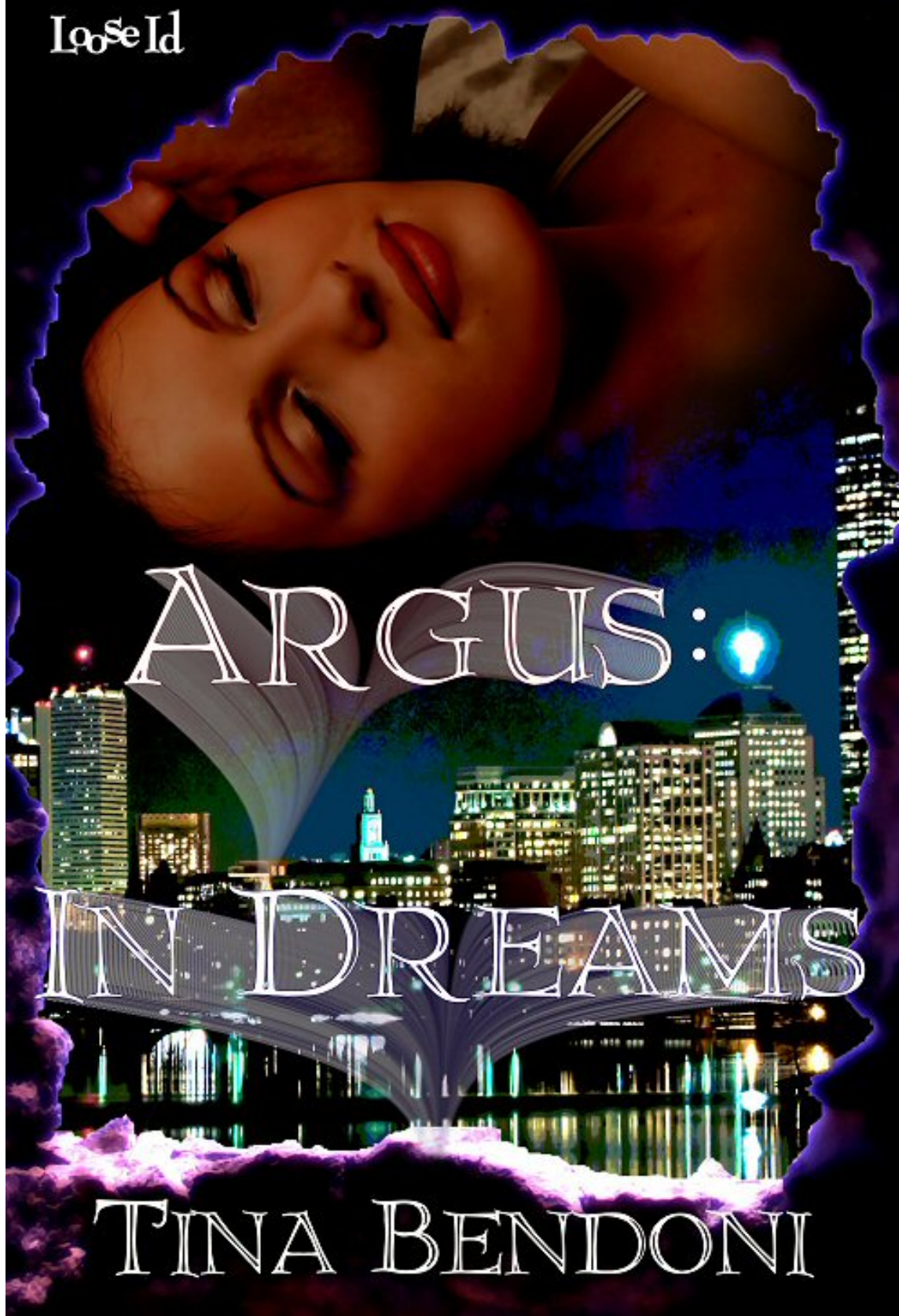


Loose Id



ARGUS:

IN DREAMS

TINA BENDONI

# ARGUS: IN DREAMS

Tina Bandoni

Loose Id.®

[www.loose-id.com](http://www.loose-id.com)

## Warning

This e-book contains sexually explicit scenes and adult language and may be considered offensive to some readers. Loose Id® e-books are for sale to adults ONLY, as defined by the laws of the country in which you made your purchase. Please store your files wisely, where they cannot be accessed by under-aged readers.

\* \* \* \* \*

This book contains explicit sexual content, graphic language, and situations that some readers may find objectionable (violence).

# Argus: In Dreams

Tina Bendonì

This e-book is a work of fiction. While reference might be made to actual historical events or existing locations, the names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Published by  
Loose Id LLC  
1802 N Carson Street, Suite 212-2924  
Carson City NV 89701-1215  
[www.loose-id.com](http://www.loose-id.com)

Copyright © December 2006 by Tina Bendonì

All rights reserved. This copy is intended for the purchaser of this e-book ONLY. No part of this e-book may be reproduced or shared in any form, including, but not limited to printing, photocopying, faxing, or emailing without prior written permission from Loose Id LLC.

ISBN 978-1-59632-373-5

Available in Adobe PDF, HTML, MobiPocket, and MS Reader

Printed in the United States of America

Editor: Catherine Gilbert  
Cover Artist: Kelly Priddy

## Dedication

*To Debbie and Tennille my first fans: Thank you for everything.*

*Kelly, without whom this would never have happened.*

*And, always, Pat. Thank you, honey. Without your support and love I wouldn't be half the person I am today.*

## Prologue

He watched from the back of the room as the tall, dark-haired woman approached the podium. Black hair, pulled back into a braid, bared her long, slender neck to his view. Graceful and elegant in a red cashmere sweater and calf-length A-line skirt, she had the attention of every person in the room, especially the males. Definitely worth the wait, he decided.

Picturing her hair loose and flowing around her body, the only covering he would allow her once she was his, brought his blood to boiling in anticipation. He would be pleased when she surrendered to him.

He saw her shiver and glance around as though aware of his scrutiny. *Not yet*, he thought to himself as he backed away, blending seamlessly into the audience. *Soon, though, you will be mine. You have hidden long enough, my Diana. Regardless of who you pretend to be, you will be mine. Soon*, he promised himself as he walked out of the bookstore and onto the dark street.

A shiver ran up Diana's spine as she walked toward the dais. She looked around, but didn't see anything out of the ordinary. Just a room full of her fans, here to ask questions about her newest book. It was different now that people knew who the person was behind the pen name she'd used for the last seven years. This was the tenth stop on her present book tour, and she still expected someone to accuse her of not being who she said she was.

With her real name known, she felt exposed, unprotected, but from what, she didn't know. Tonight, specifically, there was a feeling that was off -- as though something wasn't right. As she approached the podium, the feeling lessened in intensity, so she shrugged it off as nerves.

Five hours later, Diana let herself into her hotel room. She settled onto the settee and breathed a sigh of relief. She was never comfortable around large groups of people, and when all the attention was focused on her, it was nearly impossible for her to function. How she managed to get through these book signings was a minor miracle.

Too wired to sleep, she opened some of the fan mail her agent had forwarded to her. She tried to answer as many letters as she could, but it was getting more difficult as she became more popular. Seeing a familiar envelope, Diana stopped. Another one. Why hadn't her agent sent it to the police?

With dread, she opened the letter from her secret admirer.

*My Dearest Diana,*

*It has been too long since I have seen you, my dear, although I plan to rectify that soon. I always knew you would come to my attention, and since I found you, I have been awaiting the time when we can be with each other. I look forward to our joining with pleasure. As you read this, rest assured that I am busy preparing for us to be together again. Soon, you will be mine, and together we shall conquer all.*

*With all my love,*

*Your Other Half*

She had been getting these letters for the past six months, since her real name had been released to the press. Whoever this man was, he was fixated on her and wouldn't leave her alone. So far the police had been unable to find any evidence to point to his identity. They didn't treat this as a high priority, either. After all, what was the problem with a few upsetting letters? It wasn't like he had ever threatened her. Just because she got the shivers every time she received one of his letters wasn't reason enough for them to hunt him down. They'd decided he was harmless. She wasn't so sure.

She never expected this eight years ago. Back then she had been a substitute teacher looking for a full-time job. Writing short stories for her own enjoyment, she occasionally had one accepted for publication. Never had she anticipated becoming a best-selling author of paranormals.

That was when *the dreams* had started. She still thought of them like that, all in italics. *The dreams*. In the beginning they had been about pain and despair. The loneliness in them had scared her. How could anyone feel like that and still survive?

After a while, though, they had changed. They were no longer about loneliness and anger, but about honor and duty. They were filled with a driving need to make things better, to make a difference in the world.

Still, she had felt herself slowly going mad. Every night she would go to sleep, and every night she would have the most vivid dreams. Dreams that scared her because of their

intensity. Meditating didn't help and sleeping pills were useless. Even the few times she'd tried drinking herself to sleep they hadn't stopped coming.

At a loss, and not knowing what else to do, she started writing them down in hopes of finding a common thread. To find something that would explain why she was having them. It was the only thing that kept her sane. She would wake up every morning and write for hours before she had to go to work. She wrote down everything she remembered, what she had felt, what she had experienced.

It always felt as if she'd been there. She remembered smells, sounds, and even the feel of what was going on. She, herself, was never in these dreams, but she experienced them as someone else. A man. A man in charge of others. One who valued the lives of his subordinates, and at the same time, made sure his mission was accomplished successfully.

Then the dreams stopped. Only for a month or two, but she was able to recharge herself and think. She went over her dream diary and realized what she had. A story, with the action and dialogue all written. All she had to do was put it to paper and send it out. It wasn't her story, and she didn't know where it came from, but it was a story begging to be told.

Luck must have been on Diana's side. She beat all the odds and got an offer to publish her book from the first publishing house she sent it to. Paranormal books were popular, and publishers were looking for original stories. Her dreams were just what they wanted.

Who knew a demon-fighting psychic would be so popular? Major Tony Lebretti was not only the perfect hero, he was the perfect lover. What woman wouldn't give her eyeteeth to be with a man that knew exactly what she wanted, when she wanted it? What man didn't want to be the strong hero who always saved the day and got the girl? Even if he never kept the same woman from book to book, there was something about him that women loved. Perhaps they hoped in their hearts that one day they would be the next one he chose.

She wrote Tony as she dreamt him. At least, the warrior part. The rest of it, she created out of the daydreams she had built around him. Well, he was her creation, right? Who could blame her for upping the sensuality factor? She spent eighteen hours a day with him and his unit. Might as well make it enjoyable.

But why did she feel guilty? Why did she feel as if she was taking something away from someone without their permission? Like she was stealing their very soul?



## Chapter One

Diana hated airports, and KCI in Kansas City was no exception. True, it was better than most, but having to go through security again just to get bottled water made it extremely irritating. And it was so open. Large glass windows to the main section of the airport allowed anyone, not just ticket holders, to see who was coming and going, and where.

She relaxed into her first-class seat with a sigh of relief. Much more comfortable than the waiting area and less exposed. After buckling herself in, she turned her attention to the other passengers boarding. Was he here? Was someone really watching her, or was she just being paranoid?

Settling in, she put her laptop under her seat and prepared for the three-hour flight to Boston. Whether she was paranoid or not, she needed to get some work done. She pulled a notebook out and was immediately lost in the planning of her newest novel.

Despite her plan, her attention was pulled away from her work the moment a man sat beside her. Instantly, she felt the electricity bouncing off him in waves, hitting her with an almost physical presence. Startled, she turned to look at him.

He was busy adjusting his seat belt, so she only saw his profile -- but what a profile it was. He had a strong chin, full lips, and his nose appeared to have been broken at least once, creating a ridge that interrupted an otherwise perfect silhouette. His hair was a liquid chocolate brown, the kind you licked your lips in anticipation of tasting. She was still picturing the tub of chocolate when he turned his full attention toward her.

Diana inhaled a silent gasp. His eyes were the most vibrant, clear, piercing blue she had ever seen. They sparkled with intelligence and humor. Sucking her in, they left her unable to breathe as she drowned in his gaze. She had to force herself out of the spell they seemed to cast on her, before losing herself completely.

Concentrating, Diana searched the rest of his face. He had smooth skin, with laugh lines that told her he enjoyed life. His hair, cut fashionably short, had enough waves to run fingers through. She was right, his nose probably had been broken, but it just seemed to add to his attractiveness, giving him a rugged, rough-hewn look that suited his body.

His body. She was suddenly aware of her arm pressed against his. His hard, tight bicep left her in no doubt as to whether his bulk was fat or muscle. It took a lot of weight lifting or hard labor to build a body like that. Diana had to calm her breathing at the thought of him naked. His torso filled the first-class seat. Long legs encased in tight, well-worn jeans just asked to be touched. She realized she was staring at the same moment he smiled at her.

"Hi." His smile was perfect. Bright, with straight, white teeth and full, kissable lips.

*Get a grip, Diana, she thought to herself. It's been way too long since you've been with someone. Get your hormones in check.*

"Hi," she answered with a smile of her own.

"I'm Gabe."

"Diana." She got to sit with him all the way to Boston? Maybe this trip wouldn't be so bad, after all.

\* \* \* \* \*

Gabe grasped the hand of the woman beside him. Warmth enveloped him at her touch. He felt the heat travel from his palm to the pit of his stomach, leaving instant desire in its wake.

His eyes widened at his body's reaction to her. Strange. He gazed intently at her face. Pale-blue eyes, almost gray in appearance, entranced him as he continued to hold her hand. Her smile was welcoming and comforting, with more than a hint of sensuality behind it. Something in her called to him. Desire and need shot through his body. A need only this woman could fulfill.

"Going to Boston? Or further on after that?" Gabe realized how inane his question sounded, but what else did you ask someone on a plane who you just met?

"Stopping in Boston."

"Business or pleasure?" He gestured toward the notebook she had been writing in.

"A little of both. I have some readings and signings to do, and I plan to sightsee while I'm there."

"Readings?"

"I'm an author," Diana answered.

"Really? Anything I would have read?"

"Probably not." She smiled and shook her head.

*Well, that ends that line of questioning,* Gabe thought to himself. He hoped it wasn't going to be difficult to keep a conversation going with her. He could do better than this, he knew he could.

"You?"

"Excuse me?" Gabe had lost the point of her question in his wondering.

"Are you stopping in Boston or connecting?"

"Oh, stopping."

"Business or pleasure?" she echoed his words back at him.

"Both." He smiled.

"What do you do?"

"A bit of consulting and troubleshooting." Gabe nearly cringed as he realized he sounded like an imbecile with that vague response. It was just asking for more questions.

"Consulting about what?" She leaned toward him in apparent interest.

"My company ascertains trouble spots for clients." Well, that sounded like a nice, boring explanation. Why the hell hadn't he stuck to his cover story? Mistakes like this would get him killed, or worse.

"So you're a headhunter?"

Gabe grimaced at the term. If she only knew how close she was with that assessment. "Not exactly. I can honestly say I have never caused someone to lose a good paying job. But enough about me. I promise you, my job is not worth discussing."

Diana laughed putting up her hands. "Okay, I'll quit. I'm sorry, but it's a habit of mine. Not only am I too curious for my own good, but I'm always looking for that tidbit of information that might come in handy someday for my writing."

"You're forgiven. I can be overly inquisitive at times, too."

"How long will you be in Boston?"

"About two weeks. First vacation in a long time."

"Yeah, I know how that goes."

Amiably chatting for the next few hours, they talked about little, unimportant things, the kinds of things two strangers would normally discuss on a plane. He was pleased to hear she would be staying for a couple weeks to sightsee in the city and surrounding areas.

"I'd love to show you around," Gabe offered as they headed to luggage claim. What he had found out about her fascinated him, and he was looking forward to spending more time with her. He watched her chew her bottom lip, as though in hesitation. She was obviously thinking about it. Not wanting her to say no, needing her to say yes, he continued, "I'm originally from right outside Boston, and it's always nice to show the area to someone who appreciates it."

She looked like she was still debating it. In this day and age a smart woman didn't agree to go out with a man she had just met. Go out with him in a city that she was unfamiliar with, where no one would notice if she went missing. He could see these thoughts and more play across her face, and he couldn't blame her for her hesitation.

She finally responded, "Thank you, I'd like that very much." Satisfaction flooded through his body. They traded hotel information, and he promised to contact her later that night.

As he climbed into his shuttle bus, he realized what he had done. His plans hadn't included wining and dining this woman.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"What?" The shuttle bus driver heard Gabe muttering to himself, and typical of drivers everywhere, got ready to jump to defend his driving.

"No, not you. Talking to myself." Gabe shook his head as he continued arguing with himself, only silently this time. He wasn't here for a pleasant little dalliance; he was here for much more pressing reasons. Whether or not Diana had fun was irrelevant.

He thought about his reaction to her on the plane. It had been immediate and intense. The desire to get to know her, to be with her, hadn't lessened any as the trip went on, either. More than he expected, he was looking forward to spending time with her. What would it hurt? They would both have a couple weeks of fun, and he could go back to work with everything accomplished.

Retrieving his rental car, he drove to the hotel and checked in. Getting his business out of the way first, he went to see about his assignment. He could obsess over his companion from the plane when he was done.

He arrived back at his hotel before five. As he'd expected, the incident had been grossly overrated. Nothing that needed to concern him. He could now concentrate on Diana. Given the reaction he'd had to her, he was going to enjoy this more than he'd thought possible.

He took out the business card she had scribbled her information on. Who knew authors carried business cards? Turning it over, he checked the name of the hotel she was staying at. It was less than a block away from his.

He looked at the clock and decided to see if Diana was interested in a real Italian dinner.

\* \* \* \* \*

Diana leaned back in the desk chair in the sitting room of the suite. He had called. She wasn't a fool, she knew she was attractive, but part of her hadn't really expected him to call, or at least, not so soon. She'd told him her schedule while they were in the air, so he had known she was free, but she was still a bit surprised.

She realized she knew very little about him. She knew he was single, from Boston originally, and that he, too, was mixing business with pleasure this trip. He was intelligent, educated, and well read. And he was hot.

Diana thought back to when they got off the plane, and she had finally been able to see him standing.

He had donned a brown-leather bomber jacket before getting off the plane, and it had just served to emphasize his broad shoulders. His tall frame, all six feet four of it, screamed out for female attention. And the denim of his jeans, pulled tight over his hips and butt, gave her a great view. She had enjoyed watching him bend over to pick up her suitcase from the luggage carousel. Now *that* had been a sight worth seeing.

Was this really a smart thing to do? After all, she was alone in a strange city. If anything happened, no one would know she was missing until she failed to show up for a reading.

She only knew what he'd told her. Who is to say he didn't lie to her while on the plane? He could be her secret admirer. Diana rubbed her arms as goose bumps appeared. Could he be? She shook her head. She had to stop being so paranoid. Her letter writer was just that, a letter writer. He wasn't a stalker. He hadn't threatened her, hadn't exhibited any signs of stalking. And anyway, what were the odds someone would have intentionally been able to get the seat next to her? The psychologists who had looked at the letter had said he would want immediate acknowledgement of who he was. But what if they were wrong?

Diana thought about calling him back to cancel. It would be the safe, sane thing to do. But damn, that spark. And that body. She hadn't imagined her body's reaction to him. It was as though her entire essence responded to him. She had never experienced sexual attraction so strongly before. Maybe because she had been celibate for so long? Whatever it was, she wanted, no, needed to find out if it would happen again.

She looked at her watch and realized she had been daydreaming for long enough. It was time to get ready.

After showering, she looked over her clothing. She had brought mostly casual clothes. She was at a point in her career where she didn't feel as though she had to dress to impress her readers any more, so she went comfortable, but nice.

She had one dressy outfit, which she'd packed at the last moment. Pulling it out, she looked at it. It was a calf-length green dress that had a slit halfway up her thigh. Sleeveless, with a mandarin collar, the dress had a large keyhole opening on the chest that showed a bit more than a hint of cleavage. It was one of her favorites. Paired with her black heels and shawl, and with her hair gathered up, she thought it would do rather well.

Walking out of the elevator to the lobby, she looked around and found him almost immediately. His chocolate-brown hair lay close to his head, emphasizing his chiseled face. From his mock turtleneck to the suit coat and pants that flattered every inch of his delectable

body, he wore black. It suited him. The way he carried himself screamed power and sex. He took her breath away.

Diana's hand itched to find out exactly what was beneath all that black. She realized that all she had thought about since meeting him had been his body and getting a chance to get closer to it. *Who knows where the night might end if dinner goes well?*

His blue eyes found her, appraising as he approached. They flickered over her body. She was impressed; he didn't stop until he got to her eyes. By the smile on his face, she guessed she passed inspection.

"You look exquisite," he said as his eyes searched her face. She tensed as he reached out to take her arm, waiting for that spark again. Instead, her body grew warm at his touch. Heat radiated from where his hand lay on her arm, creating a pool of desire within. She hadn't imagined it. There was something about this man, and so help her, she liked it.

"So do you." She looked him up and down.

"And on time, too."

"I know." She shook her head. "That is so rare in a man. I'm impressed. Shall we go?"

His smile grew larger. "Touché. I hope you're hungry. There's no better Italian food than what you can find in the North End."

"So I've heard. I was planning on finding it while I was here."

"It's practically at your doorstep," he informed her laughingly as he led her out of the hotel. He glanced at her high heels. "Are you okay to walk a couple blocks?"

"No problem. For good Italian food, I'd run a marathon in these."

"No worries. That's still another seven months away." He smiled, pulling her hand into the crook of his arm, as he adjusted his step to match hers. Normally she found it difficult walking with taller men, but he kept a comfortable pace.

"Have you heard of the Freedom Trail?"

"Isn't that the walking tour of historic Boston?"

"Yup. You can walk most of it in a day. It goes through the North End. Paul Revere's home is just down there." He pointed off to a side street. "Maybe you'd like to check it out with me tomorrow?"

"That sounds like fun," she agreed.

He held her arm for most of the short walk to the Italian district. She felt his warmth through his jacket, keeping the slight chill in the night at bay. He pointed out items of interest to her as they walked, mentioning possible future trips during the day.

"Wine?" he asked after they were seated at a table in the restaurant.

"No, thank you. I'm not much of a wine drinker."

"Mind if I do?" He gestured toward the wine menu.

"No." She shook her head quickly. "Please do. It wouldn't be a proper Italian meal without at least one of us having some."

Gabe ordered his drink and her water as Diana scanned the restaurant. It was surprisingly small and very busy. The waiters seemed to be in nonstop motion attending to the needs of the customers.

There were discreet candles burning at every table, creating a romantic ambiance. Diana didn't know what she had expected, perhaps a checked red-and-white tablecloth, and loud Italian music in the background, not the understated elegance she was seeing. For all the hustle and bustle going on, the sounds and atmosphere were amazingly subdued. The smells from the kitchen made her mouth water in anticipation.

Skimming the menu, she saw she had a multitude of choices open to her, and she didn't know where to start.

"May I suggest antipasto to start you off?" The waiter had returned with their drinks while she was concentrating on the menu.

She peeked at Gabe over her menu. "It's up to you. I have no idea what to get."

"Would you like me to order for us?" he asked.

Diana surprised herself by agreeing, but requested no veal.

While he ordered, it gave her a chance to study him further. It was obvious he was relaxed and comfortable in his surroundings, as he ordered in what sounded like excellent Italian. He seemed born to it. She reminded herself he was from around here. It made sense that he would fit in.

"You really do feel at home here, don't you?"

"Yeah, I do. My mom was Italian. She was born and raised in Italy. We used to come here to visit friends and family." He smiled at the memory. "And to buy things she insisted you couldn't get anywhere else. I can't come here without thinking about her, even after all this time."

"That's where you learned to speak Italian?"

"Yup, she insisted I learn her native tongue. It's where I got my love of languages, I'm sure."

"Really? How many do you speak?"

"Four, including English."

At Diana's raised eyebrows, he explained, "Well, to be honest, I cheated. Italian, French, and Spanish are all very similar. Once you learn one, the rest are easy."

Diana laughed, "I'll take your word for it. So, where is she now?"

"She and my father are both gone."

Diana reached out to place her hand on his in sympathy.

"I'm sorry."

“Stupid thing, really. Car accident. A damn drunk driver hit them head-on. They didn’t even have a chance. They died instantly.”

Diana squeezed Gabe’s hand. “It must have been a terrible time for you.”

Gabe frowned. “I think I went a little crazy. It wasn’t pretty. Lots of anger, pain, everything. It’s been about eight years, but I still miss them.”

“I’m sure you do. It’s always hard losing someone, and especially so when it’s unexpected.”

“What about you? Family?” Gabe turned his hand over to hold hers.

She looked down at their hands and grew quiet. “None. Single child. Mom died when I was nine, Dad when I was seventeen.”

“I guess we’re both kind of on our own, huh?” Gabe gave her a crooked smile.

“Yeah, I guess we are,” she responded with a sad smile of her own.

She shook her head. This was not the direction she had intended for the night to go. “Let’s talk about something different.”

Gabe agreed. “So, did the Italian give away that I still feel like this is home?”

“No, actually, it was your accent. The more you talk, the more it comes back.” She shook her head. “On the plane I didn’t detect any accent at all. In fact, you could have been from anywhere in the U.S. Now, every once in a while you drop your R’s and add ones where they don’t belong.”

Diana’s breath caught at the sound of Gabe’s laughter. It matched his appearance, reminding her of smooth, rich chocolate. The kind that was oh-so-bad for you, but tasted so good. “I didn’t realize it came back that quickly,” he said after his laughter tapered off.

“Probably not to most people,” Diana assured him. “But I make a habit of listening to people speak, trying to pick up on the nuances of each region of the U.S. It can make a huge difference in a character I might be writing.”

He laughed again, sending more shivers down Diana’s body. “Should I be worried that I might pick up a book in a year and find myself featured in it?” he asked, still smiling as he picked her hand up, laying a gentle kiss on the back of it.

“No.” Diana blushed. “With publishing schedules the way they are, it would be at least two years.”

The waiter returned with their appetizers, and Gabe explained what he’d ordered. Listening to him, she decided she would pass on the calamari. “I’m sure it’s wonderful, but I’ve never been a huge seafood eater, and that is just a bit beyond me.”

“It’s an acquired taste, but my mom used to make it all the time, so I’m used to it.”

Diana reached for some of the more familiar treats on the platter. “I will trust you on that, but I don’t think it will replace mozzarella sticks as one of my favorites any time soon,” she teased.



"So, tell me some more about yourself." Gabe helped himself to what she hadn't touched.

"There really isn't much to tell. I'm single, live in Seattle, I write books for a living, and I love Italian food."

"Not very forthcoming are you? I can see I'll have to torture it out of you later." His thumb brushed across her knuckles, sending tingles up her arm.

"And what kind of torture do you have planned, oh, evil one?"

He twirled an imaginary mustache. "Oh, my dear, you'll have to wait and see. The Montgomery methods of persuasion against the fairer sex are famous."

Diana snorted. "More like infamous, I'm sure."

He grinned in response.

"Okay, your turn now."

"Still pumping for info for that book, huh?"

Diana laughed. "Of course, always."

"Okay, I'm thirty-seven, never been married, and have no kids. I was in the Air Force for six years, and have been working at my present job for ten."

"Do you like your job?"

"Yeah, I do. It's not very often you can find something you're good at and that you enjoy doing. What about you?"

"My writing?" Diana hesitated. Did she enjoy waking up in the middle of the night, sweating in fear, wondering what the next night might bring? No, not that, but, the writing itself? "Yes, I do. I love being able to write stories to entertain people. To help them take their minds off of their daily lives, if only for a little while. As to whether or not I'm good at it, well, I guess that depends on who you ask. According to some, I'm just another cookie-cutter writer, but I do love doing it."

"What would life be without critics, huh?" asked Gabe.

"Infinitely more peaceful, I'm sure."

Dinner arrived, and they continued their conversation as they ate. She enjoyed herself immensely, not wanting the night to end. Gabe was an interesting conversationalist and kept an even flow throughout dinner. It had been a long time since Diana had enjoyed someone so much. She found herself trusting him, and that alone should have scared her.

Diana found she couldn't take her eyes off him. She thought she detected a spark of desire in his eyes, but wasn't sure. She felt something and could only hope that he did, too. Whatever it was, she wanted more of it.

## Chapter Two

“How about a side trip?” Gabe asked as they stepped out of the restaurant into the cool night.

“Where to?”

“The water. I haven’t seen it at night in a long time.”

“Sure, why not.”

They walked arm in arm down the street to the water’s edge. As they turned a corner, a sudden breeze from across the pier blew at them, pushing Diana’s shawl off her shoulders. Gabe grabbed at it before it could hit the ground.

“Thank you.”

“My pleasure.” Wrapping it back around her shoulders, his fingers brushed against her skin, which was as smooth as the silk he held in his hands. It kindled an ember of desire deep within him. Leaving his arm around her shoulders as a compromise to what he really wanted to do, they walked to the water’s edge.

“There’s something about the sound of the ocean that makes me feel as though all is at peace with the world,” Gabe shared with Diana softly.

“It’s almost like an affirmation of life.”

Gabe turned to her, startled that she could catch what he was feeling so precisely. “Exactly. As though as long as we have the ocean and treat it well, we’ll always have a home to come back to.”

Diana nodded. “I spent my first nine years in Chicago, and most of the rest of it in Seattle. I know I could never live anywhere without a large body of water close by. Life just feels incomplete without one.”

Gabe gazed at Diana as she looked out at the boats floating on the water. Her face was lit with an inner glow as she watched them bob on the surface, a slight smile on her face. Compelled, he pulled her closer to him, turning his body into hers.

“Do you know how beautiful you are right now? The way the light makes your eyes shine? You’re stunning.” Not giving her a chance to respond, he lowered his head and kissed her.

Gabe didn’t expect the immediate reaction his body gave to just a little kiss, but given his response to her all night, he should have.

His lips barely touched hers before his body flushed with heat and longing. Her lips were soft and smooth, bare of cosmetics after dinner, and tasted divine. He deepened the kiss as he felt her ardent response. He couldn’t get enough. He wanted to drown in her.

His hand reached back to cup her head as he held her against him, unwilling to let her go.

Stretching her arms around him, she held him to her firmly, her reaction as strong as his. Ravishing her lips, he drank from her, taking in all she had to give and then taking even more. Losing himself in her scent, her touch, he forgot about the outside world. Only she and this moment existed for him.

Awakened by the sharp sound of laughter from someone further down the walkway, he realized he had to stop. Reluctantly, he forced himself to pull back. It was too soon, he would scare her away if he wasn’t careful. He didn’t want that. Brushing her lips gently one last time, he brought his hand forward to her face.

“Thank you,” he whispered and ran his thumb over her swollen lips as he stepped back. He reached down for her hand, and they continued their walk, bathed in the warmth of their mutual longing.

“So, are we on for sightseeing and shopping tomorrow?” Gabe asked as they made their way down the pier.

“Are you sure you want to?”

“Hell, yes. I haven’t been to Quincy Market in years. You’ll love it. In fact, how about we walk by it on the way back to the hotel? You can get the lay of the land that way.”

Diana shook her head, smiling at his excitement. “Okay, you’re the native.”

Gabe directed her across the street, toward the financial district of the city.

Diana watched his face brighten as he talked about the area. She could see the love he had for the city in his face. They watched the late-night shoppers and other sightseers as they slowly walked back to her hotel.

“Thank you. Tonight has been lovely.” Diana turned to him as they reached the entrance to her hotel. She debated asking him up to her room to quench the desire she had been feeling since first meeting him. She knew she wouldn’t be able to get him out of her

system by herself. What would it hurt? Looking in his eyes, she almost asked, then realized that she couldn't. She needed time to think about what she was feeling for this relative stranger, time to process it all before she took that step.

"I've enjoyed it, believe me. What time do you want me to meet you tomorrow?"

"Gabe, you don't have to do this."

"I want to." He held her hands lightly.

"Is ten too early?"

"Ten it is. I'll meet you in the lobby. Make sure you wear comfortable walking shoes."

"I will, and again, thank you." Diana spoke softly.

He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close. "My pleasure," he whispered as he bent down and kissed her gently on the lips before turning away.

\* \* \* \* \*

Diana walked out of the elevator the next morning, ready for anything her day with Gabe would bring. She still tingled when she thought of the kiss they'd shared the evening before. Her body had practically melted the instant his lips touched hers. She would have stood there for hours just kissing him if he hadn't pulled back. But why had he? She knew he'd been just as affected as she had, so why the reticence?

It was probably just as well that he had. She'd convinced herself that her reaction to him last night had been because of loneliness and lack of sleep. She had a good night's sleep, and was armored against her overactive hormones. It would be a nice, relaxing day of shopping and sightseeing.

She was early, so didn't expect him to be waiting, but he surprised her.

Overactive imagination? Lack of sleep? Overly ambitious hormones? Forget it. Whatever it was, it was still there. Her pulse sped up, and her body clenched at the sight of him as he unfolded himself from one of the chairs in the lobby.

He was wearing tight jeans again and a burnt-orange shirt that deepened the bronze of his already existing tan. She swore she could see the bright blue of his eyes, even twenty feet away. His welcoming smile was nearly enough to make her stumble as she approached.

"Good morning." His voice was as smooth as she remembered. *Oh, God, was she in trouble.*

"Good morning. I didn't expect you to be here quite yet."

"I had an errand to run this morning and decided to just come straight over when I was done."

"Have you been waiting long?"

“Less than fifteen minutes, actually.” He reached out and took her into his arms and placed a gentle kiss on her lips. The same heat she remembered from the night before swept through her body. Definitely in trouble. “Are you ready?”

Diana swallowed hard. “My credit cards are calling for use.”

Gabe smiled. “Okay. First on the tour, Paul Revere’s home. I figure we’ll start there, since it’s just down the hill, then on to the stores.”

Diana had always had a love of history, and spent much of the time they were walking asking Gabe what he knew about the buildings and area.

They arrived at the courtyard to Faneuil Hall. She saw the buildings he had pointed out to her last night, but in the light, with the crowds surrounding them, she could almost picture the area as it had been two hundred years ago.

“So, we have shopping in the North and South Market, historical interest in the actual Faneuil Hall, and food in the main building.

“Just about anything you want can be bought here. I read somewhere that they were thinking of tearing this down before they remodeled it. I’m glad they didn’t. I know a lot of people think of it as too touristy, but I enjoy it.”

He took her around the shops as she bought for her friends back home. Boston souvenirs abounded, and she was left with the decision of what not to buy, rather than what to buy.

“I’m sorry, this is probably incredibly boring for you,” she said as she paid for the Boston Tea Party Tea she had been looking at.

“No, actually, I’m enjoying myself,” he assured her with a glint in his eye.

“Why do I find that hard to believe?”

“I don’t know. It’s nice to see Boston from someone else’s perspective. I haven’t felt this excited about home in years. I should be thanking you.”

“Don’t worry. I’m insatiable. You’ll regret it soon enough.” She grinned.

Gabe mentioned getting something to eat, and she glanced at her watch. She hadn’t realized so much time had passed. Inside, Quincy Market was as impressive as he had promised. While Gabe got their food, she found them a seat, glad they had walked around for the past few hours. There was so much to see and eat, she didn’t want to miss any of it.

“Mmm, you’re right. This is the best pizza I have ever had. Just don’t tell anyone from Chicago I said that,” she said with a laugh as she bit into their lunch.

“I promise I won’t breathe a word,” he vowed, putting three fingers up in a solemn oath.

A couple of hours later Diana declared herself done shopping for the day. Gabe picked out a coffee shop in which to sit and discuss plans for the evening.

"Before we leave, I have a question to ask, or rather, a confession to make," Gabe informed Diana.

"Yes?" Diana put down her cup deliberately.

He reached out for her hand, placing it in his. "I enjoy spending time with you and want to spend more. So I did a presumptuous thing this morning."

At Diana's questioning look, he went on, "I stopped by and got these for tonight." He handed her an envelope he retrieved from an inside pocket.

Diana bit her lip and frowned as she accepted it.

"I know I should have asked first, but I thought of it this morning and wanted to get them before they sold out."

Diana opened the envelope and pulled out two tickets to that evening's production of *Phantom of the Opera* at one of the local theaters. "How did you get these on such short notice?"

"Last minute releases. A lot of theaters save seats 'til the very end for different reasons, and I was hoping I would get lucky. If you don't want to go, we won't." Gabe shook his head. He sounded like an adolescent asking a girl to the prom.

"Oh, Gabe, this is so sweet. Thank you."

"Will you go with me?"

She smiled. "Yes, I will. But at the risk of sounding like a silly twit, I have nothing to wear."

Gabe laughed as he motioned to their surroundings. "I can't think of a better place to be, then."

\* \* \* \* \*

"That was absolutely wonderful." Diana practically danced with pleasure as they walked out of the theater.

"I'm glad you enjoyed yourself." Gabe was gorgeous in a dark gray suit. His white silk shirt and multi-hued gray tie gave him an air of elegance that contrasted sharply with his manly ruggedness of earlier in the day. Diana found herself practically salivating. Was there anything this man didn't look good in? After spending the entire day by his side, she was ready to eat him whole. She was definitely glad she had made the stop at the gift shop earlier tonight. The night was not going to end at her hotel door.

He had his arm around her as he nodded to the doorman of the theater to let him know that they needed a taxi.

"I've always wanted to see *Phantom*, but never got around to it. Thank you."

Gabe gazed down at Diana for a moment. "You're very welcome. I hope you aren't too tired?"

“What did you have in mind?”

“The concierge suggested a jazz bar down the street from your hotel. He said it would be a nice place to get a drink after the show.”

Diana agreed quickly, and Gabe gave the address to the taxi driver as they climbed in.

Inside, the club was as small as it looked from the outside. The lighting was low, creating a relaxing atmosphere. There were maybe twenty small tables around a dance floor, with a jazz quartet playing on a stage toward the back. It was busy, but not too crowded, and there were a couple of unoccupied small tables.

They picked a table off to the side, removed a bit from the hustle of the main area.

When the waitress approached them to take their order, they both asked for Coke.

The waitress nodded and headed off to the busy bar.

“No alcohol?” Diana asked Gabe as they sat down, laying their coats on the extra chair.

“I don’t want my faculties impaired tonight.” He leaned close, as though imparting a secret.

Diana blushed. Or maybe it was caused by the thoughts she’d been having all night. Still, she didn’t like a man to be too sure. “Really? Are you planning on doing any driving tonight?”

He just stared at her with those eyes of his. “No, something much more fun,” he assured her. Before she could comment, he asked, “Would you like to dance?” as he held out his hand to her.

She smiled at him. “I’d love to.” She couldn’t wait to feel his body close to hers.

His hand resting on her lower back burned through her dress as he led her to the dance floor. Gracefully, he pulled her to him, and took her into his arms as they started to move to the beat of the music.

Only the thin material of his shirt was under her hand, allowing her to feel his body. Her earlier perception on the plane had been right on target. His muscles were rock hard beneath her hand, his arm tight as it wrapped around her waist. Holding her right hand in a firm grip, he pulled her close against his chest. She could feel the heat from his body as he moved, her own body flushing in response.

Pressed closely to him, she inhaled the scent of his cologne. It suited him. Masculine and woodsy, without being sweet. His smell surrounded her in a wave of sensation as she pictured a forest, deep and secretive.

She lost all sense of time as her body swayed with his, barely aware of the songs changing. He danced like a dream, leading her, enticing the right moves from her body, making her feel as though she were floating on air. Her body hummed with electric currents running under her skin. Goose bumps raised as his energy brushed against her body. Her every sense was on high alert. She was melting and decided she liked the feeling.

Diana felt herself blush as she thought of the things she wanted him to do. Her body, already wet with need, yearned to be closer to him. She bowed her head slightly in embarrassment. What was wrong with her? She wasn't normally this forward, but there was something about this man that made her want to throw caution to the wind and be adventurous for once in her life.



## Chapter Three

Gabe wanted nothing more than to continue holding Diana in his arms. The past two days had been better than he could have hoped. He was enjoying himself immensely, finding her entertaining and stimulating. Her conversation, intelligent and interesting, made him feel alive with her. Alive like he hadn't been in years. She reminded him what it was like to be excited and interested in life. Reminded him how to feel. For the past eight years his emotions had been closed off. He'd been with women, but no one had touched him like this. No one had been able to spark such desire and longing in him. He had wanted her from the first moment he'd set eyes on her. No other would do for him, only her.

He pulled her closer, compelled to feel her body against his as they swayed to the music. She moved with him, touching him from chest to hip. They fit each other perfectly. Her light floral perfume filled him with illicit thoughts of her naked in his bed, covered with rose petals, writhing in pleasure. He realized his hands were nearly shaking with the desire to pull her close and take her on the dance floor.

Since he'd met her, his body seemed to be in a perpetual state of semi-arousal, and dancing with her was making him harder. With every brush against her, his body became more aware of hers. She was firm and toned, yet well-rounded and feminine. He wondered what she did to keep in shape. She had a grace that was hard to define, and she moved with him as though they had been dancing together for years.

He looked at her in the dim light. Her eyes glittered when the light hit them just right. She seemed to be enjoying herself, which filled him with satisfaction. He relished the thought that he could do something for her that brought her pleasure.

Forced beyond his control, he leaned down and took her lips with his. He started out slowly, teasing her. Her lips were soft and full, moving with his in gentle response. Warmth spread through his body as she yielded.

Her lips opened at the touch of his tongue, allowing him inside. He groaned, deepening the kiss. He swept inside her mouth, feeling the softness, tasting the sweetness that was her.

As he explored her mouth, his arms reached further around her, pulling her closer, holding her tight. She teased him back, playing with his tongue, darting into his mouth, tasting him.

They barely moved on the dance floor. He was lost in the feel, smell, and taste of her. His attention was solely on her, on what she did to him, on how his need for her kept growing.

His body hummed with energy, and he hardened even more in reaction and anticipation. What would it be like to make her his?

Their time together couldn't last long enough for him. He wanted to take her back to her hotel and make love to her all night. He knew he was rushing her, but he longed for what she and only she could give him. He coveted it with a need that surprised him with its intensity. "Do you want to go back to the hotel?" His husky voice made no secret of his intentions.

"Yes." No hesitation. She answered him promptly, perhaps caught up in the same spell he was.

His hand on her back, he guided her to the table to get their coats and her purse. Leaving money for the waitress on the table for the drinks they'd never touched, they headed out of the bar. He held her hand all the way, and the walk to the hotel was short, accomplished in silence. Words seemed superfluous. He guided her through the door of her hotel, hardly able to breathe as he realized what he was about to receive.

As they waited for the elevator to arrive he held her close. Not wanting to let go. The need to feel her curves pressed against him was driving him crazy. Finally, the doors opened to take them up to her room.

At the door to her suite, he took her hand before she could reach for the lock. "Are you sure about this?"

She gazed up at him. "I don't normally do this, you know. Hell, I've never done this."

Somehow, he did know. He believed her completely. Something had grabbed hold of them and seemed determined not to let go. "Me, either. That's why I want to make sure you know what you're doing. That you want this." He knew he couldn't afford for her to have any regrets after she had given herself to him.

"Oh, I know what I'm doing." She smiled and reached up, placing her hand on his cheek. "And I most definitely want this."

Nodding, he swallowed hard as she turned and unlocked the door. Holding it open, he let her precede him into the room.

Closing and locking the door behind him, he leaned against it to watch Diana as she turned toward him.

She was beautiful. Her hair had started to come down from the complicated knot on top of her head. Little tendrils teased down her neck, inviting him to play. Her lips were plump and swollen from his kisses.

He slowly walked toward her with anticipation in every step. Reaching out for her, he worked his hand to the back of her head, rubbing gently, cupping her neck. She arched her head back in response, allowing him easier access.

His hands crept upward, to the hair gathered on top of her head. Swiftly he removed the pins holding it up and stepped back so he could see as the last pin was removed.

Slowly, her hair tumbled down in a silken wave, untwisting as it fell, cascading down her back and shoulders.

The mass of curls framed her face in a dark halo, and his hands moved in, combing gently through the thick tresses. Drawing it to him, he buried his face and inhaled her scent. The smooth fragrance of jasmine enflamed him even more.

"Beautiful," he whispered, as he withdrew slightly to take her lips with his.

\* \* \* \* \*

Diana burned under his touch. All the attraction and desire she'd experienced earlier in the evening came back full speed, knocking her breathless with need. She could only feel.

The desire radiating from his bright blue eyes promised a hard, bruising kiss. It wasn't. He was slow and gentle, teasing her lips open with light pressure. His tongue slowly worked its way in past her lips, pulling a moan from deep within her. Her hands crept around his waist, holding him closer.

His hands tightened as he deepened the kiss, pressing harder, tongue delving deeper into her mouth. She wrapped her tongue around his, tugging, playing with it as he groaned in response.

He shifted his hands to her shoulders, sliding down her arms to her hands, where he linked their fingers together in a bruising grip before letting go to grasp her hips, pulling her tighter against his erection.

She wanted this. She'd wanted him in the bar, and she wanted him even more now.

Slowly she took a step back, pulling him toward the chaise. Seating him, she moved away, evading his reaching arm. She faced him while he sat there expectantly.

Smiling, she reached behind her back and started to bring the zipper down on her dress. Flushed from the hunger glittering in his eyes, she moved deliberately, tantalizing him.

She had bought the entire outfit with this moment in mind. Even while shopping, she had decided that she was going to make sure tonight ended on a satisfactory note for both of them. The curve-hugging strapless sheath hid nothing and promised everything.

Slowly the dress slithered down her body, his eyes widening as she revealed her matching black lace-and-satin bra and panties. Her sheer black stockings ended at the top of her thighs.

“Very nice.” His voice was soft and thick with arousal.

Kicking the dress away, she walked to him, putting her hands in his hair as he buried his face against her. He rested his head against her chest, kissing it and nuzzling her breasts as he inhaled her scent.

“Mine,” she thought she heard him say, but immediately forgot it, as he darted his tongue out, sending shivers through her body. His hands massaged her buttocks, sending her pulse soaring even faster and her body clenching in response. She tightened her hands in his hair, wet and ready for him.

Working his hands over her bottom he squeezed, his long, calloused fingers under the satin, rasping against her skin. She arched as he stroked her, moaning in pleasure.

Her knees grew weak, no longer able to support her. Stepping back, she reached for his hand and pulled him up.

“Let’s continue this in the bedroom,” she said softly.

Gabe nodded, breaking away long enough to put the “Do Not Disturb” sign out and double lock the door to the suite.

“You think we’ll still need that out in the morning?” she asked with a gleam in her eye.

“Oh, I have every intention of still needing it in the morning.” He circled her waist, lifted her into his arms and carried her into the bedroom.

Gently placing her on the bed, he spread her waist-length hair out around her and shifted back to remove his own clothing. Diana’s eyes never left him as he stripped for her, enjoying each and every move. She watched as his muscles stretched as he removed the shirt.

Her heart raced faster as she got her first look at his hard body. *Mmm*, she thought with pleasure, *very nice*. His broad, muscled chest tapered down to a tight abdomen that rippled as he moved. The sprinkling of hair on his chest directed her eyes further down to what lay below his belt. She nearly licked her lips in anticipation. Kicking off his shoes, he climbed onto the bed, slowly moving toward her.

He wrapped a hand around her ankle, easing off first one high-heel, then the other. He slowly caressed her legs, sending shivers of desire through her body as he slid his hands up her nylon-encased calves and thighs. Reaching the top of her stockings, he teased his fingers under the lace. She thought he was going to remove them, but he just pulled the lace back for a moment and kissed the top of each thigh. Looking up, he gave her a grin. “I think I’ll leave these here. I like where they are.”

Gabe crawled between her legs, spreading them to give him access to her body. Bracing his elbows next to her shoulders, he reached for her mouth and proceeded to kiss her.

Thoroughly. He definitely knew how to kiss. Searching her mouth, teasing her with his darting tongue, promising her, without saying a word, that this would be worth it.

Shifting his attention to her chin, he kissed her along her jaw, working his way to her ear, where he started nibbling on her lobe. Licking and nipping, making her shiver with excitement, Gabe languidly made his way down to where her neck and shoulder met. A sharp love bite made Diana jump with excitement before he continued across her shoulder.

Stroking her, the back of his hand led the way down her arm. His mouth followed, kissing, licking, nipping to her palm, where he placed a gentle kiss. Moving across her chest to her other shoulder, he did the same there, bringing her hands together. She quivered with the sensation of his lips on her body. His touch was feather light, enflaming her desire further. Gently, he pulled her up to reach for the clasp of her bra and laid her back down, as he slowly pulled the material from her body, revealing her to his gaze.

She heard him moan as he moved to her breast. The wet rasp of his tongue as he fleetingly caressed her nipple, then blew hot air across the moistness, made her nub tighten with her indrawn breath of pleasure. Taking one pert nipple completely in his mouth, he lavished attention on it, paying it homage with his lips as his hand bestowed like consideration to its sister. She reveled in the attention he showed to her body. As though attuned to her every wish, he was doing things with his mouth and fingers that brought her unparalleled pleasure, making her writhe with need and desire. After driving her crazy with the attention paid to one breast, he moved his mouth to the other. Her nipples were hard pebbles of sensation, screaming in pleasure from his touch.

He worked his way down her stomach, stopping at her navel, circling it with his tongue, teasing the belly ring he found there. "Mmm, sexy," he murmured against her skin. Her body quivered as his breath fanned across her stomach. She squirmed at the sensation.

Apparently satisfied with her reactions, he moved further down where he encountered her satin panties. His mouth hovered over the satin before he blew hot air through the material, making her jerk. Back and forth his mouth teased, stimulating her through the satin. Moving his hands to her sides, he slowly dragged the material away from her hips, down her legs, and off, throwing them over the side of the bed.

Gabe stopped and gazed at her for a moment. Diana watched him as he stared at her body. His hands tightened on her sides as he dipped his head down to lightly stroke his tongue over her clit. She jumped, wriggling, begging for more. He tormented her for what seemed an eternity, making promises with his tongue, backing away before he saw them through.

Gabe sucked and nibbled on her gently, forcing Diana to writhe in need before his tongue drove deeper, nearly burying his face in her. At her sharp intake of breath, he pressed harder, shooting sensations throughout her body, making love to her with his mouth as her body shuddered over and over.

He held her hips still while his mouth worked magic on her. She whimpered in pleasure and tried to move away.

“Stay still,” he murmured, his lips brushing against her as he spoke.

“Gabe, please ...” she begged breathlessly.

“I’m not done yet,” he breathed against her. He didn’t stop, tongue, lips all creating pleasure. She knew she was going explode soon if he didn’t stop.

Slowly Gabe brushed one of his hands over her hip, bringing it across her thigh, to where his mouth labored so attentively. Gently, he probed, wetting a finger with the moisture already covering her slit. Slowly, he slipped the finger inside her, pushing, testing. Finding her dripping wet and oh-so-ready, he pushed a second finger into her, teasing her, touching, turning, finding that spot that would drive her insane.

Tension built within her, growing, as her breathing changed tempo. Panting, Diana almost forgot to breathe as she hovered just above release. Feeling him inside her, pressing, sucking, driving her crazy. Finally, not able to stand the stimulation anymore, she went over the edge. Her spine bowed, coming clear of the mattress. For the first time in her life she saw fireworks in her head, exploding as her muscles contracted and released in waves of pure pleasure. She breathed his name out on a sigh. Gabe had taken her on an unbelievable ride to ecstasy, leaving her weak and unable to move.

He got off the bed and finished stripping his own clothing off.

“Drawer,” Diana panted.

“What?”

“Drawer ... condoms. I bought them today.” Diana found herself nearly unable to finish a complete sentence.

He smiled knowingly, reached into the pocket of his jacket and showed her the silver packets he had brought along. Diana laughed. No one could say they weren’t on the same train of thought. Quickly he ripped open one of the little packages and put the condom on before climbing back onto the bed between her legs.

He eased himself above her, and she looked up at him with a contented smile. Gesturing with her hips, she lifted her arms to his shoulders. Smoothing her hands down his arms, she pulled, encouraging him to hurry and watched his face as he slowly entered her. He filled her completely. She felt him rub against the sides of her vagina as he rocked his hips, making her gasp with pleasure.

He started slowly, moving in and out, building the pressure inside her as he gained speed. Her arms tightened around him, fingers digging into him with each movement of his hips. Faster he went, pumping into her harder. The tension in her body started to build again, and her hips lifted with each of his downward strokes. She was close to another orgasm, so close, just a few more seconds, she could feel it almost there ... *Yes!* Her orgasm

broke over her, muscles spasming as he exploded with a groan. He dropped to her chest, holding her tightly as he muttered something she could not hear.

“What?” Breathing finally slowed to almost normal, she remembered he’d murmured against her neck during his orgasm.

“I’m sorry.”

“Sorry for what?” From where she was lying there wasn’t anything for him to be sorry about.

“I wanted to last. But it has been ... and you were ... I was so ...” His voice trailed off.

Diana laughed gently. “Oh, please. Don’t worry. There is absolutely no need for you to apologize. In case you didn’t realize, I had an orgasm well before you did and then a bonus.”

He lifted his head up to look at her. “I know. But I didn’t intend it to be so quick.”

“Well, the night is still young.” She smiled at him, still laughing.

He got a mischievous look in his eyes. “It is, isn’t it?”

Diana teased his hair, feigning disinterest. “Unless you’re too old and not up to it.”

He leered at her. “Oh, just you wait and see who is ‘too old’ before the night is through.”

She laughed as he shifted his weight off her and headed for the bathroom. When he returned, he pulled the sheet from under her and climbed into the bed. After covering them with both sheet and blanket, he grabbed her by the waist, rolling her onto her side, and tugged her spoon fashion into him. His hand crept down to her clit, promising her with more than just words exactly what he intended to do for the rest of the night.

## Chapter Four

“Morning.”

“Morning?” Diana opened her eyes to look at her clock. “It’s ten-thirty, where did the morning go?”

Wearing only pants, Gabe stood beside the bed smiling down at her as he held a hotel robe in his hands. The mid-morning sun peeked through a small opening in the curtains. Looking at him standing there, Diana wanted him beside her again. She wanted to run her hands over his body and peel those pants off. Good lord, she was insatiable.

“Well, I don’t remember much after the Jacuzzi.”

She blushed. She remembered something about the Jacuzzi. “Okay, never mind.”

Gabe sat on the bed. “I had them deliver breakfast. It just got here.”

“Oh, great, I’m starved.” Diana started to get up and realized she was naked. It was stupid. She had spent the entire night with him making love all over the suite, and she was too modest to get out of bed in front of him this morning.

“Here.” He smiled as he handed her the robe and leaned over to kiss her before he got off the bed. “I’ll meet you in the sitting room.”

“Stupid, Diana. Stupid, stupid, stupid,” she softly berated herself as she got out of bed and put the robe on. Instead of going straight out to the sitting room, she decided to shower first. Maybe it would help settle her nerves.

As she climbed into the shower she thought about what just happened. She wasn’t ashamed of what she had done last night, and she definitely wanted it to happen again, so why was she so embarrassed? It wasn’t like he hadn’t seen everything already. Diana laughed at herself. She would just have to get over it.

\* \* \* \* \*



Gabe heard the shower turn on, and sat down to wait. The thought of her under the spray of water brought back memories of last night. They had started out in bed and worked their way into the oversized shower and then the Jacuzzi. The smell of her jasmine soap still lingered on his skin. The woman was incredibly erotic and creative. He didn't think he would have any unfulfilled fantasies left soon if last night was anything to go by.

Hell, it wasn't just the sex that made her attractive. He had enjoyed himself last night. All night. The talking, the dancing, the laughter, everything. He was looking forward to spending more time with her.

When he heard the shower turn off, he started to set things out. Unsure of what she would like, he had ordered a bit of everything. Pancakes, eggs, bacon, and sausage waited on warming plates. Tea, coffee, and a cold carafe of orange juice were there, along with a basket full of a variety of breads. He figured if she couldn't find what she wanted here, then the hotel didn't have it.

"Mmm ... something smells wonderful."

He glanced up and saw Diana standing in the doorway to the sitting room. She had on a lightweight black sweater, blue jeans, and black sneakers. Her hair was pulled back in a long braid, creating a thick rope down her back. His cock hardened as he thought of the way she used that hair last night; wrapping it around him, teasing him with it.

He breathed deeply, willing his body to calm. As she walked over to him, he held a chair for her, leaning down to kiss her once again. "You look magnificent this morning."

Diana blushed, looking down. "Thank you."

"I didn't know what you'd want, so I ordered a little bit of everything," he told her as he sat down.

"I normally don't eat much for breakfast, but for some reason I seem to be extremely hungry this morning." She peeked up at him beneath lowered lashes as she poured her tea.

Gabe smiled, but wisely decided to say nothing as they started to serve themselves.

"Is this enough?" Diana asked wryly after they had been eating for a while. "I don't think I've seen this much at one table since my college all-night study sessions."

"Oh, don't worry. I'll eat whatever you don't. I need to keep my strength up for tonight."

Diana laughed as she threw a piece of croissant at him, which he promptly caught and popped into his mouth.

"So what's on the agenda? Still willing to let me show you around?" Gabe asked.

"Oh, I think I can force myself to spend more time with you if I have to."

"Well, that's a relief. I'd hate for my persuasive powers of last night to have gone to waste."

"Persuasive powers? Is that what last night was?"

"Among other things." He winked.

Diana laughed and changed the subject. "I bought most of the souvenirs I need yesterday, but I would still love to see more of Boston. I'm bouncing around an idea for a story and seeing more of the city would help greatly."

"Since it's getting so late, why don't we continue on the Freedom Trail? We can do the stuff that's closer, then maybe drive over to Bunker Hill."

"Drive?"

"Yeah, I rented a car for my stay here. It made more sense last night to go by taxi, as I didn't think we wanted to mess with parking, and everything else we've done is pretty local."

"Makes sense, especially from what I've seen of the traffic."

"Boston isn't the easiest town to drive around in," Gabe agreed. "Plans sound okay with you?"

"They sound great."

"Good, cause I want to show you something after Bunker Hill."

"What?"

"Shhh." Gabe put his finger against her lips. "It's a surprise." He grabbed the last croissant as he finished talking.

"Gabe --"

"Nope, not another word." He bit into the roll, ending the topic of conversation.

Diana sighed heavily. "Fine. I'll wait. I assume you'd like to head back to your hotel to change?" Her eyebrow quirked as she looked at what he was wearing.

"If you wouldn't mind." He looked down at his wrinkled clothing with a frown. "It's on the way."

"No problem."

\* \* \* \* \*

They walked to Gabe's hotel arm in arm. Diana was content, and she knew it showed in her smile as they entered the lobby. She hesitated as they moved toward the elevator, breaking free of Gabe's hold to grasp his hand.

"Is something wrong?" He looked at her curiously.

She gave him a crooked smile. "I think I'll stay down here. I have a feeling if I come up, we might not get to the sightseeing 'til much later."

He grinned. "And this would be a bad thing why?"

She shoved him gently toward the elevator. "Go. I'll be right here waiting for you."

He gave her a gentle kiss, then moved off. Diana found a magazine and a comfortable seat in the lobby and sat down to wait.

Instead of reading, Diana lost herself in thought. What an incredible night. After sex, they had taken a long bath in the Jacuzzi and at three in the morning had ordered chocolate cake from room service. She never knew icing could taste better depending what it was licked off. She had laughed more last night than she had in years. And she owed all it to Gabe. They had talked and laughed all night.

There was something about him that made her want to spend time with him. To be with him. She had never experienced this kind of feeling before and didn't know how to handle it. She'd never expected to find someone she would connect to so completely, and now that she had, what was she supposed to do about it?

Yes, last night had been beautiful, and she didn't regret any of it. But the pragmatist that she was had to wonder what would happen when her vacation ended. She didn't even know where he lived, or what he really did for a living. For all she knew he was a drug runner. What did "consulting and troubleshooting" really mean, anyway?

Could he be her letter writer? Had she just spend the night making love to a crazy man? She could have sworn he'd said "mine" last night at one point. She wasn't anybody's anything.

*Stop.* She forced herself to breathe deeply and think rationally. No. There was no way. It wasn't beyond the realm of possibility, she knew that, but the man who'd written wrote those letters wasn't capable of the gentleness Gabe had shown her over the last couple days. That man was controlling and obsessive. Gabe was ... well, he was perfect.

Thinking about everything that had happened over the last few days, Diana came to a conclusion. If he wasn't her letter writer, and she was convinced he wasn't, was wondering about this worth ruining what could be a glorious vacation? She wasn't looking for a lifetime commitment, so why not just take what he had to offer and go with it? She didn't have anyone to condemn her or tell her what she was doing was wrong. Except for herself. And how was it wrong? They were both unattached, on vacation, and having fun. She would deal with any repercussions later.

She looked up just as he got off the elevator, wearing the same bomber jacket he'd had on the plane, with jeans, and a gray, long-sleeved, button-down shirt. His stride, like everything about him, was purposeful and masculine, with more than a hint of power. His hair, still wet from the shower and a couple shades darker, made his eyes stand out even more as he got closer. She stood up as he approached and put her arms around him.

"Mmm. You smell delicious." She leaned closer as she breathed him in. The crisp scent of his soap mixed with his woodsy cologne enveloped her, making her wish she had agreed to join him in his hotel room.

Gabe looked at her in pleased surprise. "Well, if you want a taste, we can head up to my room." He nodded toward the elevators.

Diana exhaled a disappointed sigh. "No, sorry, gotta get that research done and the last of the presents bought, but I will keep it in mind for later."

"You aren't the only one," he assured her in a low, husky voice as he bent down to kiss her.

She decided she would never get tired of his kisses. His mouth was warm and soft. It made her weak at the knees, longing for some privacy. She kissed him back with fervor, before reluctantly pulling away.

"Oh!" Diana exclaimed as she jumped.

"What?"

Diana laughed. "My cell phone. I can't stand the annoying ringing of cell phones, so I leave mine on vibrate." She reached into her jeans pocket, looked at the number, and put it back. "It's just my agent. I'll call her later."

Looking back up at him, her eyes settled on his kissable lips. *Just one more. No.* "Well, I'd love to continue this, but I hear the tourist traps calling my name."

Gabe held her for a moment longer before he gave her a quick squeeze and let her go.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Okay, I never thought I'd say this, but enough." They'd just climbed back down from Bunker Hill Memorial, and Diana was exhausted. Climbing two hundred and ninety-four steps was more difficult than she'd expected. She thought they'd hit every tourist spot in Boston, and it was barely three o'clock.

Gabe laughed at her. "Okay, no more history, but there is one more place you need to see. I promise it involves minimal walking and no stairs at all."

"Is this my surprise?"

"One of many, yes." He lifted her hand to his lips, kissing her palm.

Diana gazed at him. With just a look, a phrase, or a touch, he was able to turn her into a puddle of need and desire. Being near him, she felt wrapped in safety and sensuality. She realized she trusted him like she had no other. How could this be, after just two short days? What power did this man have?

"Hello?"

Diana blinked and saw Gabe watching her.

"Are you okay? I thought I lost you for a minute there."

"Sorry, got sidetracked for a second." With a smile she motioned for him to lead the way.

A short car ride later, and they were at his planned destination.

"What is this?"

"This is the Public Gardens. I mentioned it to you earlier. I have something in particular I want you to see." As he was talking, he led her over to a large pond. There were docks set up and boats with large swans carved onto the back of them.

“Oh, Swan Boats! I read about these when I started the research on Boston for that book I mentioned.” She turned to him. “Haven’t they been part of the Gardens for something like a hundred years? They’re supposed to be pretty famous.”

“Yeah, I know it’s not really as romantic an adventure as it could be, but I’ve always wanted to ride one. Want to go?” He looked as eager as a schoolboy.

Diana had a smile in her eyes as her face lit up with pleasure. “Oh, I’d love to.”

“I think we made it in time.” They walked down to see when the last boat left. “I was afraid they would close early this late in the season.”

Diana thought it wonderful. The ride wasn’t very long, but the chance to see the gardens from the lagoon in the slowly moving craft, while the pilot pedaled them around, was an experience she was glad not to have missed. She snuggled under Gabe’s arm as they took it all in.

Afterwards, Gabe took her to see the sculptures based on the book *Make Way for Ducklings*. She had read that book to every kindergarten class she had ever subbed in and was thrilled to see their representations.

Peeking at Gabe watching the children climbing all over the ducks, Diana thought the day had added to the picture she had of him. She knew he was intelligent and well-read, but she’d learned much more about him in the last few days, a lot more private stuff. He was gentle and kind and truly interested in others. He hadn’t pressured her, and even after last night, continued to treat her with dignity, like a gentleman.

And he was a romantic. She also got to see his fun, childish side. She watched him enjoy the children’s antics and wondered why this man wasn’t taken yet. He was every woman’s dream. Well, she decided, she would get to live the dream a little bit longer and enjoy it as long as she could.

\* \* \* \* \*

After dinner they strolled along the Charles River Esplanade. The city had set up walkways along the river years ago, and they made a perfect place to relax for a while and work off their meal.

Although it was dark already, Gabe thought it would be safe enough. The paths were well lit, and it wasn’t too late in the evening yet. Walking down the path holding hands, they watched other walkers and boaters on the river. He pointed out the Hatch Shell, the place where the Fourth of July concert and fireworks were presented every year.

“I only went to two here while growing up, but since they started televising them, I try never to miss it. They remind me of home. They have other concerts throughout the year, but the Independence Day concert is the big one.”

Noticing the time, Gabe suggested they head back the way they had come. The other pedestrians had thinned considerably, and he didn't want to be the last couple on the path. He didn't expect any trouble, but you could never be too careful.

As they neared a darker part of the path, Gabe started to tense. There weren't any other people around, but he sensed something wrong. He was picking up jumbled thoughts of violence. Glancing quickly at Diana, he wondered if he should say anything. Deciding against it, he released her hand as they continued walking. How did one say, "Excuse me, but I read minds, and there are some bad people waiting for us."?

He knew that whoever was up ahead might not be targeting him and Diana, but you could never be too sure. The thoughts were too confusing and random, as though they were trying to block him. The light pole ahead was dark, the bulb either blown or broken, and it would be a good place for a mugging.

"Diana, if I tell you to run, just run, do not look back. Here are the keys to the car." He handed her the keys which she promptly put in her hands in a defensive hold.

"What is it?" she asked softly. "Something feels off." She placed her hand on her stomach as if in pain.

"It may be nothing, but please, just do it. Put the keys in your pocket, I don't want you to lose them when you're running." Gabe looked at her imploringly. Her face tightened, as though getting ready to argue, but he didn't want that; he wanted her safe. "I would rather you get to safety, please."

Diana obviously didn't like his request, but agreed to do as he asked. They continued walking, only now their hands hung loose by their sides. Gabe sensed when the others got ready to attack. "Run!" he said, as three figures ran toward them.

Diana didn't hesitate; she turned and raced off in the opposite direction as he turned to face his adversaries. There were three of them. One more than he could handle comfortably, but as long as Diana got away, it would be okay. He doubted they were going to kill him, probably a mugging and beating only. This early at night, even that was rare. At the worst, he would get hurt; at best, scare the third one off. He tried again to read them, but they were closed off. Other than a threat, he couldn't detect much from any of them.

One of them swerved off toward Diana, and Gabe turned to go after him, but a skinny blond pulled out a large knife and swung at him. So much for just a mugging. These guys meant business.

Gabe was already in combat mode. Eliminate the immediate threat, then take care of the other guy. His attention was caught for a second by motion in the corner of his eye in the direction Diana's attacker had gone, but he couldn't allow it to distract him. He was no help to her dead or severely injured.

As quickly as he could, he dispatched his assailants. It wasn't pretty or fancy, but he knew Diana needed him. It's not as easy to take down a pair of attackers as the movies make it out to be, but Gabe had been a soldier his entire adult life, and he knew how to fight.

As the second goon went down, Gabe turned toward Diana and was instantly shocked still. Not only was she holding her own, but she was pivoting in a move designed to break her assailant's wrist, and at the same time, throw him to the ground.

Gabe recognized the move as one from a martial art. It worked the way it was supposed to, and he watched as she broke her opponent's wrist, slamming his head and body into the ground, knocking him out with the force. She gave one final kick to make sure he wasn't going anywhere and looked up at a shocked Gabe. He stared back at her, speechless.

## Chapter Five

"You okay?" she asked him. Gabe had to shake himself out of his shock. God, she was wonderful.

"That should be my question."

"Naah, I only had one, and he wasn't much trouble."

He quickly walked toward her and grabbed hold, pulling her tight into his arms, then let go of the breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. "My God, woman, you scared me to death. Thank God you're okay."

Diana squeezed Gabe, smiling at him. "You're the one that had two. I'm impressed. Good job."

Gabe held her for a bit longer, not wanting to let go.

"We should call the cops," Diana said after a moment.

"No," Gabe disagreed quickly. "We need to search their pockets see if we can find any identification." He motioned toward the three attackers.

"But Gabe ..."

"No, trust me, Diana. These guys aren't regular muggers."

Diana looked torn as if she wanted to continue protesting; finally she acquiesced and moved toward the man she had taken down.

Gabe went back to his two and found nothing. No identification, no tags in the clothing, nothing but the large dagger one of them had tried to use on him.

"*Nada*." Diana came up behind him. "Nothing to give even a clue where he came from or who he is."

"You sure?"

"Hey, I watch CSI, too, you know."



Gabe smiled her attempt at levity. Damn. *Even after fighting for her life she was still calm and collected.* He could grow to love this woman. Shocked at his own thought, he banished it quickly.

“What about you?” Diana leaned over him.

“The same, but he had this.” He held the knife in his hand.

“Looks ceremonial of some sort,” she said.

Gabe shot her a quick look, which Diana correctly interpreted. “Hello? Remember? Archaeology and folklore degrees.”

Gabe looked down at the knife again. It did look ancient, like something she may have come across in her archaeology studies. “That’s what I thought. Can you tell me anything about it?” He hefted it, checking the weight, and handed it to her.

Diana took it from his hand, and shook her head. It had a large blade with a dark hilt. “It’s too dark to tell much about it, but these look like real gemstones. It reminds me of the ceremonial knives used by some cultures in Eastern Europe, but only slightly. There are so many variations it’s hard to be sure. I can definitely say it’s very different from anything I’ve ever seen. And I don’t like it.”

“Okay, we’ll check it out further back at the hotel. Tomorrow I’ll send it to someone I know and see what he can come up with.” He took the blade back, handling it like he was used to weapons.

Gabe stood up, and Diana exclaimed, “Hey, you’re bleeding.”

Looking down, he realized his hand was scratched, but it didn’t look bad. “You know the rule, if you face a weapon, be prepared to get hurt.” The bleeding was already stopping. “It’s fine. Don’t worry about it. Let’s get out of here before anyone spots us.”

“Really, Gabe, don’t you think --”

“Yes, I am thinking,” Gabe assured her quickly. “These guys will regain consciousness in a little while. The cops won’t do anything other than arrest them, and then this little beauty --” He gestured with the dagger. “-- will be confiscated. I, for one, want to find out more about it before that happens. It’s not the kind of knife you use for an everyday mugging, and that alone makes me curious.”

Diana hesitated and glanced back at the men before she finally nodded in agreement, and they quickly moved back to the car.

\* \* \* \* \*

They didn’t talk much on the way back to the hotel. Diana was lost in thought. She had noticed how he’d dispatched the two that had attacked him. He’d done it cleanly and efficiently. She had recognized some of the moves, but the way he had combined them had been foreign to her. *Where would he get that kind of training? It was beyond the basic stuff that the Air Force would have taught him. Hell, it was beyond black belt training.*

*Even in Special Forces, he wouldn't have learned all that. What had he done in the Air Force, and what did he know about these muggers? He obviously knew more about their attack than he was letting on. Well, whatever he knew or found out, she was going to make sure he told her; she was just as curious as he was.*

*Was it he the attackers wanted? Who would want to attack her? Oh, God, no. He wouldn't. Diana quickly glanced over at Gabe and revisited the attack. No, she realized after a moment, he had been in real danger.*

*There was no way he would have set this up. There was something else going on, and she would be damned if she let him get away with silence.*

*Okay, fine. When we get back to the hotel, he can just explain it. I did not sign on for this. A fun week or two -- yes. Getting attacked in a well-lit park -- no.*

"Where'd you learn to do that?"

Diana shook her head in confusion. "What?"

"Those moves, where did you learn them? They're more complicated than any basic self defense class would ever teach."

"Yes, they are."

"Well?"

Diana sighed. She debated not telling him. After all, for all she knew it was his fault they had been attacked. What gave him the right to order her around and question her like she was guilty of something? *Calm down, Diana. He was just as worried, and in just as much danger as you, if not more.*

"I have a black belt in hapkido and tae kwon do."

"Why?"

"Why? Why not?" Diana stopped herself before she could go on. She knew it was just the pent-up adrenaline from the attack. There was no reason for her to be acting like this toward him.

"Sorry. Didn't mean to be so bitchy."

Gabe smiled crookedly. "Damn, I would be worried if you weren't a bit touchy after what just happened."

"Before my mother died, she insisted I learn martial arts. It was one of the most important things to her. That I get a good education, and I learn how to defend myself. I've been in classes since I was six. It was one of the few things my father insisted I do, even after my mother was gone."

"Impressive."

"Thank you. You were, too, although I didn't recognize the style."

"It's a combination of traditional martial arts, Krav Maga, and armed-forces training. With a bit of street fighting thrown in for good measure."

"Gabe, what was all of that about? You're right, they weren't regular muggers."

He reached out to grab hold of her hand. "Let's talk about it when we get back to the hotel, okay? I don't know about you, but I know I'll feel better with four walls surrounding me."

"Okay. It can wait."

Gabe was tense as they got in the elevator at her hotel. He was still looking around, eyes darting everywhere, seemingly missing nothing. He had even checked the car before he let them get in. Diana was amazed at his efficiency. Definitely time for an explanation.

"Okay, let's have it." She turned to him as soon as the door to the suite was closed and locked.

"Have what?"

"What was that all about? Why did those guys attack us?"

"I have no idea. We probably looked like easy targets."

"Gabe, don't."

"Don't what?" He was trying his best to appear innocent, sitting down in a relaxed pose; only, she knew better.

"Gabe," she said firmly. "Don't do this. Do not shut me out. I was there, I saw what happened. Hell, I have the bruises to prove it, just like you do. I know what that knife is probably used for, just like you do. Don't."

Gabe sighed. "Okay. I'm sorry. I just don't want you to get involved."

"I think it's a little late for that," Diana pointed out. "And involved in what, exactly?"

"I'm not sure, to be honest. I work with some very dangerous people, but I have no idea why they would want to attack me this way. Hell, there's no reason they would even know I was here."

"You're telling me that what you do for a living would bring you into contact with these kinds of guys regularly?"

"Well, I'm not usually attacked in a city park, but yes, it's highly possible they were after me, but I don't know why."

"What about the job you were here to do?" Diana sat opposite him.

He shook his head. "Harmless. There was nothing there that would cause this type of reaction. It was all moot before I even got here, anyway. It had taken care of itself."

"I take it this consulting and troubleshooting you do isn't for your run-of-the-mill businesses?"

Gabe gave her a sheepish look as answer.

"Okay, then, maybe we're jumping the gun. What about these guys tonight? What exactly set them apart from ordinary muggers?"

Gabe ticked some the points off on his fingers. "They had absolutely nothing identifiable on them, they all knew more than straight street fighting, and they had a dagger worth probably more than ten grand to mug a couple of tourists they might have gotten a couple credit cards off of."

They both looked at the dagger. It was double-edged, with the edges having small jagged curves, made for maximum damage when removed from a victim. There was a pattern engraved on the blade which gave Diana a headache to concentrate too long on.

The hilt was fairly straightforward and simple, but with what appeared to be authentic rubies and garnets. In all her studies, though, she could honestly say she had never seen anything quite like it. It looked like a cross between an ancient Egyptian dagger and something from the Klingon Empire.

The scariest thing about the dagger was the blood groove that ran the length of the blade. It was different from any she'd seen before. It angled down, as though trying to direct the blood to drip off one specific point of the dagger. It reminded her of something, but she couldn't say what it was at first. Then it hit her.

"Look at this." Diana spoke first.

"What?"

"The blood groove." She pointed at it. "Normally a blood groove stops at the hilt. This one doesn't, it curves down."

Looking up at Gabe, she waited to see if he came to the same realization that she had.

"That means that it was created to collect blood." He looked up at her, agreeing with her unvoiced thought. "When someone gets stabbed standing up, the blood will run down the groove, into the curve, to drip right into --"

"Whatever the assailant is holding to collect the blood in. Probably a chalice of some sort," Diana finished his thought for him. "I just remembered seeing something like it when I researched black magic rituals." She shook her head in confusion. "But why? Why would someone want to collect our blood?"

"It didn't have to be ours specifically, it could have been anybody walking there," Gabe reminded her.

"True." She held her arms around her shaking body. "It gives me the chills, though."

"I have to agree." Gabe looked up at her, "I know this is going to sound weird, but just having this around creeps me out. Do you have anything silk we can wrap it up in?"

"Silk?"

"Yeah, it is supposed to act as a barrier for psychic instruments, and whether we believe in them or not, every little bit would help right now. I, for one, want to be as far removed from this as possible."

Diana immediately went and got one of her scarves. She had known about the properties of silk, but was surprised that he did. There was definitely more to this man than he was telling her.

"I'll send it off to the lab tomorrow and see what they can tell us about it." He placed it on the table between them, but off to the side.

"Lab?" Diana was inordinately pleased with the "us," but she was still curious.

Gabe smiled. "Yes, lab, and no, I am not going to tell you any more."

"Or you'll have to kill me, right?" she retorted morosely. She knew she was lucky to have gotten as much from him as she had.

"Either that or keep you prisoner as my sex slave for ever and ever."

"Hmm, sounds interesting."

It felt good to laugh, to lighten up things for a minute or two.

Gabe turned the tables on Diana. "Is there any reason anyone would want to hurt you?"

"Me? I'm a novelist for heaven's sake."

"Any problems with fans?"

Diana hesitated. There had been the letters. But the writer never threatened to hurt her in them. The exact opposite in fact.

"What?" Gabe asked impatiently.

"Well, recently there have been some letters ..."

"What kind of letters?"

"Well, mostly the usual ones. But these are different."

"Different how?"

Diana quirked an eyebrow, giving him a "Shut up, and I'll tell you" look.

"Okay, sorry, go ahead." He raised his hand in defense, getting the hint.

"The writer professes his undying love. The soul-mate kind of stuff that a lot of them do. But recently, he's talked about being ready for me and about making me his 'again as before.' That line always bothered me, 'again as before,' as though we'd been lovers in the past. Or even a past life. But the weirdest thing is, these letters are all written on very expensive old paper, with old-fashioned handwriting.

"I gave them to the cops at a friend's insistence, and they analyzed the last one for me. The paper itself is over two hundred years old, and the ink isn't commercially made. The technician said it also looked like he used an old-fashioned quill.

"I hadn't heard from him in a while, but the last letter promised me we'd be together soon. I got it in Kansas City, as a matter-of-fact. I forwarded it to the cops the next day." She stopped for a second and looked closely at Gabe. "For a while, I thought you might be him."

"What made you realize I wasn't?"

“Your behavior over the past two days. The man who wrote those notes isn’t capable of the kindness and affection you’ve shown me. He’s into possessing and controlling.”

“I could be a good actor.”

“No one is that good. Trust me.” Diana looked off to the side, lost in thought for a minute, holding herself tight. “When I read those notes, a shiver goes up my spine. They were written by someone evil. There is no way you’re the same man.”

“Thank you.” He reached out to hold her to him. “That means a lot to me.”

“It also helps that you were willing to talk to me tonight, ask my help, and tell me a little bit about what you know. I only wish you would trust me more.”

“I do, truly. There are just some things that ...”

“Yeah, I know. Top secret and all that. Leave it to me to get involved with a man who can’t tell me anything about himself. I always knew my curiosity was going to be my downfall.”

Gabe squeezed her tight. “Okay, change of subject. First things first. I think I should check out of my hotel and check in here.”

“Gabe ...” she started to protest, pulling away from his arms.

“No, it makes sense. Listen,” he continued before she could interrupt again. “This way I’ll always be within shouting distance. Whether they were after you, me, or no one in particular, there is always safety in numbers.”

“I don’t need a babysitter. I can take care of myself.”

Gabe smiled. “Yeah, I saw you; you can definitely take care of yourself. But this way, I’ll feel better. I can get the room across the hall or next to yours, somewhere close by. It would make me feel better.” Gabe reached for her hand as he continued to explain his case. “Really, trust me. Call the front desk and tell them your brother, bodyguard, agent, someone is checking in tomorrow, and you want him to have the room next to or across the hall from you.”

Diana didn’t say anything for a moment. She studied Gabe’s face. He really did appear concerned about her safety. She wasn’t used to this kind of attention. It was a bit unnerving, but comforting at the same time. “Okay.”

“What?”

“I said, okay. You have me convinced.” A little bit of added insurance for both of them might come in handy, and once she realized he wasn’t proposing to move into the suite with her, she relaxed. Although they had been together almost nonstop since they met, she still needed her privacy and didn’t want to be hovered over.

“Okay, great.” Having won the discussion, he seemed at a loss and didn’t say anything for a moment.

“Are we done?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“Good.” With the talking over, Diana moved into Gabe’s arms as he opened them for her. Despite the fact neither had been seriously hurt, adrenaline was still pumping through her body, and it wanted an outlet. She felt his pulse increase quickly in response to her body’s suggestion.

There wasn’t going to be anything slow or tender about tonight. She didn’t want that. She wanted it hard and fast. Needed the affirmation that they were here, together, and safe.

Their lips met in a fierce, nearly violent kiss. His lips crushed hers, urging her to open up and let him in. Like a pirate, he plundered her mouth, ravishing with his tongue, sending flames shooting through her body. She felt liquid pool between her legs, her body already eager for his.

Diana was barely aware of Gabe helping her remove her clothing before removing his own. Vaguely she noticed articles flying off toward the center of the room. Her attention was on other things, not where they or their clothing ended up. She, for one, didn’t care where their clothes landed; she just needed him.

Gabe’s mouth blazed a trail down her neck to her breast. His lips closed over one nipple, his teeth biting sharply. Her breath escaped in a gasp as she felt pleasure shoot through her. Her nails bit into his shoulders as she held on to him tightly.

He didn’t stay there long; their need was too great. He moved down her body, getting on his knees in front of her. Wrapping his hands around her bottom, he brought his face to her, tasting her, making her gasp aloud. She tried to wriggle away, but he stayed her movements. He already knew her body and what to do to give her pleasure. Moaning, she quickly fell over the edge, writhing, holding on to his shoulders for support as her body exploded in ecstasy.

He drew back, kissing her gently before he reached for protection. Taking it from him, Diana forced him to sit down on the chaise. Once he was sitting, she kneeled between his legs and opened the package. She grabbed the condom in her hand and placed it on his tip. Slowly she worked it down, squeezing firmly as she pushed it all the way to the base. She saw pleasure race across his face as he closed his eyes at the sensations.

His legs closed as she straddled him. With one hand on his shoulder for balance, and still watching his face, she held him in place as she lowered herself down onto him. Felt him pierce her. She forgot how different this position could be, how intense and powerful. She felt tighter, and him firmer, as she took control and rode him. His hands supported her, helping her move as she drove him into her again and again.

His thumb flicked over her clitoris as she pumped him, driving her to move faster and harder. Finally it was too much for her, and she came, hard, her body tightening around him rapidly, forcing him to his own release. As he cried out, she gasped and collapsed against his body, holding him tight.

*Oh, babe, I thought I was going to lose you tonight. It nearly killed me.*

“Don’t worry, I’m not going anywhere.”

“What did you say?” Gabe asked quickly.

“I said I wasn’t going anywhere.” She pulled back as she answered him.

“Why did you say that?”

“You said you were afraid you were going to lose me tonight.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Yes, you did.” Diana nodded her head slowly in confusion.

“No, I thought it, I never said it.”



## Chapter Six

Diana's comment made Gabe realize that he hadn't picked up on even a smidgen of feeling or thoughts from Diana in all the time he'd been with her. He was so used to keeping himself shielded, he didn't even realize that she must have been, too, for nothing at all to leak out after everything they had shared together.

"Gabe, that's impossible." Diana jerked away from him. She reached for something to put on and found his shirt.

Gabe stood up and went to the bathroom to toss the condom. Returning, he reached down to grab his jeans from the floor and put them on.

"You say you heard me say that I almost lost you?" he asked as he buttoned them.

"Yes. I never would have responded like I did if you hadn't said it."

"Sweetheart, I didn't say it, honestly."

"Well, then, I'm going insane." Diana sat on the settee, arms crossed, looking as though she was spoiling for a fight.

"No, I don't think so." This was strange. He had never been able to transmit to anyone who didn't have a bit of the gift, so she had to have some ability, even if it was latent. He knew how it was going to sound, but he had to ask her, "Have you ever heard thoughts before?"

"Gabe, you're sounding crazy."

*No, I'm not, and neither are you.*

"Wha ...? Wait, you didn't move your lips."

*I know. I thought it, like this.*

"No, this is impossible." Diana put her hand up as though to block his thoughts.

"Diana, it is not impossible. You just did it." He tried to reassure her, "It's not a terrible thing. A lot of people can do it."

"No. No way. This is a trick." She was adamant in her denial.

Gabe realized her reaction seemed off in some way. She wasn't the type to think it evil or wrong on a moral or religious basis. It was as though she had to deny it to herself. He asked again, "Have you ever been able to do this before?"

When she didn't answer, he sat beside her. "Sweetheart, it's okay. I've been able to do it since I was a kid. There is nothing unnatural about it. Think about it. Were you ever able to do this when you were younger?"

Diana sat there for a few minutes, not saying anything. She looked like she was warring with herself over something, but he didn't want to intrude on her thoughts. After a few minutes, though, he opened up, tried to read her outer thoughts. What hit him almost sent him reeling.

Strong impressions. Incredibly strong. Nothing concrete, but still too strong for just average spill-out. Then, her as a child, alone, with a woman who looked like her, and with a man. The memories were jumbled, in no order, and not all of them were positive.

"My dad said I was imagining things. Said that I shouldn't try to do it anymore."

"You used to do this as a kid?" She was again silent for so long, he thought she wouldn't answer.

Finally she answered, so quietly he had to lean forward to hear her. "Me and my mom. I remember we would have whole conversations when other people were around, and no one would ever know. We would burst out laughing and confuse people. They didn't know what we were laughing about. After Mom died, and I tried to do it with my dad, he said I had to stop." Diana rubbed her arms. "He said I was imagining that mom and I could speak telepathically. That it wasn't a good thing, wasn't healthy for me to try to do."

"After that you never used telepathy again?"

"No. I believed him. That I was imagining it, that I was trying to bring back my mother any way I could." Diana laid her head in her hands. "I was a child, he was my father. I trusted him. I eventually stopped thinking I was hearing people's thoughts and stopped thinking at them."

Gabe put his arm around her shoulders, trying to comfort her. She lifted her head, gazing intently at Gabe. "I haven't even thought about it in years. I remember in college scoffing at the students who studied paranormal events when they talked about stuff like this. I thought it was all childish games, like my dad said. That they were being ridiculous.

"It never even occurred to me that I used to think I could do it. That maybe everything he'd said was wrong. I buried it so deep, it just became a part of me.

"I guess I figured no one else I knew could do this kind of thing, so he had to be right, it had to have been in my head. I even played up the idea in my stories. It was too fantastical to be possible."

"You haven't had any problems?" Gabe asked her.

"What do you mean problems?"

"Hearing other's thoughts. Getting impressions?"

"No, why would I? Sure, I have my intuition, but everyone has something like that. It's no big deal." Diana shook her head in denial.

"You've never been able to predict what someone was about to do or say?"

Diana hesitated before answering, "Well ... yeah, but I just chalked it down to an ability to read people. Not any psychic ability."

"I can't believe you couldn't tell what it was. You must have built up some pretty powerful shields awful quickly, then. I'm surprised you survived as long as you have without it bleeding out again. Do you do any meditation or aura work? Anything like that?"

"Yes, as part of the martial arts training. They encourage us to meditate daily, to keep centered and calm."

Gabe nodded his head. "That must have been just enough for you to be able to keep it in check, then. Have you been meditating lately?"

"Nooo ... not since before I got to Kansas City, actually. It was pretty hectic out there, and I just kept putting it off. And since I've been here, I've spent most of my time with you."

"Well, traditionally, traumatic situations can bring about all kinds of revelations. This must have been just enough to punch through."

Diana put her hand up to her forehead, rubbing it as though she had a headache. Gabe knew it had to be frightening to be confronted with this kind of ability; he had learned how to deal with it long ago. His dad had been interested in parapsychology, and had helped him find a way to control it.

"I can teach you how to control it so it doesn't get away from you again. Between skipping the meditation, the attack, and me projecting, it was all probably too much for your natural shields. I can help you prevent it from happening again."

"Can you make it go away?"

"Not really." He shook his head. "The meditation was probably keeping any shields you had naturally intact, but your ability never went away. It was always there, just waiting. Nothing I can teach you will change that."

"Damn."

"Is it really so bad?"

"What? Hearing everything everyone is thinking? Letting them hear everything I'm thinking? Yeah, it's bad."

Gabe shook his head. "It won't be that bad. If it was, no one would ever survive with the gift. Once trained, you would probably only hear thoughts projected directly to you by someone else with talent, unless you're trying to listen. I can help you filter out extraneous noise and keep unwanted thoughts away. I can also help you to not transmit when you don't want to. Hell, I've been with you for days, and you haven't transmitted anything to me, and despite this, you're still blocking most of your thoughts."

"Most?"

"I really can't see anything but visions of you and your mom and dad. And that's when I opened up and tried. You're still blocking most of it."

She sat there for another minute in thought. She was obviously not happy with the turn of events. "I guess I have no choice, do I?"

His mouth twisted in a wry grin. "Not if you want to stay sane, no."

She straightened her body, preparing for what she was about to face. "Okay, teach me, oh, great one. Make me a freak."

Gabe just shook his head at her and hugged her. *Trust me, it's fun once you get used to it.*

"Yeah, right," she muttered.

They worked on her shields for the rest of the night. It was important for her to be able to go out in public and not be hit with extraneous thoughts that could be distracting and potentially harmful. Her old shields were still strong enough that he was able to help her build on them sufficiently so she could survive in a room of people looking at her.

"Okay, first test. Let's go down to the front desk and see if you can read whoever is on duty. Instead of calling them, we'll talk to them in person, okay? It's late, so there shouldn't be many people down there, and it will be a good training exercise."

"I'm not really sure about this."

"I know. But you'll do fine. Let's get some clothes on and head down."

Gabe led Diana downstairs. She was obviously reluctant, but agreed to give it a try. They got lucky. The only people in the lobby were two attendants at the main desk. Gabe watched them as closely as he watched her.

One of the men was preoccupied with something on a computer screen, while the other walked over and offered to help. Diana gave the man the story they had worked out, and he checked to see what could be arranged. It was agreed that the room next to hers would be occupied by her brother starting tomorrow.

Gabe watched Diana for any sign of discomfort or irritation. She seemed to handle the situation without any problems, and they headed back up to her room to talk.

"So? Anything? Any stray thoughts?" Gabe asked as soon as they got in.

"No, nothing. It was the same as it always has been."

“Good, then the shields are working. Tomorrow we’ll try at breakfast or lunch in a larger crowd, okay?”

“Okay.”

“I don’t know about you, but I, for one, am tired. Let me get my coat and the dagger, and I’ll head out.” Gabe thought it would be best to give her some time to work out all she had learned tonight.

“Do you have to go?” she asked softly.

He looked up at her quickly. “No, I don’t have to. I don’t want to, but I thought you might want some time to yourself.”

Diana bit her lip. “Please, stay. I think I need to be held tonight.” Her voice didn’t get above a whisper, but he was immediately by her side.

He tenderly wrapped her in his arms. “I’d love to stay and hold you.”

They crawled into bed together, spoon-fashion. He held her tight, trying to impart strength through his arms.

She was holding up amazingly well, given everything she had gone through that night. He surprised himself when he realized he was feeling pride at her actions. His Diana was one tough cookie. *Whoa*, his *Diana*? It was just the sexual attraction talking. That, and his protectiveness. Satisfied, he listened for her breathing to even out before he let himself follow her into sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

Diana woke first the next morning. She lay still, cuddled in his arms, but she had turned to face him during the night. Enjoying the feeling of being in his arms, she thought about the previous night. There was so much to take in. She felt as though she was in one of her novels. These things didn’t happen to normal people. ESP and ceremonial daggers were for books and movies, not real life.

She’d been so exhausted the night before, she hadn’t even had time to think about the memories she had recalled. Lying here now, she thought of them. She remembered more about the way she and her mother had communicated. The way her mother encouraged her to use her gift, showing her things she could do with it.

She also realized where some of her shielding came from. Her lessons with Gabe the previous evening, triggered memories while she slept, of how her mother had taught her. She was suddenly confident she could handle this. She knew she’d been handling it subconsciously since her mother died. Now it was time to do so deliberately.

She felt Gabe stir and turned to look him in the eyes. “Good morning.”

“Good morning.” He smiled with eyes still half asleep. “How are you doing?”

"Do you mean how am I doing with the fact that my stalker may have arranged an attack on me? Or the man that I'm currently sleeping with is some kind of secret agent and may be on someone's hit list? Add to that the fact that I suddenly find out that I wasn't imagining things as a kid, and yes, I do have some kind of super power and can read other people's minds? Oh, yeah, and that I've suppressed memories dealing with my mother? I'd say I'm doing just nifty."

Gabe tightened his hold around her. "I'm sorry, babe. I know it's a lot to take in."

Diana sighed, relaxing against him. "Actually, I think I'm okay with it. Not happy as a lark okay, but okay. I dreamed last night."

Gabe just continued to hold her, not interrupting, letting her explain at her own pace.

"I tend to learn a lot from my dreams. They're not only where I get my inspiration for my stories, but where a lot of my questions are answered. It's almost as though my back brain waits 'til I'm asleep to feed me information the front brain needs."

Surprisingly, Gabe nodded. "It makes sense. We still don't know how telepathy or any of the other psychic gifts truly work. Just that they all affect the brain in different ways. It's perfectly reasonable that your brain might compartmentalize things differently than others."

"Well, last night I had memories brought to the front part. Apparently I'm ready, or I need to remember things."

"You know, you're taking this a whole lot easier than I would expect you to."

Diana laughed. "I think part of that's because of my writing. I never explained that I write paranormals." At the slight tensing of his body, she nudged him. "It's not that bad. They're real popular right now, and you can barely pick up a book or watch TV without some mention of the paranormal. I've always figured there was something behind some of the stories. I guess I was right. Between that, and my dreams, it is just easier than normal for me, maybe."

Gabe looked at her for a few seconds. "Well, then, I should probably let you know that oftentimes, people will exhibit more than one talent. Some to a greater degree, some to a lesser."

"What are yours?"

"I'm a very strong telepath, both sender and receiver. Usually I can veer someone's thought away or towards something else. I can only communicate directly to someone that has the gift, though."

"That's why you were so sure I had it last night."

"Exactly. Otherwise, you would only have received an impression, not the exact words."

"What other talents do you have?"

"Mostly just the telepathy. Although I have slight pyrotechnic abilities."

"You mean you can set fires?"

"Only small ones, and only to things that are flammable. There have been records of some people able to set fire to brick."

"Brick? Impressive."

"Yeah, it is." Gabe seemed lost in thought for a moment. "I wouldn't worry about any secondary ones right now. If you have them, they may remain buried, or they might just pop out when you least expect it. More than likely they will reveal themselves the more control you get over this one."

*How much control?*

Gabe was obviously startled to hear her voice so clearly in his head. *This is a good start. Something you picked up in your dreaming?*

*Yes, I did a little searching and found a lot of the things my mother used to teach me. Your lessons last night showed me what to look for.*

*I'm impressed. You're coming through loud and clear. Without any interference or hesitation.*

*Interference?*

"Think of it this way." He switched back to verbal communication. "When we talk, our mind is still active. Thinking of other things, of what we are going to say next, of the person we're talking to, or even whether or not we remembered to lock the car door when we left it. Sometimes that stuff bleeds through when you speak mind-to-mind. That is one of the hardest things for a lot of new telepaths to control."

"Really? I guess I just compartmentalize that, too. My brain seems to do it automatically. There's like a screen holding everything back."

"That's good. It's basically what we train all the new recruits to do."

"Recruits?" Diana readily picked up on the word.

"Don't you worry about it," Gabe laughed. "I think we need to shower and go downstairs, see if you can stand being around people."

Diana wasn't happy with his avoidance yet again, but she was learning to live with it.

They showered and dressed, and got ready to go downstairs.

"Ready?" Gabe turned and surveyed Diana.

"Not really, but it's something I have to do."

"Right. Now, remember to concentrate on your breathing and the walls if you start to lose it. Use the bubble analogy, or if you need to, the fortified walls. Build them up brick by brick if you have to and make sure you close off the top and bottom. If it's too much, let me know, and we'll leave." He held out his hand to her with a smile.

She grasped it. "Lay on MacDuff."

Breakfast wasn't anywhere near the ordeal Diana had been afraid it would be. She was doing fine. There weren't any stray thoughts or impressions floating around that she picked up. No intrusions to her psyche. Finally, she relaxed. She was okay.

"Diana Temis! You're Diana Temis -- Meredith Devon, the author!" a voice squealed.

It came from across the room. A large, older woman was looking at her with amazement in her eyes and started toward the table.

Diana froze. Everyone was looking at her. They all wondered what on earth this woman was talking about, why she was heading in her direction. She was immediately bombarded with thoughts and emotions not her own. Curiosity, anger at the rudeness, wonder. Panicking, she felt as though she were beginning to drown. She couldn't breathe, couldn't think. Then, through her panic, she felt her hand grasped firmly. She looked up to see Gabe holding her, supporting her. He was mouthing the words as he sent them to her, *Breathe; Remember your walls.*

She felt a comforting wave of support come over her. Instantly, she calmed down. She knew what to do and that she could do it. She was able to refocus and get herself under control. She didn't think anyone noticed, either.

The woman arrived at their table nearly out of breath. Diana surprised herself when she was able to carry a short conversation with the woman and her husband. Apparently the woman had read all her books and was looking forward to the signing tonight. She was in town for vacation, and when she heard about the signing, she insisted to her husband that they attend.

Diana smiled, assuring the woman. "Yes, I'll sign any book you have, it doesn't have to be just the most recent one."

Finally, the woman went away smiling, happy with the thought that she'd actually met a "famous" author and was getting her personalized autograph. The woman promised that she'd be the first to arrive at the signing that evening.

"You doing okay?" Gabe asked her.

"Yeah." She squeezed his hand in appreciation of his help.

"Good job."

"That was weird, nothing like that has ever happ --" She stopped in mid sentence.

"Wait, that was you, wasn't it? You did something to her."

Gabe calmly sipped his coffee. "Whatever do you mean?"

"You know perfectly well what I mean." She lowered her voice to an angry whisper. "You did something to make her behave like that."

"Did something? I don't know what ..."

"Gabe."



He smiled. "Okay, I thought we needed to see how you'd do with everyone's thoughts and attention directed toward you. It's hard enough sometimes being in a crowd, but when all attention is on you, it can be nearly impossible. I thought it better that we find out now if you can handle it, rather than later, like at a book signing."

She thought about that for a moment and decided he had a point. She would have lost it if he hadn't been there to help her. "How did you do that?"

"I scanned exterior thoughts. She was talking about books and looking for used bookstores while in town."

"But how did you know she was a fan?"

"I didn't. I just made her notice you. I felt recognition and desire to meet you, so I encouraged her."

Diana snorted "Encourage, my ass. I bet you she's never done anything like that before. She's not the type."

"And with you being so gracious to her, now she'll have a positive memory of speaking out. Who is Meredith Devon, by the way?"

"Me. It's my pen name. My real name became public about six months ago. Shortly after that, I started receiving the letters."

"Hmmm."

They practiced a little more during the meal, including picking up extraneous thoughts and blocking what he called "mental darts."

"You very rarely get someone who is capable of true attacks in the everyday world, but sometimes you get a natural, and if their emotion is strong enough, they can unintentionally barb you, so it's best to be prepared," he explained further, "Have you ever been with someone who made you feel uncomfortable, or even sick or weak?"

At her nod, he continued, "They were probably subconsciously emitting energy. Either sucking up yours or transmitting negativity. That's the same idea as a barb. Normally you wouldn't be bothered consciously by it, but now that we've basically woken up that part of your brain, you need to be aware of how to avoid them."

They went back up to her suite after breakfast.

"It's been a long twenty-four hours; why don't you rest here while I go get my stuff and check out of the other hotel?"

Diana nodded. "I was going to suggest it myself. I usually tend to take it easy the day of a big signing, and you're right, there hasn't been much down time since I got here."

"What time do you have to be there?"

"I like to get there extra early so I can check out the set-up, see how many people they're expecting, and stuff like that. So probably about six o'clock."

"You know the name of the store, which town, or have an address?"

“Yup, have all that here.” She went and grabbed the information from her electronic organizer. “They’ll either send a car, or I’ll get a taxi and bill the publisher.”

“Well, no need for that, I’ll take you tonight.”

“No, Gabe. These things are long and boring for ...” Diana trailed off.

“For whom?” Gabe looked like he was holding back a smile.

“For people who go with the authors. There’s nothing for you to do there.”

“You’re there.” Gabe cupped her cheek in his hand, rubbing gently with his thumb.

Diana blushed. “There’s no reason for you to go, really.”

“I want to go; I want to see you in your element. And I’d feel better knowing you weren’t alone.”

“I’ll be perfectly safe,” she assured him as she turned away to put her planner back in her bag.

He walked up behind her, putting his arms around her, “And I’ll be perfectly content. Hours in a bookstore and exquisite scenery to boot.” He turned her around and kissed her. “Now, I’m going to head out. I’ll be back in an hour or two. That should give me plenty of time to pack, check out, and get this thing --” He motioned toward the dagger. “-- mailed off. I’ll bring your scarf back to you.”

“No, Keep it. I don’t want it back after it’s been around that thing.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, it’s an old one. I just kept it ‘cause it was silk, and I couldn’t bear to throw it away.”

“Okay, you’ll stay in the suite until I get back?” Diana just looked at him again. “Please?”

“Yes, mother hen, I’ll stay in. Now go.” They kissed at the door, and he waited until he heard the bolt slide home before he headed down the hallway. Diana watched him turn away through the peephole. “Jeez, talk about overprotective,” she said to herself with a smile.

## Chapter Seven

On the way to his hotel, Gabe stopped by a drug store, and picked up some shipping material for the dagger. Once in his room, he packed it up and called work. He knew the perfect person at Argus to help him.

He dialed the research department directly, bypassing the main switchboard and the equipment that traced all incoming calls. "Hey, Steve, it's Gabe. I got something here I need you to check out."

"What is it?" came over the line.

"Something I think you might be interested in." Gabe didn't think his call was being listened in on, but it always paid to be careful. "Why don't I just show it to you? I'll have it brought in." Steve knew Gabe was on vacation in Boston. He would know to look for the mail.

"Okay, I'll look for it tomorrow?"

"Yeah, tomorrow. Look sharp, you'll like it." Steve was the best in the business when it came to identifying or authenticating blades of any kind. Hell, he was a born researcher on any subject.

"All right, looking forward to it. Take care."

"You, too, buddy."

As Gabe headed back to Diana's -- now his -- hotel after mailing his package, he gave thought to what had happened in the last twenty-four hours.

To say he was shocked was an understatement. His shy, sexy, new girlfriend -- *girlfriend*? Well, never mind, he'd think of a better word later. The shy, sexy woman he had come to know had a spine of steel.

He'd never been so surprised or turned on by someone before. She'd been able to wrap her mind around being telepathic quickly. She acknowledged and accepted things as they were and dealt with them as needed. With such a strong spirit, if she were ever completely trained, she would be scary.

The more he learned about her, the more he admired her. She was an impressive woman. Her mind, her body, her physical abilities, they all set him on fire. He knew his emotions were getting the better of him, but he couldn't seem to keep them separate. This woman had gotten under his skin, and he didn't know if he wanted to get her out.

He checked into the hotel, and as promised, was given the room beside Diana's. He took his things to his room and unpacked. His room was between hers and the stairway. Not as good as the elevator, but if anyone tried anything, they'd most likely leave by the stairs to avoid detection, anyway. He hadn't made a point of it to Diana, but he was convinced that the attack hadn't been random. Someone was after one of them.

Although he wasn't officially military, his Government ID enabled him to carry weapons in his checked bags that were normally frowned upon, especially in this post-9/11 era. He unpacked two large knives, a dagger with its sheath, his throwing knives, a Glock nine-millimeter, and the necessary ammo.

The throwing knives he put on his bedside table. One of the larger knives he left out to put in Diana's room. The other he attached to the side of the TV, away from the door, with the help of hook and loop tape. He'd put in a request for more weaponry after he'd talked to Steve. It should arrive in a day or two.

After unpacking his version of the essentials, he called Diana's room and let her know where he was and told her he was on his way. He had just enough time to put his Glock in its shoulder holster when he heard a knock at the door. He grabbed a sport coat before peeking out to see who it was. When he recognized Diana, he sighed heavily and opened the door.

"I said, I'd be right there."

"I know. But I wanted to look at your room."

"It's the same as yours, only smaller."

Diana pushed her way in, although, to be honest, he wasn't trying to keep her out. He liked the thought of her in his room.

She walked in and looked around. "Nice." She wasn't talking about the décor, either, as she motioned to his throwing knives on the bedside table. "You know how to use those?"

"Yeah, you?"

"Yup, one of the skills taught in the higher levels."

She walked over toward the window and saw the knife on the TV. It wasn't visible from the door so the TV was a perfect hiding place for it. She looked at him and cocked an eyebrow. He just shrugged. "It's only paranoia if they aren't out to get you."

"One of these days, soon, you're going to have to tell me what you really do for a living."

Gabe just looked at her. He knew he was going to have to explain eventually, if last night developed into something more serious or if their relationship continued to grow, but not yet.

"Mind telling me why you're wearing a gun?"

Gabe was surprised. He shouldn't have been, but he was. "Most people don't even notice it."

"I'm not most people."

"No, you certainly aren't." The more he knew about her, the more of an enigma she became. She was an author, an expert in martial arts, and she knew ancient ceremonial daggers when she saw them. She wasn't freaked out by his collection of weaponry and seemed perfectly willing to accept him as he was.

"Who are you, Diana?"

"I could well ask you the same question, Gabe."

He let that lie and answered her earlier question instead, "Last night just feels off to me. There's got to be something more to it."

"I agree. I just wish I knew what it was."

"That makes two of us."

"Well, you won't be able to wear that where we're going." She gestured toward his hidden gun.

"Why not?"

"I called the bookstore today. Apparently they're expecting a large crowd. They rented the junior high school auditorium across the street from the store."

"And this affects my carrying, how?" he asked, looking at her.

"Metal detectors. They warned me. Didn't want me wearing anything that might set it off. I guess they thought letting me know ahead of time was a courtesy so I didn't wear tons of jewelry."

"You haven't been having any problems on tour that you haven't told me about, have you?"

Diana looked exasperated. "Don't you think after last night I might have mentioned it?" Gabe cringed inwardly. She was right. "Other than feeling like I was being watched too intently sometimes, no. But it's not because of me that they have the detectors. Apparently it's school policy. Every event whether it's run by the school or an outside agency has the metal detectors."

"Well, then, I'll keep it in the car."

"Do you even have a license to carry that? Concealed? In Massachusetts?"

“As a matter of fact, I do. I can go anywhere in the U.S. with it. Admittedly, some states don’t like it very much, but they really have no say as it’s a federal license.”

Diana nodded her head. “Are you ready for lunch? I wanted to grab something quick and then lie down for a while. I didn’t sleep very well last night. Those dreams I mentioned tend to sap my strength, and I’ve used the last hour verifying plans for tonight.”

“Sure, we can go to the café downstairs, if you want.”

“Well, actually I was thinking of that pizza place at Quincy Market again.”

Gabe laughed, “Oh, God, I’ve created a monster.”

“Hey there are worse things than eating pizza everyday. I could be a health nut.”

“Oh, no way. I’d never survive.”

\* \* \* \* \*

As they walked back to the hotel after lunch, they discussed the plans for the rest of the day. “If you want to be there by six, we have two options. We can leave here around four-thirty and spend over an hour in traffic, or leave at three o’clock, and get there over two hours ahead of time.”

“Would you hate me if I said I would rather risk the traffic? I don’t know if an hour will be enough for me.” It was already past one, and she knew she wouldn’t be able to get to sleep right away.

“No problem. I have some things I still need to do, anyway. Oh, here’s the key to my room.” He handed her an extra key card. “Apparently us peons with single rooms don’t have as fancy a keycard, so you’ll be able to tell the difference easily.”

“But, why?” Diana was not sure why he would be giving her a key to his room.

“Because if I’m not around, and you don’t feel safe in your room, I want you to be able to go somewhere else. Don’t worry, I don’t expect you to move in with me.” He grinned. “What are you wearing tonight?” he asked as he changed the subject.

“Probably a long skirt with heeled boots and a blouse. That and jeans have become my standard reading outfit. They’re both comfortable, and the boots aren’t too high to walk in. Why?”

“Call it paranoia, I just wanted to make sure you weren’t wearing anything too difficult to run in. Or too sexy. I don’t want your fans getting any ideas.” He finished with a lascivious wink.

“Oh, no, nothing too sexy. Unless you count what I’ll be wearing under the blouse and skirt.” Diana peeked at Gabe sideways, smiling at his raised eyebrow.

Gabe’s interest was piqued. “And what would that be?”

“Oh, something I picked up this morning in one of the clothing stores at the hotel while you were gone.”

Gabe stopped walking. "Diana, I thought I asked you to stay in your room."

"You're right, you did." She glared at him as she came to a halt. "Did you think I was going to listen like a meek little woman? Gabe, I didn't do anything stupid. If anyone is after me, they already know where I am. Going down to a crowded shop, in a crowded hotel, up and down a manned elevator was not going to pose any added danger. And I was careful. I promise."

Gabe didn't look pleased. He was about to say something when Diana placed her hand on his cheek, moving in close to him to speak softly.

"I was fine. Don't worry so much. And remember, I did it for you. I bought something you might enjoy unwrapping tonight." His eyes widened at her promise.

\* \* \* \* \*

His phone rang at four on the dot. "I'll be ready in about five minutes, so whenever you want to leave, just come on over," Diana's voice came over the line.

"Okay, be right there."

He grabbed his coat, the extra knife, a box, and headed out the door. Diana opened the door almost as soon as he knocked. "Come on in. I'll just be one more minute."

He walked behind her into the main room, while she continued into the bathroom. He watched her apply the last of her makeup, and realized in all the time they'd been together she had only worn makeup their first night together. As he watched, she finished and came out.

"Do I pass?" She twirled to show him both front and back views.

He came up to her, wrapped his arms around her, and bent his head. "More than pass."

She let him kiss her, before pulling away. "Careful or you'll mess the lipstick, and I'd hate having to put more on."

"Why bother? You haven't worn it all week, and you're beautiful without it."

"I usually put makeup on for the readings. No one wants to see a boring, humdrum writer. They want glamour," she added with a grin.

"Well, you look beautiful and glamorous."

"Thank you." She noticed the knife and package on the table. "What's that?" She nodded her head towards them.

"Presents."

"Presents? For me?"

"For you."

"Why?"

“Why do I need a reason? I just wanted to.” He reached down and grabbed both of them. “This is for protection.” He handed her the long-handled knife. “Since you know how to use the throwing knives, I figured you knew how to handle a knife without hurting yourself.”

“I know just where to put this.” She walked into the bedroom, and he saw her place it between the mattress and box spring, handle sticking out, allowing for easy access at night. They were both going to have to remember to move things before the cleaning lady came in the mornings.

As she walked back, he handed her the box. “And this, is just because.”

She took the box gingerly and slowly opened it. Unwrapping the tissue paper, she pulled out a swath of purple silk. The many shades blended in the light, creating a glittering show as she held it up.

She looked up at him, “Oh, Gabe, this is beautiful, but you shouldn’t have.”

“I wanted to.” He reached up and gently caressed her cheek with the tips of his fingers.

“But the scarf I gave you wasn’t nearly as nice or expensive. You real --”

“Shhh.” He put his finger against her lips. “I wanted to. I saw it today when we were at Quincy Market. It was in one of the windows. The vibrancy and energy of it reminded me of you. It was made for you.”

Tears sprang to her eyes at his gesture. “Thank you. It’s exquisite.”

He bent down and kissed her and to hell with the lipstick. A few minutes later, they came up for air. “We’d better get going, or you’ll be late.”

She smiled, “Well, it seems you’re wearing my lipstick now.”

He went into the bathroom to wash it off, while she went to the bedroom to use the dresser mirror to reapply it. She came out wearing a different shirt, and the scarf draped around her neck. “I wanted to wear it tonight.”

He had to swallow over the lump in his throat. “It looks beautiful. I knew it was perfect for you.” He restrained himself from kissing her again as he looked at his watch. They headed out.

\* \* \* \*

They arrived in Chautauqua a little before six. Diana suggested they go to a drive-thru restaurant since they had time to spare. She wasn’t particularly hungry, but she knew these things could drag on for hours, and she might not get another chance to eat before midnight. When they walked into the bookstore at about a quarter past six, the manager immediately ushered them across the street so Diana could see the set up.

In the lobby of the auditorium the manager of the bookstore had set up a table. All of Diane’s books were displayed, with the newest one, *Knight of Fear*, placed most prominently. Other books, similar in tone to Diana’s, had also been grouped around a temporary cash register, giving everyone the opportunity to impulse buy.



Diana knew her books had done exceptionally well in the past seven years. Her style was slightly different, though. Although they were labeled as romances, she didn't think of them that way, as her main character, Major Lebretti, was never involved in the core romance. It was always a pair of secondary characters. His team always saved the day, though, which enabled the couple to get together.

So far she had mostly avoided the damsel in distress theme. She hated the woman always having to be rescued by the man. Technically, yes, most of Lebretti's team members were men, but they rescued the male characters as often as the female ones. Nothing gave her more pleasure than when a female teen reader commented on her strong female characters, even when they were "victims."

Only her agent knew, but the book due to her publisher in a few weeks was the final book in the "Knight" series. She wanted to put Lebretti and his men to rest. They were becoming too personal to her. It felt like they were real. She had decided one more book, where she would make Lebretti fall in love, and that was it for the series.

She had already begun work on another series. It was in the final revision stage, having already been accepted by her publisher. That was one of the reasons for this tour. Getting up sales for her present book, as well as informing the public of her new series. The first one was due out in less than nine months. This one had a female protagonist. It, also, couldn't technically be called a romance, as she didn't live happily ever after, but Diana's plan was for her to meet "Mr. Right," and they would fight the bad guys together.

She was proud of everything she had accomplished over the years. Although still fairly young, she was a well-known author. Not at Steven King or Nora Roberts level, but she was doing well. Maybe it was time for her to concentrate less on her career and more on herself and her personal life.

"Are you going to sit in the audience or backstage?" Diana asked Gabe when the manager excused herself for a minute to check on something.

"The audience. Toward the back of the auditorium. It will give me a better view of everything. I'm sure nothing will happen, but I want to see if anyone strange or unusual shows up."

Diana laughed at that. "Gabe, unusual describes my entire fan base. I have everything from housewives to teenagers and businessmen to young jocks." She knew his preconceived notions of who bought romantic paranormals were going to be challenged tonight. It would be good for him, she decided.

"Now, no hitting on any cute women while I'm talking my head off up there."

"You're the only woman I have eyes for." He kissed the palm of her hand.

Diana snickered at that comment. People were starting to arrive, and she wanted to center herself before she started. She had already told Gabe that she would be leaving him to do so, and he had encouraged her to remember to strengthen her shields at the same time.

They followed the manager to the room that had been set aside for her to relax in. She had asked for somewhere quiet she could sit before the reading. It was obviously the small “green room” for the school actors, but it suited her purposes.

She turned to the manager, “Thank you. I know it’s an odd request, but I just need some quiet time before I face everyone out there. Call it stage fright.” She smiled at the woman.

“Oh, don’t worry. We’ve had stranger requests, often from less experienced writers who seem to think we owe them the world for coming to our store.” The manager didn’t seem bothered at all. “I can completely understand it, anyway. I know if I had to face fifty to two hundred people, I would be agitated, too. I’ll come get you about ten minutes before we start, all right?”

“Please. And again, thank you.”

Gabe checked the room, making sure everything was okay. “Call me if you need me.”

She felt suffused by warmth as he reminded her he would be there if anything happened. It was amazing the way he did that. “I will.” He gave her a quick kiss before leaving her to her pre-reading routine.

Diana sat down in a comfortable chair and closed her eyes. It made perfect sense to her now why she always felt better after meditating. She was amazed that she hadn’t had a problem before last night. Today was definitely not the time to break with tradition, though, even with all of Gabe’s help on her shields. She looked at her watch. Twenty minutes to herself. Just enough time.

\* \* \* \* \*

Gabe wasn’t really worried. He was pretty sure the attack the previous night had been directed toward him, but even if that were the case, if they had identified Diana, she was possibly at risk.

Looking at the people arriving, he saw that she hadn’t been exaggerating. Her fans were a motley group.

“Are fans usually this ... varied?” Gabe asked the manager during a lull.

“No, not usually, but Diana writes a different book. It’s not just romance, or mystery, or demons and vampires, it is a mixture of everything. Surprisingly, it’s a mix that works very well. She has people who would never pick up a romance reading her books avidly, same with those that don’t like paranormals.” She looked at him. “Haven’t you read any of your own girlfriend’s work?”

“Um, well, we’ve only been together for a short while.” Gabe felt uncomfortable. He was usually in charge, and here he stood, stuttering like a teenager being reprimanded by his teacher.

"Here." She handed him a book titled *Knight of the Future*. "It's Diana's first in the series. By the looks of this crowd, if she stays and signs all of their books, you'll probably have time to read most of it. You should like it. She's been credited with an incredible ability to get into the hero's head, as though she really knows what it's like to fight demons."

Gabe started to dig out his wallet, when she stopped him. "Don't worry, I'll mark it down as part of expenses for tonight. If you and she stay together, you'll remember us next time a signing comes along," she said with a conspiratorial smile. "Go sit in the back of the auditorium. We aren't going to dim the lights too much as she has to see to answer questions, so you should have plenty of light."

Gabe took the book and headed toward where she directed. What the heck, it would give him something to do other than stare at Diana all night.

\* \* \* \* \*

Three hours later he was fuming. Where did she get all this info from? Who the hell was she? She had been playing him for a fool this entire time. Who sent her and what did she want?

He looked at the book in his hand. He turned to the back blurb for the first time.

*When a U.S. senator's son gets kidnapped, Major Lebretti and his team are called in for the rescue. But this is no ordinary kidnapping. The kidnappers aren't human, and they plan on sacrificing their prisoner on the night of the new moon. For Lebretti and his men, this is a standard mission. But what comes after they rescue Scott Brown is anything but standard. They must face the fact that even they might not be able to survive what awaits them.*

Other than the fact it hadn't been a senator's son, but a governor's daughter, she had gotten almost all the details of one of the most fucked-up missions his team had ever been on.

They had gotten the girl out, but had been unable to eradicate the nest. They'd been hunted through a Central American jungle for nearly two weeks before they'd finally got airlifted out. It was not one of his fondest memories.

They'd avoided drug cartels, revolutionaries, and demons. At the same time, they had to contend with a twenty-year-old spoiled little brat who whined about her incompetent rescuers constantly. She never seemed to think about the fact that if she hadn't willingly gone off with a stranger in the middle of a foreign country, none of it would have ever happened.

It was all here. In Diana's book. The spoiled girl wasn't there, it was a spoiled boy, who shaped up by the end of the book and saved a local girl, but it was all there. Nearly every word, every thought that had gone through his head during the mission. There was stuff there that he hadn't told anyone. How did she know?

He studied her as she smilingly signed books for her fans. Books that never should have been written. He watched her with eyes that had gone ice cold and swore he would find out who she was and what she was up to.

## Chapter Eight

Diana was exhausted. This was probably the biggest signing she'd done, and it took more out of her than she'd expected. Thank God for Gabe and his help with her shields. Without it, she didn't think she would have ever survived. People had waited for hours just to have her sign their books. She was eternally grateful, but sometimes couldn't fathom why they wanted her signature so badly.

She had to admit that this was one of her favorite parts of writing, though. It was the perfect chance to meet people that loved what she did, who felt for her characters nearly as much as she did. She was always eager to discuss her books and writing in general, but it was good to be heading back to the hotel. Definitely bedtime.

Glancing over at Gabe, Diana realized he was still wearing the same scowl he'd had when they'd left the school.

"I'm sorry it took so long. You must have been bored out of your mind." She reached for him, touching his rock-hard leg.

"Bored," he muttered half under his breath, not taking his eyes from the empty road or hands off the wheel.

"Gabe? What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I'm just tired."

Diana knew that couldn't be the only thing, but she didn't know what to say to him. Maybe he'd received a phone call during her book signing that irritated him? Well, whatever it was, she was too tired to concentrate on it right now. She would have to deal with it later. She didn't have the energy to play these games right now.

They got to the hotel and rode the elevator up to their floor in silence. At the door to her room, he waited while she got out her key. She turned and looked at him. "Are you coming in?"

“No, not tonight.”

Diana was hurt. “Okay. Thanks for today. I appreciate it. Goodnight.”

“Night.” Short, nothing more.

Opening the door, she slid in quickly, purposely not looking back as she closed it. Leaning against it, she wondered what had happened. Why on earth was he acting like this? She hadn’t done anything that she knew of. She had told him how boring tonight would be. She didn’t think he was the type of person to sulk, so what was going on?

She couldn’t come up with any answers, so decided to take a shower before bed. It might help her relax. Locking the door, she walked into the bedroom to get undressed.

As she removed the scarf, she paused to think of the past few days. They had been fun and lighthearted. She’d enjoyed herself so much, she’d even begun thinking about beyond these two weeks. So much for wishful thinking. Whatever his problem was, he could deal with it alone.

\* \* \* \* \*

Gabe locked the door to his own room. Looking around, he saw it was undisturbed. He walked over to his laptop to see if he had any news. He’d called Argus earlier to find out what else they knew about Diana, and he was promised a report in his email before the end of the night.

Argus, short for The Argus Foundation, was a paranormal research facility and a whole lot more. Publicly, they were known for their research on psychic abilities and paranormal activity. However, what few people knew was that many of those with abilities were a danger to the world. Argus, named for the mythological giant with one hundred eyes who saw all, was responsible for finding them. Not every paranormal creature was bad, but those that were needed someone who knew what they were doing to control or stop them.

Gabe headed up a unit that was responsible for hunting them down. Oftentimes they were sent on wild goose chases, other times they were put in situations like those Diana depicted in her books. There were some very dangerous creatures out there, bent on destroying or ruling humankind. If not for Argus, they most likely would have succeeded by now.

Half an hour later, he was just as confused as he had been before. Everything Diana had told him checked out. Her mother died when she was nine, her father when she was seventeen. Substitute teacher, archaeology degree. There was nothing at all that suggested she might have any ulterior motives or special knowledge about any of his missions or the secret objective of Argus.

She’d broken into the publishing field about seven years ago with her “Knight” series about an agency that dealt with paranormal problems. Argus had started a file on her, just in case, but no connection had been made to anything unusual. She was considered just another

in the string of writers about the paranormal that had been cropping up for the last decade or so.

So how did she know about his missions? After reading most of the first book at the signing, he'd called the Foundation and put in the request for information. He then bought the next three in the series. In each one of them, she described more of his missions. She changed places and names, and even a situation or two, but basically, they were his missions. Not only his missions, but she included his thoughts, his feelings. Where did she get her info? How did she get it?

\* \* \* \* \*

Diana opened her eyes, instantly wide-awake with the knife in her hand. She glanced around the room in the diffused light from the window. Nothing here. She heard it then. Barely audible, it was the sound of her suite door opening. She knew she had locked it. Quietly getting up, Diana moved between the sitting room and bathroom doors. Whoever it was would not find her unprepared.

*Diana, it's me,* she heard in her head.

*Gabe?*

"Can I come in?"

Diana realized it was him in the other room. "Come in? Sounds to me like you already are in," she snapped loudly.

"I am," Gabe called from the other side of the bedroom door. As Diana watched, it slowly opened.

"Shit, Gabe. You should know better than to do that. I could have hurt you." She walked across the room quickly, away from him, the knife down at her side.

"I know; that's why I warned you." He appeared in the doorway. "You didn't answer my knock."

"Knock?" Diana glared at him as she turned to face him.

"Okay, I didn't knock. I knew you wouldn't answer it, so I didn't even bother trying."

"What do you want?"

"I want to talk."

"Talk? Well, damn, if you wanted to talk, why didn't you pick up the phone?" Diana gestured with the knife still in her hand.

"We needed to talk in person." Gabe took a couple steps into the room.

"What are you doing here, anyway? I don't want you here."

"We need to talk."

"Yeah, you already said that, but I don't want to talk to you. Go away." She knew she probably sounded petulant, but damn it, he had hurt her earlier.

"I know I hurt you; that's part of the reason we need to talk. Please, Diana."

Diana stood there glaring at him. If he thought he could just come in here and demand she talk to him, he had another thought coming. Walking over to the phone she picked it up. "I want you to leave. If you don't, I'll call security."

Gabe spread his hands out in a sign of peace. "I'm sorry."

"Excuse me?"

"I'm sorry I was such an asshole earlier. I had good reason. Or thought I did."

"You did, did you? Care to elaborate, oh, great one?" She slammed the phone down.

"Diana."

"Don't 'Diana' me. You break into my room in the middle of the night and then argue with me and expect me to -- wait. How the hell did you get in here?"

"I picked the lock."

"Picked the lock? It's an electronic key card."

"I know. But it's possible to pick it with the right tools."

"I had the deadbolt on. I know I did."

"I know. I moved it."

"Moved it how?" Diana narrowed her eyes at him.

"Telekinetically."

"Telekinetically?"

"I told you I could move things."

"No, you told me you could start fires."

"Well, yeah, I can move things, too." Gabe ran his fingers through his short brown hair. "Nothing big. In fact, the deadbolt is probably the extent of my abilities, but yeah, I can move small things."

"Great. A secret agent who reads thoughts, starts fires, and moves things with his mind. What freaking fantasy land have I landed in?"

"That's what we need to talk about."

Sighing, she crossed her arms across her chest as she debated picking up the phone again, but curiosity got the better of her. She still had the knife, and she knew how to use it, but damned if she didn't want to find out what the hell this was all about. "Fine, go ahead. Let's talk."

He walked over to her and sat on the side of the bed. "Can we sit while we talk about this? It's gonna take a bit."

Scowling, she stepped back and sat on the ottoman in front of the chair near the window. Sitting in this location still gave her plenty room to maneuver. She placed the knife beside her, still close at hand.



Gabe sighed. "I need to know where you get your ideas from."

"What? What ideas?"

"The ideas for your books."

"What does this have to do with you breaking in here in the middle of the night?"

"Diana, please. Where do you get your ideas?"

"Same place any writer does. They just come to me." She wasn't sure if she wanted to tell him where she actually got them. This was getting too weird. She had started this vacation with nothing more important on her plate than the last of her book signings. Now she was dealing with being mugged, harassed in her own bedroom, and questioned like a murder suspect. No, she had made some bad choices in her life, but getting involved with Gabe seemed to top the list of stupid ones.

"They just come to you? From where?"

"Gabe, what are you getting at? If I knew, maybe I could answer you better."

Gabe leaned his elbows on his knees, urging Diana with his body language. "Diana, your first book, *Knight of the Future* ... I was there."

"What do you mean, you were there?"

"Your main character, Major Lebretti? He's me. Every thing he did, every thought he had. That was me."

Diana shook her head in confusion. What the hell was he talking about? She was starting to really get worried now. He was nuts. Biting her bottom lip, she thought it made a sick kind of sense, really. Get her confidence and then strike when she was least expecting it. How could she be so wrong? She usually had better judgment than this. Maybe he *was* her strange letter writer.

Diana glanced at the door, gauging the distance between her and it. There was no way she could get there without Gabe stopping her, but she still had the knife. She reached down and made sure she had a good hold on the weapon. She might very well need it. If she had to, she could hurt him enough that she'd be able to get away. Always better safe than sorry.

*But what about all the help he has given you? He helped you when your shields broke. He knew what to do. But that was even more evidence that he was the one. Who else but someone who could read minds would be able to help her? How would he even know that he needed to? Who says that she could even read any minds but his? She couldn't hear anyone downstairs. He would be able to get into her mind, and read her thoughts, and ... Stop! This was getting her nowhere. Just follow his lead, and see where he goes with this. Maybe there was sense to all of this.*

"Gabe, that's make-believe. There is no Major Lebretti. There was no boy that needed rescuing from demons. It all came out of my head."

"Damn it, Diana. I know there wasn't any boy. It was a girl, two girls, in fact. And it did happen."

Gabe watched the emotions flick across her face. He knew he must sound crazy, but he needed her to understand. He needed to know exactly where she got these ideas of hers.

"Eight years ago, a governor's daughter was kidnapped. She was taken while in Central America on vacation with three friends. She and one of the others stupidly agreed to go somewhere with a guy they met in a bar, and they disappeared. Once it was ascertained it wasn't your standard kidnappers, my men and I were sent in to find them and get rid of whomever, or whatever, had them."

He looked away as he continued. "It all went horribly wrong. We were able to get her out, but not her friend. We were too late to save her. To top it off, we weren't able to get to safety where we could be picked up. Our radio was destroyed, and we had no way to contact anyone. We had to trudge through the jungle for two weeks avoiding demons, revolutionaries, and drug runners. We almost didn't make it.

"Your book told our story." Gabe turned and looked at Diana. "Yeah, you changed the sex of the hostage, changed a few things here and there, but you told our story. You told *my* story, Diana. Every thought I read in Major Lebretti's head, every decision he made, I remember making those decisions.

"Now, there are only two ways that's possible. Either I'm crazy and deluding myself, or you know things you shouldn't. Please, tell me where you get your stories."

Gabe realized he was breaking all sorts of regulations telling her all of this, but he needed her to talk to him. He needed her to tell him where she got her information. The odds of her being a plant were almost nil. Her travel arrangements, the book signings, they'd been set months before. He hadn't even decided to come to Boston until last week. So if she wasn't a plant, what was going on?

Diana looked at him for a moment. He couldn't read her, but he knew, no, he hoped she was beginning to understand.

"In my dreams."

Diana had spoken so low he could barely hear her. "What? Where?"

"In my dreams." She looked up at him, her eyes wide. Her voice was hesitant as she told him, "I dreamt them. Everything you just talked about, I dreamed. Exactly. About eight years ago I started having these strange dreams. I thought it was just an extension of watching too much Buffy. They all seemed to deal with demons and vampires and all the nasties we read stories about, but everyone knows aren't real. It got so bad I couldn't sleep.

"One day I decided to write them down. It just made sense. I was having nightmares, maybe if I wrote them down, I could figure out what was behind them and make them stop. They didn't stop, but they got less intense. I was able to view them more objectively. I could detach myself from the emotions and actions."

She hugged herself as though cold, the knife forgotten at her side. “Before, I was part of them, I was the leader of the group, the man I called Major Lebretti. After I started writing them down, I was still in the leader’s head, but I wasn’t him anymore. I became more of an observer. The dreams became easier to deal with, and I started sleeping better.

“I’d been writing short stories for years, subsidizing my income, publishing where I could. The thought occurred to me that I could make these dreams into a book. It was actually pretty easy. Just about everything I needed was there. Plot, dialogue, motivation. I took what I wrote down about the dreams, changed a couple things, made it more saleable, then submitted it. I hit the market just right. The first one was accepted almost immediately.

“I’ve done the same thing ever since. Take a couple of the dreams, combine them, and sell them. It’s one of the reasons why I’ve been able to put out so many so quickly.”

Her gaze was intense as she looked at him. “I tried to stop writing them, I did. But then the dreams got worse again. I couldn’t stop them. I decided recently that I would just write them down for me, but not publish any more. I have one more due out next year, and that’s the last one.

“I was getting too caught up in them. Major Lebretti and his men were growing too important to me. They’re too much like a part of my family to write about their pains any more. I dreamt one of them died, and I cried for days over it. I can’t share that any more.”

Gabe was stunned. Six months ago they’d lost Doug Harris. That loss had been the reason why he’d insisted his team take some time off. They’d all needed a break.

But how was this possible? Okay, she was telepathic, but the world was full of telepaths. Why her? This made no sense.

“Doug Harris was killed. He’d been with us for two years.”

Diana nodded.

“Diana, this just doesn’t make sense.” He shook his head in denial.

“You’re telling me.”

“Why would you be receiving my thoughts?”

“I don’t know.” Diana shrugged. “How many telepaths are there?”

“That we know of? At least a couple thousand in the U.S. alone. Who knows how many there are uncounted or with latent abilities.”

“You’re the expert in this field, not me. Why me?”

“That’s what I want to know.”

There was silence for a moment before Diana broke it. “That’s why you were so angry earlier.”

“I wasn’t angry, exactly,” Gabe said defensively.

“Pissy? Short-tempered? Sulky?”

“Okay, angry.” He wasn’t happy being called on his own childish behavior. He knew he could have, and should have, handled it better. If he’d been thinking straight he would have, but she’d blindsided him.

“You didn’t trust me.”

“How could I? These were things nobody else knew. Nobody but me.”

“Exactly, nobody but you.” Diana leaned forward, almost urging Gabe to understand. “If I had been reading reports, I wouldn’t have been able to do what you said I did. Write down all your actions, thoughts, feelings. With the spontaneous connection we had the other night you should have thought before you got mad.”

“Maybe I should have. I tried, but I don’t know what came over me. I was ... I felt ...” Gabe was at a loss. He couldn’t find the right words to describe the pain he’d felt.

“Violated?”

Gabe started at her intently. “Exactly. That I’d been violated and betrayed. How did you know?”

She was silent for a moment or two. She turned her head away and looked as though she was going to say something she wasn’t proud of. “Cause part of me felt bad for doing what I was doing. I started to feel like an eavesdropper or voyeur. An unwilling one, but one nonetheless.

“I felt like I was taking something, using something, without permission. But I didn’t know. I honestly didn’t know where the dreams were coming from.” She looked up at him, her eyes wide and glistening with unshed tears.

“I told myself I was being ridiculous. I believed they were coming from my own head. After all, where else could they be coming from? Everyone knows there’s no such thing as vampires and werewolves. It had to be make-believe.”

Gabe got up and walked over to her, squatting in front of her. “I’m sorry, Diana, but it’s not make-believe.”

“It has to be. You said demons earlier, that you were running away from demons. You didn’t really mean demons like in my books, right?”

“Yes, I meant real demons.”

“But demons are beings that you have to call up in a circle.”

“That’s one type, yes. There are also the demons that, well, the kind you would have seen on Buffy. They live in this world, only hidden.”

Diana didn’t say anything for a few moments, then shook her head in denial. “No, there is no way this is even possible.”

“Yes, it is. And yes, there are demons. You wrote about them. According to you, you saw them through my eyes. You tell me.”

Diana shivered as she sat there. “Let me get dressed, and we can talk some more, please?”

Gabe agreed. He was surprised she didn’t kick him out. “I’ll meet you in the sitting room.” He knew she didn’t want him in her bedroom while she changed. Their relationship had changed in the last few hours, and there was nothing he could do about that right now.

\* \* \* \* \*

Diana waited for Gabe to leave her bedroom. She looked at the clock. It was four in the morning. Great. Two hours of sleep. She knew she wasn’t in the best mental position to deal with this, but she obviously had no choice. “While you’re out there, order me a gallon of hot tea,” she yelled out to him. She grabbed some jeans and a shirt and headed into the bathroom. Just a quick shower to wake up, and she might be able to handle this better. It didn’t matter that she’d taken one before she went to sleep; she needed another one.

As she showered, she thought about the things she had seen in her dreams. There was no way most of those things were human. She had seen what they were and what they were capable of doing. If they were real, then why didn’t people know about them? But how, why, would they be faked?

Maybe she had lost her mind. Those things couldn’t be real, could they? If they weren’t, then she was going insane. If they were, then the whole world was going insane. She snorted. *Yeah, right, like this was sane to be even contemplating.* What had she gotten herself into?

## Chapter Nine

She walked into the sitting room fifteen minutes later to see Gabe leaning back on the settee. His head was back, his hands over his eyes. He was still wearing the same clothes he'd worn to her reading, only now they were wrinkled and disheveled. He looked tense and exhausted. He must not have gone to sleep when they got back. *Too bad. He started this. He'll have to deal with no sleep.*

As she walked over to him, there was a knock on the door. He was instantly alert.

"It's probably room service." She went to the door, and checked the peephole as she asked who it was. The server stood outside with his cart, waiting patiently. Opening the door, she allowed him to wheel it in. Gabe had apparently been hungry, too, because in addition to her tea, there was coffee for him, and an assortment of breakfast snacks.

She signed the bill, and the waiter left with a hefty tip. Gabe didn't relax until the door was closed and locked. Only then did she realize his hand had been behind his back, as though ready to pull a weapon. *Oh, great, he's not only crazy, but paranoid, too.*

They helped themselves to the offerings. He grabbed a couple donuts in addition to coffee, while she opted for tea alone. She didn't think her stomach was ready for anything solid.

Diana had left the knife in the bedroom. She honestly didn't think Gabe was a danger to her. Sitting down a fair distance from him, she decided to take the bull by the horns. "Okay, let's start at the beginning. Who are you, and what do you do for a living?"

Almost immediately Gabe looked like he was going to balk at telling her any more information about what his job was.

"No, if we're to get to the bottom of this, it's truth time." She stopped him before he could even start. "Complete truth. I obviously know more than I'm supposed to anyway, so you might as well fill in the gaps."

Gabe hesitated for a moment as though trying to decide how much to tell her. Then he seemed to make up his mind. "I work for a group called The Argus Foundation. It's based in Wisconsin, outside of Milwaukee. They do all kinds of research into paranormal and psychic phenomena.

"They are funded privately. A widow started it over a hundred years ago. She wanted to find out how her husband died and used her entire fortune to do so. Rumor has it that she knew he'd been killed by paranormal means, but didn't want to go public with that information, as she knew she would be marked as either crazy or condemned for dealing with the devil. Instead, she set up the foundation to do what she couldn't."

Gabe stood up and started to walk around the room, gesturing with his hands. "It has two functions. One, the public mission, is as I said, to research and study phenomena. The other, which few people know about, is to hunt down any paranormal activity that is potentially harmful. We then study it, and if needed, eradicate it.

"Not all non-humans are bad. The foundation even has a few working for it. We aren't a mindless vigilante group. We study and protect."

"Non-humans? What do you mean by that?" Diana watched him pacing. He didn't seem nervous, as though he was lying. But he was tense. She wasn't any more relaxed, but sat back, listening to everything he had to say.

"Probably what you expect. Demons, vampires, weres, the works. All those stories had to come from somewhere, right? Well, most of them are fairly accurate."

"So you're telling me vampires, werewolves, fairies, all of them are real?" Diana raised an eyebrow in disbelief.

"Well, I've never met an elf or a dragon, but there's probably some validity to the legends."

Diana thought her head was going to explode. Even though this sounded unreasonable, part of her felt compelled to believe it. He didn't have anything to gain by lying, and she had her own evidence to go by. She finally realized she really had no choice but to believe.

How else would he have known what she had changed in the book? She had dreamt it exactly as he just told her it really happened. The changes had been for publication reasons. The only place the dream version was written was in her journal. This had to be true. Either that, or she was as insane as Gabe was.

"All right. I guess I have to accept this for the time being. You say you're on some sort of hit squad for this foundation of yours?"

Gabe turned to face her directly. He walked over and sat in the chair next to her. "Not a hit squad. We're sent out when there are reports of danger to people or other beings. We are the ones who hunt the things that can hurt you."

"So you're kind of avengers or something?"

“Not exactly. We don’t avenge all wrongs or go out willy-nilly whenever there’s a complaint, and we are government-sanctioned.”

“You’re sponsored by the government?” Diana felt like she was getting more confused by the second.

“Yes and no. Like I said, we are privately funded and privately controlled. It was set up that way to avoid any conflict of interest an administration might have. We don’t want someone going on a spree deciding that all the fey need to be destroyed or anything like that. So this way, we are condoned, but not controlled.

“It basically gives us things like permission to carry concealed and official IDs, but none of the other fringe benefits or potential problems like bureaucracy or financial oversight committees. We could survive without their approval if needed, but like that case with the governor’s daughter, sometimes we prove useful.”

“You also are trained in your psychic talents?”

“Yes. It is a stipulation of being recruited. We all need some talent, and at least a minimal ability in telepathy. At least those in the commando groups do. We try not to use radios on missions since a lot of the things we hunt have exceptional hearing, and we can block telepathy better than radio sounds.”

“Okay. I am gonna assume that I know what your team does, and I will accept that I dreamt events as they actually happened. I have never seen you guys attack anyone that wasn’t hurting someone else. The rest, I will have to trust you on.”

She paused and looked at him for a moment. “You do know how far out this all sounds, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I know.”

“I think I am doing very well accepting and believing it all without going into hysterics.”

“You are. And it is all true, despite how fantastic it all seems.” Gabe sat forward in his chair.

She sighed. “Okay, is there anything else I need to know right now?”

“Not that I can think of.”

“Any assignment you’re on right now?”

“Nope, what I said before is true. I was sent here on a fact-finding mission.” At her questioning look, he explained, “There were reports of ghosts having been seen in a local historical establishment. I checked it out, but it turned out to be kids playing pranks. Since there was nothing there, I am now on vacation.”

“What about me?”

“What do you mean?”

“Did you know about me before we met?”



"No. Nothing at all. I will admit you have a file in the agency, but I didn't know about it until I asked for it tonight." Gabe shook his head.

"A file?"

"They keep a file on anyone who might have possible contact with paranormal activity. We have files on everyone from writers to senators. We have a lot of authors because of the recent influx of paranormal books and TV shows and movies."

"And what do they do with these files?"

"Nothing." Gabe leaned back and took a sip of his coffee. "They just like to know who is aware of what is truly going on in the world. If it looks like you have inside info, they keep a closer eye on you."

"And if they find out you do? Have inside info, I mean?"

"As far as I know, again, nothing. If it's a writer, they accept that he or she is presenting it as fiction, and actually, the more the public is fed fiction, the less likely they are ever to believe it's real. After an author has been writing it as fiction for years, he can't turn around and say, 'Oh, yeah, by the way, this is all real.' No one will believe him."

"True." Diana nodded in agreement and understanding.

"The others all know because of something that happened to a family member. The friend or family member was saved, and they keep quiet out of gratitude. Then, there are others who just suspect something, but can't prove it. I have never heard of anyone being hurt or persecuted by us because of their knowledge."

Gabe continued after a pause. "I think they probably also use the files as sources for future possible recruits. Rumor has it that one or two of the more popular paranormal romance writers are responsible for some, shall we say timely misdirection."

"Authors? Who?" Diana knew enough of the other authors in her field to be curious.

"I don't know. I don't read paranormals," Gabe answered her with a distracted smile. "I know Steve has mentioned his favorite is a Michelle something or other."

"Steve?"

"One of my coworkers. He works in the lab."

"Lab?"

Gabe sighed. "Research lab. He's the one I sent the knife to. If there's any occult connection, he'll find it."

"So if my books are copies of your missions, why didn't anyone notice it?"

"Most of my missions are top secret. The people in charge of the files are supposed to know just enough to be able to figure out who actually knows something, and who is just making it up. Apparently someone guessed wrong in your case."

Diana sat for a moment taking in all Gabe had just told her. "So where does this leave us?"

"I don't know. I still don't know why you would have received anything from me. Hell, if we get down to it, how the hell is it possible I could have sent it to you?" Gabe slammed down his cup, spilling coffee on the table. "I stay shielded. Even when trying, the furthest anyone has ever been able to send is five or ten miles."

"I have no idea about any of this, Gabe." Diana reached for a napkin to clean up the mess he had made.

"Did anything happen to you before you started dreaming?"

"What do you mean?"

"Anything traumatic, life threatening, anything like that."

Diana thought for a moment, "No, not that I can recall. My aunt had died recently, but that was it."

"Were you close to her?"

"We lived with her after my mother died, but we had never been what would be called close. Anyway, I know the dreams didn't start until at least six months after she died. She died in June, and I remember waking up from the first dream, sweating from the heat, even though it was freezing outside. I remember seeing my neighbors' Christmas lights flicking on and off." Her mouth twisted. "Yeah, I know, weird thing to remember, but there you go." She shrugged.

Gabe sat there, not saying anything at first. "I don't know. Maybe someone back at Argus can figure it out. I'll give them a call later and see where it leads."

"Are you going to mention me by name?" She still wasn't comfortable with the thought of a secret organization gathering information on her. It was all too unsettling. Finding out her dreams were not really dreams. Finding out everything she wrote about was real. This was too much. He was too much. She could feel herself retreat from information overload. She could think about things later; right now she had earned the right to some peace and quiet and alone time.

"I'm going to have to. They need to know who to check out for connections."

"What do you mean connections?"

"There has to be a reason you received these dreams. We have to be linked or connected somehow. Maybe something in our past. Hell, I don't know, but there's no other explanation. We have to figure out what it is."

"Fine. You do that. I guess them having all my information is no worse than Big Brother checking my research on the Internet. But while you do that, I am going back to bed. I'm tired, and I don't want to deal with this anymore." She got up from the table and started to put everything back on the tray.

"But --"

"Don't." Diana spun around to glare at him. She was exhausted, worn out, and she realized she was more than a little bit angry. "We've talked enough. You've had your coffee, and I want sleep."

"Diana --"

"Gabe, what else is there to talk about? I have dreams that are connected to you. We don't know why, and we don't know how. You said you'll check into it. Full stop. There is nothing else we can do tonight. I. Want. To. Go. To. Sleep." She emphasized the words with her hands on her hips, glaring at him.

"Okay." Gabe gave in as he got up from the table. "I'll see you in the morning, then."

"Just call first, I'm not sure if I'll be up to visitors, okay?"

"Okay." Gabe opened his mouth as though to say something further, but decided not to and quietly left.

\* \* \* \* \*

Diana spent most of the day in her room. She still wasn't completely over her anger. He had broken into her room during the night and forced her to talk about things. *Forced?* Okay, so he didn't physically force, but he wouldn't leave until he got what he wanted. She didn't like that kind of high-handed attitude. *Yeah, but you got more information, too,* she reminded herself. *Well, I would have liked to have gotten it in a more civilized manner.* She just didn't want to deal with it. Her shields were up and completely solid. The last thing she wanted right now was him getting into her brain.

This was supposed to be a combination vacation and work trip, so she decided to work. She wrote notes about everything she had seen and everywhere she had gone. Diana knew even the smallest fact or idea could come in handy in her line of work. After a while, though, it got depressing. Everything she had done in Boston, she'd done with Gabe. Switching gears, she decided to get out revisions on a work in progress that had nothing to do with Gabe and his unit.

Around lunch time, the ringing phone caused her to jump. She looked over at it, but opted to ignore it. She didn't want to deal with Gabe right now.

But how was he dealing with this? Diana's conscience wouldn't let her blame it all on him. He was the one who had just found out his life had been spied upon. He had just as much right, if not more, to be upset. Was he okay? Did he need to talk? She thought about reaching out to him, to make sure he was okay, but quickly pulled back. He could deal with it. He was the one that knew this stuff was real. He didn't have anywhere near the shit she did to process.

Shortly after that, she heard him calling her.

*Diana? Are you all right?*

*I'm fine. I'm working,* Diana responded to him curtly.

*If you need me, I'm here.* Gabe's thoughts felt almost tentative.

*I'm fine. Thank you. But I have work to do, and I need quiet.* Diana concentrated on strengthening her shields and shut him out. She was being truthful, she did have work to do and didn't want him distracting her any more. Once she was working, she knew she would be fine.

When her stomach growled, Diana glanced at the clock, and did a double take as she realized how much time had passed. It was past dinnertime. She looked over at the phone, but stopped herself from reaching for it. She would be fine without him. She wondered if she should order room service since they still didn't know what the attack was about. Realizing she needed out of her room at least for a little while, she decided eating in one of the restaurants downstairs would be perfectly safe and would give her some more time to think.

Diana woke up fairly early the next morning and got ready to face the day. Checking her voice mail revealed no phone calls or messages from Gabe about the day before or plans for the new day. She wanted to get mad at him, to accuse him of sulking, but she knew that would be wrong. He had tried to contact her, and she had blown him off. If anyone was sulking, it was her. He was just giving her the time she had told him she needed.

She still wasn't sure if she had forgiven him for the way he had acted the other night. He'd pissed her off, being cold and rude on the way back to the hotel and then breaking into her room in the middle of the night. Yeah, he'd had his reasons, but she still wasn't sure it was enough. She knew she was probably being immature, but it was how she felt, and she couldn't change it that quickly. Maybe going out and having some fun would help. She left the room before nine, planning another day of sightseeing and shopping.

\* \* \* \* \*

Gabe waited in his room. He'd heard Diana move around and thought about calling her, but decided against it, choosing instead to keep to his original plan. He waited until he heard her leave for the day, then waited an extra half hour to make sure she hadn't forgotten anything. Calling her room to confirm she wasn't there, he snuck into her suite. He'd spent days with her, but had never been alone in her room. He suddenly felt intrusive and rude. Tamping down those feelings, he proceeded to search.

Nothing. There was nothing in her room that made a lie out of what she had told him. He'd searched everything. Her laptop wasn't even password-protected. She had notes on what they had seen in Boston, notes on other works. Everything was personal or writing related. She had a story marked for revisions that she'd obviously been working on yesterday. He started reading it. Different from the Major Lebretti books, it was still well-written, and had a style that sucked him right in. When he glanced at the clock, he was horrified to see how much time had passed.

Gabe knew if she was a plant, she would have made sure there wasn't anything incriminating to find. But no one is that good, he thought. The foundation hadn't contacted him with any new intel about her, either, despite his request for more information. But there would be nothing there, he was sure. No unaccounted-for monies, no offshore accounts, no strange emails. She was as clean as the proverbial whistle.

After making sure she was okay, he'd stayed away from her the day before for more than just her comfort level. He was getting attached to her too fast, and he didn't know enough about her. This connection they had was too new, too different for him to be comfortable with it.

It might take a while to get any more information on her from Argus, and he could be wrong about her, so he would just sit tight. Since she was going to be hanging around for two weeks, he had plenty of time. Taking one final look to make sure he hadn't left anything out of place, Gabe noticed the laptop was still open to her new book. He started towards it when he heard the electronic lock activate, and the door swung open.

## Chapter Ten

Diana was depressed. She had spent the last couple hours doing some more shopping and sightseeing, but her heart just wasn't in it. Perhaps she'd been too harsh on Gabe. If he really was her Major Lebretti, and she had come to believe that he was, he had to be as torn as she was. The things going through his head, the suspicions about her he must be feeling would be as strong as hers about him. He, too, was only trying to understand a confusing situation. Maybe she should call him, and they could talk.

She got back to the hotel much earlier than intended and realized she might even be able to catch Gabe before he left for lunch. Good. It would be the perfect excuse.

Shuffling her bags, she got the key in her door, and pushed it open. Looking up, she froze in the doorway.

"Hi," Gabe said, raising a hand halfheartedly.

Diana didn't say anything for a moment. She quickly thought. No, she hadn't given him a key. He had broken in again. When she wasn't here.

Moving slowly, Diana stepped over the threshold and placed her bags on the entry table. She knew if she wasn't careful, she would throw something at him while screaming like a banshee.

Gabe stood there, looking relaxed, as though he hadn't done anything wrong.

"Would you care to tell me what the fuck you're doing in my room?" Gabe cringed at Diana's curse.

Who did he think he was? What gave him the right to infringe on her privacy like this? *Just keep breathing, Diana, concentrate on your breathing and staying calm.*

"Um ..."

“Um? Now surely, the big, bad secret agent that you are can come up with a better excuse than ‘um.’” Diana watched him for a moment. He was like a little boy with his hand in the cookie jar, fidgeting with a tight look on his face.

“Did you find anything incriminating?” She gestured toward her laptop. “Anything catch your interest? Records of more of your missions?”

“Diana, I --”

“Don’t.” Diana put her hand up to forestall any excuse he might have. “Just, don’t. I would like you to please leave and not come back. I understand you were here because you still don’t trust me, fine. You can tell your precious Foundation anything you want. I don’t care. But I do not want to see you ever again.” Every word was articulated slowly and deliberately. If she didn’t, she would lose it. She would not let him get the better of her. No matter what he did.

Gabe just stood there, not moving. She walked toward him, brushing past to get to her laptop. “Go. Now. Please.” She couldn’t say any more. She stood with her back to him, and waited until she heard the door latch shut. Then she slowly brushed away the lone tear that slid down her cheek.

\* \* \* \* \*

Three hours later Gabe heard a knock at his door. Diana? Was she willing to talk to him? Had she come to listen to his excuse? Not that he had an excuse, except that he didn’t trust her, and that wasn’t much of an excuse, was it? But still, she was here.

He got up quickly. He didn’t know what he was going to say to her, but he needed to talk. He had messed up badly and needed to fix it.

“Gabe?”

He recognized the voice. It wasn’t Diana, it was Cole, his lieutenant.

He wrenched open the door. “What are you doing here? I ordered you to go on vacation.”

Cole stood in the doorway with his duffle bag in his right hand, his coat open, and a welcoming smile on his face. Only someone who knew him like Gabe did would be able to tell how tense and alert he really was. Cole never relaxed. Gabe knew that somewhere on him, he had at least three different knives and was probably wearing his Glock under his coat. Cole was always on guard, ready for anything.

Six foot four, two hundred and twenty pounds of packed muscle, and half Native American, Cole stood out in a crowd. Wearing his long, thick black hair in a braid that went halfway down his back somehow just added to his scary presence. He wasn’t much good when it came to unobtrusive undercover work, but he was one of the best at intimidation. He was also well known in the unit for his ability to attract females of any species. That, too,

came in handy on some missions. None of that mattered to Gabe right now. Cole wasn't only Gabe's lieutenant, he was also Gabe's closest friend.

"I was. I was in New Hampshire. Steve called me. He said it looked like you might need some backup."

"Steve? Why? What does he know?" Gabe remembered Steve was supposed to get back with him about the knife. "Damn, the dagger? Why didn't he call me?"

"Yeah, that." Cole motioned toward the room. Gabe stood back to let him in. This conversation was not the kind they should be having in a hallway. Cole dumped his duffel on one of the beds and sat down beside it. "He wasn't sure if you had access to a scrambler and didn't know if it was safe to talk to you over a phone."

"Well, as far as I know it's safe, but I guess that depends on what he found out." Gabe sat in one of the chairs. In addition to the two beds, he had a desk and a mini-bar of sorts in the entertainment center.

"Well, he said it's a ceremonial dagger like you probably suspected, but it's different from the usual bloodletting ones. In addition to the obvious blood gathering, you would traditionally use this to suck the energy out of someone that had the love or attention of someone you wanted."

"What? Someone wanted to kill Diana because they want me? That makes no sense." Gabe stood up and poured himself some water, offering the bottle to Cole, who shook his head.

"That's 'cause they didn't want to kill Diana. They wanted to kill you. Apparently this dagger is geared toward the masculine element or something. I didn't understand it completely, but you were definitely the target." Cole shrugged.

"That doesn't make sense, either." Gabe sat back down heavily. "She said she thought all of this was made up. She doesn't know anyone with that kind of power. Anyone who would have access to that kind of artifact."

"Well, think about it. What happened? Who was the one that was actually attacked?"

"They came after both of us, two on me, and one on her when I told her to run." Gabe stopped and thought for a second. "Initially I thought it was a mugging. After seeing the dagger, I assumed the attack was directed toward me, because the guy with the knife stayed on me. I figured it was just accidental she was there."

"Well, apparently there's something more."

"That's impossible. Cole, I've been through her stuff, hell, I've been in her head. She doesn't know anything."

"Well, someone does. That's what I'm here to help you find out. That and be your backup."

"Dammit."

Cole gestured to the room. "Where is she now?"



"I don't know. She went out again this afternoon. Um, we kind of had a fight. I think I messed up."

Cole raised an eyebrow at that. "So who is she, and why would someone want to kill you to get to her? And what do you mean you had a fight? You just met. How could you have had a fight already?" Cole leaned back, with a smirk on his face. "Something going on? Last I heard you were still unattached and planned on staying that way."

Gabe looked over at him. "Tell you what. Let's go grab a bite to eat and some drinks, and I'll tell you all about it."

\* \* \* \* \*

Diana arrived back at the hotel late. Exhausted, she stripped off her clothing to get ready for bed. She'd had another book signing, and thankfully, it was her last for this tour.

After Gabe left, she had spent the rest of the afternoon packing her things. Even after thinking about the situation, she knew she didn't want to see him again. She understood why he'd done what he had, but she couldn't accept it.

She hadn't wanted to go to the signing, but was glad she had. It had taken her mind off Gabe and everything that was going on for a little while. Luckily, it wasn't just her this time; it was a group of four authors, and there were no readings involved, just straight meeting fans and signing books.

It had been a last minute addition to the tour, a chance for some less popular authors to get more publicity. Her name had only been added last week, when she decided to stay in town longer.

The four of them had gone out for drinks afterwards. It was always nice to meet other authors, since writing tended to be such a solitary activity. She had met two of them before at conferences, and the other one was newly published. He was the only male of the group, so the ladies did their best to make him feel comfortable. It was never easy being the new kid on the block.

Looking at the clock, Diana realized how late it really was. Two o'clock in the morning. Lucky thing she was a night owl, or she wouldn't have survived this past week. The past few nights had been full of dreams and little sleep.

The dreams brought back memories of her mother and unexpected hopes for a future with Gabe. She thought about him in the room next to hers. Future, yeah, right. Like that was ever going to happen. She had no idea where those dreams came from, as she had decided long ago not to let herself get close to anyone. They always ended up leaving her one way or another.

This time, she was leaving. She still had no idea what to do about him. About this connection they shared, or why it had happened, but right now, that didn't matter. What did matter was keeping herself safe and sane. Removing herself from more pain.

Now that she knew where the dreams were coming from, she could make a stronger effort to block or control the effects they had on her. She didn't need to experience them so intensely again. She didn't need to see *him* again.

The attraction and everything that went with it was unimportant. It was probably partly telepathic. Between the dreams and his appearance, it was just survival of the fittest kicking in. It made sense that if two people with the same beneficial trait met up, their biological incentive would be to come together to strengthen that trait. Her mind must have recognized his ability and encouraged her body to react. It made as much sense as falling for him just because he was attractive. She could fight biology.

Diana was done with the book tour, and she was done with Gabe. It was time to move on. No more books about Major Lebreton, and hopefully, no more dreams. If she did have any, she would deal with them later. Setting her alarm for an early wake-up, she climbed into bed. She would need the next two hours of sleep. It wouldn't be enough, but she would be able to rest on the plane. It was time to leave Boston, and the memories it now held, behind her.

\* \* \* \* \*

When Gabe heard her arrive back in her room, he wanted to run over and shake her for worrying him. He had spent most of the evening since getting back from dinner with Cole worrying about her. Between wondering if whoever had arranged the attack had managed to get to her, and wondering who she was out with and what she was doing, he had been unable to sleep. He'd even tried to contact her telepathically, but she'd blocked him. It wasn't until around midnight he remembered that she had another book signing.

This wasn't like him. He never worried needlessly. If he was honest with himself, he couldn't even blame it on the liquor. It seemed when Diana was involved, he lost all common sense. He couldn't afford to do that.

He had come to accept that she was no threat to him or Argus. And if she wasn't a threat, that meant she was in danger. Mystical danger. This also meant she needed his help and that of the Foundation. Fighting the desire to go to her now, to see her, maybe hold her in his arms, he rolled over in bed. He knew it would be a bad idea. He would talk to her in the morning. Get everything straightened out.

Gabe woke at seven. He knew Diana liked to sleep in, so he had plenty of time to get ready. He heard sounds in her room about an hour and a half later, and went over to talk to her. The cleaning cart was in front of the open door. He walked in. "Diana?"

A cleaning lady came out of the bedroom. "Can I help you?"

"I was looking for the woman who has this room," Gabe lied, "We had an appointment."

"I'm sorry, sir, but this room is empty. We have the guest as having checked out this morning."

*Shit.* Gabe looked around quickly. All evidence of her occupancy was gone. He glanced at the cleaning lady. "Are you sure?" he asked aloud. As she answered, he read her. It was the truth. There hadn't been anything out of place in the room, either. He thanked the woman and headed out. Taking out his cell phone, he called Cole as he walked down the hall.

"She's gone."

"What do you mean, gone?"

"She checked out this morning."

"Are we sure she did it on her own?"

"I read the housekeeper, and nothing in the room seemed wrong to her. But I'm off to the airport to check on her now."

"I'll meet you in the lobby." Cole had gotten his own room at the hotel last night.

Cole met Gabe in the otherwise empty elevator going down. "Imagine meeting like this," he said raising an eyebrow. Gabe glared at him.

After a few seconds, Gabe relented and spat out, "Damn, I scared her away."

Cole laughed. "I don't know about that, bro. From what you told me, she's a strong woman. I don't think anything you did could have scared her away. She probably just figured you weren't worth the effort and went home."

"Worth the effort?" Gabe was distracted from his goal for a minute. "What do you mean, I'm not worth the effort? I'm worth more than you can ever hope to be, bud."

"Well, I don't have women running away from me."

"She's not running away from me. Like you said, she just went home." Gabe valiantly tried to get back some of his lost dignity, but it didn't seem to be working.

Gabe walked up to the front desk to ask about Diana checking out while Cole waited in the lobby. Typical of hotel procedures, they didn't want to tell him anything until he identified himself as her brother. Then, they handed over a package she had left for him.

"What's that?" Cole asked as Gabe approached him.

"Something Diana left for me." He didn't want to open it. He knew what he would find inside.

"Well, aren't you going to open it?"

They waited until they got to Gabe's room before he opened the box. Inside he saw what he'd expected. The knife lay on top of folded tissue paper. Opening the paper, he saw the scarf he had given her. There was a note lying on top of it.

*Gabe,*

*Thank you for a wonderful time. I promise no more books, you can trust me on that. No one will ever know about what you've told me. I appreciate the help you gave me on my shields. Between that and the memories still coming back, I'm sure I'll be fine. I'm sorry, but I can't keep this.*

*Thank you,*

*Diana*

Gabe felt his stomach drop as he finished the note. Then, he started to get angry. This was hers, dammit, and he would be damned if he was going to let her get away with being so cavalier about it. "Get your stuff ready. We're going to the airport to see where she went."

"And then?"

"We find her."

After gathering their things and checking out of the hotel, they headed to the airport. Since 9/11, things had gotten a lot more difficult, but some types of identification still held sway. After getting a supervisor to the counter, Gabe was able to verify that, yes, Ms. Temis had checked in, alone, with all her bags. She had changed her later ticket for one earlier that morning, and had left on a six o'clock flight.

She was heading home to Seattle. Gabe booked himself and Cole on the next flight. It left in less than an hour.

Gabe made calls. Plans took shape for when they landed in Seattle. One of the other team members in that area agreed to keep an eye on her place until they got in.

"Gabe, do you know why we're doing this?" Cole asked his friend.

Gabe gave it some thought. Why were they chasing after her? Was it because of his feelings for her? Or did he really think she was in some serious danger? Yeah, the dagger was a bad sign, but there was always the chance that it was just coincidence. He had no evidence other than that to go on. Something told him that it wasn't just coincidence. Diana was in more danger than she could possibly imagine.

"She needs us, Cole. I just feel it in my bones."

"Does she need us, or is it you need her?" Cole asked seriously.

"Both."

On the plane, Gabe checked the rest of the information Argus had found on her. Prior to being published, she'd had no contact with anyone in the paranormal realm.

After her mother's death, she and her father had moved to Seattle to live with his sister. Apparently there was no other family. Nothing tied her to any religious groups or anything that would introduce her to possible mystic types.

When she graduated from college, she'd spent the next few years living with her aunt, who had died about nine years ago. Diana still lived in the house her aunt had left her.

Someone must have latched onto her after she started writing. He thought about the letter writer she had told him about. Obviously, his attraction for her was growing stronger. She would need protection, whether she wanted it or not.

## Chapter Eleven

Diana let herself into her house with a sigh. It was good to be home. Although she thought the same thing every time she came home and knew it sounded trite, it was how she felt. Leaving her things in the entryway, she walked around. She had been gone from home for only a few weeks. Yet it seemed as though her life had changed drastically.

How could one chance encounter change her life so completely? She felt like a different person. When she'd left, she hadn't known that she could read minds, that she was somehow connected to a supernatural paramilitary soldier. She had just been Diana Temis. Now, she didn't know who she was.

She had memories of her mother that she hadn't had before. She had no idea where they were coming from, but she knew they were hers. They had just been hidden. It was as though they were behind a wall, and every once in a while, a brick would fall, and she could see more. Movie clips of her life, with her as an onlooker, not a participant.

She saw her mother teaching her how to use her gifts. That's how she kept hearing her mother refer to them, as her "gifts." In the plural. Her mother encouraging her to "go ahead, try." And her mother lecturing her on the importance of being trained, of always being ready. Diana just couldn't figure out what she was supposed to be ready for.

She wanted to blame all of this on Gabe, but knew she couldn't. If she were honest with herself, she had to admit she had been slowly remembering things over the past few months; now they were just coming faster. Gabe had apparently just been a catalyst. But why now? And what was her mother referring to in these memories?

Retrieving her suitcases, she took them to her room. She unpacked her bags and put aside the gifts purchased for her friends to be given out later. As she unpacked, she lost herself in thought again. She'd had fun in Boston with Gabe. He'd affected her emotionally as no one had for years. He'd changed her, and it wasn't just the psychic stuff, either. There

was more. She had felt herself grow more attached to him every day. He had made her smile and laugh, he was a great conversationalist, and he really paid attention when she talked. She felt lonely without him.

Shaking herself out of her reverie, she reminded herself why she had left and what she had to do. It was over. She wasn't going to see Gabe again.

Finished unpacking, she went downstairs to make lunch. Not being home for the past few weeks, she only had canned food and dry goods in the house. Feeling cold, she made canned soup and hot tea. Maybe hot food would warm her up.

As she was finishing her meal, the doorbell rang. She walked to the front door and called out, "Who is it?"

No one answered so she looked through the window to see who it was. *That's weird -- no one's there.* Opening the door she found a package on the doorstep. Glancing around, she didn't see anyone, not even a delivery truck. There was no delivery address or card on the outside of the package. *Strange*, she thought to herself, as she bent to pick up the long box.

Opening the package, she found a dozen long-stemmed red roses. *Gabe*, she thought. She opened the card and read, *These are for you, the way you are for me.*

*What?* There was no signature. It had to be Gabe. There wasn't anyone else who would have done it. Admittedly, the note seemed a bit odd, but he may have been trying to be romantic. As much as her body said they were made for each other, her brain denied it. She was right to have left him in Boston.

How would he have gotten her address, though? Of course, the company he worked for had a file on her. Oh, well, she wasn't trying to hide from him, just letting him know that it wouldn't work. He would get over her soon enough. Holiday romances never lasted, anyway. Bringing the roses into the kitchen, she looked for a vase for them. They were too pretty to throw away, and it was a sweet gesture on his part. The least she could do was keep them.

Time to get cracking, she reminded herself. There were weeks' worth of dust on everything. She needed the house to be clean before she could even think about relaxing. Luckily she had cleaned before she left, so it only needed dusting and vacuuming, and she would be satisfied.

Thirty minutes later, she realized she was enjoying herself. She wasn't thinking about anything at all, just doing what needed to be done. She had found all this extra energy, so she thought she would take advantage of it. The curtains needed to be washed, and the spare bedrooms could use some touch up work. There was plenty to do to keep her occupied and not thinking. She knew that despite not sleeping last night, she wouldn't get to sleep tonight until she had exhausted herself.

Spring cleaning would be good way to tire herself out, even if it was fall. Turning on the radio, she tackled her chores with gusto.

Looking up at the sound of the doorbell, Diana realized that three hours had passed. Three beautiful, glorious hours where the most serious thing she'd thought about was whether to put the blue curtains or the white back up in the second bedroom.

Feeling good, she went to the front door and opened it.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Hi."

Diana didn't say anything for a minute. "What are you doing here?"

"I brought you this." Gabe handed her a package.

"Wha ...?"

"Don't you recognize it?" he interrupted her. "You left it for me this morning."

"Gabe, I ..."

Ignoring her, he pushed his way past her unresisting body, and let himself into the foyer. "You should really look out the peephole before you open the door. That's what it's there for, you know."

"What are you doing here?" she repeated.

"I told you." Gabe walked into her living room and sat down. He was fuming inside, but he was an expert at not letting his feelings show.

"Well, nice to see you, too. Why don't you just come in and make yourself comfortable?" Diana asked sarcastically, as she shut the door and followed him in, stopping at the opening to the room.

"Thank you, I already have."

"Gabe, you did not come all the way here to return this to me." She gestured with the box now in her hand.

"You're right. I didn't. And if you hadn't left Boston, I wouldn't have had to come after you at all."

"After me? Excuse me? I never asked you to come after me."

"You need me."

"Okay, and again, *excuse me?*" Gabe winced at Diana's sarcastic anger. She was an expert at it. "I do not need you. I barely even know you. A few nights of sex do not make you my keeper." Diana strode into the room and threw the box onto the coffee table in front of Gabe.

Standing with her arms crossed in front of her, she took Gabe's breath away. Even angry she was sexy. Hell, she was even sexier when she was like this.



Gabe sighed, "Diana, you need my help. You might be in danger." He sat still, hands clasped together. What he wanted was to grab her by the arms and shake her, but he needed her to understand and intimidating her wouldn't work.

"What are you talking about?"

"The attack the other night. It was directed toward me."

"And this puts me in danger how?"

"I was attacked because of you."

"What?" Diana shook her head in disbelief. "Back up and explain."

"The dagger that we found? They were trying to use it on me."

"Okay and ..." She gestured with her hands, encouraging him to go on.

"When someone is killed with that knife their energy is trapped within the blade. That energy can then be transferred to someone else." Gabe got up and walked around the room. It didn't feel right to just sit there while talking about this. It made him antsy, like he needed to do something to fix it, and he didn't know what. Hell, he didn't know what "it" was.

"It isn't life force energy that's trapped, though, it's attraction." Gabe turned back to her as he stopped pacing.

Diana put a hand up to her head in a gesture that was quickly becoming familiar to Gabe. He always seemed to tell her things that made her head hurt. "Someone is attracted to you. Someone with lots of dangerous knowledge. They must be watching you, because that knife was to be used specifically against me, against whomever you were with. If I had been killed, the attraction you felt toward me would have been transferred to the person who owned the knife."

"What do you mean?" Diana sat down in a chair.

"The owner of the knife would have done a ritual when he got the knife back. It's kind of like a guarantee that the person you want will want you back. He picked me because we obviously had feelings for each other.

"When he cast the spell, your feelings toward me would have been transferred to him, and you never would have known the difference. He could meet you on the street, and you would just think it was instant attraction."

"That's impossible. Feelings don't happen that way."

Gabe didn't say anything. He just watched her face as she thought of how quickly their own attraction had flared. She looked down. "That was different." It was said so softly, Gabe barely heard her.

"Fine, it was different, but even so, it would have happened the same way with him, if not stronger, due to the magic involved."

Gabe surveyed Diana's reaction as he told her this. Once again, he knew he was telling her things that were not normal by anyone's standards. What would he have done if someone had told him all this, out of the blue, years ago?

"Okay, you're making this one up." Diana gave a nervous laugh, stood up, and walked to the window to stare out. "There is no way on earth that could even be true."

"Believe me, it's true. I couldn't make this one up if I tried."

"Even if it is true, I am not the one in danger, you are. And if I don't see you anymore, then there shouldn't be a problem."

"Is that what you want?" Gabe hadn't intended to turn this into an emotional showdown between the two of them, but he couldn't resist.

She turned and looked at him.

"Do you really not want to see me again?"

"I left, didn't I?" She stood with her arms crossed, aggression in every inch of her body.

Gabe felt the pain of her rejection shoot through him. He thought she had been feeling something more for him. He'd thought he had a chance.

"That's not an answer to my question."

"I've already promised you I won't tell anyone what I know, and I won't be writing any more books based on my dreams." Diana walked away from him. "I don't know why I started having them, or why we met, and perhaps I -- we -- never will. But I know this isn't going to work. It was fun, I enjoyed the time with you, Gabe, and I appreciate what you taught me, but I don't need you. Our relationship, if that's what you want to call it, is over. Please leave."

"Diana, I'm not going to leave you unprotected."

"Why won't you get it through your head? It isn't your call to make," Diana snapped at him as she spun around to face him once again. "In case you forgot, I don't need protection. Not only do I have a black belt, but I had weapons training, too. I can handle a gun just as well as the next guy. I am perfectly capable of protecting myself. I have done so for years."

"You've never had someone like this after you before."

"We don't even know for sure who's doing this. If it's my letter writer, the cops will catch him eventually. He's never threatened me in any way, and we don't know if he is actually any danger to me. The psychologist said that he's exhibited no tendency to harm."

"And if it isn't him, then it's someone you brought into my life. With you gone, I'll be safe. I'm sorry, but I don't believe in this magic, even if you do. I know I can handle whatever comes my way, and what I can not handle, the cops will."

"What about the next guy that comes into your life?" Gabe didn't want to think of her in another man's arms, but she needed to see reason. If she didn't care about him, maybe she would care about someone else.

“What are you talking about?”

“The next guy you’re attracted to. If the cops don’t catch this stalker, as you are convinced they will, the next guy that comes into your life will be in even more danger. Are you willing to risk someone else’s life?”

“Hell, Gabe, you don’t even know if those guys knew what they had in their possession. They could have mugged an antique dealer the night before. And if by some crazy coincidence it is connected, by your own reasoning, with you gone, we’re both safer. And since there isn’t any other guy, as you put it, then that point is moot.”

“Diana, he won’t give up. His kind never do.” Gabe needed her to understand the danger she was in.

“Oh, now you’re an expert on stalkers, huh?” She threw up her hands in exasperation. “I’ll be fine. I have no more signings planned and no plans to go anywhere. I’ll tell the cops about the attack in Boston and ask them to keep an eye open. I’ll change my security code. I’m not stupid, Gabe, I will take extra precautions. Besides, the cops aren’t too worried about this guy, so I really don’t understand why you are.”

“They don’t know what we know, Diana.”

“I’m sorry, Gabe, but I don’t know what you want from me.”

“I want you to come with me.”

“Come with you? Come with you where?” Diana gave him a questioning look.

“To Wisconsin.”

“Wisconsin? Why would I go to Wisconsin?”

“I can keep you safe there.”

“Where in this entire conversation did you hear me ask you to keep me safe?”

“Diana --”

“No.” All her earlier anger seemed to disappear. Her shoulders dropped as she told him. “I’ll be fine. Thank you for being worried about me. I promise I will be more careful.”

Gabe tried to reason with her, but she wouldn’t budge. He thought she was being unreasonable and stubborn, and she told him he was archaic and arrogant. He was at a loss as to what else to do.

“I’m leaving my card. It has my work, home, and cell numbers on it. I am not going to give up on you, Diana. I’ll be within reach if you need me. Please take this guy seriously.” Placing his card on the box with the scarf, he left her house, closing the door quietly behind him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Diana watched Gabe walk out the door with a wrench to her heart. She didn't want him to leave, but she knew if he didn't, she'd pay the price later. He'd already proven how arrogant he could be, and she didn't need that in her life.

Need. It was a dirty word. Every time she'd ever needed anyone in her life, they'd let her down. She'd needed a mother growing up. She'd needed someone there for her, to help her learn about life and about these new things she was discovering. Where had she been when Diana had needed her? She knew it was irrational; it hadn't been her mother's fault. She hadn't chosen to leave.

It hadn't been her mother's fault she'd gone, but her father ... Her father had been alive, could have been there for her, but he hadn't been. When he lost his wife, he had seemed to lose all will to survive. He went through the day-to-day motions. He'd stopped living the day she died and just existed. Until he died of a broken heart shortly after Diana graduated from high school. The only real interest he'd ever shown in her was making sure she continued her martial arts training and insisted she take mythology and folklore classes in addition to her intended archaeology.

Her aunt Janet had been a wonderful woman, but she, too, was unable to give Diana what she had needed. Diana knew she had loved her, but Janet had always seemed afraid to get close. She was always warning Diana of different things. Telling her to be cautious of everyone and everything she came in contact with. Diana's mother had been her best friend, and it always seemed that Janet was petrified she would lose Diana the same way she had her friend.

Diana had decided early on that she didn't need anyone. It hurt too much when you expected them to be there for you, and they invariably let you down.

She had her few friends, none of whom were too close. She'd had a couple relationships, none of which she had let become permanent. Her life suited her perfectly. As long as she never depended on anyone for too much, she wouldn't have to risk being hurt again.

Deciding that what she had to do now was to get back to cleaning, she returned upstairs. There were boxes in one of the closets, memories of her aunt's that Diana had yet to go through. The thought of them had been too painful before, but maybe she could handle them now. Maybe she would find something that would explain some of the things that were going on with the dreams and her telepathy.

Diana proceeded to lose herself in the past. Most of what she found was old pictures, report cards, and various other papers. Nothing that seemed out of the ordinary. Aunt Janet had not been overly demonstrative, but she had never let Diana doubt her love for her. If she had ever doubted that fact, Diana found proof of it in all the things that her aunt had collected. Every single play Diana had been in, every activity she had participated in or article she had written, her Aunt Janet had saved some token from it. Diana felt an overwhelming wave of love for her aunt. She missed her terribly.

In the bottom of the box of Diana's accomplishments, she found a leather-bound journal with a heavy clasp. Curious, Diana started to open it, when the doorbell rang again.

"Good lord, what is this today, Grand Central Station?" she muttered to herself as she climbed out of the closet and hurried downstairs to answer the door, laying the journal on the bed as she walked out of the room.

## Chapter Twelve

Diana looked out the peephole, mindful of Gabe's warning, but saw nothing. Slowly, she opened the door. What the heck? Nobody. What the hell was going on today?

She stepped onto the porch, and her foot hit something. Looking down, she found another package. Her eyes searched the street as she crouched down to pick it up. Again, there was no delivery truck in sight. *What is it this time?* She'd already told Gabe goodbye. There was nothing he could send that would change her mind.

Bringing the package into the house, she laid it down on the entry table. Opening it, she found a note written on heavy stationery lying on top of tissue paper.

*I told you that you're mine. You should have stayed away from him. You are not to give your heart or body to any but me. You didn't listen. Now he will pay the price.*

As she was finishing reading the note aloud, her other hand was pulling back the paper. She glanced down and nearly screamed.

Inside the box was something red and wet. It looked like a piece of meat. Bloody meat. Oh, God, it was a heart. A human heart.

She backed away quickly. This was wrong. Who on earth would do something like this? Who was she supposed to stay away from? What price?

Oh, my God, *Gabe*. She remembered what he'd said about the dagger, what its purpose was. She looked over to the coffee table and saw his card. She ran to the front door and locked it. She ran to all the other doors and windows as she dialed Gabe's cell.

"Montgomery." His voice was clipped and terse. He was alive, but not happy. She would never forgive herself if something happened to him because of her.

"It's Diana. I need you."

"Diana?" His voice changed, became urgent. "What's wrong? Where are you? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. I'm at home. Just get over here, now. Please."

"I'm on my way."

\* \* \* \* \*

Gabe was frantic with worry over Diana as he and Cole drove to her place. He understood why she hung up; she probably needed the phone for the cops, but dammit, why didn't she call back? What could be wrong for her to have called him like that? He tried calling her again, but still couldn't get through.

They pulled up at her place, and he barreled up the stairs, pulling out his gun. Cole headed around to check the perimeter, while Gabe headed for the front door.

"Diana! It's Gabe!" It felt like an eternity before she opened the door. As soon as the door opened, he grabbed her, "Are you okay? Is someone here? Did something happen?"

He pulled her to him, with one arm. He wanted to keep hold of her, but knew now wasn't the time. He still didn't know what was happening. He moved away from her as he looked around. Damn, why had he told Seth to leave?

"No, I'm alone. But I found that on the porch." She pointed to the package on the table. He quickly strode over to it, scanning the entry to her house as he walked inside. He pulled back the tissue paper and saw the heart underneath. He looked at Diana with a question in his eyes.

"That note was with it." She motioned toward the paper on the table.

He picked the note up and read it. "What the ..." He was interrupted by Cole coming up to the front door. Diana squealed with a jump.

"Cole." Gabe acknowledged him quickly, assuring Diana. "Diana, this is Cole, one of my men." He then turned back to Cole. "Anything?"

"Nothing." Cole walked into the house, "What happened?"

Gabe gestured toward the package. Cole walked over and examined the contents. Whistling in surprise. "Wow, you two really know how to make enemies." Gabe and Diana just looked at him. He put up his hands in defense. "Sorry."

Diana stared at him a moment. "I know you. You're one of the men in Gabe's unit. You're the pyrokinetic."

Cole's face showed surprise. "How did you know that?"

Gabe answered for her, "I told you, Cole. She's seen everything we've done for the last eight years."

"Then how come she didn't know who you were?" Cole asked.

Gabe looked at Diana for the answer to that. "Everything I saw, I saw from Gabe's viewpoint. He just never looked in a mirror while he was on a mission, I guess. I saw all of your team. I know all of you, and what each of you does."

Cole just shook his head in disbelief. "I didn't realize you meant literally everything," he said to Gabe. "Damn, talk about never being able to have a secret."

Gabe laughed, and Diana just glared. "Can we get back to the problem at hand?" she asked acidly.

Both men started guiltily at that. Gabe glanced at Cole. "I told Seth to leave after I got here. I should have kept him on."

"Seth?" Diana asked.

Gabe steeled himself; he knew he was going to get yelled at. "I, um, sort of had someone watch your place 'til I got here this afternoon."

"Watch my place?" Diana's voice was very cool. Gabe definitely knew he was in trouble.

"I told you I was worried about you. We knew we couldn't get here until this afternoon, so I had someone watch your place until I got here."

Diana put her hand up to stop him. "I don't want to hear anymore." She shook her head in denial. "It will only upset me."

"Is he the one that left the roses from you?" she asked Gabe, crossing her arms, trying to calm down.

"Roses? What roses?" Gabe asked quickly.

"The roses I got earlier." Realization dawned on her. "Oh, shit, they weren't from you, they were from him, too. I should have known. The note was a little weird, but I couldn't think of anyone else that would send me red roses. Let me go get them."

The men stayed in the entry while she went and got the roses. Gabe closed the door. "We'll need to get this sent to Steve, see if he can pick anything up off it." He gestured to the box and asked Cole, "Is that what I think it is? Please tell me it's not human."

Cole walked over to the package again. "Probably human. But I guess it could be an animal's. We'll let Steve figure it out." He started to close it up, hide it away from view if not thought. "Slick bastard even lined it with plastic so it wouldn't drip. Why don't I ship it off to Steve and come back and get you in a little bit?"

Gabe glanced at the empty doorway Diana had disappeared through, then back to Cole. "Yeah, maybe that would be best. Call me before you come back."

Cole lifted the box into his hands, "Will do, Captain. Good luck."

Diana came out of the kitchen with the roses and the note that came with them. "Where did Cole go?" She looked around.

"He went to send off the package to the lab, he'll be back to get me in a little bit."



"Well, here. This is the note that came with the flowers." She handed him the little note card. "The flowers don't have anything wrong with them. They're beautiful."

Gabe read the note and frowned. "You thought I would write this?"

She squirmed. "Well, it seemed a bit odd, but I figured it depended on how you took it."

"How long after you got home did the first package arrive?"

Diana didn't even have to think about it. "Less than half an hour."

"Seth must not have been here yet, then, or he would have said something. Damn."

"So how the hell was he able to figure out when I'd be home?"

"That's not the half of it. If he had them dropped off a half hour after you got home and then dropped that off less than two hours after I left you, he's watching every move you make."

"Every move?" Diana looked at the picture window that faced the street.

"He obviously knows where you live and what you're doing." He motioned with the note. "This proves he was spying on you in Boston, and he knows you're home. You're not safe here, Diana."

"Great." She walked around the room as she talked to herself. "So he knows where I live and is watching every step I take. And you're in danger, too. This is freaking unbelievable. What the hell have I stumbled onto? Magical daggers, bloody hearts in boxes, insane stalkers."

Gabe watched as she continued pacing. He wanted to go to her, but it was something she needed to work out on her own. She needed to realize what kind of situation she was really in. After a few more minutes, Diana turned around and looked at him. "What can we do?"

"I still want you to come to Wisconsin with me."

"What exactly is in Wisconsin that's going to be so helpful?"

"The Argus compound is there. We can make sure you're safe, and at the same time, try to find out anything we can about this guy. Our research facilities will put anything the cops here have to shame."

"I am not going to be a prisoner, Gabe."

"I'm not talking about keeping you a prisoner; I'm talking about keeping you safe. Making sure he can't hurt you before we find him."

"What if we don't find him?"

"We will." Gabe knew it might take a while, but he wouldn't rest until this fanatic was found.

Diana wrapped her arms around herself, as though for comfort. "Was that a human heart?"

"I don't know. That's one of the things Cole's going to find out for us. I hope it belonged to an animal."

Gabe watched Diana fight with herself. She was obviously upset and worried. Hell, who wouldn't be? She had a maniac after her, threatening her and the lives of people she knew.

"Diana," Gabe started hesitantly. He knew how she must feel, and didn't want to scare her unnecessarily, but he didn't know what they were up against, either. "We need to find out who he is and why he's after you. There has to be something he wants from you or some reason he fixated on you. The best place to do that is at Argus."

Staring out the picture window to the darkness beyond, Diana nodded her head. "Let me get some things together. Is there anything in particular I'll need?"

"Just a warm coat. It will be colder there than here."

Diana left to get her things. Gabe checked the rest of the house, making sure everything was locked up and in place. He didn't see anything that looked out of the ordinary. Cole called him and told him he was on his way back while he was checking the house. Finally done, he walked to her room.

He was surprised. He didn't know what exactly he had expected, but her room fit her. The walls were done in a soft green color, complemented by the matching curtains and bedspread done in soft shades of purple and ivory. Everything was a calming, subdued tone. Nothing screamed out demanding attention. It was the kind of room that was elegant and relaxing.

Diana was in the middle of the room, repacking the suitcase she must have unpacked only a few hours ago. Gabe walked to the windows in her room, checking the last of the locks while he watched her calmly place clothing in the case, neat in everything she did. No hysterics for his Diana. How she could be so calm and cool was beyond him, and it made him feel for her even more.

She'd said she didn't want him, though. He hoped he would have the chance to change her mind, but even if he didn't, he would do whatever he needed to keep her safe. Whether she liked it or not.

"Ready." She looked up at him.

He walked over to Diana and grabbed the suitcase. "Good, Cole is outside waiting. We'll stay at a hotel tonight and head out tomorrow."

"How can we be sure he won't know where we're going?"

"We'll make sure no one is following us tonight and the same tomorrow," Gabe assured her.

"Okay. I guess we might as well get going, then." On the way out, Diana stopped and asked Gabe to wait a minute while she ran into one of the other bedrooms. She came out

with a leather journal, which she packed in her smaller bag, and then announced she was ready to leave.

They climbed into the waiting car outside, after Diana set the house alarm.

"I made arrangements for an extra room and plane tickets for all of us in the morning."

"Has anyone been following you?"

"Don't think so," Cole assured Gabe and Diana.

They headed to the hotel. The normally ten-minute trip took nearly two hours, with a stop for dinner included. Gabe said the stop would give them another opportunity to see if anyone was following them. Cole seemed to know the city well enough that he didn't get lost, making sure he drove through areas that if anyone had been following them it would have been obvious.

When they arrived at the hotel, Cole got the key to the new room. They went upstairs, and Cole opened the door to one of the rooms. He walked in while Gabe held Diana back for a moment. When Cole indicated it was clear, Gabe gestured Diana inside and followed behind her. Cole watched them enter and grabbed his duffel bag.

"The two rooms are connected in case of any trouble. I'll make sure my side is unlocked when I get over there." He gestured to a door at one end of the room. "See you two in the morning." He sketched a half salute, and walked out of the room, shutting the door behind him.

Diana looked surprised. "We're supposed to share?" she asked Gabe as he went to the door and locked it.

"It's safer this way. One of us with you, the other in a different room in case we need backup. Until we know more about this guy, you're going to be protected." He turned and gestured toward the two beds. "We figured you'd feel better with me in here rather than Cole."

Diana didn't say anything for a few seconds. She put her suitcase on one of the beds and unzipped it.

Removing nightclothes from the suitcase, she looked up at him. "I'm going to get ready for bed. I'm exhausted. Between no sleep last night and what happened at the house, I need rest."

Gabe watched her walk into the bathroom. She looked beautiful, even drained of all energy. She was taking everything too calmly, without protest or anger. It wasn't the Diana he'd fallen for in Boston. The woman in Boston was full of energy and love of life. This woman was just drawn. Learning that someone was after you and capable of chasing you out of your house could probably do that, he guessed. But he never would have expected it of Diana. He had been impressed with her calm; now he was worried.

\* \* \* \* \*

Diana walked into the bathroom to get ready for bed. She wanted a bath, but opted to take a long, hot shower instead. All her energy from earlier had finally deserted her. The lack of sleep, cleaning the house, and the threats had taken everything out of her.

She wanted to storm back into the bedroom and tell Gabe she didn't need protection. But if she hadn't thought she needed help, why had she called him? Why had she agreed to come along? She needed to get her thinking straight if she was going to make decisions that affected others' actions like this.

She'd made her decision back at the house. Both she and Gabe were in danger, and the cops wouldn't be able to handle it. Despite her earlier denials, she knew that something supernatural was involved. She needed Gabe and his foundation.

As to the sleeping arrangements, Diana wasn't sure which she would prefer. Despite having shared her bed with Gabe in Boston, she was uncomfortable around him tonight. She trusted him, but that didn't mean she was going to sleep with him again.

She climbed into the shower, making it as hot as she could tolerate. Standing there for a few minutes, feeling the hot water hit her, tears started leaking from her eyes. It all hit her. She was being threatened by a madman. She'd been chased out of her home, and she had the ability to speak telepathically, read minds, and God only knew what else. And she was falling in love with a man who seemed to want to control her. She had to stop lying to herself. Nothing was the same; it would never be the same again.

The madman, she knew, was temporary. Whoever he was, she knew they would take care of it. From what she had seen of Gabe's organization, they left no stone unturned. She would eventually be able to go back home and forget about him. The newfound ability she was sure she could handle. It might take awhile, but she knew she would eventually get a good grasp on it and learn to live with it.

Handling her emotions in regards to Gabe -- now, that was the hard part. For the first time in her life she needed someone by her side. Truly needed him. She felt safe with him, protected. He fulfilled needs she hadn't even known she had. Every moment with him was heaven. She wasn't used to this kind of feeling and didn't want it. He was so powerful she could see him overwhelming her without even trying.

She could see her doing as her father had done with her mother, and living only for him. She knew she didn't want that kind of relationship; she didn't want to lose herself like that, and with Gabe she wouldn't have any choice. She could lose herself just by letting him be part of her life. He would take it over. He wouldn't mean to, he was just that kind of a guy. And then, she knew, eventually he would leave her like everyone else had. Where would that leave her? She was better off alone. That way, he couldn't hurt her down the road. She might be alone, but at least her heart would be safe.

She stood there, thinking and crying until she was all cried out. She heard Gabe knocking on the door. "Diana, are you all right in there?"

She shook herself out of her daze and forced herself to respond. "Yeah, I'm fine. I'll be out in a couple minutes." She washed and dressed, and headed out into the bedroom area.

"Are you okay?" Gabe asked. He looked worried.

"Yeah, fine. Just wanted a long shower," she assured him as she moved her things from the bed. "Any particular bed I have to sleep in?" She looked at Gabe.

"No, either one is fine. We aren't on the ground floor, so I'm not too worried about the window."

"What, don't any of the bad guys fly?"

"Plenty of them do, but I don't think we need to start worrying about them just yet."

Diana was too tired to comment on that thought. She pulled back the bedspread and climbed into bed.

"Goodnight. I'll talk to you in the morning." She shut the light off next to her bed and turned on her side, facing away from Gabe.

Gabe stood there for a few seconds, before grabbing his own clothing as he headed into the bathroom.

Diana heard him leave and thought for a quick moment about running away. She wasn't a prisoner, but she wasn't sure she really wanted to be here. She knew the safest place was with him, but she also knew her heart wasn't safe with him, not safe at all.

## Chapter Thirteen

“Diana, Diana, Diana.” The reprimanding voice had a snaky quality to it. It was deep, sexy, and alluring, but with an oily undertone. “Why did you go and do it, Diana? I told you I would be with you soon.”

Diana was confused. She tried to remember how she’d gotten here, what she was doing here, wherever here was. The last thing she remembered was going to bed at the hotel. Gabe! Where was he? Why wasn’t he here with her? He’d never have let her go without a fight. Why didn’t she remember a fight?

Diana tried to remember, and she realized something was off. The atmosphere was different. Her surroundings had almost a fake quality to them, as though not real. It was then that she realized she was dreaming.

The dream world was always a bit different from the waking world, but this time there was something wrong. That off quality she had noticed before. Diana tried to move, but she was unable to. She was chained to a wall like a prisoner in an old movie. Her arms were stretched out and above her head, preventing her from moving more than a foot or so away from the wall. She was wearing a long, diaphanous gown, one she knew she didn’t own and would never put herself in.

Checking out her surroundings, Diana realized she was in a dungeon of some kind. The walls were large stone blocks, the floor was the same. Torches lined the walls, giving off a flickering, menacing light. A shiver ran down her spine as she realized she had been dragged into another’s world.

In addition to the torches, there were dozens of candles throughout, creating more pockets of light and shadow. The room itself was large and rectangular, maybe eighty by fifty feet. It looked like something out of a movie. Someone’s idea of a medieval dungeon, minus the rats and filth.

She was against one of the shorter walls, and the far end of the room was completely shadowed. In the middle of the room was what looked like a large stone table or altar. It was covered with a black cloth, but there was something beneath the cloth. There were chains at the corners, starting from the ground, and snaking up under the material. In the flickering candlelight she was unable to make out the shape of what was under the cloth, but she already knew she wouldn't like it whatever it was.

A movement in the far corner caught her eyes. A man was slowly walking toward her. The first thing that struck her was the fact he was absolutely gorgeous. Tall, dark, and handsome, the epitome of masculinity. He moved with a grace that many women would kill for. Sleek, like a cat. As he came closer to her she could make out more of his face, and realized that, although it was gorgeous, it was cold and hard. The eyes were empty and unfeeling. There was nothing gentle or even human in it. In fact, there was something in there that made her cringe back. An aura of evil surrounded this man.

She spoke quickly, "This is a dream."

He laughed. "Oh, my dear. You're good, aren't you? Yes, you're right, this is a dream. But is it your dream, or mine? Which one of us is in control?"

Diana tried to pull at her chains again. They were solid. She attempted to will them away, to will herself somewhere else. She wasn't able to. *This isn't right*, she thought to herself. *Why can't I get myself out?* Diana physically struggled against her restraints. She needed to get out of here, get away from him.

"You can't hurt me," she spat out at him, not so sure all of a sudden.

"Perhaps, perhaps not, but that is irrelevant." He waved nonchalantly at her declaration. He appeared unconcerned, even amused by her assertion. "I didn't bring you here to hurt you. I thought it was time we met face-to-face. My goal has never been to hurt you. In fact, I want to spend eternity with you. It has taken me years to find you, and I won't let you go now."

"Who are you? What do you want from me?" She should have felt relief at the thought that he wasn't going to hurt her, but she didn't. She was more scared now than she had been.

"Why, my dear. I am your destiny."

"What are you talking about?" Was this the man who had sent the packages? He must be. But what kind of power did he have that he could visit her dreams? She needed to wake herself up, prove that she could break away from his power. She started to think herself awake, to get herself out of this nightmare, when she saw the cloth on the altar move.

The man saw her eyes flick toward the cloth, and his laugh was angry this time. "Oh, so my little toy awakens," he said as he went over to the altar. "Would you like to see what's under the cloth, my dear? Hmmm?" He didn't wait for an answer, just pulled the fabric away. Diana didn't know what to expect, but it definitely wasn't what she saw before her.

Gabe was stretched out in front of her. He had been gagged and chained down to the altar, barely able to move. He appeared unconscious. Unconscious or dead. But no, she had seen the cloth move; he wasn't dead.

"Gabe! What have you done to him you bastard?" Diana directed her attention to the man standing beside the stone table. What was Gabe doing here? Who the hell was this madman?

"Oh, don't worry, my pretty. He's alive. For now. He's only unconscious. I found it easier to keep him that way until I am ready for him." He smiled evilly as he ran his hand down Gabe's arm, stroking it as he would a lover's.

"What do you want from me?" Diana demanded, asking again for some answers.

"Oh, dear, dear, Diana. I have told you already, I am your destiny" He shook his head as though he could not believe her ignorance. "Didn't your mother tell you that one day your destiny would come for you?"

"My mother? What are you talking about?" There was no way this crazy man could know anything about her mother. This had to be her imagination working overtime from all the stress of the past couple of days.

But she was powerless. She had never been powerless in a dream before. It wasn't possible.

*Yes, it was.* She didn't have control in the dreams about Gabe, either. Maybe it was a dream like that.

But she hadn't been an active participant in them, she reminded herself. She was always in Gabe's head, reliving his experiences. *This wasn't anything like those at all.*

Okay, if she wasn't just imagining this, then that meant there was more to this than an ordinary dream. The only person this man could be was her stalker. But how? How could he get into her dreams, or her into his? *The dagger! Remember the dagger. Whoever this guy was, he knew about magic. He wasn't an ordinary stalker.*

Unless he was able to change the rules of dreams, he really couldn't hurt her. At least she didn't think he could. How much of this was a true dream, and how much was his creation? Either way, picking her dreams to invade was a bad choice. She had decided, after nearly having a breakdown over her dreams about Gabe, never to be powerless in them again.

She looked at him, then at Gabe. She knew she could get herself out, but how did Gabe get here? Hell, was it really Gabe? She was still in the same situation she was a few minutes ago. The only way out was to find out more about how and why she was here. Find out what he wanted and what he knew. Then she could figure out what to do.

"Your mother, the dear Alexis, didn't tell you what you are, did she?" He cocked his head to the side as though he were thinking, or perhaps listening to someone. "Oh, no, of



course not. You weren't even ten when she died. Oh, too sweet." His laughter was cold this time. He appeared too pleased.

"And I bet your aunt never told you, either, did she?" He didn't wait for an answer. "Of course, she didn't. She was too afraid. She was afraid that you would do the same as your mother did and die. She never warned you about me, how I would find you no matter the obstacles. This is just too good to be true."

He walked away from the altar, toward her. Stopping right in front of her, he put his hand out as though to touch her. She shied away from him, not wanting to feel his flesh. Dropping his hand, he turned away. "In her efforts to protect you, she left you wide open to me. Oh, poor Janet, all you feared has come to pass. The one you sought to protect is at my mercy because of you." Diana watched as he talked to the air, as though her aunt and mother were able to hear him. "Alexis, the last of your line will fall to me, she will be the consort of Bale, and your ancestors will be doomed."

Diana was convinced this man was crazy. She had no idea what he was talking about. How could he know her mother's and aunt's names? Had he researched her? Why? What did he mean? "Bale? Who is Bale? What are you talking about?" She realized he might be crazy, but he had power enough to bring her here and keep her helpless. *Just let him keep talking.* Maybe she would learn something helpful. And what was he ranting about her mother and aunt?

He turned on her then. "I am Bale," he growled out the words angrily, appearing nearly enraged that she did not know who he was. Taking a deep breath and smiling broadly, he seemed to calm himself. "You're to be my consort for all time, my dear. Just as you were promised to me, hundreds of years ago. Only this time, I shall succeed, and the Temis women will fail."

Diana just shook her head. She wanted to rail at this maniac, but she still was unsure of what was real and what was not. Did he really have Gabe prisoner? Was he in her head, and she was imagining Gabe? Or was Gabe in this dream, too? And if he was, could he be injured? Yes, it was a dream, but what if she was wrong, and Bale really could hurt her? Then he would be able to hurt Gabe, too, and there was nothing she could do about it.

Bale saw her eyes glance toward the altar again. "Oh, yes, your newfound love. I told you that you were mine, my dear. You really should have listened." He walked back towards Gabe, his voice gaining a sing-song, sad quality, as though he were regretting what he was telling her, what he was about to do. "This is all your fault, you know." He glanced over his shoulder at Diana. "He never would have been dragged into this if you had done what you were told. It's sad that this innocent man has to pay the price for what you have done. But, alas, that is how it has always been since time immemorial." His voice had grown hard, angry. "All men pay the price for fickle women."

Bale looked down at Gabe. "I see you are fully awake. I am sorry, young man, but you picked the wrong woman. Diana is mine, and I will not tolerate poaching. I hope you had a good life up to this point." He went off toward the back corner.

Diana didn't know what he was getting at, or what he wanted to do to them, but the waiting time was over. She knew they had to get out of the dream, and fast. If this wasn't her dream, it was possible he had dragged Gabe into it the same way he had dragged her. She needed to know what was real.

*Gabe? Can you hear me?* She tried to contact him, hoping that if he was actually in the dream, he would be able to respond.

*Diana? Is it really you? I can't think. I feel groggy.*

*I think he drugged you somehow, or was trying to keep you unconscious.*

*Am I dreaming? Where are we?*

It hurt Diana to feel Gabe's confusion. It was so unlike him. What had Bale done to him? *Yes, you're dreaming. We both are. I don't know how he did it, but he dragged us both into his world. He's my stalker. He shouldn't be able to hurt us in the dreamworld, but he obviously did something to you, and I can't do anything.*

*What do you mean?*

This was so not the right time for explanations. She had to make it quick. *Ever since I started dreaming about you, I've been working on lucid dreaming. Other than in your dreams, I have complete control in my dreams. I should be able to will away these chains, to change anything I want, and I can't. I don't know what that means, other than this isn't a normal dream. I don't know if we're in any real danger.*

*Can you wake yourself up?*

*Maybe. I haven't really tried yet.*

*Then do it.*

*No, I won't leave you here with this madman.*

*Do it, Diana. When you're awake, you can wake me up in the hotel room.*

*But dammit, Gabe, what if it doesn't work? What if I leave you here? You need to try to wake up, too.*

Diana sensed Gabe's laugh. *Honey, I will, but I need you to try, too. If what you say is right, you're the only one of us with enough experience to overcome whatever he's done to us. I can barely think straight, never mind concentrate hard enough. I'm still groggy.*

Diana glanced toward Bale. He was on his way back to Gabe with something in his hand.

*But he knows things about my mother, my family. What is he talking about?*

*I don't know. But I really don't want to hang around much longer.* Diana realized Gabe had a better view of whatever it was in Bale's hand.

As Bale approached, Diana saw the sharp steel of a dagger glitter in his hand. Whatever he could tell them, it wasn't worth the risk of hurting Gabe.

"Now I'd like to make this quick, but since you stole the dagger prepared for you, I have no choice but to take it slow. I'd also like to tell you it won't hurt, but I'd be lying." Bale smiled grimly as he brought down the knife to Gabe's arm.

"No!" Diana screamed.

Bale looked up at her. He stared her straight in the eye. Emotionless, uncaring. "I'm sorry, my love, but I have no choice."

*Diana! Go!* she heard Gabe project to her. She needed to be awake *Now!*

\* \* \* \* \*

Diana woke up yelling, "Stop!" She cursed as she realized she was awake.

*Gabe!* She jumped out of bed and ran to him. *Oh, God, no.*

"Gabe! Wake up!" she yelled as she reached his side and shook him hard. "Gabe, wake up!" She didn't know how strong Bale's hold was on him, so she called him mentally, too. There was no sense of him slowly waking up, he just suddenly sat up.

"Wow."

Diana looked at him carefully. "Are you okay?"

Gabe shook his head, "Did what I think just happened really happen?"

Diana sighed in relief. "Yeah, it did." She shivered, thinking about what they had just escaped. "Did he do anything to you after I got out? Did he hurt you? I saw the knife go down ..."

She was babbling and she knew it, but she couldn't stop herself. Her hands roamed over Gabe's chest, then down his arms, looking for injuries.

"Ouch," Gabe uttered as Diana's hand brushed against his forearm.

Diana pulled her hand away and found blood. "You're bleeding." She pulled his arm closer to her to see how severe the injury was.

"It's nothing ..." Gabe tried to reassure her.

She threw him a look and jumped off the bed to get a towel to wipe away the blood. "Were you stabbed this often before meeting me?" she asked him in a soft voice as she dabbed at his arm.

He put his hand on her chin and forced her to look at him. "This isn't your fault. You did not make this happen."

Diana pulled her head away and looked down again at his arm. "If I had come with you when you first asked, then maybe you wouldn't have been hurt."

"It's a scratch, nothing more. You did not put us in there with that psycho. It's not your fault."

"I know," she answered in a choked voice.

"Diana ..." Gabe started, but she interrupted him.

"Tell me what happened after I left you."

Gabe didn't say anything for a moment. Diana stopped tending his wound to gaze up at him. "He saw you disappear and started laughing. He was muttering about seeing you again and being impressed with your power. He had just started to cut me again when you woke me."

"Why didn't he kill you immediately?"

"Well, I for one am glad he didn't."

Diana quickly added, "No, don't get me wrong. I'm glad he didn't, either ..." Her voice tapered off as she realized Gabe was teasing. "Idiot," she muttered under her breath.

Gabe smiled before he went on. "As he started to cut, he muttered something about a ritual. I imagine that's why he didn't kill me outright. More power in slowly bleeding me."

Diana nodded. She had learned a lot in the last eight years about rituals and sacrifices and the like. She didn't buy into it, but she knew enough about it to understand what Gabe was referring to.

"There's something wrong with that man, Diana. Whoever or whatever he is, he's not natural. I've seen lots of evil, but he makes even my skin crawl."

Diana sat back on the bed. "His name is Bale, and you're right. There is definitely something unnatural about him. My God, I was freaked. I have never been that defenseless in a dream before."

Gabe barked out a laugh. "Defenseless? Woman, you were far from defenseless. You're the one that got us out of there." He shook his head. "Anyway, we're safe now. At least I think we are, aren't we?"

Diana slowly nodded. "I think so. Now that we're awake, I can't imagine he will be able to get us again."

She gazed at Gabe. "Do you know how wrong this is?"

"What? Having a madman pull us into his world while we're dreaming?"

"No. Well, yes, that, too. But I'm talking about this." She gestured to his arm. It was only a scratch and had stopped bleeding, but was still evident. "This shouldn't have been possible. Despite what we've heard, regular dreams won't hurt you in the real world. He has power, and I don't know how to handle it."

"Don't worry, we'll figure something out." Gabe put his arms around her and held her tight.

"Did you notice anything before you found yourself on the altar?" Diana asked from the safety of his arms.

"Not really. The last thing I remember is being in bed trying to sleep. The next thing I knew, I was bound and chained, waking up to Bale leaning over me."

"You're not groggy any more."

Gabe didn't answer for a minute. "You're right. I wonder why?"

Diana shook her head. "It must have been something he was controlling. He must have a way of keeping you unconscious until he wants you awake. To be honest, though, I just don't know."

"Okay, so how did this happen? How did he get us?"

"All I can figure is he got us both when we were drifting off. It never occurred to me to shield before I went to sleep last night. It isn't something I've ever done before." Diana pulled back a little so she could look at Gabe's face.

"You probably didn't need to before; your natural shields were always enough. Why would you think to?" Gabe assured her. "Plus, I'm the only one to have ever invaded your dreams, and I was right here with you."

"I didn't even know something like this was possible. It was different from being pulled into your dreams." Diana looked at him. "Well, your experiences," she amended. "I didn't even know something like that, dragging us into his world, was even possible. I don't know exactly how we got there, but we're back in the real world now."

Gabe shuddered. "I don't know about you, but sleeping is not an option for me right now."

"Me, either." Diana shook her head. "He had some interesting things to say. He knew my mother's name. Hers and my aunt's. But it wasn't just that. He could have found that out on the Internet. He was rambling about my family. What was he talking about?" Her voice shook with worry and fear.

Gabe tightened his arms around Diana comfortingly. "I don't know, babe, but we are going to find out. I have a feeling that we *have* to find out."

Diana looked at the clock. "It's four o'clock. Too early to head to the airport."

"Would you accuse me of trying to take advantage of you if I suggested we just lie here for a little while, and let me hold you?"

Diana looked at him with a smile. "Only if you don't accuse me of the same thing."

"Deal."

They lay there for the next two hours. Holding each other tight, they kept each other awake, and made sure that the things that went bump in the night didn't come and get them.

## Chapter Fourteen

Diana glanced at the clock one more time. Six. Had she slept at all since the dream?

"Cole will be here in about thirty minutes."

"How do you know?" She looked up at his smile. "Oh, never mind. You know, I don't think I'll ever get used to that," she said as she remembered they didn't need phones to contact each other.

"The more you use it, the more comfortable you'll get with it."

"I am not sure I want to be comfortable with it."

"Why not? You have to admit it came in handy last night, right?"

"True ..."

*You gotta use whatever weapons you have, Diana. And this can be a formidable weapon.*

"Yeah, I guess you're right." Diana gave in, knowing he was right.

"You will get used to it, and we'll help you, okay?"

She sighed, "Okay."

"Now, who gets the shower first, you or me?"

"Me." She quickly jumped up from the bed and headed toward the bathroom. "I'll be out in a jiffy."

Washing her hair in the shower, Diana jumped when she heard Gabe in her head, *You do know that you're broadcasting, don't you?*

*I am?*

*Yup, you sound like you're humming. Do you sing in the shower?*

*Sometimes.*

*You're washing your hair right now.*

*Can you really tell that?*

*Normally, no, but you were projecting toward me. Were you thinking about me?*

*Umm ...* Diana was unsure what to say. She had been thinking about him. She'd been thinking about his arms wrapped around her, and ... She felt her face get bright red. She heard Gabe's laughter in her head. It was warm and comforting. She could definitely get used to this.

*Me, too, babe. Me, too.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Gabe smiled at Diana's thoughts in the shower. There was something about having her with him that made things seem right. She made him feel happy. The kind of happy he hadn't been in years. They were in danger, a psychopath was after both of them, and all he could think about was climbing in the shower with her and making love to her.

"All done."

Gabe looked up to see her standing in the bathroom doorway. The towel wrapped around her body was the only thing she wore. He smelled her soap, remembering it on his skin. The way it felt on him, the way it mixed with her own scent. He started to walk toward her, but stopped. They didn't have time for that. He forced himself to reach for clean clothes and walk past without reaching out to her. "Be right out. Cole should be here soon. I told him some of what happened. I figure we can explain the rest over breakfast."

"Okay," she answered as she watched him close the door.

\* \* \* \* \*

"All right, so how did you get into this dream?" Cole looked at Gabe and Diana across the restaurant table. Diana glanced around before answering Cole's question. It was still fairly early, and the café wasn't busy yet, affording them relative privacy for the conversation. Anyone up at this hour was probably getting ready for work or just getting off the late shift.

Lucky for them, she thought. No one is close enough to hear this crazy conversation about hearts and psychics and weird dreams. She wondered how long it would take to put the lot of them in the nuthouse if someone did hear. What a nice addition to your breakfast. Psychos with your pancakes and waffles.

Diana answered with a shake of her head, "I don't know. Like I told Gabe, I don't know all the ins and outs of these psychically induced dreams. I know how to deal with the standard dreams. Even my learning dreams tend to follow the rules of what we would consider normal in the sense that I can direct them and change them."

“Learning dreams?” Cole asked.

Diana sighed, “There are times when I need to remember something that I’ve already learned, but I can’t recall it. Part of me, subconsciously, does remember it. So, when I go to sleep, I’m able to access those memories. It’s along the line of lucid dreaming, only more so. I believe some cultures call it dreamwalking.”

Cole leaned forward, nodding his head. “Pretty impressive. I’ve heard of it, but have never done it myself. I always thought that lucid dreaming and dreamwalking were two different things, though. You can do both?”

“I guess so. I have both learning dreams and dreams where I’m aware and can change things.” Diana nodded.

“That’s pretty rare, you know. I’ve never heard of anyone that could do both well. My grandfather used to tell me that dreamwalking was invaluable for learning about oneself and the environment. I always pictured it much like astral projection, only a bit more immediate.”

“I never thought of it as much of anything special. I’ve always been able to do both. That was one of the things that freaked me out when I started dreaming about Gabe. I could never change anything. That, and the way writing them down helped more than anything else is how I knew they weren’t regular dreams.” Diana turned and looked at Gabe. “After Gabe proved to me I was able to communicate telepathically, I got a lot more information from my dreams. They don’t guarantee that I will always know what I need to know, but if it is in my head, and I know I need to look for it, I can usually find it.” She smiled at Cole, just then realizing how confusing her last sentence had sounded.

“That makes sense. They always tell you to sleep on it if you have something you need to think about it. You just end up taking it a step further. And this dream wasn’t like the normal kind, how?”

“I couldn’t control it at all.” Diana sighed, “Normally I can wish things away, change the environment, shift whatever I want to, but I couldn’t get us out of there. It was like I was in the real world. Everything was as solid and unchangeable as this table right here.” She stabbed at it emphatically.

“What did you try to do?”

“Get the chains off, move us somewhere else, stuff like that.”

“What about little things?”

“What do you mean?”

“Little things, like maybe changing your dress, or putting shoes on. Something that he might not have noticed right away.”

Diana didn’t say anything for a moment, then shook her head. “You know, you’re right. I didn’t try anything like that.”



"What difference would it make if you could have?" Gabe sounded impatient and confused.

She turned to Gabe. "If I can change little things, it means he doesn't have complete control over the dreams. That he only has control over the big things, and what he doesn't view as important, he leaves to just happen."

"That gives you a window of opportunity." Cole leaned forward.

Gabe smiled. "Just because he doesn't think it is important, doesn't mean that it isn't."

"One problem, though," Diana interrupted their thoughts. "Whatever his power, it's extensive enough to cause damage that comes with us out of the dream."

"But he was concentrating on hurting me, Diana."

"Yeah, I know that. But that isn't what I'm talking about. This worries me even more." Diana shook her head as she pulled up the sleeve to her shirt. She had a large, fresh scrape on the inside of her wrist. "I found that while I was getting dressed this morning. It wasn't there last night when I went to bed. It's where my hand was rubbing against the chains."

Gabe grabbed her hand and pulled it toward him. He turned her arm to get a better look at it, concern evident in his face, "Why didn't you say anything about this before?"

"Because I didn't notice it until you were already in the shower, and when you came out, Cole was already in our room. To be honest, I totally forgot about it until just now."

"There is no way you could have gotten that anywhere else?" Cole asked.

"I guess there is. Like I said, I didn't even notice it until I was getting dressed. But I thought it was worth mentioning. If I did get it in the dream, it means Bale's power is stronger than we thought. His dream is real enough to affect us even without conscious thought on his part."

"Which means?"

"Which means we are in a heap of trouble if he gets his hands on us again before we can defend ourselves."

"Do you have any ideas how to block it from happening again?" Cole asked them both.

"No, I don't, other than consciously, actively shielding before we go to sleep." Diana turned to Gabe, "Will that even help, though?"

"I think if we stay in the compound, the shielding that's been set up around it should be strong enough to keep him away from us."

Diana didn't want to think about what would happen if it didn't work. She just hoped it would.

They had no problems on the way to Argus's headquarters. It was still light when they arrived, so Diana was able to see some of the compound. She didn't know what she had

expected. Perhaps a high fence around a modern, sharp-edged, cold building. She definitely had not been expecting this.

She couldn't see the house from the road. The driveway was blocked with large iron gates that screamed old money and security. The workmanship and style of the high stone wall gave the impression of age. Something that had been built over a century before. Beyond the gates, a long, curving driveway lined with trees led the way into the five hundred acre complex.

The security was top notch, with cameras, keypad, and keycards all to be faced before they were allowed in through the gates. Diana realized no one would be able to get in uninvited.

"What about the wall?" she asked Gabe as he was pointing out the electronic security measures.

"Also electronically wired. Anything that either climbs over the wall, or flies over the wall at less than thirty feet above the ground will be detected. They are zapped with a mild electric shock, and security comes to check it out

"There are sensors that stretch across and up, and are able to tell you exactly what just climbed or jumped over, if they were flying, or if their trajectory indicated they were headed for a landing." He pointed to the trees that were inside the perimeter of the wall. "Nothing grows within twenty feet of the wall. So far, we haven't found anything that can jump a twenty foot wall straight to a tree twenty feet away."

"You guys take this seriously, don't you?"

"We have to. Argus has been hunting things for over a hundred years; it tends to make them want to hunt us back."

"I thought no one knew about you?" Diana asked.

Gabe gave her a grim smile. "Most things that have found out are dead now. But we can't account for everything out there."

Diana felt a cold shiver go up her back at his look. He and his men took their lives into their hands every time they went out on a mission. Obviously, if they were discovered, then their lives would be forfeit to any of the beings that wanted them dead.

As they drove up to the main building, Diana's breath caught in her throat. No stainless steel, soulless building here. In front of her was a veritable castle.

"The woman who originally sponsored us was very, very wealthy," Cole said with a smile in his voice, as he stopped the car to give Diana time to take it all in. "This was their home before her husband was killed."

Diana remembered what Gabe had told her before. "Did they ever find out what killed him?"

"Yeah, they did. And they made sure that it and its nest were destroyed before any more could hatch."

Diana thought about asking exactly what had killed the man, but decided she was probably better off not knowing.

The house was built of the same stone as the wall. It, too, had an aged appearance about it. At least three stories tall, with three separate wings, it looked like something out of a Vincent Price horror movie.

Despite her mental connection, though, it wasn't threatening in any way. She felt welcomed by it. The driveway circled in front of the main doors, creating a courtyard. In the center of the looped driveway a large fountain of the three fates weaving, measuring, and cutting the threads of life was spilling water into a pool below.

The building promised a fairy tale come true. Above the main entrance was a stained glass window, split in four, representing the elements, earth, air, fire, and water, one in each compass direction. The colored glass seemed to glow and created the impression of movement with sharpness and depth. Balconies dotted the front of the edifice, each backed by French doors.

On either end of the castle were large turrets, reminding Diana of the pictures of medieval castles, only without the sense of a dangerous fortress. The ground floor of each turret had even more French doors, which led onto the main patio that wrapped around the sides of the castle. A large, stone, double stairway led to the front doors.

"If Disney had seen this place, Cinderella's Castle would be much different," she said in an awed voice. Neuschwanstein, the basis of the famed Disney Castle, had nothing on this place.

"The main house originally had over seventy rooms," Gabe explained. "After the foundation was formed, wings were added, basements were dug, and other fortified structures were built around the grounds.

"Most of the more secretive and dangerous work gets done in the underground areas. Above ground are the basic research labs, conference rooms, classrooms, and sleeping quarters for staff who are required to stay overnight for one reason or another."

"Okay, so where is the secrecy agreement I have to sign before you threaten to silence me forever?" Diana tried to make light of what she was seeing and hearing.

"You already passed the test." Gabe glanced at her as Cole started the car moving again towards the building. "If I didn't think you would keep your word, you'd never be seeing any of this. Up until now, it would have been your word against mine. You wouldn't have been able to prove anything I told you previously."

Diana thought about that for a moment and realized he was telling the truth. Although he seemed to tell her a lot, he had never told her anything she would be believed about if she talked. The fact that the foundation was a genuine research group disproved any claims she might have made.

"You trust me?" she asked him softly, feeling a lump in her throat. She hadn't given it any real thought before, but the answer to this question had suddenly become very important to her.

"Yes," he assured her simply and just as softly.

They got out of the car at the front entry. Gabe informed Diana that someone would take care of the car and luggage as he ushered her into the stone edifice.

Doorway was too mild a word to describe the opening to the castle. "Portal" came to Diana's mind as he pushed open one of the ten-foot tall, wooden double doors. They looked heavy, though they swung open easily on their large hinges.

The foyer was larger than many houses she had been in. The stained glass windows in the front sent a myriad of colors through the entry way, striking the chandelier into rainbows of colored light. There was a large divided staircase that led up to the next story, splitting in two at a landing, creating a perfect frame for a larger than life-sized painting of a couple dressed in nineteenth-century clothing.

"That is our founder and her husband, Sarah and Robert Thomas. Legend has it that they were so deeply in love she willingly followed him into death once the creature that killed him was destroyed. It's said she didn't want to live without him and was eager to meet him again, either in the afterlife or in another life."

"She believed in reincarnation?" Diana asked.

"I told you she was something else. They apparently did everything together. Everything, from hunting, to taking care of the estate, to even building this house. He treated her like an equal, in intelligence and strength. There are bricks in this house that she installed with him, side by side. They were definitely not a normal couple for the times."

Diana continued to look around the main entry. Paintings and tapestries dating back to well before the nineteenth century covered walls of stone, making an area that had the potential to be cold and heartless into a home. The floor was made of light-colored marble, inlaid with astrological symbols and representations, creating an atmosphere of light and fancy. The staircase was covered in a thick, dark carpet, inviting people to share what the house had to offer.

They didn't stop at any of the front rooms; instead, the men led Diana to a room toward the back that turned out to be a library. "This is only one of the libraries the house has. It has obscure works, the kind of things very few people ever read." As he was talking, he was, of all things, moving a set of books aside to reveal a hidden panel with a keypad, where he proceeded to enter a code.

At the look on Diana's face, he just laughed. "I know, I know. Clichéd, isn't it? But worth it to see the look on your face." As the hidden door opened, Gabe continued, "It's not the only entrance to the labs, but I thought you might get a kick out of it." Behind the door was a narrow staircase, old, but well lit, leading down to another door which also had a security panel connected to it.

Behind this door, all references to an old hidden passage from a manor house ended. It was obvious they were now in a business atmosphere, one that had important work to do, and which took itself very seriously. The walls were off-white, the lights fluorescent. There was another doorway immediately in front of them and stairs that continued down. They continued to descend. At the bottom of the steps was a final door that needed another code to be opened, this one requiring ten digits.

Behind it was a hallway that went off in both directions, looking like any hallway in a modern office building. People were walking by with a sense of purpose, but all nodded hello to the group.

“This way.” Gabe led her down the right side of the corridor. “We’re going to see Steve first. I want to know if he found any more information on the knife, in addition to what it does. I would love to know if he’s figured out where or when it came from.”

They continued down the hallway until they reached a door with a frosted glass top. The writing on the door simply read, Steven Francis.

Gabe turned to Diana with his hand on the doorknob, smiling. “Don’t worry, he won’t bite.”

Diana took a deep breath and followed him.

## Chapter Fifteen

Diana wasn't sure what to expect, but a kind, elderly gentleman who looked like a grandfather was not it. Steve was a large man, at least six feet and two hundred and fifty pounds, but moved with a grace that surprised her. He turned around with a smile on his face, welcoming them as they entered the room.

Gabe walked up to the man with his arms open, grasping him in a bear hug.

Steve pulled back and stared intently at Gabe. "You look well. And at peace." He glanced toward Diana with a question in his eyes.

"I am, Steve. For the first time in a long time."

Steve slapped Gabe on his back a couple times, smiling broadly.

Steve brushed aside both of the men and reached for Diana's hand. "Well, I guess proper introductions are called for. I'm Steve Francis. And you must be the incredible Diana Temis."

Diana laughed at his polite introduction as she shook his large hand. "Diana, yes, incredible, I don't think so."

"Well, Ms. Temis, I have to admit that I have been curious about you ever since Gabe told me about you."

"Diana, please," she interrupted him before he could go any further.

"Diana, then," he said with a nod. "I've read all of your books in the last few days, and being one of the few people privy to the complete mission report files, I have to say I'm amazed at your accuracy."

"All of the books?" Diana asked surprised.

"Oh, yes, all of them." He grinned sheepishly. "I have an incredible reading speed, and a photographic memory."

"He's also incredibly modest. He forgot to mention that he is a certified genius and puts most members of Mensa to shame," Cole interjected.

Steve chose to ignore him. "You told Gabe that everything you wrote in those books you got from your dreams?"

Diana glanced quickly at Gabe, remembering the way she had described her hero. The addition of the love scenes and sensuality she had put in the books seemed silly now. "Um, almost everything. All of the fighting and monsters and things."

"You must tell me more about this --"

Gabe interrupted Steve. "She will, Steve, she will. But first things first. We need to know if the shields surrounding the house will allow someone to sleep without any outside psychic influences."

"Yes, of course. That was one of the things they were designed for, but why?"

"We've got a lot to tell you, my friend."

Over the next few hours, they caught Steve up on everything that had happened over the past few days. After listening, it was his turn to share what he had discovered.

"I haven't been able to find out much more about the knife itself. Diana was right when she told you it reminded her of the European ceremonial daggers she had seen, but other than that, I'm not sure how much of a connection to any culture or nation there actually is. I can tell you it is at least five hundred years old, but that is about it."

Steve held up the blade, pointing to the etching that had made Diana sick to look at before. "The carvings, however, are a different matter. They were added after the dagger was created, and spell out exactly what the new intended use is. The spell itself is extremely complicated, and it would have taken a lot of power and ability to perform.

"There are reports of other devices with these kinds of spells, but this is the first one I have actually seen. I finally found a reference to the writing after exhaustive searching. The only reason we even know what it is, is because of a collection of grimoires we have from a bunker in Nazi Germany." Steve looked up, smiling. "Thank the Gods Hitler was a collector of obscure occult information. The only good thing he did was collect what he found and prevent its destruction.

"If you look here, there's a small glyph." He pointed to a section of the dagger at the end of the hilt. "We've traced it back to, who would have guessed, but to your Bale, Diana. Apparently he had it made, or imbued with the magic spell a couple hundred years ago."

Diana interrupted, "That has to be a different Bale, there is no way he could be the same one."

Steve gazed directly at her. "Unfortunately, he could be one and the same. If he is as powerful as it looks like he is, staying alive for a couple hundred years would be nothing at all to him."

“But, how?” Psychic abilities she could handle. Non-humans she could accept, but being able to live for hundreds of years seemed too much.

“It could be a variety of reasons,” Cole tried to explain to her. “He could be something as mundane as a long-lived non-human, a reincarnated spirit with memories of a past life, or a practitioner of black magic to help him live a long life. Magic is a part of life, both black and white, and taking another’s life is nothing to some if it furthers their own ambitions. We already know he’s not above taking a life for his own purposes. That he would use that energy released to benefit him further is not that big of a jump.”

Diana was in over her head. Every time she thought things couldn’t get any weirder, they threw something new at her. There seemed to be no end to this.

Diana stared at Steve. “How did you know where to look for information about the knife?”

Steve smiled smugly. “Well, I would love to explain to you all about my photographic memory and tell you I have read nearly everything the foundation owns, but none of that is why I was able to track this down.”

Gabe looked at Steve reproachfully. “After the advent of computers, our searches have gotten much easier. We’ve put everything we have in a known language into the computer database.”

“Everything, that is, except for the items too dangerous to be read aloud or typed.” Steve explained further at Diana’s look of confusion, “There are some actual spells that it only takes recopying or reciting to bring forth whatever the desired result is. Those are locked up where no one can get them. Sections are put into the database, but never enough that anyone could piece an entire ritual together. Just enough so someone knows where to go look.”

“If they have the security clearance,” Cole finished for Steve.

“Steve probably has the highest security clearance of anyone. He’s the one who decides what gets put in the computers, what gets hidden, and who gets access to it,” Gabe further explained Steve’s role to Diana.

“I wouldn’t think our little problem would rate the attention of the big cheese,” Diana said with a smile.

Steve returned her smile with one of his own. “Well, normally it wouldn’t, but since these guys saved my little sister ten years back, they seem to think they’re my friends, and I can’t get rid of them.”

Diana watched the three males joke and tease each other. It was nice to see Gabe relaxed again. He’d been on edge with her ever since the reading, when he’d found out what she wrote for a living. She hadn’t expected to see him relaxed again until this was all taken care of, and he was finally safe.



It was unfair for him to have been put in danger because of her. She would be gone from his life as soon as they got this all figured out. It would be better for both of them that way.

"I haven't had enough time to do much checking on the note and package you sent me. I can tell you that the heart is human, though. Probably from someone between the ages of twenty and forty. It was fully developed, but no real sign of aging that I could detect. Of course, I'm not a pathologist, and I'm sure one could tell you more, but the fact that it is human is probably the thing we most needed to know."

Diana blanched at that bit of information. The thought that this psycho would kill someone just to send her a message filled her with a sense of guilt.

"It's not your fault." Gabe rubbed his hand on her arm as he tried to reassure her. "Sweetheart, you can't blame yourself for the actions of some nutcase. It wasn't your fault he got those guys to attack us, it isn't your fault that he's crazy enough to kill someone. If it's the same Bale that created the knife, he has to have been doing this for centuries, long before you were even born."

Diana tried to take comfort in what Gabe said. Even knowing it was true, it didn't make it any easier to deal with.

"This first note --" Steve changed the subject on them. "It came with the roses you said you got?" he asked Diana. She hadn't shown it to Gabe until after Cole had left, so they had brought it with them.

"Yes. I didn't put it together earlier, but I think it's the same paper he sent all his letters on."

"Probably. It's quite old and probably expensive, but there's nothing spectacular about it."

"I obviously haven't had any time to analyze it, but I'm sure it's just normal paper, which is probably not news to you if you gave previous ones to the police. Now the second note, the one you sent ahead, that is not paper. It's skin. And it was written in blood. Both probably human." He looked at Diana with worry in his eyes. "You have someone very dangerous fixated on you, my dear. I'm glad you found us."

"Human skin?" Diana's mouth was dry.

Steve nodded. "But not from the same human. The heart was fresh, the skin was not. It was also old and has been treated in a way that I have yet to actually determine. I have never seen it quite so pliable. Usually it cracks and becomes brittle, but this seems to retain the elasticity it must have had when created, and still be thin and light. I don't know how he did it, but it is incredible," Steve enthused as Diana put a hand up to her mouth.

Diana swallowed at the thought that someone was able to do that to another human, to strip off their skin and use it as a ... a notepad.

Steve stopped talking and apologized again, "I'm sorry, Diana. I am not that sick of a monster. Using skin as parchment centuries ago was more common than you would like to think. Usually it was the hide from animals, but every once in a while you got someone really sick.

"Animal skins were often used in grimoires and the like. For human skin to have been used for a note, that implies serious obsession, possibly even the beginning of a spell, as in a statement of intent.

"Sometimes a spell requires that the object of revenge or affection be notified, for want of a better word. It creates a symbiosis, almost. That alone would tell us we're working with a dark sorcerer, if we can call him that for now. Added to the fact that it is human skin he's using, then, well, I don't want to even contemplate how sick he is."

Diana sat up straighter. She looked around at the three men with her. "Boy, I can really pick my stalkers, can't I?" she said, her mouth twisting into a grimace.

Gabe put his arms around her in a comforting hug. Her life was possibly in danger, a madman capable of unspeakable evil was after her, and she had never felt safer. Gabe was able to make her feel protected and cherished without saying a word. Good Lord, she had it bad.

"Okay, well, based on your shared dream, we need to find out who this Bale is, what he wants, and how he would know your mother and family."

He directed his next question to Diana. "You know nothing about him? Have never head of him before?"

Diana shook her head, thinning her lips. "No, nothing. I'm trying to remember any mention of him, but so far, nothing. If I can get to sleep tonight without interference, I can try searching then, but nothing is coming to me now. But remember, I was only a kid when my mother died. There were probably tons of people she knew that I never met or heard of."

"True." Steve patted her hand in a fatherly fashion. "Don't worry, we can do this the old -- well -- the new-fashioned way."

Steve moved over to his computer. "Throughout history there are quite a few gods with the name Ba'al, or Bel and numerous associations with these names. I know there was an Egyptian god by the name of Ba'al. According to some legends he was an eater of souls. There might be some connection, given the nature of the dagger. He may be a follower or priest that took the name Bale in honor of his god." Steve shook his head. "But that is all speculation; let's see what I can find."

The three of them watched Steve as he worked his magic, opening up databases, searching references, and doing what came naturally to him. "I miss the actual books. Nothing beats the touch of parchment under your hands. Of course, the dust and bad writing always were a detriment. Plus the fact that so many of the old books just reeked of smoke and old potions. You never knew what you were breathing in," Steve rambled as he searched the records. "But I have to admit, this is much faster and easier on the lungs."

“Aaah, okay, here we go.” Steve leaned closer to the screen, pressing keys, getting more info as he spoke. “The first reference to Bale occurs in a monk’s diary from the early fifteenth-hundreds. According to this, he was definitely not a candidate for a Nobel Peace Prize. He seems to have been the ruler of some small area in Eastern Europe.

“There is no record of where he was originally from, but he apparently beat the existing ruler of the area in a war or battle of some kind.” Steve looked up from his computer screen. “Which actually was very common back then. It was a violent, turbulent time.”

Turning back to his computer, he continued to summarize the diary. “He would often have villagers taken to his castle, and they would never be seen again. Again, not too rare. Peasants and serfs were their property; they often did what they wanted with them. This priest, however suspected Bale of ‘nefarious acts’ and of summoning demons. No mention of what happened to him, though, and that’s it for this book. Let’s see ...

“There is reference to him during the mid-seventeenth century, from the Spanish Inquisition. He was reported to be worshipping demons and devils.” Diana learned quickly that Steve had the habit of interspersing what he was learning with facts from history. “Surprisingly, one or two of the people they killed actually were as evil as the clerics claimed. He was taken prisoner at a remote estate. A messenger was sent on ahead to inform the priests they were coming, but the group never arrived. The priests sent out more soldiers, and they found those who had taken Bale prisoner were all dead.” Steve stopped for a moment. “It says the soldiers were found mutilated, many with their hearts torn out.

“There is nothing here for the next one hundred years, until the eighteenth century in England. Not much ... Ah, wait.” They all watched Steve as he continued to work his own brand of magic on the keyboard.

Steve had a scowl on his face as he read the computer screen.

“What is it?” Gabe asked

“Well, it says here that a coven of white witches stripped him of his power and performed a binding spell on him.”

“What’s wrong about that?”

“That is the last reference I have of him. If he is the same Bale, there should be more. It looks like he just disappeared after that.”

“Then what they did worked.”

“It seems so.”

“So it’s not the same one,” Diana responded

“I don’t know. I just don’t know,” Steve replied. “The odds of there being two Bales would be slim.”

“Unless this one took the name of the first to inspire fear,” Diana pointed out.

“True. But it’s not as though the name Bale is well-known even in occult circles. Well, whether it’s that or just missing information, I’ll keep looking,” Steve assured her. “That is all

we have on him that I can find. But I won't stop. I can do some cross references, and maybe, find something else."

"Well, it's more than we had an hour ago," Gabe reminded him.

"But why is he so set on me? He kept saying he was my destiny. What did he mean by that?" Diana asked, not having learned what she wanted.

Steve shook his head. "I'm sorry, Diana, there's nothing here. Maybe I can find something else eventually."

Diana smiled at the large man, nearly laughing. "Oh, please, Steve, don't apologize. You've just told me more than I ever wanted to know about him or any other creature. Just thinking about him, and all the possible reasons for his existence, gives me the heebie-jeebies." She hugged herself tight, rubbing her hands up and down her arms as if to ward off a chill. "I can already tell if there is more to find about him, you will. I'm just not sure if I want to know about it."

Getting out of her chair, she addressed the rest of the men in the room. "If you gentlemen don't mind, though, I think it's bedtime for me. I've learned all I can in one day and not go insane." She looked at them all with a sad smile, then turned to Gabe. "Where can I find my bags?"

"I'll show you." Gabe got up and placed his hand on her back as he led her off to find her things.

## Chapter Sixteen

Gabe led Diana to a room on the second floor at the far end of one of the wings.

"This is a suite usually reserved for families. I had them put both of our things in here in case something like last night happens again. I want you to be able to find me if you need me, and I want to know exactly where you are."

Before Diana could say anything, he continued, "It's a suite with two bedrooms. It shares a sitting room and a bathroom. Your things will be in one of the rooms."

He opened the door. "Do you want anything from the cafeteria? It's late, and none of us have eaten since lunch when we landed in Milwaukee. I don't know about you, but I'm still on Boston time."

She looked up at him. "Um, sure," she answered hesitantly, "but nothing heavy. Maybe just some soup or something."

"I'll get some ordered and be back in a little bit, okay?"

She smiled tiredly at him. "Okay, thanks."

He left her at the door, and Diana entered the suite. She was struck by a sense of elegance right away. Ivory walls and hardwood floors created a welcoming warmth instead of the coldness that stark white would have given the room. She felt calm and immediately at ease. Someone obviously understood the effects of color on one's psyche.

The draperies were in a complementary shade, with spots of color interspersed throughout the room, keeping it from being monochromatic or boring. To the left, there was a large fireplace with a mantle carved of white marble. Representations of nymphs, or perhaps goddesses, on either side made her feel watched over and protected.

The furniture was antique, but comfortable. It was all traditional American, sturdy, but beautiful, allowing one to appreciate the beauty and not be afraid of breaking anything. A large divan was in front of the fireplace, giving her a place to relax and enjoy the flames that

someone had already lit. Diana was amazed at the beauty this entire place held. She felt comfortable, like she was coming home.

On the right wall were three doors. Upon quick searching, she realized that two led into bedrooms, and the middle into the connecting bath.

She found Gabe's bag in the first bedroom she looked in. In shades of burgundy and red, the room looked made for a man. It was masculine in both furniture and overall appearance. She didn't look around too much, as she didn't want to intrude.

The third door led to her room. Instead of red, though, it was dominated by blue. Various shades of blue set off by bright white. Blue walls, comforter, curtains. White furniture, white carpets, and white sheets. A silk duvet was nearly hidden by the silk and velvet pillows thrown on top, filling most of the space on the four-poster bed.

She felt as though she had walked into a high class hotel room at a seaside retreat. It continued the warm, comforting theme the sitting room started. Just walking into the room made her feel relaxed and almost happy.

The bathroom was between the two rooms, and it was also splendid in its luxury. Light gray marble shot through with white and pink covered nearly every surface from the floor to the walls of the glass steam shower. The tub was wonderfully huge, with jets that she could just imagine pulsing away some of her tension.

The glassed-in shower had at least three showerheads and was more than big enough for both her and Gabe together. At that thought, Diana brought her attention back to the rest of the room. She did not need to be thinking about Gabe right now.

Apparently the foundation didn't stint on the comfort of its guests or employees. The dual sink vanity had golden fixtures and was on a raised platform with an ornate mirror spanning the entire wall above it.

Spying herself in the mirror, Diana noticed the dark shadows under her eyes. She looked exhausted. *Well, might as well look the way I feel*, she thought as she turned and went to her room to get something out to wear to bed. As she was changing, she heard Gabe come back into the shared sitting area.

"Diana, it's me." He knocked on her bedroom door letting her know he was back. "Food's here."

Finished changing, Diana headed out of the bedroom and walked to the small table in front of the window that she had barely noticed earlier. Gabe had already set up the food there and was waiting for her to join him.

"I wasn't sure if once you started eating you might want more than just the soup, so I brought a little extra." He gestured to the table as she sat down.

He had brought chicken noodle soup, turkey sandwiches, and lemonade. There were crackers for the soup and dressings for the sandwiches. Diana sighed. It was perfect.

They both began to eat their first meal in hours. There was little conversation. Gabe seemed to sense Diana's need to just not think for a little while. She appreciated it, as she felt she had been through a lot lately and was nearly ready to collapse. When ready, she asked him to tell her some more history about the house.

"This suite is where their sister used to stay when she came to visit."

Diana looked up. "Their sister?"

Gabe smiled. "Oh, sorry, I guess I forgot to tell you how they met. Robert and Sarah were foster brother and sister. Robert and his sister Jaclyn had been left orphans as children, their parents dead. Sarah's mother was named guardian of them and their fortune. The mothers had apparently been best friends from an early age.

"Sarah and Robert grew up together. Sarah's father was dead, and they only had her mother to raise the three of them. They were both very young and grew to love each other. Without a father, Sarah's mother was both a mother and father to them all. She must have been the one who instilled the quaint idea of equality of the sexes into their heads.

"Legend in the foundation states that Robert and Jaclyn's parents were not killed by regular thieves or bandits. It's believed that they were attacked by something non-human. It's unsure if Sarah and her mother were there at the time, or were contacted later, but it's said that's why Sarah was sure that her husband was killed by non-humans. She had already been exposed to it and was willing to accept it happening again."

"Strange," Diana said quietly.

"The history of the foundation seems to have an awful lot of coincidences, actually, but only if you believe in them."

"Don't you?" Diana asked him curiously.

"I used to, but sometimes things just seem to happen at just the right time, and coincidence is too simple a word for why."

Diana remained thoughtful for a moment. "You may be right. There are times when I've thought that there has to be a reason for some things to have happened the way they did. I guess we'll never know." Diana grew silent as she thought about her own life. How, if but one thing had been different in a long chain of coincidences, she wouldn't be here having this conversation. Shaking herself out of her melancholy, she spoke softly, "I'm off to bed." They had finished eating, and the plates were organized on the tray Gabe had wheeled in. "Is there anything I can do with these?" She gestured toward the dishes.

"No, I'll take care of them. You go get some rest. I'll check on you when I get back, and then I, too, will be heading off to bed."

\* \* \* \* \*

Diana found herself in the same dungeon. The torches and candles were all lit, as if waiting for her appearance. How had he ... Before she could finish her thought, she felt her consciousness yanked, dragging her away from Bale and his world.

Looking around, Diana now was in a large sitting room of a Victorian house. High ceilings, wood floors, and gorgeous crown moldings all reminded her of the foundation. She breathed a sigh of relief as she realized she was safe now. However Bale had gotten to her, something had prevented him from keeping her.

Once she realized she wasn't in danger, Diana relaxed her guard. This wasn't Argus, even though it felt similar. It actually felt like one of her normal dreams. She realized that perhaps tonight she would be able to learn some of what she needed to know.

She started to search for what had pulled her from Bale's grasp. Walking toward the front of the house, into the entry, she found a staircase leading up to the second level. Something pulled her upward, telling her that was where she needed to be.

Slowly she ascended the stairs, anxious to learn something, and yet hesitant at the same time.

Upstairs was a hallway of doors. The one at the end was partly open. She slowly walked toward it, wondering, cautious, but without fear. She approached the door, and it slowly swung further open. She didn't touch it, nor did the woman inside. The woman was sitting on the opposite side of the room. She was in front of a fireplace, writing in a journal of some sort. She did not appear to notice Diana.

The woman was young, maybe twenty-five. She had her hair pulled up in a bun and wore an old-fashioned riding habit of some kind. She was concentrating on whatever it was she was writing. Somehow, Diana knew the woman's name was Maia. She watched her as she finished in the journal and then pulled out a piece of paper and once again began to write. There were tears in her eyes as she wrote. She continued to write and cry.

Diana tried to move closer to see what she was writing, but she was unable to. It was as though she were watching a movie. A movie that had let her in, but only so far. She was a part of it, yet not. "Hello?" Diana tried to communicate with the woman. She had not shown any reaction when Diana entered the room, but perhaps she could hear her. The woman threw sand on the paper to dry the ink, having finished her message.

"Hello? What's wrong? Can I help?" Diana tried again.

The woman's crying slowed a bit as she looked up with a thoughtful look on her face. As though she knew something was there, but unsure of what.

"Is someone there? Hello?" The woman looked up, seeming to answer, but Diana knew that she was not truly aware of Diana's presence. She continued to speak to the air, though, looking towards, but not seeing Diana. "If you're here, then perhaps all is not lost. I do what I have to do to protect us all. Perhaps he will believe it is the end, and the promise of freedom a lie. I don't know if it will be enough to keep him chained forever, or even for a while longer, but I will try. If I fail, she is hidden as best I can manage.



"The paths are in motion to assure his destruction. He will search for you, he will make you pay for what was done to him. If you are the last, your payment will be more severe than any other's has been. Alone, you can only bind him again, but know that which can truly defeat him is the power of the two lines united. One of blood and one of spirit. Nothing else can destroy him."

Diana watched as the woman folded the letter and placed it on the journal. "Hopefully, my children will understand why I do what I do, and their own duty to the future. Now, quickly, go, he cannot find you here. He has power I have never seen, despite what has been done in the past. If he catches you between, all may be lost. Be careful, my daughter." The woman then blew a kiss toward Diana.

Diana felt the room begin to fade away. She tried to keep it present, but it escaped her. Something was pushing her away, pulling her from the woman in the room.

Once again, she found herself somewhere new. It was dark, too dark to see anything. She realized she was between dreams, between worlds. What had happened? Was it time to wake? Had Bale found her? Diana decided it was time to wake. The last thing she wanted was to be in that man's power again.

"Wait."

She heard a voice. A woman's voice. Who was it? What did she want? Diana waited a moment. Gradually she became aware of being somewhere solid. A room of some sort. A light grew in the room, and at the same time, in her heart. Bale had not found her. There was something else for her to learn here. Something someone else wanted her to know.

This was so different from her normal dreams, she wasn't sure where it was coming from. But regardless of that, she knew she was in no danger. And whatever was about to happen was something she needed to see.

Slowly she became aware of her new surroundings. She was in a room, a kitchen. Diana realized with a sharp intake of breath what room it was. This was the kitchen in her parents' house. The house she had lived in up until her mother died.

It was a bright summer day, with the windows wide open and a breeze blowing the curtains in. Two figures were becoming clear to her. Two figures who appeared to be arguing. Her mother and her Aunt Janet. This was wrong, her Aunt Janet was never at the old house during the summer. The only time she had been there during the summer was after Diana's mother had died.

"Don't do it, Alexis. Remember what Maia saw. You know it won't work."

"I have to Janet, I have no choice. If I do it, maybe she won't have to."

"Alexis, you don't know that. You aren't strong enough, how do you even --?"

"You're right, I don't know," Diana's mother interrupted, "I can only hope." Alexis grabbed Janet's hands. "If I don't come back, see to it she is protected. See she learns what

she needs to keep safe. Please, Janet, promise me. I don't want her having to face this unprepared."

Janet didn't say anything for a moment. "I will keep her safe," she assured Diana's mother with a tense nod.

"Thank you, sister of my heart. I have left the letter, you will know where to find it and when to give it to her. Please watch over them both." Alexis hugged Janet, looked out the back window of the kitchen, raised her hand as if to wave goodbye, turned, and left.

Once again, the scene started to fade. "No, *don't*," Diana yelled at the powers that be, at whomever was in control of her dream. "*That's my mother. Where's she going? Mommy! Come back!*" Slowly the scene faded, melted into nothingness. "*Mommy, No!*"

\* \* \* \* \*

"Shhh, Diana, it's okay, Diana, babe, it's okay." Diana slowly became aware of her surroundings again. She was in someone's arms, someone was holding her. Someone male. He was rocking her, smoothing back her hair, the way her father used to. But this wasn't her father, this was someone else. His voice was deeper, softer. She had feelings for the man with this voice. She heard a woman whimper.

"Diana, honey, wake up. Come on, babe, wake up." *Wake up?* Why was he telling her to wake up? Where was she? Who was he? Diana was still swimming in the dream, her mother, what was it about her mother? With a start, Diana realized where she was and who was holding her. She remembered what happened, and she felt the loss of her mother all over again. With a cry, she woke up fully and buried her head in Gabe's shoulder.

"Oh, honey, it's okay, it's okay." He was still rocking her. He seemed to know she was awake now, but still needed comfort. "It's okay, babe. You're here with me. I won't let anything hurt you."

Diana just lay there in his arms, holding him tight, as she felt tears come to her eyes. Tears for her mother she hadn't shed in twenty years.

\* \* \* \* \*

Gabe didn't know what happened, but he knew Diana needed him. He held her, comforted her, let her cry it out, whatever it was. It was killing him to see her like this. His strong, determined Diana was breaking, and there wasn't anything he could do but hold her.

He held her until she fell back asleep. He thought about leaving her, but she felt so good in his arms, he didn't want to go. What if she had another nightmare? What if she needed him? He knew it was a lame excuse, but it was enough to convince him to stay. He snuggled in beside her, making sure she was tight in his arms as he dozed off.

He awoke a couple of hours later. The clock on the bedside table read that it wasn't even three yet. He knew he should leave before Diana woke up in the morning, but she felt

so right here beside him. They had moved in their sleep so he was spooning her. She stirred, and he held his breath, waiting for her to wake.

"Mmm. This feels good." He heard her say, then felt her tense as she realized he was in bed with her. "Gabe?"

"Yeah. You had a bad dream. I was in the bathroom and heard you calling out. I came in to wake you." He tightened his arms around her. "You fell back asleep, but I was afraid it might happen again, so I decided to stay with you."

He was unsure what her reaction would be. She hadn't invited him back into her bed. Hell, she'd gone all the way across the country to avoid seeing him again. How was she going to react?

"Thank you." She relaxed back into his arms.

Gabe was stunned. That was the last thing he had expected to hear. "Do you remember it? Was it about Bale?"

Diana didn't say anything for a moment, was so silent Gabe wasn't sure if she had heard him, if she was going to answer. He waited. "Yes, I remember it. And no, it wasn't about Bale. It was about my mother." She didn't say anything for a few more moments. He wondered if he should ask or just let her explain at her own pace.

"My mother and Aunt Janet were arguing in the kitchen of our old house. Aunt Janet kept trying to tell my mother that she shouldn't do something, but Mom wouldn't listen. She kept saying she had to do it so someone else wouldn't have to. I assume she meant me."

"Do you know what they were talking about?"

"No, I have no idea. That was it, but it ended with my mother walking away. I knew I would never see her again. I couldn't let her go. I cried out for her, but she wouldn't turn, she didn't, she couldn't see me."

Gabe tried hard to understand, "I thought you told me you saw your mother in your learning dreams, that she often came and showed you things."

"She does, or the memory of her does. This wasn't a memory, though. I wasn't in that kitchen; I never saw that scene growing up. It was like I was visiting it as an adult, like I was seeing something that had already happened, something that I couldn't change or control.

"She was saying goodbye to my aunt, asking her to watch over me and my dad. I know that was what she was doing. Aunt Janet had come to visit us that summer. She would usually come over Christmas holidays, but that year for some reason, she came in the summer. She was there for us when Mom died."

"How did your mother die?" Gabe asked softly.

"A car accident. At least, I was told it was a car accident, that she had gotten hit while crossing the street. We didn't even have a full funeral. My mother's remains were cremated, it was in her will. I remember Aunt Janet saying something about a fire." Diana was shaking

her head. "But I just saw my mother saying goodbye. She knew she wouldn't be back. It all sounds wrong now, but I was a kid, who was I not to believe my aunt?"

"There was no reason to not believe her, Diana, you're right. Are you sure your mother was saying goodbye?"

She nodded. "Positive. She told Janet to protect me, to teach me what I needed to know. She knew she was going to die. She knew, and she never said anything to me." Diana turned her pain-etched face up to him.

"Oh, babe, I'm sorry." His arms tightened even more, trying to give her the comfort she needed. "I'm sure she didn't expect to die. That she thought she would be coming back, didn't want to worry you."

Burying her face back into the pillow, she lay still. "What was she going to do? What did she have to do, and what did she mean that she did it so that I wouldn't have to?"

"I don't know, babe, I don't know, but I promise, we will do our best to find out." Gabe didn't know if anything would be in the database, but if there was something at all to be found, they would do it. He hated to see her like this.

He continued to give her the only comfort he could and held on to her tightly, letting her know with his body that he would keep her safe. They stayed in that position for a while longer, her arms holding on to his, keeping him close.

Gabe smelled her freshness, the jasmine shampoo she used, the lavender soap. It all combined to create a smell distinctly Diana. He realized his body had a mind of its own and felt himself react to the closeness. He tried to shift, moving the lower half of his body away from her. She didn't need this on top of everything else. He wasn't here for him, he was here for her. As he shifted, he heard her giggle.

Gabe sighed, "I'm sorry. It has a mind of its own."

Diana giggled more. "I think I like the way it thinks," she said softly as she turned her body toward him, reaching her arms around his shoulders.

"Are you sure of this, Diana? You've had an emotional night." Gabe wanted this, oh, how he wanted it, but he didn't want to take advantage of her vulnerable condition.

She smiled. "I'm sure. This has nothing to do with what happened tonight and everything to do with you and me."

Gabe didn't need any more encouragement. He had missed this woman. He'd only known her for a week, but he'd hated the past few nights without her. Yesterday morning had been heaven and hell, having her in bed with him, but just holding her. He didn't think he could survive another night like that. He ached with wanting her.

He bent his head until his mouth met hers in a soft, searing kiss. He wanted to please her, to drive all sense of sorrow and fear out of her, he wanted her to think only of him and the pleasure he could give her.

His lips searched hers, his tongue probing for admittance. She opened up, allowing him in. Smooth and hot, her mouth welcomed him, her tongue answering his. Rubbing his hands up and down her back, molding her closer to him, he felt goose bumps form under his touch. Pulling his lips away, he kissed his way down her neck, to her shoulders, pushing the collar of her pajama top open.

“Oh, babe, you feel so good.”

“Show me.”

He knew at that moment he could never get enough of her; she set his body on fire with need. Wanting more of her, he unbuttoned her top, allowing him better access to her body. He left the shirt open and gazed at her with longing. Knowing that she was his, if only for the moment, forced a groan from him as he leaned down to pay homage to her. She rose up, meeting him partway.

Her skin was so smooth and silky. He loved the way she felt. She drove him wild just by being who and what she was. His sexy, stubborn Diana drove him mad with need. He latched onto her breast with his lips.

“Mmm,” Diana groaned while her hands tunneled through his hair.

*You like that?*

“Yes.”

He sucked harder. *What about this?*

“Ye-es.” Diana’s breath caught.

*And this?* He teased her unmercifully as he bit her nipple, holding it with his teeth as his tongue flicked at it rapidly.

Diana arched her back, holding his head tighter against her body.

A wave of feelings that were not his own hit Gabe. He felt Diana’s pleasure at each move he made, each kiss he gave. She shared her arousal with him, her desire for fulfillment. He’d never shared this kind of link with any woman ever before. It touched him deep inside as he sensed her need.

He didn’t know if she was aware of what she was doing, but he reveled in it, enjoyed the dual sensation, the truly intimate knowledge, and doubled his efforts to give her pleasure.

\* \* \* \* \*

Diana gasped at the touch of Gabe’s hands roaming over her body. His touch drove her wild, setting her blood on fire. Everything he did drove her further than she had ever been before. She needed with such an intensity with him, it scared her.

Needing to touch him, feel him, she ran her fingers through his hair, down to his neck, his shoulders. His body was hard all over, strong enough to protect her, to hold her tight.

When his hands moved down to her hips to push her bottoms down, she raised up to help him. She wanted him like she had wanted no other. There was something about him that made her feel more complete with him by her side. This just felt right.

He laid her back down and worked his mouth down her body, down to where her legs joined. Without warning, he pushed her legs apart and delved in. She jumped as he reached her core. He was an expert at what he did, moving his tongue, licking and sucking her to a rapid orgasm that left her shaking, eyes closed in near exhaustion.

A cool breeze blew over her as he moved away. She opened her eyes and watched him remove his own clothes. She reached for him, wanting to help him, touch him, give him some of the pleasure he had just given her.

"I want inside you, Diana. I need to be inside you, now." He insisted, gently avoiding her hands. He climbed back between her legs, pushing them open wider, and entered her on a deep sigh.

He pushed all the way in, filling her. Tight. He was so tight inside her, completing her. Raising her hips to meet him, she moved to entice him further and deeper. She angled her body up for deeper thrusts, accepting more of him into her. His groans as he plunged into her dragged out moans of her own as she drove him to pump harder and faster. Tiny sparks of release shot through her body, bringing her rapidly toward another, deeper one she felt building inside again.

*Oh, babe, you feel so good. I needed this. I missed you so.*

The intimacy of the moment struck Diana. The desire, need he was projecting toward her was reciprocated tenfold. She felt what it was like to be him, to be buried inside her as she pulsed around him.

Gabe's attraction, his desire for her, drove her own feelings to further heights. Knowing what it did to him to have her in his arms, feeling it from his point of view. The intensity of the double sensation was incredible. Nothing could ever compare. They were one, throbbing, pleasing, driving together towards something spectacular.

Breathing was unimportant as she felt the end in sight, her body tensed tightly around him, her arms, her legs stiff with promise as she suddenly felt her release. Her breath gasped out in a scream of pleasure, her vagina tensing around him, rapidly squeezing him in spasms, as he, too, reached the end and came, falling on her body in completion.

They held each other, sweaty and breathing heavily from the exercise. "Damn, that was ..."

"Good?" Diana finished with a low laugh

"Better than good," Gabe growled as he slowly moved away from her, positioning himself so he could hold her against his chest. "That was absolutely ... Oh, crap!"

"Well, that isn't exactly what a girl hopes to hear afterwards." Diana moved her head to look at him.

Gabe had a hand up to his forehead. "Dammit, Diana, I'm sorry. I totally forgot."

"Forgot?" Diana was confused, and then she realized what he was talking about. "Don't worry, I'm on the pill."

"The pill? Then why ...?"

Diana just continued to look at him.

He nodded. "Never mind. We did kind of get into this fast the first time. We didn't really know much about each other. I guess better safe than sorry."

"Exactly. I don't make a habit of jumping in the sack with someone I don't know, and I thought it was just better to be extra cautious with my impulsive decision."

"Does this mean you trust me?" He looked down at her as he held her tighter to him.

She looked at his chest, not meeting his eyes. "Yes," she answered so softly he almost didn't catch it. "I trust you."

He smiled.

## Chapter Seventeen

“Dammit, Gabe!” Diana stepped back. “This just isn’t going to work.”

“What do you mean, it isn’t gonna work?” Gabe stared at her.

“You aren’t putting any effort into it at all. It’s like you don’t trust me.” Diana narrowed her eyes and studied him carefully.

“I trust you.” Gabe stood with his hands on his waist, frustration in every inch of his body.

“Do you?”

“Of course, I do,” Gabe insisted.

“Sure, you trust me not to hurt you, because you don’t think I can. But you don’t trust me not to let myself get hurt.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Diana looked at the man opposite her on the exercise mat in frustration. “Gabe, I am a black belt in two different disciplines, have training in various weapons, and have won more tournaments than I can count. I can handle myself.”

“I don’t doubt that. Remember, I saw you in action.”

“But you do doubt it. That’s the point.” Diana walked over to her towel and started to rub her arms down. “You aren’t putting any effort into this. Every time you throw a punch or kick, you hold back. And your blocking sucks. You’re treating me like a novice, and I can’t get any kind of workout like that.”

“Diana, I don’t --”

“You don’t want to hurt me. I get that, Gabe, and I appreciate it. But unless you change tactics, I might as well just use the sparring dummy.”

“Maybe something less physical?”



Diana laughed at the expression on Gabe's face. He was trying, but she knew he really was afraid of hurting her. A lot of men underestimated her ability, until she showed them what she really was capable of. She needed something to put him completely on the defensive and not worry about her.

"How good are you at weapons?"

"Weapons?"

Diana walked over to the holding area and grabbed a staff. "Yeah, weapons." She gave him an evil grin as she moved into position. He didn't know what he was in for.

\* \* \* \* \*

Later that morning they met Cole and Steve in the employee cafeteria. Diana looked around at the unique eating space set aside for the employees of Argus. It was unlike any cafeteria she had ever been in. There were tables scattered around the room with enough space for at least fifty to eat at the same time, but any similarity to ordinary cafeterias ended there. It looked like it had once been the formal dining room of the castle. The ornate fireplace, velvet draperies, hardwood floors, and swinging doors to the kitchen supported her assumption.

It was obvious that little had been done to change the overall appearance of the castle. Diana imagined it was much like it must have been when Sarah and Robert had lived there.

"This is an interesting cafeteria," Diana said looking around.

Gabe smiled. "Yeah, we've been lucky that they've tried to keep as much of the old home as possible. I think it was a stipulation of Lady Sarah's."

"Lady?" Diana didn't remember Gabe mentioning anything about her being a lady before this.

"Just a title we bestowed upon her. We don't always use it, but it seems whenever we're in one of the older rooms, it just comes naturally. The house feels like old money or even royalty, and after all, she was the founder of all you see. The least she deserves is a title."

"True, this place is wonderful. Is there a chance I could see more of it?"

"I'm sure between being quizzed by Steve and checking out leads ourselves, we can probably find time for a tour, including the gardens."

"Gardens?" Diana found herself parroting one word questions a lot lately, but there were so many fascinating things to find out about this place she couldn't help herself.

"A formal English garden, no less, and even a maze to go with it."

Diana's eyes sparkled at the thought of a maze. "I can't wait."

Cole laughed. "Well, we send all new recruits through it as a test. It's always at night, and they're blindfolded. We time them to see how long it takes them to reach the center and then get out again."

"What happens if they don't reach it?"

"They spend the night out in the open, and we find them the next day."

Diana thought about cold Wisconsin winter nights and shivered at the thought of being outside without much protection.

"Steve." Diana turned and looked at the large man as she reached out to Gabe. "We need your help on something else."

"Yes, my dear?" Steve responded in the kind, courtly manner that Diana had gotten used to yesterday. Everything about him was precise and gentlemanly. She couldn't help but like him.

"Last night I had a dream." Gabe's hand squeezed hers, giving her strength to continue.

"A dream?" Steve became more animated. "About Bale? Gabe? What about, my dear?"

"About my mother." Diana shook her head, "There was something else, too, but I can't remember it right now. I know it will come to me when I need it, though. But that doesn't matter right now. We need your help to do some research on my family."

"In regards to Bale? Well, we already planned on trying to find out how your mother connects to him."

"Right, but there's more to it." Diana shook her head again. "Actually, I'm not sure, but I think there's more. There's something about my mother that I need to know, but I have no idea what it is. It may have nothing to do with Bale, but I have to find out. I have a feeling, though, that since it came to me now, it's probably connected."

"Well, dear, I will see what I can do. We have a very good genealogy database, at least in regards to supernatural or paranormal beings or those associated with them. Perhaps we can find something. Since Bale referred to your family, the odds are we should be able to find something about them, and if not, there are always the public records we can search through."

Diana was confused. "Public records on demons?"

"County and city records on births and deaths, my dear," Steve explained to her. "If we can't find anything in our database, there will be records of births, deaths, family members, things like that, so we'll have even more names and places to check on our network."

"Oh, okay. Sorry." Diana smiled at her own naïveté.

"Don't be sorry, this is not your area of expertise. If we were writing a novel, I am sure you could research circles around me." Steve patted her hand like a loving grandfather. "Now, tell me all about this dream."

\* \* \* \* \*

After breakfast they headed down to Steve's lab to start the search on Diana's family.

"Okay, dear, now tell me everything you know about your family."

"Very little, to be honest. My father's name was John Devon. My mother's was Alexis Temis."

"Your parents weren't married?" Steve asked, not unkindly.

"Yes, they were. It is a tradition on my mother's side of the family. The women never change their last name."

"Really? Well, that will either make things easier or more difficult. I'm not sure which." Steve turned around to his computer. "Where were you born?"

"Chicago."

"And your mother?"

"Um, not sure, I think it was Chicago, too."

"What year?"

Diana thought for a moment. "I think nineteen fifty-five."

"Any aunts or uncles?"

"Just my father's sister."

"And your grandmother's name?"

"Brina Temis"

"Okay, let's start with your mother's death. You said it was an accident?"

"Yes, Aunt Janet told me she was hit by a car."

"All right, let me see what I can find for her date of death." Steve fiddled at his terminal, and after a few minutes looked up at Diana. "I can't find any report of any car accidents fatal to a female anywhere in Cook County on that date. You're sure the accident was local?"

"Yes, my aunt said she was crossing the street, doing some shopping, that it happened in town."

Steve shook his head while he was looking at the computer. "Nothing, Diana, nothing at all. There is the memorial announcement, but nothing else. Hold on, let me check the coroner's records."

"Aren't those records sealed? Is that something someone off the street can get?" Diana asked Steve as she watched him scroll through county records.

"They are only as secure as the hacker is bad. And trust me, nothing is secure enough to keep me out."

Steve continued scrolling through the information on his screen. "That's weird. There is nothing here, either. If your mother died anywhere in Cook County, there should be a record of it here. Wait, now this is strange."

Diana, Gabe and Cole all waited for Steve to explain himself. "There's a death certificate for your mother filled out. Cause of death is listed as a heart attack. The doctor is listed as her primary care physician, but I can't find any record of any such doctor ever working anywhere in Chicago or the surrounding area."

"Heart attack? No, that's impossible." That made no sense to Diana. "My mother wasn't sick a day in her life. She didn't even have a doctor. What name is listed?"

"A Doctor J. Malmo. Nothing else."

"No, that name doesn't sound even vaguely familiar. But I was only nine." Diana looked at Steve and asked, "There's nothing else?"

"I'm sorry, Diana, that's all I can find right now on her. I'll let the program keep searching, but let's start work on your other relatives, okay?" Steve pushed his chair over to another monitor.

"Nothing at all esoteric for your father. It appears he paid his taxes, lived his life, like any normal person. Nothing exciting or different here. He lived to the age of forty-five, does that sound right?"

Diana did some quick math. "Yes."

"Your Aunt Janet, on the other hand -- now this is interesting." Steve got sidetracked again, moving to another computer, typing in something else while the three of them waited again. "Janet Devon, born in Chicago in 1940, brother by the name of John Devon, well, well, well. When did you say she died?"

"Eight years ago."

"And when did you start dreaming about Gabe?"

"About six months after that. Why? There can't be a connection. Aunt Janet didn't know anything about this stuff. My father was freaked out about it when I was a kid, and I never even mentioned it to Aunt Janet."

"Well, my dear, your Aunt Janet was a successful psychic in the Chicago, Seattle, and San Francisco areas. It appears that she toured the country with an act that was near perfect. She claimed she could move things with the power of her mind and performed acts of farseeing." Steve pointed to his monitor as he looked at Diana. "According to this, she just up and disappeared about twenty five years ago. Stopped performing, no more appearances, nothing."

"What? What is farseeing? And what do you mean move things with her mind?"

"Farseeing is the ability to see another place, what is going on somewhere else," Gabe explained. "The government was doing some work with it, but I'm not sure if it ever went anywhere. It can be invaluable if you know where to look or what to look for."

Steve nodded to Gabe and turned back to Diana. "Exactly. Apparently as part of her act your aunt would have people tell her of something they had left at home, and she would be able to explain exactly where it was."

"You obviously got your talents from both sides of your family, Diana," Cole added.

"But my father couldn't do anything like that. I told you he didn't like me to do any of it." Diana shook her head in denial.

"This actually lends credence to the idea that his sister really was talented. If she could do those kinds of things, he probably didn't want to think about it. He was probably highly bothered that his wife, sister, and daughter could do things like that," Cole pointed out.

Diana shook her head, "Okay, say my aunt was talented. What does that have to do with the dreams?"

"She was blocking you," Steve said simply.

"What do you mean, blocking me?" Diana, once again, was being forced to accept things that just didn't mesh with her view of the world.

"You said in the dream that you saw your mother asking your aunt to protect you, right?" Steve pointed out to her. "Well, if your aunt really was psychic, and there was something that was potentially harmful to you in a psychic manner, then the way that she would want to protect you would be to block your abilities. That would include your dreams. Remember, that's how Bale got to you the other night."

"But that would mean he had something to do with my mother's death." Diana's head was swimming.

"We don't know that he didn't, Diana. But we also don't know that he did." Gabe squatted down in front of her and reached for her hands. "Bale knows something about your family, something that you don't know. That means either he has done research on you or has prior knowledge. We need to find out what he knows and how he knows it, so we can work around it. If we go on the presumption that he knew your family before, then this all makes more sense."

"But if my aunt was blocking me from Bale, why didn't he find me as soon as she died?"

"Maybe he wasn't looking for you? It's possible he either didn't know about you or had no way of finding you once you disappeared off the psychic/dream menu. He could have found you accidentally."

"After I started writing the books." She looked directly at Gabe, who hadn't moved from in front of her. "But I used a pseudonym, how would he know who I was?"

"I don't know. If he hadn't invaded your dreams before the other night, maybe he wasn't sure it was you until just recently."

"Wait." Diana thought of something and addressed Steve. "This started -- the letters and stuff, all started after my name became public knowledge."

Steve nodded. "That could be part of it. He might have only had your name. Maybe your working on telepathy with Gabe opened you up enough for him to get into your dreams. You guys said yourself you didn't shield before you went to sleep."

Diana turned to Gabe. "So why did you and I connect? And why did we meet now?" She needed answers.

He stood up, pulling her into his arms. "I don't know, babe. I have no idea."

"All right. Let's think about this rationally. We don't know everything we need to know, but we've made a start." Steve stood up and started pacing his lab. "We'll go on the assumption that so far everything we think we know is right. Your mother was going to do something dangerous and knew she might not return. She asked your aunt, a very powerful psychic, to make sure you were protected. Bale knows who you are and has information about your family.

"You say your mother insisted you take martial arts?"

Diana turned so her back was against Gabe's chest with his arms wrapped around her. She took comfort knowing he was behind her, supporting her. "Yes, I told you it was one of the things my father insisted I continue working on after she died. I never understood why, but it has become such a part of me I've never thought of quitting."

"So, it follows that your mother wanted you protected not only psychically, but physically as well. Okay. More research." Steve turned back to his computers with determination. The other three watched, talking quietly amongst themselves. Diana pulled Gabe's arms around her tighter. She needed the contact.

"How could I miss it?" Steve yelled out about thirty minutes later. He turned and looked at Diana. "Temis is the name that the females of your family have always had?"

Diana nodded. "From what I understand, yes. If the female was married, she wouldn't take her husband's name. The name Temis got passed down to all the women of the line. If not legally as a last name, then at the very least as a middle name. The males would be given the name of their fathers. Most of the time it wasn't a big deal, because it was mostly men who inherited anything, anyway. Actually, I think that's why we started it. I remember my mom telling me about it when I asked why my name wasn't the same as my father's. She told me that an ancestress had stipulated that the females remain pure to the name, and as long as they did, they would continue to inherit."

"Inherit?" Gabe asked pointedly.

"I assumed she meant my trust fund." Diana stepped away and turned to be able to look at him and the others.

"You have a trust fund?" Gabe raised an eyebrow.

Diana looked down. "Yeah, I do. I can't really touch it, though. As long as I'm supporting myself, I only get a stipend from it until I have a female child. Then it's to be used to further her growth and education however needed. Something about making sure all future generations of women can take care of themselves. I always had the impression that whoever started it had been dependent on men for most of her life and didn't want any of her descendants to be so. If I couldn't work, then it would support me. Although, to be

honest, I'm not sure how many of the stipulations it sets forth are actually legal in this day and age. It wasn't ever something I thought necessary to fight." Diana stopped and looked at Steve. "But what does this have to do with what you're looking at?"

"The witches that bound Bale." Steve looked excited. He was practically bouncing in his seat. "I just found some more references to them. They called themselves the Daughters of Artemis."

"Steve, where are you finding all this?"

"Oh, here and there. It's similar in a lot of ways to a keyword search. You'd be amazed at what's in these databases. Like right here. We have a motto or quote attributed to them. "Until the last dreams of her other half, we are bound to protect the world from our mistake."

All of them looked at him expectantly. "Don't you get it?" he asked excitedly. "The witches weren't witches, they were priestesses, and they called themselves 'The Daughters of Artemis.'" He looked at Diana. "Your last name is Temis, your name is Diana -- that is the Roman name for Artemis -- and you dreamt of Gabe. It all fits."

"Steve, I think you're losing us here," Gabe said it before Diana could. "What all fits? Just because Diana has the name of an ancient goddess, that doesn't follow that she is a descendant of a bunch of priestesses."

"Okay, let me take this slower," Steve said more calmly. "The two of you met on the plane to Boston, right?" Steve asked Gabe and Diana.

"Yeah, I told you that already."

"How long had these plans been in effect? Any recent changes, any urge by either of you to change plans?"

Diana answered first, "Me." She shook her head. "I mean I had changes. I was supposed to stay in Kansas City for another few days with a friend. Her husband got the chance to go to Vegas for work, and they offered to fly her out for free, too. I figured that since they wouldn't be around, I could spend a little extra time in Boston. I wanted as long a vacation as I could get. I remember thinking I couldn't wait to get there, so I changed my flight."

Gabe looked confused. "My flight changed that day. I was supposed to have a connection through Chicago, but for some reason, there was a problem with the original flight, so they sent me on one with a stopover in Kansas City. They even bumped me up to first class."

"Okay, and were you both staying at the same hotel?"

"No, we were at different hotels. I only changed after the attack on us. I didn't know if Diana was in danger and wanted to make sure she was safe." Gabe shook his head. "Steve, I don't understand where you're going with this. What does it matter how we met?"

"Damn, Steve, how could I have missed it?" Cole practically jumped as Diana looked on, confused. "If there is some kind of mystical connection between the two of you, it makes

sense that you would encounter each other when you needed to. The universe would make sure you two had the opportunity to meet.”

“What are you talking about, Cole? What mystical connection?” Gabe asked.

“Look.” Steve took back the explanation looking at Gabe, pointing to Diana. “She was having dreams about you.” He turned to Diana. “He had this incredibly strong urge to protect you, even though you two just met, and he thought you might be a plant. You’re having dreams together, both of you are psychic, both are trained in self defense, you feel connected to each other, and you met when you were ready and most needed to. There is more than meets the eye, here, guys, whether you want to admit it or not.”

Gabe followed the gist of their reasoning and responded with obvious disbelief. “Are you talking about divine intervention? No way. Not possible.”

Cole interrupted, “Not maybe divine intervention, Gabe, but perhaps history finally playing itself out.”

“I am not going to accept that I’m a pawn to someone else’s actions from however long ago,” Diana interjected, getting angry.

“Not a pawn, Diana. But the final piece. How you decide to play it is up to you. Fate, an ancestor, whoever, decided only that you were to be a player, what you make of it is your choice.”

“No.” Diana shook her head, putting distance between her and Gabe. “Absolutely not. That is crazy. My life is not ruled by fate. I have free will, and I am who I am because of that free will. This is too much.” She quickly walked out of the office.

\* \* \* \* \*

Gabe started to follow her out, but Cole stopped him in his tracks. “Give her a little bit, Gabe, this really is a lot to handle.”

“A lot to handle? Hell, damn straight it is.” He looked at Cole and Steve angrily. “Based on her dream and a quote, the two of you are telling us we’re destined to be together and that she has to confront something that may have killed her mother. Hell, it’s freaking *me* out, and I’m used to the two of you.”

“Damn, Gabe, I am sorry.” Steve looked apologetic. “I should have done more research before blurting it all out like this. But you guys were here, waiting for something, and I was finding it, and it was so exciting -- maybe I’m wrong. Maybe I have this totally screwed up. Give me some time to do some more checking. To find out more about this thing, this man, whatever he is. See if she really is connected to him, and what it really does mean for her -- and you.”

Cole looked at his long-time friend. “You don’t seem too concerned with the idea that maybe you and she are connected somehow.”



“Hell, Cole, I know we’re connected. I felt it on the plane. I’ve never been that attracted to someone that quickly before. There’s something about her that just drives me crazy. Her independence excites me and infuriates me in turns. I love her ability to defend herself, and I’m scared that I won’t be there when she needs me. I don’t know what it is, but I already know that I can’t live without her.”

“Have you told her that?”

“When have I had the chance?” He shook his head slowly. “And this is definitely not the time. She sure as hell doesn’t want to hear it from me now. Right now all she wants is to get away from us crazy maniacs and get back to her calm, normal life.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Diana walked quickly toward her room. She was infuriated. But when she stopped to ask herself who she was infuriated with, she couldn’t provide an answer. By the time she got back to the suite, she had calmed down. Steve had only been telling her what he was reading.

So, he was making jumps of logic. That didn’t mean he was right. There was no evidence that what he was saying was accurate. He even said that he was guessing. Everything he’d said was based on assumptions. After he did some more research and realized all the things he thought about her family were wrong, then they would be able to come up with a reasonable explanation for all of this.

If not a reasonable one, at least one she could deal with.

What was she so resistant to? Was it the idea that her life was planned by someone or the idea of Gabe being the one for her? She was attracted to him. That was obvious. She felt good when he was around, and she felt more complete when they were together. What was so wrong with the idea that they were destined to be together?

Destiny. She didn’t like that word, never had. The idea behind destiny took all choice out of her hands. As far as she was concerned, nothing was preordained; lives were what people made of them, not what some higher power or ancestor decided. No one, no thing had the power to screw with her life any more. Anything that happened to her from here on out was going to be her choice and her choice alone. She would let Steve search more, and when she was proven right, she would be able to go home and live the life she wanted to.

Decision made, she went into her room to grab a book to read while she waited for Gabe to get back and tell her that Steve had it all wrong. She opened her carry-on bag and only then remembered that she had finished the book she’d had on the plane. She had nothing to read. As she went to close the bag, she noticed something sticking out of one of the outside pockets. It was the journal she had found in her aunt’s closet. She didn’t know why she had packed it, but it would give her something to do while she waited.

She sat on her bed as she opened the book. Strange. It was handwritten and not in English. At least not all of it. She flipped through to see if any of it made sense. Some passages were in English, some looked to be Latin or Greek, but most were in a different language. One that looked vaguely familiar, but she couldn't place it. Reaching the end of the journal, she noticed something strange about the back inside cover. It bulged, and the inside flap was puckered. There was something in the binding. Reaching over, she grabbed a nail file from her bag, and used it to pry open the covering to see what was behind it.

She pulled a folded piece of paper out of the binding. Opening it, she started to read.

She never heard Gabe come in a while later. She was too busy crying her heart out.

## Chapter Eighteen

“Diana, what’s wrong? What is it?” He moved to her side. He hadn’t expected this. His strong Diana, the woman who would deny fate, who accepted the existence of demons and monsters without flinching, the woman who he realized he was willing to die for, was crying. Again.

“It’s all true.” She looked up at him with tears running down her face, drawn and exhausted, and said, “Steve was right, about everything.” She handed him the journal she had been reading and slowly walked into the bathroom.

Distantly he heard her turn on the shower, but his attention was on the book she had handed him. What had she found out? He opened it and realized her life had just been turned upside down.

*Dearest Diana,*

*If you’re reading this, I am most likely gone from your life. I don’t know how or when, but I am sure it was early, too early for you to know who you are and what your job is in this life. Please, as you read this know that I loved you with all of my heart, and I did everything I could to prevent you from having to do this. But the fact that you’re reading this means I have failed, and you have a terrible burden ahead of you.*

*Your name is Diana Temis. You’re named after the Goddess Artemis, in her Greek and Roman forms. You’re a hunter, a defender of those who cannot defend themselves. A protector for all humankind. You’re part of a line that has been chosen to do what is needed to keep this world from spinning into chaos. You have no choice, for you are the chosen.*

*I hope you have been able to live your life as a normal young woman before having to read this. I hope you’ve had time to learn what it is you’re fighting for, for that will give you*

*strength when you need it the most. That will keep you going when you feel there is no end in sight.*

*Your Aunt Janet has most likely given this to you on your twenty-first birthday, if not earlier. It is not a present I wanted you to have, but one you need to have. In this book you will find the answers to the questions you most likely have about why you are what you are, and why you must do what you must do. Those questions that are not answered in here, your father or aunt can answer for you, for although they don't like the idea behind it, they know it is necessary.*

*Please, my dear, remember that I love you. I have always loved you, and I will always be with you wherever your fight may take you. Remember to find strength in those around you, and to believe in your heart, follow where it leads you, for it will never lead you astray.*

*I love you, my dear daughter. May the strength of the Goddess be within you.*

*Your Mother,*

*Alexis*

Gabe paged through the rest of the book, finding the bits and pieces that he could read. The rest was undecipherable to him.

What he could read, though told him enough. Steve had been right. She was a descendant of the priestesses who had bound Bale, and she was responsible for making sure that binding held.

He felt like a voyeur, looking at something that he wasn't meant to see, but Diana had handed the book to him, and he felt he needed to learn all that he could.

Diana was the female version of himself, only, unlike him, she wasn't able to make that choice; it had been made for her.

He put the book down on the bed and went to join her in the shower, stripping off his clothes as he walked.

*Babe, I'm sorry.*

Diana could feel Gabe as he entered the bathroom even though her eyes were closed. She knew he was coming to be with her, and she was grateful.

"It's not fair, Gabe, it's just not fair. What right did they have to set things in motion like that? To make the choice for so many women to follow? That makes them no better than what they say they protect against."

"I know, hon, but they did the best they could. They tried."

"They're responsible for my mother being gone. They might as well have killed her themselves the way they set her up. She and every single female of my family before her. And I'm next. What gave them the right?"

Saying nothing, he just held her, comforting her as she continued to cry her anguish out.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I feel like a histrionic fool. I hope Steve and Cole will forgive me." Diana was under the protection of Gabe's arm, her own around his waist, as they walked through the gardens among the late-blooming trees and flowers.

"There's nothing to forgive, Diana. Good God, babe, in the last ninety-six hours your entire life has flip-flopped and twisted beyond belief. Who in their right minds would believe what you're being forced to believe? You're entitled to more than just a couple difficulties accepting it."

"Does that include running away across the country?" she asked, with a worried sideways glance.

"That depends." He realized that a lot depended on this answer. Not fate of the world stuff, but definitely fate of his heart stuff. "Were you running away from the other-worldly stuff or from me?"

Diana sighed. "Both," she answered almost hesitantly. "The telepathy bothered me at first, but honestly, the dreams helped me accept and deal with it more than you can possibly imagine. I trust my dreams and memories, so I knew I could handle that."

"So it was mostly me you ran from?" Gabe didn't want to hear any more, but knew he needed to know the truth before he let himself get any more emotionally involved. Not that he could stop the feelings he knew were growing deeper every moment he knew Diana.

"You. And me." Gabe listened, prepared himself for bad news. They reached a stone bench and she tugged him over to sit.

"Mostly it was me. I told myself it was the smart thing to do. That I didn't need you. That now I knew what the dreams were, I could control them better, and maybe even, not have them anymore. But I was lying to myself. None of that mattered, really. It wasn't that I didn't want you. It was that I was afraid I would grow to need you. That I would need you too much.

"I've convinced myself over the years that I don't need anyone. That I'm better off alone. You brought out feelings in me that confused me. I wanted to be with you. Every minute I wasn't with you, I wondered where you were and what you were doing.

"And then you got all aggressive and arrogant on me." She put up a hand to forestall any comment Gabe might have made. "I know you didn't get physically aggressive, but emotionally. You talked about coming to Wisconsin, being here with you, where you wanted me. You broke into my hotel room because you wanted to talk. The fact that I knew we needed to talk, and I wanted it, too, was irrelevant at the time. You forced it on me,

when you wanted it. I don't take well to that. It's just hard-wired into me, I guess. It was just enough of an excuse for me to leave as soon as my duties were done."

Diana got up and walked over to a small tree that was on the other side of the path. She reached out to a low-hanging leaf and rubbed it between her fingers. "Gabe, this is all so new to me. So different. I'm not used to it. I need time. Not only do I have these feelings, I'm being told that now I have a destiny and that it includes you. Like I said, I don't do well when I'm told I have to do something. I don't want to push you away or accept you based on that."

Coming up behind her, he placed his hands on her shoulders. "I'll be honest. I never expected any of this, either. Since we met on the plane, I've only been able to think of you. I've never felt like this before, and I understand your reluctance, why it would scare you. But I can promise you this, I will never do anything to hurt you."

"You know." She turned to gaze into his eyes. "That's the one thing in this whole mess that I am sure of. Just give me a little more time, okay?"

Gabe nodded, pulling her tight into his arms before they turned and continued walking arm in arm through the garden. He wasn't exactly happy with the situation, but content enough with what she had said to wait a little longer.

"We have company coming," Gabe said a while later as they were looking at an extraordinary rose bush, still in bloom this late in the year. Diana looked up at him and he nodded back toward the house. Two men were coming toward them. "Seth and Chase from my unit," he told her.

"Oh." She turned and watched the two men approach them. Both were tall, muscled, and gorgeous. She recognized them from her dreams. Seth, the empath, and Chase, the telekinetic. Seth had blond hair and blue eyes, the epitome of the stereotypical surfer boy. Chase was dark where Seth was light. Black hair, dark eyes, and skin the color of coal with the kind of smile that dropped women in their tracks.

"I've been meaning to ask you," she said under her breath. "Where do you recruit? Hunks "R" Us?"

Gabe looked at her, eyes wide in surprise, and started laughing. "Just as long as you remember I'm the only hunk for you, we'll be fine." He turned and waited for his men while his laughter died down.

"Hey, boss. What's so funny?" Seth started the conversation. He was too polite to read anyone without their permission.

"Chase, Seth, I'd like you to meet Diana Temis." Gabe performed the introductions.

Both men shook hands with Diana and made sure she knew one from the other.

Seth started the conversation with an understanding shake of his head. "Cole told us about the books and the dreams. I can't imagine being that close to someone's emotions for

so long and not being able to shut them down. I don't think I could have survived as long as you did.

"And about the other day. I'm sorry. When I heard what happened, I felt terrible. I wish I had scanned or something before I left. Maybe I could have prevented it. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, really." Diana smiled and gave a look full of meaning to Gabe, "Thank you for watching over me, though. A girl loves to feel protected."

Chase laughed at that. "Damn, Gabe, a man doesn't have to be an empath to read into that one." He turned and looked at Diana. "You have to forgive our inestimable leader. He has this tendency to protect first and ask questions later."

Diana twisted her lips. "Yeah, I kind of noticed."

The four of them continued walking, making sure the two new additions were caught up with everything that had happened.

"Is there anything we can do to help you now?" Chase asked in a deep baritone.

"As of right now, it's a matter of just waiting to see what else happens. We need to find out more about Bale if we can and then formulate an attack plan. There haven't been any more moves by him, and we want to keep it that way until we know exactly what we're dealing with. Actually, we're on our way to Steve's office to tell him about some new developments."

As they headed back to the building Diana got a chance to learn more about the guys. Although she felt like she had known them for years, everything was through Gabe's perception of them.

She knew that Seth fit the surfer boy image in more ways than one, was an incredibly accurate empath, and was extremely considerate of those whose feelings he sensed. Chase was a bit harder to read in a lot of ways. He had only been with the group for a few years, and he kept to himself. She knew that there was something different about him, that Gabe knew something that no one else did. He trusted Chase implicitly and knew him to be intelligent and highly perceptive. That was enough for her.

She wasn't completely joking when she asked Gabe where they recruited. All of the men in the unit were incredible. They were gorgeous, intelligent, and kind. And as far as she knew, they were all unattached. It must be hard to find someone who could accept their abilities without considering them freaks. No wonder these guys were so close. They had formed their own family and protected each other with a vengeance.

Diana realized that they had opened up their ranks to include her in that family. They made her feel welcome, as though she belonged. It was a feeling she hadn't experienced in a long time. If she'd had to find out that she had talents that set her apart from the rest of the world, at least she was able to find others like her at the same time.

They entered the lab laughing over something Seth had said, and Steve looked up. "My dear," he started immediately. "I am sorry to have done anything to --"

Diana tried to cut him off before he got any steam up. "Don't worry, Steve, it wasn't you. I'm just a little high-strung lately."

"I know, and I do apologize for adding to your stress." Steve was obviously distraught over the pain he felt he had caused her.

"I'm fine, really. Stop worrying. Now, let's get to the important part. Were you able to read the journal?" Gabe had dropped the book off to Steve before they went outside. They thought it best to let Steve read it and see if he could come up with anything concrete.

"Yes, some of it at least, and I have to say I feel very privileged to have been given the opportunity. It is impressive what the women of your family have accomplished. Before I go any further, though, I wanted to let you know that I did some more research on that phrase about finding your other half. Depending on the translation I used, it may also mean the other half of your power or your protector. So we really don't know what it means exactly."

Diana and Gabe looked at each other. She knew she didn't want to think about how it might affect her. She had just started to come to terms with the idea that she and Gabe might be mystically connected. She didn't need this added confusion to deal with right now. Reaching out to grasp Gabe's hand, she squeezed it tight.

"As you most likely read," Steve nodded to Diana as he began to summarize for the others, "Your ancestresses have been working against evil for hundreds of years. This book goes back to the first designated protector. Before that, the women in your line worked towards good, but there wasn't any expectation of the line to do so."

"To be honest, Steve, I didn't read all of it. I skimmed some, but I think I was in shock, because I didn't retain much. Please just tell us all what you found out."

"Well, around seventeen hundred, a circle of priestesses got together to banish an evil sorcerer by the name of Bale. The women were unable to effect any permanent damage on him. They were able to bind his powers, however, for an indeterminate amount of time.

"It was decided that one of them would be responsible for following him down through history, making sure that if the binding was to loosen, they would do their best to make sure that he wasn't able to free himself. They knew the best they could do was keep him from breaking the bonds completely.

"Your line, Diana, was chosen for a variety of reasons. Your ancestress was the most powerful in magic. It was thought that the trait would continue in future generations. However, and this reason seems more important, she was chosen because your family was guilty of aiding Bale."

At Diana's questioning look, Steve continued, "Apparently, at one time Bale had just been a small-time charlatan, not able to tap into any of the greater powers. Someone of your



line, a Nyssa, I believe the book said, met him and fell in love with him. Against the wishes of her elders, she taught him something of the art of magic.

“As you all know, you need an inherent talent to be able to manipulate most of the forces involved with magic, and unfortunately he possessed that talent in abundance. He took what she taught him and perverted it. He went on to studies beyond what she had taught him, delving into the black arts in a bid for more power. By the time she realized his real intentions, it was too late, and he disappeared.

“She was deemed as ultimately responsible for his actions, and her line was given this responsibility as restitution for what she had done. Apparently the priestesses who caught him in the eighteenth century were the most successful at stopping him, but not completely.”

Diana nodded her head. She understood some of what he was telling her from her reading parts of the journal after her mini breakdown, but not all, and it was important for the others to know what they were up against. Since Gabe had gotten attached to her, he was now in danger. She didn't see them letting him face it alone.

“He is guaranteed to be free of this binding if he can turn one of you or destroy the last of you.”

## Chapter Nineteen

Diana swung her head toward Steve. "Excuse me? I think I missed that. He has to turn or destroy one of who?"

"One of your line." Steve looked down at the book quickly. "The book also includes a genealogy, at least of your direct ancestors, Diana. I didn't see any other lines, so either there aren't any, or they aren't important. So that means that you're the last of your line. He has to either turn you to his side or destroy you."

Gabe put his arm around Diana. "Steve, what do you mean exactly?"

"Exactly what I said, Gabe." He shook his head. "I'm sorry. But he either needs to get Diana to join him, or he will try to kill her. It would be easier for him to kill her, but if she joins him, their powers combined will be greater than he could ever imagine."

"Why now? Why Diana?"

"According to what I can figure out from the book, Diana is the first one he's been able to find without a child. I'm not sure of all the rules in this spell, as it wasn't placed word for word in the book, but it seems that he has to wait until the woman reaches her majority, until she is at an age to make an informed decision. If Diana had a daughter, he would have to wait until the daughter was old enough and give the same choice to her."

"That's ridiculous!" Gabe sounded infuriated.

"It makes sense." Diana's voice was low as she put her hand on Gabe's, as though to calm him down. "It's probably the only thing that has kept us alive all this time. As long as we were able to have children before he found us, the line would continue. If he searched for us in our dreams, then our mothers, or guardians, could protect us when we were young, and we would know how to do it ourselves once we got older."

"How can we destroy him?" Diana looked to Steve for the answer. "I assume that he can't just die normally, or someone would have taken care of that by now."

"It says here that only the power of the two can destroy him." Steve shook his head again. "I have no idea what that means. It doesn't explain it any further."

"Power of two, power of two," Diana repeated quietly. "That sounds familiar for some reason. Let me think for a minute." She got up and walked to the other side of the lab, deep in thought. There was something in her memory that wanted to come out; she just had to let it. The men talked amongst themselves quietly while Diana paced.

"I know what that means," she said quietly.

Everyone else looked at her expectantly. She walked back to them. "Remember I said before that I had a dream about my mother?" She looked at Steve and Gabe now. "That there was something else, though, something that I couldn't remember? Well, I remember now.

"There was a woman, from the eighteen hundreds. She was in front of a fireplace, and she had a journal, *that* journal." Diana emphasized her statement by pointing. "She was writing in it, and she talked to me. She said that the power of the two lines reunited would be enough to destroy him."

Diana shook her head in frustration. "But what two lines was she talking about? I know she said more, but I just can't remember it. There has to be something in that book, Steve, I know it. It was prominent in the dream, and I grabbed it from the house for a reason. There's something in there that can tell us more."

Steve looked at the book again. "Diana, do you know of any men born to the family? You said that the men kept their father's names?"

"That was what my aunt told me, but I know my mother never talked of any male relatives. Grandmother didn't have any brothers that I know of, nor did my mother or I."

"Well, let me double check the genealogy. Maybe I missed something. And I have a feeling that this might answer many of our questions." Steve held out the journal to Diana. She reached for it tentatively.

Diana glanced at the page Steve held open for her. It was in the strange language she had noticed before. "This is just gibberish."

"No, it's not gibberish. It's a code."

"Code?"

"There is a definite pattern, but I have yet to figure it out. I hoped you might have some idea. I tried to plug it into the computer, but I haven't gotten very far with it yet. I am pretty sure it's English, Latin, and Greek, in addition to having some numeric substitutions. Does it look at all familiar?"

Diana looked at the writing a few minutes longer, her brow creased in concentration. She had thought it looked familiar before, but why?

Steve explained quietly to the others while Diana looked at the journal. "Much of the first half of the journal is written in English and some in Greek and Latin. Those I could read, but the second half, everything written after the mid-nineteenth century is in this code. It

seems that the basics, the history, is in English, but everything else seems to be written either in a foreign language or code. I'm sure we can learn something from it if we can only decipher it."

"This, right here, it says 'Dear One.'" Diana's voice seemed loud in the silence that followed Steve's comment.

"How do you know that?" Steve asked excitedly.

"I thought it looked familiar before, but couldn't place it. Seeing this group of numbers reminded me. It means one. My mother and I had a secret code. She used to tell me it was for just us girls. My dad didn't even know it." Diana gazed at nothing, lost in memory. "We used to leave notes for each other. Nothing major, but I remember it was our secret, and that made it special."

She shook herself and looked down at the book again. "This looks like a more complicated version. I can't make out all the words. I would need some time to see what I could figure out."

Steve moved forward in his seat. "Would you be willing to give me a rundown of it, so I could feed it into the computer?"

Diana thought for a moment. It had been their secret. Hers and her mother's. She had been told to never share it with anyone. Even knowing they were there to help her, Diana decided that she just couldn't do that. She shook her head. "I'm sorry, but, no. I'll have to translate it."

Nodding, Steve assured her, "I understand completely. I'm just grateful that you're going to be able to do it. Is there anything you need from me?"

Diana nodded. "Pencil and paper, really, is all I'll need."

\* \* \* \* \*

Later that evening, Diana, Gabe, and the guys went out to dinner. They invited Steve along, but he rarely went out, so they hit a local steak place, and gave Diana a chance to get to know them as people, not just from her dreams.

"So you really saw the entire mission?" Seth asked about the mission from her book, *Knight of the Future*.

"I don't know. I only know what I dreamt. It was most of the night scenes, that I do know. Gabe and I have managed to figure out that I don't always have these dreams as they're happening, so there may have been things I missed."

"So if you didn't have the dreams when Gabe was living them, then why would you have them afterwards?" Chase asked.

"Probably when he was dreaming, going through the missions in his head. He would have been least protected then."

"Makes sense, we have little to no control over our emotions when we sleep, and memories can be intense in dreams." Seth added his opinion. "I know there were times an ex-girlfriend of mine used to wake up angry at me, and when I asked why, all she could come up with was that she had been dreaming she was angry right before she woke up."

Their conversation stayed light for most of the night, but it was inevitable that someone would bring up the dreams with Bale.

"You've never had that happen to you before? Being dragged into another world?" Chase appeared fascinated by the entire idea.

"No. Even the ones with Gabe were different. I was there, but it wasn't as me. I was in Gabe's head."

"And you said you were unable to change things in Bale's world?" Chase asked Diana.

"Exactly. Normally, I would have been able to will the chains away, but they were solid. I had as much effect as I would have here in the waking world."

"But you were still able to wake yourself up?"

"Yes." Diana nodded. "That wasn't a problem."

"What are you getting at, Chase?" Gabe asked.

"Did you try to change anything subtly, instead of willing it away?" Chase continued his line of questions, after acknowledging Gabe with a look.

Diana shook her head. "Cole mentioned that, too. But I haven't had a chance to try it out. We talked about the fact that if he wasn't concentrating on some small piece of the dream, it might not be that stable."

"I recommended changing what things were made of," Cole suggested.

Chase nodded. "Instead of willing the chains away, maybe will them into silk bonds or tin foil, something like that. Not making them disappear, but changing them within his dream context. Changing them just enough to benefit you."

"Right. Getting around his concentration by working on things he views as secondary."

Gabe joined the conversation, excited. "If he isn't working to keep them one way, then it may be possible to affect them."

"That just might work," Diana agreed softly.

"If it does, that's one possible edge against him that you might need," Chase concluded.

"Do you think he'll try to pull you into his dream world again?" asked Seth.

"Most definitely. According to what Steve said, he needs to seduce me. As long as he can't physically get to me, dreams are the only access he has to me. Sooner or later he'll find me. He will find a way past the shields. He almost did the other night."

"He never found you at your aunt's," Seth reminded her.

"We already decided he didn't know who I was or where I was. Now he knows me and knows where I live."

"You're right, once contact is made it's easier to re-establish a psychic link." Gabe's voice was unhappy. "So we need to be prepared."

"I need to be prepared, Gabe. It's me he wants."

"Diana --" Gabe started to argue, but Chase interrupted.

"Diana, there's no way any of us are going to let you do this alone. We'll face it together when the time comes. You're one of us now, and we don't leave our own out in the cold. We'll do it as a team. All of us."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Chase asked Diana as she sat upright in her bed.

Back at the restaurant they had discussed possible ways to deal with Bale in dreams. Their biggest problem was that they had no way of testing their theories. Diana suggested a controlled experiment, which Gabe promptly vetoed. She informed him that he either helped her, or she would do it by herself.

"Yes, I'm sure." She looked over at Gabe who was frowning at the rest of them. "It's the only way to test our ideas. If it works, great, we have a weapon we didn't expect. If it doesn't, we can concentrate our energy on finding something else that does work."

Chase looked at Gabe who was leaning against a wall. "Are you still up for this, or do you want one of us to do it?"

Diana waited for Gabe's response. Although she liked all the men, she trusted Gabe with her life. She knew what kind of person he was and wanted him as backup. And if he couldn't learn to trust her and her abilities, despite the possible danger to her, they would never have a future together.

"Of course, I'm going to do it. Just because I don't like it doesn't mean I'm not gonna help." He moved over beside Diana on the bed, reaching for her hand. "What makes you sure this will work? You haven't been bothered any night other than the one time you had your dream."

"Exactly. I told you I felt myself being pulled. My consciousness was drifting. Every time since then I've made sure I shield before I go to sleep. This time I won't."

"And she will be more in a meditative state than actual sleep. Or at least she'll start out that way," Chase pointed out.

Gabe held onto Diana's hand as he looked at her. "I'll be right here." He tapped her temple gently with his finger. "Just picture me as a little mouse watching everything you see. Hopefully he won't be able to see me." He lifted her hand up and kissed it gently, looking into her eyes, "Be careful. I don't want anything to happen to you."

"I will," she spoke to him softly, smiling back. Diana and Gabe lay back on the bed, him spooning her tight against his body, their hands clasped together.

*Are you sure there isn't another way?* Gabe asked, already linked in her mind.

*I need to do this, Gabe. Thank you for helping.* Squeezing his hand, she started her deep breathing as she got ready to go into a deep meditation.

She'd never done anything quite like this before, but they had all gone over the theory behind it. It wouldn't be exactly the same thing as sleeping, but close enough. The idea was to get her mind in the same state as a dream. She went in, and then concentrating, sent her essence out.

Immediately, she literally felt her consciousness grabbed and pulled elsewhere. Her initial reaction was to fight, but this was what they had hoped for. She allowed Bale to pull her into his world once again.

\* \* \* \* \*

Diana found herself somewhere entirely unexpected. She was sitting on a couch in a thoroughly modern room. Everything was white. Stark white with silver and black accents thrown in. Instead of clean and chic, the room left her feeling cold and empty.

Here and there were a couple of knickknacks, a fountain with river stones, some books, but none of it alleviated the atmosphere of the room. There was no heart in this place.

It took her a moment to realize she wasn't tied or restricted in any way. Surprised, she looked around, expecting to see Bale.

"Well, hello. I didn't expect to find you this early, but perhaps you had a long day."

Diana swiftly turned around to find Bale standing behind her. His arms were crossed loosely, and he was looking at her with a smile on his face. As breathtakingly handsome as she remembered him, Diana found it easy to believe her ancestor had fallen for him.

"Why have you brought me here again?"

"Again?" Bale raised an eyebrow. "My dear, you have never been here before. I thought you would like the new atmosphere." He gestured to the surroundings.

"Why have you brought me to you again? And where are we?" She had thought it would be difficult to hide the sound of triumph in her voice that their plan had worked, but the only sound that came out was touched with fear. Despite her bravado, she was petrified of this man and what he could do to her.

Bale walked slowly toward her, like a cat stalking a mouse. "As to the where, this is my home. I thought you'd be more comfortable here. It isn't as drafty or cold as the dungeon." He gave an exaggerated shudder as he gained her side. He quickly, gracefully sat and reached for her hand. "As to the why, well, we have been over that before, you're mine, and I want you with me."

"And if I don't want to be with you?" Diana pulled her hand away and stood up, taking a couple steps away from him.

“Oh, my dear, there is so much to be gained, though. Haven’t you ever dreamed of money, influence, power? All that and so much more could be had, if you join with me.

“The power I have now is nothing compared to what we will have together. Instead of a few followers, together we will rule the world. We can change the planet, mold it as we see fit. Force an end to the petty squabbles that dot the globe.

“Think of it. The world with just us as rulers. No more war, strife, or starvation. You could solve all the problems on the planet in one fell swoop.”

His voice was charming, hypnotizing. She felt herself wanting to believe him. He was being kind, graceful, and generous. What if he was right? Could they shape the world into a better place?

She felt something fluttering against her mind trying to get in. Her nostrils filled with the sharp scent of putrefaction. Shaking her head to clear the sudden odor from her nose, she found herself thinking more clearly. Suddenly, she realized she had been listening to him, almost agreeing with him. Everything had seemed to make sense. What had she been thinking? She knew this man was insane. How could she even think what he was saying was real? What had he done to her?

Diana stood taller as she shook off the rest of his spell. Taking a few more steps away from him, she leaned onto a table for support. If he hadn’t been so clumsy in his attempts to get in her mind, she might have fallen for it. If she hadn’t been practicing with Gabe, she probably never would have realized what he was doing. Chalk up one more ‘thank you’ to Gabe.

Looking at what Bale was doing objectively, she had to admit that nothing he did was threatening, but she found him scarier in this seductive mode than she had when he was trying to be threatening. She could see how so many could have fallen under his spell.

“You make it sound so good. I wonder what the price would be, though.” Diana was holding a small, dark brown stone from the fountain. She concentrated on changing the color to black, something that would go with the rest of the stones, but was different from its original state.

“Price? What on earth could you be talking about?” Bale seemed to relax. He was leaning back on the couch, legs crossed as he continued his casual-seeming discussion.

“Price. As in, your soul?”

Bale laughed, “My dear, what is eternal life for if not to be enjoyed to the fullest? And the idea of souls was created to make people scared to do what they want to do.”

“So you don’t think you have a soul?” Diana looked down at her hand and kept herself from jumping with joy. The stone was not only black, it was the black of obsidian rock. She had done it.



Diana resumed strolling across the room, touching things, examining things. Every once in a while changing something minor, its color, texture, even what it was made of. Inside she was quaking with fear, waiting for Bale to find out what she was doing.

"Let us say that I don't worry myself about trifles like that when I have everything I have ever wanted, and death is too far off to worry about. In fact, I am closer than ever to getting my truest desire."

She started to turn back to Bale, to look at him, but she saw a small shadow in the corner. A mouse. A tiny mouse with bright blue eyes. She looked away quickly, down to what she had in her hand. A feeling of confidence rose in her. She could do this. She wasn't alone. Gabe would never let Bale hurt her.

"And what would that truest desire be?"

"Why, my dear, that would be you." Bale had gotten up from the couch and approached her without a sound. He lightly grasped her on the shoulders from behind, causing her to jump at his touch.

"Me?" She again moved from his grasp. His touch chilled her to the bone. "You want me? Why would that be? You know nothing about me. For all you know I snore and hog the covers. I'm grumpy in the morning and can't stand any noise when I'm writing. There is very little to want about me."

"Oh, but my dear, you're so wrong. There is so much to want about you. I would do anything to make you happy."

"Like kill people I care about?" she snapped at him. *Get it together, Diana, this is not the time for a confrontation about your mother.*

"Kill the people ... ah, your young man." Bale shook his head, shrugging his shoulders. "That was unavoidable. He was poaching. I had to take care of him." Bale got a look on his face that was hard to decipher. "Now that is strange, I haven't been able to find him since that night. I wonder why?"

"Poaching?" Diana realized she couldn't let him continue on that path of thought. "Poaching? What? Am I a possession? Is that what I would be to you if I agreed to join you?"

"Oh, dear. No, not just a possession ... well, yes, you would be. No one touches what is mine." His voice became very hard at that pronouncement.

"I'm sorry. I don't think I can join you. You'll have to find some other woman who suits your needs."

"No one else will do, dear, and you will soon learn you have no choice. As soon as I find you, whatever you think, you will be mine."

"I have a choice, just like my mother did, and I make the same choice she did. I don't want you, I don't want to be with you, and I will destroy you." Diana didn't know why she blurted it out, but she couldn't help herself. She definitely didn't expect the response she got from him, though. He laughed. He stood there and laughed at her.

“Oh, dear, you do amuse me,” he stated once he calmed down enough to talk. “I was wondering how long it would take you to learn about your mother. I am impressed. What was it? Something I said? Did your aunt leave you something? Or perhaps your dear, sainted mother herself?” He shook his head with an ironic smile. “I should have remembered, the Temis women are nothing if not sly. Of course, they built in a fail-safe.” He stopped for a moment, thinking. His absolute stillness scared Diana even more. What was he thinking of?

“That gentleman of yours. Of course, he’s the reason the attack failed. No one could have gotten away from the three of my men like that unless he had ...” Bale eyed her intently. “You have found him, haven’t you, my dear? You have found your protector? And with him you have learned the truth.”

Diana felt panic rise in her chest. “My protector? What are you talking about?”

“Oh, Diana, Diana, Diana. Don’t lie to me.” He approached her rapidly, grabbing her by the upper arms, his voice angry and grating. “You know the truth. You know that either you come to me willingly or I shall be forced to kill you. You’re the last of your line, and you’re not strong enough to fight me. Join me or die.” His suave, seductive exterior was gone. All she could see was a cold, heartless man bent on conquering and destruction. His eyes shone with hatred and the lust for power.

Diana tried to pull herself away from him, almost forgetting all her training in her near panic. “No, I will never join you! You killed my mother! I will see you rot in hell!” she yelled into his face.

He let one of her shoulders go and slapped her backhanded across the cheek, sending her sprawling across the floor with the force. “Then you shall die, and I will finally be free of you all.”

Diana was where she wanted to be. Out of his arms and far enough away that she could prepare for anything he might try to do. She knew she had to get out and get out now. *Out*, she thought to herself, *Out, wake up, get out.*

Startled, she was looking into Gabe’s eyes. His beautiful, bright, warm blue eyes. Then he was holding her tight, speaking into her mind. *Oh, babe, it’s okay. It’s okay.*

She held tight to him for a moment, enjoying the feel of being close to him again, safe in his arms. Then she pulled back. “I can do it.” She looked up at the others in the room. “I can do it. I am not completely helpless.”

## Chapter Twenty

“So what have we learned from last night’s ill-conceived experiment?” Steve asked.

Diana cringed at his question. He was right; last night probably wasn’t the smartest of actions on their part, but it was the only thing they could think of to test their theory. Diana decided not to say anything in their defense. She could already tell that Steven might be a quiet, courtly gentleman most of the time, but he was worse than a mother bear with threatened cubs when he was angry.

“We learned Diana can affect things in his world,” Seth offered tentatively.

“When she is in a meditative state. We know nothing about when she is actually sleeping,” Steve pointed out.

“Well, that’s not true.” Everyone turned to look at Diana. “You’re assuming everything about my abilities that we learned isn’t valid because this was a controlled situation. Remember, though, the brain is very similar when you’re in a meditative state to when you’re sleeping. I really think that what I learned is very much applicable to the dream world. If he can still hurt me, when I’m in control, then I know I can hurt him if he is in control.” Diana brought her hand up to her bruised cheek.

Steve looked like he was pondering this, looking for a loophole in her logic. He grunted.

Diana continued in the silence that followed, “And we have also learned that Bale doesn’t know about Argus, has a few followers, and has no idea physically where I -- we -- are. Plus we learned the meaning of that phrase. Gabe is my protector. Exactly how he is supposed to protect me and against what, I guess we’ll find out later.” Diana avoided looking at Gabe. They had slept in their own beds last night. Between the conversation they’d had in the garden and her experiment with her abilities, she had just wanted to be alone and had told him so. She wasn’t sure how she felt about it, either.

It should have been easier, knowing his preordained place by her side was as her protector. But then it brought up other questions, too. Were these feelings she was having because of that? After all, it would be easier to be protected by someone whom she liked. What about his feelings? She didn't know what to do, didn't know how she felt, or why she felt that way. She did know, however that her plan to not feel anything for him was shot. It was too late for that. And as to her needing a protector, well, she had finally managed to come to grips with that last night as she tossed and turned. Even if the women that created this chain of events hadn't lived in a time where women didn't fight physically, it always helped to have a little extra muscle around if you were to fight for your life.

"Okay, fine, we'll go by your assumptions, Diana. But this still leaves us unsure how to destroy him," Steve pointed out.

While the rest of the group pondered that, Steve went over to the journal. "Diana didn't discover much new yesterday in what she translated, as you all probably know, but I picked apart the parts I could read and the family tree. We have something interesting that I thought you all would want to know.

"There is record of a Jaclyn with a brother by the name of Robert, living in the nineteenth century. The only other fact we've been able to discover about Robert is the name of his wife. Sarah."

"You've got to be kidding!" Seth laughed at the news.

"Nope, not at all. There is also mention of a letter that Jaclyn left for the 'ones who come together.'"

"Are you certain it is our Sarah and Robert?" Gabe asked with a stunned expression on his face.

"Positive."

"We will have to rewrite Argus history," Chase said with a twisted grin.

"Oh, gods, no," Steve said with a groan.

\* \* \* \* \*

Diana enjoyed the gardens at Argus. The day before she had realized how beautiful and calming they were, and she felt in need of that calm right now. The weather was warm for mid-September, and she treasured it.

"Hey, Diana!"

She glanced up at the sound of her name and saw Seth and Cole approach. She waited for them to join her.

"I remembered what you said about wanting to see the maze, I thought maybe I could show it to you," Cole said.

"Thank you, I'd like that." She had seen the maze, but remembered what Cole had said about people getting lost and thought that maybe it wasn't the best idea to go in on her own.

"Is it true that new recruits get lost in it?" she asked as the three of them walked toward the large hedge.

Seth coughed, "Um, yeah."

"You?" she asked unbelieving.

"Yeah, I was a little cocky. I wasn't expecting to be blindfolded or drugged."

"Drugged?" Diana asked with concern.

"Yeah, part of the idea is to see how we can work our way through situations where we're disoriented. We're given a small dose of the venom from the Anroth Demon. It has short-term disorienting effects."

"But is that safe?"

"Perfectly," Cole assured her. "There's nothing in it that has harmful long-term effects. Anroths aren't very fast, and they eat their victims alive. This venom is just a way to confuse the prey so they're easier to catch. It isn't long-lasting, or even very strong, as it would affect them, too."

"Eew." She shuddered.

"Sorry, too much information. But yeah, it's safe and has been used for years. No side effects and lasts less than twelve hours."

"So how long until you got out?" Diana turned back to Seth.

"They came looking for me the next morning."

Diana tried hard not to laugh, but a smile escaped her. "Did it kick out some of that cockiness?"

"Hell, no. I went back the next night to get it right."

"And did you?"

Cole answered, "He got in and out, no problem. Not record time, but faster than many."

"How do you know he didn't go in and turn around?" She sent Seth a smile, knowing he wouldn't take offense at her teasing.

"There are only two entrances or exits from the maze. Each one is a mirror to the other. The only way to get to the second entrance is to go through the middle. Most of the guys get through to the middle, but get lost on the outgoing side. The idea that they are doing exactly what they did to get in tends to confuse them into thinking they're wrong."

"It's really just an exercise in over-thinking. Most of us who lose the first time keep doubting ourselves and convince ourselves it couldn't be that easy," Seth told her.

"Who has the record?"

"Need you ask?" Seth asked with a twisted smile.

“Gabe?”

“Yup, the only one who came even close is Chase.”

They had made it to the hedge by that time. It was nine feet tall and so thick she couldn't see through to the other side of the wall of bushes in front of her. The entrance showed the walls to be about two feet thick.

“The entrances are at the cardinal points of East and West. The men go in here, at the East entrance and have to find their way out at the West entrance. There is actually a set pattern to the moves.”

“If we go in, and I take the lead, can you get us out if I get you lost?”

Cole thought about it for a second. “Yeah, if you don't mind being late for lunch,” he said with a smile.

“How about we make a wager?” Seth asked

“What kind of wager?”

“I hear you make a mean lasagna.”

Diana laughed, “Okay, if I need to ask help to get out, when we get back to Seattle, I make you lasagna. But what do I get if I win?”

“Bragging rights?” Seth offered.

“I don't think so.”

“Okay, let me think on it.”

“It's a deal.”

They walked into the maze with Diana in the lead. She knew she had more information than the recruits did when they went in, which made her doubly determined to get it done. After a while she began to doubt her ability, but refused to give in. She checked her watch. They had only been in the maze for forty-five minutes. She decided to give herself another fifteen minutes and then see how far off she was.

Thirteen minutes later she led them to the middle of the maze. “Impressive.” Seth said. “Less than an hour. Of course, it was daylight, and you weren't blindfolded or drugged, but still, I'm impressed.”

Diana smiled at Seth absently, but her attention was caught by what she found in the center of the maze. There was a large five-pointed star with a pedestal in the middle.

Cole saw where her attention was and explained it to her. “A pentagram has always traditionally been a symbol of balance and power. It is only recently that it has been bastardized and viewed as evil. Each point is representative of the points of the compass, and the fifth is the representation of the center, or self.”

“Were Sarah and Robert pagans?”

“We don't know. All we know about this area is that it was used by all three of them extensively. The podium has a poem on it that Robert's mother wrote before she died.

Diana approached the podium and was struck silent.

*The Huntress shall come, alone she shall be  
To accept the Hunter, that is her key  
Apart they are halved, though strong on their own  
Together they are one, no longer alone*

*They are the two, together at last  
The power needed, they will amass  
She soars high, and he is her ground  
He fights low, and she circles round*

*The power they have, they must trust  
If they want an outcome right and just  
Spirit and Blood, together entwined  
To overcome all, not just to bind.*

"Diana, what's wrong?" Seth glanced up at Diana's sound of surprise.

She stood there, saying nothing.

Seth and Cole quickly walked over to her. "It's just a poem, Diana, we've all seen it. There's nothing important there."

Diana looked at them. "Yes, there is. This is about me."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Okay, Okay, hold on. Explain this to me again." Steve held his hands up as Diana tried to explain to him about the podium in the garden. The three of them had rushed back out of the maze in record time because Diana kept saying she had remembered something and needed to talk to Steve.

"Once I saw the poem I remembered the rest of my dream. She said the only way to defeat him was with the two lines. 'One of the blood and one of the spirit.' That made the poem make sense."

"Are you sure that's what she said?" Steve asked.

"Yes. Seeing it there reminded me. She definitely said spirit and blood.

"My dream said that only the two lines together could destroy Bale. I'm obviously the blood descendant of Jaclyn. If my great-great-whatever Uncle Robert and his wife Sarah

started Argus, it was in the spirit of what Jaclyn was doing. And if they didn't have any children, it follows that the people involved in their cause, anyone who supports it, could be called their spiritual children." She looked at Steve for confirmation of where she was going with this.

"Right. Anyone who is associated with the foundation would be a child of spirit. It makes what I found before make more sense, too," Steve agreed with her.

"That's what she meant about one of the spirit and one of the blood."

"Exactly. You're the blood, and Gabe is the spirit. Which would explain why Gabe has been designated the protector."

"Wouldn't that mean that any one of us could be her protector?" Cole pointed out.

They all stopped for a moment. "Theoretically, yes," Steve agreed. "But I think that the connection with the dreams is probably part of it. The poem talks about grounding and flying, I would think that refers to the dreamwalking Diana has done in Gabe's dreams.

"If Bale knows Diana has a protector, then why doesn't he know about Argus? Wouldn't it follow?" Gabe reached out to hold Diana to him.

"Not necessarily. Bale probably knows that Diana would have a protector, but not who or why. That might be why the book was written in code. In case he ever got ahold of it. Nothing is in a normal language except for the history of Bale and a couple innocuous facts. Diana seems to be the one woman he has found before she has had a child."

"So does this mean that Gabe is the one who has to fight him?" Chase asked.

"No," Diana spoke up. "I know I have to fight him, but I don't think it's in physical combat."

"Then how?"

"Your dreams," Gabe answered softly, looking at Diana.

"Exactly." Diana moved away from Gabe and started to walk around the lab as she talked. "It follows a progression, as long as you're willing to believe this is all predestined. If I hadn't started dreaming about Gabe, I never would have done all the research and practice into lucid dreaming. He's the reason I have the ability to destroy Bale. That's why I needed to meet up with him."

"I don't know if it's that simple, though, Diana. It says the two of you together are needed to destroy him. Gabe's psychic ability is telepathy, but his major strength would be physical."

"So, does that mean that I protect Diana while she is in a dream? Or that I have to attack Bale physically while she gets him mentally?"

Steve shook his head. "I don't know. I guess we're just going to have to see what the book says. Are you ready to work on it some more?"

Diana nodded. "Definitely. I want to get this figured out as soon as possible."



"You boys might as well go do something with your time. Neither Diana nor I will need you for a while," Steve told the men as Diana walked over to a desk. "Oh, and Gabe, have you set up an access code for Diana for this level yet?"

"No. I needed your permission before I did that," Gabe reminded him.

Shaking his head, Steve commented, "I should have remembered. Okay, Diana, come over here and help me enter your info and give you a code. You're now officially recognized as an ally of the Argus Foundation."

Diana walked over to Steve, and looked down at his computer to answer his questions. She glanced back up at the men hovering. "Go, we'll be fine. If we need you, we'll call. I'm sure there's plenty for you guys to do."

"Are you sure you won't need us?" Gabe asked.

She gestured with the book. "I'm going to be working on this, and you won't be of any help at that, so go."

"You're sure you'll be okay?"

Diana smiled at Gabe's concern. She knew he didn't mean physically. "Yes. I promise I'll be okay." Reaching up, she laid a kiss on his lips, thanking him for his concern.

His arms reached around and held her tight for a few seconds. "Okay, we'll come get you for dinner."

"See you then."

\* \* \* \* \*

"I just don't like it," Gabe said as he kicked out at his opponent again.

"What don't you like about it?" Cole blocked the kick and returned with a lead-hand jab. "The fact that she has to fight or that you can't be all macho and save the day?"

Gabe stopped for a minute to think about what Cole just said. "Ouch!" He grunted as Cole made contact with a slap off the side of his head.

"Pay attention, bud."

"Am I really being that sexist?" Gabe stood there rubbing his head, face turned toward the window, where he could see the upper levels of the wing Diana was working in.

"You really askin'?" Cole questioned.

"Yeah, I am."

"Then the answer is yes." Cole walked over and grabbed a towel from the stack by the wall. "Gabe, all you've wanted to do since you met her is protect her."

"Well, I wouldn't say that's all I've wanted to do."

"Yeah, besides that. Hell, you chased her across the country. When have you ever chased anyone across town, even?"

"Jeez, Cole. You make me sound like an asshole when it comes to women."

"Gabe, you know what I mean. If a woman leaves you, you aren't likely to moon over her and chase her down. You act differently when it comes to Diana."

Gabe turned back to Cole, grabbing his own towel as he continued the conversation. "You think there's anything to this mystical connection Steve keeps going on about?"

"We've both seen stranger things," Cole reminded him.

Gabe didn't say anything for a few minutes.

Cole walked back over and sat on the bench near the mat. "Okay, let's take it step-by-step."

"Steve already did that."

"Well, then, let's do it again, only without all the mumbo jumbo. You met her on the plane on an unexpected stop. You were attracted to her, not unexpectedly -- she is a beautiful woman. You flirted, you slept with her, you had a good time, she left you, you went after her. Sounds to me like good old-fashioned lust."

"So you think Steve's out of his gourd?"

"I didn't say that. The point I was trying to make is even if there are mystical connections, there's still real physical attraction. You've already admitted that and more to me."

Gabe joined Cole on the bench, shaking his head. "It's not only physical, you're right."

"Then what is it?"

"I don't know. But there is definitely real feeling there."

"Well, then, what does it matter? At the risk of sounding like a woman and not macho --" Cole grinned and flexed his muscles with a grunt. "-- I'm gonna say you're falling in love. It doesn't matter why, just that it's happening. The question is, are you going to let all this bullshit get in the way?"

\* \* \* \* \*

"Steve?"

"Yes, my dear?" he looked up from his papers.

"Can you tell me about Gabe?"

Steve hesitated for a moment, stood up and walked to the desk Diana was using. He sat on the edge before he began. "Before I do, I need to know why you want to know."

Diana thought for a moment. Why did she want -- no, need -- to know about Gabe? "I ... I need to know if these feelings are real."

Steve nodded. "Well, Gabe is not what I guess you would call a standard guy. He was brought up in a happy home, which in itself is unusual. His parents not only loved him, they loved each other."

"He told me they died in a car crash."

"Yes they did. About eight years ago. He was devastated. They were his world. He's often said everything he is, he owes to them. They supported him in every decision he made. When he told them he heard voices and thoughts, instead of panicking like most parents would by assuming he had a mental illness, they did research, found someone to help him. When he decided to join Argus, they were behind him one hundred percent. They didn't like the thought of him putting himself in danger, but they agreed with the purpose behind the unit."

Steve looked at nothing for a minute. "After he lost his parents, he was a little scary for a while. I think the only thing that kept him alive was the job. The first mission after their deaths went to hell in a handbasket. He blamed himself for it. They weren't able to get one of the girls out they went after. Actually, you wrote about it."

"Was that the one with the governor's daughter?"

"Yes, it was."

"That was my first dream about him. I remember how much pain and rage he had in him. The dreams scared me. But underneath it all, I felt concern for others." Diana twiddled with a pen, deep in thought. "Despite how scary his thoughts were, he was always concerned about the girl and his people."

Steve shook his head. "If you know this, then you had great insight to his mind. You probably know him better than anyone right now. You need to decide what to do with that knowledge, my dear."

She looked up at him, her eyes wide open, glistening with unshed tears, "I don't know, Steve. Every time I've loved someone, they've left me in one way or another. Not only that, but I need to know how much of this attraction for him is real, honest attraction, and how much is this stupid prophecy." She pushed the journal in front of her, sending it sliding across the desk.

"I don't know, Diana. I have no answers for you." Steve got up and walked over to make himself a cup of tea. He gestured to Diana in question, and she nodded yes. "I have never been married and have only been in love once. Unfortunately it didn't work out, but I can tell you that the feeling is rare, and when it is real, it is something to be cherished."

He brought the tea over to her and sat back down. "Do you think you're in love with him?"

"I don't know." She shook her head. "I know I love being with him, and I miss him when he's not with me. Just the thought of him is enough to make me smile. And the thought of losing him scares me to death."

Steve didn't say anything, just looked at her over the rim of his mug as she continued, "It's ridiculous. I am not living in a romance novel; people don't fall in love in less than a week!"

"They don't?"

"Not outside of movies and books," Diana answered emphatically.

"Gabe's parents met on Thursday and were married on Friday. They were together for thirty years."

"Really?"

Steve smiled. "Really. Now, be honest. The time is not really what's bothering you, it's the cause, isn't it?"

"What if all these feelings are just to make this prophecy work? What if they aren't real?"

"Do they feel real?"

Diana hesitated. "Ye-es"

"Then does it really matter? Who cares what brought you two together? The point is, you are together." Steve gestured toward the empty room. "When I see the two of you with each other, my heart literally lightens. He's always aware of where you are and what you're doing. His concern for you is genuine. You lean on him when you need help, and I can already tell you don't do that often. And he's willing to do anything for you, even let you put yourself in unsafe situations. You two mesh. You make a team."

Steve stopped and moved from the desk. "And anyway, no prophecy is worth its weight in the paper it is printed on if it isn't meant for the participants to end up happily ever after."

\* \* \* \* \*

Gabe found Diana out in the center of the maze later that day, staring at the poem in the middle. "Thought I might find you out here."

He walked over to stand behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist, pulling her back against his chest. "This is just so ... much," she said quietly.

"I know. It's a lot to grasp."

She leaned her head back against his strong chest. "How are you handling it so calmly?"

Gabe laughed. "I've had a lot longer to get used to this type of things."

"True."

"Plus, I'm not the one that just learned all my ancestors were in some secret battle against evil and that it will fall to me to decide the fate of thousands, if not millions of people."

"Is that your attempt at making me feel better?"

Gabe just laughed again. "Didn't it work?"

She lightly elbowed him in the gut. "No, you idiot, it didn't." But she was smiling.

## Chapter Twenty-One

“What do you mean you have to go back?” Gabe sounded furious as he turned on Diana, grasping her arms tightly.

“Bale is just going to keep building up his defenses, and we’re never going to defeat him.” Diana tried to keep her voice calm as she explained her reasoning.

“Defeat him? Of course, we aren’t going defeat him, we have no idea how to even bind him, never mind defeat him.”

“That is why I need to go back. I need to meet with him, see if I can learn anything.”

“Meet with him? Are you nuts?” Gabe released Diana as he paced away from the group of people in the office.

Diana glared at Gabe hard enough to make him squirm. She knew he was only worried about her, but dammit, he needed to trust her.

“In my dreams. They’re the only contact we have with him, and if I need to draw him out, then that’s how I would choose to do it.”

“Diana,” Steve interrupted. “Are you sure this is the best course of action?”

“It’s the only course of action, Steve.” She walked over to Gabe to lay her hand on his arm and spoke to him in a low, soft voice. “I know you’re worried about me, and I appreciate that. But you have to let me do this. My strengths are in my dreams. I can’t keep hiding here where he can’t find me. I need to do something.”

“But --”

“Gabe, you know he won’t quit. He needs me turned or dead. We need more information about him before we can kill him. It’s the only way.”

“What about your journal?” He sounded almost forlorn to Diana.

"I'll keep trying to decipher it, but it's different from what my mother taught me. It will take time. It's like trying to decipher Middle English as a third grader."

"I'm sorry, Gabe, but she's right," Steve agreed with Diana. "We can keep trying to find out more, but the best way is from him."

"Why would he be stupid enough to tell you?"

Diana stepped back and shook her head in impatience. "He's told us quite a bit already. I think he wants to talk. He needs it. He is too egotistical not to. Hell, I think the term egomaniac was invented to describe him."

"He's obviously never seen any James Bond movies," Seth muttered. When everyone turned to look at him, he responded defensively, "What? You know, get the bad guy to tell all and save the world?"

Gabe looked away, ignoring Seth. "He attacked you last time because you defied him. What makes you think he won't this time?"

Diana answered slowly, "I don't think he will. The odds are he can't kill me in my dreams. I think he was just too frustrated to realize what he was doing. I'm pretty sure he'll keep trying to seduce me. And I'm going to let him."

\* \* \* \* \*

"I still think this is a dumb idea." Gabe was leaning in the doorway to the blue bedroom, arms crossed, leaving no doubt as to his mood.

Diana looked up and smiled slowly. She closed her journal, went over to him, and wrapped her arms around his waist.

"Thank you."

Surprised, Gabe looked down at her and stood up straight. "For what?" His voice was gruff with tension.

"For caring. And for worrying. That means a lot to me."

Gabe was confused. "You're thanking me for telling you your idea is dumb and that you shouldn't do it?"

Diana smiled. "Yes." She reached up and kissed him gently on the lips.

His arms went around her of their own accord as he returned her kiss and deepened it. He was so afraid of losing her. He had just found her, still hadn't told her how he felt, and she was planning this crazy scheme that could get her killed. And there was nothing he could do about it.

"I'm worried about you, Diana." He looked into her eyes after they broke apart.

"I know, Gabe. And I know you'll be there to help me if I need it. I'm not worried."

Gabe was speechless. No one had ever shown him this level of surety. His team always knew he would be there, but they knew that about all of the team members. This was

different. Diana was telling him that she knew he would never let anything happen to her. That she trusted him to keep her safe. He swallowed hard.

"Are you going to be ready?" she asked him, nodding towards the sitting room as she pulled back from him.

"Yeah. The guys said they'd be here at about ten o'clock, so we have a few hours to waste. I didn't know if you'd want to watch a movie or something. I'm too wired to read."

Diana smiled with a glint in her eye. She got a strange look on her face that Gabe couldn't decipher right away. "That much time?"

As she spoke, she slowly moved back from Gabe 'til she was out of reach of his arms. Her hand went up to the top button on her blouse. Toying with it, she turned and slowly walked toward the bathroom. He couldn't move his eyes from her. The way she walked gracefully across the room, wiggling her hips. Wait. Wiggling her hips? She never did that. He looked up to see her stop at the door to the bathroom. She had obviously been unbuttoning her shirt as she walked, because it was hanging open over her right shoulder as though she were getting ready to take it off. "I was thinking I might take a shower, kind of recharge my batteries, and all that."

He felt his body tighten with desire as he watched her stand there with just a shoulder bare. He inhaled sharply as she slowly peeled her blouse off, laying it on the dresser beside the door. She resumed walking as her arms reached around in back of her to unclasp her bra. He swallowed hard. God, she was so sexy. Did she even know what she was doing to him?

"Wanna scrub my back?" she asked huskily over her shoulder.

Gabe was on her before she even finished her question, his arms going around her body, catching her breasts in his hands as they fell free from her bra. They felt so good in his hands. They looked like they belonged there. He cupped them as he pulled himself into her to show his body's reaction to her. Diana rubbed her bottom over him, making him groan.

He inhaled her fresh, clean scent. He would never be able to smell jasmine again without thinking of her. The light floral scent with a hint of sex underlying it would always be enough to drive his hormones wild.

He looked up and saw them in the mirror. They were just a few feet inside the doorway, facing the vanity. His dark, tanned hands on her creamy-white breasts. Her red lips, her eyes half closed, face flushed with desire. He did that to her. His thumbs started to move over her nipples, teasing her. Her lips parted on an indrawn breath, eyes opening quickly in reaction. Their eyes met in the mirror.

He fondled her breasts gently at first. Cupping them, brushing the nipples with his long fingers, all the time watching in the mirror. Slowly he brought his mouth down to the tip of her ear. His tongue flicked out, running gently down to her lobe. He grasped it in his teeth and pulled it into his mouth, sucking on it firmly. Her breathing sped up in response. His hands grew firmer, harder on her breasts, kneading them, pulling her back into his body. She arched forward, meeting the pressure of his hands. A small moan escaped her parted lips.



Gabe pinched her left nipple hard, causing her to jump. He was sure he had her attention, as he saw her eyes watching his hands leave her breasts. Slowly he worked them down to the waist of her jeans, her eyes tracking his every move.

Her belly quivered as he slowly unbuttoned her fly, pushing her jeans down past her hips, letting them fall to the floor. His hands moved to the small straps on either side of her waist. He hooked his thumbs through them and slowly worked her panties down, letting them, too, fall to the floor, revealing the treasure beneath.

He watched as she licked her lips, leaning back into him, her head tilted to the side to allow him access to her neck.

Gabe didn't know whether he was more fascinated with her body or her reaction to seeing everything he was doing to her. His tongue flicked out quickly, moving up the side of her neck, causing her to shiver. His teeth bit down, nipping at her, tasting her, reveling in her.

Done with the obstacles in their way, his hands moved in. His right hand cupped the juncture of her thighs. He could feel her wetness, her readiness.

It always amazed him how she responded to him so quickly, how her body let him know what she wanted without her saying a word. He held her there a moment, just enjoying the feeling of her against his palm. He eased back, fingers parting her to allow him access. She spread her legs slightly to open herself to their combined gaze. Gabe imagined he could see her pulsing inside with need. Reaching with his other hand, he slowly inserted a finger through her tight, wet, sheath.

\* \* \* \* \*

Diana watched his hand move into her as she felt it. It was a strange, exciting sight, seeing what he was doing to her. Seeing the way his other hand grasped her as her body held on to his finger. She watched as another finger joined the first, feeling him stretching her open further. His thumb flicked over her clit, sending shivers through her body. She knew she wouldn't last long as he moved in and out of her, flicking, teasing, pumping into her. Driving her insane.

She felt the tension build quickly, her breath panting, coming in quick gasps, as her body tightened around his hand, tighter, tighter. Her inner muscles quaked, spasming faster, sending shivers throughout her body as it anticipated the upcoming release. She only had time to think, *Oh, God, Gabe*, before the magic of his fingers hit her full force, sending her head back in a moan as her legs collapsed, and her body turned to jelly with an orgasm that sent fire racing through her blood.

Diana slowly became aware of Gabe holding on to her. His left hand still inside her, his right arm wrapped tightly around her waist, keeping her upright.

Their eyes met again in the mirror, hers glassy with afterglow, his shining with predatory intention. He slowly removed his hand from her, trailing up her body, laving her juices on her nipple, sending even more shivers through her. He slowly brought his hand to his mouth and licked his fingers clean. The look in his eyes caused her body to quiver in anticipation of even more pleasure.

Diana leaned back against him, catching her breath. "Um, shower?" she said with a shaky smile.

"We'll get there," he promised with a kiss to her neck, "eventually." With that he gently pushed her up and knelt down to help her step out of her jeans and panties. Standing up, he divested himself of his own clothes.

"My turn." Diana reached to touch him, taking control of the situation. His male beauty amazed her every time she saw it. His chest was firm, defined, and made her mouth water just by look alone. An electric shock ran through her at the contact of her hands against his body. She ran her hands over his torso, his arms, to his biceps, which she massaged gently. *So beautiful.*

Gabe smiled at her. "I am?"

She hadn't realized she had sent to him. "Yes, you are. I love the feel of your skin. Your body is perfect."

She looked up and saw Gabe smile a secret smile, looking down at her. "What's going through your mind?" she asked him.

*How gorgeous you are. How much I love having you in my arms. How this was meant to be.*

He was right, this was meant to be. It didn't matter why they were together, why they had met. What mattered was, they were together, and it felt oh-so-right. Nothing could compare to how she felt when she was with him. She knew she would never be happy with another. She needed him to know that, too, and tried to convey it with her actions.

Diana's hands continued roaming over his body, feeling every inch of him. She enjoyed the contours of his pecs, his abs, his waist, the way his stomach shuddered as she ran her hands down his body. The heat generated from her caresses sent her deeper into desire. She needed him, just like she did food and water.

His body was so smooth and hard at the same time. Like silk-covered steel. She could touch him all day. Her hands stopped at his hips, threatening to move lower, but waiting in anticipation.

She looked up at him slyly. "Is there something you want?" Her hands quickly moved further south, grasping him with intent. He groaned loudly.

Smiling, she lowered herself to her knees. She saw him watching her as she moved closer to him, holding on as she rained small kisses on the tip of his cock. He groaned louder with each little touch.

Her tongue shortly joined her lips, darting here and there, teasing, tasting him. His small sounds and musky taste inflamed her further. She needed to taste him, all of him. Starting at the base of his shaft, she ran her tongue all the way up to the tip, not just once, but again and again, until she had caressed every inch of him with her tongue.

Diana leaned back and met his eyes as she licked her lips. He was breathing heavily, eyes half closed. She moved forward and quickly took him deep in her mouth. She felt his knees start to give, forcing him to lock them in place. He buried his hands in her long hair.

Pulling away, she held just his tip in her mouth, darting her tongue out, licking around. Opening her mouth wider, she took him in once again, slower this time, wrapping her lips around him, tasting him, reveling in the feel of him in her mouth. After another groan from him, she asked, *You like?*

Gabe's hands tightened in her hair reflexively. "Oh, don't stop, please."

*If you insist.* She continued lavishing attention on his shaft, moving one of her hands down to cup his balls while the other massaged his thigh. Fondling his sac, she moved her hand slightly, pressing against the muscle that ran from his cock to his ass, knowing what that would do to him.

*Oh, babe, damn. If you keep doing that, I won't last.* His mental voice was as out of breath as his real voice.

*Hmm, sounds like a challenge,* she responded with laughter in her thought as she continued to work his body to a fever pitch of excitement, taking him faster and further into her mouth.

\* \* \* \* \*

Gabe had women go down on him before, but what she was doing to him made him ready to explode almost instantly. The touch of her hands and mouth as she worked him was incredible.

He watched her in the mirror as her head moved back and forth in rapid motions. The sight of her from that angle drove him insane with need. To see her take him like that, see his shaft covered in her wetness as she moved back, making love to him with her mouth.

Deciding he'd had enough, he reached his hands down to her shoulders and pulled her away from him. "Oh, no, we aren't done yet, and if you don't stop, I will be."

Once she was standing he gave her an earth-shattering kiss designed to send her juices flowing all over again. Pulling away, he gently turned her around, raised her onto the step at the vanity, and leaned her against it, once again facing the mirror. Their eyes met, wild with desire, his intent obvious. Quickly, she smiled and spread her legs to provide better access.

Positioning her hips where he wanted them, he reached a hand around her to separate her lower lips, fondling her, bringing her once again to the brink of orgasm. As she came, he moved in from behind, sliding into her, once again sending her right over the edge, writhing

in ecstasy as he entered in one firm thrust. He felt her body quiver, milking his cock, wanting more.

He held her close for a moment, not moving, letting the aftershocks shooting through her body die down. His hand cupped her, holding her tight against him. It felt so right to have her in his arms, his cock in her body. He was almost content enough to never move again.

Eventually, though, Diana signaled that she wanted more. Wiggling, she encouraged him to get a move on. Smiling, he slowly started moving in and out, watching her in the mirror again, watching as the flush on her body deepened with her excitement, her lips parting, her eyes widening as her breath came in tight gasps.

He wanted her so badly he could barely keep himself in check. He wanted, no, needed her to know what he felt. The attraction for her, the need, the love. Yes, the love.

\* \* \* \* \*

She pushed back against him, meeting him thrust for thrust, reveling in the snug feel of him inside her. His body slapped against her ass, thrusting harder and faster as they came closer to fulfillment.

His hands roamed her body at will, one staying at her cleft, massaging her, sending shivers through her, the other reaching up to her breast, lightly pinching at it, twisting, sending more sensations down her spine.

As he moved inside her, she felt his desire. Felt it in her heart and in her head. They were entwined, as if they truly were the one the poem promised.

With each thrust, she felt his urgency, his need to be with her, to keep her safe. His desire to keep her with him always. His fear that she would leave, or worse, she would die. And his fear that he would be unable to protect her as he thought she deserved.

*Oh, Gabe.* Touched beyond imagining, never having dreamed of the need he had for her, she reached back for him with her arms as she bathed him with her own feelings. The need for him to be there, the surprise that need brought out in her. The closeness and happiness she felt with him whenever he was near. The way he completed her as no other ever had or ever could. Her decision to never let him go.

*Oh, babe.* She heard him exclaim in her head, sending her heart soaring further at the love that flooded in with that tiny phrase.

She felt him in her mind, sending her images of her body from his perspective, how it felt to be inside her, her body pulsating around him. She didn't know where she ended and he began; it was too much. Just as she thought she couldn't handle it any more, her body exploded in ecstasy. Her vagina vibrated and fluttered, squeezing Gabe, milking him, begging him for fulfillment.

He couldn't hold on any longer. She felt his release in her body and in her mind. Felt his explosion as he shot all he had inside her again and again, her body squeezing, draining him of every last drop.

He dropped his head on her shoulders. "Oh, my God." He squeezed her tight, then slowly pulled from her.

"Are you okay?" he asked as they stood up, and she turned around.

Smiling, she assured him a bit breathlessly, "Oh, yeah."

He looked at her, brushing a curl of hair out of her face. Reaching down, he slowly, deeply kissed her.

"I felt you," Diana told him when they moved apart.

"I hope so," he said with a laugh.

"No, I felt you in my head, what you were thinking, feeling. It was nice ... No, it was intense," she decided as her arms clenched around him.

Diana was touched beyond words. She couldn't explain how it felt to know what he felt, how he felt.

"Do you really?" She looked up at him, suddenly shy.

Gabe took a moment to understand what she meant, pulled her even tighter against him as he answered, "Yes, I do."

"Me, too." Diana's voice was so low he wasn't sure he heard her right.

Leaning back, he looked into her eyes. "I love you, Diana. With all my heart. I don't know how it happened, or when, but I know I can never live without you. You've become the most important thing in my life, and I want to always be there for you."

Diana glanced down, before gazing in his eyes. "I love you, too. All this prophecy stuff confused me for a while. I doubted my feelings. I was convinced it couldn't be real. But it is. I never want to lose you. You make me whole."

Gabe held her for a moment longer, not wanting to let go.

"Now I think I know why men love sex so much." She laughed lightly. "Is it really that intense?"

"With you? Yes," he answered simply, holding her tight.

"Um, maybe now would be a good time for that shower."

Gabe smiled at her in his arms. "Yeah, it might be." He laughed as he led her to the stall.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Okay, so what's the plan of attack?" Cole asked, looking at the others sitting in the lounge area of the suite. Diana and Gabe were sitting together on the oversized chair. She was wrapped in his arms, feeling truly secure for the first time in a long time.

"I go in."

"That's not much of a plan, Diana."

"Same as last time. I'll go in, and Gabe will come with me."

"Are you sure you can find him?"

"Pretty sure. I'll send out my spirit, past the shields here, in hopes he's looking for me."

"Will that work?"

"I don't know. He found me the last time we tried this, so I can only assume he's searching for me on a regular basis."

"And if it doesn't work?"

"Then we try again tomorrow night. It will work, it's just a matter of time. We've already proven when I put myself beyond the shields, he can find me."

"And what exactly are you going to do when you find him?" Cole asked.

Gabe was silent. Diana knew he wasn't happy about her plans, but he also knew she had to do it. They needed to find out still more information, and this was the best, if not the only way to do it.

"Like I said before, get him to talk."

"And you're still sure he will?"

"He has to. He needs to prove his superiority. He will not only want to, but will need to gloat."

Diana looked around at her new family. She appreciated their concern, but her mind was made up. This was her life they were talking about. Her future. She was not going to let Bale, or anyone else, control it.

After no further objections came up, Steve took control of the conversation. "Now that that is taken care of, what about the journal? Anything new?"

"Not really." Diana gestured with the journal in her hand. "So far pretty much of it is a repeat of what's written in English and what you've found out through other resources. There seems to be a lot of history about the coven, but nothing that helps us defeat Bale.

"There are one or two more references about a protector, but I haven't been able to translate those parts completely yet." It didn't matter to her what the translation said. She knew all she needed to know about her protector. She pulled his arm tighter around her, and spared a glance and a smile to him, reassuring him without words of her feelings.

"I'm sure there is plenty more there. Please continue trying," Steve begged Diana.

Diana nodded. "Not a problem. I want to know just as badly as you do."

Cole brought up the plans for the evening again. "You're sure you don't want us in here tonight?" He gestured to the sitting room.

"No, really." Diana shook her head. "We've already established I can get away from him if needed, and there wouldn't be anything you could do for us other than wake us up."

Steve asked, "You two have been practicing your telepathy, right?"

Diana blushed, just thinking about the last conversation they'd had telepathically.

"Yeah, we've had a couple conversations," Gabe answered, meeting Diana's eyes with a smile.

"Okay, then, you two should be able to find each other if one wakes up and the other doesn't."

"What do you mean, find each other?" Diana asked, perplexed.

Steve began explaining it to her. "Each person seems to transmit, if you will, on a different frequency. It seems that is why we don't pick up when others are speaking privately. You can choose to wideband to everyone, or just to one individual."

"Really? I've only ever talked to Gabe. How would I go about talking to a group of you?"

"Just think about it."

"Just think about it?"

Steve leaned forward. "I know, it sounds weird, and to be honest, we don't really know how it works, but when you want to project to others, all you have to do is think about it and something in your brain takes over and sends to everyone. Go ahead, try it."

*Like this?* Diana concentrated on responding to Steve telepathically.

"Not exactly," he responded aloud. "You were just thinking toward me. Try the whole group. Concentrate on telling the room something."

Diana looked around at the assembled faces. Try to concentrate on sending to the room. How did she do that?

"Just think about talking to us, Diana. Like you were going to say something out loud, but you keep your mouth closed." Gabe tried to give her some pointers.

*You guys are all nuts*, crossed Diana's mind when she realized what she was trying to do. Telepathically send to an entire group?

Seth burst out laughing. "And what makes you think we don't know that?"

Diana blinked in surprise. "You heard that?"

"We all did, Diana," Cole told her.

"Wow." She sat there stunned. Even though she had talked to Gabe telepathically, this seemed different. Her face suffused with color as she realized what she had thought to them. "Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to say that. I don't really think that."

“Don’t worry,” Cole assured her laughing. “We all know we’re a little off our rockers. Hell, it takes more than a little bit of insanity to do what we do.”

“Are you ready?” Gabe asked her a few hours later after everyone went their separate ways for the night.

Was she ready? Ready to face the man who’d killed her mother? Ready to pretend to believe his stories? Ready to put her sanity on the line, based on a book that she couldn’t even read in its entirety?

“I am scared to death. But I know I need to do this. So, I guess the answer to your question is, I’m ready as I’ll ever be.” After all, this was her idea; might as well get to it.



## Chapter Twenty-Two

"Tonight is it."

"Diana, it's only been three nights."

"Three nights and nothing. I don't know if it's the shields, or me, but it's not working here." She looked up at Gabe.

"It worked the first night."

"And it hasn't worked since. He's being more cautious or something. It's not gonna work here again."

"Give it a bit longer." His hand caressed her face.

"Tonight is the last night here. Either we get in contact with him, or we try something different." Diana was adamant.

Gabe didn't seem to want to give in, but he did with a nod. "Agreed. At least we've had some practice in keeping in communication while we're sleeping. You know that you won't be alone."

"Every little bit helps, trust me. I'm not sure I really want to do this."

"Then why are you?" Gabe had moved closer, his arms wrapping around her.

Diana relaxed against his body. "Because we have no other choice. And I still think it's the safest way to find out what we need to know."

"I just worry about you."

"I know. And that means everything to me."

\* \* \* \* \*

Diana willed herself to the room where she had last seen Bale. She didn't know what else to do. The last couple nights, she had varied between sending out a call for Bale and just letting herself drift, letting him come for her. That hadn't worked; maybe this would.

The cold, white room was exactly the same as before. She didn't expect it to be different; after all, it was just in her and Bale's imaginations. She walked around the room, touching things, changing some as she did before. She figured that Bale would eventually show. He was too aware of himself to not know when someone invaded his space, even if it was in a dream.

"Well, my dear, to what do I owe this surprise visit?"

Diana turned and watched as Bale entered the room. He was wearing all black, which seemed to be his usual. Practically gliding across the floor, he didn't make a sound. She was nearly overwhelmed by his sense of presence. The power he emanated, even in the dream world, was incredible.

"I wanted to talk to you."

"Talk? Why, the last time we met you told me to go to hell, and I threatened to kill you, if I recall correctly."

Diana tried to look uncertain. It wasn't hard, given the circumstances. "You did, but I've been thinking."

"Where is your protector?"

Startled, Diana looked around. Could he sense Gabe in her mind? Did he know what they were doing? No, she realized, he just knew that Gabe had a connection to her. He didn't know everything.

"Protector? Oh, you mean Gabe."

"Yes, my dear. That strapping young man you had with you before."

"He left me."

"Left you? But that is impossible." Bale looked almost shocked.

"Impossible or not, that's what happened. I told him about what happened here, in the second dream. I thought he would believe me, help me, especially after what happened the first time." Diana crossed her arms, holding herself tightly as though cold.

"He said he didn't believe me. That I made it all up and needed mental help."

Bale didn't respond for a moment. Diana stole a glance at him, he looked contemplative.

"So you still have yet to answer me, my dear. What exactly do you want from me?"

"I need information, and you're the only one who can give it to me." Diana breathed an inner sigh of relief when her voice didn't shake. She needed to convince him she wasn't afraid.

"What kind of information?"

"I want to know who I am, and why I see you in my dreams."

"Didn't your mother or aunt tell you these things? You seemed much more knowledgeable the last time we talked."

Diana didn't say anything.

"Come, come, my dear. I can't help you if you don't talk to me." Bale gestured to her to have a seat. "After our last encounter, I never expected you to come to me."

Diana didn't answer right away. She had planned this entire conversation, but didn't know if she could carry it off. She knew the way to him was through his ego. But she had to give him a believable reason for her to turn to him.

"I didn't know where else to turn."

Bale looked at Diana and leaned back, relaxing on the couch. Diana could practically feel the satisfaction coming off him in waves.

"Why don't you tell me what this is all about, my dear?"

Diana took a deep breath and started. "I found a journal that my mother had left for me. I can't read it all. There's a lot of water damage from a flood in my basement that happened a couple years ago. And parts of it are in some kind of code. But what I can read, tells me I have a choice to make. A choice of great good or great evil."

"The journal has been written in by many people over the years and is confusing, but basically, it says I have to right a wrong. I don't know what it's talking about. You're the only one who knows anything about my mother. My past. Hell." Diana managed a hollow laugh. "This might all be a figment of my imagination. You're probably no more real than Santa Claus, and I'm really a candidate for the insane asylum."

"Oh, my dear, trust me, I am very real." Bale moved, sitting forward, to lean on his knees. "I do know of this wrong that you speak of."

"You do? What does she mean?"

"I am the wrong you are to right."

"So that's why you wanted to kill me. Revenge."

"Revenge? No, my dear, not at all. Plain and simple, it was fear. Fear that you would finish off what your misguided ancestor had started."

Diana tried to project disbelief in her look as she shook her head and sat down out of his reach.

"Here, let me explain. A long time ago an ancestor of yours imprisoned me unfairly, and it has been left to the women in your family to fix that mistake. So far no one has done so, though.

"Nyssa and I were in love. At least I was in love. I thought she was, too. I was what I guess you would call the wise man or shaman of our village. I fell for your ancestress and asked her to share my life. She was intrigued with what I could do and asked for training.

Poor, besotted fool that I was, I taught her. I taught her too well, in fact. By the time I realized what she was up to, it was too late.”

“Too late?”

“She was more evil than I could have imagined and had grown more powerful than I expected. When I confronted her, she laughed at me. She told me her feelings for me had been a ruse and that she had used me for access to things she never would have learned elsewhere. And then she tried to kill me.”

“But she obviously failed.” Diana had never expected to hear this kind of a story. It made a sick sense, though. The best lies are those that stick close to the truth.

“No, she succeeded.”

“I don’t understand.”

“She succeeded in killing my physical body, but I had hidden strength and abilities she knew nothing about. She killed my body, but not my soul.”

“But you’re here, alive. Okay, this is a dream, but you still have form.”

“Only because of my followers.”

“Followers?”

“There have been many people over the years who have sought knowledge and power. I have been able to give that to them, and they have always paid the price asked of them willingly.”

“Price?”

“Yes, their bodies.”

“What do you mean their bodies?”

“Often times I have come across someone so evil he made me ill. I would promise him what he wanted, but all the while knew that I could not release that kind of evil into the world again.”

Diana shook her head. “I don’t understand. What would you do?”

“I would convince them that as part of the final passing on of knowledge, they needed to welcome me into their bodies so I could impart the rest of the knowledge, the innate stuff, to them directly.”

“And they agreed to this?”

“They have all been power hungry. Most would have done anything to get what they wanted.”

“And what happens then?”

“Once they let me in, I would take over. By the time they realized what I was going to do, it was too late. And that was one less evil sorcerer let loose on the world.”

“So, you, what ... hopped into someone else’s body? But you don’t look older than thirty-five.”

"Age is immaterial in this world. But I do change bodies every twenty years or so."

"Every twenty years? How long have you been doing this?"

"Ever since I was entrapped by your ancestor."

Diana didn't need to fake the surprise and disbelief she knew was on her face. "What happens if they don't allow you in?"

"I can still make the jump, but it is dangerous. The body lies unresponsive while we fight over control. He would appear to be in a coma or dead to any who came upon him."

"How long would you fight?"

"It varies. If he was weak, a matter of seconds, if strong, a few minutes, at the most, a few hours. At least in real time; in their minds it often seems to take much longer."

Diana realized that Bale was very convincing. If she hadn't read what she had and experienced his evil firsthand, she could find herself believing in his innocence. It was amazing how he could believe in his own power enough to think he was able to convince her of his goodness.

"How can I believe you? You had me chained to a wall and tried to kill Gabe the first time we met."

"I've explained that already, my dear. I was afraid you were going to kill me when you found me."

"But Gabe was an innocent."

"I thought he was another enslaved in your power. I thought you were like Nyssa. I knew the only way to free his soul was through ritual bloodletting. To cleanse him. I know it sounds barbaric to you, but trust me, I thought it was the only way."

"And the last time we met? You offered me all the power I would ever want. The ability to rule the world."

"A miscalculation on my part." Bale hung his head as if in shame. "I misread you, as I said. I thought if you were like Nyssa, that would be the ultimate temptation for you."

"But this is all impossible. You're telling me you're hundreds of years old and that magic is real." Diana got up and walked away from him. Her skin was crawling, she couldn't be near him any longer. She knew she needed to get out of this dream soon, before she lost it.

"Who is to say what is possible and what is not. After all, you have conversations with strange men in your dreams. Dreams you know to be true visions."

"Okay, let's say I believe you. What do I need to do to help you?"

"Meet me."

"Where?"

"Where are you now?"

“Um ...” Diana realized she didn’t want Bale knowing exactly where she was. She wasn’t ready for that. The foundation didn’t need that.

“You don’t want to tell me, is that it? After all I have told you, you still don’t trust me? I can only apologize so much for my mistakes.” Bale sounded forlorn and disappointed.

“I’m not sure I am ready yet. Give me a little while. You’re telling me I come from a line of evil sorcerers and that it’s up to me to save you. And if I don’t save you, you’ll have to kill me.”

Bale sighed. “I’ve waited this long, I imagine I can wait longer. How much time do you need?”

“A couple of nights?”

“Agreed. When you are ready, just come here. I will find you.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Diana woke up in Gabe’s arms. She loved the feel of being held by him, of being surrounded by his clean, manly scent. She felt her body relax into his. The comfort he provided made everything seem almost normal.

Gabe tightened his hold around her, squeezing gently. “You okay?” he asked softly.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Just glad to get out of there and away from him. He made me feel nauseous.” Squeezing closer to him for a moment, she sat up. “You get that?”

“Yup, all of it, I think. Damn, he’s one twisted bastard, isn’t he?”

“Yes, fortunately for us, though, he thinks he’s sane, and he’s convinced of his ability to seduce me. I imagine a psychiatrist would have a field day with him.”

“So, was it worth the risk?”

“I think so. We learned he’s crazier than we thought, but he can be manipulated. And we learned how he’s staying alive. Now we just need to figure out how to stop him.”

“Easier said than done.” Gabe shook his head at the thought.

Diana glanced over at the clock by the bed. “Six a.m. I, for one, could use a shower. And then some breakfast. I forget how much this stuff takes out of me.”

“Great,” Gabe said as he got out of bed. “We can head down after showering and tell the guys what you found out.”

Diana sat in the center of the maze, leaning against the pedestal with the poem engraved on it. There was something about this place that made her feel peaceful and safe. She had her journal open on her lap, trying to translate more of it. The more she read, the more she realized that the code here was similar to, but very different from what her mother had taught her. Leaving the journal open on her lap, she closed her eyes for a moment. The previous night had taken more out of her than she had realized, and she was exhausted.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Victorian House again. Diana started when she realized she was dreaming. She had never had one of these dreams during the day. What was happening? Following her previous route up the stairs, Diana found a woman in the same room as before. Only this wasn't the same woman, wasn't Maia. She looked a lot like her, but it definitely wasn't the same person. It came to Diana that this was Jaclyn, sister-in-law of Argus's founder and Maia's daughter.

In front of her was the journal that Diana now held in real life. Watching, Diana saw Jaclyn playing with something in her hand. She held it up, looking at it. A tiny pentagram with some sort of stone in the middle. "Mother, I have done as you asked. The note is placed in the center, and only she of the blood can open it. Hopefully all our sacrifices will not be in vain."

With that, the woman took the star, and pressed it against the journal. Diana realized there was something wrong with the catch. It was different. Jaclyn pushed and twisted, and the pentagram became part of the lock. In a brilliant example of workmanship, it was no longer recognizable as a separate piece of metal. There was no telling it apart.

"Hello?" Diana tried to communicate, but like her mother, Jaclyn didn't respond. Diana watched as she took the book and put it on the bookshelf behind her, patting it almost lovingly as she did so. Slowly, the room faded into nothingness.

Diana found herself awake, back in the maze. The book. Quickly Diana turned to the front cover. What had Jaclyn done to it? Diana tried to remember how she had twisted it to meld it together.

"Diana. Babe, I've been looking for you."

She barely heard Gabe as he approached her, her concentration wholly on what she was doing.

"Babe?"

"Oh, Gabe. I had another dream. A vision."

Gabe squatted down beside her. "What happened? Was it Bale?"

Diana rapidly shook her head. "No, no. I think it was Jaclyn. She said that she had fulfilled her mother's wishes, and that the one of the blood would be able to find the note in the center." Diana pushed herself to a standing position. "But the center of what?"

Gabe followed her up. "What else did she say? What did she do?"

"She had a pentagram, a small one that she somehow melded with the clasp on the book. She twisted, and ..." Diana was working on the latch as she was talking. Suddenly, she felt something loosen and fall into her hands.

"This is what she had. But what is it? Why is it so important? And center of what?" Diana looked up again. Turning her head around. Her head moved back to the podium. She

had been leaning against it when she fell asleep with the book in her hands. Quickly she walked around to the side with the poem. There it was.

"Diana, what are you doing?"

"She said the one of the blood could open it." As Diana was speaking, she reached down and placed the book on the ground. "Look there." She pointed to a small star at the bottom of the poem.

"It's just an engraving."

"Is it?" she asked with a smile as she placed the small pendant in the space made for it. Pushing and twisting, she felt it give, and the sound of grating stone struck her ears.

"What on earth is that?" Gabe asked, stepping back in surprise as he watched a small door the size of a drawer open in the podium.

"That is a message for us," Diana whispered as she reached inside to grab the note that had waited over a hundred years.

Hands shaking, Diana opened it and began to read.

*Dear Sister,*

*If you find this, it means all our actions were not in vain. It is time for our debt to come to an end. We did the only thing we could, the only way we knew that Bale could be destroyed. It is up to you now.*

*I have the gift of prophecy as my mother and many of our ancestors have had before us. It is why we came to America, why we left our coven. We knew that only in the New World, in a land as yet untamed, could we hope to sow the seeds to destroy him.*

*I have seen the future, and I know what must be done. I have no choice, and I'm sorry to say, neither do you.*

*By now you have met the man destined for you. He is your match, perfect for you in every way. He is not only your Protector, but your soul mate, bound to you throughout history. He will guard you with his very life. Trust your heart, it will not lie.*

*If you do not defeat this evil, the consequences will be grave for the world. He must not be free again, despite the cost of his destruction. There is no other option.*

*You must return to the City of Emeralds and meet your fate. Guard each other well, for remember, only together can you hope to succeed.*

*Bright Blessings,*

*Jaclyn*

"City of Emeralds? The Wizard of Oz?" Gabe asked, obviously confused.

"No, Seattle is the Emerald City."

"But was it called that in the eighteen hundreds?"



"It doesn't matter. If she knew about us, she knew about Seattle. I need to go home."

\* \* \* \* \*

"I need to be at the house alone."

"No." Gabe didn't hesitate to disagree.

"Yes."

"I said no."

"There's no choice." Diana turned and looked at Gabe. "If he has the place watched, he'll know I'm not alone. He'll just drag you back into the dream with me."

"I am not letting you go in alone, Diana, and that's final."

Diana crossed her arms and glared at Gabe in frustration. She opened her mouth to tell Gabe exactly what she thought of his high-handed attitude and where he could put it, when Cole interrupted.

"He's right, Diana." And before Gabe could say anything, Cole continued, "and so is Diana, Gabe. Diana, you can't go in alone. Gabe, if Bale knows you're with her, he will pull you in and use you as a hostage."

"So then what do we do?"

"I'm not sure. If you're sure that you need to go back home ..." Cole waited for Diana's nod. "Then you need to take Gabe with you. If Bale wants you, and you don't think he wants you just in the dream, then he's going to have to take you physically."

"You'll need protection. And yes, I know you're perfectly capable of taking care of yourself, but we know that he's not working alone. He's sure to bring more than just the two of you can handle."

"If Gabe's inside the house, then we can have one additional man situated outside at all times. We can work in shifts. Bale will never know we're there."

"Are you sure about that?" Diana asked.

"Diana, this is what we do," Gabe assured her. "You asked me to trust in your strengths, you need to do the same for me." He grasped her hands tightly. "I need to be sure that you're safe, babe."

He was right. He was trying for her; she needed to do at least that for him. Diana nodded her head. "Okay. It's a deal. We go back, and you guys handle the surveillance. But what do I do about him in the meantime?"

"What do you mean?"

"If I don't search him out, he'll come looking for me."

"All the more reason why we need to get going now. When he does come, we'll be ready."

## Chapter Twenty-Three

“Yes, Kelly, I know.” Diana stopped and listened to her agent ramble on about the importance of deadlines. Finally, she interrupted, “Kelly, stop. That’s why I came back home. I already called the delivery service. Someone should be here any minute. You’ll have it by start of business tomorrow.”

Diana continued to listen to her friend and agent as she stopped at the top of the stairs. Looking back, she made sure the bedroom door was closed so she wouldn’t disturb Gabe. They hadn’t gotten much sleep last night she remembered with a grin. Let the man sleep.

“I didn’t shut my cell phone off, it just didn’t work where I was. Yes, I’m sorry, no, I won’t do it again, and yes, I will be within reach from now on.” Diana shook her head at her friend, even though she couldn’t see her. Over the years their relationship had grown into the closest thing Diana had to a true friend. She knew Kelly must have been near frantic with worry.

Diana was brought back to the present when the doorbell rang. Looking through the window from the top of the stairs, she could see a man in a brown uniform. “Listen, Kell, gotta go. I think they’re here. Let me know when you get it, okay? I’ll catch you later.”

Diana walked down the stairs, closing her cell phone and slipping it into the pocket of her sweater as she answered the door with a smile, package in hand.

“Hi --” she started to say, but was interrupted when the man blew some sort of dust in her face. Diana had just enough time to realize there wasn’t a delivery truck in the street and then lost consciousness.

\* \* \* \* \*

Gabe reached over for Diana as he woke up. He liked waking up beside her, feeling her body first thing in the morning. He realized he wasn’t finding anything and remembered her

saying she would be calling her agent early this morning. She probably hadn't wanted to wake him. Smiling, he thought of her waiting downstairs for him.

He jumped into the shower before getting dressed. Maybe they could go out for a late breakfast, although as he glanced at the clock, he realized it was still early.

Walking out of the room, he called for Diana, but didn't get a response. *She must be in the kitchen making tea or coffee.* As he walked toward the stairs he noticed the front door. It was ajar. Did she go outside for something? Gabe reached for his Glock and slowly walked down the stairs listening for sounds deep in the house. His worry increased the farther down the stairs he got. There wasn't anyone in the living room, and he couldn't hear anyone farther back. Mental probes netted him nothing.

He slowly approached the door and pushed it open. On the porch he saw the package Diana had made up the night before. Looking around, he saw the van that Seth was supposed to be in. He sent out a call, but got no response.

Moving quickly back into the house, he made a fast search. Nothing. Hiding his gun against his leg, he went outside and walked toward the van. No one acknowledged his approach. Shit. What was going on?

As he moved closer, he saw someone slumped over the front seat. He ran the rest of the way. The window was open a crack, and Gabe tried the door. Locked.

He rapped on the window with the butt of his gun. "Seth! Wake up!" Gabe saw no blood. So what the hell had happened?

Seth moaned and started to move slowly. His eyes opened, and he jumped when he saw Gabe.

"Oh, shit, what happened?" Seth looked worried as he quickly opened the door and got out.

"What do you mean what happened? You were supposed to keep an eye on the house," Gabe snapped at his lieutenant.

Seth thought for a minute. "God, Gabe, I'm sorry. I had the window open just a crack for ventilation. I didn't want to run the engine all night. Last thing I remember is some woman walking up beside the van with a baby carriage, her looking at me, and then blowing a kiss."

"She blew you a kiss?" Gabe was astounded at what he was hearing.

"Well, yeah, kind of. But her hand was right at the window, and then there was -- dammit! There was some kind of powder. She blew it at me, and that's the last thing I remember." Seth looked around. "Where's Diana?"

"I don't know." Gabe ran his hand through his hair in frustration. "She got out of bed extra early this morning, and when I got out of the shower she was gone."

Gabe and Seth quickly went back into the house. Gabe ran upstairs to get his cell phone while Seth stopped at the front door to pick up the package on the porch.

Gabe came down the stairs just then, talking into his phone. "No, don't contact the locals yet. I know we need all the help we can get if we want to find her immediately, but they won't take the proper precautions in dealing with Bale and his followers. Okay, I'll wait to hear from you." Shutting his phone, he turned to Seth.

"Okay let's go over this again."

"It looks like they got her with the same stuff they did me." Seth pointed out the light coating of black dust on the package, keeping it away from his face so he didn't breathe it in again. Carefully they collected the powder into a small plastic bag.

Gabe talked while they worked. "This is the package Diana prepared last night for her agent. She must have thought whoever was at the door was here to pick it up. She never would have opened the door for a stranger with everything that's going on.

"This is just fucking wonderful. We don't know what they were driving, how many there were, or what direction they were going. Dammit!" Gabe's anger exploded as he punched the nearest wall.

"You know she's gonna give you hell for that when she sees it." Seth nodded to the gaping hole.

"What?" Gabe snapped. His eyes tracked to where Seth indicated. He almost snapped again when he caught the humor. He snickered. "She is gonna hit the roof. Think I can hide it?"

"She's likely to notice a picture of dogs playing poker hanging there, bud."

Gabe smiled, appreciating Seth's attempt at levity, but the worry never left his eyes.

\* \* \* \* \*

Diana awoke, finding herself lying on a cot in a small empty room. It took her a moment to realize where she was and why she was there.

*Bale!* she thought. Why would he take her now? He'd promised her time.

"Get real, Diana. Bad guys aren't supposed to keep their word. If they did, they wouldn't be bad." She laughed at herself. Hell, she hadn't been planning on keeping her word, either.

Diana appraised her situation. She checked her pockets first. Nope, cell phone was gone. It was a bit much to hope for that they hadn't taken it, anyway.

She looked around to find that she was in a small room without any windows. It looked like a large closet of some type. A pair of recessed lighting fixtures were in the ceiling and holes in the wall where it looked like screws had been removed.

What would someone be hanging on the walls of a closet? Shelves. If they had removed the shelves, he had prepared for this. Her eyes went to the door. Closet doors did not tend to be on the strong side.

"Hello?" Diana walked up to the door, yelling to see if anyone was in hearing distance. If they had locked her in and then left her, she might still be able to get out while they were gone. She tried the doorknob, and, as expected, found it locked. "Hello?" she repeated, knocking on the door.

*That's not right*, she thought at the sound of her knock. Knocking again, she realized Bale really had prepared for her. The door wasn't the standard hollow core door of a closet. This one was solid. Solid hardwood from the feel of it. Which meant kicking through it wouldn't be as easy as she'd hoped. Damn.

The door proving more difficult than expected, Diana turned her attention to the walls. Sheetrock. Sturdy, but breakable.

Before she could think about what to use to start tearing into them, she heard a lock on the door pull back. Quickly she went over the options open to her. Attack or wait? Looking around she saw nothing to use as a weapon. She decided to wait and see what was going on.

Diana backed away from the door, giving herself room to maneuver if necessary. A few seconds later the door opened, and the man from her front porch walked in.

"Who are you?" Diana demanded. "What do you want?"

"My dear, don't you recognize me?" The man shook his head in apparent dismay.

"I've never seen you before in my life. At least not before this morning."

The man made a move as though wounded in the chest. "My dear, how could you forget so quickly?"

Diana shook her head. What was going on? His phrasing sound like ... "You aren't Bale. You don't look anything like him."

"But of course, I am. Oooh, I see the problem. My dream self that you have seen is the true me. What my original body looked like. This is just my shell." He looked down at himself. "Although I'm not displeased at the thought that it will become my permanent body. It's not bad at all."

"You promised me time," Diana interjected quickly. "Why have you brought me here?"

"Yes, I did. But you promised you would actually think about it. Now, dear, we both know that was a lie."

"What do you mean?"

"You told me your protector had left you. That you didn't know anything about your history. Those were lies, weren't they?"

"What are you talking about?" Diana's mind raced. How did he know all that? Even if he had seen Gabe with her, he couldn't know how much she knew.

"I know about the Argus Foundation. I know all about their researchers and resources. I am sure you know more about me than I do," he added with a derisive grin.

"It is fitting, really, that your protector is part of their organization. Gabriel, isn't it? Ah, such a noble name. One of its meanings is strength. Too bad he won't be here to help you."

Bale shook his head. "But as I was saying about this Foundation of yours. Jaclyn always did have good foresight. So I guess it is not only fitting, but fated. Only she would plan for nearly two hundred years in the future."

"What are you going to do with me?"

"Well, sacrifice you, of course. I should have known no one of Nyssa's line would turn, but the possible benefits outweighed the risks. There was no way I could pass the opportunity up. But once I learned where you were, that all changed."

"Learned -- but how?"

"Oh, my dear, I have ways. Remember I am a sorcerer, even if my powers are diminished. I have abilities you wouldn't dream of."

"Now since we have established that you're not willing to be my consort, I thought I would prepare you for what will be happening tonight." He peered at her. "No, don't think about trying to attack me and run away. There are men outside this door and cameras throughout the house. There is nowhere you can go that you will not be seen."

"Prepare me how?"

Bale laughed at her. "Oh, dear, nothing silly. I am sure if I asked you to put on a nice flowing, virginal white gown you wouldn't. And anyway, all that is just part of Hollywood and their penchant for the overdramatic. You will be fine just the way you are. That's not the kind of preparation I was talking about."

Diana narrowed her eyes in understanding. "You want my fear."

"Of course, I do, dear. The amount of power in fear alone is incredible. I want you to think about what I am going to do to you, and the fact that no one -- not even your precious Gabe -- will be able to save you."

"You won't succeed." Diana didn't want him to know how scared she really was.

"Once again, my dear, you're wrong. We are in the middle of nowhere. No one knows that this shell was ever involved in the occult. He hid his leanings from his family, afraid they would cut the purse strings."

"You can scream all you want, and no one will ever hear you." Bale made as though to leave and then turned around. "Oh, and try to get out if you want. I enjoy a good chase." He left with an evil smile.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Okay, what do we have on Bale? On any of his past lives? Anything?" Gabe spoke into Diana's speakerphone to Steve in Wisconsin.

"I'm sorry, Gabe," Steve's tinny voice came across the line. "But we don't have much on him. No one ever knew to look for him."

"This makes no sense, given the connection that Argus's founders have to him."

"I've given that some thought, too. I'm sure that Jaclyn knew that it wouldn't do any good to keep tabs on him. That only when the time was right would we know about him, as we wouldn't be able to defeat him without one of her line."

"Well, dammit. That doesn't help us at all."

"I'm running a check on all well-to-do people associated with the occult in your area. If they're into power-grabbing and the like, the odds are they have hit our radar at one point or another. Well-to-do because we know that Bale likes to live in comfort."

"Check on recent family deaths, too. Instances where family members disappeared and left one person to inherit everything. Bale has never had a problem killing to get what he wants."

"Good point. I'll let you know if I find anything."

"Okay, call my cell if you have anything. Shit!" Gabe yelled at the speaker, causing Seth to jump. "Cell phone! Her cell! Where is it?"

Seth looked at Gabe questioningly.

"Her cell phone. She uses it for all business-related calls. If she called her agent this morning, she would have used the cell. If it's not here, she has it with her."

Steve caught on. "Let me do a GPS search for it, while you guys look for it there. Do you know her number?"

"No, dammit, or I'd call it myself. It wasn't on the business card she gave me in Boston."

"Don't worry, I can find it. I'll call you back as soon as I have anything."

"Any suggestions?" Seth looked at Gabe after they hung up with Steve.

"She usually has it in her pants pocket or laptop case. If it's not in her case, she has it on her."

Seth and Gabe searched for the briefcase. Gabe ran upstairs as Seth searched down.

"Found the case!" Seth yelled upstairs as he carried it into the living room where Gabe met him.

Seth took everything out of the case. "Nope. She must have it with her."

"Let's hope."

Cole and Chase arrived at the house. They had already been called by Seth earlier, and the guys quickly caught them up on what little they knew.

Gabe's cell phone rang. "It's Steve," he said upon looking at the caller ID. "Give me some good news, buddy."

"We've got her. The signal has stopped moving. It's coming from about fifty miles northeast of Seattle. Ian and the rest of the crew should be there in about five hours with a full load of equipment."

"Give me the exact location; I'm not waiting for them."

"Gabe, stop and think. I'm sure Diana is fine. Bale is old school; he'll want everything to be perfect. He'll most likely wait for tonight. It's a new moon, the perfect time for a sacrifice. He won't want to waste the chance. We don't know how many people he has with him, you'll need the backup."

"Dammit!" Gabe knew Steve was right. "All right. Give me the info you have, and we'll wait for the team."

\* \* \* \* \*

Less than six hours later the team was assembled in Diana's living room preparing their plan of attack.

"Okay, according to Steve she's being held at an estate northeast of Seattle. It's pretty big, probably around seventy-five acres." Ian, another member of Gabe's team, pointed out the location on the map they had spread out in front of them.

"Do we know for sure she's there?" Cole asked for everyone.

"No, but her cell phone is. And the owner fits the profile you worked up."

"We figured, given the nature of the take-over and Bale's personality, he'd only be jumping into bodies of young, rich males. It made sense that he'd try to eliminate anyone who would make trouble for him, either financially or personally," Gabe informed filled Ian and the rest of his team in on their logic.

"Right. According to Steve, the man who owns this estate is thirty years old, and his parents and sister died in a freak car accident about six months ago. They investigated, but no cause was ever found." Ian pointed to a photo, laying on the table, of a youngish, good-looking man amongst satellite photos of a large compound.

"He has since cut all communication with all family and friends, remaining isolated on the estate. Apparently he's undergone a complete behavioral change and has members of a cult living on the grounds.

"The ATF has had their eyes on this group for a while. It recently relocated from the Chicago area."

Gabe nodded as Ian finished his report. "Everything seems to fit. Since we aren't one hundred percent sure that Diana is there, we're going in early. We should get there just after sunset, plenty of time to scope out the grounds and see what's going on."

"Where does Steve think that Bale will be likely to conduct this ritual?" Chase looked up from their maps.



"Most likely outside. Unfortunately, that gives us quite a bit of ground to cover before midnight. Fortunately, Steve is convinced the area is likely close to the house, so we should be able to narrow our search a bit. We go in with full infrared, heat sensors, the works."

"Let's move out."

\* \* \* \* \*

"I love a good chase. Why does he always have to be so melodramatic? Good God, I think he gets all his dialogue from old horror flicks." Diana sat on the cot, leaning against the wall. She decided that it was pointless to waste her energy trying to escape, she was sure that Bale had everything covered, and she heard voices out in the hallway often enough to let her know she wouldn't get very far, even if she did claw her way out of the room.

"Think, Diana, think. What can you do?"

Diana realized there was nothing she could do. She knew that Gabe would realize what happened as soon as he woke. Hell, Seth had been right outside her house; he'd probably followed her here. Wherever here was. She had no idea what time it was or how long she'd been out. She only knew she had to escape. And the best time would be when they came to get her.

At that thought, she heard the door unlock, and a woman stepped in with a tray of food.

"I was told to bring this to you." The woman was beautiful, but unsmiling, and gave Diana a look of hatred.

"Thank you, but I'm not hungry," Diana responded.

"Don't go all prissy miss nice on me. The master said you needed to eat to keep up your strength." As the woman bent down, Diana saw a gun in the small of her back. Somehow she thought the woman probably knew how to use it.

"I hardly think it's going to be an issue if I miss one meal."

"I agree, but he wants you to eat. He even told me I had to taste it in front of you if you were afraid it was drugged." The woman sneered at Diana. "Although why you would think something that stupid is beyond me."

"Well, I am his prisoner, aren't I? It wouldn't make much sense for me to trust him."

"You're only his prisoner because you're too stupid to accept what he offered. Only a fool would reject him and what he is offering."

"And what is that?"

"A chance to rule the world by his side." The woman looked enraptured by the thought.

"And he has offered you this?"

"No, only because he's fixated on you. Once you're gone, he will turn to me."

*Good God, are they all this bad? Do they sit around watching old movies thinking, 'Oooh, a line for me to use'?* Diana found it ridiculous. If she didn't have the evidence to the contrary, she would think it was a joke. This woman was as crazy as Bale.

"If you think that, then help me to escape."

"You'd like that, wouldn't you? I'm not that stupid. He would only chase after you and then punish me for not believing in him. Anyway, after midnight tonight, you'll cease being an issue. He will be mine."

With that melodramatic statement, the woman left the closet, slamming the door behind her.

Diana looked at the food. A plate with a tuna sandwich and potato salad, along with a handful of potato chips lay on the tray. Apparently healthy eating wasn't their strong suit. At least there was an unopened can of soda to go with it. Diana wiped off the top, mindful of what the woman had implied, and opened it. It might be the only thing she had today. She needed to conserve her strength and decide what to do.

When they came for her, she was ready. There was no way she was going to let them take her like a lamb to slaughter. She had managed to get one of the longer screws out of the cot. It wasn't a great weapon, but sharper than her nails. If they didn't try to put chains on her, she would wait 'til they got outside.

The door opened slowly, and a man entered with a gun. Behind him were two others, one with a shotgun. The other had a gun in his pants and was holding handcuffs. Apparently they weren't taking any chances.

The third man threw the cuffs to Diana. "Put these on," he commanded her gruffly.

"And if I refuse?"

He pulled a telescoping baton out of his back pocket, extending it to its full length. "Bale said we couldn't kill you. He didn't say anything about not hurting you."

*Damn.* She was hoping they would count on her fear and the fact she was a woman. Bale really had done his homework. Standing up, she slowly put the cuffs on. Once completed, thug number three came over and grabbed her wrists.

"There." He said as he tightened them almost painfully with a cruel grin. "That wasn't so bad, was it?"

Diana debated striking out, but knew she had no chance with the other two blocking the door. She would just have to wait.

They led her out the door into a sumptuously decorated bedroom. The gold and cream bespoke elegance and money, the curtains thick enough that she was unable to tell if it was light or dark outside. There was no time allotted for sightseeing as they forced her through the room into the hallway beyond.

The question of time was answered for her almost as soon as they walked into the hallway. She could see a window at the end which showed the dark of night, and she heard a

clock. Unless she counted wrong, it was ten o'clock. Two hours until Bale tried to sacrifice her.

Would doing something drastic like throwing herself down the stairs help? No, she realized, because if she lived, he would just have her dragged to wherever the ceremony was being held, and if she died, his curse would still be broken.

Did Gabe have any idea where she was? Damn, *she* still didn't know where she was.

*Gabe?* Diana tried to send a mental call to him, but received no response. Where was he?

Walking outside, Diana saw the perfect chance. The property was surrounded by dense trees. If they were going to walk into the woods, she could try to make a getaway there. Even with her hands cuffed, she knew she could move around the woods better than most people. She had grown up around here, and it had been part of her defensive training.

They started heading in the direction she had hoped they would. Apparently, the men thought they had talked the fight out of her. Only one of them held on to her, by her right arm. The others were split up, one in front and one in back. *Just twenty feet more*, she told herself, then she would make a move.

Diana slowed her steps a little, forcing the man holding her to slow down, too, creating a larger gap between them and the man in front. Just as they reached the edge of the woods, Diana swung her body around with all her strength. Careening into the man holding her, she forced him back into the one behind them. Startled, he let go as he felt himself knock into the other and lose his balance.

Diana didn't stop. Immediately she raced toward the underbrush. If she could get there, she knew she could evade them for a while, if not manage an outright escape.

The second Diana thought she was going to make it, she felt a prick on her skin. She had just enough time to register what it was before feeling thousands of electronic volts running through her system, knocking her down as she lost all ability to control her muscles.

Diana was aware of someone walking up to her. "Where you going, baby?" The bastard with the cuffs leaned over her, grinning into her face. "You ain't leaving us before the party starts."

## Chapter Twenty-Four

*Good lord, Diana thought, just get it over with. How many dark gods can you invoke?* She was lying on a stone slab, much like the one to which Bale had chained Gabe, in her dream. Her hands and feet were tied to each corner, and Bale had had her redressed in a long red robe. Apparently, he'd decided that her street clothes just weren't good enough. *At least it isn't virginal white.*

She watched as the group of robed participants chanted and moaned their way through yet one more invocation of a dark lord. She wanted to say something to them, point out how foolish they looked, but Bale had gagged her after the first few times she'd mocked him.

Despite her personal danger, Diana found herself fascinated by the pageantry going on around her. Although she had ridiculed Bale and accused him of trying out for a B movie, she was amazed to be witness to a ritual that no one had seen for hundreds of years. She had some pagan friends and had been to a few rituals, but Bale went well beyond anything she had ever seen. It seemed that maybe those overblown movies had gotten something right. She wondered if perhaps it was more ornate as she was the last of her line, or if he had done this exact ritual every time he killed one of her family. Including her mother.

Diana shook her head. No. This wasn't the time to think of that. She needed to concentrate on the here and now. On getting herself out of this somehow. She tried once again to send out a mental call to Gabe, but seemed to hit a brick wall.

The circle. Bale and his group had invoked a circle of protection before they got started. It must stop psychic projections. Diana watched carefully. It might stop psychic ability, but it looked like it didn't stop actual physical objects, as she saw one of the participants bend down and throw a rock that he had just stepped on.

Everyone was dressed in silk or cotton robes, under which they were completely naked. She had a feeling there was more than one reason those robes were easily removed.

She recognized many of the gods' names. Some of them were not representations of darkness so much as sexual energy. The odds were Bale's followers were likely to celebrate her death in numerous ways.

Once again something Hollywood got right. The more she thought about it, though, she came to realize that Bale was probably putting on a show for his followers. They would be expecting all this fanfare. How much was really required of him to perform his ritual? After all, not only had it not been performed in hundreds of years, but no one had any accurate records of exactly what did happen at these rituals. Catholic priests' assumptions and tales were not known for their unbiased accuracy in the reporting of the history of other religions.

Diana wondered what time it was. If Bale were going to sacrifice her under the new moon, at the stroke of midnight, it had to be getting close. After being shot with the Taser, the goon who shot her had punched her on the jaw, knocking her out. She had no idea how long she had been out; she only knew when she awoke she had been wearing this robe and was already tied to the altar. Her sharp scrap of metal was long gone. Either dropped when she was shot or taken when they changed her clothes.

Diana knew she had to concentrate on getting out of her situation. She realized that focusing on those surrounding her was just a stalling tactic of her mind. Struggling against the ropes hadn't done any good up until now, and she was out of options. The thought that she was about to die wasn't far from the front of her mind.

Bale finally seemed to be done orating. He walked toward Diana and leaned over. "Are you ready to be quiet?" he asked her as he started to untie the gag from her mouth. "Although, to be honest, it doesn't matter if you are or aren't. You really don't have much time left."

"You won't win." Diana glared at him coldly.

"Oh, are you going to tell me that your precious man is going to protect you? I'm sorry, my dear, but none of your ancestors ever had any luck stopping me, why do you think you will?"

"Even if you kill me, you lose. You said yourself, you will never be what you were before."

"That is true. But I have come to realize that living in this day and age almost anything is possible. I don't need the powers I had before when I have the power of money and people who will eagerly do whatever I want. I think I am going to enjoy this very much. The extra powers I will get with your death will just further assure my dominance."

"Gabe will never rest until he finds and kills you."

Bale laughed in Diana's face. "My dear, he and his precious foundation are next on the list. Soon there will be no Argus Foundation left to hunt me down. I will make sure they are gone before I reveal my hand. Remember, I have much more experience at this than anyone there."

He turned to walk away, still laughing.

"Bale, give it up!" someone shouted from the bushes. "You're surrounded!"

Bale swung back toward Diana. "This will not happen!" he screamed at her, and started to bring the knife down quickly.

A shot rang out, and blood appeared on his chest. A shocked look came across his face, as though to say, "How?" Slowly he fell to the ground.

Apparently Bale's supporters were either very stubborn or very stupid, because most of them dove for weapons. The bastard who had hit Diana with the stun gun, retrieved the knife from Bale's hand and went after her. He raised his arm, ready to finish the job his master had started. Before he could even start a downward motion, he was jumped from behind and taken out.

The next thing she saw, Gabe was standing beside her, knife in hand, cutting her bonds.

"Well, it's about time you got here. What took you so long?"

"Sorry, Babe, the boys and I decided to stop off for a beer before we came to rescue you."

"Did you bring me any?"

As soon as Gabe was done with the ropes, they reached to each other to hold on tight.

"I knew you would come. How did you find me?"

"Your cell phone."

"But I don't have it with me."

"GPS tracking is a wonderful thing."

Gabe helped Diana off the slab and held her tight against him for a moment. The rest of the team had successfully subdued the participants, and they were being handcuffed.

"What's going to happen to them?"

"Well, they'll probably get charged with accessory to murder."

"You're going to report this to the local authorities?"

"It's the only thing we can do. We aren't equipped to prosecute humans. And nothing happened that can't be explained away by cult behavior." As Gabe was talking, he slowly let go of Diana and moved toward Bale. "I'm only sorry that I didn't get a chance to beat this one to a bloody pulp before shooting him."

"No, Gabe, don't!" Diana shouted as he reached down to check for Bale's pulse.

Bale was quicker. Gabe turned around to look at Diana. Bale rose up, grabbed Gabe, and threw Diana a look of satisfaction right before both of them collapsed.

Cole turned quickly at Diana's yell, in time to see Gabe and Bale both go unconscious.

"What happened?" he asked quickly as he ran to Gabe's side where Diana was already kneeling.

"Bale took him."

"What do you mean, took him?"

"Bale jumped bodies. He's inside Gabe right now fighting for control of his body."

"What? How is that possible?" Cole shook his head as soon as the words were out of his mouth. "Never mind. What can we do?"

"Shit! Shit! He's in his mind. Gabe has to fight him."

"Well, hell, we know he'll do that, but will he win? Bale has been doing this a long time."

"No, he can't win. I need to help him"

"How?"

"I need to go in after them."

"How the hell are you gonna do that?"

"I don't know, but I need to try."

"What do you need?"

"Let me lie down beside him, touching him." Diana settled herself and got ready to try something she didn't even know was possible. Taking a few deep breaths, centering herself, she went *in* and then sent herself *out*.

Floating. She was floating in nothing. She needed a direction. Where would he have taken Gabe? The dungeon. No sooner had she thought it, than she found herself there.

Where the hell were they? He had to have taken Gabe here. This was his seat of power. She opened the door and started up the stairs. Hearing noises of fighting, she ran as fast as she could.

She found the two men fighting in the main room. The same room that Bale had attacked her in. Although she knew Gabe was stronger and trained, Bale was winning. Between his magic and his own experience, he had managed to get Gabe to the ground. Bale had Gabe around the neck in a chokehold, strangling the life out of him. She saw Gabe start to lose consciousness as she watched.

"No!" she screamed as she dove for Bale.

He was slow to react, and she managed to knock him off Gabe. A quick glance assured her Gabe was still breathing, and then all her attention was on Bale.

"You can't have him." She glared at Bale with all the hatred her body contained. "You took my mother, my father, and everyone who has ever meant anything to me or the women in my family. You can't have him!" She watched him crouch beside the fireplace. He wasn't done, she knew that, but neither was she.

"I will win. I told you that before. I will not lose."

"You have no choice. You've already lost. The body you were in is dying, and you can't have Gabe's."

"You think you can stop me? You're nothing compared to some of the other women in your line, and I beat them. What makes you think I can't beat you?"

"They didn't have the reason to survive that I do. I know that I'm the last, that I am the only one that can defeat you. I have no choice but to win."

Bale laughed. "Silly child. It is you who has already lost." With that, he swung out his right hand, and a ball of flame came shooting at Diana. Without thinking, her hand went up and deflected it harmlessly against the wall.

"What --? How did you do that? You have no magic!"

"Try me." She grinned maliciously.

Bale glared at her and with a flick of his wrist equipped himself with a large sword. Just as quickly, Diana held a Bo staff in her hand.

"How can you do this?"

"This is the dream world. If you have the knowledge and practice, you can do almost anything here. And thanks to Gabe, I have both."

Bale approached her, putting himself in attack mode. "You have only known him a short while. How could he have taught you anything?"

Diana smiled in response. "My ancestors saw to it that I was prepared for this fight. I have learned more in the last eight years because of him than you can ever hope to learn. He's why I know what I need to defeat you."

"And what is that?"

"The fact that you're not real. You have no power in this world without an anchor. Your anchor is dying in the real world. When it's gone, so are you."

Diana caught Bale's glance at Gabe, who was stirring back to consciousness. "Oh, no," she laughed at him. "You're not getting near him. I'll stop you if it's the last thing I do."

"You do know if you die in this world, you die in real life, don't you?" Bale asked Diana quietly.

"So be it. But I don't have to kill you. I just have to hold you off Gabe until your physical body dies."

Bale smiled evilly and attacked.

Diana knew that in the long run, a sword would almost always win against a Bo staff, but there was a trick to bettering those odds, and it was more than just avoiding the sharp side of the blade. She knew that Bale would underestimate her as he had all along. And that might be just enough to save her and Gabe's lives.



Diana had never been more grateful for her mother's insistence that she learn how to defend herself, her father's resolve that she continue it, and her teachers' persistence in relaying their knowledge to her over the years.

Diana fought like she had never fought before. She fought for Gabe. She fought for her mother, and she fought for herself. For the girl who lost her parents because of a chain of events that was put into play long before she had ever been born. For the girl who grew up alone and for the woman she had become.

Bale was weakening, Diana could see it. More of her strikes were hitting him. He was less on the offensive and more defensive. His attacks were slower, his movements less coordinated.

With one final strike, she knocked the sword out of his hand and swept his legs out from under him. He fell to his knees, breathing heavily.

"This isn't the way it was supposed to be." His voice was faint, that of an old man breathing his last.

"It's the only way it could be." Diana looked at him coldly. Slowly he grew even weaker, bit by bit getting fainter until gradually he faded into nothingness.

Reaching down, Diana went to help the now-conscious Gabe to his feet.

"I knew you would come for me. But what took you so long?"

"The boys and I debated letting you do it yourself, but we decided you probably needed a woman's help."

"You were right. You did it," he said with a smile, leaning on her.

"How much did you see?"

"All of it. I'm proud of you."

Diana smiled back at him. "I think it's time to go home."

"I definitely agree."

## Epilogue

*For nearly five hundred years we've paid the price for the choice one woman made when following her heart. Despite that, my advice to you, reader, is to always follow your heart. Remember, there is no force as powerful as the love between two people. With that power there is no feat that cannot be accomplished, and no destiny that cannot be fulfilled.*

Diana lay her pen down beside her journal and looked up at the man who had become more to her than she ever could have imagined. He was glaring in the mirror at his reflection while fixing his tie. Smiling, she got up and went over to him.

"You look fine," she assured him in a low voice, moving his hands away from the tie he was crumpling beyond recognition.

"I just want to look the best I can for you."

"You always look good to me."

"I don't want to embarrass you."

"Never in a million years. I love you as you are, and whether you're wearing a suit or camo, I will always want you."

"I've never been to a book release party before. Do I look okay?"

"You're gorgeous as always."

"Do you know what an incredible woman you are?" Gabe's arms went around Diana, holding her close to him.

"No, it's not me. It's us."

"Are you sure you want to make the announcement tonight?"

"Why? Are you changing your mind?"

"Never." His arms tightened in response.

Diana looked at the diamond on her finger. Had she changed her mind? No.

“It’s time that I say goodbye to my Knights. Lebretti is finding his true love in the next book, and even though he’ll still be fighting, it’s time to move on to a new character.

“As to the other announcement, well, that’s just for personal pleasure. I want everyone to know that you’re soon to be Mr. Gabe Temis.”

Gabe laughed at his fiancée. “How about Temis-Montgomery?”

“That will work. We can start a new tradition for those that come after us.”

“Will there be any after us?”

Diana was silent for a moment. “Someday, yeah. There will definitely be someone to carry on our new tradition.”

 THE END 

## **Tina Bandoni**

Tina Bandoni has been writing as long as she can remember. From a play in 4th grade, to the more adult books she now writes, stories have always been part of her life. Ideas hit her in the strangest places, and she tries to keep a piece of paper and pen handy with her wherever she goes. She was raised in Massachusetts, went to college in Wisconsin, and now lives in rural Missouri with her very supportive husband and very demanding cat.