

Chapter 51

Michael Visits Reginald Reynard, III

About five minutes after Michael left, Mr. & Mrs. Fuchs arrived. Mr. Reynard was sitting in a chair in the shadows and facing Amanda. He was berating her for her attitude concerning his grandson and the fact that she dared to associate with a “dirty, stinking human”. Amanda was responding very angrily to these statements just her parents entered the room.

“Hey Sweetie,” Ophelia said as she walked into the room. “Why are you so angry?” Amanda just glared at her mother.

Jacob, however, had done a quick scan of the room as he entered and had seen Mr. Reynard, Senior sitting in the shadows. “Hello Senior,” he said. “What are you doing here, as if I didn’t already know?” Jacob looked pointedly at Ophelia as he said this.

He walked over to Amanda and kissed her cheek. “How long as Michael been gone, Sweetheart?”

“About five minutes, Daddy. He was escorted out of here by two gorillas.”

“Really?” Jacob turned to Mr. Reynard and said, “That’s a little heavy-handed, Reginald, even for you.”

Mr. Reynard didn’t say anything. However, Amanda said, “They were gentle, Daddy, friendly even. Neither of them laid a hand on Michael and they were even chatting amiably. They were surprised that Michael knew about the different races of gorillas and their lifestyles.”

“Did Michael say where he was going after he left?”

“Not in so many words, Daddy, but, I think he’s going to pay my ‘fiance’ a visit.”

“Did he say why?”

“He thinks that Reginald should have visited me by now.”

When he heard this, Mr. Reynard stood up and quickly walked to the telephone next to Amanda’s bed. He dialed a telephone number and, after a few seconds, had the following conversation.

“Wiley?”

“Yes sir?”

“This is Senior. Do you remember that human that arrived at the Engagement Party with Amanda Fuchs?”

“Yes sir. He was quite amiable. I had never met a human until him.”

“Never mind that! I believe he’s on his way over there. Do not, under any circumstances allow him into the manor. You got that!?”

“Yes sir. But, why?”

“Because I don’t want him there. If he get in the manor, it’ll be your job. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Mr. Reynard. Uh, Mr, Reynard?”

“What is it?”

“Well, sir, as you know, one of my duties is to assist any of the other servants that may need it. What do I do if this human arrives while I’m assisting someone.”

“Just make sure he doesn’t get into the manor. Got it?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. Now, let me talk to Reginald.”

Michael and the Haryla brothers reached the first floor. As the doors to the elevator opened, Alphonse was saying, “You mean humans used to kill gorillas even before the changing?”

“I’m afraid so, Alphonse.”

A worried look appeared on Alphonse’s and Ryan’s faces. Ryan said, “Why?”

“Several reasons, Ryan. First and foremost, fear. Humans saw gorillas as big, strong beasts that looked very similar to humans and, at the same time, so different from us. Likely, the people that saw gorillas in the wild thought gorillas would attack them. Second, territory. Humans have always been greedy and have always wanted land that someone else had. Why, you may ask. They wanted it for food, treasure, or something else. Finally, and, to me, most disgustingly, for food. Humans have a knack for eating almost anything so, I have no doubt some humans saw gorillas as a potential supply of meat.”

Both gorillas replied, "Ugh! That sounds too much like cannibalism."

"That's how I feel. People eating gorilla meat might have disagreed, especially during times of famine. I know that wild chimpanzees are known to hunt, kill, and eat monkeys and, supposedly, chimpanzees from other troops. Humans were known to do that, too. There's evidence that some ancient species of humans hunted and ate other humans. We are a sorry lot at times."

Ryan said, "If it makes any difference to you, I think you're a good person, Michael." Alphonse nodded his head in agreement.

"Thanks, guys. Well, I guess I'll be leaving. Y'all take care and maybe the next time we meet it'll be under better circumstances."

"We're looking forward to it, Michael."

Michael got into his car and sat there for a moment thinking. After several seconds, he made up his mind, slapped the steering wheel, cranked his car, and left. He drove down a relatively familiar road although he'd only driven down it once in his life, two months ago. He didn't know what the next few hours would bring for him; he might even wind up in jail but, he didn't care. What he was planning on doing he was doing for Amanda and, for her, he would try to move a mountain.

After about half an hour, Michael turned into the circle driveway of a mansion that looked like a castle, complete with a moat and drawbridge. Unlike the stereotypical angry lover, Michael didn't race up the half mile long driveway; he drove at a normal pace so that he'd have time to complete his plans for the very near future. When he left the hospital, the only plan he had was to arrive at the Reynard mansion and, somehow, get inside. It was the somehow that he had to complete plans for. After a minute or so, he arrived at the drawbridge and parking lot he had used two months earlier. He was surprised that he wasn't surprised to see an older coyote standing outside of the mansion and watching him drive up. It was almost as if he was being expected. As Michael got out of his car after parking it, Mr. Wiley approached.

"Mr. Thomson," Mr. Wiley said.

"Don't try to stop me, Mr. Wiley. I've come to talk to Reginald, III, and I'll go through you if I have to."

"Just a minute is all I ask, Mr. Thomson. Would please give an old man one minute?"

Michael, who had been taught to respect his seniors, instinctively stopped when he heard that phrase. "I'm sorry, Mr. Wiley. I let my anger control me for a moment."

“That’s all right, Mr. Thomson. No doubt your anger is directed toward Mr. Reginald, Senior and I don’t blame you. To call him a bigot would be an insult to bigots.

“Mr. Reginald called here several minutes ago and, in no uncertain terms, told me that if you succeeded in entering the mansion I would be terminated. Having conversed with you before and after the Engagement Party, I know you are a good human. Therefore, as soon as I hung up the telephone, I went to my room and packed my bags. My father and I have worked for this family for well over 70 years but, I won’t abide Mr. Reginald’s attitude toward you for one second longer. After I packed my bags, I informed several of the other servants and they agreed with my decision to allow you to enter. After giving me the minute I requested, feel free to enter and, as long as you don’t cause any irreparable harm to the young master, no other servant will interfere with you, except one, and I can assure you that she will be too indisposed to respond.”

Michael said, “I’m sorry that you will lose your job, Mr. Wiley.” Michael took a business card from his pocket, handed it to him and said, “If you need a job, call me tomorrow and I’ll see what I can do for you.”

“Thank you, Mr. Thomson. Now, I didn’t see you enter the mansion because, I was busy entertaining a certain attractive, slightly overweight, prairie dog cook.” He winked as he turned away.

Michael smiled slightly as he said, “Mr. Wiley, please tell me that you and this ‘attractive, slightly overweight cook’ have been close for a while.”

“She’s been flirting with me for a couple of years. I’ll just tell her that I suddenly realized what a lovely lady she is.”

“You aren’t sacrificing yourself for me, are you?”

“Oh, no. Coyotes do love a chubby, prairie dog.” He said, as he walked toward the mansion.

Michael laughed and said, “True, but not necessarily as sex partners.”

The last thing Mr. Wiley said as he entered the mansion was, “”Don’t knock it until you’ve tried it, Mr. Thomson.

“Wait here for a couple of minutes to be sure I got her attention, then you can visit the young master. Remember, no irreparable harm to him.”

“Yes, sir.”

Michael waited a short while and eased through the front door of the mansion. He knew absolutely nothing about the layout of the mansion and proceeded to very quickly get lost. However, he approached a door and opened it slightly and heard part of a conversation. He

recognized one speaker as Mr. Wiley.

“Hello, my dear.”

“Oh! Wiley, you startled me.”

“Now, Florence, the master’s gone and we’re all alone. You can call me Thomas.”

With a shocked voice, Florence said, “Wiley, what has gotten into you? You’ve never acted this way before.”

“Florence, I’ve just been thinking that I’m not getting any younger and you’ve always flirted with me. I thought that maybe I should consider having a little intimate companionship in my waning years.”

The next thing Michael heard was, “Thomas! Whatever has gotten into you I hope it doesn’t go away any time soon.” Then, Michael heard a soft feminine moan.

Smiling, Michael said, “Well, Mr. Wiley’s not going to be lonely for long.”

Michael straightened up and said, “Now, to find his room.”

As he said this, a huge furry hand landed on Michael’s shoulder and spun him around. Michael had balled up his fists expecting to have to fight his way to where he intended to go. However, he looked up into the deep black eyes of a brown bear that stood over seven-feet-tall. The bear leaned toward Michael until they were literally nose-to-nose. Michael’s heart was beating so strongly that he was afraid that it would burst.

“You Michael Thomson?” The bear literally growled.

Michael considered lying and denying his name but, he figured the bear had already been given a description so, he said, “Uh, yes sir.”

The bear nodded his head and said, “I thought I recognized you.” When Michael looked at him with confusion, the bear added, “I was the crier on the night of the Engagement Party. Wiley told me to keep an eye out for you. He said you would likely get lost in this mansion. To get to the room you’re seeking go through that door behind me, turn right, go through the third door on your left, take the stairway on your right. At the top of the stairs, turn right and the room you’re looking for will be directly in front of you. If you promise to not harm the young master, I’ll let you go. Otherwise . . .” The bear cracked his knuckles for emphasis.

“Mr. Orso, don’t worry. If he comes with me peacefully, I won’t harm a hair on his , , , body. However, I can’t guarantee his health and well-being if he decides to fight me.”

“Why do you wish to take him with you?”

“Because he hasn’t visited his ‘fiancee’ even once since the accident. I believe if he’s going to marry her, he should have a wee bit of concern for her well-being. Don’t you agree?”

“I’d be concerned if my wife got injured but, I’m not a privileged rich brat.” Mr. Orso grinned a semi-malevolent grin as he spoke.

“Thank you, Mr. Orso. I will do my best to not injure the brat.”

Michael shook Mr. Orso’s hand and, following his directions, soon found Reginald’s room. He silently walked down the corridor toward the door. When he arrived, he gently placed an ear on the door and listened. From the sounds he heard, Michael knew that Reginald wasn’t alone and was indisposed. After waiting until Reginald finished, Michael knocked on the door. From the interior of the room, he heard Reginald call out angrily.

“Wiley, I told you to not disturb me for at least three hours. That was an hour ago. Now, go away and leave me alone!”

As Reginald spoke, Michael was silently and carefully testing the door knob. Upon finding the door unlocked, Michael turned the handle completely and gently pushed the door open enough to allow him to slip inside. When he saw the look on Reginald’s face as he was recognized, Michael wished he had a camera to capture the moment.

“Hello, Reg,” Michael said, malevolently. “Remember me?”

About that time a young Thylacoleo woman stepped out of the bathroom, naked as the day she was born. She was speaking as she walked out and didn’t notice Michael at first. “Reginald, we took entirely too long. My wife might become suspicious if I don’t . . . AAAAAAHHHH!”

Michael, who had been watching her as she walked across the room, wasn’t caught off guard by her reaction. “Wife? Are you a . . . lesbian?”

“Yeah. Do you have a problem with that?”

“No. I’m just curious as to why you just got out of bed with a guy if you’re a lesbian.”

Michael could see panic in her eyes as she said, “Did my wife send you? I know she was having me followed.”

“Ma’am, I wouldn’t know your wife if she walked up and slapped me. I’m here for him.” Michael pointed at Reginald. “However, I’d rather you not leave until my business with him is completed.”

“And if I refuse?”

Michael pulled off his belt, walked over to the woman, grabbed her wrists, and wrapped

the belt around them, pulling it nice and tight. Then, he led her to a chair and gently forced her to sit down. After she sat, Michael said, "I have no desire to cause you harm in any manner; however, I won't allow you to leave and cause me trouble as a result. Understand?" The woman nodded meekly.

"May I get dressed?" She asked.

"No. Sorry. Your nudity will make you a little more compliant to my orders."

Michael turned to Reginald and said, "As for you, Reg . . ."

"My name is Reginald, human."

Michael smiled a mildly malicious smile and continued, "As for you, Reg, you get dressed."

Glaring at Michael, Reginald slowly stood. Michael watched his every move closely. When Reginald made a dash for the door, Michael was already there when Reginald arrived. Reginald swung a haymaker at Michael but Michael had already ducked. The force of the swing was so strong that Reginald lost his balance and fell in a heap onto the floor. Before Reginald could even take a breath, Michael was sitting astride his chest and smiling at him."

"Reg . . ."

Reginald growled loudly and fairly shouted, "I told you my name is Reginald!"

Michael smiled maliciously again and continued, "I'm sorry, Reg. I'll try to remember that, Reg."

Reginald only growled more loudly.

"As I was saying, Reg, You're lucky I promised two of your people that I wouldn't harm you. However, if you attempt to strike me again, all bets are off. Got it? Now, go get dressed. Oh! Wait a minute."

Michael produced a length of rope and tied one end around Reginald's waist. Reginald looked at the rope around his waist and said, "What is this for?"

"Well, Reg." Once again, Reginald growled at Michael's familiarity. "This mansion is based on an ancient style from the human era called a castle. Castles were notoriously honeycombed with secret passages. This rope will make sure you can't use such a passage without taking me with you. Also, if you'll note, the rope is $\frac{3}{4}$ " nylon which means it's both strong and flexible. If you've got a nasty surprise behind any secret door, like, say, a razor, the razor won't be able to cut the rope because the flexibility of the rope means it would bend as the razor tried to cut it."

Reginald said, "You must be a hell of a chess player."

Michael smiled at the compliment and said, "Well, I do try to think three moves ahead."

"Now, get your clothes and lay them on the bed. I'm going to check them before you put them on."

The Thylacoleo, who had been sitting quietly, spoke up, "What about me? May I get dressed?"

"Sorry, ma'am. I already told that you can't get dressed. I need you to stay right where you are and in your lack of attire. I'd rather you not contact the police until I get this reprobate to the hospital. He's going to see what his 'fiancee' looks like now that she's out of her coma and talking. When I get to the hospital, I'll have this guy call the servants and have one of them release you. Please understand."

A look of wild hatred crossed the Thylacoleo's face. "What do you mean 'fiancee'?" She looked at Reginald and said, "You have a fiancee!? And you didn't tell me!?"

Smugly, Reginald replied, "Well, you've got a wife."

"Yeah, but you knew about her. You, you son of a bitch!" She was straining against the belt but wasn't able to break free.

Michael said, "Reg, she may have a hard time getting out of that but she might. Therefore, it would behoove you to come with me."

Reluctantly, Reginald allowed Michael to escort him out of the mansion. He kept his head on a swivel hoping to see one of the servants so he could let them know that he was being kidnapped. But, to his surprise and chagrin not a single servant was to be seen. Even when they passed any of the servants' rooms, not a one was to be seen.

As they passed another empty room, Michael roughly pulled Reginald close and whispered harshly in his ear, "What's the matter, Reg? I see you looking around. Not seeing someone you expected to see?"

Reginald glared at Michael for several seconds before responding, "What did you do? How did you get them to leave?"

"I only met and talked to two of your servants, Reg. Mr. Wiley and Mr. Orso. Mr. Wiley told me that your grandfather had informed him that if I get inside this mansion, he was fired. Mr. Wiley was none too happy about that so I'm guessing he arranged for all of the servants to be somewhere else when we left." Then, Michael laughed semi-maniacally.

"I don't believe you. Wiley has been a loyal servant since the days of my great-grandfather."

Michael shrugged and said, “I really don’t care if you believe me or not. Believe your eyes. Do you see any of your servants anywhere? No? Well, maybe I’m telling you the truth.”

A couple of minutes later, the two of them exited the mansion and approached Michael’s car. Michael opened the passenger door and Reginald balked. “What are you going to do now, smart guy. In order for you to get in the care, you’ll have to let go of the rope.”

Michael just smiled. He took a loop of the rope, wound it around Reginald’s neck, and tied a slip knot in the rope. He, then, put the rope through one of the openings in the steering wheel and ran the tag end through the opening and back out of the passenger door. He none to gently put Reginald in the car and tied him in place. He walked around the car and got in. After getting back into the car, he turned to Reginald and smiled another malevolent smile at him. Then, he took the end of the rope, gave it a shake and the rope fell away from Reginald as if it had never been in place.

“Don’t try to open the door, Reg. You won’t be able to. I have the door locks set up so I can press a button and they all lock or they all unlock.”

Reginald sat quietly as Michael cranked the car, backed out of the space and drove off. Meanwhile, Mr. Wiley and Mr. Orso, were watching from a second floor window. Mr. Orso looked at Mr. Wiley and said, “How’d he do that with the rope?”

Mr. Wiley said, “It’s an old magician’s trick. Master Reginald was never tied up. Mr. Thomson made a big show of not tying him up and convinced Master Reginald he was tied up. Well, I guess I should go to Master Reginald’s room and untie Mrs. Carnifex.”

Just at that moment, Miss Florence Cynomys’ voice could be heard. “Oh, Thomas.”

Mr. Wiley and Mr. Orso exchanged a look before Mr. Wiley said, “Maybe you should release Mrs. Carnifex. I think I’m going to be busy for a while.”

Michael and Reginald arrived at Piedmont Regional Hospital. As was his custom, Michael parked in the back of the hospital. He got out, untied Reginald and, after grabbing Reginald’s wrist hard enough to make him wince, Michael whispered into Reginald’s ear. “Now, you listen and you listen good, Reg. If you cause any, and I do mean any unwanted attention, I can easily break this wrist before anyone can investigate. Do you understand me?” Reginald meekly nodded his head. “Good. Let’s go.”

They entered through the rear door of the hospital and approached the elevators. The receptionist, a spider monkey, saw them and said, “Good morning, Mr. Thomson. You’re getting here rather late. Aren’t you afraid Mrs. Fuchs will see you?”

“She’s kind of expecting me, Miss Simian.”

“Oh, okay. I see you have Mr. Reynard, III, with you. I didn't know you two were friends.”

Michael laughed lightly and said, “Oh, Miss Simian, Reg and I aren’t friends. I met him at his Engagement Party. He’s been a bit remiss about visiting his fiancée since she’s been in the hospital. I’ve been tasked with bringing him to see her. Oops! Here’s the elevator. I’ll see you later, Miss Simian.”

After the elevator doors closed, Reginald looked at Michael and aid, “I can’t escape from an elevator, human. So, would you please let go of my wrist?”

“Sorry, Reg. You and I are bonded until I get you to Amanda’s room.”

After a couple of seconds, Reginald, said, “Why did you lie to the receptionist?”

“I didn’t lie to her.”

“Yes, you did. You said that someone sent you to bring me here.”

“Nope. I never said that.”

“Yes, you did. You said . . .” Reginald stopped and thought.

“What did I say, Reg?” Reginald continued thinking. However, Michael answered the question himself. “I said that I’ve been tasked with bringing you to see Amanda. I never said who tasked me to bring you here. Did I?”

Reginald thought for another moment and then said, “You'd make a great lawyer. You know how to twist words to where it sounds like you’re saying one thing but you’re actually, saying something else.”

Smiling, Michael said, “If you’re going to start being insulting, I’m going to get upset.”

Reginald looked at Michael curiously causing Michael to smile as the elevator doors opened. Still holding Reginald’s wrist in a death grip, Michael led him out of the elevator. The nurses, who had grown quite fond of Michael and his devotion to Amanda over the last two months, greeted him warmly and, even though they noticed it, no one commented about Michael griping Reginald’s wrist as tightly as he did.

Michael led Reginald to Amanda’s room and practically dragged him through the door not caring in the least who might possibly be visiting. “Amanda,” Michael said as cheerfully as he could. “Look who just begged me to bring him to see you. Didn’t you, Reg?”

Reginald glared and growled at Michael but he said, "Yes."

Ophelia said, "How dare you kidnap him? Do you know who he is?"

"Yes, ma'am. He is a privileged, rich brat who appeared out of nowhere claiming that the woman I love is his fiancée and has been for four years even though she swears she'd only seen him once before the Engagement Party. He's also the man who's never visited his 'fiancée' since she was injured in an accident while riding in his limousine. That's who he is, Mrs. Fuchs."

Ophelia got right in Michael's face as she said, "It doesn't matter. He's one of the wealthiest Humanimals and one of the most eligible bachelors in all of Catlanna."

"Tell me, Mrs. Fuchs, how does being rich make someone more eligible of a bachelor than someone who isn't rich? It might make him a more desirable bachelor than a poor man, but I don't know how it makes him more eligible."

"Never you mind. He can give Amanda everything she could possible ever want."

"Except for one thing, Mrs. Fuchs."

"What?"

"Love. He doesn't love her. I may not be rich; I may not be powerful but, I do love Amanda and I'm going to do everything in my power to get her out of that contract even if I have to give up everything I own to do it."

Reginald, who had been more than a little surprised to hear Michael make such an insane promise, said, "Good luck."

Michael turned o Reginald and said, "Did you say something, Reg?"

Ophelia said, "Stop calling him that!"

Michael threw his arm around Reginald's shoulder and pulled him in close for a hug and said, "Oh, but Mrs. Fuchs, Reg and I are fantastically close friends, aren't we, Reg?"

Reginald looked at Michael's arm around his shoulder, removed it with two fingers like he would pick up a used paper towel and said, "No. We are not close nor do I ever see us being close."

Sarcastically, Michael answered Reginald saying, "Aw, Reg. I thought we had become so close since your injuries from the automobile accident had affected your memory. After all, you had forgotten that you had a fiancée who had to be hospitalized due to the injuries she had sustained in that accident. You had also forgotten that because of the Arranged Marriage Contract you are, for all intents and purposes, married; that's why I caught you in bed with

another woman when I burst into your room.”

Ophelia looked at Reginald in shock but she turned on Michael saying, “That’s none of your business! He isn’t married to my daughter yet!”

“Au contraire, Mrs. Fuchs. According to Humanimal law and tradition, upon signing an Arranged Marriage Contract, the happy couple are married in all but name. In other words, when the Contract is signed they can move in with each other until the day of the nuptials. Plus, if either of the parties is caught in a compromising situation, that party is guilty of adultery and, if the offended party so desires, the contract is immediately void. Right, Reg?”

“Wrong, human!”

“Wrong?”

“Yes. The way my Arranged Marriage Contract is worded, Amanda is not my wife until the actually ceremony. So, I can sleep with any woman I so desire and it won’t affect my marriage until after we exchange vows.

“Now, if you will excuse me, I must return home to prepare for my impending wedding. I’m so looking forward to marrying such a beautiful young woman and receiving her dowry. Tootle-loo.”

Michael stepped between Reginald and the doorway. “Just a cotton picking minute, Reg.”

“Look human, I played along with your little game. Now, I’m going home. I’ve got a little unfinished business with a gorgeous Thylacoleo woman. Step aside.”

Michael took a step toward Reginald before saying, “I’ll step aside when I finish talking. I’m no lawyer but I did take a few business law courses while I was at college. One thing that stuck with me is the fact that every contract has an escape clause. I want a copy of this marriage contract because I’m going to find that escape clause.”

“You don’t have to look for it. I’ll tell you what it is. The escape clause is Amanda’s dowry. All she has to do is pay me her dowry, sign a paper stating she no longer wishes to be my wife and ‘VOILA’ no more Arranged Marriage.” He looked at Michael rather smugly.

“I still want a copy of that contract. Likely as not, there could be an escape clause even you don’t know about. I’ll get Amanda out of this marriage and save her dowry.”

“Oh, you are a bother. Very well, I’ll get you a copy, eventually.”

“Oh no, big boy. It will be on my desk at SoGa Industries by 0230 tomorrow morning or I’ll go and get it from you. Got it?”

“Allow me to use your telephone, Amanda.”

Amanda nodded. Reginald picked up the telephone receiver and dialed ten numbers. After a few seconds, he said, “Hello, Tiffany. This is Reginald, III. I need to speak to your boss, please.” After a few seconds, Reginald said, “Thomas, this is Reginald, III . . . Not so well, Thomas. I’m in Amanda’s hospital room . . . No, I didn’t decide to visit her.” He glared at Michael and continued, “Someone else decided I should visit her . . . No, you know better than that. It was the human she’s supposedly engaged to . . . Yes, that’s his name! How did you know? . . . Oh? Really? . . . Well, I need you to send a copy of the marriage contract to him at SoGa Industries by 0230 tomorrow morning. Got it? . . . Good . . . Yeah, yeah. Have a profitable day yourself.”

Reginald looked at Michael and said, “There! The contract will be on your desk no later than 0230 tomorrow morning. Happy?”

“I haven’t gotten it yet, Reg. I’ll be happy when it’s in my hands.”

“Don’t worry. If the family lawyer says he’ll have it delivered, it’s as good as delivered. Now, do you mind if I go home now? I have to make amends to someone.”

“Sure thing, Reg.”

“Stop . . . calling . . . me . . . REG!”

“When this situation is resolved, one way or the other, I promise I will stop calling you Reg, Reg, but, until then . . .”

“You’ve got two months from the day Amanda is released from the hospital to find that non-existent escape clause because two months from her release date is the wedding day.” Reginald laughed a humorous, semi-maniacal laugh. Then, he took a step toward Amanda’s bed as if he intended to kiss her then, he seemed to remember something as he rubbed his jaw. After a couple of seconds, he turned and walked out of the room.

Michael sat down and put his head in his hand as Ophelia smiled a gloating smile at him. “Well,” she said, “it looks like you’ve lost.”

Michael turned his head and smiled at Ophelia. “Mrs. Fuchs,” he said, “there was a saying when I was growing up. It went, ‘The opera ain’t over till the fat lady sings.’ The fat lady might be warming up her vocal cords but she ain’t singing yet and it’s going to be at least two months before she can start singing.”

Michael stood up, walked over to Amanda and bent down. Ophelia started to say something until he looked at her and, to everyone’s surprise, she relented. Michael gave Amanda the kind of a kiss that, normally, only lovers give each other.

After kissing Amanda, Michael said, “I need to go home, too. I’ve got to feed the kitties,

eat a quick breakfast and get some sleep. I'll see you again tonight, Princess."

"Bye, Michael. I'll see you tonight."

Michael left. As he left, Ophelia was watching him. However, unlike all the times in the past, there wasn't any malice on her face. There wasn't any love there by any stretch of the imagination but, there definitely wasn't any malice. After a few seconds, Ophelia turned to Jacob and said, "Jacob, why would he risk being arrested and either imprisoned or deported to force Regional to come here?"

"Because, Ophelia, he loves Amanda as much as I love you. He wanted to shame Reginald into willingly releasing Amanda from the contract. Because Reginald absolutely refused to even consider it, I believe Michael will find a way out of the contract."

Ophelia didn't respond because she was thinking and her thoughts both worried and tormented her. "He treated Amanda the way Jacob has always treated me. Have I been wrong about him? No! He's human. I can't allow myself to be swayed by such sentimentality!"