

Chapter 50

Amanda Awakens

Despite the fact that Jonathan's words had hurt her, like most bigots, Ophelia's attitude toward Michael didn't change. She continued to blame him for Amanda being in the hospital and she continued trying to get Jacob to have him banned from visiting Amanda which he politely refused to do. She also continually tried to justify her attitude as a mother only wanting the best for her daughter. In her eyes, living in the lap of luxury in a loveless marriage to a womanizing man of her own race who likely wouldn't touch her or even talk to her was significantly better than being married to a human man who adored her and would do anything within his power to give her every thing she needed and most of the things she wanted. Where Michael was concerned, Ophelia ignored the fact that he was a human version of her own husband. He was a human and, in her eyes, incapable of loving Amanda the way Jacob loved her.

Two months after the accident, the hospital removed the casts from Amanda's body and leg, the wire from her jaw, the breathing and feeding tubes, and the catheter. After removing all this, they slowly brought her out of the induced coma. The process took about eight hours because the hospital didn't want to shock her system into shutting down and possibly causing her to die. The resident doctor on duty, a Florida red wolf named Harold Wolfson, monitored her progress and anytime Amanda's body seemed, even remotely, starting to stress, he would stop the process for a quarter-hour to allow her body to recover and then he would start the process again.

Finally, at 1000, Amanda's eyes started fluttering open. She winced and moaned at first due to her eyes not being used to the light. When she could finally open her eyes without pain, she looked fearfully around the room. She started to panic because she didn't recognize where she was. Her fear caused the heart monitor to start beeping rapidly which, in turn, caught the attention of the doctor who was monitoring her vital signs. He looked over at her and saw the fear in her eyes so he walked over to her.

"Hello, Miss Fuchs. I'm Doctor Wolfson. I'm the resident doctor on duty at Piedmont Regional Hospital. How are you feeling?"

"Hospital? Why?"

"You were severely injured in an automobile accident about two months ago."

"Injured?"

“Yes, You had over 10 broken bones, a broken jaw, a punctured lung, a perforated diaphragm, and a lacerated stomach and liver.”

Amanda paused for several seconds as she thought about this information. During this time, Ophelia and Jacob, who had decided to go to the hospital cafeteria while they awaited Amanda’s waking up, entered the room just in time to hear her say, “Where Michael?”

Ophelia didn’t give Dr. Wolfson a chance a chance to answer. She rushed over to Amanda and said, “Don’t worry, Baby. We’ll make sure that human doesn’t bother you any more.”

“NO! Want Michael!”

Amanda’s breathing and heart rate started climbing. Jacob noticed this and, before the doctor could respond, quickly stepped to Amanda’s side and said, “Ophelia, stop that!” He looked at Amanda and said, “Don’t worry, Sweetheart. He’ll be visiting you later.”

Amanda’s heart and breathing rates started dropping until Ophelia said, “No, he won’t! I forbid it! It’s his fault our baby is in this hospital bed!” Once again, Amanda’s heart and breathing monitors started climbing.

Jacob practically growled, “Ophelia! Shut! Up!”

“But.”

“I mean it, Ophelia! Shut! Up!”

Jacob looked at Amanda and said, “Sweetheart, we’ll be back shortly.” Then, he turned to Ophelia and said, “Come with me, Ophelia.”

“But.”

“Now, Ophelia!”

Despite his obvious anger, Jacob never treated Ophelia with anything but love and respect. He gently took hold of her arm and equally gently led her out of Amanda’s room. He took her to a chair in the hallway near the door to the room and gently made her sit in it. He paced back and forth in front of her several times to calm himself a bit before he stopped and faced her. As he looked at her, Ophelia noticed how sad his face was a mixture of anger and sadness. Finally, after several seconds, Jacob spoke.

“Ophelia, do you doubt that I love you?”

“No, Jacob.”

“Yet, almost since Amanda’s birth fur was replaced with her permanent fur, you’ve given me every indication that you don’t love me.”

“Jacob, that isn’t true!”

“Isn’t it? Oh, you’ve never refused me anytime I’ve wanted to make love. Heck, you’ve initiated our lovemaking as much as I have. However, you’ve defied me regularly where Amanda is concerned, especially about Michael. You know as well as I do that the only thing Michael had to do with Amanda being here is because he drove her to the party and he left without her. Yet, you are trying to convince yourself that he caused the accident. You’ve hated Michael since the day we met him.”

“Jacob, he was trying to rape her.”

“You know as well as I do that he wasn’t trying to rape her. All you saw when we walked into Amanda’s apartment was her head in a human’s lap and the human was scratching her head like her grandmother, your mother, used to do for her. You’ve hated him from that moment.”

“But, he’s human.”

“Ophelia, that is totally irrelevant. Did you know that each boy, all three of them, Amanda went out with when she was in school tried to force her into sex?”

Ophelia said, “No, but I’m not surprised. She looks like a mixed race person and you know how mixed race people are treated.”

“Yes, I know. But, did you know that Amanda has practically thrown herself at Michael and all he’s said is, ‘I respect you and your future husband too much to do that to you.’”

Ophelia’s shock was obvious. “What!?”

“Yes, Ophelia. Michael loves and respects Amanda. He would never knowingly do anything to hurt her. If you could get over his outward appearance and talk with him, you’d find that he’s an honorable and intelligent man.”

“I doubt that.”

“What would it take to convince you to trust Michael?”

“I don’t know, Jacob. I can’t get over him being human. I could accept him more if he was a mole rat or a shrew.”

Jacob just looked at Ophelia with shock for several seconds. Finally, he said, “Did you ask to be born a fox, Ophelia?”

“Jacob, how could I ask that?”

“Exactly, I doubt very seriously that Michael asked to be born human but he was. Did he let the fact that Amanda is a fox stop him from falling in love with her? No.”

“I don’t care, Jacob. He’s human. Humans mistreated our feral ancestors and our Humanimal ancestors.”

“Yes, and Michael has never denied those things happening. In fact, he once told me that, even though he was in stasis at the time, he wouldn’t be surprised in the least if humans enslaved Humanimals. He even told me that he can’t guarantee that he’d have been opposed to the slavery.”

“You see, Jacob. What did I tell you?”

“Ophelia, please. Let me finish. He also said that he’d like to believe he would have been opposed to it. He said that he hated the idea that his country had, at one time, enslaved other races.”

“What!? Are you saying that humans used to enslave other humans!?”

“Yes. Michael said it was the biggest black eye that this country had to live with. He also said that some parts of the country opened their eyes and abolished it long before this part of the country did. So, you see, Ophelia, Michael isn’t the kind of human you believe him to be.”

“I don’t care, Jacob. I hate all humans because of what they used to do to us.”

All Jacob could do was tell her, “Okay, Ophelia. We live in a country that treasures our right to have an opinion and to voice that opinion no matter who is offended by that opinion and, believe me Ophelia, there are a lot of people who are offended by that opinion . . .”

“I don’t care who’s offended, Jacob.”

“Including that young lady lying in the bed in that room?” He concluded as he pointed toward Amanda’s hospital room.

Ophelia paused for a moment before she said, “I still don’t care, Jacob. One day Amanda will see that I’m right.”

“I doubt that, Ophelia. But, I know you won’t change your mind about Michael because you refuse to talk to him. You only talk at him or about him.

“Now, we’re going to go back into that room and you will not say anything negative about humans in general and Michael in particular. If you do, I will remove you from Amanda’s room and I will be none too gentle about it. Understand?”

Jacob had spoken quietly and pointedly enough so that Ophelia understood that he meant every word he had said and he would brook no argument so, she said, “Yes, Jacob.”

They returned to the room and Jacob could see that there was a small amount of anger in Amanda’s eyes as she looked at her mother. Jacob saw that Ophelia saw it, too. He decided to let her stew in that look for a few moments before he spoke. “I’m sorry, Amanda. I had to explain a few things to your mother. I can’t promise how she’s going to act in the future but, at this moment, she’s agreed to not speak about Michael or humans. Right, Ophelia?”

“Yes, Jacob.”

“We know you’re probably tired so, we’re going to go eat dinner and then go home for the night.” He leaned over and kissed Amanda’s cheek. “We’ll see you in the morning.”

Amanda smiled and said, “Michael?”

“He’ll stop by and spend the night here in a little while. Come on, Ophelia.”

Ophelia leaned over to kiss Amanda and saw the fear in her eyes. “Don’t worry, Baby,” she said. “I made your father a promise and I try to keep my promises to him.”

After kissing Amanda, Ophelia stood up, took Jacob’s arm and accompanied him out of the room.

At 1330, Michael arrived at the hospital. He spoke with Dr Wolfson who informed him that Amanda was out of her coma and seemed to be doing well. Dr. Wolfson also told Michael that the first person she asked about was him. Michael smiled happily at this bit of information. Dr. Wolfson related to him about Ophelia’s tirade about him causing Michael to smile and say that Ophelia didn’t know how to say anything good about him.

After this short conversation, Michael went to Amanda’s room. He stood at the door and stared at Amanda as she lay there sleeping. It had been two months since he had seen her without a body cast so he wanted to enjoy seeing the bed sheets conform to the shape of her body. Finally, after several seconds, he entered the room and walked to the side of the bed. Instead of sitting in the chair beside the bed as he normally did, he sat on the edge of the bed and gently caressed Amanda’s facial fur.

After a few seconds, a smile formed on her face and she opened her eyes. She turned her eyes toward Michael and her smile broadened. In a weak voice, she said, “Michael!”

“Hello, Princess. Did you get your nap out?”

“Still tired. Glad to see you.” A sad look crossed her face before she continued, “You mad at me?”

Michael leaned over and placed a hand on the bed on either side of her body. His face was less than six inches from hers when he said, “No way, my love. I love you too much to be angry with you.”

Amanda was slowly regaining her ability to speak properly as she talked with Michael. “You left party without me. Thought you were mad.” Tears started forming in her eyes.

“I was upset, yes, but not angry. I thought for a while that you had deceived me. But, after I drove down the street a way, I realized that you would never do anything like that, especially to me. It had to be your mother’s doing. When I went back to get you, Mr. Wiley said that Reginald had given you a ride home. A couple of hours later, I learned about the accident.”

“Don’t remember accident. Doctor said I nearly died. True?”

“You were in surgery for about 12 hours to repair your injuries. You had 19 broken bones including all of the ribs on your right side. Because of your broken ribs, the doctors believed it would be better for you to be in a coma to reduce the pain of breathing.”

“You read to me.”

Smiling, Michael said, “You remember that?”

Amanda smiled and said, “Don’t read smut, Michael. Read romance.”

Michael laughed and said, “Po-tay-to, po-tah-to.” Amanda looked at him curiously so, he added, “You can call it romance but some scenes happened to be rather explicit.”

“But, was romantically explicit.”

Michael stared at her for a couple of seconds before he said, “If you say so.” Then, he smiled mischievously.

Amanda saw the smile and recognized what he must be thinking. Weakly, she balled up her fist and hit Michael’s chest as she said, “Not lying, Michael. Thought about us as I read it.”

“I’m just giving you a hard time, Princess. You know I love you.”

“I know, Michael. I know.” She said as she caressed his arm.

Michael held Amanda’s hand tenderly as they talked. Occasionally, he would caress her facial fur as if he was trying to smooth it or brush away a tear. Each time that he caressed her face, Amanda would lean her head into the caress and moan softly. As he caressed her face, he

thought that he might never be able to do this for her as her husband and it brought tears to his eyes and a resolve to his heart to release Amanda from her arranged marriage no matter what it took.

Amanda noticed the tears and said, “Why tears, Michael?”

“I’m just thinking, Sweetheart, and what I’m thinking makes me emotional.”

“What thinking ‘bout?”

Michael swung their arms back and forth a few times as the tears became more noticeable. He was trying to gain control of his emotions. Finally, despite his failure to control his emotions, he said, “I . . . I’m jus . . just thinking about how, despite all of our plans, all of our dreams, I won’t be able to show my love for you because you’ll . . . you’ll . . .” He swallowed hard to try to get the lump out of his throat. “You’ll be married to someone else. Someone who obviously doesn’t give a tinker’s dam about you because even though he knows you’re here, he has yet to come visit you.”

Amanda started crying, “No, Michael! Won’t marry anyone but you! Love you and you alone! Won’t be anyone’s wife but you! If I can’t marry you . . . I’ll . . . I’ll . . .” She turned her face away from Michael’s eyes and cried softly while she squeezed his hand hard enough to make him wince.

Michael’s emotions were, once again, running high. He reached over, turned Amanda’s face toward his, touched his forehead to hers, and, with tears dripping from his eyes and a voice choked with emotion, said, “Baby, please don’t talk like that. I’d rather live in a world with you married to someone else and alive than try to live in a world without you in it. Please promise me that you’ll accept your fate no matter what it is. Please!” Then, he gently kissed her nose.

Through her tears, Amanda laughed and said, “That’s my nose, you silly, lovable human.”

“I know. But, it got you off that morbid train of thought. Didn’t it?”

Amanda slowly, somewhat painfully slipped her arms around Michael’s neck and, with a serious look on her face, said, “All right, Michael. I’ll accept whatever the future holds for me on one condition.”

“And that is?”

“You’ll keep the promise you made to me when I was in my coma. That being that you’ll do everything in your power to get me out of that damnable marriage to that equally damnable playboy, Reginald Francis Reynard, III.”

Michael sat up as straight as he could with her arms around his neck, raised his right arm, and said, “I do so solemnly swear.”

Amanda smiled, pulled him back down, and kissed him passionately. As they kissed, they heard someone clearing his throat. Michael pulled back, looked at her, and saw her looking toward the door. He saw an impish smile form on her lips as she looked at the doorway. He also felt her arms tighten possessively.

When Amanda looked back at him, he said, "I know that wasn't your mother because we both know she wouldn't clear her throat; she would have launched into a paint-peeling, fur-curling, hate-filled tirade against me for daring to sully her daughter by placing my lips on yours. So, that means . . .

"Hello, Mr. Fuchs." Michael said as he turned his head.

"Good evening, Michael. Hello, Sweetheart."

Jacob walked into the room as Michael said, "How did you bend the rules this time, sir?"

Jacob smiled a tooth-baring smile as he said, "You may not know this, Michael, but, I am good friends with the owner of this hospital. Since he knows how much my Amanda means to me, he informed security that I'm exempt from visiting hours limitations. So, you two had best not be doing anything you don't want me to see." His smile broadened.

A shocked look crossed Amanda's face as she said, "Daddy! Don't imply that!" She looked sideways at Michael as she added, "You might give Michael ideas."

Michael placed his hand over his heart and started stammering. Amanda and Jacob laughed uproariously at his discomfiture. Finally, Michael said, "Amanda! Don't say such things to your father. He might have a shotgun and I'm allergic to lead!"

Confused, Amanda said, "What?"

"Yeah, it tends to leave large bleeding holes when it enters my body at high rates of speed." Michael smiled; Amanda shook her head; and Jacob laughed even harder.

After a few seconds, Michael asked, "Is Mrs. Fuchs resting again?"

"Yes, she is."

"She's going to figure out that you're here, Sir."

"Just before she fell asleep, I told her that I was going to visit Leo and Tigresa."

"Aren't you afraid, she'll think you're spending time with another woman?"

"No. Since the day I met her when I was 10 and she was 6, I've never looked at another woman in a sexual manner and she knows it. The worst thing that could happen would be if

Ophelia wakes up and I'm not home. She'll call Leo and, when he tells her I'm not there, she'll call here and ask Amanda if I'm here. When Amanda tells her yes, and I would be very upset with her if she lied to her mother, Ophelia would demand that Marshall bring her here and Ophelia would be steaming mad, not at me but you, Michael."

Michael snorted and said, "You're probably right, Mr. Fuchs."

The three of them chatted for a few more minutes when Jacob noticed that Amanda was having a hard time holding her eyes open even though it was still relatively early in the evening. So, he made his excuses and said that he really should visit Leo and Tigresa just so he wouldn't be guilty of lying to Ophelia and, with that, he kissed Amanda, shook Michael's hand, and left.

Michael looked at Amanda and saw that her eyes were closed so, he kissed her forehead just as she started giggling. Amanda opened her eyes and looked at Michael with an amused look in her eyes and said, "Allergic to lead. Really Michael." Then, she laughed and said, "Good night, Michael. I'll see you in the morning."

Smiling, Michael leaned over and tenderly kissed Amanda on her lips. When he pulled back, he said, "Good night, Princess. Sweet dreams and I'll see you tomorrow."

The next morning, Michael woke up and looked at the clock. He saw that the time was 2345 so he got off the sofa and started getting everything together before he left for the day. As he puttered around the room, he noticed Amanda's eyes were open and following him around. He smiled at her and approached the bed.

"Good morning, Sweetheart," he said when he reached the bed. Then, he leaned over and kissed her nose.

Amanda laughed and said, "You kissed my nose, you silly human."

"I know but it's a cute tiger nose and I've been wanting to kiss it for a while."

Amanda slowly, somewhat painfully slipped her arms around Michael's neck, pulled his face close to hers and, with a serious look on her face said, "I was thinking about what you said last night, Michael. As much as I hate the thought of possibly not being your wife, I'll accept whatever the future holds for me because you want me to."

She pulled Michael in closer, placed her lips on his and kissed him properly. Once again, they heard someone clearing his throat. Knowing that this most likely wasn't Mr. Fuchs, Michael pulled back from Amanda and saw a look of abject fear on her face. Michael turned his head and saw a very stern-looking older Arctic fox standing just inside the doorway.

Jacob woke up when his alarm sounded at 2300. Knowing that Ophelia would want to leave for the hospital as soon as possible, he reached to her side of the bed to wake her up but, his hand only clutched empty air. It was at that moment that the smell of bacon frying hit his nostrils. He thought that Ophelia hadn't cooked breakfast since Amanda had been in the hospital. A look of sadness crossed Jacob's face as he came to the conclusion that, once again, Ophelia was up to something that would cause trouble for Amanda, Michael or both of them.

Jacob got dressed and went downstairs. As he neared the kitchen, the smell of breakfast cooking steadily got stronger. Just as he was about to enter the kitchen, his noticeably pregnant wife almost ran into him as she was exiting the kitchen.

"Oh! Good morning, Honey!" Calling him "Honey" was another indicator that she was up to something.

"Good morning, Dear. Why are you cooking breakfast?"

Marshall, who had been awakened by the smell of breakfast cooking walked up behind Jacob and stood listening to the conversation. Ophelia, who was focused on Jacob, never saw Marshall walk up behind his father.

"I hadn't cooked breakfast for you and the kids since Amanda's accident. So, I thought that now that she's out of her coma, I'd cook you breakfast to help celebrate it."

"Uh-huh. Go get dressed, Ophelia."

"But, Jacob."

"Don't 'But, Jacob' me, Ophelia. I've been married to you for almost 20 years. I know when you're up to something and you're up to something. Now, go get dressed. We can eat at the hospital."

Without turning his head, Jacob called out, "Marshall!"

Marshall said, "Yes, sir."

After jumping about a foot, Jacob turned and said, "I see our tiger ancestry wasn't lost on you. Your mother and I are going to the hospital. She's up to something and she's trying to keep me here to miss it. I want you to finish cooking breakfast for your siblings and make sure they get to school. All right?"

"Yes, sir."

Jacob called out, "Ophelia! Are you ready?"

From the second floor, Ophelia's voice could be heard saying, "Give me a minute, Jacob."

"You've got one minute for me to hear you coming down the stairs or I'm leaving without you."

Having dealt with Ophelia's ability to procrastinate for so long, Jacob knew that if he showed even the slightest sign of weakness, Ophelia would take advantage of it and get what she had planned. Jacob watched his watch and, exactly 45 seconds after making his promise, he heard Ophelia walking down the stairs. When he saw her face, he saw that she was unhappy but not defiant. She knew that Jacob loved her more than anything else in the world but he had long ago ceased putting up with any shenanigans she might plan, especially where Amanda was concerned.

Jacob held Ophelia's coat for her and, after adjusting it to her shoulders, offered his arm as he was wont to do when they left home together and escorted her to the car. Ophelia sat quietly in her seat debating how to answer the question that she knew was coming. Jacob also sat quietly as he debated how to word the question that he knew Ophelia knew was coming. In her pregnant state, Jacob knew that it would be very easy to upset her to the point of tears and that was something he wanted to avoid.

Finally, after about 3 minutes of debating it, Jacob spoke. "Ophelia," he said, "you know what I'm going to ask you so, go ahead and tell me."

Ophelia's normally stern countenance melted under Jacob's calm demeanor. She didn't want to anger or upset him because he was the love of her life and she knew he felt the same way about her. But, she just couldn't seem to make him see what a danger that human was to Amanda. She didn't know what she could say to convince him so she spoke the truth.

"I contacted Reginald Reynard, Senior and told him about that human being in Amanda's hospital room and how I feared he planned on harming Amanda."

Jacob thought he was going to explode but remained calm, "And?"

Ophelia shrank a bit then said, "He's going to Amanda's room and forcibly remove him and ban him from the hospital. You know how he feels about humans, Jacob."

"Yes he hates them worse than you do. He's been actively trying to get the Federal legislature to remove the protected status off humans and allow them to be killed on sight and he's threatened to be the first Humanimal to kill one. I can't believe you would stoop so low, Ophelia."

"Jacob, it's for Amanda's own good. She can't see what a danger he is to her."

“Ophelia, Michael is less of a danger to Amanda than you are. You’ll find out one of these days.”

Before Michael could say anything, the Arctic fox said, “What are you doing kissing my grandson’s fiancée . . . human!?”

Michael fought down the anger that started to grow at the attitude this fox had toward him. He could tolerate Ophelia’s attitude because she was Amanda’s mother but this was almost too much. As he looked at the fox, Michael noticed that he had assumed a posture of dominance and, therefore, was trying to intimidate him. Michael fought hard not to smile as he noticed that the fox was about 3 inches shorter than him. Also, since he didn’t know for certain what the relationship between Amanda and this gentleman was, he decided that rather than confront him, he would try a little bit of tact.

“Hello,” Michael said, as he stuck out his hand. “I’m guessing you’re Reginald Reynard, I.”

“Senior, human!”

This reaction caused Michael to instantly develop a strong dislike of the man. However, Michael still wanted to be cordial at the very least. So, he replied, “I’m terribly sorry, sir. I didn’t mean to offend you.”

“Walking into my future granddaughter-in-law’s hospital room and seeing a human attempting to molest her in her weakened state is enough to offend me, human!”

With a slight smile on his face, Michael quirked an eyebrow, turned to Amanda, and whispered, “He kind of reminds me of someone else we both know and love. Doesn’t he?”

Amanda snickered causing Mr. Reynard to growl, “What’s so funny?”

Amanda stopped laughing, clearly intimidated. Michael, on the other hand, was anything but intimidated. He replied, “I said, ‘He kind of reminds me of someone else we both know and love. Doesn’t he?’ Sir!” Michael’s voice was calm, low and even. He didn’t even smile because his dislike of this man was growing with every passing second.

“You are not supposed to be here, human!”

Now thoroughly irritated by the obviously bigoted older gentleman, Michael took a step toward him as he said, “Mr. Reginald, this young woman and her mother are the only people I allow to direct that word toward me in that tone of voice and that’s only because a) I love this woman, b) she would never use that word in that tone of voice and c) her mother can use it

because she's this woman's mother. Got it!?" Michael took another step toward Mr. Reynard as he added, "And don't think you can intimidate me, better men than you have tried . . . and failed."

Michael could see fear growing in Mr. Reynard's eyes; he also noted a look of cunning there, too, as he said, "Do you know who I am?"

"Yes, you've already told me that you're Reginald Reynard, Senior. Am I supposed to be impressed?"

Michael saw the look of cunning replace by one of anger as Mr. Reynard said, "You fool! I'll have you fired from your job! I'll have your electricity, telephone and other utilities cut off! I'll have your automobile repossessed! I'll have you put on a reservation where all of you humans belong! I'll have you removed from this world! What do you think about that, human!?"

"You sound like a pretty powerful man if you can arrange all of that. But, I'm still not impressed nor intimidated by you. You sound like a weakling and a bully who lost something he desired and is trying to blame anyone but himself for his shortcomings. That's what I think about that. Oh! And Mr. Reynard, you just made a threat of physical harm and/or death against a member of a protected species and a documented national treasure. I do not believe the national government would take that treat too kindly."

Seeing that he wasn't going to succeed in intimidating Michael, Mr. Reynard turned toward the open doorway and nodded. In response to this action, two silver-back gorillas walked into the room. Each one of them was easily 6'6" tall and weighed over 300 lbs of solid muscle. Each gorilla took a position on either side of Mr. Reynard who now had a smug look on his face.

"Intimidated now, human?"

"Impressed, yes, but definitely not intimidated."

Michael looked at each of the gorillas before he said, "Tell me, gentlemen, are you mountain gorillas or lowland gorillas? I never learned the difference between the species other than where they lived."

The gorillas looked at each other with mild surprised written all over their faces. In a deep gravelly voice, the one on Michael's right said, "Mountain gorillas. How do you know about the two races of gorillas?"

"I've always been fascinated by primates in general and gorillas in particular. When I was growing up, they were the biggest primates alive. The silver-backs are both mean and fierce yet gentle giants. As long as you didn't mess with their mates or their young, they'd tolerate humans in their territory. They'd also play with their young until they felt threatened and then they would go on the offensive."

“Humans used to use the word ‘gorilla’ as a descriptive of a human who was big, dumb, and muscle-bound. Yet, a young gorilla was taught to use human sign language to make her needs and wants known to her human handlers. As I understand it, she even taught her babies sign language.

“Oh! I’m Michael Thomson, by the way.”

Michael stuck out his hand. Each of the gorillas took his hand and, despite their great size, gently shook it. As they shook hands, Michael added, “And in case you’re wondering, yes, that’s Thomson as in Thomson’s gazelle.”

The first gorilla that had spoken said, “I’m Ryan Haryla and this is my twin brother, Alphonse.”

Alphonse said, “Pleased to meet you, Michael.”

Mr. Reynard raised his voice and said, “I didn’t bring you two apes in here to make nice with this good-for-nothing human. You’re supposed to take him out of here, forcibly if necessary.”

Anger flushed Michael’s features as he said, in a voice far too quiet to match the look on his face, “Mr. Reynard, I would appreciate it if you would refrain from speaking to these two gentlemen in such a demeaning, insulting, and racist manner.”

“You keep your trap shut, human! I’ll speak to my employees in any manner I choose!”

“Employees? I thought they were slaves from the manner you spoke to them.”

Ryan and Alphonse looked at one another and then at Mr. Reynard. Michael could see the internal battle being fought in each gorilla. They really didn’t like being spoken to in such a manner by Mr. Reynard but, they were also employed by Mr. Reynard and felt loyalty to him. They would never lay a hand on him to defend their honor but he was starting to chip away at their loyalty by speaking to them the way he did. Michael imagined that at the right word from him, these two men would take a couple of seconds longer than normal to respond if Mr. Reynard needed their assistance should he be attacked.

Michael decided to change the subject. “Mr. Reynard do you know anything about the Emergency Contact Law?” He asked.

Not realizing how close he had been to not having any bodyguards, Mr. Reynard shouted, “What!?”

“The Emergency Contact Law.”

Alphonse said, “Oh yeah! That’s the law that requires hospitals to allow anyone on someone’s emergency contact form access to that person if they’re in the hospital even if they’re

unconscious. Right?”

Michael nodded his head but, Mr. Reynard said, “I know about the law, Meathead.” Looking at Michael, he continued, “What does that have to do with anything?”

“I’m on Amanda’s Emergency Contact List which means that, if you attempt to prevent me from visiting Amanda, you would be in violation of Federal Law, a felony, sir. You might be able to buy off a local or Provincial judge but, you can’t buy off a Federal judge.” Michael smiled a mildly malevolent smile at Mr. Reynard before looking at Amanda and adding, “I think I should be on my way, Sweetheart. It’s almost time for your parents to arrive and I’d rather not deal with your mother right now.” He whispered loud enough for Mr. Reynard and the gorillas to hear, “She’s scary.”

Amanda snickered and said, “Bye, Michael. Will you be here tonight?”

“Oh, I don’t think anyone will interfere with me when I return. Right, Mr. Reynard?” Mr. Reynard just turned his back on Michael.

Michael took a step toward Amanda to kiss her good-bye but was interrupted by the gorillas. “Really guys?”

“Sorry, Mr. Thomson. He’s our boss and we have to do anything he wants us to do as long as it’s legal. The Emergency Contact law doesn’t say anything about allowing you to kiss her.”

“Very well.” Michael took a step toward the door when he stopped and said, “In answer to your earlier question, Sweetie, I thought I’d pay a visit to your ‘fiance’ and remind him that you’re here.”

Then, Michael turned to face Mr. Reynard and said, “Mr. Reynard, it’s been interesting chatting with you but, I really must be leaving. Oh! And don’t think I haven’t been a little slice of heaven meeting and talking with you, because it hasn’t.”

Before what he had said registered with Mr. Reynard, Michael, accompanied by Ryan and Alphonse, left the room and headed toward the elevator.