



Devil's Food Kate

Book 3 of the *Teaching Old Gods New Tricks* series

Darragha Foster

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This is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents and dialogues in this book are of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is completely coincidental.

Dedication

For Pula, her parents and her grandmother, whose name, *Alfheithur*, inspired me.

Author's Note

Teaching Old Gods New Tricks chronicles the tantalizing journey and sensual delights of three strong women blessed (or cursed, as the case may be) with touches of divinity. Sometimes touched by their own divine nature, and sometimes touched by a horny god or two...

Each book in the series feeds off the others, though they do not have to be read in sequential order. Readers are introduced to different Norse gods, their quirks, penchants and deviancies in each book, while weaving together the characters from the other books into the series.

Norse mythology is like a giant wagon wheel, with one central god (Baldur) as the hub. Most of the mythic stories radiate out from him, even if he is not the central figure in a particular legend. *Teaching Old Gods New Tricks* alludes to the chaos occurring to the gods after Baldur's death, but since Baldur was not a naughty, naughty god (but rather a very well-behaved one), the series reflects mostly upon those of his godly brothers and sisters who rocked the Norse world with their sexual appetites and exploits.

The Norse gods were not a forgiving, loving, compassionate group of deities. They lived hard and played harder, as did the peoples (the "Vikings") who worshipped them. Their learning curve was quite narrow, and if it wasn't "tradition," it didn't matter.

Teaching Old Gods New Tricks. It can be done. Enjoy!

Chapter One

Kate wiped away a gooey white bead from the head of the golden-brown penis. The sticky droplet gracing her fingertip, she brought it to her lips for a taste.

She frowned and wrinkled her nose. "Not sweet enough."

Kate slit open a two-pound bag of powdered sugar and poured the contents into her mixing bowl. She switched the industrial MixMaster on low and allowed the machine to do its work.

Kate's co-worker, Richey, laughed. "Having trouble with the dicks?"

"Can't get the semen quite right," Kate replied. "It needs to be thicker, and for my tastes, sweeter."

Richey laughed. "You're the master pastry chef—you should know what our crazy customers will buy. Sweet semen. Jesus. Can you imagine what an eavesdropper might think?"

"What, with all our talk about boobs and dicks and how sweet they are?" Kate replied. "They might not understand exactly what we do for a living."

The bell on the shop's storefront jingled. Richey glanced at Kate, "You want I should go get that?"

"No. You're gloved up, and God only knows what will happen to your cunnolis with my dickies cooling on the rack. Protect the virtue of the baked goods, Richey. I'll go," Kate replied.

Wiping her hands on a clean, white kitchen towel, Kate maneuvered through the stainless steel countertops of her bakery kitchen to the old-fashioned swinging door leading into the shop. She glanced out the porthole window. The customer's back was to her.

Kate raised an interested eyebrow as she sized up the gentleman awaiting her assistance. About six foot four, early fifties by the streaks of gray in his hair, and my, oh, my, his bum fit nicely into his faded Levi's. *When I was alive, he might have been just my type*, Kate thought. She shook off the chill of attraction. *I have sworn off men. The only thing that matters is my business. Yeah. Right. Keep telling yourself that, Kate.*

The customer turned as she pushed open the door.

Not too shabby on the flipside, either, for a pirate! He's wearing an eye patch! "Hi. Welcome to Naughty Bits. What can I do for you?" Kate asked. *Don't stare at the eye patch, girl!*

"Naughty Bits," the customer replied. "Nice name."

His words came out slow and soothing. Kate got a mental impression of aged whiskey or fine chocolate as he spoke. And she knew well the best qualities of both.

"Named her myself," she replied.

"'Erotic edibles for the lover in you'," he quoted. "I saw your ad."

"Well, I guess advertising does pay. See anything you like?" Kate asked.

She smiled. She saw something she liked. What was not to like? She again buried her attraction to the customer. All she needed from him was a sale. Nothing more.

The graying, one-eyed man smiled. "Yes, I do." He smirked and raised his left eyebrow suggestively.

In an erotic bakery one might get used to sly comments and the occasional off-color comment. Kate never had. She blushed. "You look like a pastry man to me."

"Quite true," he replied.

"Are you looking for something special or just a quick treat?" Kate continued. What a baited question!

"Yes."

Kate giggled. "Which?"

"I'm in the mood for something ... something rich and satisfying. Something that will make me feel like I've just made love to a beautiful woman."

Kate nodded. "I have some fresh cunnolis in the back."

"Cunnolis?"

"They're like a cannoli, only since we're 'Naughty Bits' we refer to them as 'cunnolis.' I know—it's bad, but they are a best seller."

"Cream-filled?" the customer asked.

"Of course. My own mixture," Kate replied.

The man looked at Kate with such a fiery, piercing gaze she nearly lost her composure. "I bet your cream is delicious."

"I'll get you a sample, Mr..."

He held his hand out across the display case. Large, working-man's hands. Hands just rough enough to tease, but soft enough to please.

"Borsson. Odin Borsson."

Kate clasped hands with her guest. "I'm Kate Tabor, owner/operator."

"Nice to meet you, Kate." He teased his way across the flat of her hand, tracing his fingertips against her palm as he released his grasp. Flustered, Kate took a step back. "I'll get you a sample." He wasn't wearing a wedding band.

His one bright blue eye twinkling, he nodded his thanks.

Kate fled the too-warm aura of Mr. Borsson's presence, relishing the comfort of her hot kitchen over his fire.

"Richey, I need a couple cunnies. Make one with a cherry on the end," Kate said breathlessly.

Smirking, Richey skillfully piped Kate's secret mixture of fresh whipped cream, mascarpone, sour cream, nutmeg and vanilla into a cannoli shell. "I caught a glimpse. He's dishy. Older, but damn dishy. Are you going to let him sample your wares?"

"He is really attractive. Will you please put that on a paper doily for me? The gentleman does indeed require a sample—of my wares," Kate replied, a huge grin brightening her face. "God help him."

"Want to take an early lunch? I'll watch the shop," Richey offered.

"He hasn't asked me out—yet. And I don't date customers—or any man, ever again, for that matter," Kate replied, slipping through the swinging door.

Richey giggled, then whispered after Kate, "Bullshit!"

With a ceremonious flare, Kate offered the cream-filled, golden-brown pastry shells to Mr. Borsson.

"Well, this is a lovely thing," he said, before swirling the tip of his tongue around the cream overflowing the cunnoli's open ends.

Kate realized her mouth was open. She closed it and swallowed hard. *Holy shit. The man certainly knows how to eat a cannoli!*

Odin Borsson slid the tip of his tongue into the shell, scooping out its sweet center. His lips closed around the end, and he sucked on it until the firm shell was permeated with moisture. It melted in his mouth.

"Oh, my ... I'm undone," he sighed.

"You like?" Kate asked. *I like!*

"I'll take two dozen. But you should change the name," Borsson replied.

Kate reached for a pink baker's to-go box. "To what?"

"Cunnoli is too crass a word for such a decadent treat."

"It goes with the shop's theme. We *are* an erotic bakery, after all," Kate replied.

"We are? Or 'this is'?"

Kate waved a finger at her customer in a mock scolding. "This is an erotic bakery. We, as in me, myself, are not likely to grace the insides of a pink bakery box anytime soon."

Odin chuckled. "Could have fooled me. Anyway, I think you should give them a name that compliments their artful beauty and sweet combination of flavors."

"Such as?"

"Why not name them after yourself? All great artists create a self-portrait."

"And I am a cannoli?"

"You are the soul of the cannoli. The heart. Its sweet insides and tasty shell."

Kate couldn't help herself. From behind a glass display case she felt safe enough to play along. Teasing could be an art form, too. It had been so long since she'd batted her eyelashes and allowed herself to be flattered and wooed by a handsome man.

She raised her hand to offer Borsson the second cunnoli. With a level of seduction in her voice she thought she had lost to lack of use, she cooed, "You want a bite?"

Odin Borsson chuckled. "Yeah, I want a bite."

Kate set the cunnoli on the counter and nodded her pretty head toward it. "Pick your spot." She then quickly disappeared into the kitchen with the bakery box.

"Two dozen cunnies, Richey," Kate said. She felt flushed.

"Just filling the last one now," Richey replied. "So? He must be pretty damn hot to melt your iceberg. Jesus, Kate—you're hyperventilating. Seeing you this way is so refreshing!"

Kate giggled as she filled the box. "Well, we're flirting. It's fun. I'd forgotten how much fun."

Richey smiled. "It's about time, Kate. With all the men who come into this shop and give you the eye, it's about time you had some fun. You know what else is fun?"

Kate put her hand on her chest to slow her breathing. "Yeah? What?"

"A roll atop the flour sacks with someone like him." Richey nodded his head in the direction of the shop area.

"Yeah, right," Kate replied. She closed the box and slid into the storefront.

She took a breath before addressing her customer. A deep breath. "Two dozen cunnolis—or Kate-olis—I don't care what you call them, as long as you enjoy them and come back to see us again."

"How much do I owe you?" Odin asked.

"Sixteen even," Kate replied.

Odin Borsson smiled. "I think I owe you more than that."

Kate flashed a teasing upward glance at her customer. "Samples are free, Mr."

Borsson.”

Chuckling, he handed Kate a twenty. She pulled four dollars in change from her till and passed it back to him. “Thank you. Come again. Oh, and please take a brochure. We do a full line of catering as well as baked goods.”

“I intend to ... come again,” Odin replied, pocketing the brochure. He extended his hand.

Kate reached out for a traditional “closed deal” handshake. She held her breath as Odin Borsson gently kissed the top of her hand. The touch of his lips sent shivers down her spine and a flood of warmth to the dormant regions of her body.

Kate blushed. “Yes, well ... thank you, again.”

Odin nodded his head in a gentlemanly fashion and sauntered out of her shop.

She watched him cross the street to a waiting limousine. “Well, crap. I just blew that one,” she called to Richey.

Richey opened the door. “Why?”

“He left in a limo. He’s rich. He’s handsome. He flirted with me and kissed my hand, and I didn’t ... damn!”

“You’ve sworn off men, remember? Now come along and take your frustrations out on your dickies. Color the icing purple and make them all look diseased,” Richey replied. “I know—add some black sprinkles for pubic hair!”

Kate followed her friend into the kitchen. “I need chocolate,” she said.

“Well, honey, we’re in the right place for that!” Richey replied playfully.

Kate found it difficult to concentrate on the piping of icing onto her penis-shaped cookies. She couldn’t distance herself. Carefully piping white icing around the “heads” of the dickies made her feel just plain horny. *Jesus Christ! I’ve iced thousands of penis biscuits and have never wanted one to spring into action before.* She looked at her right hand—where his lips had touched. The tingle hadn’t dissipated. It had taken root.

She imagined Mr. Borsson’s lips on her throat, trailing down across her breasts. She lifted an iced dickie and bit the head clean off. The anise-almond flavor of the cookie and subtle powdered-sugar icing went down smoothly. She finished the dickie in three bites, wishing she had the real thing in her mouth.

She removed her apron and called to Richey, “Restroom break. Catch the phone, okay?”

“Sure thing,” Richey replied, lifting a tray of bosomy, nipple-point French rolls to the warming oven.

The bakery’s restroom was equipped with a lounge area, a shower, a large basin and a linen closet. It was the first thing she’d remodeled after buying the business. From a cramped, dingy men’s room filled with beer and sports posters, she’d created an oasis of soft yellows and greens. Since Richey exuded feminine qualities, he was far more at home in the powder room than the locker room.

Kate locked the door behind her and stretched out on the micro-fiber settee. She’d taken many a nap there when pulling all-nighters. Resting her right hand just inside the waistband of her baker’s whites, she allowed herself to relax—for just a moment. Mr. Borsson’s stately image filled her mind as she closed her eyes. The vibration of his kiss coursed through her still. A part of her had reawakened and was demanding attention.

She stretched her fingers lower, under her panties and through her curly, brown pubic hair.

Concentrating on his kiss, the sweet touch of his lips, Kate's fingers found her swollen clitoris. It had been an eon since she'd made the time to pleasure herself. But, like riding a bike ... one never truly loses the skill. It took about three minutes before she manipulated herself to orgasm. She pressed on her clitoris, wishing she had a dildo to impale herself upon as she came. Wishing she had the real thing as she came.

Kate whispered his name—giving her fantasy man a face—casting a wish that her next orgasm would be by his hand, mouth or member. “Odin Borsson. Odinnnn...”

Chapter Two

Naughty Bits closed at five o'clock, but Kate's work was hardly done for the day. She'd contracted to cater a banquet. A banquet mixing strange and wonderful foods rich in spices, texture, color and weird. Weird was too gentle a word. Bizarre, perhaps. Bizarre instructions outlining the exact timeline for food preparation and presentation.

Kate had signed the contract willingly. The money was too good to pass up. A few sleepless nights was worth twenty grand. Cash. Not a purchase order. Not by check or plastic. Twenty thousand dollars in cash.

Kate smiled, thinking about the ten thousand dollars securely locked away in her floor safe. "For that much money, I'll grind the spices at midnight. Hell, I'll slaughter the lamb and field dress it at dawn for twenty thousand dollars." Kate glanced at the menu and the detailed list of instructions left for her by the unsmiling, somber, Germanic event coordinator.

"Tonight ... I ... oh, tonight I get to go home by ten o'clock. Cool." She rifled through a cache of spices left by the German. "Tonight we grind the spices with the aromatic Icelandic moss. By hand." Kate pulled her mortar and pestle closer. "Hello, Mr. Mortar. Hello, Mr. Pestle. Tonight I shall be handling you and not Mr. Cuisinart. Mr. 'C' just won't fit the bill. Come on, boys, let's get grinding. Mr. Lamb and Mrs. Chicken and her sisters are waiting for their dry rub. Mustn't keep them waiting."

The event planner had been evasive when questioned about the nature of the event, but was thorough in numerous other details. Kate didn't even have to drive herself to the venue. A refrigerated van was slated to pick up the food and her. No going slow over bumps so as not to topple the wedding cake this trip! If anything happen to the food *en route*, it wouldn't be her fault.

Kate shivered. She didn't like to recall the wedding cake mishap. The inside of her car had smelled like vanilla cream for a week, and she was damn lucky the baker at the hotel helped her piece things back together before the bride saw the messy fiasco.

She shook her head. "Nothing is going to happen! Everything will be fine. Everything will be delicious, and I will be temporarily flush with cash."

Richey gone, the storefront dark and secure, Kate cranked the radio and began plotting her attack on the menu.

She could bake her way through the various tapas and savory breads, main course roast chicken and lamb, and a dessert array that could make the infamous "death by chocolate" phrase seem tame. She could do the baking blindfolded. Roasting lamb—well, not since cooking school—but she could do it.

A few must-have items were a bit daunting—but she'd make the menu work. After all, the event planner, Madam Berlin, with her stern face, tight bun and dark suit, had assured her delivery of those foodstuffs not usually found in the area. All Kate had to do was prepare them according to specific directions left for her. Cube the fermented shark. Shave the smoked Icelandic lamb. Soak the cabbage in Brennivin—a pungent and powerful Icelandic schnapps. She did have some reservations about the pickled rams' testicles and blood pudding. Both those items were to be shipped to her shop ready to eat. All she had to do was provide presentation, and her guarantee that the items were plated

according to “tradition.” Traditions she didn’t understand, but was being paid to follow.

The bakery was open half-days on Sunday and closed on Wednesdays. The event was Thursday night. “I have about five full days to get this spread pulled together if I work nights. I can do it. God, I hope I can do it. If Richey handles the store, I can do it.”

Kate sighed. She had five days in which to prepare seventeen tapas-style hors d'oeuvres, three salads, two main dishes, one soup, three breads and seven dessert choices—not to mention the “traditional” foods being delivered to her on Wednesday afternoon.

Pencil in hand, she made a couple of notes on the menu. “Such a schmeer.” Her thoughts turned to Mr. Borsson. “Such a man!”

Kate giggled and began the prep work for the largest catering job she’d ever tackled.

Chapter Three

Odin Borsson had been around for a long, long time. He'd been married, once. He'd taken several lovers and fathered many children. He'd ruled nations of men. He'd been feared, loved, worshipped. He was, quite literally, the stuff of legends. He was the All-Father, Chief God of the Vikings. And he was retired.

Since the twilight and decline of the Norse gods, he'd traveled the world of humankind extensively. He had a penchant for drier climates, but found the wet and gray weather of the Pacific Northwest a nice respite when the desert sun grew too hot for him.

Odin's driver looked over his shoulder at the one-eyed god as they pulled up to the valet parking area of the hotel. "Will she do?" he asked.

"She will," Odin replied. "Have a cannoli, Vidar." Odin offered his driver a cream-filled pastry.

"Oh, my gods—this is good. Too good. Her divinity shows," Vidar, chauffeur to the gods, said.

"She has been completely untouched by the old ways. Her bloodline is unknown to her. The magic she creates in her kitchen is pure mortal skill. Her innocence and unpolluted nature are sweeter to me than even these delicate pastries. I anticipate her, Vidar. I've waited for her for a very long time."

"She will make a stunning consort for you, Odin."

Odin smiled. "She will."

Vidar chuckled. "The preparations are underway, and the snare has been set. This winter, you shall not lie alone."

Odin stretched out his long legs in the back of the limo. "No man, divine or mortal, should ever remain alone for so long. I am weary of wanting, Vidar. I long for her embrace."

"May you sire many daughters with her," Vidar replied.

Odin lifted a water bottle, taking a long drink. "I'll drink to that."

* * * *

Kate locked up her shop around midnight, smelling of cumin, saffron and roasted Hungarian paprika. She'd ground spices for a dry marinade, rubbed two colossal lamb shanks with the aromatic mixture, set the bases for her sauces, and started the yeast dough for the catered affair and her business. Wednesday's special at Naughty Bits: Braided Pecker Loaves. An erotic twist on the more traditional and sedate challah. Excellent with a little sweet cream butter.

She slipped into her car and drove home to her cats. Exhaustion had set in. She didn't check her messages or read the mail. She didn't shower. She crawled into bed, pulled the covers up, and just before succumbing to the pull of sleep, remembered to set her alarm for the ungodly hour of five o'clock in the morning.

She knew she had been dreaming, but the images were too vague to recall as she awakened suddenly, about thirty minutes early. Sirens and lights in the distance gave her a clue as to why she'd climbed back to consciousness earlier than planned. A light

sleeper, even the purring of her cats could awaken her. She only had one dream, any way. It had been a variation on a theme since childhood.

Kate looked at the clock. The soft blue glow of the dial comforted her. She had thirty-two minutes to stay under her blanket. Thirty-two minutes to think.

Usually this time would be reserved for making mental notes of supplies to be purchased or new recipes to try. Not today, however. Today, Kate wanted to devote this quiet “extra” awake time to a more pressing matter to be dealt with. Odin Borsson.

Why isn't he lying here next to me? I haven't been so smitten with a man in years.

Kate recalled her last love affair—seven years prior—the one that had made her swear off men for good. The bookish, corporate executive with the crooked penis and chronic halitosis had been a mistake. A big, hairy mistake. Literally. He'd had the body of an ape, the mind of a computer and the sexual appetite of a rabbit. Once she got past the body hair and bad breath, the man was a dynamo in the sack. That whole Leaning Tower of Pisa-penis thing he had going on made sex, well, unique.

He'd failed in all the social graces, however. Dinner out? Disgusting. A movie? Not unless she wanted a play-by-play commentary. Out with friends? Not twice.

If nothing else, at least Odin Borsson made for good masturbatory fantasies.

* * * *

Odin Borsson poured himself a strong one and sat down before the big-screen television with wireless internet access and complimentary in-room movies. He considered Santa Fe, New Mexico, his home, but he hadn't made the time to visit in months.

He loathed the whole “living as a human” scenario. Life had been so much easier for him when he was feared as the Terrible One and had a council of wise prophets to help him make decisions. That was the hardest problem of being a retired god. Decision-making for himself—and only for himself. One might think a divine being, especially one such as he, who had ruled with an iron fist, would have no decision-making issues. Truth be known, he had ruled with an iron fist attached to a strong arm—the arm of the Fates. The bitches had deserted him—and all the gods—and had left them all to their own doings. Free will was not all it was cut out to be.

“I'd love a solid, unbreakable prophecy to guide me,” Odin said aloud, flipping through channels. “But all I have is my heart. I pity humankind. They've had to live this way for centuries. Poor bastards.”

“Quit whining, you old fool,” a voice chided.

“Ah, Loki. How are you?” Odin asked, recognizing the voice. “And don't you ever knock?”

“There's no need to knock. We are brothers. Tell me, Odin, are you bored?” Loki asked.

Odin turned off the television. “Come around where I can see you. And, no, I'm not bored. I don't care for the conventions surrounding human romance, and wish to get on with my life, such as it is, with my new consort...”

“...Without having to make decisions. You want it all set out before you like a grand banquet. You start with the soup and make your way to dessert, and there are no surprises. No questions. No decisions. Just consumption,” Loki interrupted.

Odin nodded. “Yes. That's it.”

“Why not go to her in a dream, ravish her, infect her with your godly prowess and leave her wanting you so badly she cannot walk without having an orgasm?”

“She is special,” Odin replied.

“Ah, more so than my human lover?” Loki remarked. “And I recall you had no trouble making the decision to spin her on your godhood.” Loki paused. “We took her well that day, did we not, brother?”

Odin nodded. “She was the last mortal woman to receive my affections. I cannot act so randomly any longer. I must settle down—and it must be with Kate.”

“Why Kate? Why not any attractive woman walking the face of the Earth?”

“Because other women do not share her bloodline.”

Loki darted around the sofa. He leapt like a cat, landing on his feet. Perched on the armrest, he continued, “So there’s the rub. Kate has good parentage. But what if she refuses you, Odin? What then?”

Odin turned his head to face his blood brother and nemesis of old. “In her veins flow the final vestiges of my warrior maidens.”

“Kate Tabor, that skinny little wench with the proclivity for baking, is a Valkyrie?”

“Only slightly. She’s the last surviving relative of Alfheimur.”

Loki’s eyes lit up. “Alfheimur. Oh, my. Now there was a woman. Kate must be forty generations removed from her demi-god blood, however.”

“She has no idea. Had she been raised knowing her heritage, I wouldn’t have to groom her now. It took me lifetimes to track Alfheimur’s human lineage. If it is my last act upon this Earth, I shall make amends. I...” Odin paused.

Loki laughed. “Odin ... do you feel remorse?”

“Centuries of reconsideration have led me to the conclusion that my wrath against Alfheimur was unfounded. I should have never banished her.”

Loki blurted out, always loving an opportunity to get a good jab in, “Banished her for loving a mortal—which you now purport to be your objective with Kate.”

“Living amongst humans has softened my heart toward mixed marriages,” Odin replied.

“No more the ‘use a mortal woman’s body but never give her your heart,’ eh, Odin?”

Odin chuckled. “Those were the good old days.”

Loki slid onto a sofa cushion. “I have found fulfillment with a mortal woman, Odin. I do not fault you for wishing to spend your twilight years in the arms of a mortal female.”

“Are you fulfilled, Loki? In love?” Odin asked.

“Since I have rarely spoken a true word, for that has not been my nature, I know you may not believe me, but yes. Yes, I am fulfilled and in love. I am literally tamed by Lilliah’s love. I am recreated and renewed by her love. I ache to be her husband in the eyes of this pathetic society.”

Odin nodded. “I guess that means we won’t be despoiling a cocktail waitress tonight. Not that I am in the mood for such a thing. I feel old, Loki.”

“Alas, no, brother. No waitress shall be sandwiched between us tonight—or ever again. My love is reserved for another. If there is other mischief I could create in your honor, just say it, however.”

Odin rose and stretched. “I would leave it to the Fates to see that Kate performs the necessary tasks at the appointed times—but perhaps you could nip over...”

“The grinding of the spices and curing of the meat after dark and all that tommyrot which added hours to meal preparation in the old days?” Loki asked.

“That, and more. She is catering our Thorrablot. The prescribed food handling techniques have been made known to her via my agent—but, of course, Kate knows nothing of the entheogenic nature of the foods. Her divinity shall be awakened by the very spells she casts while catering the blot.”

“She shall literally be generating the divine within—within her. Of course, if her lamb is as good as her pastries, then perhaps we shall all reach a new state of divinity,” Loki replied. “Until, of course, at the banquet, you confess your sins to her, profess your undying love and try to prod her with your godhood over the devil’s food cake.”

“By the time she arrives at the banquet, she will have had five days of immersion into our world. The rituals for the food preparation are but one small part of her acclimatization. The dreams should become more intense now. She will see her great ancestor, Alfheithur, Queen of the Valkyries and Light of the Hidden People, as she was in the old days. Magnificent. Proud. Brave. She will see Alfheithur’s mate, for whom the Valkyrie gave up immortality—and whom she destroyed with her passions. She won’t understand that it is her own bloodline of which she dreams, but the stories will be fresh in her mind, and at the banquet, she will be like tempered metal, ready for the forge of the gods.”

“You do have ambitions for a mortal woman, Odin!”

“She is the last of her kind. And only with my seed and her blood can the Valkyrie race live again,” Odin replied.

Loki laughed. “Odin, I understand being desirous of female companionship and the need to protect Alfheithur’s bloodline, but what do we need Valkyries for? The battles fought now are not our concern. We live outside the differences of humankind.”

Odin looked sharply at Loki. “The battles of today are our concern. We are world citizens now. With my armies replenished from the fallen heroes of today, I can bring peace.”

“You sound like a politician, Odin. And more—I see your true purpose. It is not only the soft body of a woman you crave, but the warrior offspring her body can produce for you.” Loki paused. “Will your children ride horses across the sky, Odin, or will you give them stealthy, small aircraft as they collect the souls of fallen combatants in this twenty-first century of ours? I know, you’ll have them hang glide.”

“Do not mock me, Loki.”

“Do not fool yourself, Odin!”

“I have never played the part of the fool, Loki. Not in the before-times, and not now.”

“Be that as it may, brother, I see trouble on your horizon. You wish to harness the blood of the last Valkyrie, in the body of a modern woman, to beget a phalanx of warrior maidens. Do you not see that this could be a fool’s errand? A twenty-first century businesswoman is not going to accept the fact she has a magic vagina through which she will birth you warrior-goddesses.”

Odin scowled. “You never did understand warfare, Loki.”

“I am a lover, not a fighter, Odin. Though I have gone by many names, none of them matched those blood-thirsty monikers of yours. You are a god of war. It is no wonder you believe only an army of the walking dead can bring peace to the world of humans.”

“Go away, Loki. I tire of your incessant banter,” Odin commanded.

Loki laughed and leapt from the sofa. “I am no longer yours to command, brother. You gifted me with free will. I don’t have to leave. You can’t make me.”

Odin pulled on his beard. Loki recognized it as a sign of irritation.

“I’m paying for the room. Get out,” Odin again commanded.

“Fine. See you at Thor’s party, which incidentally is the venue for my wedding—or have you forgotten *that* in your quest to impregnate the caterer? Truthfully, Odin, I have better things to do than commiserate with a has-been god warmonger,” Loki replied.

Odin waved Loki away. His patience with his blood brother was at an end. The more time Odin spent living amongst humans, the less tolerance he had for the spoiled natures of his fellow gods. Especially Loki.

Odin opened the jet fridge and took out a chilled bottle of vodka. He took a swig straight from the bottle. Then another.

The fiery liquid purged his senses, dulling them to the hard facts of his life.

He took a long drink, gulping down four mouthfuls. “I am a has-been god and warmonger.” He tipped his head back and downed the contents of the bottle, swallowing madly until the frosty container was emptied of its frigid and expensive contents.

The drink hit him full-on. Odin had never been the best drinker—that honor had been bestowed on his son, Thor, who in his youth could drain an ocean of mead.

He let the empty bottle fall out of his hand as he teetered his way back to the sofa.

The bigger they are, the harder they fall. In Odin’s case, this proved true. The One-Eyed God fell heavily onto the neatly upholstered hotel sofa. Face first, one arm underneath him, the other hanging lifelessly toward the floor, he began to sob.

Chapter Four

Nearing exhaustion, Kate pulled a layer of cling-film over the last bowl of freshly ground spices, and in accordance with the explicit instructions set out for her, placed the covered bowl on the back stoop of the bakery.

She shook her head, almost questioning her sanity for agreeing to prepare such a bizarre and elaborate banquet with such odd “traditions.” She glanced at her computer as she switched off lights on the way to the restroom. The accounting program indicating her business was “in the black” was why. Money. Pure and simple. Small business meets big job and begets cash flow.

“Jesus Christ, I’d stand on my head nekkid and sing the *Star-Spangled Banner* if they’d give me another ten grand.”

She washed her hands and changed out of her baker’s whites. As she exited the shop, she performed the last ritual prescribed to her by Madam Tight Bun—the Germanic overseer of the secret celebration. Kate stepped outside, and after locking the door, turned east, raised her right hand and dropped a bay leaf onto the alleyway.

She opened her car door, mumbling, “Mine is not to question why, mine is but to bake and get paid.”

Kate drove home through empty streets. It was past ten p.m. on a Tuesday night. Only a few die-hard partiers graced the night by their presence outside the handful of Ma-and-Pa pubs along the way.

Her route took her by the Redmond Hotel. She always slowed to catch a glimpse of the magnificent stained-glass windows of its foyer. They depicted a warrior woman riding on a horse across the sky, her arm raised aloft as she aimed a pointy spear toward an army of men below. The glasswork of the window was astounding.

While working as a barista in the hotel lobby, she’d spent way too much time gazing at the images memorialized in the glass and too little time on her college textbooks.

Kate smiled. She’d met a wonderful little old man while working as a barista. He must have been in his eighties, and he loved the window as much as she. It was this quiet gentleman, who always wore his Sunday best and purchased a small black coffee every day during his “constitutional,” who told her the story behind the image.

“It’s the Ride of the Valkyrie. A warrior maiden of the Norse gods. She snatches up souls of the bravest as they die in battle and places them in the All-Father’s army in heaven.”

Kate listened to the stories, served the man his drink and returned the sly old dog’s winks.

Kate missed the simple days of working the espresso stand. Days when she was poor, but happy. *Now I’m poor and overworked. Something is just not right here. That’s what I get for opening my own business.*

Her car stalled at the intersection across from the Redmond. As she gritted her teeth, trying not to cuss like a sailor at her alternator, she saw him cross the street in front of her. Odin Borsson.

Kate quickly rolled down her window. “Mr. Borsson!” she called.

Odin smiled. “Naughty Bits Bakery. How are you?” He approached Kate’s open car

window.

“Kate. Please ... call me Kate. And I’m not doing too well. I’m on my way home, and my car has stalled.”

Odin reached into his front jacket pocket and retrieved his cell phone. “I’ll call the concierge. They’ll run someone out to help.”

“Concierge?” Kate asked. “I was kind of hoping you’d just help me push my car to the side of the street.”

“The Hotel Redmond. I’m staying at the Redmond in the executive suite. I believe my butler said the hotel maintains a full garage on the premises. I’ll call a mechanic for you,” Odin replied.

“Well, aren’t you the knight in shining armor? Thank you, Mr. Borsson.”

“Odin.”

“Odin,” Kate corrected. She opened her car door and slid out. The street was deserted. “Enjoy your pastries?”

“No, not really,” Odin replied.

Kate startled. “No? Was the cream spoiled? Oh, my God...”

“No, no—nothing like that. The cannolis were perfect. I had no one to share them with. Naughty bits are best shared.”

Kate laughed. “Oh, I see. There is no Mrs. Borsson to tempt with delicate dainties?”

Odin shook his head. “We went our separate ways long ago.”

Kate withheld a satisfied chuckle. Single! “Oh, I’m sorry. Any children?”

Odin nodded. “Nine boys.”

Kate choked. “Nine?”

“All well into adulthood with families of their own.”

“You don’t look like a grandfather. Too young,” Kate replied.

“I have several.”

“I have a cat,” Kate replied.

Odin smiled. “Ah, my squire approaches.” A well-appointed young man dashed to Odin Borsson’s side. “Mr. Borsson. Having car trouble, sir?”

“This young lady is, yes. Do you think you could fix the problem?” Odin asked.

The uniformed man nodded to Kate. “May I, ma’am?”

She stepped away from the car door. “Yes, please.”

The hotel concierge slid onto the bench seat of Kate’s late-model Buick and tried to turn the engine over. A grinding sound and sputtering followed.

“Mr. Borsson?” the young man asked.

“Yes?” Odin replied.

“I’ll have the hotel’s maintenance department move the car to the limo garage. We should be able to have the car running shortly.”

Odin took Kate by the arm. “Thank you, that will be fine. Miss Tabor and I will have a late dinner in my suite. Just ring up when her car is ready.”

A bit mesmerized by the commanding presence Odin Borsson had over the situation, she quickly tried to regain control. “I could phone AAA and have my car towed to my regular garage.”

The concierge emerged from her vehicle. “No need, ma’am. We’ll change out your starter, and you’ll be right as rain. We offer full service to our guests.”

“I’m not a guest. Mr. Borsson is,” Kate replied. “I will pay for whatever work you

do, of course.”

“Well, I’ll let you and Mr. Borsson work out those details. Shall I phone room service for you, sir?”

Kate quickly closed her open mouth. Here the kid was about to fix her engine, and he was offering to phone room service for Mr. Borsson. If this were Las Vegas, would Odin Borsson be a bona fide “whale?”

“That would be lovely. Strawberries and cream, black tea, a cheese tray and some other fruits—grapes or something,” Odin replied. His hand still on Kate’s arm, he took a step. “Come along, then, Miss Tabor. Johnson here will get your car fixed up, and we’ll have a nice cup of tea in my suite.”

“Thank you, Odin,” Kate replied softly, allowing herself to be led away into the hotel. “But you were obviously on your way somewhere. I don’t want to keep you from your plans.”

“I was just getting some air,” Odin replied. “I had a bit of vodka and felt the need for some clarity—and open space.”

They passed the closed espresso stand. “I worked there while attending college.”

“At the coffee bar?” Odin asked.

Kate nodded. “I used to spend way too much time studying the stained glass. I was just thinking about those good old days before my car died.”

“I’m glad it did.”

“Glad my car died?” Kate asked.

“Yes. You interest me, Kate. This will give us a chance to get better acquainted.”

A thousand thoughts fluttered through Kate’s mind. *Is my breath minty fresh? Do I smell like paprika?* “I’m flattered.”

Odin smiled, sliding his key-card into the private elevator mechanism. “You should be.”

Well, he’s certainly not the humble type! “I hope I live up to your expectations,” Kate replied.

“You already have,” Odin whispered.

They stepped into the lift and were whisked away to the top floor. The mirrored elevator doors opened up into a spacious living area with a vaulted ceiling and potted trees easily nine feet high. Kate admired the thriving foliage as she entered Odin’s suite. “Oh, my goodness, someone loves these plants. I’d kill to have a green thumb.”

Odin chuckled. “Ah, I think the world is better served if your thumbs stay white.”

Kate looked over to Odin with a confused look on her face.

“From the flour. A white thumb. Never mind. Bad pun,” Odin apologized.

“How long are you staying at the Redmond?” Kate asked, strolling through the grand foyer of the suite into the sitting room.

“I haven’t decided yet.”

This place must be three thousand a night, at least—and he hasn’t decided how long he’s staying? “Extended business trip?” she asked.

“I’m retired. I’m here for a family reunion of sorts,” Odin replied.

“Where are you all coming from?” Kate asked. She looked at the seating choices. Would sitting down on the leather love seat make her look too eager? Would sitting in the wingback chair make her look aloof? She chose the edge of the padded coffee-table.

Odin reclined into the butter-soft brown leather love seat. “Santa Fe, Los Angeles,

Miami. Some from farther away. Iceland. France. And some closer. One of my brothers lives in Bellingham.”

“That’s only two hours north of here,” Kate replied. “With all the exotic locales your family members hail from, why choose Redmond?”

“My future sister-in-law suggested we converge on the Pacific Northwest this year, and the idea appealed to us.”

A chime sounded. “Ah, room service,” Odin announced. He lifted a remote control. Kate heard the whoosh of the elevator doors opening.

“You can work the doors with a remote? Cool,” she commented. “Odin, I’m impressed.”

Odin stood. “Don’t be. I didn’t invent the thing. I just utilize the locking mechanism. I wouldn’t want housekeeping to show up when I’m fresh out of the shower. My grandeur might frighten the help.”

Kate laughed. “God, I love modest men.”

“Modesty is overrated,” Odin replied. He met the waiter at the entrance to the sitting room. “On the table, sir?”

“No, set it up on the cushioned bench. The young lady will move,” Odin replied. Kate lifted her eyebrows. *I guess that means I’m moving ... hmmm...*

“Very good, sir.” The waiter skillfully set the tray of late-night snacks on the padded coffee-table. Odin reached into his jet fridge, removed the tell-tale pink bakery box and placed it next to the teapot.

He looked at Kate with a sly glow in his single blue eye. “Cunnoli?”

Kate nodded to the waiter as he poured her a cup of tea. “Lemon, thank you.” She turned her head to Odin. “And I thought we changed the name to Kate-olis.”

“Will that be all, sir?” the waiter asked.

“Yes, thank you,” Odin replied, palming a bill into the waiter’s outstretched hand.

Odin sat next to Kate on the love seat, the remote poised in his hand. He clicked the locking mechanism as soon as the elevator doors closed.

“Tea?” Kate asked.

“Please,” Odin replied.

“Do you take it sweet?” Kate continued, holding the bone china dish of sugar cubes in one hand, the teapot in the other.

“Oh, yes. I like things very sweet.”

Kate blew across the top of her steaming teacup. “So, your brother is getting married?”

Odin nodded. “Blood brother. Yes, he’s marrying. I’m performing the ceremony at the close of our family reunion.”

“You’re a minister?” Kate asked. “A minister who visits shops like mine?”

“I am licensed to marry couples within the boundaries of our faith. I am not a man of the cloth in the usual sense. More of an unusual sense, you might say,” Odin replied. He took a sip of tea. “Would you care for some brie? Or perhaps something more pungent ... like sharp cheddar?”

Kate reached for a toothpick-speared cube of cheddar. “I should probably check on the status of my car.”

“What’s your hurry?” Odin asked.

“I put in close to seventeen hours today at the bakery. I’m catering a large event, and

the food prep is phenomenal. And bizarre.”

“How so?”

“I’m being paid a ton of money to cater the event. Nearly twenty-thousand dollars, in hand. I had to agree to certain contract items that are just plain odd.”

Odin bit into a strawberry. He swallowed, his face reflecting the supreme satisfaction of the berry’s perfect flavor. “What have you had to do? Besides hand-grind spices?”

Kate blushed. “Oh, my God. I smell like paprika, don’t I? I’m sorry.”

“The subtle fragrance clings to you like a fine perfume. I detect smoked paprika, curry, cinnamon and nutmeg. You smell delicious.”

“You’re very kind, Odin.”

“I’m just being truthful. If you’d like, you could shower. The hotel provides sumptuous bathrobes and slippers.”

“My car...” Kate began.

“Is in good hands. It’s late, and although the hotel staff will do everything they can to accommodate me, it may be that even their best limousine mechanic cannot repair your vehicle until morning.” Odin paused. “I gave my butler the night off. You could shower and spend the night in his quarters. In the morning your car will be repaired, and you can...”

“The shop is closed on Wednesdays. I wasn’t planning on going to work until noon. I should probably just phone a cab and head home, Odin.”

“Why?”

Kate glanced at her wristwatch. “It’s nearly eleven o’clock. I’m exhausted, and although your offer is very kind, I don’t know if I should...”

Odin finished her sentence. “Shower, refresh yourself and sleep in your own bed behind a locked door?”

“I don’t want to impose,” Kate replied.

“And I won’t take ‘no’ for an answer. I’m used to getting my way, Miss Tabor.”

“Honestly, Mr. Borsson—I’ve never been too trusting of others. And you are being so kind to me.”

“Stay,” Odin said softly.

Kate folded her arms across her chest in a defensive move.

Odin placed a hand on Kate’s forearm. “What can I do to make you feel more at ease, Kate?”

Kate laughed. “I’m sorry—I don’t mean to be ungrateful—it’s just that I’m overtired, my car broke down, I smell like roasted chicken, and I’m alone in a hotel suite with a rather attractive man when I have sworn off the male gender.”

Odin squeezed Kate’s arm. “That was a mouthful. Good to get that off your chest?”

Kate nodded.

“I think you need to finish your tea, take a shower and let me worry about your car,” Odin replied. “And as for me being attractive, well, I think the same of you. We’ll just have to see where things go.”

“Out of the frying pan and into the fire,” Kate whispered.

Odin leaned forward. “I’d prefer a slow simmer to a charcoal burn. The taste is richer and more satisfying.”

“I may be a bit presumptuous in saying this, but are you saying that I’m not going to get burned?” Kate asked.

Odin pulled Kate's hand from its hiding place under her arm and gently touched his lips to it. "A little singed around the edges, perhaps, but not burned."

Those lips, again! Kate's hand quivered from the electrical current of Odin's kiss. *What could those lips do to other parts of my body? Am I going to allow myself to find out?* "Are we talking about barbecue here, or are we making innuendoes regarding my spending the night?"

He winked. "Do you prefer a dry or wet rub?"

Jesus Christ! "Well, when I season my meat I use a dry rub, followed by a wet the next day."

"Works for me. Lie down," Odin replied.

"Why?" Kate asked.

"You are so tense. I can feel the blood coursing through the vein in your hand at an alarming rate. I thought perhaps I'd give you a back massage. I'm quite skilled."

Kate laughed so hard she nearly toppled her teacup. "I'll bet you are!"

"Are you afraid of compromising yourself?" Odin asked.

Kate nodded. "Yes. Like the fool rushing in where the angel fears to tread."

Odin pulled Kate to her feet. "I'm no angel, Kate, but I am certainly no fool, either." He slid his hands around her waist.

Kate could feel herself trembling in his arms. *Is this what I want? Is this what I need?* "It's been a long time for me, Odin."

"Since you had a massage?" he asked.

Kate laughed. "Yes, Mr. Borsson, it's been a very, very long time since I've had a massage." *Or a good roll in the hay.*

Odin loosened his embrace. "Lie down."

Kate obediently slid out of Odin's arms and onto her belly lengthwise on the sofa.

His arms crossed in front of his chest, and his foot tapping nervously, Odin laughed. "Kate, I'm a big man. There's no way I can give you a massage on the sofa. Why not move to the settee? Or the bed?"

"I'm comfortable," Kate replied.

"All right. This is going to be a bit cramped, but I'm sure I can manage."

Odin stepped onto the sofa. On his knees, straddling Kate's legs, he rubbed his hands to warm them up.

"Are you squished?" Kate asked groggily.

"Yes. I am," Odin replied.

Kate giggled. "So am I. How about we move to the floor?"

Odin rolled off the sofa. "Yes. Thank you."

Kate stretched like a cat, arching her back as she pulled herself up to her knees.

"Comfortable sofa. I could take a nice little nap right here."

"If sleeping is what you wish to do, then by all means, take a nap. You'll be safe. I promise."

Kate slid off the sofa and onto the floor. "I'd like the massage first, thank you. Where do you want me?" she asked.

The eyebrow over Odin's single blue eye rose. "Well, that's a baited question."

Kate wrinkled her brow in a mock frown.

Odin laughed. He pushed the upholstered coffee-table aside. "Right here will do."

Kate slid forward onto her belly.

Odin inched his way up to her head, kneeling.

Kate glanced upward. Odin's spread legs were on either side of her head, and she could easily discern the outline of his hefty manhood through the fabric of his jeans. She closed her eyes. Her alternatives were to ignore it, or to run her tongue across the faded denim to get a better idea of what she was not going to allow herself to have.

Odin leaned in, the strong heels of his hands trailing down Kate's back from shoulders to hips.

Kate moaned. She blushed. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

"You get one free one. You better stifle any more of those, or I'll think you're enjoying this," Odin replied. His fingertips worked their way slowly up her spine. "Your shirt is in the way."

"Smooth. Very smooth," Kate replied.

Odin pulled Kate's shirt up, exposing her back. "Take it off."

"I'm too old to fall for that old trick, Odin."

He ran his fingertips lightly over the soft flesh of her ribcage. "Take your shirt off, Kate."

"You take yours off, first," Kate replied.

Odin sat upright and pulled his shirt off over his head. "No problem."

Kate peeked—but only for a moment. *If I look, I'm going to want. If I want, I'll give in, and if I give in, I'll hate myself in the morning. Oh, Christ. It is morning. I'll hate myself this afternoon.*

"Take your shirt off, Kate."

Kate slid out and away from Odin. Both of them on their knees atop the plush eggshell-white carpet of Hotel Redmond's executive suite, she pulled off her shirt.

"Is this what you want, Odin?" Kate asked, holding her t-shirt before her naked bosom.

"You don't need to hide from me," Odin replied, pulling Kate's shirt away. "You have beautiful breasts."

Kate giggled. "So do you."

Odin smiled. "Lie down."

Obediently, Kate slid onto her belly, her head once again positioned under Odin's raised knees.

Starting at the base of her neck, his thumbs slowly working every kink and iota of tension from her shoulders, Odin manipulated Kate into a sheer and utterly relaxed state. His well-manicured fingertips played lightly along her spinal column, seeking out every muscle, every indentation. The warmth of his touch and skill of his technique awakened Kate's senses. "You are so blocked, Kate. Roll over. Let me clear you."

Like a cat under its master's hand, Kate responded to Odin's request, rolling onto her back. She opened her eyes. The bulge in his jeans had become more apparent. His need was obvious. Her nipples were hard. *My need must be exceedingly obvious, too. Christ.*

Odin chuckled. It was a pleased, throaty sound. His fingertips found her navel. With extreme control and gentleness, he massaged the flesh of her belly, working his way upward. Kate kept her eyes fixed on Odin's thighs. The way his jeans fit over them. The way the fabric pulled across the right side where his obviously aroused member was trapped.

Kate sighed when Odin's delicate touch reached her breasts. He traced his fingertips

over her nipples, teasing them.

“Odin,” Kate whispered. “We shouldn’t...”

He cupped her breasts in his hands, not replying. His right hand slid down her belly and under the waistband of her Levi’s. She heard the muffled sound of buttons coming unfastened, one after the other. And then both Odin’s hands worked their way into her panties.

He was atop her, in a pseudo-sixty-nine position. Kate moaned and brought her hands up to caress Odin through his jeans. She squeezed the length of his penis across his thigh, then trailed her hand up his backside along the seam to caress his ass.

Odin rolled onto his side. Kate’s jeans and panties were at her knees. She rolled over to face him—to face the monster between his legs.

Her mouth went to the fabric over his member. Odin moaned as she ran her tongue along his length, gently biting through the denim. “Not fair,” Kate sighed.

Odin slid one long finger into Kate. She quivered against his hand as he slid another finger, then a third, into her. She unfastened his jeans. “Not fair that you still have these on, Odin Borsson.”

He pulled away and quickly rose to his feet. In a matter of seconds, he was stripped nude. Nude and glorious.

“Oh, my God,” Kate marveled. Though older, his body reflected a firm youthfulness that caused her to salivate. She slid out of her pants. *I’m going to have sex! Oh, my God. It’s been so long!*

He stood above her, smiling, his hand lightly stroking his swollen penis. “Kate?” he whispered.

She nodded. “Yes.”

Odin dropped to the floor, covering her body with his. She opened her legs for him. She wrapped her arms around him. Their mouths met like teenagers desperate to experience a taste of adulthood in the backseat of daddy’s car. Eager. Passionate.

Kate melted into Odin’s embrace. There was nothing awkward or hesitant in his kisses. He devoured her, aroused her.

Kate undulated her hips, hoping to help Odin find his way inside her. She trailed her hands down his back, clutching the top of his buttocks. His penis slid across her slick vulva, but did not enter. Its head passed over her clitoris over and over until she thought she would go mad if she didn’t orgasm. But Odin pulled away each time she tried to coax his member into her.

What do I need to do? Yell, “fuck me?” Oh, my God. I need him so badly!

As if reading her mind, Odin replied softly, “Not yet.” He rolled onto his back. “I want to taste you, Kate.”

Kate spun around, then mounted Odin, her head to his belly and her mound to his bearded chin. She took his penis into her hand and stroked it. As Odin’s tongue parted her labial lips to pleasure her engorged clitoris, she slid the thick head of his member into her mouth.

He took her full weight onto his face. His tongue slid into her vagina. His nose rubbed against her perineum and anus. His tongue flicked her clitoris, slathering it with just enough attention to keep it teased and primed for orgasm, before retreating into her depths.

Kate moved her hips atop Odin’s face in rhythm to the passes of her lips and tongue

over the tip of his member. The head alone filled her mouth. She could taste his semen brimming.

Odin pulled her clitoris into his mouth and sucked it in concert with her motions. He moved his mouth to her thigh and slid two fingers into her vagina and breached the entrance to her anus with his thumb. Kate moved against his hand as though she wanted to ride his engorged penis. She felt the withdrawal of his thumb from her rear and the insertion of his warm, soft tongue. He slid his fingers across her labia as he violated her anally with his kisses.

She came against his hand. She rode his fingertips to an amazing orgasm. Kate couldn't help herself. It felt too good. It had been too long. She gave in to the surging, hot moment, and with guttural passion, completely lost control and exploded. Erupted. Thundered and shattered.

Odin squeezed her clitoris between two fingers as her orgasm declined. The pressure was nearly unbearable. Her sensitive female regions were blazing in climactic wake.

She remembered Odin's raging member as her senses returned to her. She began stroking it, hoping to return the favor. He stopped her.

He pushed her off and onto the carpet on her back. He turned to face her. His face and beard were soaked from her climax. "This time was for you and you alone."

He rose. Kate reached for him, but he took a step back. "Uh-uh."

"Odin!" Kate exclaimed.

"You're the one who was tense. Feel better?" he asked.

"What about you?" Kate replied. "You..."

"Will you spend the night with me, Kate? Let me hold you?" Odin asked.

"I want you, Odin," Kate replied.

Odin chuckled. "I'm going to bed. Are you coming?"

"Odin!" Kate protested.

He didn't reply.

Kate rose. Parts of her that had been dormant for years had awakened, and like a newborn, wanted to be fed.

She pulled on her t-shirt and panties and walked slowly to the bedroom. Odin had already crawled under the covers and was lying facing the flat-screen television, channel flipping. He had the sound muted.

Kate crawled onto the bed. She was lost in the vastness of the California king with its shimmering, brushed-cotton sheets. Odin switched the TV off and folded Kate into his arms. He had not dressed.

"It was nice of your car to stall. I'll have to thank it later," he whispered.

"And I'll scold it for being naughty. What's it going to think?" Kate replied.

Odin pulled Kate closer to his warm body. "Don't be too harsh on your vehicle, Kate. It was only following orders."

She was too tired to respond. Too comfortable. Too relaxed. This was proving to be the nicest one-night stand she'd ever had.

Chapter Five

In a brief moment of consciousness before succumbing to the pull of sleep, Kate envisioned herself lying in Odin's strong arms. She knew it was safe to dream—the dream she'd had since childhood. But this was different. As if the images knew it was the correct time to show her their story.

As she grew older, the dream had changed from G-rated simplistic images to more complex R-rated ones, but it was all the same dream. She'd kept a dream journal as a teen, when the images first became more physical in nature. She'd wanted to write back then—and thought the dreams might become the basis for her first romance novel. She found she could not write fiction from the dream images. It always came out rather dry and technical, like a chronology or genealogical history.

This time the dream came to her in vivid colors, solid forms and in new, rather NC-17 ways. Kate knew she was dreaming. She knew the characters. She knew the setting, the conflict, their goals—but now, she saw their love. Forbidden love juggernauting them into a relationship that changed their lives and the lives of their descendants, forever.

* * * *

The western slope abutted the ocean, and the sun sank like a giant red ball against the horizon. Its hot, brilliant rays enveloped the combatants. Their weapons drawn, it was a battle of Goliaths, black against white. The dark warrior had been bloodied—but not by the strike of an enemy. His own knife had bit his chest to signify the call to battle. He was Ande Ajani of Khartoum, Byzantine mercenary and guide. He spoke Greek, Arabic, Norse and the dialects of his own region. He had led the armies of the sultanate into a trap, and for that grave error, he was prepared to die.

His nemesis stood as the last of his own army. The combat had raged for days, pitting man against man until only two remained. The fair-haired barbarian from the northlands, whose guttural vocalizations Ande Ajani barely understood, postured now like a great leopard about to pounce. Around them both, the bodies of their armies sweated and decayed under the hot African sun. Blowflies had staked claims. Small scavengers, unafraid of the battle, had scurried in before the buzzards, picking choice pieces of flesh from the dead. Vultures now circled overhead. They were waiting for the last man to fall.

Ande Ajani fought with a long spear. It was his staff. His weapon of choice. He kept a blade at his waist for ceremonial purposes.

The barbarian, Hakkon, pressed a great war-hammer across his chest. One strike of that hammer and Ande Ajani's body would most certainly buckle and shatter. Unless he could disable Hakkon before Hakkon could wield a fatal blow.

The men circled one another, stepping over the corpses littering the field. In the distance the sounds of women in mourning wafted in, mixing with the cries of the gulls from below the cliffs.

There would be no victory for either side. One man would walk away, but entire armies had been laid to waste.

Hakkon made the first move. He reached into his tunic and withdrew a waxy-looking brown substance. He brought it to his lips, revealing his stained teeth with a menacing smile.

Ande Ajani recognized the material. He recognized the glazed look in Hakkon's eyes. His foe had ingested Baldur's Brow—a plant native to the northlands and a powerful agent for battle. Men's minds became shadowed under the influence of the plant. Hakkon would feel no pain and would summon the strength of ten men against him. Such was the power of Baldur's Brow.

Ande Ajani braced himself as Hakkon stormed across the field, cursing unintelligently and salivating like a rabid dog. He deflected the first blow of Hakkon's war hammer. The Northman only grew more incensed that he had to make a second pass at the African.

Ande Ajani planted his bare feet into the blood-soaked earth and prepared himself to take the full weight and impact of Hakkon's blows. He had not expected to win the battle. After the ambush, he wanted to die with his men, but honorably, in battle.

Hakkon rushed Ande Ajani a second time. Just as he expected to feel the rib-shattering strike of the hammer, a brilliant flash of light separated the men. As his eyes cleared, Ande saw the tip of his spear planted firmly into Hakkon's throat. He didn't recall raising his staff to strike Hakkon, but here was the body of his enemy, bleeding out before his eyes.

"I had to choose," a dulcet voice called from behind Ande Ajani.

"Woman, what have you done?" Ande Ajani cursed. He turned, expecting to see a warrior woman of his people. A dark woman with scarred cheeks and bound breasts. He would kill her for interfering. It was not her place to slay Hakkon.

The woman was not of his people. Surrounded by a magical blue glow like that of certain rocks in a lightning storm, she was fair—very fair. Her breasts were not bound, but were large and full and encased by copper disks strapped across her chest. She wore a helmet and gauntlets and held a magnificent sword in her hands, the likes of which Ande Ajani had never seen before.

"I had to choose," she repeated. "And I chose you."

"For what?" Ande Ajani asked. "I do not know you."

"He did not deserve to live. He is a vile man who beats his children and fails to make regular sacrifices to the gods," the woman replied.

"His death should have been mine," Ande Ajani hissed.

"You were slated to die, but you are the better man, and I could not bring myself to carry Hakkon's stinking body to Valhalla. I killed him with your weapon, but he did not die honorably, for it was not your hand that wielded it. His life is over. He shall not march in the army of his god."

"You took away his right as a warrior," Ande replied.

"I have the power over life and death on the battlefield wherever my people are. I chose to spare your life and end his. He is not unwell or in a state of punishment. He is simply finished."

"Why spare my life? I do not know your gods, nor do I recognize you as a messenger of Hakkon's gods."

The woman sheathed her sword. She took a step toward Ande Ajani, the blue glow surrounding her fading as she moved. "I have watched you in battle. I have watched you

with the camp followers and their children. You would give a child your own ration of water and go thirsty so that the child of a whore could live another day. You honor your contracts, and even when you have made a mistake, you do not flee and leave others to their destruction. You are the most valiant warrior I have ever beheld. I had to choose. And I have chosen you.” The woman unclipped the disks protecting her breasts. They fell open, exposing her perfect, milky-white bosom.

Ande Ajani held his ground. “For what have you chosen me?”

“To father my child,” the woman replied.

“Why should I give you a child of my body? I do not know who you are, nor do I even know your name.”

“I am Alfheithur. I am the Light of the Hidden People, and I want a child. A son. Will you give me a son, Ande Ajani? Will you give me a son to love?”

“He will be a half-breed,” Ande Ajani replied.

Alfheithur nodded. “In more ways than you know, that is true. However, by the virtue of our mixed blood, my son will be free of servitude. My bloodline and my curse flows only to daughters. Help me. Please.”

“Why should I?” Ande Ajani asked.

Alfheithur sauntered up to Ande Ajani like a pampered housecat, rubbing her pristine white flesh against his sweaty, shining, coal-black body. “Love me, Ande Ajani. Love me, and both our lives will be saved.”

Always ready for battle, in one form or another, Ande Ajani needed no stimulation.

Their mouths crushed together hungrily, their tongues seeking to bridge the impasse of their verbal communications. Ande Ajani lifted Alfheithur off the ground. She wrapped her legs around his hips.

Standing ankle deep in carnage, he stormed his way into her. Alfheithur assisted his thrusts, holding fast to his strong shoulders with her own powerful arms. It was hard, fast, passionate sex. At the moment of his orgasm, Alfheithur thrust against his pelvic bone with every fiber of her being. Every last drop of his seed filled her. She worked her own orgasm to its zenith as his subsided.

Within the surging pleasure sweeping through their bodies, the child took root. It was her son. The male child to extinguish the Light of the Hidden People. Until one of his heirs produced a daughter.

Chapter Six

Kate awakened slowly, stretching out against the ultra-soft sheets, basking like a cat in the sunshine. As she opened her eyes, she remembered that she was not at home and should not be alone. She reached out. Odin's large frame was absent from the huge bed.

She sat up and scanned the room. The tranquil blue glow of the digital bedside clock glowed the truth with startling consequences. It was past noon. She'd slept for over twelve hours.

So that's what an orgasm can do to my sleeping patterns—actually allow me to sleep more than three or four hours at a time! She listened for any sounds of movement in the suite. The quiet unnerved her. "Odin?" she called.

A knock on the door broke the silence. "Odin?" she called again.

"No, ma'am. Mr. Borsson had to leave. He asked me to see to your needs. May I enter?" a voice called from beyond the closed door.

"Who are you?" Kate replied.

"I'm Harker, butler for the suite. Mr. Borsson left me explicit instructions regarding your needs, Miss Tabor."

Kate reached for a Hotel Redmond robe draped across the nightstand on her side of the bed. She donned it as she walked to the door.

"Hi, Harker. I'm Kate," she said, extending her hand to the butler.

Harker shook Kate's hand. "A pleasure to meet you, ma'am."

"Where's Odin?" Kate asked.

"Mr. Borsson had business to attend to. He had a variety of foods sent up. He also asked me to let you know that your vehicle has been repaired and is waiting for you in the garage."

"Wow. That's great. Did Mr. Borsson say anything else?" Kate asked.

Harker removed a sealed envelope from his jacket pocket. "He left you this letter. Would you like some coffee, Miss Tabor?"

"Yes, thank you."

"Cream and sugar?" Harker asked, skillfully pouring coffee from a carafe.

"Cream. Splenda if you have it," Kate replied.

"Very good, ma'am," Harker replied. "Mr. Borsson indicated that you might be hungry upon awakening. May I serve you?" He offered Kate the coffee.

"Thank you. You know, Harker, I'm not used to being fussed over. I don't want to be rude, but can't you buttle somewhere else and let me graze?"

"It's my job, ma'am. Please, enjoy my services and Mr. Borsson's generosity. I can prepare you an omelet or sandwich. What's your pleasure?"

Kate sighed. "I'd love an omelet."

"Does madam wish it to be vegetarian?" Harker asked.

"No. I eat meat. What do you have?" Kate replied.

"Everything. May I suggest a crab, asparagus and cherry tomato omelet with melted Gruyere?" Harker extended a filled coffee mug to Kate.

Kate accepted the coffee, taking a short, much-needed sip. "That's fine. Thank you. Do I have time to shower?"

“Of course. Mr. Borsson anticipated that you might wish a fresh change of clothes and had some things sent up from the shops. He didn’t want you to have drive all the way home, then back into the city.”

“How considerate. Where are the clothes?” Kate asked.

“In the dressing room, off the steam shower,” Harker replied.

“Okay. Well, then, it’s to the dressing room with me,” Kate said.

“Very good, ma’am.”

Kate wandered back into the bedroom, hoping that the steam shower and dressing room were nearby. She wasn’t ready to be pampered by a butler again. At least, not until she’d finished her coffee. *What must he think? That I’m Odin’s mistress? Or worse ... that I’m some floozy he picked up off the street. Crap. He did pick me up off the street. Damn. I am a floozy.*

Through French doors, which she’d thought was a closet, Kate discovered the dressing room and steam shower. The dressing room was larger than her kitchen. *Such is the suite life of Odin Borsson.*

Neatly folded and tied with lavender ribbon, she found a matching panty and bra set—La Perla, yet—cute, lacy anklets, a Christian Dior sweater in peacock blue and a pair of Buffalo jeans. *Gorgeous. Expensive. Payment for services rendered? But I didn’t fuck him. He did me ... I wonder what this is all about.*

The shower stall could easily fit four adults. Now *that* would be a party. She set the coffee mug down and opened Odin’s note. She expected a “thank you for the lovely evening/I’ll phone you later” note. A one-night stand’s polite adios.

The scented linen note card bore a familiar image—that of the hotel’s stained-glass window. The inside read simply, “Regards—Odin Borsson.” He had a sweeping signature, penned in fountain ink.

Kate frowned. “Right back at ya, Borsson.”

She opted to forego the steam element for a quick shower. The smell of garlic and basil were singing to her from beyond the bathroom. Harker was making beautiful music, and she was hungry!

Naturally, the clothing fit. The periwinkle-blue bra and panties fit like a second skin, and Kate felt sinful and guilty wearing them. La Perla undergarments were an extravagance she had never allowed herself. The teal sweater buttoned down the front and had quarter-length sleeves. The jeans rested on her hips provocatively.

“Odin has good taste,” Kate said, studying her reflection in the full-length mirror.

She exited the dressing room feeling refreshed and ultra-attractive. Maybe that was the idea.

“Hey, Harker! What smells so good?” she called.

Harker was nowhere to be seen. However, the table had been set for her. Omelet, toast, fruit and coffee.

The room service trays had been cleared, and her clothing, cast aside the night before during her debauch with Odin, had been neatly folded. She blushed. Now, that was embarrassing—to have a butler fold up the clothes she’d removed during a moment of passion.

A carefully printed note rested on her plate. Kate read it while biting into a strawberry. *Well, it seems Harker was called away by Mr. Borsson, himself. That means he’s here—somewhere. Hmmm.*

She sat and slid the steaming omelet off its silver serving tray onto her plate. She ate in silence, wondering exactly where Odin was hiding himself and when she was going to get to know him just a little better—in the Biblical sense.

Chapter Seven

Kate found her way to the hotel's garage and to her repaired vehicle. It had been washed, waxed and detailed. A new starter and alternator had been installed.

She offered the desk her Visa card in payment.

"Oh, no, thank you, ma'am. Mr. Borsson has taken care of the charges," the clerk replied.

"Can you reverse the charges and put them on my card?" Kate asked.

"No, ma'am, I'm afraid I can't do that."

Kate glanced at her wristwatch. It was nearly two o'clock in the afternoon. "Look, I need to go to work. Will you ask Mr. Borsson to call me? I'm sure he knows the number."

The clerk smiled. "Of course, miss. Have a nice afternoon."

Kate slid into the driver's seat of her car. "It didn't look this good when I bought it," she said aloud as the engine fired up, purring like a fat cat. She pulled out of the service bay and took back streets to her shop.

She flew in the back door of the bakery, frantic at being off-schedule.

Richey had, Kate noted gratefully, started mixing dough for the next morning. "Look what the cat dragged in," he teased. "Jesus, Kate. You look like a woman who just got laid. I want details. And where did you get that sweater? That is about the nicest thing I've ever seen you wear."

Kate stripped off the brilliant-blue sweater and donned a t-shirt.

"Oh, my God! You're wearing La Perla!" Richey exclaimed. "You didn't buy this stuff. I know you. You're a Goodwill enthusiast."

"All right. No, I didn't buy the bra or sweater. Or panties, jeans or socks, either. They were waiting for me."

"Where?" Richey asked.

"In the dressing room off the steam shower," Kate replied, tying her baker's apron around her waist.

Richey held a coffee mug out to Kate. "I need a break, and you need to talk. Spill it, Kate."

"My car broke down at the stoplight by the Redmond. He just happened by at the right moment. He's staying there. In the top-floor suite," Kate began.

"I served at a party there once. Holy shit. That's some swanky pad," Richey interjected.

Kate nodded. "While the hotel garage repaired my car, Odin..."

Richey interrupted. "Odin? His name is Odin?"

"Yes, his name is Odin," Kate replied.

Richey laughed. "Kate, do you know who Odin is?"

"My Odin? Or are you referring to some other Odin?" Kate asked.

"You know that window at the Redmond you're so obsessed about. The one with the warrior woman? She's a Valkyrie..."

"Yes, I know that," Kate replied.

"Odin was her boss."

Kate shot a puzzled look at Richey.

Richey took a sip from her own coffee mug. "Odin was the All-Father in Norse Mythology. He directed the Valkyries, kind of like their commander-in-chief."

"Oh. Okay. Norse? As in Norwegian mythology?" Kate asked.

Richey nodded. "Yeah. But I think most of what I know about the Norse gods comes from Iceland. In fact, Odin is a fairly common name over there, even today. Maybe your Mr. Borsson is Icelandic."

Kate giggled. "Whatever he is, I like it."

"Oh, darling—do tell," Richey encouraged.

"Odin wine and dined me in his suite. I'm not sure how it happened, but we ended up naked on the carpet. We didn't have intercourse, but he did ... you know..."

"Make you cum?" Richey asked.

"I hate that word, but yes."

"Did you return the favor?"

Kate shook her head. "He wouldn't let me. I wanted to! He's so gorgeous. I haven't felt this way about a man in years."

"Mr. Crooked Dick," Richey recalled.

"Well, Odin's dick doesn't hang a right around the corner, if you know what I mean. He's like a glorious Kenny Rogers-type with a bod that could make a teenage girl drool."

"When are you going to see him again?" Richey asked.

"I don't know. I'm not sure how to handle all this. I mean, he gifted me La Perla after a one-night stand. And I didn't give him so much as a hand job." Kate stood. "I can't think about this now. I've got work to do. That damned event planner is coming by around five o'clock with a delivery of *alimentos extraños de los Dios*."

"Oh, no. She came by. She and four hunks carrying Styrofoam cases. I had them stacked in the walk-in."

"I could have sworn she said five. Uh. Did she ask any questions?" Kate asked.

"Not really, no. She said she knew you were detained ... oh, my God. How did she know you were detained?"

Kate sat back down. "Odin said he was in town for a family reunion. I wonder if he's the client. Holy crap."

"Thursday evening is the event, right? I bet you'll find out then," Richey replied.

Kate tossed her head back. "I've got so much work to do. Where's my list? I can't worry about who's paying me right now. Fact of the matter is, I'm being paid to do a job, and whether or not Odin is my client, it has no bearing on the issue. His money is as good as the next client's."

"Well, then, honey. Wanna see what's in the walk-in?" Richey asked.

"I'm afraid to ask, but did they bring in the shipment of pickled rams' balls?"

Richey nodded. "I think so, yes."

"It can wait. I need to get my hands into some batter. Therapy."

"I'll get back to the dough. Should be ready to cut by now," Richey replied.

Kate went to her station and looked over her lists. One for her bakery and one for the event. Her eyes trailing down the list of her shop, she could easily see that Richey had the following day's baked goods well in hand. That left the catering menu. Spices ground. Check. Meats marinating. Check. Delivery of specialty items. Check.

Kate approached the walk-in cooler with trepidation. Knowing that pickled rams'

nuggets and rotten shark awaited her culinary skills and technique did not whet her appetite for the job.

The Styrofoam containers were far from clearly marked. The writing had to be Icelandic, though Kate was fairly certain she'd never seen the language before.

She scanned the boxes. One box had a definite logo—the outline of a Great White shark. “*Hkarl*,” she pronounced. “Ah, must have something to do with shark. Go figure.” She pushed the box aside, trying to discern the contents of the others. “*Hrutspungar*. Whatever the hell that is. And here we have something unpronounceable. Jesus. S-i-v-and something that looks like a ‘d’ with a cross through its tail.”

“That is an ‘eth’,” a gentle, teasing voice called from the kitchen. “The dish is *svið*. It is sheep’s head boiled in sour milk after being put through a fire. Very tasty. Especially the meat of the cheeks.”

“Odin?” Kate asked.

Odin stepped into the cooler. “Richey let me come into the kitchen. He’s a colorful fellow, isn’t he? I do hope I’m not breaking any health regulations.”

Kate took a step toward Odin, assuming she could hug him, but stopped, instead offering her hand. “Nice to see you again, Odin.”

“Is that the kind of greeting you give all your lovers?” Odin asked.

“Oh, so we are lovers?” Kate asked.

Odin slid in beside Kate. His bearded chin brushed across her throat. “Your perfume lingers on the tip of my tongue.”

A flood of readiness burst the dam between Kate’s thighs. She wanted him. Now.

“You know, Odin—we can lock the cooler door on the inside,” she whispered. Boldly, and deliberately, Kate ran her right hand down Odin’s backside, trailing her fingertips across his hips to his fly.

His arousal became apparent as she toyed with the bulge at his crotch.

“I don’t need to close the door,” Odin replied. He lifted Kate atop the sturdy Styrofoam crates containing the exotic and pungent Icelandic specialty foods.

Their mouths crushed together in almost animal-like desperation.

Kate wrapped her legs around Odin’s waist as he unfastened his button fly. A moment later she felt her new jeans—the jeans Odin had bought for her, being shredded. The sound of the denim ripping both alarmed and stimulated her.

In a single moment of clarity before again falling away into the fire of passion in a room at a temperature of eight degrees Celsius, she thought, *He’s strong. He’s very strong. And I want him. I’m going to have him.*

Odin’s fingers found their way into the pricey La Perla panties. With one tug the delicate fabric fell away. He probed Kate’s welcoming body with his erection—not entering—but not pulling away.

Kate lunged forward, nearly toppling her perch. “Now, Odin. Please,” she begged. “I’m going to explode if you don’t take me right now.”

Odin chuckled. Holding her fast with his strong right arm and exploring her breasts under her shirt and apron with his left hand, he thrust inward.

Kate gasped as Odin entered her. His hard thickness stretched and filled her. It burned into her like a hot knife into soft butter. The air around them grew foggy as their breaths grew shallow and their movements against each other quickened.

Odin was embedded into Kate up to his pelvic bone. She clung to him, grinding her

hips, pressing her swollen clitoris against him. He lifted her easily.

His lips went to her outstretched throat as he held her fast to him, plummeting into her over and over.

Kate felt dizzy. Lightheaded. Beyond aroused. Nothing short of his member inside her mattered. Nothing.

She saw the armored woman, straddling the standing body of the African warrior. She merged with the image. As Odin climaxed deep inside her, she felt the eruption of the Nubian warrior. As the female combatant reached orgasm in the vision of the dream, so did Kate.

And she screamed.

Kate bucked against Odin, trying to swallow more of him, all of him. She could feel the pulsing throes of his orgasm as it pumped into her.

Exhaustion fell quickly upon them. Still joined, his member still throbbing, and her body restricted and refusing to release him, they fell back against the crates.

They shared a passionate kiss. A loving kiss. Not the embrace of two ships harbored abreast at port before sailing away.

As their tongues spoke the sensual language of love, intertwining, teasing and caressing, Kate felt Odin's penis swell inside her. Sucking his tongue like she envisioned doing to his hard member, she encouraged him to greater heights. Rocking against the boxes, they made love a second time. More slowly. Their mouths never parting.

Kate came first. The position of her body atop the crates was perfectly aligned with the hilt of Odin's member. With each slow thrust, he titillated her sensitive clitoris in such a way that sent cascading waves of pleasure through her nether regions.

Odin grunted as he joined her in orgasm. A moment later he released her.

"Well, now that we've frightened any customers away..." he whispered.

Kate's chest rising and falling as she attempted to catch her breath, she pointed at the closed door to the cooler. "Richey," she huffed. "Closed the door. Not ... open ... on Wednesdays, either."

"Pickled rams' testicles," Odin replied.

Kate pulled back. "What?" she asked, shocked.

"We made love atop the *hrutspungar*. The scrotum of a ram. They are soured in spoiled milk and pressed flat. The taste is similar to salted cod." Odin paused. "Do you have any *rúllupylsa*? It has always been my favorite."

"Oh, Odin. I could have lived long and well without knowing what was in this box," Kate replied, slapping the package with her hand.

Odin leaned forward, kissing her hard on the lips. He then pulled away and buttoned his fly. "Why are you stocking traditional Icelandic foods?"

Kate slid off the stacked boxes and reached for her torn jeans. "Hmmm."

"I'm sorry. And you looked so lovely in them. Have you any clothing here?" Odin asked.

Kate nodded. "Will you grab my sweats from my locker for me? And these lovely treats are a part of the big catering job I have."

"Where's your locker?" Odin replied. "Though having you walk about with a bare bottom is quite fetching."

"And cold," Kate replied. "My locker is across the kitchen in the restroom. And Odin...?"

“Yes, Kate?”

“If I have that rollawhatsoever in here, you’d be the one to know. I can’t read the box contents. I’m hoping someone packed presentation instructions for me.”

“Let me retrieve your clothing. Then we’ll talk.”

Odin pushed open the cooler door. He walked across the kitchen to the restroom. Without knocking, he burst into the room.

“Hey!” Richey called, quickly closing his shirt. “I’m changing in here.”

“I’m sorry,” Odin replied.

“Don’t sweat it. I’m pretty sure I know what you came for,” Richey allowed his Hawaiian-print shirt to fall open, exposing his smooth, toned chest. He reached into a small metal locker, withdrawing a pair of red sweatpants.

“Thank you, for everything,” Odin said, taking the sweats from Richey with a sly wink.

“Yeah, no problem,” Richey replied as Odin exited. He continued speaking softly to himself, “No problem at all. My boss gets fucked in the walk-in by a hunk, and I get an eye full of something I am never, ever going to be able to get out of my mind. God, I need a man.”

Odin returned to the cooler where Kate donned the sweats. “Now, about these boxes here,” she began. “Would you be willing to translate the contents for me?”

Odin frowned. “I was hoping for a bit of post-coital cuddling.”

Playing it cool, though truly wanting the same, Kate replied, “I’ve got a banquet to cater and only a couple of days to get it all pulled together.”

“An Icelandic banquet?” Odin asked.

Kate shrugged. “Hell if I know. The Frau won’t give me any information about who is paying me, just that I need to put the dried fish in one of the wooden bowls she dropped by.”

“Only the dried fish requires a special presentation?” Odin asked.

“Oh, no. Everything. My list is on the counter. The dark bread...”

Odin interrupted, pointing to a small container on the floor. “This is the dark bread. *Bloðmir*. It is rye mixed with sheep’s blood and baked in the animal’s intestines.”

“Sounds like haggis,” Kate replied.

“No, that would be the *slátur*, the contents of which are clearly marked on the small package on the cooler counter. What a multifarious event.”

“I shall not be partaking of the traditional dishes. Anyway, the blood bread is supposed to be sliced at dawn and spread on an old plank. And as for the scrotum pickles, well, they...”

Odin interrupted again. “They must be served next to the sheep’s head. Will you be carving the *svið*?”

“God, I hope not. I’ve got staff for that—Richey and a couple of his friends, Fernando and Goliath.”

Odin smirked. “Goliath?”

Kate nodded. “That’s what they call him.”

“Any idea why?” Odin asked.

“I guess he has a thing for men named ‘David’—I don’t really know. He’s pretty good at slicing and serving. That’s all that matters. I am going to station myself by the desserts, as far away from the heads and privates of sheep as I can get. I think I’ll stick

Richey with the sheeps' nuggets."

"Do avoid the *hákarl*. I've never cared for it. Tastes like pickled tire rubber."

"Ah, that's the rotten shark, right? The only box with a logo. I bet the caption reads 'it bites back'," Kate replied.

Odin studied the fermented shark label. "Yes, it does say something like that." He laughed.

Kate stretched. "I've got so much work to do, Odin. I don't know how to politely say this, but, you've just got to leave. You are a major distraction."

"No need to explain. Though I hope to distract you further—say, Thursday?"

"Thursday's the big event. Jesus. Thursday is so soon. Thursday is tomorrow!"

Odin smiled. "Will you be ready?"

"Save for cubing the shark, I don't have to pull any of this stuff together until Thursday afternoon. Except for the desserts, I've got everything else ready," Kate replied.

"You won't be taking any shortcuts, will you? You will slice the meats at dawn and plate accordingly, yes?" Odin asked.

Kate nodded. "For the amount of money I'm being paid, I'll do whatever they want."

"And you have no idea who your employer is?"

"The Frau is pretty tight-lipped."

"*Frú*. In Iceland she would be a '*Frú*'. 'Frau' is German."

"And tight-lipped is the same in any language," Kate replied.

"Yes, it is. Thank you for showing me your cooler. I'll take my leave. May I call you later?" Odin asked politely.

Kate smiled. "I hope so, yes."

Odin kissed Kate tenderly. "I love a woman who follows traditions."

Chapter Eight

Kate watched Odin leave. Like before, he climbed into the rear of a waiting limousine. A limo that had waited for him while he screwed her in the cooler.

"Christ, he must control everything in his world," Kate said as Odin's car drove away. Using her deepest voice to imitate Odin, she continued, "Driver, I'm going to play a little patacake with the baker. Please be ready to depart upon my exit."

Amused and satiated, Kate returned to her kitchen.

Richey raised an interested eyebrow as Kate strolled by. "Man's got nards, honey. Nice nards, I might add."

Kate blushed. "I don't want to talk about it. If I do, I'll never get the ganache started."

Richey laughed. "What's to talk about? I heard most of it and saw ... well ... I saw too much. Or maybe not enough. Looks like you were his main course for lunch, that's for sure."

"I'm sorry. It was inappropriate of me to carry on like that in the workplace," Kate apologized.

"Like no one's ever had sex in a cooler before. I used to wait tables, honey. Been there, done that. Anyway, your little tête-à-tête inspired me to try something new with our product line."

"We kicked the last freak out who wanted us to bake him a French bread anal plug," Kate replied.

"I'm not talking about sculpting a giant phallus out of a crookneck squash. I'm talking gelato molds. An arrow through an open circle. Sexual in nature, but, oh, so innocent. We can call the new line 'Cooler Passion.' What do you think?"

Kate mulled over the idea for a moment. "Molded ice cream? Like penis pops?"

"Gelato. Sweeter and more creamy than ice cream. It freezes beautifully in molds. We could use that small chest freezer collecting dust in the storage room. I don't know ... maybe paint it red or something," Richey replied.

Kate reached for a clean apron. "Write me up a proposal. Sounds good, Rich."

"Thanks, Kate. So, while you're melting chocolate and I'm egg-washing the pecker loaves, are you going to share dirty details with me?"

"I thought you saw it. What's to tell?" Kate replied. She lifted a huge block of unsweetened chocolate onto the counter. The best chocolate, Valrhona Guanaja Lactee, all six pounds of it. Purchased and supplied by the Frú.

"I saw a few seconds of your encounter as I closed the cooler door. Right after you screamed. Holy shit. I'm so glad there wasn't a customer in the store! He had you fork-lifted and nailed. The image is burned into my brain, and I've been saying prayers of thanks-for-getting-Kate-laid ever since."

Kate brought an ice pick down onto the chocolate, fracturing it into several large pieces. "It was incredible, Richey. It's like—it's like we belong together. Like we're incomplete unless we're joined."

"Oooo ... do I feel love in the air?"

Kate whacked the block of chocolate again. "No. Not yet. But I want him. And he

wants me. If I didn't have this banquet tomorrow, I'd have gone with him and..."

Richey giggled. "Given him a ride in the limo?"

"Exactly," Kate replied. She flipped a switch on her gas range. The largest top burner's flame ignited. She added the chocolate pieces to the top of her double-boiler and watched as the smooth, unsweetened, deep-brown goodness melted. "I thought I'd never allow myself to feel this way again. I'm feeling passionate."

As soon as the chocolate pieces were partially melted, Kate removed the top of the double boiler from the rolling water bath and replaced it with a second top pan filled with fresh, heavy cream.

"You're in heat!" Richey remarked. "Oooo, and I smell cocoa."

"I love this part. Watching the chocolate melt away into the cream. It's magical," Kate replied.

"The pathway to heaven. Six steps to perfection. Ganache 101," Richey whispered.

"Yes. Exactly. Each step in creating the perfect ganache leads to a state of blissful indulgence."

"Can I lick the bowl when you're finished, mommy?"

Kate laughed. "I'll save it for you."

Kate dove into the preparations, concentrating on the almighty dollar and desperately trying not to think about Odin Borsson. Too busy to notice, she forgot to eat, subsisting upon only mass quantities of black coffee for several hours.

The shop had long closed up for the day when Kate finally sat down, mug in hand and a slice of French bread in the other. She dipped the bread into a small bowl of olive oil and dill. Her stomach growled.

When did I last eat? She thought back ... the omelet in Odin's suite. She glanced at the wall clock. "Thirteen hours. It's been thirteen hours."

She took a sip of coffee and swallowed the steaming liquid without tasting it. She set the bread aside.

"Everything is ready," she said. She looked at her notes. She and the food stuffs were to be picked up at three o'clock sharp. Her staff was to arrive independently by three-thirty. Set up completed by four-thirty. Ice sculpture to arrive at five p.m. Plating of perishables and desserts on buffet line at five-twenty. Final strange ritual to be completed at exactly five-fifty-five p.m. Be in place to serve by six o'clock when first guests arrive. *Will they know if I don't say the blessing over the banquet tables? Who'd know? Am I to be watched? Am I not only the caterer but the dinner show?*

She looked into the depths of her coffee mug. Her own tired reflection looked back at her. She swirled the coffee, watching the mini-vortex disrupt the reflection before settling. Kate held her breath as the swirling, steaming liquid revealed more than a few stray coffee grounds to her.

The coffee and the man are the same color. Rich brown. The coffee and the man. Strong, black, potent. Kate closed her eyes. The man in my dreams—the powerful man who made love to the warrior woman. Standing, fucking—in a field of corpses. She took a deep breath, holding it. She could see their faces. The woman's. Radiant blue eyes, her body enveloped in a heavenly blue glow. Like St. Elmo's Fire. She was a catalyst and harness for the elemental flames of the soul. The Light of the Hidden People. Kate recalled a word from childhood—a word said but once in a dream. *Huldufólk*. The woman in her dreams was their queen. Their light. But she left them. She left them for the

African. She broke her vow to the gods for him.

The images came grainy and blurred—like an old super-eight movie reel. The waking dream was unfocused, yet turbulent and powerful in its disorder.

They had climaxed, but remained intertwined. The dream man, Ande Ajani, and the dream woman, Alfheithur. Alfheithur slid away from Ande Ajani's seven-foot frame. He dropped to his knees and vomited.

"Why?" he asked. He could not rise from the carnage. He was becoming a part of it. He knew he had been poisoned.

Alfheithur allowed a single tear to roll down her cheek. She had never cried for a dying man before. "I need a son. A son to carry my divinity into future generations. A son who can never use the powers, but who will pass them on. He will be impotent to his godhood."

Ande Ajani seized, his body undulating under death's grip. He choked the question out a second time, his voice barely discernible. "Why?"

Alfheithur unsheathed her sword. "I vowed I would mate with only the finest warrior. A man who could be king. A man with heart and passion."

His strength of will incredible against the flow of his demise, Ande Ajani forced a moment of composure. "Why kill me if I am of kingly stock?"

"Only a god can love me and live. Should I take one of them to my bed, however, I shall awaken in the morning as fresh as a virgin and just as barren. Only one god can give me children, and then, only daughters. Daughters born to ride into battle collecting souls of fallen soldiers destined for conscription into the All-Father's ranks. I refuse to fill the lines of his private army by bearing him Valkyries. I have refused to share my bed at all. I want to end the cycle of death and live to see the fall of Odin and his armies. Thereby, I have mated with a mortal man. The strongest and bravest of men. And for that, I am cursed to live a mortal life, and you, Ande Ajani, will die for my selfishness. I'm sorry."

Blood trickling from his mouth, Ande Ajani looked up, staring into the eyes of his murderer. "It is how it must be. I forgive you. I am ready to die. I came here to die. Though I had not expected to die in this fashion."

Chapter Nine

Kate shook her head, clearing her mind of the strange and awesome vision from her coffee cup. She rose to her feet, her legs feeling weak and unsteady under her. And then her world went black.

Logically, Kate knew she had fainted.

Realistically, Kate knew she was uninjured—just down. Down for the count.

She couldn't force herself to consciousness.

Deeper than any dream or fatigue-born hallucination from the bottom of a coffee mug, she saw herself walking across a great, empty plain. She wore armor and carried a sword nearly half her size across her back. In the distance behind her, a horse grazed peacefully.

Ahead of her, approaching her, came a tall man shrouded by a dark blue cloak. His walking staff bore symbols she knew she should recognize. Above him two ravens swirled, and at his heels two gray wolves slinked.

It was a standoff.

The man was clearly angry. His right hand gripped the staff with white knuckles. Body language can say more than words. But speak he did. Through the darkness under his hood, his voice resounded like thunder. "You have condemned us all."

Kate held her ground. The leather, steel and bronze shielded her doubts. "I could not allow it to go any further."

The man pulled back his hood. His rage stormed across his face. In his single blue eye. "It was not your choice! You are my servant. It is your duty to obey!"

Kate shook her head. "No longer. I've been your slave long enough. It ends here. My body shall not produce your warrior maidens, nor shall a daughter be born of my line—ever again."

"You are insolent and willful! But I forgive you. Now, come home."

Kate chuckled. "Feel trapped, Odin? Feel the nails being driven into your coffin as I single-handedly lay waste to your armies?" She paused. "Good."

Odin closed his eyes and exhaled. His hot breath enveloped Kate, piercing her flesh. "I am left with no choice. You are banished. No god shall help thee. No faithful man shall comfort thee. You and your children's children shall feel my wrath until the end of time." Odin spat on the ground, then turned his back.

Kate shivered. She had known it would come to this—but hearing the words was no less painful. "I've chosen a mortal life, Odin. My sons will never know their heritage and no daughter shall be issued forth from my bloodline ever again. It matters not that you have banished me from the community of gods and goddesses, nor shall it ever affect my progeny. What good is divinity when you don't know you possess it? Your cursing and rants are as pitiful as you are."

Odin did not turn to face Kate ... or Kate as the armored woman from her dreams.

Up from the earth a great wailing rose, surrounding and penetrating Kate with its mournful cries. Rocks overturned and crags opened. The Hidden Folk emerged, to say good-bye to their queen. To bid farewell to their light. The Light of the Hidden People.

Kate withheld tears. Her decision, though painful, would save the Hidden Folk from

Odin's love of war, too. Her decision would save generations of men from being conscripted into never-ending battle. Someday, they'd understand.

* * * *

A voice called to Kate through the darkness of unconsciousness, rousing her. "Kate! Kate, wake up! Oh, my God ... Kate?"

Kate's eyes fluttered open.

"I'm phoning 911. Hold on, Kate." It was Richey.

Kate reached out weakly. "No."

"Kate—can you sit up?" Richey asked.

Kate rolled onto her back. She'd fallen in an awkward position. Her right arm was asleep. "Yeah. I'm okay. I must have passed out. What time is it?"

"It's six-thirty in the morning," Richey replied.

Kate sat up and shook out her arm. "Well, so much for me going home for a few hours."

Richey helped Kate into a chair. "What happened? Did you trip?"

"I think it was a combination of too much coffee and no food. My blood sugar plummeted, and my body followed."

"I'll make you something to eat."

"Thanks, hon. I'd like a glass of water, some ibuprofen and just a hunk of French bread for now. I need to clear my head."

Richey offered Kate a bottle of water and a loaf of bread from the day-old basket. "*Bon appétit.*"

Kate opened the bottle and drained it, then tore off a piece of the crusty bread and chewed it mechanically. Her mouth not quite emptied, she began to piece together her evening before the fall. "I must have blacked out sitting right here. Then I dreamed I had a vision in my coffee mug before I dreamed of blacking out and having a second vision."

"Mystic," Richey replied, handing Kate her bottle of ibuprofen. "Want me to interpret?"

"It's all kind of fading. You know that dream I've had since childhood?"

"The warrior woman?"

Kate nodded. "I saw another part of her story, and then I became her. It was like I was living her life. She really broke a lot of hearts."

"Oooo ... a femme fatale?"

"No, not exactly. More like a beloved monarch to all these little munchkin things—only smaller—and..."

"And what?" Richey asked. "I'm making some fresh coffee. Want a cup?"

Kate pointed to her toppled coffee mug on the floor. "Yeah. Not what I need, but definitely what I want. And the warriorress—is that a word? She seemed to hold a special purpose in ... holy shit." Kate paused. "Odin was in my dream."

"Of course, he was. You screwed him silly yesterday. First time in what, seven years? Not surprising you dreamed of him."

"No, Odin wasn't Odin. He was Odin. The real Odin. That Norse god dude."

Richey pressed the button on the coffee grinder, sending the nutty aroma of fresh-ground beans throughout the kitchen. "Cool. Maybe you are really that chick, Brynhild."

"Who?" Kate asked.

“You did bump your head, didn’t you? Brynhild is the warrior woman in Norse mythology, and you know about her, Kate. She’s the one in the window at Hotel Redmond.”

Kate nodded. “Right. Right. I knew that. But that isn’t her name.”

Richey handed Kate a mug filled with steaming black coffee. “What’s her name?”

“Alfheimur.”

“That’s a curious name. What does it mean?”

“The Light of the Hidden People,” Kate replied. “Look, I don’t have time to go home. I’m going to shower here and change into some clean whites. I hope I have some.”

“No problem. The laundry delivered yesterday. You should have crisp, clean whites for tonight.”

Kate sighed. “The banquet.”

“I’m thinking of it as the twenty-thousand-dollar buffet. I’m looking forward to working it. Maybe I’ll meet some nice old Icelandic gentleman.”

Kate giggled. “I did!”

Chapter Ten

Showered and refreshed, Kate changed into clean baker's whites. Thank God, she had a pair of clean socks and panties in her locker. In truth, there was little she could do to prepare for the banquet. Everything except presentation—and the final, ritualized, bizarre task—had to take place on-site. She knew the location, but had never catered an event in so grand a location before.

Raven Hall. The *crème de la crème* of party venues. Located on the first floor of an elaborate and well-maintained Victorian mansion outside the city limits, Raven Hall had once been a grand ballroom. Kate smiled to herself. One good review of her catering business—especially a good review for an event at Raven Hall—could make her. But, the event was a private affair, and she could not simply invite a food writer to the function.

The shop buzzed with activity, giving Kate no time to fret or fuss. She closed the shop at two-thirty, ushering the last customer out with an extra loaf of nipple bread.

"Rich!" she called. "Will you take care of the register while I get changed for the banquet? Jesus, the car will be here in thirty minutes."

"You're stressing, Kate."

"Yes, I am!" Kate called as she fled the storefront for the convenient and calming ladies' room.

Kate switched whites—from simple baker to caterer extraordinaire. She had a special hat and apron when catering. The apron had her bakery logo on the bib. Good advertisement since she normally didn't have time to hand out business cards at functions.

Crisp and clean, made of heavy brushed cotton, her "event whites" made her feel powerful. Beautiful. She brushed her dark hair into a pony tail and applied a faint peachy lipstick. Her eyes popped out as she lined them in dark brown and applied a few layers of black mascara.

"Dressed to kill," she said to her reflection. "Dressed like you're worth a million bucks—or at least twenty thousand plus tips." She made the universal "ta-da!" stance before the mirror. "Show time!"

The refrigerated van arrived right on schedule. The tall, blond driver silently helped Kate load the food stuffs. When he did speak, she noted an accent similar to that of the event coordinator. "You Icelandic?" she asked.

"I am," the driver replied.

"What's your name?"

"Gisli Jonsson," he replied. "I am named for a very famous character in Iceland's history, Gisli, the Outlaw."

Kate smiled. "Are you an outlaw, too?"

Gisli laughed. "No, ma'am. I just drive."

"Will you be at the dinner tonight?" Kate fished.

"Of course," Gisli replied.

Kate pursed her lips. *I want information!* "Large event, huh? I've prepared enough food for an army."

Gisli looked at Kate. His startling blue eyes unnerved her. "That would be

appropriate.”

Damn! Looks like I have to go point-blank with this guy. “What exactly did I cook for?”

Gisli lifted the last container into the back of the van. “Many things will happen tonight. A birthday, a wedding. Many unveilings.”

“So much packed into one night?” Kate asked.

“We cannot often be together in one place,” Gisli replied.

“Is this a family reunion?” Kate asked.

Gisli nodded.

“Do you know Odin Borsson?” she continued.

“A well-respected and much-loved man. Yes. I know him.”

“Will he be at the banquet?” Kate asked.

“Undoubtedly.”

Kate tensed, withholding a rush of excitement. “You’re certain?”

“He is the patriarch of our clan.”

Kate nodded. He knew all along I was preparing for his event. He knew! “I see.”

Gisli opened the passenger side door for Kate. “You will, yes.”

The drive to Raven Hall was filled with silence. Gisli concentrated upon the safe passage of the delicacies while Kate nervously ran through her tablescape designs in her notebook.

The van pulled up to the service entrance of the hall, and within three minutes, its contents were unloaded into the kitchen by a gaggle of blond men who strongly resembling Gisli. “Relatives of yours?” Kate asked.

Gisli gave her a puzzled look. “We are not related, madam.”

“You all look so much alike,” Kate replied.

“The Icelandic gene pool is shallow,” Gisli answered, escorting Kate into the kitchen. “I must leave you now. Will you be well until your staff arrives?”

Kate nodded. “Yes, thanks.”

And then, she was alone.

The kitchen of Raven Hall was fully equipped, modern and clean. Impressive. Grand. It was the nicest kitchen she’d ever seen.

She exited the double-doors leading to the reception area. As had been promised, the steam tables had been set up and the cold-food areas filled with ice.

The cavernous room brimmed with color and soft lighting. Deep, rich tapestries lined the walls, and from above, huge antique chandeliers cast an other-worldly glow. Florists had already delivered and erected decadent sprays of roses and lilies, deep reds and soft lavenders kissed by pure shades of pink and white.

The buffet serving tables lined one wall, and dozens of crisp, white linen tablecloths covered round tables scattered around outside the highly varnished dance floor, which reflected the light of the chandeliers so well the polished wood could have been a mirror.

A canopy had been raised and decorated with long swags of still more lilies and roses. Kate smiled. “The wedding ceremony. Gorgeous.”

Everything was absolutely perfect. Nothing had been missed. Even the crystal cake platters and serving trays shone with polished brilliance.

“Jesus, they’re spending a ton of money on this evening,” she said aloud.

A voice replied. A voice she recognized. A voice she craved. “Money is

unimportant.”

“Odin,” Kate said, turning. “This is your family reunion. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Would it have mattered?” Odin replied.

“No. Well, yes. Maybe. I don’t mix business with pleasure,” Kate said.

“I didn’t intend for you not to know. We never pursued that course of conversation. We were busy, if I recall.”

Kate blushed. “We were.”

Odin reached out and pulled Kate into his strong arms. “I have matters to which I must attend right now, but I hope to see you later.”

“I’ll be behind the dessert table, serving the cake,” Kate replied. “But you have to eat your veggies before you get dessert.”

They kissed briefly. “Yes, ma’am. I’ll be eating everything on my plate tonight. I’ll see you in a few hours.”

Odin’s smooth manner and slow voice left a smoldering in Kate’s belly that she knew couldn’t be extinguished by a simple kiss. “I look forward serving you.”

Odin turned. “I shall require extra helpings of *Devil’s Food Kate* tonight. My sweet tooth and my need for your rich flavor has not yet been sated.”

Kate shuddered. “Well, that message came through loud and clear. Talk about a chill down my spine. Odin Borsson, you are a caterer’s nightmare! How am I to concentrate on my dishes when thoughts of you ... um ... having your Kate and eating her, too, are running rampant around in my brain?”

His deep chuckle only encouraged her to dream of his mouth pressed against her nether regions. “Be certain you take note of some of the finer details about you, Kate. I think you will particularly enjoy the china I had created especially for this evening.”

Kate glanced toward the buffet line’s plate station. She walked over to it, hoping Odin was enjoying the confident sway in her hips. She lifted a plate, its reverse side facing her. “This is Grant Madison china. Jesus, it’s about fifty-dollars per plate to have a custom design.” She turned the plate. The design was ... familiar. “Odin, you put the stained-glass window on the plate. The warrior woman! Hey ... I kind of had a dream about you—and her—when I...”

There was no reply.

Kate looked over her shoulder. “Hmmm. Odin has left the building.” She trailed her fingers across the fine porcelain plate. “The Valkyrie,” she whispered. “Nice to see you finally left the hotel window and the dark recesses of my mind.” As she returned the plate to its rack, she stopped, noticing something different about the image of the warrior. The face. “That’s me.” Kate held the plate closer. “Christ, that *is* me! He put my face on the Valkyrie’s body and made me into a set of china!”

Holding the plate, Kate pulled up a well-appointed, cushioned dining chair and sat. “Kate, the Valkyrie. It’s just like in my dream.” She turned the plate over again.

“Grant Madison, Austin, Texas. 2006. Alfheithur, pattern number SO9.” She paused, running her finger under the very fine print, stopping at the word *Alfheithur*. “I know that name. I know her.”

She closed her eyes for a moment. Only a moment. There was too much to do to dwell on her image emblazoned on fine china right now. But that name ... *Alfheithur*...

A brilliant flash of light—like ball lightning—passed before her closed eyes. There, as if her eyelids were movie screens and her eyes projectors from the depths of her soul,

she embraced the light, followed it and watched the tale it carried unfold.

She saw her own birth—no—the moments before her birth. The same light had been with her in utero. Kate remembered. She remembered long dormant pre-birth memories. Memories of her fathers before her. Generation after generation of baby boys, born without the ability to recall the memories. Generation after generation of baby boys, born never knowing the light. The Light of the Hidden People.

“I am...” Kate paused, hesitating to vocalize the truth pressing against her throat, wanting only to be expelled and recognized. “I am Alfheithur.”

She opened her eyes, rose and replaced the plate. A refreshing new bounce to her step, Kate continued checking the banquet preparations. She smiled softly, knowingly. “No. I am not she, but her daughter. The first daughter born in a thousand years. Holy crap, I’ve got good parentage!”

Kate looked at her hands. “These are still my hands—my busy baker’s hands. And these are my hips and breasts and elbows. I am unchanged, save that I am recalling ... recalling what, exactly? A past life? That’s not quite it, either. I need Richey.” She glanced at her wristwatch and headed back into the kitchen.

Richey had arrived and was unpacking the freezer cases. “Well, there you are. Two hours ’til show time, and you’re wandering about the joint? Oh, and incidentally, you’re not the only one who’s going to get lucky with a Viking god. I got your driver’s phone number. He is delicious. And so very much my type!”

“That’s great, Rich. Hey—you know all that reincarnation spiritualist stuff you were into a year ago?” Kate asked.

Richey shrugged. “Sure.”

“I just had what you might call a past-life experience. Except that it was for this life.”

“That’s déjà vu, honey,” Richey replied.

“No. It’s not that. I didn’t get the feeling I’d been there, done that before. It was like I suddenly awakened to whom I really am. My true identity,” Kate whispered.

Richey laughed. “I was nineteen before I came out with who I really am.”

“I don’t mean that I’m gay, Rich. I am more than just Kate Tabor, however.”

“Well, bully for you. However, it is Kate Tabor who needs to whip her sorry little ass into gear and get this banquet set up. So put your other personality aside for now, and let’s get this thing set up, hmmm?” Richey paused. “Oh, wait! I hear the sound of twenty thousand little dollars flying out the window because the rams’ balls went warm and the flambé dessert got cold.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Kate replied. “But I think I was born to more than just this.”

Richey raised his arms as if cursing the heavens. “There’s more to life than just this? Where have I been?”

“Icing my dicks for the last few years,” Kate replied.

“Oh, so that’s why my hands are always so sticky!”

Kate laughed at Richey’s joke, then calmed herself by taking a deep breath. “Odin is here.”

“You do have an evening planned out for you, don’t you? I’ll be cheering you on from behind the fresh meat—where I belong. Will he be taking his dessert in private this evening?” Richey asked.

Kate looked at her friend and employee sheepishly. “If he does, will you cover my

station for me?"

Richey put his hands on his hips and shook his shoulders like a diva. "Meats and sweets. Hmmm ... sounds like the name of a bar I visited in San Fran, but, yes, I think I can handle that. You'll just owe me a day off when that blond chauffeur wants to drive me home. If you get my meaning. With pay!"

Kate slapped her chest over her heart. "Ouch. But, okay."

Richey brightened. "Fernando!" he called.

"Richey, 'ello. And the lovely Kate. How are you?" Fernando greeted. He kissed Kate on both cheeks.

"Where's my kiss, Fernie?" Richey teased.

"Ah, business before pleasure. How shall you use me tonight, Kate? Do you want me to serve the tapas? I am good with finger foods."

"That would be fine. Is Goliath with you?" Kate asked.

"He is talking to a blond man by the cars. And I think they have made a connection."

Richey stomped his foot down. "That bitch! He's mine!"

"Easy come, easy go, Rich. Let's get to work," Kate replied.

Like a well-oiled machine, Kate's team rallied to her support, getting the food stuffs plated and the main buffet table set according to her sketches. Kate pulled the blood bread from its dark wrapper and shook her head. "Crap. I didn't slice this up at dawn. I was unconscious at dawn. Crap! I promised to follow all the traditions, too."

Richey passed Kate a serrated-edged knife. "Who's gonna know? Slice the damn thing, get it plated up on this musty old piece of driftwood, and let's get on with it."

Kate nodded. "I promised, Rich."

"Well, this is one of those 'don't ask/don't tell' kinds of things. Savvy?"

Kate sliced into the dark, blood-infused rye bread, deftly creating a pile of wafer-thin slices. She laid them out on the graying plank. "He's going to know," she murmured. "And he isn't going to be happy with me." Kate recalled her dream. "Won't be the first time I've felt his wrath."

Richey and Fernando passed by, each carrying a large silver tray graced with precisely arranged meats and cheeses. "Quit mumbling to yourself, Kate. Now, you want this out by the meats or the hors d'oeuvres?"

"Put it with the traditional foods, just in case someone wants to try something not completely inedible from that table," Kate replied.

Richey laughed. "Oooo ... that's cold, Kate. Better watch your attitude, or you'll end up serving the ram pickles!"

Chapter Eleven

Everything was in place within an hour. Steam rose from the hot water-bath serving tables, in competition with the dry-ice chilling the cold foods. The ice sculptor had arrived and set up his colossal piece of frigid art in the center of the champagne fountain.

"What is it?" Kate asked, not recognizing the form.

"Mjollnir," the artist replied.

"What's that? It looks like a giant hammer to me."

"Exactly. It is the hammer of Thor. Mjollnir. It shall bless the Thorrablot."

Kate sighed. "I think that's my job."

"To give a blessing?" the artist asked.

"I'm supposed to make a little speech five minutes before the doors are opened. This entire job has been fraught with hard work, bizarre foods and rituals I don't understand."

"Just because you don't understand them doesn't mean they are any less powerful."

Kate looked at the ice sculptor. "You're one of them, aren't you?"

He nodded. "So are you. Or you wouldn't be here."

"I almost believe you. My experience with them has been ... interesting, to say the least. Who are these people?" Kate asked.

The sculptor smiled. "I think you will know us all very well, soon enough. Look at the time. The beasts will be gathering at the gate shortly. Are you ready for them?"

"A hungry crowd? Bring them on. This isn't the first big party I've catered. It's just the strangest." Kate looked at her watch. "Jesus, it's already five-forty-five. I've got ten minutes." She reached into her apron pocket, removing a folded slip of paper. The "blessing words" were written upon it. She'd practiced them once, then tucked the prayer away—it unnerved her.

She rehearsed the script mentally. *To the east, to the west. To the north and to the south, I welcome the families of the old ones to the bosom of the raven. Wolf-time, axe-time, wind-time behind us, the sun rising before us and a new day dawns in our cups. We celebrate the birth of Thor, the marriages of our kin and confirm Thengils, son of Hodur and Hel, into our clan. I, the bearer of the meal and keeper of the hearth, break bread of my own free accord and offer it to the old ones with...*

"Who wrote this thing?" Kate crumpled the paper in her hand.

Fernando and Goliath moved into position. Richey followed. The three drones to her queen-bee status.

From the foyer outside the closed doors leading into Raven Hall, a trumpet sounded. A long, slow, deep wail. It could have called troops to battle. Kate knew it was only to call the hungry to the table—her table.

The wide, ornate double doors burst open. Kate stood before the ice sculpture, her hands folded neatly across her apron. She kept a watchful eye out for Odin. Within the smiling throng of tall blonds and redheads she did not see him. But her female parts felt his presence. Hidden behind her professional demeanor, she was ready for sex. His sex—however he wanted to give it to her.

Kate started as a large gray wolf loped into the hall on a fine silver chain held by the right hand of a tall, regal-looking man. The man could only hold the leash with his right

hand—for his left arm was missing. The wolf seemed calm enough, but its red eyes looked at her as if she were a vat of kibble. It licked its chops. Kate shuddered. No one else seemed to mind the huge predator. Most eyes were on her and her tables. Hungry eyes—as hungry as the wolf’s, and so much more fierce.

A beautiful, but sad-eyed woman walked into the room on the arm of a dwarf. She rested her hand on his shoulder as he led her to their table. She wore a brilliant necklace of cascading diamonds. It radiated across her bare chest above her strapless black gown like the aura across the night sky. Kate knew her story immediately—it was the sad tale of many women who married for wealth rather than love. The woman was the little man’s trophy wife. The necklace was her trophy and only joy. She had sold her soul to wear a star around her neck. “How sad,” Kate whispered.

A most impressive man burst into the room, his red hair uncombed and wild, and a diminutive, lithe woman on his arm; he chortled and laughed his way across the dance floor to the main table. He wore motorcycle leathers emblazoned with the symbol Kate now recognized as Thor’s Hammer. The woman wore tight, low-cut jeans and chaps and a leather halter top. Her incredibly long, golden hair swayed across her tiny bum as she walked proudly alongside her man.

Kate smiled as a lovely, but tired-looking woman walked in carrying an infant, her husband two steps behind her with the diaper bag. They were like night and day, this mother and father. She, blonde and radiant, the perfect visage of beautiful motherhood. He, dark and somber, but with a slow pulsing glow—no doubt the pride of fatherhood.

Directly behind them strolled a tall, lanky, red-headed man whose very nature screamed “Ouch!” Fire incarnate. Walking passion. Kate’s nipples hardened as he caught her gaze. He smiled seductively—but held fast to the hand of a well-dressed, educated-looking woman. They moved to seats near the arch. Perhaps they were the couple to be wed during the night’s festivities.

Kate’s hands were sweating. The folded piece of paper in her hand grew moist. Fear hit her in the pit of her stomach, and she wanted to flee—as the oddest guest of all entered the hall.

Deformed and with a bluish tinge to his flesh, the guest moved slowly like a lumbering giant. But his deformed features and skin tone were not frightening. Kate pitied his handicap. It was his date—his guest. Wrapped around his neck and shoulder, raising its head and hissing as it tasted and smelled the air with its forked tongue, clung a giant serpent. A boa constrictor? A python? Kate didn’t know. She didn’t want to get close enough to know. The lyrics of an old Jim Stafford song rang through her mind ... *I don’t like spiders and snakes...*

The blue giant with his herpetological friend took a seat next to the one-armed man and the wolf. The woman with the child pulled a chair up close to the blue man and stroked the serpent—lovingly. Kate cringed.

The celebrants milled about for a few moments before taking their seats. The round tables across from the dance floor became a sea of faces—all looking at her. How awkward and uncomfortable. Kate preferred to be in the background—with her dickies and bowls of icing. This was too much!

At last, Odin entered. He had donned a light-gray silk suit for the occasion. A Jodhpuri suit with a long coat and delicate embroidery at the cuffs.

His eyes were on her and her alone. She had to glance away. His gaze made her feel

naked in a crowd. His gaze made her even more ready to consume him.

He nodded his head to her as he approached the center of the room. That must be my cue. Kate unfolded the blessing and carefully began to read it aloud. Her voice hung on the air like a fine mist, as sweet and as tantalizing as the array of desserts to her right. She could sense it, herself. As she spoke, it seemed to her that honey was dripping from her lips. Never had any words come purer or more serene. “To the east, to the west. To the north and to the south, I welcome the families of the old ones to the bosom of the raven. Wolf-time, axe-time, wind-time behind us, the sun rising before us and a new day dawns in our cups. We celebrate the birth of Thor, the marriages of our kin and confirm Thengils, son of Hodur and Hel, into our clan. I, the bearer of the meal and keeper of the hearth, break bread of my own free accord and offer it to the old ones with deep respect. I prepared this feast according to hallowed traditions. This banquet is fit for the gods and each of you.” Kate paused, knowing the next line contained unfamiliar words. Words which she knew she should recognize, but had never before said aloud—at least in this lifetime. “I call upon Odin to offer the sumble in celebration of our Thorrablot.”

Odin stepped forward. An older, yet impressive woman offered him a drinking horn.

Ignoring the woman, he looked only at Kate as he took the horn from the woman’s hand. “Kate, fill my horn, and as it passes amongst my kin, keep it filled.” She followed Odin’s gaze to an earthen pitcher resting against a table leg. She lifted the heavy urn and filled Odin’s horn with the strong, frothy malt. Odin whispered into her ear, “I’ll be having you for dessert later, you know.” Kate looked into his eyes. “I know,” she replied softly.

Kate was surprised to see that the glasses on the table were already full. She simply had to walk around and refill the empties.

Odin raised his bone and silver horn in a toast. “I raise my horn and toast my glorious past. Who I was and what I represented. I raise my horn and toast who I shall be and to my future—to our future.” He drank. The congregation of his kin followed suit.

Odin raised his horn a second time. “I salute and honor my kin! May your deeds be sung for all times and may your new adventures prove fruitful!”

He raised the horn a third time. “I salute and honor our fallen comrades.”

Some of the guests stood and saluted with their glasses.

Kate deftly filled the empty glasses.

“I welcome new family! Lilia, Thengils and Kate,” Odin called. He took a long draught.

Kate froze. “Me? He’s welcoming me?” she exclaimed mid-pour into the cup of a hauntingly beautiful woman. “Why’s he welcoming me? I just work here!”

The woman laughed. “Kate, dear sister. Of course, he’s welcoming you. You have been too long away from our family.” She held out her hand. “I am Niorun.”

Kate set the pitcher down and shook Niorun’s hand. “Nice to meet you. I’m afraid I don’t understand all this. I’m sorry—is this part of the blessing? It wasn’t written down for me.”

Niorun laughed. Her voice echoed through the hall. “Do you not feel the boiling of your blood at the sign of the hammer and scent of the traditional foods?”

Kate laughed. “Food is my business. I can’t become emotional over it. And no offense, but some of those traditional foods were a chore to handle.”

“They are eaten to remind us never to be wasteful. They are a lesson in humility for

us,” Niorun replied.

“If I had to eat testicle pickles, I’d remember the lesson well.” Kate lifted the pitcher and poured into the cups of those she could reach without moving away from Niorun. Odin’s eyes were on her. Burning into her.

“Don’t worry, Kate. We’ll help you. We know you better than you know yourself. Have you not embraced the meaning of your dreams and visions? They are keys to unlock your birthright.” Niorun said, exuding warmth and compassion in her tone of voice.

“Who are you?” Kate replied.

“As I said, I am Niorun, lesser goddess of dreams and visions. I’ve been with you your entire life.”

“Goddess?” Kate asked.

“As are you. But I cannot keep you from your duties. Please, fill the cups. My kin are thirsty, and the toasts continue. We shall speak later.”

“I’ll be serving dessert later,” Kate replied.

“I’ll find you. Don’t worry. Even if it is through your dreams,” Niorun replied.

That’s not too comforting, Kate thought, quickly moving to fill glasses.

Kate counted a hundred and nine guests, not including Odin, the snake, the wolf and the funky blue man as she passed the pitcher of ale. As soon as the toasting had concluded, she dashed to the dessert table, hoping she could fade into the display and a bit of anonymity. It seemed they all knew her. They knew of her dream. *One of them even referred to me as “Alfheithursdottir”—whatever the hell that is!*

Never had she been so glad to be stationed at the dessert table. *No one starts with desserts ... okay ... one of them started with dessert. In fact, a plate of chocolate delights.* It was the smoldering red-haired man whom she presumed was about to be married.

When he took a bite of his chocolate cake, it felt as if he was biting into her in nasty, forbidden places. Kate’s polite smile hid her furious desire to have the fiery man come around the table...

The other guests, Odin included, made their way through the buffet line in the standard set out by polite society. Kate smiled. Richey was apparently having the time of his life offering the obnoxious traditional dishes to Odin’s clan members. She could hear the women giggling at his jokes. “Have a ram’s testicle, dear. They’re good and so good for you!”

She wanted to gag—but the women were taking two or three servings of the noxious ram flesh away with them. “Jesus, I hope my tapas go over as well,” Kate said aloud.

“We must eat of the traditional foods for a Thorrablot. Then, we shall enjoy your modern delicacies.”

“Odin, I didn’t know you were behind me,” Kate replied, turning to see the handsome man in gray.

“When I am in my element, I can move like smoke in fog. I came to let you know that I ate my vegetables. And I’m ready for dessert.”

Kate leaned in toward Odin. “You’re paying me to work tonight, Odin. I can’t have a tryst with you in the walk-in again.”

“Really? It will be some time before you need to slice the cake and pour the coffee, my little Valkyrie. You were magnificent serving the ale for the toasts. And your speech was perfect.”

“Thank you,” Kate replied.

“But I can tell that the *bloðmir* slicing did not occur at dawn,” Odin continued.

Kate froze. “I’m sorry. I fell asleep.”

“It’s all right. The rituals were more of a test than traditions, any way. If you made the effort to follow the ridiculous preparation procedures set out for you, then you were truly ready to serve the clan. Tell me, did you dream when you fell asleep during the crucial slicing of the *bloðmir* window?”

“I should be angry at you for making me waste time preparing for your banquet.”

“But you’re not,” Odin added.

“No. I’m too tired to be angry. Besides that, I’m contracted to get paid the same no matter what I have to do to. And yes, I did dream, Odin.”

“Can you accept the truth of your dream?”

Chapter Twelve

Kate pursed her lips. *The truth? Is the truth inescapable?* “That I am the daughter of the woman in the stained glass?” Kate asked. “Or that I am a goddess? And that all of you are some sort of club for divine beings?”

Odin nodded. “That you are the daughter of Alfheithur, Light of the Hidden People, and by all rights, my eternal consort.”

Kate raised an eyebrow in suspicion. “Eternal consort?”

“Her blood rushes through your veins, to your heart, your limbs. Your perfect female parts. Alfheithur’s line will continue once you feel her blood’s fire. I am here to help you remember. I am here to help you acclimate,” Odin whispered. “When I make love to you, the memories will come, and you will be made whole with your destiny.”

“That’s a big promise for a roll in the hay, Odin,” Kate replied. “Now, go away. I’m being paid to work tonight—and if I recall, you’re the one paying me the ungodly sum of money.”

“Oh, Kate, my love—there is nothing ungodly about my money.” Odin kissed the back of her neck, then sauntered away like a proud tom cat.

The hairs at the nape of her neck were on edge, her pulse rate increased, and the pressure between her legs was now nearly unbearable.

Richey snapped Kate out of a rather naughty fantasy a moment later. “Darling—do you know that these people believe you are related to them? And that you and Odin are supposed to breed pretty girl babies? And ... your face is on the china!”

“Yeah, I know,” Kate replied. “Odin just dropped the bomb. I think he wants me barefoot and pregnant. So much for him being my true love. I’ve never had a man want me for my uterus before.”

“And?”

“I don’t know what to think. I mean, the more I think about all this, the more my dreams make sense. I’m beginning to understand their connection to me. But I’m keeping him in my back pocket until I get paid.”

“Well, my little Valkyrie, when you fly off into battle, can I have your shop?” Richey asked.

“You can fly back over to your station and make sure Fernando and Goliath aren’t slacking.”

“I’ll have them start clearing dishes,” Richey replied.

“Thanks for this, Rich.”

“Don’t look now, but here comes hunk o’ burning love trouble,” Richey remarked, ambling back to his station.

Kate laughed as Odin re-entered her corner of the room. “What brings you back to my table so soon?” Kate paused. “Jesus ... give Richey an inch, and he takes a mile. He should have gone into theatrics. He’s so dramatic. Poor Fernando. I don’t know if he’ll work for me again if Richey keeps spanking him with a towel.”

“I have never used a leap-and-spank method to get my employees to clear the tables, but it seems to be doing the job. Your assistant has a unique flair,” Odin replied. “I like him.”

“What can I do for you? Ready for dessert?” Kate asked.

“I am, yes.”

“You can help yourself to the *petit fours*, or may I serve you a slice of ganache-laden devil’s food cake?” Kate paused. “Or would you prefer something else?”

“I want you, Kate.”

Kate leaned forward, whispering her reply. “I want you, too. But I’m working right now.”

“For me.”

Kate smirked and squared her shoulders. “No matter. I don’t mix business and pleasure.”

“When will you take a break?” Odin asked.

Kate shot Odin a playful, smoldering glance. “When you tell me I need to.”

“My kin are amused and sated. Seems your chicken has passed their rather finely attuned palates—of course, several of them don’t know chicken from chewing gum—so let’s just say that they are happy and well-fed, and this would be a very good time for you to take a break.”

Kate nodded toward Richey, who nodded back knowingly. “All right, I’m officially on break.”

“Lovely,” Odin said.

The soft glow of Raven Hall changed to a glorious night sky as a thousand pinpoint lights twinkled on. The ceiling, the tables, the floor—it looked as though the room were suspended amongst the stars.

Kate gasped. “Oh, my God. This is beautiful. Is it on a timer?”

Odin didn’t reply. He slid around the dessert buffet table and wrapped Kate in his arms as fluidly as a tide washing over a beach. His lips went to her throat.

Kate giggled as his whiskers tickled her chin. “Ah, Odin. Shouldn’t we go somewhere more private for this?”

His hands traced the curve of her rear end. “They don’t care.”

Kate tried to pull away. “I do.”

Odin held her fast. “Trust me.”

“There are people watching,” Kate exclaimed.

“They’re not watching. They don’t care what we do. They know better than to interfere in my actions, anyway,” Odin replied. One strong hand slid inside Kate’s crisp, white pants. He palmed his way across her hip to her pubic region. “Spread your stance for me. Just a little. I want to explore you.”

“Here?” Kate cried.

Odin dipped two fingers between her labial lips. “Yes. Here. Now.”

“Richey ... my crew...” Kate mewed.

“I don’t want to pleasure them. Leave them be. I want you, and I want you now. Here.”

Odin kissed Kate hard on the lips. His long fingers found their way inside her. He moved his mouth over her breasts, kissing them through the pristine white of her apron.

Kate gasped as he dropped to his knees before her.

In one quick movement, her lower garments were down to her ankles. Odin replaced his fingers with his probing tongue.

She grasped Odin’s head, steadying herself as he helped her slip out of her pants, her

apron tucked up into its tie around her hips. He spread her stance. Working from the northernmost inner confines of her womanhood, he trailed his tongue southward, across the hill and into the valley of pleasure. Clutching her buttocks, he consumed her.

Public sex. She'd never given it much thought, as her former lovers had been as adventurous as dishpans. As the flame of orgasm grew, a tickle of excitement came over her. *When I come, everyone will know. They'll share it with me. And, oh, my God ... I'm going to come if he keeps this up!* "Odin," Kate sighed as she ran her fingers through his gray hair, stroking him like a cat lapping milk from a bowl. Only he wasn't a cat, and it wasn't a bowl of milk his tongue was tasting. She wanted to ride his face—ride the bridge of his nose with his tongue deep inside her. She felt Odin's index finger penetrate her anus as he continued his oral assault.

Kate shuddered and sighed weakly, embarrassed, as the sexy red-headed man strolled by the table, a very knowing look on his face. He lolled his tongue at her, mocking the flicking action against a clitoris. "Is Odin having his Kate and eating her, too? Excellent."

Kate couldn't reply. She averted her gaze, blushing from head to toes. Odin chuckled and roughly inserted three fingers into her. She moaned. She couldn't stop herself.

The red-haired man, with his wild auburn locks and flaming eyes, leaned across the table. "Do you know who I am?" he asked her.

Kate shook her head. "I..."

"Oh, don't try to speak, dear. Not now. Not as you're being violated. My identity won't be a secret for long."

He stepped back and lewdly cupped his crotch. "Your scent arouses me." He turned toward a woman hovering in the background. "Liliah!" he called.

The woman strolled forward. She didn't look like she was subservient. She held her head high, proud. Her love for the strange, wild man radiated from her like a beacon.

"I am in need," the man said softly—lovingly.

Liliah glanced at Kate and smiled. She then dropped to her knees, opened the man's fly and removed his swollen shaft.

Kate didn't know what to concentrate on—the slow, deep finger-fucking she was receiving or the incredible vision of the woman performing fellatio on the man at the drop of a hat!

Odin pulled away and rose to his feet. He ran his Kate-wet beard across her face as his lips met hers. "Take off your clothes and stretch out." He whispered the words into her mouth—into her soul. She felt lost in him. "This is what we do. This is how we celebrate."

Kate nodded. "When in Rome..."

Odin smiled. "Exactly. Look about you. Not only are Loki and his bride enjoying each other, many others of my clan are engaged in a bit of pre-dessert bliss, as well. Ah, even your staff is, occupied."

Kate untied her apron, scanning the room for Richey, Fernando and Goliath. Her eyes widened at the sight of Richey's entanglement with the blond driver. "Oh, that's more than I ever wanted to know about Richey," she said. Then, she added in a most shocked manner, seemingly forgetting where she was—and what she was doing, "Who's pouring the coffee?"

Odin laughed. "Always the businesswoman. Kate, by the looks of it, no one's

serving coffee, but Gisli is serving a rather large helping of meat for Richey.”

Kate laughed. “I’ll say!” *I had no idea Rich was hung like a horse!* “Oh, my God. Did that lady with the baby leave? The baby can’t be around this debauch! And the blue man with the snake. I don’t have to touch the snake, do I? Or the dog—the wolf? I won’t have any of that.”

Odin sighed. “Of course, Hella has taken her child away, and our brothers in animal form do not participate. They’re with the other kin who no longer participate in this special portion of our celebration. Really ... we may be retired gods, but we are not uncivilized! Now, would you please relax?”

“I’m not sure, but I’ll try,” Kate responded openly. “Retired gods?”

“Don’t think of this as public sex. If it helps, think of it as an orgy in a private location. A secure, private location where everyone is healthy, willing and well over the age of consent. Now, please lie down. And yes, we’re all retired gods. You, too, have divine blood. Do you want to discuss this now or make love? I thought Niorun had spoken with you about this.”

“I’m not so sure I’m ready to participate in an orgy, Odin. But I do want to make love. Then do you promise to tell me what the hell is going on around here?” Kate replied as she knelt, then fell back against the cool, back-lit tiles of the serving area.

“Floor too hard for you?” Odin asked.

“No. It’s fine. It’s nice.” Naked on the floor behind the dessert table. *Yeah, Odin ... everything is just fine.*

Odin smiled broadly—like a kid in a candy-shop window. With a bare hand, he dug into the ganache-draped devil’s food cake.

“Hey! That’s dessert!” Kate complained.

Odin knelt and gently persuaded Kate to recline. “Yes, it is dessert, and I intend to eat it from the most delicate china of them all.”

Oh, my God! He’s going to ... Kate couldn’t finish her thought. Before she could complain, protest or move, Odin had smeared the chocolaty goodness across her vulva.

Kate squirmed and writhed against the cold floor as Odin’s skillful tongue licked the ganache frosting and moist cake from between her legs. “Odin! This is nasty!” she cried. “Oh, my God. Public sex. Food sex. Sex with my cake!”

Odin lifted his chocolate-stained face. “Would you hush? Unless you’re having an orgasm, let me have my dessert in peace!”

His long strokes across her thighs and all places in-between were too much. Just too much. Kate needed him inside her. Now.

She slipped her fingers into his hair and pulled his head up. “I need you inside me. Right-fucking-now!”

Odin smiled. He leaned back and removed his silken jacket and shirt.

“Now, Odin. Right now!” Kate demanded. She slid a hand between her legs.

Odin batted it away. “Mine,” he whispered. He slipped out of his tie-waist slacks.

Kneeling over Kate, he stroked his thick member against her swollen clitoris, teasing it. Teasing Kate.

“Odin!” Kate cried.

He entered her with one solid plunge. His mouth went to hers. She could taste her own ardor and her delicate ganache on his lips. She swept her tongue across his mouth, sampling his dessert from his whiskers.

Odin literally pounded his body into Kate's. She opened and lifted her legs to allow him full access. He let his full weight fall against her. His shaft found its perfect match in the groove between her labial lips.

A moment before her orgasm—that all-knowing, all-encompassing moment when nothing else matters in the universe except the climactic pressure building between lovers, Kate made a vow to herself that she would not scream. *No matter how good it feels, I'm not going to scream.*

Yeah. Right.

Kate's voice filled the room with the sweet sound of her release. The orgasm seemed to spring from her throat, low and guttural.

Odin came as he raised himself up by his palms, arching his back over Kate as she fell limp under him. He shuddered and quaked atop her, pushing into her as far as he could, as he spilled inside her.

Kate turned her head, focusing on the writhing bodies joined in similar unions across the room. She then realized that if she could see them from the space under the table, that they could see her, too. And there was no doubt that anyone with the presence of mind to listen, had heard her, as well.

"Some celebration," she whispered as Odin pulled away.

Odin chuckled. "It's only just beginning." He clapped his hands together. "Fulla!"

Instantly, a woman who could have been the event coordinator's sister scurried from a dark corner, offering steaming towels. "Thank you, Fulla," Odin said, taking the hot cloths from the woman. "That will be all."

Odin ran the moist, steaming terry cloth over Kate's belly and thighs. "We can't have you all sticky, now, can we? I must say, you bake one hell of a chocolate cake."

Kate laughed. "Odin, you are too much!"

"Too much for you? I don't think so," he replied. "There, all traces of our pleasure are washed away."

Kate slipped into her panties. Odin handed her a second towel as he cleaned *Kate* off his face.

Sounds of mutual pleasure wafted about the hall. Kate stood and scanned the room. Some were in groups of three or more. Some were merely watching the others while engaging in a bit of self-stimulation. Richey ... well, Richey had obviously introduced Goliath and Fernando to his new friend.

"How often do you do this?" she asked. "I mean, is this what retired gods get down to?"

"This?" Odin asked. "A banquet in honor of my oldest son? A wedding?"

"An orgy," Kate replied.

"Ah, this is a very special occasion. It is on your behalf. You'll see."

"Because I am a descendant of Alfheithur, the stained-glass woman?"

"Because you are a descendant of Alfheithur, the woman depicted in the stained glass and because of your recognition of same."

"So, to welcome me to the clan, everyone fucks?"

"Don't be so crass, my dear. No one is simply fucking! We are binding ourselves to each other. Sharing our gifts with each other," Odin replied.

Kate laughed, nodding toward the other guests. "Who takes them hot towels?"

"Fulla will. She's keenly attuned to our needs. It's her job."

“Hot towels?”

Odin shook his head. “She is a handmaiden.”

Kate cleaned up the edges of cake where Odin had removed a handful, carefully smoothing the ganache and evening out the slice. “What now, Odin?”

“Well, once everyone is ready, I’ll perform the wedding, and we’ll give Thor his gift, and then we’ll likely drink and debauch until dawn.”

“Handmaiden, huh?” Kate questioned.

“Does that amuse you?” Odin asked.

“You speak of her as though you are her king, and she is your subject.”

Odin nodded. “I’m not her king, though I am the Chieftain and patriarch of our clan. Are you ready to understand who we are, and more importantly, who you are?”

“Will it hurt?” Kate asked.

“Walk with me,” Odin commanded.

“I need to serve ... oh, screw that. They can serve themselves if any of them gets hungry,” Kate replied. “I really want to...”

“Understand?” Odin replied, finishing Kate’s sentence.

“Yes. Understand. I want to understand.”

Odin held out his hand. “Then walk with me.”

“Where?” Kate asked, taking Odin’s hand.

“To the beginning.”

Less than three steps from the dessert spread, Kate found herself no longer in Raven Hall, but in a strange and wondrous landscape of swirling colors and glowing lights. “Am I drugged?” she asked.

“No. You are remembering,” Odin replied.

“My past?” she asked.

“The history of your bloodline. Embrace what you see here and cherish it. You are the first daughter born to Alfheimur in a thousand years.”

“My mother’s name is Maxine,” Kate replied, turning her head to take in the spectacular view. Holding Odin’s hand, she seemed to be floating through a pink and golden sunset. She laughed. “I know! You’re the ghost of Christmas past, and I’m Ebenezer Scrooge, and this is my Christmas Eve vision.”

“For now, if you must reference this journey by comparing it to Charles Dickens, then so be it. It is not from Maxine that your divine lineage flows. It is from Bruce, your father.”

“He didn’t seem too divine,” Kate replied. “He was a plumber.”

“Sons carry the gift, daughters manifest it. Do you recall your great-grandfather?”

Kate nodded. “Yes. I met him before he died.”

“He carried a strong likeness of Alfheimur’s lover—the one who fathered her son that bound her to a mortal existence and...” Odin paused, “—changed everything.”

“Great-grandfather was a dark, swarthy man. Even in old age. Dad said it was our Italian blood.”

“Perhaps—for your bloodline has been thoroughly mixed—but in your great-grandfather’s case, it was not Italian blood that made him so darkly handsome. It was Nubian blood.”

“There is no Nubia. It’s a region in Egypt now.”

“True. It is now incorporated into Egypt and the Sudan. But a thousand years ago,

when Alfheithur broke ranks and seduced Ande Ajani, Nubia was the pride of the world. Your first father was the bravest warrior, and Alfheithur hand-chose him to sire her sons.”

“She loved him?” Kate asked.

“Loved? I don’t know. She used him to sever her ties to the gods.”

Kate sighed. “He died. I saw that in a dream.”

“Her passions poisoned him. No mortal man can mate with a Valkyrie and survive,” Odin replied.

“And she gave up her immortality to bear a son by him—but I don’t understand why.”

“She wanted out,” Odin replied.

Kate squeezed Odin’s hand. “Tell me the truth, Odin. What did Alfheithur want out of? Exactly.”

“She acted as my recruiter, so to speak. She was the first Valkyrie and trained other she-godlings to work with her to collect the souls of fallen heroes to fill my halls. Those maidens were not true to the cause. One by one they succumbed to the passions of the gods...”

Kate interrupted, “That’s not hard to do.”

Odin smiled. “They married, bore children and lived the privileged lives of our race. Alfheithur could not follow them. She was forbidden to marry and bear children save by any god, but one.”

“You,” Kate replied. “However, she spurned your affections.”

“She did. I wanted her to bear daughters of my body to fill the skies with my sacred Valkyries. The Final Battle—our end times—was approaching. A strong army borne to the heavens on the backs of my daughters’ horses would have ensured our victory. Alfheithur had seen too much battle. Too many dying men begging for their lives. Too many evil men fighting bravely and dying nobly just to win their way into my ranks.”

“So, she mated with Ande Ajani like she was a Black Widow spider. She took him and left his rotting corpse in her wake. Did she feed on him, as well?” Kate asked.

“Do not hate her, Kate. Her blood purifies your humanity with a divine light.”

“The Light of the Hidden People,” Kate whispered.

“She was their queen.”

“Who are they?”

“*Huldufólk*. Gnomes. Pixies. Fairies. The hidden beings that inhabit the world of humankind. They loved Alfheithur. They worshipped her.”

“Was she not sad to leave them behind?” Kate asked.

“I don’t know. I do know, however, that they await her return. In Iceland, especially,” Odin replied. “They are everywhere. Soon, you shall see them in all living things, too.”

“She is long dead. She cannot return.”

“You need only embrace your bloodline, and she shall live again.”

“How?”

Kate’s answer came with an abrupt change of scent, sight and taste. The air around her grew foul. She could taste smoke in her mouth. She coughed and choked as burning flesh invaded her nostrils. “I don’t like it here.”

She stood ankle-deep in blowfly infested carnage. Body after body stacked atop each

other, pinned together by arrow or spear. Bludgeoned by war hammer or fist.

Here was the battlefield of her mind.

As she had been in her dream, she was Alfheithur. Proud. Strong. Determined to put an end to Odin's collection of fallen souls.

There, too, stood Ande Ajani. Magnificent. Shining with sweat. Victorious.

With them was Odin. Younger. Ruggedly handsome, his missing eye not masked like a pirate, but covered by a long lock of golden-gray hair.

"Choose!" Odin commanded.

Kate spoke. The voice was her own. "I cannot!"

"You must choose!" Odin again commanded.

"I do not wish to be the mother a race of warrior maidens whose only purpose is to press the souls of fallen soldiers into your army. Nor do I wish to kill an innocent man by making love to him."

"Choose," Odin replied.

Chapter Thirteen

Kate strengthened her stance. “What will you do when your ranks are again brimming with skilled men, Odin? What war will you wage? There are no more giants to kill!”

“Choose me, and the Hidden Folk will rejoice with me. Choose him, and your sons will curse their sex for all time. The memories will be in them, Kate—always just out of their reach. Like an itch that cannot be scratched. They will know what you did. How you relinquished your divinity and condemned them to an existence so far removed from godling ways that they shall spend their entire lives trying to capture it. In art. By the drink. By climax. They shall seek a light they can see, but never grasp—for all eternity.”

“You can’t badger or frighten me into crossing into your world, Odin,” Kate replied. “I am Alfheithur’s heir, and as I stand on this battlefield, I feel her blood boiling within my veins. Her will to defy your command was strong.”

Odin’s single blue eye pierced Kate’s heart with touching sadness. “I loved her, Kate. And I love you, now. We are a matched pair, you and I.”

Kate sighed. “Too long separated. I ... I feel that, as well. Alfheithur did love you. Her choices were not easy ones. But I was not born into this world. I am a self-made woman, Odin—not a simpleton with a magic vagina and holy womb.”

Odin nodded. “That phrase...magic vagina. Loki used it. I smell his influence here. Join with me and embrace your past and your destiny.”

“Loki has nothing to do with this. I can see quite clearly that he has embraced the twenty-first century whereas you, have not. Women no longer live or think *that* way, Odin.” Kate turned toward the silent, statuesque Ande Ajani. “He is not really here with us, is he?” she called.

“He is a choice, an option.”

Kate took a step closer to Odin. “I could love you, Odin.”

“You do not yet love me?” he asked.

“No. I must not. I love what you do to me. I love the way I feel in your arms. It’s your mindset I’m having issues with.”

“You will grow to love me. I will be a good father to our daughters, Kate. I will make you an excellent husband.”

“It is our wedding celebrated tonight, isn’t it?”

“It could be,” Odin replied.

“I’m not giving up my bakery,” Kate said.

Odin smiled. “Agreed.”

“And a few other things are going to be my way, too—or I shall refuse you here and now and relinquish my blood ties to your clan.”

Odin remained calm, his “game face” intact. *She is making demands! I’m not used to such a dominant personality in a female. Especially one with human blood!* “You are feeling the light of her strength in your veins, aren’t you? You are fearless—and you like it.”

Kate threw down her sword and took a stance so close to Odin she could feel his breath against her face. She looked into his single brilliant eye. “It’s my way or the

highway, Odin.”

He laughed. “What does that mean?” *I find this oddly stimulating. Am I about to be dominated? That would be something new!*

“As I see it, you have infected me with your godly prowess—and in return, I have softened your nature with my humanity. You want an army. I am a pacifist. I will not bear daughters whose sole purpose is to fill your ranks with the spirits of modern-day soldiers. The warriors of today will not understand who the Valkyries are, nor will they willingly go with them. The fallen of our times are Christians, Muslims and Jews. They do not know you.”

Odin’s eye grew red. “It matters not if they worshipped me in life. In death, they will serve proudly in my army. I have spent a thousand years waiting for you, Kate. I have waited a thousand years to command an army that will bring about the end of all wars for humankind.”

“You are deluded, Odin! War cannot end war. It never has. It never will! I stand with Alfheimur, Light of the Hidden People, in this matter. I shall not relent.”

Odin carefully worded his reply. Kate was fast becoming adversarial—as had Alfheimur before her. He could not sacrifice his dream. To do so—would mean the end—the end of the Odin of myth and legend. “The understanding in you grows deeper. Soon, you shall understand that old gods die hard.”

“Your pride and ambition stop you from admitting you wish only to love me, as I am, and see our daughters play happily as mortal children and not divine beings. Old gods can learn new tricks, Odin.”

“I shall always be a god of war!” Odin replied. He felt his temper flaring. With this conquest, he needed a more gentle approach. He chastised himself. He’d been so tender, so patient ... so far. *Just a little longer, and she will be mine.*

Kate shuddered as a surge of power fired through her body like an arrow. She understood—truly understood what she had to do. Turn the tables on Odin. Convince him to turn ... to the light. “That time has passed for you, Odin, and cannot be dredged up by the blood of innocent little girls enslaved to your dreams.” She slid her arms around Odin’s neck. “I could love you. I could love you so easily if only you would allow your compassion to shine through. Be a god of peace, Odin—and you shall have every piece of me.”

“And if I do not relent?” Odin asked.

Kate pulled Odin’s head down and flicked her tongue across his lips. “Then you shall have none of me.”

Odin kissed her, hard. “All of you.”

Kate pulled away. “What if I convince you otherwise?”

Odin smiled. “No feminine wiles can turn me from my goal.”

Kate began undressing. “Even on this battlefield littered with decaying corpses—I will change your mind and have your pledge to cease any dreams of playing toy soldiers with the souls of today’s warriors.”

“No woman has ever bested me, Kate,” Odin replied.

“I am not simply a woman, as you have so aggressively drilled into my head. My nature is divine—and I challenge you.” Kate asked, “If I please you so greatly that you cannot continue living without my touch, then you will agree to my terms.”

“And if you do not rouse a single measure of compassion in me, you will be my

bride under my terms,” Odin replied.

Am I so certain that it is only his pride that keeps his eye focused on the goals of a warmonger? Yes. I am certain. Odin holds fast to his past glories instead. Time to bring him into the twenty-first century. “Agreed,” Kate said firmly.

Odin waved his hand slightly, his fingers calling forth a fine mist across the plain. The tattered human remains of battles past melted into the mist, leaving only a pristine green field in their wake.

Kate glanced over her shoulder just as Ande Ajani turned and walked off into the mist. She called after him, “Grandfather! I honor you!”

Though he did not turn, Ande Ajani raised his hand in salute.

Kate smiled, then returned her full attention to Odin.

“How will you take me, Kate?” he asked.

How will I take him? She smiled. “Bit by naughty bit, that’s how.”

“Ah, you shall knead me and roll me out, eh?”

Kate shed her remaining garments, letting them fall onto the grassy plain. “Take off your clothing, Odin.”

Odin smirked and shook his head—but removed his clothing as directed.

Kate exhaled. Here stood a man ... no, a god ... of such awesome male beauty, and she wasn’t sure how to win this battle of wits and naughty bits against him. She closed her eyes. *Alfheithur! Teach me what I must know! Quickly!*

The surge of power coursing through her grew in strength—like a light bulb being flicked on to illuminate a dark closet. Radiant, sizzling.

Forcing the radiant glow in her veins outward, Kate envisioned enveloping Odin with the light of love. The pure light of Alfheithur. Kate might not know how to tame a god—but Alfheithur did. Kate gave herself over to the impulses and urges of passion welling up from within her. Within the surging fervor, she found her answer. Alfheithur’s answer.

Fluidly. Like a slow-moving river where deep currents can pull you under. Like a tide washing across the shore. Make him surrender to you. Bring him to his knees and flow over him until he begs for mercy and sweet release.

The words echoing in her mind, Kate wrapped her arms around Odin’s neck.

She put her lips to his, embracing him like a woman needs chocolate. She controlled their embrace until she broke the kiss by pulling his lower lip out with her own.

They dropped to the earth, locked in a deep, slow, exploratory kiss. Her warm, moist tongue caressing his, sucking his, Kate allowed the spirit of Alfheithur to move her.

She pulled away for a moment, and Odin lunged forward, eager to resume their embrace. “Kiss me. Kiss me,” he whispered against her lips.

Kate allowed their kiss to continue, aware that she should not lose herself in him—as she needed to *lead* this campaign.

Not to tease, and not completely to please, but to coerce, convince and control—like any good woman behind a strong man—Kate devised her plan of attack as she turned her attention to his hardness. She took it into her mouth, slowly moving her lips up and down the shaft. It gave her time to think. Time to think while he simply did what she needed him to do: react. React with want. With need. With passion and vigor. She mouthed his member with a vengeance, trying to draw out his ego like poison from a snakebite.

Kate’s mind frantically worked out new scenarios for sex that she had never

considered before. They weren't her ideas! They had to be Alfheim's. She realized something new ... that it wasn't sex alone she needed to use as a tool and weapon—she needed to meet Odin as an equal. And that meant in battle. A war god understands the nature of victory or defeat.

She tasted Odin's salt and pulled away. "I will do this for you every night if you take me as your wife in peace and not as your companion in war."

Odin moaned. "Shut up and finish the job, woman."

Kate shook her head. "Not until you promise me."

"I cannot," Odin replied.

"Then neither can I," Kate countered.

Odin sat upright. "I could force you."

Kate stood. "Bullshit, Odin. This is the twenty-first century, not the tenth. Get civilized, will you?"

"Why do you insult me? You are to be my wife! True, it is a marriage of convenience, but we shall learn to love each other dearly. I promise you this."

"I have had enough of your crap," Kate replied. "You slithered into my life and gave me hope that I might have a normal, loving relationship with a man, only to find you are a god, albeit a retired one, and so am I! You use me sexually, whenever and wherever you wish, I might add, and now have me in some otherworldly dimension for the sole purpose of forcing me to choose love and children with strings attached, or love and children who despise me because I chose not to give them the privileged life of a godling!"

Odin frowned. "You speak to me as though I am the serpent in the Christian Tree of Life. I am Odin! The All-Father! You must obey me. It is your duty, Valkyrie. To obey!"

Kate became increasingly aware that she had a large sword strapped across her back. *Do I know how to use it? Yes ... I do!* She unsheathed her sword and took a defensive stance.

Nude and still aroused, Odin laughed. "You must be joking."

"I challenge you to the kind of battle you understand, Odin!" She waved her sword menacingly before her.

"To what end?" Odin asked.

"I win, and you agree to my terms. All of them. You win, and I shall agree to yours."

"I have no weapon," Odin replied.

Kate's voice grew low and fierce. "Draw one from the ethers, Odin. And put some pants on."

Odin pulled on his member. "This is the only steel of mine you should feel."

Kate shook her head. "I strike whether or not you are armed, Odin."

He lifted an arm to the sky and withdrew a blade from the fabric of the heavens.

"Alfheim was a skilled swordswoman. Are you?"

"It is her hand that wields my blade, Odin," Kate replied.

Odin laughed. "Then perhaps I should put my pants back on."

A seething, passion-born rage moving her, Kate lunged at Odin. It was both exhilarating and painful—rage that fierce. Odin blocked and turned aside. Kate caught her footing and sprang to attack a second time.

"You are good!" Odin remarked. "I'm so pleased that you have accepted your heritage, Kate!"

“It is not on your behalf that I have done so!” Kate called.

“Then for whom do you ‘go godly’?”

Kate’s ears piqued as the sound of twittering from behind the blades of grass caught her attention. The Hidden Folk had come to her aid. “It is for them—do you not hear the little ones, Odin?”

“They know better,” Odin replied.

Kate planted her sword in the earth. “Listen more carefully.”

Odin frowned, then nodded. “Ah, they have learned to cross the boundary between earth and spirit. Bravely done. They must be very happy to have their precious *Alfheimur* back.”

Kate smiled. From the corner of her eye she saw a gnome in a battle-ready stance. Diminutive in stature, the ferocity of his gaze told her what she needed to do. She called out, “Attack him! Bring him down!”

Rising up from the earth like drops of rain from the sky, hundreds of Little Folk rushed at Odin. He laughed at first—for their little hands and feet tickled his bare flesh as they surrounded him and climbed up his legs. “Get down!” he chuckled. “Get down!”

Odin was no longer amused as the *Huldufólk* pulled him to the ground, pinning him beneath their strength-in-numbers.

“They will hold you until you relent, Odin,” Kate said.

“They will tire and burrow back into the earth,” Odin replied. A pixyish Hidden One pulled Odin’s curly pubic hair. “Stop that!” he commanded. “You’re hurting me!”

Kate walked through the swarming, teaming throng of little beings, her path opening up before her like the Red Sea before Moses. “I want you, Odin. I want to get to know you, explore loving you, commit to you.”

“There’s going to be nothing left for you to love if you don’t call these little beasties off of me!” Odin exclaimed. “They’re going to rub my privates raw and claw me to death!”

“Agree to my terms,” Kate stated plainly.

Odin shook his head.

He winced as the same annoying pixie again tugged on his short hairs. “Little vermin,” he cursed.

“Don’t slander them, Odin. They are sentient beings worthy of respect,” Kate replied. “Now, will you agree?”

“You are more clever than was *Alfheimur*,” Odin replied.

“And you are no longer as strong as you were. I have the strength and power of generations of humanity flowing in my veins. Though you have not lost your prowess in many ways, you are the weaker combatant in this battle.”

Crawling with sprites and pixies and weighed down by chubby gnomes at his ankles, Odin sighed. It was not only unpleasant, it was embarrassing. “Call them off, and we shall talk.”

Kate nodded her head. A flood of *Huldufólk* cascaded off Odin and into the tall grass.

“May I counter your offer?” Odin asked, brushing himself off. He had feared the time would come when he’d be forced to make a change in plans. He had not suspected at any point that a single woman could coerce him—or that the Hidden Folk would turn on him.

“Sure,” Kate replied.

“Kate,” he began. “You were correct. As humbling as it is to admit—you are correct. It is time this old god learned a new trick. When we marry and you bear me daughters, I shall not pressure or coerce our daughters into choosing a Valkyrian life. I shall make only loving, fatherly suggestions.”

“And what of your plans to dominate the world with godly peace?” Kate asked.

“I am embarrassed to admit that *something* changed my mind.”

“And what was that?” Kate replied.

“I want your sweet mouth against my privates much more than I want a gnome’s fingers tugging and prodding in the same place. I can see that you...” Odin paused.

“Go on, Odin. You can say it,” Kate encouraged.

“I’ll only whisper it into your mouth,” Odin replied.

Kate smiled. She slowly stripped off her leather armor, letting it fall in her wake as she approached Odin. She slid her arms around his neck, pulling her lips to his. “What do you need to say to me, Odin?”

He pressed his mouth gently against hers. “I relent.”

“Thank you,” Kate said. She kissed Odin deeply.

* * * *

Odin reclined against a thick blanket of Icelandic purple moss. Straddling him, Kate engaged him in sexual union. His hands went to her breasts. There were tears in his eyes. He was both humbled and revived by her. More so than he had ever imagined he could be. Swallowing his pride had left a lump in his throat he knew only time could cure—but Kate’s sweet kisses would certainly soothe his bruised ego.

Using the powerful, female-superior position to her advantage, Kate controlled the ebb and flow of Odin’s member inside her. She didn’t know who she was teasing more—him or herself! She stopped her maneuvers, hovering with her vaginal opening poised at the tip of Odin’s hardness.

“Don’t stop!” he cried. “Don’t stop now! I’ve agreed to be a more peaceful god. I won’t come out of retirement and wage war against the armies of humankind! Please, continue, my love!”

Kate slowly slid her body down Odin’s shaft. “You know, Odin,” she began. “You’re still going to have to pay me the balance of the catering contract.”

Odin laughed. He gripped Kate’s hips and pulled her down atop him until the seam between their bodies disappeared. “I can deny you nothing and shall give you everything.”

Kate smiled, enjoying the deep penetration and connection to Odin. “Marry me, Odin. After a long, torrid courtship and an even longer engagement. I want to know you inside and out before we celebrate our nuptials with a wedding orgy.”

“I accept,” he replied.

Kate leaned forward and kissed him gently. “Old gods can learn new tricks, can’t they? You’ve learned to sit and speak and almost had to learn how to play dead today, Odin. Let’s see if you can manage to lick your bowl clean like a good little god.”

Odin smiled like a Cheshire Cat and lifted Kate off his swollen shaft. He laid her tenderly onto her back. Without a word, he dipped his bearded face between her legs. “I’m going to enjoy having my Kate and eating her, too.”

Kate giggled. "You can come back for seconds any time you want." Odin lashed his tongue against her clitoris with such skill and expertise that Kate ascended to orgasm almost immediately. She held his head against her mound as she came, breathlessly trying to get her point across. "And you don't have to eat your veggies first."

Odin slid up. He kissed her with his drenched whiskered lips. "I promise you, I'm going to eat dessert first from now on."

Kate returned his kiss, urging him with her legs to enter her. "Good god," she cooed. "Good god."

The End

GLOSSARY

Why the Norse Gods?

“Because sometimes we choose our gods, and sometimes they choose us.”

I’ve been fascinated by the Norse Gods since early childhood. My obsession did not diminish in adulthood. In college, I nearly failed a semester because I spent way too much time in the library hand-translating Icelandic Sagas into English for my own enjoyment. Yeah ... I needed to get a life. I admit that. It was good use of my two years of private lessons in Icelandic, however. Even after I converted to Buddhism (SGI-USA) at age twenty-one, my adoration of the gods continued. Of course ... when the gods actually adore you right back ... you kind of stand up and take notice.

In 1979, I had a run-in with Odin at the National Museum in Reykjavik. Odin thanked me for a brief moment of genuflection on my part (while I stood before a vellum text from the thirteen hundreds emblazoned with his image). My nose began to bleed—fiercely bleed. I was whisked away by the museum staff to their private restroom. There, a woman in a gray dress (Odin often traveled the earth in a gray cloak) comforted me and led me to a store room to relax until my taxi arrived. A storeroom filled with Norse antiquities. Most impressively, a Lidskjalf—the chair of Odin. A Lidskjalf often sat empty at the head of a Norseman’s table for the “unseen guest”—Odin. The next day I discovered that the museum had no female employees and that the chair I had sat in—with its intricate designs—was a plastic folding chair. I had been given a very special gift by the gods. Or I was freakin’ nuts from a fever and walking pneumonia.

This encounter was later published by *FATE Magazine* (September, 2000).

While writing my first novel, *Love’s Second Sight* (Atlantic Bridge, 2003), I was again accosted by a Norse god. A godling, actually. As I drank a coffee and mulled over my thoughts regarding how bad I should make the villain in the story, in walked the most radiant, beautiful man I have ever beheld. He commanded respect by his very stance. Oh, babies ... I wasn’t the only female to notice him, either. Though I was the only one his eyes sought out.

I recognized him. And he recognized me right back.

It was Loki, Norse god and Trickster. He wanted me to write him into *Love’s Second Sight*. He spoke to me in passing—but not with words. With body language. Sensual, fluid movements. He became my villain. He is the consummate villain.

My mall encounter with Loki became the basis for chapter one of *Devil King of the Sixth Heaven*, wherein the Buddhist college professor romps with passion incarnate.

Since you, my dear reader, may not know much about the Norse gods, I’ve written a glossary for this novel. I’m always happy to answer questions or hear about your experiences with the Aesir. You can contact me via my website:
www.darraghafoster.com.

And remember ... sometimes we choose our gods, and sometimes they choose us.

If you see a man in the mall that turns you into gelatin and causes you to have a big “O” with a single glance ... it could be Loki. He gets around.

—Darragha

* * * *

Odin got around quite a bit, himself. Chief God of the Vikings, he certainly lived up the nickname, “All-Father.” He was a serial lover. He fathered more children than any other god—and sometimes fathered them while in the guise of a woman. He must have been one hell of a creative lover, because the guy made love to ocean waves and the earth herself.

Baldur, Odin’s son in his marriage to the goddess, Frigga, is certainly the central figure in Norse mythology. But Odin had more fun. In fact, he had fun with Loki at one point ... but that’s another story.

I should mention that this glossary is by no means a complete listing of the gods. Some of their exploits are too perverse for even erotic fiction!

Additionally, the same glossary will be found in Books One (*Devil King of the Sixth Heaven*) and Two (*Death Warmed Over*) of the *Teaching Old Gods New Tricks* series.

NORSE GODS AND GODDESSES

* **BALDUR**—Baldur the Good. Baldur the Fair. Baldur—the Sun and Light. Without him, there could be nothing. No gods. No feasts. No fun. Killed by the cunning of Loki.

* **BRAGI**—son of Odin and Gunnlog resulting from a three-day/three-night debauch inside a labyrinthine mountain enclave.

* **BROKK**—a naughty little dark elf and master craftsman who bought Freyja's affections with a pretty bauble.

* **FATES**—also known as Norns. Your basic Past, Present and Future weavers of fate for gods and humans. They were the ones running the show, yet they receive so little credit in the mythos!

* **FREYJA**—a beautiful fool. A fertility goddess—perhaps from the race of the Vanir—a group of gods older than even the Aesir. Twin sister of FREY. FREYJA was ODIN's main squeeze when he wasn't siring children off his wife, FRIGGA, or wooing other conquests. FREYJA turned her affections to the Dark Elf, BROKK—and his brothers—for a fabulous necklace. ODIN failed to see the benefit of her commerce. He punished her by making her not only the goddess of love—but the goddess of war. She's another Norse god with promiscuity issues. It's no wonder she and ODIN got along for so long.

* **FRIGGA**—the goddess who told Odin were to put his empties. Queen of the Norse gods. Mother of the best of the best.

* **FULLA**—handmaiden and lesser goddess. A fertility goddess.

* **HEIMDALL**—son of ODIN by nine sisters in the form of ocean waves. He never sleeps, can see in the dark, and can hear sheeps' wool growing. Visualizing how ODIN did the waves is one of those things that can keep a person awake at night.

* **HEL**—daughter of LOKI and ANGRBODA. Represented the unchanging nature of life and death. Described as skeletal and/or 'dead' on one side and incredibly beautiful on the other. Ruled the Underworld as Queen. Refused to allow BALDUR to return to ASGARD after his death.

* **HERMOD**—son of ODIN and FRIGGA. Messenger of the gods. Dared to enter the Underworld to ask for the life of BALDUR from HEL.

* **HODUR**—blind twin of BALDUR, as dark as BALDUR was fair. Son of ODIN and FRIGGA. Tricked by LOKI into slaying BALDUR with a dart made from mistletoe.

* **IDUNN**—wife of Bragi. Keeper of the apples of health and eternal youth and vigor.

* **LESSER GODDESSES**—there's a whole slew of them. See VALKYRIES, too.

* **LODUR**—one of Loki's disguises.

* **LOKI / TRICKSTER / FATHER OF LIES**—Let's see ... He fathered HEL, the FENRIS WOLF and THE MIDGARD SERPENT by the giantess, ANGRBODA. He gave birth to ODIN's eight-legged pony when he ran off in mare form with a stallion. He had two sons by a lesser goddess with low self-esteem (SIGYN) and once tied his testicles to a goat to make the sad goddess SKADI laugh. What fun! He bedded Thor's wife, SIF, BRAGI's wife, INDUNN, Odin's mistress, FREYJA, (the goddess of love *and*

war), and numerous other lesser goddesses and beings. He was a horny little godling (and still is)! LOKI has a serious edge ... he and ODIN were not only implied lovers, but blended their blood. ODIN pledged not to accept drink unless it was presented to them both.

* ODIN a/k/a ONE-EYED / TERRIBLE-ONE / ALL-FATHER—The god with the open fly. With whom did he not have sexual relations? And here this reasonably omnipotent being was considered all-wise for his finding of the Runes and ability to traverse thought and memory!

* THOR—Thunder God. Son of ODIN and Jord. Jord is “the earth.” I’ve always figured ODIN must have schtupped a crater, planted his hardy god-seed, and blammo! out jumped THOR. Not very bright. All action, little forethought. Married to SIF. Didn’t like dressing up as a woman, although LOKI enjoyed THOR in female garb immensely.

* VALKYRIES—Warrior Maidens of Odin. Lucky ladies who get to fly around and capture the souls of fallen heroes for the sole purpose of keeping Odin’s heavenly ranks well-stocked. Also acted as waitresses in Valhalla. Some said they were virgins. Some said they could fuck like puppies and re-awaken all virginal. Gotta love Norse mythology.

* VIDAR—son of ODIN with the giantess Gridr. He has very large feet and wears shoes made of strips of leather sacrificed by mortal men. Sacrificing leather strips ... still attached to the cow, perhaps?

OTHER USEFUL TERMINOLOGY

- * ARGR—playing the female part in sexual relations with another man.
- * ALFHEITHUR—Icelandic female name. Means “Light of the Hidden People.”
- * ASGARDIANS—another name for the Norse Gods living.
- * ASTATRU—modern-day worshippers of the old gods
- * BIFROST—the rainbow bridge to Asgard
- * FLYTING OF LOKI / LOKESENNA—a highly perverse name-calling “roast-like” feast of Loki to the other gods and the other gods to Loki.
- * GARM—gotta love a big, smelly dog with a bloody chest! GARM protected the entrance to the Underworld.
- * GIANTS or JOTUNS—frost giants! Big, nasty, ugly, frost giants who often had gorgeous, shapely, sexually active daughters that THOR and the other gods just couldn’t get enough of. When THOR wasn’t fighting giants, he was making love to their daughters.
- * GJALLARHORN or HEIMDALL’S HORN—sleepless in Santa Fe. HEIMDALL has a horn which he sounds to warn the other gods when danger is approaching.
- * GLADSHEIM—Baldur’s home in Asgard. Nothing unclean could enter. The U.S. Government is working with the gods to affix pieces of Gladsheim at every entrance to the United States. Everything should be in place by the next presidential election...
- * HUNGER / FAMINE / DISEASE / GLIMMERING MISFORTUNE—HEL’s personal effects.
- * LOKEANS—modern-day worshippers who revere Loki above all other gods
- * NIDHOGG—the dragon who lived at the roots of the Tree of Life.
- * NINE WORLDS—the gods of the Vikings had to spread their love around. So, instead of simply Heaven, Earth and Hell, they had nine worlds in which to romp. And romp, they did. From lowest to highest, the nine Norse words are:
 1. Niflheim—Hel’s kingdom. The Underworld. Frosty, icy, full of dead Vikings who weren’t lucky enough to die in battle.
 2. Musplheim—World of Fire. Go here. Get burned.
 3. Svartalfheim—Realm of the dark elves and their sexual perversions and highly successful craft shows.
 4. Jotunheim—Realm of giants.
 5. Midgard—The world of humankind. Even Las Vegas can be included here.
 6. Alfheim—Home of the Bright Elves. The fairies. The pixies and light beings. Puppies, bunnies, kittens. Nothing fun ever happened here.
 7. Vanaheim—Home of the Vanir gods. Something was terribly wrong with these folks. Their debauching and incestuousness did them in and only cursory information remains about them. Oh, they were bad, bad gods.
 8. Asgard—Home of the Asgardian Gods.
 9. Gimle—High Heaven (could be the place all old gods went after fading into legend)
- * ODINISTS—more modern-day worshippers of the old gods
- * THORFINN KARLSEFNI—Icelandic/Viking explorer before advent of

Christianity to Iceland.

* TWILIGHT OF THE GODS / RAGNAROK—What happened after Baldur died. Adios, Amigos!

* VALHALLA—Home of ODIN in ASGARD. Hall of his warriors and hand-maidens. A big party house with lots of mead, sex and roast pork. Gotta love the way the Vikings partied!

* VARANGIAN—Norse mercenaries in Byzantium.

* WRESTLING DEATH—In the home of UTGAARD-LOKI (no relation to LOKI), THOR is challenged to wrestle an old woman to the floor. He loses. The old woman is HEL, Queen of the Underworld in disguise. No one, not even a god, can wrestle Death herself and win.

* YGGSDRASIL—The Tree of Life in Norse Mythology.

Preview of Book One: Devil King of the Sixth Heaven

Teaching Old Gods New Tricks chronicles the tantalizing journey and sensual delights of three strong women blessed (or cursed as the case may be) with touches of divinity. Sometimes touched by their own divine nature, and sometimes touched by a horny god or two...

In Book One, Liliah's dreams have been consumed with a man whose touch both chilled and ignited her. In the light of day, her dream lover reveals himself to be Loki, Norse God of Mischief, fire and heat in tight jeans. Loki takes Liliah on a sybaritic escapade through a local mall, bringing her to new heights of pleasure and enlightenment and leaving her touched by divinity. He also finds that Liliah just may be the answer to his karmic question. But can a God known for trickery and lies find redemption after thousands of years?

* * * *

Liliah held her brownie up to her lips. Chocolate. Sacred chocolate. It was her Eucharist. Her rescuer. Her drug of choice. She closed her eyes. She willed the fat and carbs of the decadent treat to vanish. She stopped herself from wishing the calories onto the heinies of the girls. Karmic retribution could be painful.

Pushing aside thoughts of fattening up the girls, Liliah touched the tip of her tongue to the glossy ganache frosting atop the moist, chewy fudge brownie square. The taste of the chocolate cascaded through her body like an electrical jolt. Her nipples tingled and hardened. She raked her tongue across the frosting, enjoying the rich, satisfying, silken texture. Washed in a bath of tryptophan and phenylethylamine, chocolate's feel-good chemicals, her headache and mood improved.

That's when she saw him. He entered the mall like a superstar entering an arena of adoring fans. The sight of him took her breath away.

An icy chill enveloped her from head to toes. Her spine tingled. Her unused and neglected womanly attributes awakened. Pressure, desire and need attacked her nether regions. She squeezed her legs together.

She couldn't take her eyes off of him. He was simply beautiful. He had the tall, athletic build of a super-athlete, but moved with the grace of a dancer. Liliah realized her mouth was hanging open. Embarrassed and hoping no one had noticed, she locked her lips together. The man was literally jaw-dropping gorgeous.

Her arms suddenly began to throb with an ache that she knew could only be cured by wrapping them around his neck. Her hands tingled. She wanted to shake them out by kneading his powerful shoulders. And as for that dire, empty sensation between her legs ... well ... she knew what she needed there, too. Him.

The man's pace was even and fluid. He nodded a greeting at the elderly gentlemen sipping coffees near the mall entrance. He smiled at the owner of the Tandoori chicken stand grinding spices for the day's offerings. He waved his hand faintly at the uniformed mall janitor pushing a broom around the theater entrance. He strolled by as if they were his subjects and he, their king.

Dressed simply, he made a flannel shirt and Levi's look good. His walk accentuated the tightness of his faded blue jeans. His thigh muscles were clearly defined. So was his package.

He must have a Hickory Farms Beef Log stuffed in his shorts. Damn! Liliah set her brownie aside. He's walking this way! And he's sizing me up! Jeez—I hope it's me he's looking at so intently.

Hers was not the only female attention he garnered. The silence of the teen girls and the absence of whirring noise from the barista's espresso machine proved that. Liliah glanced over to the coffee bar. The girls were huddled together, trembling—gazing at the man like cows starting into the headlights of an oncoming train.

The barista's face had gone ashen.

Liliah snapped back to the real world as hot coffee dribbled onto her hand and lap. "Dammit." She slipped off her stool to retrieve some napkins.

Approaching the barista, she whispered, "He's a babe, huh?"

The coffee bar attendant nodded. "I've never seen such a handsome man before in my life. God, I hope he buys a coffee."

Liliah nodded, whispering, "He walks as if he owns the mall and everyone in it. He knows we're looking at him. I'll bet he's counting on it. He's a bad boy. He's the kind of guy that accepts nothing less than total adoration."

The barista smoothed her apron. "I could use a bad boy about now."

Liliah turned to face the barista. "Get in line, honey."

* * * *

Preview of Book Two: Death Warmed Over

Teaching Old Gods New Tricks chronicles the tantalizing journey and sensual delights of three strong women blessed (or cursed as the case may be) with touches of divinity. Sometimes touched by their own divine nature, and sometimes touched by a horny god or two...

In Book Two, Hel, Queen of the Underworld, is the last of the Norse gods to 'retire' from godly life to Santa Fe, New Mexico. The once powerful Norse gods have taken refuge at a way-station called *Hacienda Valhalla*. Hel, dethroned and evicted from the Underworld, wears her godhood in ways that cannot be hidden from mortal eyes. Half-corpse, half-striking beauty, she's not certain she'll fit in anywhere. Between fighting off a modern-day worshipper and suffering a rather lovely allergic reaction to humanity, Hel learns to accept her unique traits, forgive her past mistakes and finds that love is, indeed ... blind ... and HOT!

* * * *

Bathed in fluorescent light reflecting off pristine, white-tiled walls, she had never looked so good. Hel pressed her face to the mirror, examining her flawless complexion. No necrosis. No gray pallor. She wore the healthy glow of a woman loved by the sun. Her long, wavy blonde hair hit her silken shoulders and cascaded off like gold dust.

Her visual investigation continued. "Oh, my gods! I have two! I have two of them! And they match!" she cried, cupping her breasts, pressing their fleshy roundness up. "I have cleavage!"

Hel stripped off her shirt. To her delight, her left side had become as attractive as her right. She unzipped her jeans and pulled them off, taking her damp panties with them.

She was perfect. Perfectly female in appearance. From golden crown to light-brown tufted pubic region to her ten little toes, she was perfect.

Hel twirled around before mirror, shaking her rear and running her hands over her hips and belly.

Then a toilet flushed.

"I hate to interrupt you, madam. But I thought this was the men's room. May I exit this stall, please?" She didn't recognize the voice.

"Oh, crap," Hel cursed. "Yes. Just a moment. I'm sorry. I didn't think the room was occupied."

Before she could pull her clothes on, the stall door opened. A man emerged, his right arm extended before him. "I'm sorry, could you direct me to the basin?"

"Hodur?" Hel asked.

"Yes?" the man replied.

"It is I, Hel."

"Ah, I should have recognized your voice. Alas, it has been literally ages since last we met."

Hel slipped her jeans on. "The sink is two steps to your left." She felt embarrassed by the sound of her zipper as she dressed.

"Did I catch you at a bad time? I really did think this was the men's room," Hodur

said, moving gracefully to the sink.

“It is the men’s room.” Hel pulled her t-shirt over her head.

“Then why did you undress before, redress now, and pray tell, what do you have two of? You said you have ‘cleavage,’ which infers you were talking about your breasts.”

Hodur paused. “And you smell musky. In a very womanly way, I might add.”

Hel blushed. She could see the crimson glow wash across her face in the fractal reflection of the mirrors.

Don't miss this exciting novel by Darragha:

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Excerpt, Love's Second Sight:

Thorgunna walked across the room, the glow of the newly stoked fire brightening the dimness as Leif stirred the embers and added driftwood to the flames. She returned, her fine, womanly form clearly showing through her dress as she moved closer to the hearth, presenting a large cask to Leif.

"This is it. My livelihood and the bane of my existence. Tireean Gold."

Leif dipped his cup, filling it to its brim with the amber-colored liquid. He downed the cup's contents in two large gulps.

The beer was unlike any he had ever tasted. "Smooth is too simple a word to describe this beer, Lady. It looks like gold and tastes almost effervescent. It is vibrant and delicious. It is sweet, yet not too. I can see why Olaf of Norway covets it so, and why your late husband was willing to defend it."

Thorgunna reached into a leather bag beside the hearth, removing two silver-inlay drinking horns, "Use this. It is more fitting than an earthen cup."

"Lovely horns," Leif replied, using his cup as a ladle. "Lady, is it not odd that we are alone? Even in Greenland there are conventions regarding how men and women may interact."

"Are you afraid of me, Greenlander?" Thorgunna asked.

"Are you not afraid of me? I've been at sea for quite some time. I am a man—and you are..."

"A woman. Yes. I am a woman. I am also a business woman, skilled horseman, farmer, brewmistress, widow and the village witch. I can defend myself. I have defended myself," she paused. "Do I need to defend myself?"

Leif laughed, "No, Lady. I shall not ravish you."

"And for that reason, sir, we are without chaperone."

"You had me pegged as a gentleman from the start."

"Yes. Otherwise, you would not be here. You should know this, too. I am never truly alone."

"The large man with the grimace?" Leif guessed.

The End

About the Author:

Darragha lives in the Pacific Northwest with her husband and daughter, in a one-hundred-sixteen-year-old house that is continually under renovation. The house is haunted by the spirit of a Union Civil War-era soldier who seems to enjoy watching the construction every now and then.

Someday, he may turn up as a character in one of Darragha's stories. Darragha's pretty certain the old gods are happy with '*Teaching Old Gods New Tricks*' as two ravens have been hanging out in her yard for months.

She's named the birds 'Thought' and 'Memory' after Odin's ravens and tips her cup of joe in mock-salute to the symbolic birdies every so often, just to keep on the gods' good side—'cause sometimes we choose our gods—and sometimes they choose us.

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