme, it's not as bad as it seems. I swear to you that you're not the only woman in the world to sleep with two men at one time."

Pushing him hard, he backed up. I was surprised by my own strength. Only days earlier, touching him had been like touching a brick wall, now I could move him with one hand. I was betting the fact that they'd saved my life and given me pieces of their power had something to do with that.

"You wait one minute here. I'm not upset about last night. What we did was beautiful, and I'm not ashamed of it. I'm talking about being in knots over loving both of you." I turned away from him because I didn't want to cry and if I looked into his brown eyes, I would. "How can I love two men?"

Maxim snatched me up and turned me to him. His mouth came down on mine. He laughed and smiled more than he kissed me, but I got the point. He was happy and excited and I found that I was too. I tapped his shoulders. "Down, put me down. I need a shower."

He put his face down near my neck. "You smell good to me."

I pushed on his face. "I think you need to see a vet, your sniffer is out of whack. Maybe, I could morph you a new one."

Maxim laughed so hard that he nearly dropped me. He set me down and I took off for the bathroom, leaving him still standing there, laughing.

Chapter 20

Looking at the pile of bedding on the floor, I sighed. I hated doing laundry, but after the night we'd had, I needed to do some. I looked back in the mirror and finished running a brush through my wet hair.

Today wasn't going to be fun. Maxim and I had to go to the funeral home and finalize the last of the arrangements. He'd called Angie when I was in the shower and asked her to meet us there. When I'd asked him how he knew Angie's number, he smiled and told me that Derrick was one of his people too. I was beginning to wonder who wasn't one of Maxim's

people. I was sure that Angie didn't know that Derrick was a shape shifter, and I wasn't planning on telling her. He was good to her and treated her like a princess, and that made him okay in my book.

Putting my brush down, I stood up slowly to survey my appearance. I hadn't brought any dress clothes with me, and knew that neither Fawn, nor Vinnie would mind me showing up in jeans to make their arrangements, so I went with it. I put my dark gray sweater and newsboy cap on. I caught sight of Henry as he dashed past the doorway in search of another great kill. He was getting used to Maxim. He'd only tried to claw him twice since we'd been up. Henry, apparently, wasn't too fond of wolves.

I fished around for my gloves and went out to find Maxim. He decided after breakfast that he wanted to bring some more wood in before we left. He wasn't sure what time we'd be getting back and didn't want to be leaving me after dark to do it. I tried to point out that he'd end up all sweaty, and since he'd just gotten out of the shower that seemed silly. He gave me a sideways glance before reminding me that he could probably lift his truck off the ground and not break a sweat. He had a point so I let him go.

I walked out the backdoor and was hit by a face full of cold air. I was sure that the weatherman was wrong. Snow was coming sooner than he thought. I looked out towards the shed and saw the wheelbarrow sitting out there. Backing towards it, I called Maxim's name. He didn't answer me.

I got to the back of the shed and found that the wheelbarrow was half-full of wood, and that there were pieces dropped on the ground next to it, but there was no sign of Maxim. I looked around the woods and the edge of the property for him, but found nothing. Running back to the cabin, I double-checked that the Range Rover was still there, it was. Fear ripped through me as I called his name out again, and got no response.

I searched the house for him and panicked when I couldn't find him. Something felt off. I was sure that I was being watched, but I didn't know from where. I thought about Jovan and how Dag and his Lycan-flunky buddies had attacked him without thought. I ran to the front closet, and found the old wooden bat that Bill had brought here years ago, still tucked back into the same corner I remembered it in.

Something moved on the front porch and I stepped back against the wall. I pulled the bat up and thought about what I was about to do. The door

opened and I turned and swung out hard. I caught sight of Maxim's wavy brown hair in mid-swing. He grabbed the bat with one hand and pulled me to him.

"What in the hell are you doing?"

I let go of the bat and flung my arms around him. I kissed at his jaw, his neck, whatever I could reach. He pulled back from me and smiled.

"Rayme, what's going on?"

"Nothing, it's silly. I just couldn't find you, and when I went looking for you something felt off. I felt like someone was watching me. I just ... I just thought about what they'd done to Jovan and I was afraid that they had you. I was going to," I laughed as I said it, "try and save you for once."

Maxim stiffened and took a deep breath in. He smiled and brought his lips down to kiss me. He didn't though. Instead, he moved his mouth next to my ear. "Keep laughing, and follow me to the truck. Dag's men are shadowing us. We aren't safe here."

He pulled back from me and I had to make an effort to smile. I leaned up and hugged him one more time, more out of a need to make sure he was safe than anything else. He took my hand in his and we headed down the porch to his truck. He spun me around and had me walking backwards towards the truck while his body pressed against mine. I caught movement from behind the cabin and knew then that he wanted his body between them and me. He put his hands down into my pockets. To an outsider it looked like something a couple that was in love did, but when I felt him pushing his car keys into my pocket I knew that he wasn't planning on leaving with me.

An array of emotions hit me and I knew that I couldn't leave things like this between us. "I love you."

His face relaxed and he kissed me gently as he opened the car door and lifted me into it. Our eyes met and I knew that this was serious. "Go, Rayme, drive away and don't look back. Find Angie. Terrance and Vince are with her, they'll keep you safe. Jovan will help you if you need him. Now, go!"

I touched his cheeks and felt my nostrils flaring. My eyes did what they'd come to do best--held back tears. "Max, no, please come with me, I can't do this without you."

He averted his gaze. I saw it too then, the shadow moving up closer to us. "You'll be fine, now go."

I shook my head in protest. There was no way that I was leaving him. "I won't do this without you."

There was a growl and Max spun around fast. He deflected something large and black away from him, but it was followed close behind by another blur. Maxim was knocked to the ground, but he rolled and came up on his feet. I went to climb out of his truck, but stopped when I saw the two half-wolf creatures standing before me. They turned to me and leapt at the car. I pulled the door closed and watched as one of them slammed into the side of it. Maxim was on his feet and storming towards me. Three more Lycans appeared behind him. I honked the horn and pointed, he spun around.

Something slammed into the side of the truck again and it rocked back and forth. I fished the keys out of my pocket and fumbled with them, trying to find the right one to start the ignition. The truck rocked back and forth again and I fought back a scream. I found the right key and started it.

Maxim was now surrounded by half-wolves.

I put the truck in drive and slammed on the accelerator. A light off-white wolf turned towards me, but I didn't slow down. I hit him full force and kept going as he body flipped over the truck. I slammed on the brakes as I hit the cluster of them. I didn't want to run Max over as well. I did manage to take out a few of them, but there were still some on Maxim. I backed the truck up and put it in park. I wasn't about to leave him here. No matter what he wanted me to do.

Something smashed through the back window. I had just enough time to turn around before I was being ripped from the driver's seat. Someone slammed my body down into the backseat. I looked up to see Dag's narrow face above me. He smiled wide, and I thought of a weasel again. The driver's door opened. "This is fun," Morton said, as he climbed in. "You didn't tell me that I'd get to kill a King today, too."

Dag pressed his face to my chest and buried it in me. He pulled back and laughed. "Looks like you'll get to fuck a Queen too. Didn't I tell you that if you followed me instead of Darius' son, Maxim, you'd have more fun?"

Morton laughed. "That ya' did, that ya' did."

Dag tried to touch my face and I pushed his arm away. He looked shocked and then excited. His tongue came out. It was long, longer than any human tongue I'd ever seen. His teeth showed and I knew that he had let his wolf come through. I'd played the victim enough with him, it was time he learned some respect. I thought of Jovan, and how I'd been able to pull from his Omnimorpheleon and strike Maxim in the heat of passion. I needed that power now, but I didn't intend on marking Dag. I intended to kill him.

"Jovan Shepard!" I screamed out, hoping that what he said was true. If I called he would hear me.

Dag laughed. "Your Omnimorpheleon's dead. I put enough stakes in him to kill three vamps. I image that the maggots are feasting on his body as we speak. I knew I should have left you a note. I really wanted you to see my handiwork.... Hunh, the sun's probably burnt him to a crisp by now. Maybe, I'll take you over to see his remains before you die."

I wanted to tell him that he was wrong, that Jovan wasn't dead, and then I stopped. I didn't want to tip my hand to him. He could think Jovan was dead. The air around us suddenly grew cool and I knew that Jovan was with me.

I cannot get to you right now, Rayme. The sun is still up, and you are too far from me for me to shift and still find you. Let go and I will aide you, I promise. I heard Jovan's voice in my head as clearly as if he was standing next to me.

Dag tried to kiss me and I clawed at his face. He lurched back from me and grabbed his bleeding cheek. I scrambled to sit up. He reached out and struck my face, yelling at me in the process. "You bitch!"

I could feel my body changing, making me suddenly more aware of my surroundings. I could hear both Dag's and Morton's hearts beating. Morton was scared, as he should be. Dag was furious. I could smell his rage, combined with his lust for me. It was sickening. He wasn't sure if he wanted to fuck me or kill me. If I had my way, he'd do neither. I licked my lips and felt tiny fangs descending. Jovan had helped me call my demon, now it was up to me to use it wisely. I glanced over and saw that my hand was resting by the window. I should have felt pain in the sunlight. I felt none.

Dag made another move to hit me and I ducked. He put his hand through the window. Glass shattered everywhere and he screamed out in pain. I brought my hand up and struck him in his throat. It would have killed a human, but Dag wasn't human. He pulled back from me, bloody and holding his neck. He gasped for air and I smiled.

"You let the Dark Master turn you," he said it so calmly that I first I didn't think that werewolves worried about Omnimorpheleons that much. When Morton slammed on the brakes and I flew into the back of the seat I knew that I was now a force to be reckoned with.

I tried to open the door, but it was locked. I leapt through the window. Dag's sharp-clawed hands caught my ankle and ripped my skin as I went out. I didn't scream, I didn't even flinch. Sure, it hurt, but I wasn't about to give him the satisfaction of seeing that he'd gotten me.

I tucked my head down and did a summersault to avoid busting my head open. I hit the ground and rolled to my feet. Dag tried to follow out the window, but got stuck halfway and had to open the door. I could have run, but I didn't. I wanted to make him pay for what he'd done to Fawn, Vin, and Jovan.

Dag jumped out and threw his leather coat on the ground. His body twitched and he sprouted gray fur from head to toe. His clothes began to rip as his body shifted form. I got a little concerned. I hadn't planned on fighting the werewolf side of him. When he looked up at me he no longer resembled a man, he was a wolf on two feet. He crouched down and then sprung forward at me. He hit me with such a force that we were both sent airborne. His jaws snapped down on my side, and I felt like I was being ripped in two. I jabbed my finger into his eye socket and he released me. He dropped away and held his face. I knew that I was a target lying on my back, so I struggled to get to my feet.

I clutched my side and tried to slow the bleeding. Dag pulled his hand away from his face and I saw that I had left him blind in one eye. He tried to rake his hand down the front of me. I stepped to the right and he missed. He staggered a little, looking for me. I knew then that if I could stay on his bad side that I just might have a chance at beating him.

Dag let out a sinister laugh, and touched his face. "This will heal, we always heal."

I looked down at my hands. My nails were now longer than they normally were and I was betting that they were also a hell of a lot more lethal too.

Dag struck out at me and I raked my nails down his furred arm. The sensation of his skin ripping under my touch made me sick to my stomach, but I didn't stop. It was either him or me, and I wasn't planning on today being my last day. I was putting my money on Dag. I continued to pull and his skin continued to tear.

His other hand came around and caught the side of my face. He had such strength behind him that he sent me flying off my feet. My body hit Max's truck and then I fell to the ground. Dag was on me in an instant. He had hold of my hair and pulled me off my feet.

"Where's your Dark Master now? Where's your King, your savoir?" His voice was deep, a mix of animal and human. "Once a dancer whore, always a dancer whore...oh, but wait, you can't dance anymore, isn't that what my boys told me. The ones who smashed your leg to bits.... Ha, my people will never let a half-breed waitress be their leader. They will worship me from saving them from the likes of you."

He thrust his hand up and through my chest. I screamed out and could feel Jovan's cool energy around me, calming me, easing my pain. I struck Dag like a snake and sunk my fangs deep into his neck. His blood spilled into my mouth, and down my throat. He tried to push me off him, but I held tight, riding his body as he fell down. He hand pulled free of me, but still I didn't let go of him. I drank past the point of being full, I let the blood spill out of the sides of my mouth, yet I continued to suck. I sucked until I felt his heart beat for the last time and then I jerked my head away.

Falling backwards, I tried to wipe Dag's blood from my face. I looked down at my hand and the realization of what I'd just done hit home. I turned over vomited Dag's evil blood up.

Rayme, you must hold it down. He was a madman, but he was also a shape shifter. His blood will heal you. I heard Jovan's voice in my head again.

There was no way I wanted to keep a drop of that lunatic's blood in me, healing powers or not. I threw up again. The splashing of the blood on the ground in front of me only served to make me sicker. I could feel Jovan trying to enclose me in his power. I pushed back at the nothingness around me.

Rayme, please.

Get out of my head! You don't care. I was just another one of the Dark Master's pathetic women. Another lovesick fool. I pushed my thoughts out, hoping they would find the mark they were intended for. They did. I blocked him from reaching me. It felt like cool fingers were touching my head, pulling on me, but I stayed strong and kept him out.

The vomiting stopped and I sat up on my knees. I was sure that Dag was going to be standing behind me, waiting to rip my head off. He wasn't. His nude human form was lying in the spot I'd left him. I wasn't sure if he was dead, and wasn't stupid enough to check. I wasn't strong enough to deal with him in my condition and I knew that.

I pulled myself up with the help of Max's truck and walked around to get in. Morton was nowhere to be found. I wasn't surprised he was a coward. When I saw that the keys were still in the ignition I knew that he wasn't just a coward, he was a moron to boot.

Chapter 21

I pulled down the lane to the cabin and clutched my chest. It hurt like hell, but my concerns were more with Maxim. I'd left him to fight off at least a dozen, maybe more, of Dag's people. Bodies littered the yard, and my heart went to my throat. I jumped out of the truck and tried to scan the casualties for Maxim's body. There were too many. I caught site of brown hair with golden streaks in it, and froze. I knew it was Maxim when I saw the curve of his back, and the sweet bend of his muscular arm. He was face down on the ground, and he wasn't moving. I ran towards him, and fell on the ground next to him.

"Maxim!" I screamed out his name as I rolled him over. His shirt hung on him by a thread. He had claw marks and large cuts all over his body. I leaned down and tried to see if he was breathing. The dark thing that I now carried deep within me pushed up long enough for me to hear his heart beating. He was alive. I tried to lift him, but I wasn't strong enough.

Something moved behind me and I spun around, ready and willing to fight. Angie stood there with her arms up in the air. "It's me!" She looked down at Maxim and her eyes widened. She looked back towards the house. "He's over here!"

I glanced towards the cabin and saw Terrance, Vince, and Derrick running in our direction. Vince fell down next to Maxim and scooped him up. Terrance came to me and tried to lift me, but I put my hand up and stopped him.

"I'm not that bad, help Maxim."

"But my Queen," Terrance said, still trying to lift me.

I glanced at Angie and she smiled. She lifted her pink sweater and I saw a fresh bite mark on her stomach. My eyes widened and she held her left hand out to me. There was a large diamond ring sitting on her finger. I looked at her and then to Derrick who was talking on his cell phone. He hung up and stared at me.

"The others are coming to help clean this up. We need to get Maxim stabilized. Are you hurt?"

In the entire time I'd known Derrick, he'd never once said so many words to me. I was dumbfounded. Angie moved next to me and put her arm around me. Her hand touched my chest wound and I jerked away from her. She moved closer and touched the tear on my sweater. She peeled the bloodied wool back and gasped. "Rayme!"

Cold air moved around me and lifted my hair slightly. Angie drew her breath in. "What was that?"

"Jovan," I said as I fell into her arms.

Vince turned and looked at me. "He can save our King, do you think he would?"

"Yes, Jovan owes him one."

Vince nodded and then looked at Terrance. "Bring her and meet us at Jovan's."

I began to protest, but Terrance beat me to it. "No, she stays with Maxim. We will not separate them."

Vince looked like he wanted to strike Terrance, but he had his hands full with Maxim. He looked down at me and I tried to get to my feet. "I'm going with him whether you like or not, so deal with it."

"Yes, my Queen."

Terrance and Angie helped me to my feet. I followed close behind as they loaded Maxim into the back end of his Rover. Terrance helped me climb in next to him and went and sat up front. Angie ran to the back of the truck and poked her head in through the broken out glass.

"He'll be okay. Derrick tells me that we're fast healers... We'll meet you there."

I touched her hand and squeezed it tight. I didn't want to let her go, but I had to. Vince headed out and I moved my body down and lay next to Maxim. His chest moved ever so slightly and his breathing was getting weaker. Vince slammed on the brakes and I sat up fast.

Terrance was out of the car and bending over something in the road. He came back to the window and looked at Vince. "It is Dag, he is dead."

They both turned and looked at me. "Did you kill Dag?" Vince asked, his voice sounding slightly alarmed.

"It was him or me, and I wasn't ready to give up yet, I needed to get back and help Maxim."

Terrance smiled and climbed back into the truck. I was about to ask what they planned on doing about Dag's body, but I really didn't care. Vince kept staring at me. I looked down at Maxim. "He's dying Vince, can't you disagree with me later?"

"No, my Queen, I cannot disagree with you. I see now that Maxim was right in selecting you."

That meant a lot coming from him and I knew that. I also knew that Maxim wasn't going to hang on much longer. I put my hand on his chest and was about to tell Vince to go when I realized that Maxim had stopped breathing. I sat on my knees and ripped the remainder of his shirt open. Closing my eyes, I let junior high health class lessons flood my mind. I called my demon up to the surface and it could sense no heartbeat, Maxim was dead. I initiated chest compressions on him and varied them with breaths in his mouth.

No matter how hard I tried, Maxim wouldn't come back. I could still smell the forest around him, around me. I let the gifts that he'd given me guide me. I brought my wrist to my lips and bit down in it. I put it against the open wound that was closest to Maxim's heart and let my blood mix with his. Putting my lips on his, I kissed him gently. His lips parted and his tongue pushed into my mouth. I pulled back from him and found his brown eyes looking up at me.

He lifted his hand to my cheek and pulled away a tear. "You're right, we did make you weepy."

I laughed through my tears and put my head to his chest. His arms wrapped around me and I knew that he was going to be all right. Something touched my shoulder and it startled me.

"Excuse me, my Queen, but what do wish for us to do now?" Vince asked.

"Start calling me Rayme," I said. Maxim laughed slightly.

"Very well, Rayme. Shall we proceed to the Dark Master's home?"

I thought of Jovan. He'd already done enough to help me. I didn't need to bother him with anything else. "No." I looked down at Maxim. "Can you take us back to my house?"

"But, my ... Rayme, Maxim may be more comfortable at his own home," Vince said, softly.

Maxim's hand ran up my back. "No, Vince, I go where she goes, and if she wants to go to her house then that's where I'll go, and for future reference, my home is her home."

Epilogue

The funeral services for Fawn and Vincent were beautiful. Maxim had seen to every detail. Fawn's family had a hard time, as I thought they would. Her mother took my number and promised to call me. We had the after service gathering for Vinnie at the bar. Most of the city showed up to pay their respects to him. Angie and I ended up with people out in the parking lot paying their respects and remembering him.

Vinnie's lawyers found me midway through the evening and handed me a mound of paperwork. Apparently, Vinnie had left me all that he had, the bar, the Laundromat, two additional buildings, his house, and enough money to never have to work a day in my life. I tried to refuse it, but when I read the letter that he'd written two years earlier, I couldn't refuse him. He'd penned it the night that he had first met me. He told me that he felt that his daughter had sent me to him as a gift to keep him going. The minute that he saw me he felt alive again, and had known that I was his family now. He said that he couldn't go against his heart and it was telling him that we were meant to find each other. He asked me to keep his dreams alive, and that was the least I could do for him.

It's only been a week since Vinnie's passing and I haven't been able to bring myself to reopen the bar. Angie and Maxim think it will do me good and help me get over losing Vinnie, but I'm not sure anything will ever help me with that.

Maxim is staying with me. Vince tried to convince me to move in with Maxim, and Maxim said he'd be happy if I just came to see where he lived. We've made plans to go next week. He also seems to think that I'll agree to marry him in front of his entire pack. I'm not too sure about that.

I found out that all four hundred weres went out to the cabin and handled the situation. I haven't gone back out there. I'm not sure I ever will. I've come to terms with the negative things that happened there, I just haven't come to terms with the positive--Jovan.

I haven't spoken to Jovan since he helped me defeat Dag. It's for the best--I'm sure. Maxim thinks I should talk with him, and that surprised me. I would have thought that he would have been pleased that I had closed the door on Jovan. He keeps telling me that there's a reason for everything and that he'll not deny what nature has selected for me--even if it means two men. For an alpha male, he's being incredibly understanding about it all.

For now, I'm content with living for the moment. I love Maxim and he loves me. I don't need anything else, right?

The End