

Devon's Price

Brenna Lyons



Cups

Devon's Price - Tarot: Ten of Cups

By

Brenna Lyons

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"So, you accepted my suit," he prodded her.

Michelle pulled off the side of the mountain road and into a small grove of fruit trees, putting the truck in park. She turned to him, her expression starkly serious. "Let's get one thing straight, Devon. I'm not the mating kind."

"Mmmm hmmm," he murmured, smiling as her nipples came to points for him.

"I don't want to be sealed. I don't want to be the mother of your sons. I want a hot time in bed, and you keep giving me looks that..."

He unclasped her seatbelt and lifted her, turning Michelle astride his lap.

"Promise that," she gasped.

Dedication:

To open communication and a happy family.

My husband, a most worthy man, who has proven himself over and over again.

Tarot Card: Ten of Cups

The 10 of Cups is a card of peace and family. Devon Kaufmann wants nothing more than a wife and family, and Michelle Armen is the woman he wants to fill that void in his life. A Warrior never knows peace the likes of which he does when he seals printing, and that is a state Devon avidly pursues. For a Warrior, the key to happiness is family.

Unfortunately, Michelle has been raised in a close-knit Warrior family as well. Torn, between the same need to find family with Devon and her individual need to retain her family ties in Armen, it seems they will never find the peace they seek. After all, how can she have both?

The book starts off with a tense game of cat and mouse between the mate-seeking Devon and the pleasure-seeking Michelle, but hostilities cannot last long between them. However, Devon's true test of restoring harmony comes when he has to earn James Armen's forgiveness and restore peace in the household after going too far in his printing madness.

Glossary of Warrior Terms:

Beast	Beasts are what humans erroneously refer to as vampires. The stories humans tell are obviously not correct, but you can't expect a human to get everything right.
Blutjagd	The 'blood hunt'. Warriors crave battle with the beasts, as the beasts crave blood. Warriors are tied to beasts in that they sense many of the beasts' special powers. A Warrior can feel the use of coercion, feeding, and other controls of humans. They also feel other Warriors engaged in Blutjagd, the death of beasts and Warriors in their range, and the presence of nearby beasts who are not ghosted.
Elder	One of the original beasts, the stone stealers who were damned for their crimes against the stone and the Warriors. The elders are gifted with powers turned beasts are not, including the ability to reproduce with a <i>Blutjagdfrau</i> , the ability to turn other beasts, and the inability to be killed by anyone but a Warrior.
Ende Spiel	The point in printing when a Warrior must either seal printing or go insane. A Warrior who feels printing may not progress should break printing long before this point.
Ghosting	A talent that both beasts and Cursed

Warriors learn to harness. Ghosting can hide the physical form of Cursed Warriors or beasts and all they hold or carry from each other and humans. In a lesser strength, it can 'blur' the image of the user so that humans do not note the passage but still see a person there, which avoids accidental collisions. Even a ghosted beast cannot hide uses of power that a Warrior can track.

Printing

Like imprinting, a Warrior becomes tied to his mate for life. He cannot choose another if she is lost, cannot be unfaithful while she lives, and cannot ever divorce or otherwise dissolve the union. A printed Warrior is the most stable of men unless his mate or children are endangered or lost. Then, he will suffer the printing madness and may have to be killed by his house. Likewise, a Warrior who breaks printing, even early printing, will suffer for it. A Warrior who breaks printing too close to Ende Spiel will face the madness.

Warriors

Also called Cursed Warriors or Sons of the Stone. The Warriors were an ancient race of protectors who spawned the beasts and now are driven to hunt their former brothers to extinction.

Chapter One

September 5th, 2003

“Then I have your permission?” Devon Kaufmann asked.

James Lord Armen nodded. “Since your lord gave you leave to remain, you may do so in my range. The usual rules apply.”

Devon smiled. “I’ve never had a holiday, Lord Armen. It would take an emergency to get me into battle...feeding, something I couldn’t ignore as a Warrior. I doubt I’ll be interfering in one of your tracks.”

“I hardly –”

“Dad, have you seen –” a female voice began.

The lord raised his hand and jingled a set of keys hung on his fingertip, one eyebrow raised in a look of supreme amusement. “Next to the computer,” he informed her. “You have really got to learn to keep a handle on your keys, Princess.”

“Thanks, Dad. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

Devon looked up as she passed his chair, biting

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back his laughter studiously so as not to appear rude to his hosts. His smile faded, and his gaze followed her.

She was enchanting, nothing like any Warrior-born daughter he'd ever seen. The woman had long blonde hair. He might have assumed she'd dyed it as some daughters did were it not for her stunning blue eyes. Even contacts couldn't turn brown eyes that perfect shade of blue.

She took the keys from her father's hand and leaned to place a kiss on his cheek, her breasts pressed tight into her halter and her jeans molding to a luscious backside. Her eyes met his, and she stood, offering Devon a shaky smile.

The Lord Armen cleared his throat. Devon snapped his eyes to him, feeling his face heat at the lord's inquiring expression, certain that he'd just blown his holiday in Armen to the Christian Hell.

The woman backed away then turned for the door. "I'll finish that computer track this afternoon," she promised.

"When you have time," her father replied.

Devon didn't watch her leave, though he ached to. He didn't have leave to pursue her, didn't even have an indication that she'd welcome the move. And, he'd already pushed Lord Armen further than he should have.

"My daughter," the lord offered simply. His voice was calm and seemingly without censure.

"My apologies. Her appearance is—striking. She surprised me."

He chuckled. "You expected her to look like the typical Warrior-born. Most Warriors do unless they know *of* her."

"If you don't mind my asking... I mean, Warriors don't usually adopt children because of the risk of exposure, and—"

"My mate was a widow when I saved her. She had twin daughters, infants. I am the only father they have ever known, and I love them *as* my own."

Devon nodded, barely stopping himself from asking if there were two women like that running around in shock that any house had been gifted two girls, no matter how they came to be there, let alone ones that looked that enticing. The threat had been stated clearly enough. They were Warrior-raised, and the Warrior in question wouldn't hesitate to enforce the rules of sanction where his daughters were concerned. "I understand. I wouldn't dream of touching her without your leave to do so."

For a long moment, the lord stared at him. He looked toward the foyer and back to Devon. "Very well. Enjoy your holiday, Devon."

He nodded again, nearly shaking in relief that he hadn't offended his gracious host. That was one thing his father and grandfather would punish severely. "My thanks."

* * * *

Michelle stood by the stairs, watching the Warrior who'd been meeting with her father. Tim had told her

it was Devon Kaufmann, when she'd asked. Even now, she wasn't sure why she was waiting for him. There was just something about him, something in his eyes that she wanted to see again.

The door to her father's office opened, and Devon headed across the foyer to the front door, seemingly deep in thought.

She hesitated, uncertain how to begin. "Well, well, well... What's on your mind, Warrior?" she drawled.

Devon stopped, looking to her in confusion. "Miss Armen," he greeted her with a courtly bow.

"Let me guess. My father didn't tell you my name." She ambled toward him, adding an exaggerated sashay that caught his attention immediately. Michelle smiled. It had never failed on human men, so she'd known it couldn't with an oversexed Warrior who wasn't related to her or mated already. "It's Michelle, by the way." She offered her hand for him to shake...or kiss.

"No. He didn't." Devon didn't take her hand. "Tell me your name, I mean."

Michelle sighed. "I'm certain my father won't kill you for a handshake," she ventured, trying to keep him talking.

In truth, her father wouldn't kill him at all...probably. She had autonomy. It was one of the things her mother had insisted on. Of course, the rules of sanction might still apply to Devon, since he was a Warrior and she the daughter of another house, autonomy or no. It was dangerous business for a Warrior to poach on the family of another.

Devon looked at her hand, his expression pained. "It wouldn't be appropriate," he replied.

She stepped to him, grasping his wrist, drawing his hand up to hers, noting his indecision in amusement. He didn't dare wrench his hand away, but he wasn't comfortable touching her either. He winced as she grasped it in her own but didn't pull away, resigning himself instead to shaking her hand properly.

"See? Not so bad, is it?" she asked.

"No," he admitted in a rough voice. "It isn't."

Michelle chuckled at his unease. "In America, it's considered rude to turn down the offer of a handshake, especially when you are a guest in someone's home. If you mean to stay for a bit, you should remember that."

"And how do you know I mean to stay?" he asked suspiciously.

Thank you, Tim. I owe you a beer for this one. "I'm not my father's best electronic tracker for my pretty face. I'm not that shabby at foot tracking, either." Though, the pretty face does occasionally help with that.

Devon withdrew his hand, and Michelle pasted on a smile to hide the sense of loss coursing through her.

"Are you?" he asked.

"I am. I trained specifically for it in college. I've always wanted to go into the family business, and this was my way in. I'm afraid I've made myself rather indispensable, though."

He ranged his eyes over her, and she gasped in surprise at the hunger in his expression. Yes. That was the look she wanted to see again.

"A woman of many talents," he noted.

Michelle shivered at the possible hidden meaning in that. "Some say so," she countered smoothly.

His smile disappeared. "I should —"

She grasped his arm as he started to turn. A fine tremor raced under her fingertips.

"I really should leave," he managed, though he made no move to do so.

"And if I offered to let you stay?"

He turned back, a fierce determination burning in his eyes that stole her breath. "If you do that, I will be forced to ask your father to give me leave to pursue you in any way you prove agreeable."

She forced a breath, wetting her upper lip. "I think I'd like that," she managed. She'd certainly be willing to help Devon enjoy his vacation properly, though she didn't want a permanent relationship.

He stared at her, perhaps shocked by her blunt acceptance. Or was he calculating how best to approach her father to take her up on it?

"Is that so?" James asked, breaking the moment.

Devon winced, turning to him, probably planning to offer an apology for speaking out of turn.

"Of course it is," she answered before he could speak. "I'm sure you're going to ignore my autonomy, since Devon is a Warrior, so why don't we just settle this now?"

Devon shot her a look of disbelief then looked back to James, seemingly waiting for an explosion.

Her father's smile widened. "You want to pursue her?" he asked.

"By your leave alone," Devon replied hastily. "My intentions are honorable."

"Mine aren't," she warned. There was no sense letting either of them think she was in the market to be some Warrior's mate.

Devon half-turned to her, his expression assessing.

James chuckled. "Do you *still* want to pursue her?"

"Oh, yes." The hint of challenge was in his eyes.

Michelle raised an eyebrow in acceptance of that challenge. She'd never lost before, and she wasn't about to lose now.

"And if she refuses to mate, Devon?"

He seemed to consider that, clearing his throat, darkening. "If she refuses me, I must accept it."

"Very well. Since you seek a permanent arrangement, you have my leave to act as young lovers will." He paused. "Syth help you. You're going to need it."

Devon bowed his head in thanks, casting her another hungry look. Her father went back into his office and closed the door.

Time to put this game in motion. "Well, I do have to go into town," she informed him. "We could meet—"

"I'll come with you. I imagine we have a lot to talk about."

"Yes. Perhaps we do." A lot to talk about if he thinks he can order me around.

* * * *

Devon knew it was coming, whatever ultimatum was

brewing in Michelle's pretty brain. They would understand each other perfectly before he was done.

"So, you accepted my suit," he prodded her.

Michelle pulled off the side of the mountain road and into a small grove of fruit trees, putting the truck in park. She turned to him, her expression starkly serious. "Let's get one thing straight, Devon. I'm not the mating kind."

"Mmmm hmmm," he murmured, smiling as her nipples came to points for him.

"I don't want to be sealed. I don't want to be the mother of your sons. I want a hot time in bed, and you keep giving me looks that..."

He unclasped her seatbelt and lifted her, turning Michelle astride his lap.

"Promise that," she gasped.

His half-erect length came to full attention, and he pressed her to it, rocking his hips to grind it against her. Her eyes closed in ecstasy and she rode him, groaning softly.

Devon pulled her head toward him, tangling his fingers in her golden tresses and taking full advantage of her parted lips. Her mouth was frantic against his, her tongue sliding along his while their bodies ground in mimic of what he'd soon have. Her nipple was already hard and ready when he tweaked it. Michelle jumped in response then pressed harder against him. Gods, but the woman was hot!

Her hands pulled at his shirt, and Devon switched the engine off. The urge to take her on the grass outside the door was insistent, but that would be

giving Michelle what she wanted. Devon had no intention of that.

He eased her hands away, dimly noting that she'd unbuttoned half of his shirt. Good. If she wanted him badly enough, he might just leave Armen range with a mate.

Michelle tried to pull back, but he clasped her head to his, swallowing her groan of protest. She sighed, moving against his thrusts.

The game was sweet torture, all the more so when her climax neared. She pulled at his clothes, alternately fought her climax and pursued it, and even escaped his kiss to plead with him. Devon nearly laughed at that, but it was more important that he make his point first.

Then the moment crashed over them. She stiffened then eased into his chest with a ragged cry. Her scent was sweet and pungent, an assault on his aching body.

"Devon, I—"

"You want more?" he interrupted her.

"You know I do."

He brushed his lips over her forehead. "It's not fun, is it?"

Her brow furrowed. "What isn't?"

"Being unfulfilled. That's what release is like for me."

"Release is," she started to argue.

"Experiencing a climax and wanting more. At least it is for Warriors who are ready to settle down. Let's get *this* straight, Michelle. It seems your father gave

his leave, because I want more than release. Neither he nor I are comfortable with the idea of you sampling a little Warrior cock with no return."

She pushed away, settling on her knees beside him, seemingly livid. "How dare you! How do you know what my father —"

"Warriors understand each other well enough."

"So, you're saying you won't fuck me unless I agree to marry you?" she challenged.

"I'm saying I won't *fuck* you at all. Your father gave me permission to pursue you as my mate."

"He gave us permission to act as young lovers will," she shot back.

"A woman I pick up for release isn't a lover, Michelle. A lover is someone you want more with. Unless I have a reasonable expectation that you'll consider being my mate, you'll remain as unfulfilled as I am. Oh, I'll give you orgasms, mind-blowing orgasms, but to get what we both want... Both of us have a shot at it or neither does."

Michelle crossed her arms over her chest, her face crimson and her jaw tight in fury.

"I've given you enough to consider. I'll see myself back to the manor and my car while you finish your errands. Have a nice day, Michelle."

He didn't give her time to argue. Devon slid out of the truck and strolled away, savoring the taste of Michelle in his mouth and the sun touching his chest in the vee of his half-opened shirt.

* * * *

"That son of a bitch," she growled for the tenth time in the last hour. Four of them had been uttered before she'd regained enough composure to start driving again.

He'd rattled her horribly. There was no denying it. So far, Michelle had left her keys behind at two stores and left her credit card behind at a third.

"He is going to pay for this," she vowed. All of the Warriors learned that quickly enough. After the examples she'd made of Tim and Tyler, few had been stupid enough to try her again.

But that had been the typical male bullshit, their belief that they had the right to order her around, despite her autonomy. This was different. Her retaliation would have to fit the challenge.

For a moment, Michelle considered simply refusing him. It would serve him right if she called a halt now, coming out on top, one orgasm up on him. One...tremendous orgasm...

A smile curved her lips. Michelle pulled a three-point turn and headed back to town, a new plan in mind. Devon would pay. He wanted to leave her in agony? Two could play that game.

Chapter Two

Devon opened the door to his hotel room, raising an eyebrow at the sight of Michelle. The little vixen was stretched out on his bed in the most alluring sky blue lace teddy he'd ever seen. He strode inside, locking the door behind him, trying to ignore the insistent ache of his now-erect cock.

"Cyber tracker?" he asked.

She smiled. "You did use a credit card to pay the bill. I told you I was the best."

"I won't deny that I'm surprised to see you here."

"You doubted my abilities?"

"No. I doubt your willingness."

"Well, my intentions still aren't pure, if that's what you mean."

He nodded. "Thought so."

"I guess you'll just have to convince me." Her smile widened.

"It's against the rules of sanction to convince you to willingness. You know that."

Michelle stretched her back, and Devon shifted toward her, noting that he could see the darkened tips of her breasts through the lace...the faint outline of her

pubic curls, even the darker patch where her juices had wet the fabric between her thighs. The temperature in the room seemed to kick up ten degrees.

Her voice was dripping in invitation. "Oh, I'm more than willing, Devon. You just have to convince me to be your mate. You intend to do that anyway."

He nodded, his mouth watering.

"You made promises this afternoon," she hinted, stroking her fingers in little circles over her mound.

"I most certainly did." Devon stripped off his jacket, weapons belt, boots, socks and shirts then headed to the bed.

"Hmmm. Is your control that uncertain?" she mused.

He faltered, one knee raised over the bed. "What?" She was questioning his control, while she was dressed this way and in his bed, inviting him to take release with her?

Michelle stared at his jeans. "Afraid you'll give in and fuck me?" she teased.

Devon ground his teeth at her base description of what he wanted. "I fuck blade chasers," he corrected her.

Her eyes flashed in anger, and she turned away.

His anger faded into confusion. What the hell had he said to cause this response? "Michelle?"

She slid from the bed, reaching for a trench coat. "I'm hardly going to waste my time with you, if that's what you're—"

He made it to her in a single stride, taking her

shoulders in his hands. Michelle tried to shake him off, but he pulled her closer.

"Let go of me," she ordered.

"Cool your jets."

She glared at him.

"Tyler taught me that one. Did I use it wrong?"

"Let go of me." Her voice was low in warning.

He ignored her. "You think I'm planning to take release with blade chasers while I pursue you, don't you?"

She stopped struggling and stared at him.

"I'm not."

"Then what are..." She faltered.

"You aren't a blade chaser, Michelle. If I give in, I'll still be making love to you. Remember that."

* * * *

Michelle stared at him, struggling for clarity. The wild urge to walk away assaulted her then was silenced by her need...and her need for revenge for that afternoon. He hadn't paid for that yet. And yet, she couldn't shake this confusion.

Nothing seemed clear anymore. Her anger, for instance. What did it matter to her if he screwed a blade chaser?

Michelle tried to convince herself that she'd never get him to give in and have sex with her if he was releasing it with another woman. She reasoned that he wouldn't be suffering as she was if he did. She argued that it balked the idea of a level playing field.

None of those reasons stood up to scrutiny for long. She was jealous.

And I shouldn't be. Devon is a Warrior, a natural-born male slut.

Until they print.

But, she didn't want to consider that possibility.

Devon released her shoulders, holding her gaze. The unmistakable sound of a zipper made her gasp. He went still, his eyes questioning her. She nodded, and he stripped away his jeans and boxers.

Michelle panned her eyes over him, hungry in a way that the other men she'd slept with had never caused.

It was a solemn truth of Warrior-born or Warrior-raised daughters that they went to extremes. They craved Warriors or men who resembled Warriors in every way...or they craved men who couldn't be mistaken for Warriors in a pitch-black room. There was no middle ground, no slight dark men and no Vikings.

Her twin, Melissa, had gone the way of marrying a very human man. At five feet ten, with strawberry-blond hair and green eyes, Mack couldn't be further from a Warrior if he tried. Despite the scars he bore from the beast he'd stood up to in defense of Melissa, he was no Warrior and had no desire to play at being one.

Michelle had always favored tall, dark men. She'd masturbated to visions of visiting Warriors for years.

And now I get to indulge myself. She tossed her coat on top of the dresser.

Devon took the hint. He sealed his mouth to hers, taking the lead as he had in the truck. She wanted to complain about that, to turn the tables on him, but what he was doing felt too good to stop. His hands were everywhere, cupping her to his body, arousing her with practiced ease. He lowered Michelle to the bed, covering her with his body.

She pressed to his cock, gasping as he broke off the kiss, his eyes closed in pleasure. Devon fingered the lace straps over her shoulders.

"Yes," she urged him on. "Remove it."

He smiled wickedly. "Not this time."

Devon moved abruptly, rolling to one side and sliding down. In the time it took her to raise her head to question him, he'd started his seduction.

His mouth was hot and insistent against her breasts, the softness of his tongue at odds with the rough knit of lace. She groaned, fisting her hands in his hair. His fingers stroked at her clit, using the damp cloth to rocket her toward climax.

It took him only minutes to send her over. Michelle screamed in pleasure, gasping out a plea for him to stop when he continued pushing her on.

His head came up, a wicked smile curving his lips. "I promised to make you climax again and again, but—"

Her face heated. "I can take anything you can dish out," she attested, knowing it was a lie even as she uttered the words.

"I'm not done with you yet, Michelle." His hand retreated, leaving her drawing in ragged breaths.

She watched in disbelief as Devon sucked in his fingers then released them and licked his lips, his gaze traveling down her body, making his meaning clear. The man was going to kill her this way.

But, what a way to go! She reached for the shoulder strap, intent on aiding him in his quest to taste her.

Devon pulled her hand away, smiling. "I like the teddy. Leave it on."

Her temper flared. "I like a man's tongue *inside* me."

He rose to his knees, spreading her legs around him. "I like a woman who knows what she wants and isn't afraid to demand it."

"But?" Her eyes settled on his rigid cock, and her frustration spiked. Of course, he didn't want to take the teddy off. It was a physical barrier between them.

He chuckled. "There's a nice feature to this type of lace, Michelle."

"What?" What the hell was he talking about?

Devon slid two fingers between the lace crotch and her aching flesh, stroking his knuckles up and down her seam.

"Don't you dare," she warned him. The outfit had cost her forty dollars, and while she knew that her father wouldn't bat an eye at the waste of that much money, her mother had imparted enough frugal lessons to her daughters to make her avoid such destruction.

He yanked the material to one side; Michelle winced, mentally preparing herself for the sound of ripping fabric that never came.

She arched up as his tongue dipped inside her, screaming harshly. This went beyond good; it outstripped every fantasy of a Warrior she'd ever had.

Devon eased back, his breathing buffeting her sensitive tissues. "Lace stretches, Michelle. At least, it does if it has a Lycra base."

The other outfits she'd purchased coursed through her mind. Most of them included lace panels. Michelle prayed they were the same type of lace.

Her musing was cut short when he went back to his play, his mouth doing glorious things that made thinking impossible. Everything came down to pure sensation, touches and sound, snips of color and smells so powerful they triggered the illusion of taste.

Michelle shattered, her hands tightening on his shoulders as his groan set off aftershocks. Her head spun, and her muscles were heavy in exhaustion.

Devon smoothed the lace over her, shushing her softly when she jerked away from the added sensation. He laid down next to her, stroking his fingertips over her stomach.

She shivered, gasping out a plea for him to stop. Her body was little more than live nerves, raw, powerful, painful even in pleasure.

"Enough for tonight?" he asked.

"Yes." Michelle felt her face darken in response to his mocking smile.

Devon started to draw the sheets and blankets over them.

That brought the world into focus for her. Sharing

his bed wasn't in the cards.

* * * *

Michelle moved so quickly that Devon didn't register her intent until she was off the bed. By the time he was beside her, she had her 'come fuck me' heels on.

"What do you think you're doing?" he demanded.

"Going home."

"Why?"

She didn't answer. Her hand closed on the trench coat.

Realization that she'd come to him in nothing but the lingerie and coat caused him to harden more forcefully. He reasoned back his response. *I am not going to fuck her. I am not going to fuck her on the dresser.*

Common sense rocked him back to course. He snatched the coat away, shaking his head, trying to force words.

Michelle turned on him, her eyes wide in shock. "My coat," she demanded.

"You are not returning home this way."

"I came here —"

"No," he growled.

"Excuse me?"

Reason deserted him. "You cannot..." He motioned to her state of undress, vaguely aware of the pulse in his cock.

"If you'd hand me my coat, I'd be properly covered," she snapped.

He shook the coat, noting the faint jingle of keys

from the pocket. "*This* is not properly covered. Not for a woman traveling alone at night."

"It wasn't dark when I arrived here."

"It is now," he managed through clenched teeth.

Michelle glared at him then turned and strode to his discarded shirts. The lace molded to the curves of her ass as she leaned and snatched his button-down shirt up.

Gleaning her intention, Devon started dressing as well. He glanced at her, fastening his jeans, calculating how best to defuse her. *The keys*. He swept them from her coat pocket and into his jeans silently.

She turned, snatching the coat from his hand, pulling it on over the dress-like shirt as he retrieved his t-shirt and weapons belt. By the time she'd tied it, forsaking the buttons, he'd gotten dressed, save his socks and boots, sloppily though it was.

Michelle headed for the door, her posture stiff in anger. He bit back a smile as her hand dipped into the coat pocket and she stopped abruptly. She checked the other pocket, muttered a curse then turned back, searching the floor around the dresser, giving him the time he needed to finish dressing and straighten his clothing.

Devon fastened the last buckle on his boots, stood and pulled on his jacket. "Ready to go?" he asked.

Her jaw tightened and her eyes narrowed. She raised her hand, palm-up. "My keys," she ordered.

"When you're safe at home."

"When you've walked me to my car," she countered.

He shook his head. Devon raised an eyebrow in challenge at her growl of frustration.

Her face went crimson in barely-leashed fury. "It's five miles home, Devon."

"Five miles you're not traveling alone."

"You have no right—"

"A protected obeys Warriors in matters of safety."

"You're not of my house."

"I'm a Warrior, and I know for a fact that you don't listen to the Warriors of your house, either. You're right. I'm not one of them; *I* won't put up with it."

Michelle sputtered for a moment. "I'll ask for a judgment," she warned.

"Then I'm guilty of seeing to his daughter's safety. Are you ready to go?"

She seemed to work that through, no doubt coming to the realization that the Lord Armen would side with Devon if it was presented that way. "Give me my keys and follow me."

He smiled. "Your brother says you are quite the driver. Attended a certain race-driving school and came out with flying colors? I don't think we'll be testing that tonight."

A smile curved her lips. "And how will you get back here? You're not using my truck."

"I'll manage."

"Fine. Suit yourself." Michelle preceded him to the truck, tapping her foot while she waited for him to unlock her door.

The trip back to the manor was tense. Michelle fairly seethed bloodlust, and her plotting was

obvious.

At the house, she was out of the truck and striding up the walk before he caught up to her. To her credit, Michelle waited until they were halfway across the foyer before turning to him with her hand out in silent demand.

Devon raised the keys, letting them hover over her palm for a moment then dropping them in.

"Thank you," she stated in a crisp voice that nearly crackled with ice.

James's voice broke the tension between them. "Nice night?" he asked.

"I think so," Devon answered brightly.

Michelle turned, unknotted the coat, and strode to her father, kissing him on the cheek. She whipped off the coat and placed it in his hands without a word then sauntered up the stairs, clad to appearances only in her heels and Devon's shirt.

Devon choked at the display, envisioning an end to his days even as his errant body responded to the sight.

James chuckled. "Sleep well, Princess."

"I will," she sang back.

Devon snapped a look at the Lord Armen, certain his cheer had been for his daughter and his expression would hold a warning for Devon...or worse.

It didn't. The lord was still chuckling, folding the coat over his arm. He nodded toward Michelle. "If there was ever a human woman with the spirit of a Warrior, Michelle is it."

"I noticed."

"I warn you, she's not going to make your pursuit an easy one."

I could have used that warning earlier. Oh, who am I kidding? I knew this wouldn't be easy. He nodded stiffly.

"You're prepared for the possibility of failure?"

His heart ached. "I have to be. Every Warrior does."

James nodded grimly. "You drove her home?"

"I couldn't risk less."

"Thank you for that. I'll drive you back."

"No. I think I need the walk to clear my head." *And work off my arousal.* He smiled. "I promise not to kill a beast unless it's stupid enough to attack me." He turned away.

"One more thing, Devon."

"Yes?"

"To put an old man's mind at ease... She was wearing something under your shirt?"

"Oh, it was something," he drawled. That settled it. He needed the walk to cool his blood.

Chapter Three

September 22nd, 2003

Devon took a calming breath, nearly groaning as she repeated herself.

"I need more, Devon."

"So do I," he replied. He had to keep that in mind when the urge to sate them both properly called to him.

"I'll consider it," she pleaded.

He went still, forcing his mind to function. "What?"

"I'll consider your suit seriously," she vowed.

He ground his teeth, reining in his body.

"I said."

Devon pressed his forehead to hers. "I heard you," he gasped. "I understand."

"I don't," she admitted. "I said —"

"Say it when you're calm, when your drives aren't talking for you."

"I will."

"When you do... If you do, I'll consider it a

promise. You know what this means to me.”
Everything.

“You don’t trust me?” she whispered, seemingly hurt.

It was on the tip of his tongue to state that he didn’t. After her attempts to lure him with one carefully-constructed outfit and scene after another, her teasing, her hot and cold running emotions...

And that wasn’t taking into account her dogged determination that his unwillingness to let her take him to climax was unfair. She hadn’t even started with a hand job when he’d agreed. Memories of her taking him into her mouth nearly shook his resolve. He’d come too close to conceding when he’d agreed to let her play the same games with his pleasure that he played with hers.

Oh, but I do want to trust her. There was no denying it. He wanted Michelle to be serious, and if he intended to pursue her to mating, he’d have to trust that she was serious at some point in time. *The sooner, the better.* “I trust you.”

“Then you’ll—”

“No. Not until you state it when I haven’t already aroused you.”

“Devon,” she pleaded, her voice cracking as if she might cry.

“It would be convincing you to willingness. Not willingness to make love but willingness to mate...or to consider mating.”

“You’re really going to turn me away?” she asked in misery.

Causing her unease ate at him, and yet he wouldn't risk even the appearance that he'd convinced her, even to himself. "For this... For this afternoon, yes."

Michelle pushed him away then slid from the bed, pulling on her shirt in silence. He started to rise.

"Don't," she ordered. "It's light out. I'll get a cab."

"I can drive you —"

"I don't want you to!"

Devon winced. "I'm not refusing you, Michelle."

She paused, then straightened her underwear and reached for her jeans. "No. You're not. You just want me to say it in my right mind."

"Yes. I do. I need that. Can't you see?"

* * * *

"Yes, of course, I can." She pulled her jeans on, not daring to look at him.

Michelle could see. Unfortunately, she could also feel. She'd tried to tell him she'd consider his suit seriously a half dozen times, that she *was* considering it. Then she'd remember what that meant to a Warrior and choke on the words.

The reason was obvious. She cared for him. *Maybe, I more than care for him?*

As long as she made no promises to Devon, Michelle felt he could walk away. As long as she didn't, she wasn't really hurting him.

And there was no question that giving him hope would lead to hurting him. Accepting him wasn't like accepting a Hunter or Maher. Devon was a

Kaufmann. If she became his mate, there'd be few visits home to see her family. *If any.*

Devon's range was half a world away. He'd be expected to stay there, and he wouldn't deal well with her globetrotting home at the drop of a hat.

Michelle couldn't deny that a life with Devon held appeal. It wasn't just that the man made her crazy sexually. He was solicitous, thoughtful, witty...

"Are you sure I can't drive you?" he asked.

Courteous, a little overprotective... "I'd rather you wouldn't."

He grumbled his agreement.

Michelle slid her feet into her heeled sandals and headed for the door, patting her front pocket though she didn't need keys to get into the manor. She turned the knob.

"Will you be coming back?" he asked calmly.

She glanced back, her mouth going dry at the sight of him. Devon sat in the bed, the sheets pooled low on his hips, one of the most powerful beings that hunted the night seeking a promise from her.

Releasing him now would be kindest. Just the thought of it tore at her. They'd have little enough time together; how could she walk away before she had to?

To save him more pain.

Michelle wavered. It was the right thing to do, and she knew it, yet...

It came down to her wants versus his, her pain versus his. He needed her to say she wanted him when she was in her right mind. It seemed the only

way she'd be able to say it would be if she wasn't.

She turned away, confused. "I.. I need time." She left without giving him time to answer.

* * * *

"Michelle," Melissa shouted.

She managed a strained smile, hugging her twin.

Melissa didn't pause, exuberant as always. "Mack had four days off, and you know we just had to come. I thought I'd miss you. Tyler said —"

"Yeah. I know. Big sister is cock-teasing a Warrior." He'd hinted as much to her with more than a touch of disapproval.

"He did *not*!" She threaded her arm through Michelle's and pulled her along to the stairs. "Come on. You have to see Mickey."

That speeded Michelle's steps. She hadn't seen her nephew in more than a month. A few minutes with Mickey was just what she needed.

Michelle smiled widely at the sight of him playing in the bouncy seat set in the center of the smaller nursery, two of the toddler Warriors towering over him. She sat beside him, fingering his strawberry-blond curls.

"So," Melissa hedged, "are you planning to give this Warrior a dark-haired Mickey? Or are you really going to play house and leave him?"

"We're not playing house...precisely."

"You've been sleeping with the man for three —"

"No I haven't, and it's only been a little more than

two—”

“So, you’re not sleeping. Such nitpicking.”

“We’re not...really...um...” Michelle rubbed at the base of her skull, feeling a sick headache coming on.

Melissa appeared at her side, searching Michelle’s face. “Not what?”

“Devon won’t...” She glanced at the toddlers then away. “He won’t...consummate until I tell him I’m seriously considering more.”

Her sister’s mouth dropped open in shock. “You’ve got a Warrior so tied up he hasn’t had release outside of self-release in almost three—”

“A little more than two!”

Melissa glared at her.

“Two and a half,” she conceded.

“You’ve had this poor guy hanging on with nothing but self-release for that long? Are you nuts?”

“Of course not. He’s...getting more than that.”

“I thought he was serious about this?”

Michelle fumbled for words, her sister’s twisted logic losing her. “He is...I guess. Okay, I know he is.”

“He’s taking other women to bed? Doesn’t sound serious to—”

“No! Of course not. Not with other women. With me...well, once I convinced him to—”

“I don’t think I follow you.”

Michelle sighed and tried to order her thoughts. “We play around, but he’s not... That’s not the only thing there is, you know!”

“Oh, I don’t know what I’m doing anymore. What should I do, Melissa? Should I leave him? Should I

stay with him? Should I—”

“Slow down. Do you want to leave him?”

She swallowed down a sob, shaking her head. Her eyes burned in the tears she blinked back.

“Then what’s your malfunction?”

“He’s not a Hunter or a Maher, Melissa. He’s not even a Crossbearer.”

She motioned for Michelle to continue, seemingly lost.

“If I do this, we’ll never see each other. I won’t see Mom and Dad or Mack and Mickey. I don’t think I’d mind not seeing Tyler so much,” she joked weakly. “I’ll be on the other side of the world from everyone I love.”

“Except Devon.”

“That is the problem,” she admitted. “If I have Devon...”

“You don’t have everyone else,” Melissa finished for her. “But if you stay here...”

Her stomach lurched at the thought. She nodded, feeling more than a little ill.

Her sister sighed. “I never said it was easy, Shell. When Mack and I had to relocate to San Diego—”

“There’s still weekends at home,” she argued. “No weekends, Melissa. No holidays.”

“And if they moved us to Maine, there would be only holidays. If they moved us to China, would there be even that much?”

“And you’d go with him? You’d accept that being with Mack meant not being with us?”

“Either your love is strong enough or it isn’t. If it’s

not, you need to figure that out soon and cut Devon loose while he has a chance."

"What if I don't know?"

"From what you've said, you still haven't given him a chance. How could you know?"

"But... If I do this, and it's not enough, what will I be doing to Devon?"

Melissa smiled. "The fact that you're afraid of that should tell you something."

A lead weight settled in her stomach. "That I'm going to hurt him, and I should let him go now," she replied woodenly.

"No. That you care enough about him to cut him loose, even if it hurts you. It just might be strong enough, after all."

Michelle nodded, thoughts crowding into her overloaded mind. "I think I have to go," she whispered.

"Is something wrong?"

"Yes. I walked away from him. I shouldn't have done that."

"Say 'hi' from me."

Michelle pushed to her feet, laying a kiss on Mickey's head and meandering toward the door. She snatched Tyler's Trans Am keys off the board and headed for the garage.

* * * *

Devon sat crossways on the hotel room love seat, his knees bent to facilitate his height. It seemed he spent

more and more of the time Michelle wasn't with him here, brooding, biding his time, praying to Ani that she'd say what he needed to hear.

With her drives, he'd thought the game would be nearly over by now. Her stark interest in him coupled with her passionate nature had him convinced that he was right. Now it seemed he was wrong. Now...she might never come back.

I shouldn't have refused her. She said it, impassioned or not. I should have trusted her.

He considered his options. How long should he wait? How long should he give her before actively seeking to break printing?

Devon fought back the urge to scream. He couldn't choose to do it. Until Michelle spoke the words, until she refused him, he couldn't take that road...

Unless I pose a danger to her. If it came to that, he'd do whatever he had to. He would never hurt Michelle. It wouldn't come to that.

A knock at the door brought him back to the here and now. Devon ambled to it, his heart pounding, hoping it wasn't James Lord Armen with a cabin key in his hand and news that Michelle was calling it off.

He opened it, gaping at the sight of Michelle. Words deserted him.

"Am I welcome?" she asked, seemingly disconcerted.

He stepped back, nearly stumbling over his own bare feet. "Of course."

There were several long minutes of silence after he closed the door behind her. Michelle calmed herself

visibly. "I was wrong to walk out that way. I was just...confused."

His heart sank. "I was afraid of that."

Her eyes widened. "No. I didn't mean..." She rubbed at her forehead then the back of her neck. "I mean, I wasn't confused about what I said."

Devon stared at her. "You're certainly confusing me."

"I know. This...this isn't easy for me."

His heart stuttered. *This is where she calls it off.* Devon prepared himself to let her leave then call her father to ask for a cabin to fight the madness.

"I've been seriously considering your suit for some time." She paused, darkening, biting her lower lip.

"But?" It was all he could do to force out that one word.

"I'm scared, Devon. I feel so...out of control."

She feels out of control? He bit back laughter at the irony of that statement.

"I don't know what will happen next. I'm confused. I can't promise to be your mate today—"

"I'm not demanding that."

"I don't want to hurt you. If I accept you and I'm wrong, I'll hurt you." Tears pooled in her eyes, threatening to fall.

Devon sighed. "I accepted being hurt when I asked your father's permission to pursue you."

Michelle stared at him, swallowing hard. Was she really that afraid of hurting him? If so, there was a chance.

"I don't understand, Michelle. Are you refusing

me?"

"I want to know," she whispered.

"Know? Know what?" She wasn't making sense.

"If I love you enough to be the mate you need."

Devon crossed the space between them in two long strides, giddy in disbelief. He cupped his hands behind her head, raising her chin with his thumbs and claiming her mouth deeply, solemnly.

Michelle pressed her hands to his bare chest, sinking against him. She eased back from the kiss, breathing in quick gasps, trembling.

He nuzzled her lips. "Don't leave tonight."

She nodded, stammering out a reply that made no sense.

* * * *

Michelle couldn't have recounted how she got undressed. The only fact she was certain of was that she did none of it herself.

The little her mind acknowledged consciously was a montage of images.

Devon kissed her. He whispered his plans to her, though she scarcely heard them.

They were on the bed, her shirt off, his mouth providing an unhurried torture of her breasts, his palm pressed to the zipper of her jeans.

He was nude. Her jeans were open and ringing her thighs. His fingertips teased at her clit while she stroked him. He groaned, promising her all of him.

They were both nude. Michelle screamed as two

fingers breached her body, aching for him. Devon whispered pleas, begging her not to come without him. She nodded.

He kissed her, his body rolling over hers, their limbs entwined. "Now, Michelle," he breathed into her lips, his fingers sliding free then circling her clit again, using her own lubricant to arouse her.

"Yes, now."

She didn't question what 'now' meant. As long as it meant Devon was with her, 'now' was good. It turned out that 'now' meant he was going to replace his fingers with the much more substantial length and width of his cock.

Michelle tilted her hips up, unable to arch her body beneath his weight, moaning, grasping at his back.

He moved slowly, pushing the head of his cock through her, stretching her for the rest of him with painstaking care. It felt sublime, beyond all comprehension. She sobbed, and he stopped abruptly.

Devon stared at her, questioning her silently. Even now, she knew he'd stop if she asked him to. She nodded frantically, urging him on.

His advance resumed, heartbeat after heartbeat, until he nestled fully inside her. He slid back slightly then returned, slowly building his speed and vigor until sweat coated their bodies.

Michelle whimpered in delight, teetering at the edge of climax.

"By Ani, yes. Give yourself to me," he pleaded.

As if invoking the goddess's name were the last straw, Michelle shattered, crying out harshly as her

nails bit into his back and her body contracted around him.

Just when she thought Devon was going to ride her crest and push her further, he tensed, his heat playing sweet harmony to her climax. He pulsed inside her, massaging the clenched walls of her sheath.

Then it was over. Michelle let her hands slide away from his shoulders, her muscles aching from the strain of clenching them in the throes of passion. He pulsed inside her again, and she pressed up against him, aftershocks rocking her body.

"Baroo, give me strength," he growled.

She smiled at that.

His lips caressed hers, tracing them from one cheek to the other. "What are you thinking now?"

"I don't know whether to thank Syth as my house god, Baroo as yours or Tes for granting wishes and blessings."

He chuckled. "I'm thanking them all. The whole lineup from Ani on."

"Even Fih and Zel?"

"Getting here wasn't easy."

"Ah. That's Fih, the god of battle. And Zel?"

"You've never heard of le petit morte?"

Michelle couldn't help it; she laughed long and hard, doubly so when Devon groaned at the sensation.

Chapter Four

October 2nd, 2003

“Stop,” Michelle pleaded, trying to push his hands away, giggling as he managed to tickle her again.

“I want to feel you laugh.” Gods, but he seemed to love feeling her laugh while he was buried inside her.

“Stop playing and kiss me.”

Devon’s hands halted then wound through hers. His voice was rough in arousal. “I love a woman who knows what she wants and demands it.” His kiss was hot, hard and full of promise.

He broke away, staring at her, abruptly serious. “Be my mate.”

Ice settled in her stomach. The moment had arrived, the one she’d dreaded, the one she’d had nightmares about for the ten days since she’d accepted him.

She’d known it would come eventually. It had to, but she wished she had more time. How could this moment come before she’d made a decision?

Melissa had said that your love was either enough or it wasn't, but how could Michelle know if it was enough? The thought of losing him made her feel as if her heart were being ripped out. The thought of losing her family did the same.

He ground his teeth. "You're not going to," he guessed. "You're going to refuse me."

Tears she hadn't realized were pooling spilled over her lashes. "I don't... I need —"

"I have no more time," he roared. His hands fisted beside her head.

Michelle cringed, her heart pounding at the ferocity of his response.

Devon took a calming breath, closing his eyes, his hands unfisting. He left her body then left the bed, pulling the sheet over her gently.

She watched him dress in dismay. "What are you doing?" He was leaving her?

"I need...space."

She winced at the monotone of his voice, wiping away the tears coursing down her cheeks.

He glanced at her then away. "Promise me you won't leave. Not alone in the dark."

"I promise."

Devon nodded and strode away, locking the door behind him.

For a long moment, Michelle stared at nothing, her emotions rioting. It wasn't fair. There had to be a way to work this out. Maybe if she told Devon what her problem was, they could figure out a way together.

* * * *

Devon entered the Armen manor, defeat weighing on him heavily. He'd been sure she'd say 'yes.' For the last five days, she'd been so at ease that this outcome had ceased to exist for him.

He hesitated then knocked on the Lord Armen's office door, knowing that someone would be there, likely James himself. He'd hunted the previous three nights, so he was due for down time.

"Come in," came the muffled reply.

Devon entered, still certain that this was the wrong course but uncertain what else he could do in his state.

The lord looked around his shoulder at the empty foyer, his smile morphing into a look of fury. "Where is she?"

"Safe. At the hotel and with a promise to stay there until morning."

"Why the hell would you —"

"She refused me."

James paled; he mumbled a curse, but he didn't comment.

"I need a cabin. I can't...trust myself anymore." *How close did I come to hurting her? Too close. Far too close. "I beg this indulgence." I won't hurt her. I'd rather die than do it.*

"You have it. Stay here while I get the keys and directions for you." He fairly bolted from the room.

Devon nodded stiffly, a knot of tears rising in his throat, pushed up by the urge to scream. Why did

James have to be so accommodating? Part of him wished the lord would force him to try again, to ask Michelle one more time. Another part reasoned that he wouldn't survive her refusal again.

James returned, placing a set of keys on the desk between them. He started drawing the map that would lead Devon to the mad cabin he'd use.

Devon fisted them, his hand shaking in the effort not to punch something...or to scream. "My thanks," he rasped.

"The cabin is stocked."

I won't need it. The thought of eating makes me want to puke.

"Let me know if you need anything else."

"I do."

"Name it."

Devon unbuckled his weapons belt and set it on the desk. "Hold this for me."

James looked up at him, his eyes wide in horror.

"I can't trust myself," he repeated. "I'd rather die than use that weapon in madness."

"Syth protect you," he mumbled, going back to the map.

"Didn't seem to help last time," he whispered, wincing at the sacrilege he'd uttered.

James didn't call him on it, a sure sign that he believed Devon far gone.

Devon admitted to himself that he was. He recognized the emptiness eating at him, warring with his pain and loss. When push came to shove, it might be kindest if Syth led a beast to him and let him die.

Chapter Five

October 3rd, 2003

Michelle groaned at the headache pounding behind her eyes. This was what too little sleep did to her, and crying probably hadn't helped. Now, she no doubt looked as horrible as she felt: red eyes, swollen cheeks and nose, upset stomach and pounding head.

She blinked her eyes, cursing the gray light filtering around the drapes. Though it wasn't bright yet, it was brighter than her aching head wanted to deal with.

But, it was morning. She'd been awake half the night, waiting for Devon to come back so they could talk, but he hadn't. Michelle wasn't certain why she'd thought he'd come back in the night. He'd indicated that he might not, but she'd been keyed up and hopeful that he would.

When would he come back? Should she order breakfast for two and assume he'd be here soon or wait for him? Though her stomach rumbled in

complaint, she knew eating wasn't on the agenda until she worked this out favorably.

The realization that she didn't know the time, and as such couldn't judge anything, assaulted her. That overcast light could be six o'clock in the morning or nine.

Michelle fumbled the bedside clock around, shaking her head in disbelief. It was wrong. It had to be wrong. She turned on the television, flipping through to the TV Guide Channel.

"Eleven thirty," she choked.

Where was he? His belongings were still scattered around the room. Surely, he hadn't left for Kaufmann range.

Had he been in an accident? Fallen in battle? Decided to work off steam at training and stayed at the manor for lunch?

Yes. That one was likely. If he'd been in an accident or fallen in battle, someone would have come looking for her. He was just letting her sleep and getting the space he said he needed at the same time. She'd take a taxi to the manor. His car would be there, and she'd know he was all right.

* * * *

"Where is he?" Michelle demanded, her heart pounding in a mixture of anger and terror.

Her father sighed. "You've left him no choice, Michelle. A Warrior can only go so far. Devon has gone as far as he can. He had to go."

"Where?" she repeated, sick at the thought of Devon facing the madness.

"This isn't a game. If you don't intend on marrying him, let him go. Even now..." He ran a hand over his face, looking weary. "He could hurt you, Michelle. Devon has enough sanity left to know it and run like hell from it. Don't push him further unless you intend to seal...and don't go to him alone."

Memories of his fury when she'd tried to ask for more time to decide flitted in her mind. He'd startled her, but she hadn't considered that he might actually hurt her. "He'd really..." She stopped, annoyed with herself. Of course, Devon wouldn't hurt her. Why would she even ask it? Her father was just being overprotective.

"Yes. He would. Now, do you want me to take you to him?"

Yes! How could he ask that?

"Be sure, Michelle. If you're not sure, you could literally be the death of him."

Her head spun. She wanted him; there was no denying that she wanted him until it made her crazy, but did she want him enough to give up the life she treasured for him?

"Think about it, but be sure before you answer me. He deserves that, Princess."

"Yes. He does."

She wandered out of the office and across the foyer, trying desperately to sort her feelings. If only being with Devon didn't mean leaving her home and family, she'd agree in an instant, but it did. If only

there was a way to talk to him alone, she was certain they'd be able to work this out somehow, but how could they do that with her father standing over them? Since he was playing the part of Warrior-father, he'd never tell her where Devon was.

The key board. Michelle looked at the closed office door then around at the deserted foyer and stairs. She hurried to the key board, scanning the rows impatiently. For this to work, she'd have to figure out where he was and be gone before anyone was the wiser.

The keys on the board were spares used for only two reasons: making copies if someone lost a full set and to allow a visiting Warrior a place to track from. *And for me to change vehicles or have keys until I find the ones I've misplaced.* Wherever Devon was, he had to have keys, and unless James had sacrificed one of his own to keep her from doing precisely this...

Michelle noted the empty hook in satisfaction. *Typical! Even her own father underestimated her abilities.*

The cabin wasn't far at all, only an hour by car, less if she took her father's half-ton truck and used the back roads that were inaccessible to her Kia Sportage or Mazda Speed 6. She snatched the truck keys and left quietly, hoping her father wouldn't catch on. The miles passed in a dizzying rush, but there was no sign of pursuit.

She bit her lip lightly, remembering her father's warning about Devon's mental state. She pushed away the image of him as a raving lunatic. He wouldn't hurt her; she knew he couldn't. Michelle

assured herself that Devon would only consider hurting her if she refused him again. Surely, if he knew she wanted to find a way to be his mate, he'd be able to control his madness. As a Warrior, he wouldn't want to cause her unease; if he knew that leaving her family was causing her unease, he'd work with her to solve this problem. That was what Warriors did for their mates.

A light rain started falling, and the mountain mist thickened. When the cabin finally came into view, she breathed a sigh of relief from the tension she hadn't realized she'd harbored. She slid out of the truck and followed the sound of splitting wood around to the back.

Devon didn't seem to note her approach. He swung the axe again and again, his muscles rippling smoothly, his hair slicked down in a mixture of sweat and rain, completely immersed in the physical labor though a full cord or more of wood was already stacked beside him. She wondered vaguely how much had already been there when he started.

He split another log and turned, dropping the axe at his feet and striding toward her, rain rolling down his bare chest, his eyes hard. His hands locked around her arms, and his mouth captured hers in a near-bruising kiss. For a moment, she stiffened in fear and pain, her gasp disappearing into his mouth as she opened hers to protest and he took advantage of it as if she'd invited it. His mouth and hands gentled as the storm gathered steam.

Michelle moaned at the sensation of Devon over

her, pressing her into the thick grass while he buried his face in her throat. She opened her fists, touching him, needing the connection of skin against skin. How could she lose this?

"You shouldn't have come here," he whispered.

She sobbed. "You don't want me here?" Wasn't that why she was here? She didn't want to lose Devon any more than she wanted to lose her family.

He pulled back so she could see his hopeful expression, brushing her hair off her cheek. "I want you here, but you know what I want from you."

"I do want it, Devon. But, we need —"

"Then you'll be my mate and go to my range and —"

She winced, trying to find the words to explain.

His face hardened and he pushed off of her, using his fists against the ground to lever himself up. Michelle grasped at his arm, stopping him at his knees, shaking her head.

He shook her off, growling. "Why are you here? What do you want?" he demanded.

"You. Devon, please —"

"I told you that release isn't enough for me," he shouted.

"It's not enough for me, either."

Confusion, hope and fury warred in his expression.

"I want to be with you."

"But," he prodded.

She took a calming breath. "I have family here...my parents, brother, twin sister...and her family."

"I can't stay here. You know that."

Tears stung her eyes. "I know."

"And, you won't leave." His voice was bitter and cold.

"That's easy for you to say," she snapped. "You don't have the option. You can't be forced to give up—"

He vaulted to his feet, marching to the cabin, his posture stiff. The door slammed behind him.

Michelle wiped the tears from her cheeks, managing a weak laugh when more took their place, supplemented by the rain. She forced herself up and headed for the truck, feeling hollow. Devon wasn't willing to find a way. It was over. There was nothing left for them.

She stopped, patting down her pockets. *Good gods, now is not the time to lose keys.*

Retrace your steps. When did you have them last?

She'd had them in her hand when she'd approached Devon. Michelle plodded back to the spot where she'd lain, searching the grass for them as the rain became a downpour. They weren't there.

"I had them," she reasoned miserably. "Where could they go?"

Her heart stuttered. *Devon!* She looked at the cabin nervously, swallowing hard. She couldn't follow him now. Not when she'd just refused him.

Michelle slipped and slid her way to the truck, climbing inside, dripping wet, shivering, miserable in body and spirit. "I shouldn't have come."

* * * *

Devon paced the main room, fisting her keys in his hand. He wasn't sure why he took them. This situation was hopeless, but he couldn't let her leave until he had exhausted every possibility of making this work.

Michelle had come here to work something out. She *wanted* to be his mate. If he could meet her halfway, he had to do it.

But, she was right. He owed allegiance to his house. Even with two younger brothers, there was no chance his grandfather would release him to Armen range. He had no choice but to return.

"It's not fair," he grumbled. Certainly, Lord Armen wouldn't revel in the idea of having Michelle ripped from his side. She was his daughter; James loved her. She was also a tracker, as useful as any Warrior in that regard.

He went still, a mad idea taking shape. "Why not?" he half-laughed. It would be an equitable trade of resources...if his lord would go for it. Devon grabbed his cell phone, his hands shaking, praying to Dobler and Tes that he could strike a deal.

The phone rang three times before Kohl answered, and Devon's heart seemed to stop between each ring.

"Kaufmann," his brother intoned.

"I need Grandfather."

"Devon? I just heard. I'm sorry —"

"Max," he barked. "Now." The last thing Devon wanted was anyone's pity. At least the Lord Armen hadn't shown him that.

"Is this a good idea? I mean...the madness will explain away an awful lot, but—"

"Damn it, Kohl! Get me Max, or I'll come there and kill you with my bare hands. This is not the time to fuck with me."

"It's your funeral," he warned.

The line went quiet for several long moments. Devon ran a hand through his hair, trying desperately to rein in his frustration before his house lord came on the line. All too soon, Max's voice echoed over the connection.

"Devon, I realize you are in the grips of madness. I suggest highly that you turn off your phone for the duration."

"Wait! Hear me out. There is a possibility that I could still claim my mate."

"If she's refused you—"

"She hasn't. Not exactly...I mean—"

"I can't wait to hear this story." Max's voice dripped in sarcasm.

"Michelle's only problem with being my mate is leaving her family. She's been raised in Armen, insulated in a Warrior household. The idea of losing them is tearing her apart inside."

"You expect me to release you to Armen? Are you... Well, yes. You *are* insane right now. That's why you're asking."

"No. I'm not asking that. I want to meet Michelle halfway."

"Halfway? Devon, you're not making any sense. Maybe you should turn—"

"She's a tracker, Grandfather...cyber and foot. She's the best Armen has, bar none."

"Interesting." He hesitated. "Go on."

"I propose a trade. We're taking away one of Armen's best resources, a resource they raised and trained...or at least paid to have trained."

"If she agrees," he noted.

His gut twisted at that. Michelle could refuse this offer, even if he got permission to go forward. "My plan is a simple trade of resources. Six months in Kaufmann, during which we benefit from Michelle's expertise. Six months in Armen, during which they benefit from an additional Warrior. Any children would be Kaufmann, of course, and I would have to insist that Michelle be limited to cyber tracking when she carries or we have little ones."

Max didn't respond to that.

Devon nearly growled in irritation. "She's here, Grandfather. If you refuse me, you'll have to call in the Lord Armen and —"

"You've made this offer already?" he shouted. "Without consulting me first?"

"Of course not! I'd given up, but she's here, and she wants me. Any chance is better than none."

"You're the oldest of your generation, Devon. A lord can't oversee a range he's absent from half the year."

"I'll give my oath to Kohl when the time comes, if we're still traveling back and forth and not settled in Kaufmann. He'd make the better lord, anyway. I don't care if I'm ever lord. Would you have, if it came

to a choice between your mate and being lord?"

"No," he admitted. "I wouldn't."

The silence stretched out between them, and Devon felt his nerves buzzing uncomfortably beneath his skin. "Will you support this?" he managed. "I have to know."

"On Michelle's word that she'll track for us, I'll accept this trade. She is excused from all tracking for three months after she has a child and cyber-tracking only for the first two years and her pregnancies, and that last portion is an order. She will accept my rule in this, just as any other Warrior would."

He laughed in relief. "Thank you, Grandfather. I should go now."

Devon vaguely heard Max saying something as he powered down, but he had far more important things to attend to. He had a woman waiting for him who wanted to be his mate...he hoped.

A steady beat made it through his refreshed senses, and he looked at the windows, his smile fading fast. Good gods! He'd left her stranded in a rainstorm. He wasn't even certain that she could seek shelter without the keys tucked in his pocket.

* * * *

Michelle wrapped the sleeping bag that had been stored behind the seat around her shoulders and shivered. If she had the keys, she'd turn on the heat. With the storm raging, she couldn't leave, even if she had them, and her father couldn't reach her, even if

she had a cell phone to call him.

The cabin door flew open, and Devon marched out.

She felt the air catch in her lungs. She'd refused him again, and he was trapped in printing madness. The gods only knew what he'd do. Michelle locked the doors with numb fingers then moved to the center of the seat, cursing herself for ignoring her father's warning and coming here.

He wrenched at the driver's side door, shooting her a look of disbelief.

Was she an idiot? He was a Soldat der Nacht. Even safety glass wouldn't stop him, if he wanted in. And, that was assuming he didn't have the truck keys. She sent up a prayer to Tes that he didn't have the keys.

Oh, so he'll use his hands or the axe? She bit back a groan.

"Open the door, Michelle," he ordered.

"Go inside, Devon. I was wrong to interfere in this and—"

"Open...the...door." His voice was edged in cold fury.

She shook her head, inching closer to the passenger-side door.

He pulled the keys from his pocket and inserted one in the lock. Michelle dove for the other door, pushing it open as the door behind her swung away. Devon's hands closed around her waist and dragged her back across the seat. She turned to face him, dropping the sleeping bag with a scream of fear. Rain plastered her half-dried hair back to her head in the space of a few heartbeats.

"Shhh," he soothed her, hugging her to his chest. "I won't hurt you." A weak smile curved up his mouth. "That's what you think. Isn't it?"

She felt her cheeks flush.

"I'm not that crazy. Now, will you come inside?"

She shook her head, fresh tears sliding down her cheeks between the raindrops. "You're right. What I want isn't possible."

He growled a curse and hefted her over his shoulder, striding back to the cabin.

Michelle tried to lever herself up against his slick skin, but the hand on her lower back stopped her. "Devon! The truck... We can't leave it—"

"You'll catch pneumonia. I don't give a damn about the truck."

She squeezed her eyes shut, seeing the next day play out. The truck was her father's favorite. She was never going to hear the end of destroying it this way, even if, as she suspected, Devon planned to pay Armen back for the damages.

Devon closed the door behind them and strode into the first room off the hall, setting her next to the bed. "Now, either you will take off your clothes in the bathroom and wrap up in a quilt, or I will do the same for you here."

She stared at him, stunned by that pronouncement. "You trust me not to...um..." What would his reaction be to the idea that she might run from him? Better not to chance it.

He scowled. "You have a point." He reached for her shirt.

Michelle sidestepped him. "Whoa. What are you doing?"

Devon chuckled. "Then you do it. Be reasonable, Michelle. You're freezing."

She hesitated, trying to unravel his strange mood.

His hands settled on the top button of his jeans. "Show me yours, and I'll show you mine." His voice was laced in sexual promise.

Michelle laughed in spite of herself, peeling away layer after layer of clothing. She looked up as she kicked away her jeans and panties, her heart stuttering at the sight of Devon's hungry eyes and rock-hard cock. She took a step back, reaching for the quilt as her thighs brushed the mattress.

Devon nodded. "Until we talk," he agreed.

She wrapped the quilt around her body and let him lead her close to the fireplace, settling onto the rag rug in the center of the floor. He built up the dying fire, his body rigid in strain.

"Do you want to be my mate?" he asked, still kneeling before the hearth.

"Devon... I didn't... I don't want to —"

He turned to her, his eyes pleading. "If your other concerns were met, would you still agree?"

It was unfair to give him hope. "They can't be met," she choked out. "I was dreaming to think —"

He dropped down on the rug, leaning toward her. It took Michelle a moment to realize that he wasn't at the edges of violence. She took a calming breath, shivering though she was warming nicely.

"I'm going to kiss you, Michelle."

No! "Yes." She needed this. She couldn't imagine life without it.

His kiss was slow and thorough, his hands caressing. Michelle was suddenly uncomfortably hot in the quilt. She released it, reaching for him.

Devon pulled back, closing the quilt around her again. "If you're needs were met—"

"In an instant," she breathed. It didn't matter what he meant. He'd decided to work this out with her, to find a way to save their relationship. Somehow, they'd manage that.

He sighed in seeming relief. "If I met you halfway... If I promised you half of every year here in Armen range, would that be enough for you?"

"What about you? You can't possibly go that much time without—"

"Both of us."

Her heart leapt, then sank again. "Your lord would never agree."

"He already has agreed to it. Now, if your father does—"

"He would, but... How? Why? I don't—" She wasn't making sense and she knew it.

Devon feathered another kiss over her lips. "Promise to track for Kaufmann when we're there and follow Max's orders on when you may not risk yourself, and we have the Lord Kaufmann's vow."

Michelle nodded, dumbstruck. "You did this for me? You asked your lord to allow this and willingly offered to give up your home the same amount of time I did...for me?"

"I would do anything for you. Don't you know that? I made this bargain for you. I vowed to swear allegiance to Kohl when the time comes for a lord in my generation for you. I'll swear allegiance to your father or any other lord of Armen when we reside here. Anything."

She nodded, shrugging the quilt off again.

His gaze followed it, and a strangled groan escaped his lips. "Say you'll be my mate."

"Yes...and your lord has my vow. I'll track for him."

* * * *

Yes! Devon drew Michelle to his chest and tossed the quilt out to cover the rug and floor behind her, easing her down beneath him to the cushioned surface.

She wiggled in his arms, untangling her legs from his and hooking them over his hips. He groaned, stroking deep inside her ready body. It was perfect, hot, soft, wet, throbbing in the precursors to climax already.

"Say you want me," he breathed.

"I want you. I need you." She started moving under him, urging him on.

"That's why you came here tonight?"

Michelle moaned, nodding frantically.

"Then I'm yours."

There was no need for words after that. Sighs and moans played sweet counterpoint to the crackling fire. Their bodies slid against each other, mouths

tasting, hands pulling them closer, deeper.

Michelle cried out, her climax arching her body beneath his. Devon followed her gladly, closing his eyes to the strength-draining pulse of his orgasm within her. She guided his mouth to hers, gasping as his cock bucked against the walls of her sheath, seeking more of its mate.

My mate. That single phrase brought clarity and calm to his chaotic mind. He buried his face in her damp hair, drinking in the smells of mountain rain and their mixed musk. He was exhausted in body and mind, sated, surrendering to the lure of peace.

Michelle pulled the quilt around them, murmuring an invitation to sleep.

The darkness called, closing around their joined bodies until his entire world was Michelle.

Chapter Six

James looked at the ringing phone in irritation, dropping his pen and scooping the receiver to his shoulder. It seemed it was a day for interruptions, and though he didn't mind Michelle, the rest he could have done without.

"Armen," he growled.

"James, you need to get to Devon," Max stated as if his grandson was the most urgent matter on the agenda.

While the idea of any Warrior facing the madness gave him chills, it was his own demon to best and interfering wouldn't help Devon. "You know I can't—"

"He has a plan to ease your daughter's reservations about mating. It's a good plan, and I've agreed to it, but he's riding the edges. If she refuses him again, I can't vouch for his control."

"What plan—"

"Later! He means to present it to her immediately."

James looked at the pouring rain pelting the windows, recalling the advance of the weather front from memory. "The weather will stop him

temporarily. I don't think he's crazy enough to drive in —"

"He's not the one traveling, James. Unless Devon is hallucinating, your daughter is with him."

His heart seemed to stop beating at that pronouncement. Michelle would ignore his warnings. There was no question about it. If she wanted Devon, she'd find him. It was what she did.

"James! I said Michelle is with him. I tried to tell him to call you in and wait, but he shut down. James, are you there?"

"On my way out the door," he managed in a thick voice. He dropped the phone onto its base and stormed out into the foyer, shouting for Tyler.

His son appeared at the top of the stairs. "Here."

"Is Michelle in her room?"

"She left more than an hour ago in the half-ton. Let me guess. She didn't have permission to take your —"

James spat a series of curses. The half-ton would have been his first choice to reach the cabin in this weather.

"Problem?" his son asked nervously.

"Pull out Tim's mudder. We have to reach Devon."

His son stared at him in shock.

"And Michelle," he added with a note of warning. *Gods help him if he's gone too far.*

Tyler scrambled past him, already lit up for battle.

* * * *

"Damn this!" Tyler cursed, pulling himself up the

washed-out slope.

James hauled him the last body length, scowling at the SUV in the gulch. "We won't be getting that out without the winch on the half-ton. We'll have to walk from here."

"At least we're close and the rain has stopped."

He nodded, fighting the tension in his muscles. Yes, they were almost there, but the usual forty-minute trip had taken them three hours of sliding along treacherous mountain trails in almost zero-visibility conditions.

It was only a few hundred yards further, and James wasn't about to waste another second. He fought his way up the slope, his heart hammering against his ribs.

The truck came into view first, both doors thrown wide and the sleeping bag dragged half into a mud puddle. He sprinted to it, pulling the keys from the door in dismay. Couldn't Michelle keep a key safe just once in her life? It had been too easy for Devon.

"Gods, no," Tyler breathed.

James's mind spun. They'd taken Devon's sacred weapon at his request. That was a bad sign in a Warrior facing the madness, because it marked his wish to die. If a beast met him unarmed, the Warrior would die.

Still, there were many other weapons at the cabin, starting with the Warrior himself. Michelle was human; Devon didn't need weapons to kill her.

He headed to the cabin on unsteady legs, praying the young Warrior hadn't gone too far. In the

madness, his responses would be impossible to anticipate. Even if he hadn't killed her—or seriously injured her, he might have forced himself on her. That image proved too much for him. He couldn't allow it to form fully or he'd howl out his own madness.

James eased the cabin door open, stopping Tyler as he surged toward the couple on the floor. Michelle had to come first. Until they knew for certain, they had to assume that Devon would snap and kill her. That meant the utmost caution.

He motioned his son to Michelle then gave him hand commands to wait for his move. They separated, moving to opposite sides of the quilt.

James sank to one knee, his eyes locking on a deep bruise marring Michelle's upper arm. He noted the tear tracks, much more enflamed than they'd been when he saw her that afternoon. The smell of sex assaulted him, and *Blutjagd* lit his fury like a bonfire.

* * * *

Devon opened his eyes in shock, reaching for the weapon that wasn't at his side. Reality hit him in a rush. He'd surrendered his weapon to Lord Armen. Now, he was unarmed at night with his mate to protect and something malevolent hovering over them. He had only an instant of realization that the danger wasn't a beast before there was a sacred weapon at his throat.

"Don't move," the Lord Armen ordered.

A second Warrior dragged Michelle from the quilt

just as she started to stir, shushing her cry of fear and wrapping a leather coat around her. "It's okay," Tyler soothed her. "You're safe."

"I was *always* safe," she countered. "Let me go."

Devon sighed in relief at that, counting the seconds until James released him. The moment didn't come.

"Take Michelle to the back bedroom," the lord managed through clenched teeth.

"I'm sane," Devon grumbled. "We've sealed. Michelle is —"

"Sane?" James thundered. "You hurt her. What did you do? What rules of sanction did you break? As your judge, I demand to know."

"What? No. I never —"

Michelle shook her younger brother off, grasping at the jacket and shooting him a look of warning. In the faint firelight, the bruises on her arms stood out in stark contrast to her creamy skin.

"Oh, gods help me," he whispered. "I did." It must have been the moment he first touched her. *I didn't touch her; I grabbed her. Hard.* How hard had he grabbed her? Had she winced? How could he not have realized he was harming her?

Devon swallowed a tight knot of emotion. Michelle was his mate, and he'd injured her. The Lord Armen could kill him for this. By all rights, he *should* kill Devon for it.

She touched the bruises, shaking her head. "No. I surprised him. It was before —"

"He hurt you," her father growled.

"If you kill him, *you'll* hurt me."

James hesitated, meeting her eyes. "Princess, you cannot take this chance. He lacks control. If a dog bites once, it will bite again."

Devon forced back his anger at being called a dog. He was no better than one. How could he do this to her?

Tears rolled down her face. "Are you sane?"

The Lord Armen sputtered for a moment. "What? Of course, I'm sane."

"Are you? The bruises surprised you, and you're going to kill over them without even asking me what happened. Are you sane? Devon has never touched me in anger. Never."

"What about the truck?" he challenged.

Devon ground his teeth at the memory of dragging her out of the vehicle. She'd screamed, flailed, turned to him, wide-eyed. She'd been shaking in his arms, terrified of him. Had he bruised her then? No. He'd had her by the waist then, not the arms. It had to be when he first reached her.

No wonder, she was shaking. I'd hurt her once. Of course, she assumed I'd hurt her again.

"I didn't want to hurt Devon, so I refused to come inside," she explained. "It wasn't safe out there, and he knew it. He couldn't take the chance of me driving off into the storm...or being injured or taking ill. So, he brought me inside. You thanked him once for doing something similar, as I recall. You thanked him for protecting me. This was no different."

He looked to the bruises, his unspoken disagreement as clear as if he'd shouted it. This was

different, and they all knew it. "Michelle, please go with Tyler."

"I love him, and Devon loves me. He's sane. I cannot let you do this, Dad. He's my husband. I won't let you take him from me."

"You'd really go off to Kaufmann with a potentially dangerous—"

"The six months in Armen," she pleaded. "To put your mind at ease, we'll take it now. His lord will agree, considering the circumstances. Give us that long." Her eyes brimmed with new tears, and she hugged herself tightly.

"What? What six months?"

She took a deep breath. "Devon made a deal with his house lord."

"Max mentioned it, but he didn't give me details."

"We'll spend six months of every year in Armen and six months in Kaufmann. Devon will swear allegiance to the Lord Armen and act as one of our Warriors while in our range. I'll track for Kaufmann when we're there, though they have limitations for me, because I'm a Warrior wife."

She pulled the jacket closer around her chest. "If we take our time in Armen first, you'll see that Devon is sane. Please... Please, promise me that time."

Devon's heart ached. He'd hurt her, but Michelle was pleading for his life. When this was over... If he survived to hold her again... There was no vow he could make that was worthy of this show of trust.

"On conditions," her father bargained.

"Anything," Devon vowed. *Anything for Michelle.*

"Anything within reason," she countered, her eyes flashing in challenge.

"You will swear your allegiance tonight," James demanded.

"Absolutely," Devon agreed.

"And the rest?" Michelle asked.

"You will not plant a child in her until the six months are up and I am convinced you're sane. I will not allow you to leave my daughter alone with a child that way, especially not the child of an unstable Warrior."

"I wouldn't dream of it," Devon assured him.

"If you ever bruise her again, I will kill you where you stand."

"If I ever come close to it, I'll hand you my blade to do it."

James pulled his weapon away from Devon's throat, rising to his feet. "Kneel and vow your allegiance...now."

"He's naked," Michelle protested.

"It's all right," Devon soothed her. He deserved less than they were giving him. He wouldn't complain about so trivial a thing.

"It's not all right!"

He pushed the quilt away and knelt before the Lord Armen. He'd stand nude before the Council of Lords and every house, as long as he had Michelle. She was all that mattered in his life.

Devon cleared his throat. "My blade is yours. My duty is at your whim. I stand as a Warrior of Armen, yours to order, My Lord."

"That wasn't necessary," she fumed.

James ignored her. "You return with us to the manor tomorrow. You will pay for the repairs to the truck."

"That was *my* fault," Michelle argued.

Devon motioned her to silence. "Agreed." Max would have a fit, but it was only right that he pay for his mistakes...all of his mistakes.

The Lord Armen seemed to consider something. He looked past Devon to his children. "You will have your blade when the bruises heal."

"Dad, you can't—"

"After that, you'll hunt like any Warrior of Armen. You'll check in until I release you from that burden, and Michelle will not be permitted to accompany you on trail until I approve it."

"Understood," Devon replied. "I am at your whim." *Gods help me, I am agreeing to walk back into Armen manor as a dishonored Warrior, stripped of my blade like a trainee.* But, it didn't matter. None of it mattered.

"Very well. Tyler and I will be in the back bedroom, if you need us, Michelle."

"I won't," she snapped.

"She won't," Devon echoed, but it would be a long, hard road of being treated like a First Night pup until he proved that.

* * * *

Michelle glared at her brother as they closed the door

to the bedroom. Devon bowed his head, and she bit back a sob.

"They had no right," she apologized.

"They had every right to do that and much more." He turned to her, touching one of the bruises with a wince. "I will never —"

"They aren't as bad as they look," she assured him. "I just have a pale complexion."

Devon kissed the spot then moved to the other. He peeled the jacket away, scanning her body as if searching for more injuries. "He should have killed me for this," he whispered.

"No. That was before. You weren't responsible —"

"It's no excuse. A Warrior who can't control —"

"Please, don't. You didn't mean to. I know you didn't."

"I will never harm you again. You have my vow on that."

She pressed her lips to his, sighing as he responded.

Devon settled his hands in her hair, his cock hardening. "I love you."

"You know it will take a few weeks for the bruises to disappear."

His eyes filled with pain.

She spoke before he could. "You'll need a duty to perform until then."

"Your father will assign me duties that don't require —"

Michelle smiled, and he stopped speaking, smiling in return as her meaning became clear to him.

Devon's Price - Tarot: Ten of Cups



"You have a duty in mind?"

"One I trust you will enjoy. One that will prove your gentle touch."

Chapter Seven

March 15th, 2004

Devon pushed through the doors into Armen manor. He smiled at the sight of Michelle hurtling down the staircase toward him, catching her and swinging her in his arms. She brought her mouth down on his, and the sweet joy of relief settled in his soul. There was nothing like holding her after a long track.

"Ahem," James interrupted them.

Michelle broke away, sighing. "I can't wait to get to Kaufmann," she grumbled.

Devon set her on her feet, at a loss to soothe her when he agreed completely with her.

Her father winced at her comment, looking hurt by her words. He offered his hand to Devon. "Good hunt."

Though he'd like to refuse, Michelle's words burned in his mind. It was rude to turn down a handshake. He clasped the offered hand. "Thanks," he replied uneasily.

It had been a long five and a half months. He'd been required to check in for the first two, and

Michelle's freedom to follow him on trail still seemed at the lord's whim. It was maddening, being in a place where he wasn't trusted, where every moment with his mate was watched intently.

More than once, Michelle had promised not to return to Armen, but Devon had refused to accept that. He wouldn't cause a rift between Michelle and her family if he could avoid it, no matter the cost to him. He'd given his word on that, and he wasn't taking the easy road now.

"If you're done with my husband," she snapped.

Devon hugged her. "It's okay," he whispered. "Someday..." But, what could he promise? That James would accept him? That was unlikely. That they'd be free to leave Armen? That would only infuriate the Lord Armen.

Michelle shot her father a look that promised retribution. "You're never going to say it, are you? You're never going to admit you were wrong."

"Princess—"

"Don't Princess me." She turned without giving him a chance to answer and stalked back up the stairs.

Devon sighed, reining in his frustration. His homecoming was supposed to be a happy time, but James's reactions put the damper on it, as usual.

Their future together depended on this six months in Armen. Though his blood burned to stop the force causing his mate pain, any action or cross words might see Devon dead. They'd come too far and suffered too much to risk that now. Their best option... Their *only* option was putting up with it until

they were free to return to Kaufmann.

"If I'm free to go, My Lord," he managed through clenched teeth.

"You're not free to go. Come with me."

Devon looked up the stairs, aching to hold Michelle. His discomfort meant nothing to Lord Armen. It never had. "As you wish."

They went to the office, and James took a seat behind the desk. Devon stood, needing a way to focus his raw nerves.

"Sit down," James ordered.

"If you don't mind —"

"I do mind."

Everything about me. Every move I make.

Devon forced his *Blutjagd* back and took a seat. More than ever, he was considering taking Michelle up on her offer to stay in Kaufmann permanently.

James stared at him, watching for something he couldn't comprehend. "The six months are nearly over," he commented coolly.

"Yes. They are."

"You're probably as anxious to get to Kaufmann as Michelle is." There was a bite of anger to his words.

"I miss my family, and I've promised to show Michelle Europe. She wants to ski in Czechoslovakia." He smiled at that, the plans they'd made in bed, the one place no one followed them. "Beautiful snow in the Czech Republic."

"And to get away from me."

Devon didn't answer that.

"You don't like me much, do you?"

"A Warrior doesn't have to like his lord. He just has to obey."

"Do you like your Lord Kaufmann?"

"Of course. Max is my grandfather, though he's one hell of a taskmaster." There would be hell to pay when he returned, trials for his lack of control and misdeeds, but once they got past that, Devon knew it would be business as usual in Kaufmann. *Nothing like it is here.*

"You still intend to come back to Armen in six months?"

"I gave Michelle my word that I would. As long as she wishes to return to Armen, we'll be coming back to Armen, and I will be acting as a Warrior of Armen when we do." Perhaps six months away from her sister and mother...and her nephew would convince Michelle that she really didn't want to leave for good.

"You always keep your word," he noted.

The silence stretched between them.

"You have nothing to say to me?"

Devon bit back a laugh at the irony of that question. "Are you inviting me to speak my mind? I'll be honest. I have no urge to lose my life so close to the end of my trial."

James seemed shocked into silence. "That's what you think this is?"

"A test. A punishment." He shrugged. "I don't deny your right to it. After what I did, I imagine vengeance will be long coming...if it ever does."

Despite all the blows James had dealt him in training, the long tracks Devon had taken on, his

unceasing acceptance of every humiliation and injury... Despite everything that had been heaped on him in the last five and a half months, there had always been an edge of mistrust that the lord never lost. Even when his sons and nephews had accepted Devon and their wives had stopped avoiding him and the children flocked to him, James had never softened in the least.

Michelle is his child. If it were my daughter injured... No, he couldn't think of that. If it were his child, he'd never forgive the man in question, and he couldn't believe there was no hope of making peace.

"You think I'd kill you?" James asked, seemingly horrified.

"If I was unstable? Yes. You'd have to...and I'd welcome it. When I saw the bruises, some part of me wished you *would* kill me, because death would have been easier than knowing I'd hurt her, than seeing the proof of it every day for almost two weeks."

"Go on. I want to hear this."

Devon stared at the fireplace, searching for the words. "I can't remember it...not clearly, anyway. I try, endlessly some days. It's maddening to have half memories of an instant in time that is so vital."

He turned to James, hoping that he'd said enough, but the expression on the lord's face demanded more. Devon sighed and continued.

"I remember turning and seeing Michelle standing there. I needed to hold her. I needed to feel her in my arms and know she was real and not some hallucination the madness had conjured up for me. I

was desperate for every sensory input I had that would prove her a solid reality.

"I didn't know I hurt her. I swear I didn't. I didn't mean to, not that it excuses me. I only meant to hold her. I had to ask Michelle, to be certain that moment was the one I hurt her. I suppose I knew it was when I saw the bruises, but... How could I not know I hurt her?"

The lord stared at him for a long moment, seemingly deep in thought. "And you put up with all of this, because you thought I'd kill you?"

"I'm no coward, Lord Armen. I don't want to die, but I put up with this..." He waved his hand in frustration. "Because the only way we will ever have peace between us is when I prove my self-control. I'm starting to think that will never happen, and it *has* to happen."

"Why?"

"Why?" Devon growled a curse.

"Tell me why," he barked.

"Michelle refused to be my mate, until I made the agreement with Max. The agreement was my idea, but... Never mind that. She refused to lose her family for me, but she didn't want to lose me, either. She could have let me break printing, but she didn't. She begged me to allow her all of the people she loved, and I did that. I sacrificed my right to be Lord Kaufmann. I agreed to lose my family, just as she does, for half of every year...for her. All for Michelle. I would do anything for Michelle.

"If I don't find a way to appease you and learn to

live in peace with you, I fail her. I gave my word not to be the breach between her and her family. So, you tell me, what else can I do to keep my vow to her?"

"You really would do anything I asked to keep Michelle happy."

"What do you think I've been trying to do these last five months? I gave my vow to do anything you requested of me."

"Anything within reason," James qualified.

"No. Michelle said that. I said 'anything' and I meant it."

"And you keep every vow."

"When I can." *If you let me.*

"What does Michelle want?" he asked honestly.

"It's not my place —"

"Tell me."

He nodded, recognizing the bark of an order well enough. "She wants your acceptance of our marriage. Not tolerance or grudging notice but respect for our union."

"And?"

Devon felt his face heat.

"And?" he repeated, less patient for a response.

"That will be enough for now."

"No. It won't. She hates me, and it's not just the way I've treated you. What have I done to make her loathe me this way? For the last four months, it's been getting worse. Tell me. What is it that I've done to her in particular?"

"A child."

James gaped at him.

"It's not unexpected. For months, she's held her sister's baby, knowing the new one is growing inside, and wanted one of her own. I assured her that when the six months are up and we reach Kaufmann—"

"Tonight? I'm not blind, Devon. Some nights are worse than others, and I don't know why."

"She knows her cycle as well as I do," he replied simply.

"If I gave you my leave?"

"I wouldn't deny her. You know I wouldn't be able to."

"It's been maddening, hasn't it? You know she wants a child, and your drives demand you give her one, but you don't have leave to do it."

Devon ground his teeth. "I *am* sane, Lord Armen."

"Yes. You are."

His heart stuttered. "What did you say?"

"You're sane. We should probably have had this discussion long ago."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying you've proven yourself. You've more than proven it."

"Because, not giving her a child—"

"I know how hard that is, but... Do you know why I mistrusted you?"

"Well, that's obvious, isn't it?" he snapped. "I wouldn't have trusted me, either."

"I don't think so...that it's obvious, I mean. You are so stoic and controlled, I mistook it for a lack of remorse. Even in those first moments, I saw shock and resignation to punishment. I saw more misery in

this interview than in the last six months combined, including when you asked me for a mad cabin."

Devon winced. "Controlled was what you wanted, what you demanded," he grumbled.

"Be careful what you ask for, I suppose. You're a good man, Devon, and I've done you both a disservice."

He waited, barely breathing, silently begging each god in order that this was really the end of his torture.

"Go to her. You are released from all restrictions."

"All?" he repeated, biting back relieved laughter.

"I trust you'll make a good husband and father, given the chance."

Devon took to his feet and offered James his hand, murmuring his thanks before sprinting for Michelle's — their bedroom.

* * * *

Michelle looked up at the sound of footsteps pounding down the hall, gaping as Devon charged in. He shut the door behind him and strode toward her, peeling off his leather jacket and dropping it to the floor.

She stood and wrapped her arms around him. "I'm sorry," she breathed.

He chuckled. "Don't be. Everything is —"

"Horrible," she sobbed. "It will be different in Kaufmann —"

His mouth closed on hers, ravenous. Michelle wanted to scream in frustration at that. She pushed

away the image of him pulling out the condom, of both of them pretending it wasn't there, dreaming of the child they'd conceive in Kaufmann range.

"I have so much to tell you," Devon breathed.

"Just love me," she pleaded. She didn't want to hear how her father had insulted Devon this time. She couldn't bear to hear it again.

He groaned at that, peeling off her clothes then his own. "I'm going to make love to you all night, Michelle. Say you want me to. Say you want my son."

"You know I do." *More than anything.* If only her father would allow it.

It would be different in Kaufmann range. They'd be free to conceive a child next month. If Devon wanted to pretend as they always had until then, she wouldn't steal the illusion from him, though she ached for the reality.

Another ache soon overpowered that one, the insistent need to have him inside her, latex or no latex. Devon tasted and touched all of her, first leading her to the bed then on it.

Michelle opened her eyes in shock as he entered her...without protection. "You can't," she whispered. If Devon broke the conditions placed on him, her father could – and likely would – kill him for it.

He chuckled, a dark sound of arousal. "I told you that I had a lot to tell you, but you didn't want to listen." He slid to the hilt, abruptly serious. "Now...are you sure you want this?"

She stared at him. "We actually have my father's blessing?"

"For anything our hearts desire, my love. What do you want?"

"He said it?" That seemed too good to be true.

Devon nodded, happier than she'd seen him since they'd sealed. "That I'm sane. That I've more than proven myself. That he's been mistaken all this time and has done us a disservice in it. That... That I'm released from all restrictions he'd placed on me."

Michelle threw her arms around his neck, laughing and crying at the same time.

"We're coming back to Armen," he whispered. "You know your father only wanted to protect you."

She scowled. "If he behaves," she decided. "Skipping a few months...or even the first year would do him a world of good, I think."

"Michelle," he reasoned.

She smiled at a wicked thought, arching against him purposefully.

Devon groaned, moving inside her, his eyes closed in pleasure. "Are you sure?" he repeated.

"We're spending the next year in Kaufmann," she insisted.

"Don't antagonize him," Devon pleaded. "Just make peace."

"I'm not antagonizing," she replied innocently. "Our son or daughter will be a Kaufmann. It's only right that he or she be born and blessed in Kaufmann."

He laughed heartily, opening deep brown eyes that glittered in mischief. "Anything for you."

A note from the author:

The fun in Night Warriors books is usually watching a Warrior take a mate, but once in a while, a Warrior-raised daughter doesn't choose a Warrior to marry. Since DEVON'S PRICE centered on Michelle Armen, I thought I'd give a glimpse into her twin, Melissa, deciding to marry.

Of the two, Melissa is the more sedate in many ways, but while Michelle is the one who went into the 'family business', Melissa is the one who can't seem to stay out of the line of fire.

I actually started writing HEART OF A WARRIOR, because Melissa heartily disagrees with Michelle's assertion that Mack couldn't be mistaken for a Warrior if he tried. I'll leave that determination up to you, fair reader.

Happy reading!

Brenna

Heart of A Warrior

Chapter One

February 28th, 2002

Melissa sauntered into the manor, swinging her arms at her sides, smiling at the memories of her evening. She bit back a giggle at how crazy she'd been, but somehow crazy seemed right with Mack. Gods, the man was hot. Of course, that wasn't the only reason she wanted him. He was funny, playful, considerate...and used the worst come-on lines to his best advantage.

"Hey, Baby Doll," Tyler called out.

She scowled at the pet name. Michelle had been Princess, and Melissa had been Baby Doll. It was probably the only thing she'd ever envied her big sister, the nickname their father had given Michelle within an hour of meeting them.

Her younger brother didn't seem to notice her irritation. He scooped Melissa up in a hug and twirled her around, planting a kiss on her cheek. He stopped short, his smile disappearing and his eyes narrowing.

Melissa's heart pounded in terror, but she feigned

confusion, laughing lightly. "Let me down, Tyler. You're rumpling the suede."

"Who is he?" he asked through clenched teeth.

"Who is who?" *Oh, come on! That isn't going to work.*

"Whatever man took your maidenhead and gave you a good topping off tonight. Name, please." It wasn't really a request. More of a veiled threat, actually.

She felt her cheeks burn at his crass description of her beautiful evening. "I have autonomy, Tyler. That's none of your business."

"Fine. Then answer when Dad asks." He set her on her feet and turned Melissa toward James's office door.

"Little brother, you are going too far," she warned, but she marched to the door and knocked. The only way to knock Tyler on his arse was to have their father or Michelle do it, and she fully intended to.

"Come in."

Tyler opened the door for her and waved Melissa in. Their father's smile at seeing her faded, and he looked back and forth between them.

Melissa crossed the room and settled in one of the interview chairs, crossing one leg smoothly over the other, still acutely aware of the pleasurable ache of making love for the first time. "Well, go on then," she invited her brother.

"I believe I will. Melissa has..." He stopped, his face darkening as she'd known it would. Tyler was accustomed to censoring himself around Melissa, though he could vent any foul comment around

Michelle.

"Made love? Taken release? Had sex?" she taunted him. She stopped short of 'fucked'. What she and Mack did wasn't fucking. "You're a Warrior, Tyler. You know the words. Just so you know, I prefer the first option. It has the right sound to me."

James chuckled, shooting a look that promised his sisters were about to best him again at Tyler. "And the problem is?" he asked, though he'd surely guessed closely enough to the fact.

"Your son."

"Ah... I see. You know Melissa has autonomy. We went through this with Michelle when she was eighteen, if you recall. I believe your oldest sister commented that she'd have taken care of her virginity before you'd started training if she'd realized how intolerable you'd be when she did." He picked up his pen, dismissing the complaint that simply, as she'd known he would. It was a good thing that Warriors were so predictable.

"Thank you, Daddy," she called out brightly. Her push to her feet was cut short when Tyler raised his protest of the matter.

"We *haven't* been through this before."

Melissa rolled her eyes and settled into the chair again with a sigh.

James glanced at him then at the file on his desk. "How so? Michelle—"

"At least provided a name when asked."

Melissa snapped. "Michelle has never had a relationship that lasted longer than a week. She's

never had to worry about you waltzing in and screwing up a good thing, and you would."

Too late, she realized she'd said too much. She grimaced as both Warriors' heads swung around to her. Release they could handle. If she planned to marry Mack, they'd want to do all the usual checks. There was too much chance of someone getting overzealous and ruining what she had developing with Mack. As it was, it was a miracle that she'd been seeing him for more than three months without Tyler barreling in.

They stared at her, waiting for her to continue.

Melissa groaned. "Blood in the water."

"You see?" Tyler asked.

Their father tapped his pen on the desk calendar. He didn't demand Mack's name; that was a surprise. Of course, as long as he wasn't demanding it, Melissa was free not to offer it. They stared at each other in silence.

"Aren't you going to tell us, Melissa?" Tyler asked.

"No. I'm not."

James raised an eyebrow.

"At least until I know if he's serious," she qualified, praying that would be enough to convince her father to wait.

"Fair enough," he decided. "Of course, if you don't prepare him for what we are, it may go badly when he learns it."

She sighed, voicing her greatest fear. "If I tell him too soon, he'll think I'm nuts."

"Maybe we should meet him," Tyler suggested.

Devon's Price - Tarot: Ten of Cups

James motioned for him to stand down. "When Melissa is ready."

Chapter Two

February 29th, 2002

“What’s your sign, baby?”
Melissa laughed in spite of herself, easing back into Mack’s body. *Gods, but I wonder where he gets so many lame lines. Research. He has to do research on the subject to keep me laughing. “Certainly not ‘stop’.”*

He groaned. “I was hoping you’d say that.” His arms wrapped around her. “Dinner tonight?”

“Let’s order in.” She wiggled against his rising cock.

His voice went rough in response. “Pizza in bed? My favorite meal...besides you.”

She turned to him, staring into his green eyes, her heart quickening. “Guess that means you can have both.”

Mack lowered his face and kissed her, winding his hands in her hair. It was a slow kiss, patient, blooming into something more, a mirror of the way he’d taken her virginity.

He pulled away, his eyes opening, hot in need.

"You know I—"

"So, this is him," Tyler drawled.

Melissa glared at him. "I am going to report you," she threatened. "You were warned off, if memory serves."

Her brother hopped up on the low walkway wall, making himself comfortable. "Aren't you going to introduce us?" he hinted.

"In a word, no!"

Mack recovered his senses and eased Melissa behind him. She snuggled to his back, taunting Tyler. Tyler tensed slightly, most likely affected by the sight of another man, an outsider, protecting Melissa this way.

"Goth boy a problem?" Mack asked.

Tyler mouthed the 'Goth boy' back to her as a question, incredulous.

Melissa cracked a smile. "He's harmless," she stated with confidence.

"Harmless?" both men asked in unison.

"Mostly. More like a couple of flies than a swarm of bees."

"Are you calling me *annoying*?" Tyler demanded.

"If the boots fit..."

He scowled at her.

"I think I'd like that introduction," Mack hinted.

No time like the present. "This is my little brother, Tyler."

"Little? Yeah. I can see that." Mack eyed Tyler's six feet four warily.

"This is my *younger* brother, Tyler...the vampire

hunter.”

Mack didn’t miss a beat. “Oh. I see. Dark clothes. Dyed black hair.”

“That’s natural, actually,” she inserted.

Tyler looked up at the curls over his eyes in disbelief.

Mack shrugged. “How convenient for him. Type casting. Crosses and ash stakes are his thing, huh?”

“Not quite. Those stories aren’t true. It actually takes a sacred weapon, sanctified and honed in the blue flame of the stone to kill one.”

Tyler clenched his teeth, and she shrugged at him. This crash course wouldn’t be necessary if she didn’t need to cover for him in the first place.

Mack nodded. “Riiiiight. Well, sure. Everyone knows that.”

Tyler made a move as if to pull the weapon and show it to him.

Melissa shot him a look of warning. “Sorry, Tyler. We have a date to get to.”

Mack nodded to him and turned, taking Melissa’s arm and leaving her brother behind. He got her settled into his Protégé and headed away from campus.

She sighed at the sight of Tyler at the curb. He’d gotten the license plate number; that meant he’d know everything there was to know about Mack within hours.

* * * *

Mack breathed a sigh of relief. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"Just fine. As I said, my brother is annoying, but he won't hurt either of us."

"You're sure about that?" He didn't need to state that he wasn't. Melissa was quick enough to catch that without the explanation.

"I'm sure." She smiled brightly. "I should thank you for gallantly trying to save me, though."

Mack found himself smiling in return. "You know I love you."

Melissa gasped. "You mean that?"

"Hell, yes." After waiting for her for the last three months, how could she doubt it? He'd have waited twice as long...three times as long, at least.

"If you weren't driving, I'd kiss you."

Mack pulled into a parking space and slammed the car into park.

She knelt on the passenger seat and brought her mouth down on his. Her long, blonde hair cascaded around him, cool satin against his skin. Her mouth was a sweet promise that he desperately wanted to take her up on. Melissa backed away, breathing raggedly against his lips.

For once, even his pick-up lines deserted him. "I'm going to take you home and make love to you now," he whispered.

"That's a good idea. Yes." She eased back into the seat and put the seatbelt on.

Mack shook his head, trying to clear his mind enough to drive. It took a minute, but then they were

on their way again.

At his apartment, the feast of touching started at the door. Clothing littered the floor from there to the bedroom.

He lowered her onto the bed, staring at her. Melissa was nude save the medallion at her throat, beautiful, trusting, in his bed, his for the taking. Mack couldn't begin to imagine how he'd gotten so lucky.

She reached for him, and Mack groaned. God, she made him crazy.

He joined her on the bed, searching for something to say, anything at all. She scattered him. It had always been like this, reducing an articulate man to lame come-ons that made her laugh.

"Come here often?" He had no clue where that one had come from; he hadn't used it before.

Melissa smiled, her chest shaking in silent laughter and her face darkening to deep pink. "Twice so far. I'd like to go for three, now."

"Definitely."

* * * *

Melissa ran her fingers through the line of strawberry blond curls running down his chest, stroking his erect cock, spurring him to motion.

"Now," he rasped.

Mack settled over her, parting her labia and easing inside. She moaned, arching to invite him deeper.

He stopped, concerned. "Feel good?"

She nodded frantically. The pleasure of what he

was doing overwhelmed the slight discomfort and made her throb for more.

As if in agreement, Mack filled her in one tender slide of his hips. The rest passed in a blur of moans and whispers, kisses and the glorious feeling of his body moving over and in hers.

He lasted only as long as she did, his heat exploding outward as she shattered, his shout mixing with hers. Then they lay entwined, stroking hands and lips reaffirming their bond.

Mack smiled, caressing the backs of his fingers over her cheek as he slid free of her body.

"What are you thinking?" she asked.

"That you really need to marry me...that I really need you to marry me."

Her heart stuttered at that pronouncement. "Are you asking?"

"Yes, I guess I am. I've wanted this practically since the night I met you, and..."

"And?" For his lack of inspiration at other intimate moments, he was certainly well-spoken when asking a woman to marry him.

He chuckled. "If we keep getting so caught up that we forget contraception, your father will be leading me to the altar with a shotgun. I'd rather get there before he has a chance and avoid the rumors."

He didn't question that she wanted a baby as much as he did. Gods, but they were going about this whole thing arse backwards. Until they made it to bed together, it seemed to be a perfectly respectable dating situation, almost antiquated. Now, they were

nearly planning to conceive a child out of wedlock.

But, if they were going to do this, there were things he had to know. "The shotgun is unlikely." Since Melissa had autonomy, her father would leave this portion of her life to her to handle, even if she got pregnant and things fell apart with Mack. *Unless he hurts me, but Mack would never hurt me.* "And if he did make any threats, it would be with his bare hands or a sacred weapon. Most likely, it would be his bare hands." *Warriors don't need weapons to fight humans.*

Mack's smile disappeared; he stared at her, seemingly fishing for words again. "Sacred weapon? Your father thinks he's...uh...a...um..."

Melissa sighed. "If you're serious about marrying me, you need to know this, Mack. My family doesn't just think they're vampire hunters...Soldat der Nacht...Night Warriors. They are."

He didn't seem to know what to say to that. When he spoke, his voice cracked slightly. "A lot of money in that?"

Though she was sure he didn't really want an answer, Melissa resolved to answer every question, no matter how outrageous. Honesty was her only chance of salvaging a bad situation, and honesty was the only way she'd know if he could accept the truth of her life.

"A comfortable living. Fortunes have been amassed in the last fifteen hundred years. Some saved were wealthy, and they became powerful patrons. Houses are passed down through the families, owned by the families without individuals selling them off

for a spending spree. Some of the old money is carefully invested to bring in new. Many necessities, like boots and medical care, are donated to —”

“Donated?”

Melissa nodded.

“Why?”

“The boot makers have been patrons for centuries, and they make a good living adapting new Warrior designs for Goth and cyclists. Doctors are protected, so they offer service for service.”

“Protected from...”

“Beasts...what you would call vampires.”

Mack took a calming breath. “You realize this sounds insane, don’t you?”

“It sounds insane, but it isn’t. I swear to you it’s all true.” She waited for his reaction, scared to death that he’d call it off.

He shifted his weight off of her, turning further to the side so that he was looking down on her, his head propped on one bent arm. “You actually believe this?”

“I’m not crazy, Mack. It’s true. I’ve seen it.”

“You... You’ve *seen* a vampire?”

Melissa nodded solemnly then shuddered at the memory. He laid beside her, wrapping his arms around her, offering comfort as if they weren’t discussing whether she was insane. For a moment, they didn’t speak.

Mack fingered her amulet, studying it for the first time since they’d started seeing each other. “Interesting piece,” he noted cautiously. “Old?”

"My father forged, etched and sanctified my amulet himself when I was sixteen. It replaced the one I'd had since I was an infant."

"And how long ago was that?"

The urge to cry warred with the urge to hit him. She blinked back tears. "Seven years ago. I'm not a beast, Mack. Technically speaking, I'm not even a Warrior-born daughter. My father adopted us when he married my mother."

"Tyler?"

"Oh, he's a Warrior, all right. Born, bred, raised and trained to be a cocky, overprotective..." She paused. "Everything I've told you about myself is true, Mack. I've never lied to you."

He stared at the amulet. "Cling... Cling..."

"KlingeStütze. It was the family name at the start of the second beast war. All but one of the house names have been changed over time to fit English sensibilities, but the amulets still bear the historical names, and they are used in formal ceremonies."

Mack didn't answer her.

She started to ease away from him. Obviously, this was all too much for him. "Maybe I should —"

His hands closed on her hips, and he shook his head. "I can't say I believe it, but I won't discount it until I'm sure one way or the other."

"Sure?" What would it take for him to be sure?

He floundered for a moment. "I do love you, Melissa. I won't throw that away lightly."

* * * *

She nodded, her expression pained.

"Tell me about the vampire you saw," Mack requested. He had to ask questions. So far, everything had been seamless. As long as it remained that way, he could hold onto hope that Melissa was sane and her family precisely what she claimed they were.

Melissa paled. The terror in her expression was so elemental that he started to ask her not to tell him.

"No," she managed. "I'll tell you. I was ten. My grandfather Ben had taken me for a ride on Cinnamon, a mare that belonged to my grandmother."

"Go on."

"The beast had a score to settle with my father and grandfather. It decided terrorizing the little girls of the household would bring it the Warriors it sought. Since Michelle was my father's princess and I was my grandfather's baby doll, we were the obvious choices to take down the ones it wanted."

He nodded. It made sense in a twisted sort of way.

"It was dark. We'd watched the sunset over the water and were headed back in. We rode double, because I wasn't a good enough rider to ride at night, and Warriors have better eyesight." She stopped, seemingly deciding what to say next.

"Go on," he urged her.

"The beast unghosted in our path."

Mack wondered what 'unghosted' meant but decided to let her talk through and ask questions later.

"Animals are scattered by beasts. They sense the creature as foul, dangerous, evil, worse than a predator, probably worse than a carrion eater. Unghosting meant that my grandfather knew the beast was there, but so did Cinnamon.

"If it weren't for me, he'd have dismounted smoothly and fought. I was his handicap. When Cinnamon reared, Grandfather wrapped me in his arms to cushion my fall." She paused, tears misting her eyes.

"You don't have to," he whispered. Whether it had been a vampire or a vagrant that night, the event had scarred her.

"No. I want to."

"*Only* if you want to. Not for me."

Melissa nodded. "Warriors heal quicker than humans, but they can still be hurt. The fall broke his left shoulder. Ben... He was a leftie, like you. Any Warrior can fight with the off-hand when he needs to, but it affects his skill, much as you wouldn't be able to write legibly with your right hand."

"Yes. I understand that."

"The beast made it clear that I was its target. I think it did it to enrage my grandfather, to put him even further off his usual prowess. Part of it was to terrify me. It did the full show: glowing red eyes, fangs extended, claws at the ends of its fingers..."

He shivered at the mental image.

"It kept trying to talk to me, but I was crying too hard to hear what it was saying. Not that it would have mattered; beasts always lie unless the truth will

cause more pain. Grandfather...kept shouting at it to stop lying to me. I'm not certain that what it was saying was a lie, but..."

He wondered at that. What would she think the beast would want to tell her that would be painful to her?

"Their battle didn't last long. It couldn't, that close to the manor. The minute a beast unghosted on the property, every Warrior within the walls and a certain distance outside them would have felt it. Half of them were coming, and the beast knew it.

"It didn't have a lot of time, but it had enough. When it took off, I thought we were safe." She took a deep breath, closing her eyes, her face paling slightly.

"You weren't?"

"I was. The beast had taken a death blow on Ben. I didn't know it. He stood there, ordering me to stay at his back in case it was a trick, all the while bleeding out. When my father and uncles showed up, he finally gave up the pretense and collapsed. He...died later that night."

"I'm... I'm sorry sounds so lame."

She managed a weak smile. "You're trying, and I appreciate it."

"Yes. I am."

Melissa stared at him, waiting for his acceptance...or his condemnation.

"I'll try. I can't promise to believe it, but I will try."

* * * *

Melissa stopped in the library doorway, staring at the file in Tyler's hand in anger and exasperation mixed. "Well?" she challenged him.

Tyler darkened, looking somewhat sheepish. "Good job, well-educated, not in trouble with the law...now or in the past, no radical entanglements, no fluctuations of his bank account indicating...bad habits."

"Wonderful," she offered dryly.

"I didn't...um...screw this up for you, did I?"

"It's too early to tell."

He winced. "I'm —"

"I had to tell him everything. I didn't want to, but I had no choice, thanks to you."

"And?"

"He thinks you're insane; no change there. The jury is still out on me."

"What can I do, Baby Doll? I'll do anything you ask to make this up to you."

"Stop calling me Baby Doll! If you want to help, take my lead for once. Stay out of my way until I ask for your help."

"On my honor," he vowed.

"When you show some, I'll believe you." Melissa headed for the stairs, ignoring his groan.

Chapter Three

March 7th, 2002

Melissa wound her fingers through Mack's, her back pressed to his chest, his face buried in her hair. She waited for the questions to start as they usually did, whispered in the afterglow of their loving.

She supposed she should be grateful that he was still asking questions, that he was still trying, though he'd been more attentive about birth control since she'd dropped the bomb on him. In fact, his cock, still buried inside her, was bare for the first time since then. She hoped that meant he was more at ease with the truth, more willing to tie himself to this crazy life.

"I want to meet them," Mack requested.

Her heart speeded. "My family?"

"Your father to start. But, yes. I think I should meet them all."

She glanced at the clock on his end table. "Okay. Get dressed, and we'll head to the manor."

"Now?"

Melissa slid off of his length, smiling at his groan. She turned to him, biting back laughter. "He works nights, Mack. After dinner is the perfect time to meet him."

"What time does he...go to work? Shouldn't we call first?"

"My father made a kill last night. He'll be riding a desk tonight."

"Riding a desk? Vampire hunters have desks?"

She laughed heartily. "There's a lot of paperwork involved in hunting beasts."

"I'll take your word for it. Just...don't tell me who they file it with. I'm not ready for that."

Melissa planted a kiss on his cheek then hopped from the bed and leaned to scoop up her blouse.

Mack hooked his hands around her hips and pulled her back into bed, rolling her beneath him. His mouth was urgent against hers, and he thrust into her again.

She tipped her hips to his, lost in the wild need that always drew them together. "What brought this on?" she managed.

"That pose was too tempting, Melissa. Don't you know how much I want you?"

Her eyes slid shut, and she held to him, giving herself fully to their loving. He wanted her. If he wanted her this badly and wanted to meet her family, maybe there was a chance for them.

* * * *

The man appeared out of thin air. One minute, there was open space in front of them, and the next, a six foot man. Michelle gasped, dragging back on Mack's hand.

He didn't follow. He stared at the glowing red eyes in shock. *It's true. My God! Everything she said is true.* Without hesitation, he dragged Michelle toward his back. If he died for her as her grandfather had, so be it. The vampire wasn't taking her.

She stumbled a step toward him then planted her feet, releasing his hand and launching into the claws slashing toward them.

"No," they screamed together.

The vampire flew away, and Michelle hit Mack's chest, forcing him back as if he'd been tackled by a pro football player instead of a hundred plus change woman. The hit nearly knocked him off his feet, but he managed to right them both. Mack ran his hands over her shoulder and chest from his place behind her, searching frantically for blood that didn't seem to be there. Those claws should have skewered her, but they hadn't.

She turned toward him, making the same inventory for injuries on him.

Mack glanced at the vampire rising slowly from the ground, his mouth going dry. "Are you crazy?" he grumbled. "Get behind me."

"Back to the wall." She shoved at his chest, forcing him back.

"What? He's coming. Oh, Christ. He's coming. We should run while we have the chance." The wall was

suddenly at his back.

"You can't outrun it," she stated calmly.

"Him," the vampire corrected her, behind her in the blink of an eye.

"Oh, God," Mack breathed. How the hell could you fight something that fast?

The vampire smiled, revealing lengthening canines.

Michelle turned, flattening her body to Mack's, face out toward their foe.

"No," Mack protested, reaching his arms around to lift her away. "You can't do this."

She grasped his hands and pinned them to the wall. "Use my amulet. If you stay behind me, the worst *it* can do is beat us up a little."

The vampire sneered at that, its head bobbing back and forth like a snake's.

"Melissa —"

"The amulet repels it. Please, stay at my back. Look at it this way... Without you there, I get the full force of the beast *and* a brick wall. This makes us even."

"That sucks," Mack grumbled. He was supposed to protect her, and the best he could do was 'even?'

"Now, he knows the game," the vampire taunted. "That will make it more enjoyable when I force him out."

Melissa nestled her head to Mack's face, covering as much of him as she could, but he was still uncovered from just below his eyes to the top of his head.

"Don't listen to it," she instructed. "Don't leave the

wall. Don't give it your back. No matter what you do, don't put your body in front of mine and give it a target I can't protect."

The vampire took a step toward them, leaning until he was nearly face to face with her. "Him," it shouted.

Mack bit back a gag; the vampire's breath was nearly as foul as the garbage cans a few feet away.

"In a former life," she compromised.

"Thus the game begins. You cannot protect him any more than your grandfather could protect you, Baby Doll."

"Don't call me Baby Doll," she warned. "Go on then. Touch me. The Warriors are already on their way from the first time you tested the amulet. You'll only speed them up if you touch me again. And while we're at it, name yourself."

For his answer, the vampire struck her across the face. Her head rocked back, crashing into Mack's mouth hard enough to make him see stars and taste blood. His head spun. If this was the amount of force being exerted, what damage was this doing to Melissa? He calculated it out in a panic then factored in his body acting as a buffer. She was right. As much as he loathed this arrangement, she'd be in worse shape without him.

She shook her head, taking a deep breath as the vampire pushed to its feet again. "Come on," Melissa whispered. "Where are you? There are always a half dozen Warriors or so in the city somewhere."

"Are you okay?" Mack asked, his heart pounding at the sight of the beast closing on them again.

"Fine. Here it comes again. Be ready."

Mack groaned, praying her family would arrive before the vampire managed to do her more harm.

"My name is Brandle. Release the boy to me, and you may leave without further injury," it offered. "Fight me, and I will see you dead before I'm through. You know it's not impossible."

"Never. My family will be here before you can do it, and you —"

"Unlikely. I know where they are. I checked."

She gasped. "You're lying."

Brandle smiled an unholy smile that made Mack's blood run cold. "You hope I am. Release him. This isn't your duty, Baby Doll. You aren't a Warrior. You aren't even trained like your twin is."

"And, you aren't much of a beast. At least the last one was less talk and more action, Brandle."

"What are you doing?" Mack choked. Egging him on didn't seem wise, but maybe she figured that keeping him talking meant less time getting hit. Or, maybe she hoped to keep him distracted long enough for her family to make it to them.

Melissa didn't answer him. "Who was it to you? A master? A lover?"

Brandle swiped at Mack's exposed face with a roar of fury. He ducked left; Michelle went right. In almost surreal slow motion—or so it seemed—the claws touched her face, retracted slightly, and the vampire flew away. Her rebound forced them both hard against the wall. She sagged slightly, groaning.

"Melissa?" he questioned frantically. He couldn't

hold her up without becoming a target, and he wouldn't make her take more abuse than she could stand. Mack had never felt so helpless in his life.

She straightened, treading the fingers of her left hand through his and squeezing in reassurance. "Here," she gasped. Her hand shook slightly, but she seemed determined to hold on for reinforcements.

He couldn't let her do this. He couldn't hide behind her and let her get hurt. "Let it have me," he whispered. "Get out of here while you can, while it's still recovering."

"Never. I won't lose you to that damned beast."

"I won't lose *you* to it. It's going to kill you to get to me. The amulet isn't foolproof. You're getting hurt. I know you are."

"The Warriors will make it on time. They're close. Please, gods. They have to be close."

"If it comes down to a choice, you have to let it take me."

"It won't. Oh, shit."

Her choked whisper brought Mack's attention back to the beast.

Brandle was up and running. Mack calculated the damage this amount of force would do to Melissa in sick disbelief. He wrapped his right arm around her waist and started to lift her out of harm's way, moving sideways along the wall.

The ripping sensation through his forearm announced the he'd failed. Mack screamed in a mixture of pain and misery as the vampire rebounded and its claws ripped free.

They collapsed together, her hand loosening. Mack eased his left arm from under Melissa, smoothing her hair, whispering her name though he knew there would be no answer. She was unconscious.

The damned thing was getting back up, smiling widely at its victory already.

Mack forced himself to his feet, grasping a dented aluminum baseball bat that had fallen from one of the trash cans with his uninjured left hand. He stepped over Michelle, ignoring the blood running off the tips of his fingers and the blinding pain of the slashes. "If you want me, come and get me. You're not touching Melissa again while I live."

Brandle licked Mack's blood off of its claws. "You think you can stop me?"

"I'll sure as hell try to."

"Little boy, you don't know what you're asking for. Killing you is going to be sweet pleasure."

Mack glanced at Melissa then back to his foe. "I think I have a clue. If I had a sacred weapon, I'd shove it so far up your ass you'd taste shit, Brandle."

The vampire's eyes narrowed then widened. It arched forward then jerked and fell to a heap on the concrete.

Tyler appeared behind it. "Allow me to make him eat that..." His cocky smile faded, and he paled, his gaze moving past Mack to his sister. "Ani, no," he breathed.

Mack turned toward her, collapsing to his knees, abruptly dizzy. "It was a gut shot...hard." His voice was thick. He touched her blood-soaked sweater.

"Blood's mine. I think it's mine."

Her brother was abruptly beside him, pulling up the sweater and running his hands over the unbroken line of her abdomen. He prodded at it, looking for signs of deeper injury, then checked her pupil response. "Can you walk?"

"Yes...I think. If not, take her."

Tyler pulled out a strip of black cloth, bound Mack's injuries tightly then scooped up Melissa, dragging Mack up after them by his uninjured arm. "Follow me."

* * * *

James cradled the phone to his ear, pen in hand. It would be whatever Warrior had reached the protected under attack first. "Tell me," he ordered. The move would have to be handled quickly and efficiently. When the beasts decided that the amulet wasn't reason enough to stay away, it was standard practice for the Warriors to protect their charges in any way they had to, and a move was essential to that.

"Dad?" Tyler called back, his voice strained to near panic.

He furrowed his brow. Tyler didn't call him 'Dad' when he was hunting. There were no relations in duty. Something had him rattled. "Here."

"Get to the clinic. Now."

His blood ran cold. "Who's hurt?" It couldn't be a Warrior, and an injured protected was bad news for

everyone. It undermined the trust of every protected, and it hurt Warrior morale. Not to mention, no one liked to lose a protected.

There was a muttered curse from the other side of the connection. "Please, just do what—"

"Tyler," he barked, putting the demand of a house lord into it without speaking the words. Every Warrior recognized the tone promising pain for disobeying such an order.

"Mack and Melissa."

James felt faint.

"I've called in both George and Angela. Mack can't wait, but I don't want Melissa to."

He nodded stiffly, even as he reasoned that Tyler couldn't see it. Calling in both of their doctors at once was a bad sign. It meant that the injuries weren't minor, whatever they were.

"Dad? Are you still with me?"

"How bad are they?"

"I don't know. They'll survive, I guess."

"I'll make it there." He hung up and turned to find Beth in the doorway with Michelle just behind her. He didn't wonder at it. If Beth hadn't sensed that something was wrong, Michelle surely had. His wife and daughters were unusually close.

"It's Melissa," Beth stated. "Isn't it?"

James nodded numbly.

"Let's go."

"I'll drive," Michelle offered. "You're in no condition to."

He didn't remember much of the ride to the clinic.

James supposed that Michelle drove much too fast, but in his near-madness, any speed would have felt too slow.

The next truly coherent moment for him was walking into the clinic room where Tyler sat next to Melissa and Angela stood across from him, a clipboard in hand. His daughter was pale, and there was a bruise on her cheek, but she wasn't hooked to machines as he'd feared she might be. The sight of her covered in a mass of tubes and wires would have been his end.

Angela cleared her throat. "Michelle is going to be okay, though the soreness is going to last several weeks," she assured him.

"You're sure?"

"Her blood is stable and the tests show no soft tissue damage past the bruising."

Beth voiced his question for him. "What did the beast do to her?"

"Severe amulet bruising. Given enough time, the beast would have beaten her to death that way."

James fisted the lower bed rail, growling at the mental image.

Angela didn't seem to notice; she was busy consulting the file she'd had tucked under the clipboard. "It didn't have nearly enough time for that, of course. Her face, her shoulder... The one that put her out was to her abdomen. I think the pain was too much for her. I've given her something for it."

The rail bent, creaking as he tightened his grip. Angela gasped and moved a step away.

"James," Beth snapped. "You need to calm down. You're frightening the protected."

He nodded, forcing his *Blutjagd* back. "My apologies," he grumbled.

"None needed," the doctor managed calmly. "Now, the man brought in with her —"

James winced. "Mack. How bad is he?"

"He'll recover...maybe not to one-hundred percent of his original dexterity though. George is piecing him back together at the moment. He'll need physical and occupational therapy for his injured arm. We agreed that it looked most like a mauling by a large dog. That's what we reported it as."

"I gave him protection," Tyler broke in. "When he was headed into surgery, I gave him an amulet and blessing."

"Without checking?" James asked. Tyler never skipped protocol; now he had twice in a day? There hadn't been a feeding. That meant protecting Mack hadn't been an emergency; beasts couldn't track him without a feeding. The house lord should have been consulted before protection was offered.

His son darkened. "He has the heart of a Warrior," he grumbled. "He deserved no less."

"He tried to fight the beast off of Melissa?" Gods, but the man would have died trying without protection.

Tyler nodded. "With a baseball bat... He was injured, bleeding out. He knew what he was facing, but he didn't run, didn't panic, and didn't leave Melissa to the beast. He placed himself between it and

Melissa and accepted death; he even threatened the beast with as much damage as he could do on the way to death."

James nodded. "I'm impressed. It takes a strong man to do something like that. I approve."

"There's more."

"What?" James caught the small box Tyler tossed his direction in one hand, without taking his eyes off of Melissa.

"I think he planned to ask Baby Doll to marry him tonight. The ring was in his jacket pocket...and they were headed to the manor when they were attacked."

He stared at the blue velvet box, a lump rising in his throat. If he had to release a daughter to marriage, he could think of no better man to release her to. "Will Mack be able to travel when he comes out of surgery?"

Angela considered it for a moment. "I don't see why not."

"Good. We'll relocate him to the manor with Melissa. He's more than earned a place in the family."

Chapter Four

March 8th, 2002

Mack opened his eyes, staring at the room around him in confusion. It wasn't a hospital room, and it wasn't his apartment. It was as big as the combination living and dining room at his apartment, and it was beautifully decorated: cool blue walls, nearly-matching high thread count sheets, a Battenberg lace quilt and brocade drapes.

"Where the hell am I?" he grumbled. He forced himself up, wincing at the pain slicing through his right arm, panting as he cradled the braced and bandaged appendage to his chest. Mack glanced around at the room one more time, taking a deeper breath as the throbbing eased slightly. Maybe they'd taken him to what Melissa called 'the manor.'

"There's no way to know unless I ask." Since there was no one in the room, he'd have to get up to accomplish that.

Thankfully, he was still wearing his jeans. Heading out nude would have made him think twice. He

would have done it, if for no other reason than to get information about Melissa, but he would have considered it first.

Mack ran his left hand over his chest, seeking out whatever was brushing over it. His fist closed on a metal disk on a leather thong that was undeniably an amulet. "That's good news," he muttered. At least if another vampire showed up, he'd have a better chance at protecting Melissa and himself.

He started out, making his way to the hall then following the sound of voices to a wide staircase and down.

Children running through the foyer at the base stopped to stare at him, wide-mouthed. One of them bowed his head slightly and whispered something about 'the human Warrior.' Mack nodded to him, though he didn't understand what the greeting meant.

"What are you three up—" The familiar voice stopped abruptly as Mack whirled to her.

"Melissa..." He shook his head to clear his twitching vision. "No. You're not Melissa. You must be Michelle." He'd never met her sister, but the woman couldn't be anyone but Melissa's twin.

She smiled, striding to him, taking his uninjured arm. "Which means you're more intelligent and observant than my second boyfriend. He laid one hell of a kiss on Melissa before he got slapped and realized he had the wrong sister."

"Where is Melissa? Is she okay?"

"Sore but fine. Come with me. She's going to kick

herself for not being there when you woke."

Michelle guided him across the floor to a closed door and opened it without knocking. She smiled then turned and walked the other way, shooing the children ahead of her.

Everyone inside the room turned to Mack.

He stared at the Warriors, his gaze settling on one after another, feeling like a child amid giants. "Where's Melissa? Is she okay?" he repeated. Why had Michelle brought him here, if Melissa wasn't here? Was this some sort of interview or interrogation?

"Well done," Tyler called out. "A Warrior always thinks of his mate first."

"Heart of a Warrior," another added.

"Welcome to Armen manor, Mack," the one behind the desk offered. "Are you feeling all right?" He checked his watch. "You can have more meds now."

Mack didn't answer him. He was too busy watching Melissa make her way to him from behind the mass of male bodies. She moved quickly but tenderly, her face pale and her eyes wide.

He met her halfway, the need to touch her overwhelming any other concern. Her mouth was urgent against his, the silk-robed, lilac-scented solid reality of her in his arms the center of his senses.

"Heart of a Warrior," someone sighed.

Mack pressed his forehead to hers, holding her to his body. "You're never doing that again," he grumbled.

"Mack," she began.

"I have an amulet. I assume it does the same thing yours does?"

She nodded slightly. "It does."

"Then the next time I tell you to get behind me, you'll damned well do it."

She smiled, her blue eyes shining in tears. One spilled down her cheek.

"I can handle vampires, Warriors and all the rest. *This* is the deal breaker, Melissa. I will never hold you in my arms, injured and unconscious, again."

Someone laughed lightly in the background.

"Agreed?" Mack demanded an answer. He needed to know she'd never try to risk herself for him again.

"Yeah. I think I can handle that."

Deep laughter brought his head around.

The Warrior who'd welcomed him offered his left hand in deference to Mack's injury. "James Armen," he stated.

Melissa's father. Mack released her and clasped the offered hand for a shake. He startled at the feeling of the ring box trapped between their palms.

"I believe you were coming to meet me last night," he answered the unanswered question between them.

"Yes. I was."

"I have a little work to do now. Lunch is in two hours. We'll talk then. Right now, it sounds as if you have a lot to discuss with Melissa."

Mack smiled in understanding. "I'll be there."

* * * *

Melissa led Mack back to her room, nodding to her mother's reminder of his meds.

He stopped in the center of the room, looking around in surprise. "They put me in your room?"

"Of course. I have autonomy, Mack." Michelle had brought a few men to her bed over the years. It wasn't as if no one knew they were sleeping together, after all.

He stared at her, seemingly confused by that.

"Autonomy," she repeated. "It means that I choose who I sleep with or marry without interference from or permission of my father."

He smiled. "Do you?" He glided toward her, his manner promising sensual delights.

"Can you? Your arm —"

"I won't need my arm for what I have planned."

That simply, she knew nothing would stop them. "If you say so."

"You should have told me about autonomy," he chided her.

She chuckled. "It didn't seem to stop you."

Mack raised his uninjured hand, flicking a ring box open with his thumb. "It slowed me down."

Melissa stared at the simple white gold band with a diamond, hardly daring to believe it wasn't a dream. "You're asking?"

"Oh, I am asking."

"Then I'm saying 'yes'."

He smiled offering her the box. Melissa slipped the ring on then tucked the box into her robe pocket. Mack started to hug her then grimaced.

"Your meds," she reminded herself.

"Not yet." He held to her lightly, shaking his head.

"I've agreed, Mack. You need to take care of yourself."

"Who said asking you was all I had planned?" He backed her toward the bed, his eyes hot as they always were before he made love to her.

"Your arm—"

"Do you feel up to being on top?"

"Tim was right. You have the heart of a Warrior."

"Is that good?"

"It's perfect."

"Is it a 'yes'?"

"Hell, yes." She smiled widely. "Come here often?"

Mack chuckled. "Not yet, but I intend to."

About the Author

Brenna Lyons lives in Haverhill, MA with her husband, three children, and a zoo of pets. She was born and raised in the Hazelwood/Glenwood area of Pittsburgh, PA and toured the east coast as a Navy wife for thirteen years, nine of them in VA Beach, where she wrote her first novel.

She enjoys the Society for Creative Anachronism and is a member of such groups as Broad Universe, EPIC, WRW and ERWA.

Brenna holds a BS in Accounting and a Certificate of Computer Programming. Why? An auditing teacher commented that she would either "make the perfect auditor or the perfect thief," and she had been writing for eleven years with little professional training—in effect, a thief of attention by misdirection.

Never one to pass up a challenge, Brenna has worked as an auditor, tracking down fraud suspects, finding the backdoors into exchange computer systems, creating accounting programs for government and small businesses, and as a writer. Overall, it's the best of both worlds.

Brenna enjoys talking to readers and can be reached via her site at <http://www.brennalyons.com>