

Gargoyle's Challenge

Nia K. Foxx

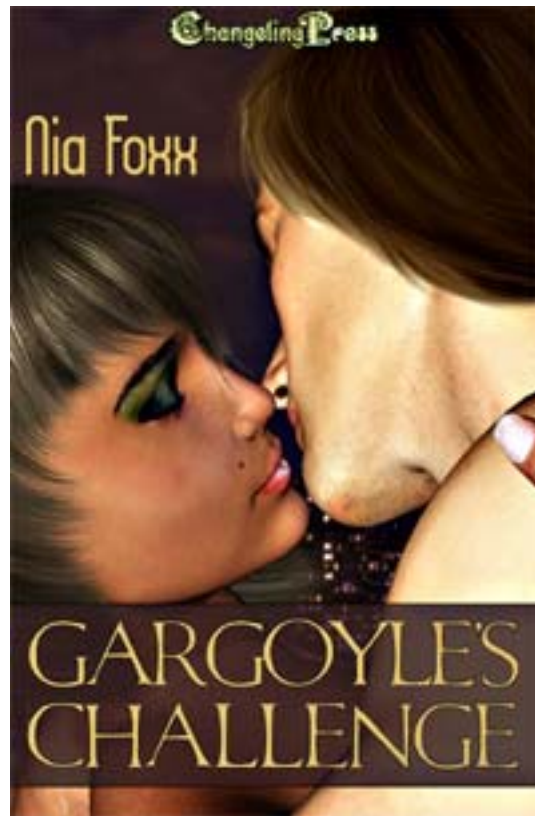
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Chapter One

Sergei could feel the beginnings of a headache coming on as he dropped the newspaper on his desk, its dull throb gradually attacking his frontal lobe in a steady rhythm. Swiveling in his leather chair he looked out at the New York skyline from his fortieth story office. The next time he saw Jean De LaRue, the younger Protector would get a serious piece of his mind -- if he didn't strangle him first. When he agreed to the harebrained notion of running an ad in the newspaper, he'd thought Jean would place a discreet feeler in the personals, not take out a full-page advertisement on the front page of the *New York Times*.

Like clockwork his private line rang.

"Sergei here."

"What the hell is going on?" Alexi practically bellowed into the phone, which only made the pulsing worse. "Did you see the newspaper?"

"Yes." He rubbed his now aching left temple, willing the migraine to go away. "When Jean came to me about the ad --"

"Came to you? You mean you authorized this?" If possible his voice rang even louder.

Sergei continued in the normally calm manner he was renowned for. "I discussed with him the feasibility of placing some sort of advertisement."

"I can't believe you of all people would okay this."

"I didn't know he would get the front page of the *New York Times*." His Russian accent became more pronounced, a true sign of his irritation.

"The *New York Times*? I'm looking at the *Chicago Sun Times*."

Both men cursed in tandem.

"Where is he?" Alexi growled.

"France. He wanted to be there for the birth of his nephew."

"Or maybe run away from the fallout. Leave it to a De LaRue to cause more trouble for us."

"Watch it, Alexi," Sergei warned.

"Whether you call him friend or not you know I speak the truth. So what would you like to do now?"

"What can we do but deal with the consequences?"

Alexi swore under his breath again. "I'll do my best to assess the damage he's done. He may have placed other ads."

Great, Sergei thought. He'd be willing to bet money the younger Protector had done just that.

He looked down at the paper sitting so harmlessly on his desk.

Ebony Beauties Wanted To Marry Rich Bachelors.
Age unimportant. Must be willing to relocate.
Criterion: Winged-Shaped Birthmark.
Tattoos are not acceptable!!!

Jean had even gone so far as to list an 800 number, one of Sergei's private lines normally used by fellow Protectors. If the little weasel knew what was good for him, he'd stay in France for the next two centuries and hope Sergei didn't hunt him down.

By the afternoon the toll free number's mailbox reached maximum capacity with its designated forty voicemail slots filled. Sergei learned why later when a frustrated Alexi called him back in a rage.

"He took out an ad in every major city in the western world, not to mention several industrialized African nations!" Alexi said by way of greeting.

Sergei closed his eyes against the implications. "What's done is done. I've taken the liberty of calling a temp service. We can use them to screen the calls of potential candidates."

"You're serious?"

"Of course. It's not the method I would have preferred but we can't undo it."

"Well, we could sure as hell ignore it," Alexi said after regaining some composure.

"And potentially miss out on locating Fledglings?"

The silence on the other end let Sergei know he had struck home. "Okay," the other man agreed reluctantly. "What do you want me to do?"

"Get ready to start interviewing."

"How did I know you would say that?"

* * *

Between her fits of giggles Aman re-read the front-page ad, this time to her co-worker and friend Samantha Jennings.

"It has to be a joke," Sam gasped, jerking the paper from her friend's hands to read for herself. "Some kind of April Fool's prank, or maybe a casting call for some new reality show."

"Whatever it is, do you know how many desperate women are going to actually respond?" Aman asked.

"Thousands, kinda like the movie, you know the one where the guy advertised to get married in order to get his inheritance," she remembered with a laugh.

"Oh, yeah," Aman recalled. "And all those women chase him around like money grubbing gold diggers. Well, that's actually the group they're appealing to with crap like this." She pointed to the paper.

Samantha looked wistful. "I wonder what these guys look like."

"Probably old, decrepit perverts with stock in Viagra." Aman shook her head.

"You're such a pessimist."

"Oh, come on. Do you really think some hunky rich guys would need to advertise in the newspaper for women? Get real."

"Stranger things have happened, like you using the word 'hunky'."

Sam tucked a lock of wavy red hair behind her ear. She regarded her friend quietly, not surprised at the woman's reaction. Aman Jacobs would be the last person to

give in to fairytale notions -- she was definitely one person firmly grounded in reality. Hell, you couldn't even let her pass a romance section in a bookstore without hearing some tangent about how "grown women shouldn't perpetuate the propaganda of such idiotic drivel."

Sometimes Sam admired her "don't need a man to make me happy" attitude, wishing she could adopt some of that into her own personality. Four months and three ex-boyfriends surely couldn't be a good omen of things to come. She just couldn't figure it out. Men were attracted to her -- a little too much, in fact. They were drawn to her petite five feet, two inches, classic features, alabaster skin and flaming red hair. Hell, most even thought her freckles were adorable, but the mystique usually didn't last long and she found herself out there again searching for Mr. Right.

"I'll tell you one thing, this is one birthmark bearing sista who won't be replying," Aman huffed, following her friend into the locker room. They'd just completed another eight-hour shift at the New York delivery company where they were employed and were about to put in a grueling hour of aerobics.

Sam rolled her eyes. "You know the old saying, man cannot live by bread alone."

"Well, I prefer the motto, if you want drama at bay, keep the damned men away," Aman retorted, finding an empty bench in front of a row of lockers.

"I believe lesbian activists adhere to the same motto," Sam informed her friend.

"They're smart women, then, but I'm not planning on being a switch hitter if that's what you're implying."

"So, what, asexuality for the rest of your life?"

"Nope. I'm sure in the next ten years someone will develop an android that can meet my standards. Until then." Aman wiggled the fingers on her right hand.

"You're sick, you know that?"

"Sick? That's a matter of opinion, but drama, disease and kid free definitely." She snapped her fingers to punctuate the statement.

"I'm done talking to you." Sam laughed, tugging off clothes.

A little over an hour later the women parted ways in the subway station, Aman heading to her Bronx studio apartment while Sam made her way to her parents' midtown home where she'd resided off and on for the last twenty-nine years.

"You sure are wearing them pants, girl," a teen commented as Aman hopped on the train preparing for the long, standing only trek. She rolled her eyes letting the young man know any further comments just might get him cursed out. She was accustomed to remarks like that, had endured them her entire life. She was what brothers admiringly referred to as a "thick sista" -- a woman with a little extra meat on her bones. At five foot ten, that meat was proportioned in all the right places. Her long, shapely legs curved upward to nicely rounded hips and an ass that had men doing a double take. Her waist dipped properly on her elongated torso, rounding up to broad, womanly shoulders. Her breasts were full, some might even say buxom. She secretly viewed the perfect size Cs as her best asset.

Physically, she considered herself attractive, her round caramel-colored face enhanced by pleasingly full lips, pert nose and Asiatic eyes the color of copper. She wore her relaxed hair cropped short, not wanting to deal with the fuss of long tresses or sport a weave like so many other black women opted for in this day and age. Overall she had no complaints, secure in the woman she'd become and eagerly looking forward to the one she hoped to be -- if she could focus and finish her damned bachelor's degree.

Completing her undergraduate studies and getting her teacher's certification was a dream of hers long overdue. At thirty-two, she was tired of putting her life on hold for everyone else. She'd struggled through high school to work for her family because an alcoholic mother and absentee father didn't see the necessity of providing for their three offspring. She continued to help support a sister four years her junior when the eighteen-year-old became pregnant and the father decided he'd rather play than pay. As if that burden wasn't enough, her younger brother had received a partial scholarship to UCLA, and although he hadn't asked her for help there was no way she was going to let him miss out on an opportunity she would have loved for herself.

Eight years later her younger sister, now happily married and working as a paralegal in a prestigious Manhattan law firm, was pregnant with her second child, while her still single brother practiced medicine in Los Angeles. Not bad for some kids from the projects. As a token of their appreciation for all her hard work and sacrifice they both decided to pay for her to go to college and pursue her dream of becoming a teacher. Not one easily moved, Aman cried for two days after her younger siblings sprung the surprise on her thirtieth birthday.

Now after two years, she would be graduating with honors in her major of education from the local community college. She'd been accepted to NYU and was scheduled to begin in the fall full time, which meant cutting back on hours at work. Her life was finally heading in a direction she wanted. Sure, things would be tight, but if she worked enough overtime in the spring and summer she would be able to make it through the ten months of school none the worse for the journey.

Chapter Two

Aman pulled the loaded dolly through the front glass double doors of the skyscraper, easily maneuvering inside before they slammed on her parcels. It was a particularly muggy day in the city. The kind of day that left you gasping for air if you were unfortunate enough to be outside, and running your air-conditioner at full blast if you were lucky enough to have one. For April the weather was highly unusual. Hell, the city had only begun to thaw last month. No one expected this type of heat wave until June, and until yesterday it had been the most talked about piece of news.

"Hey, Joe," she greeted the security guard. He was one of the favorites on her route, an elderly Middle Eastern man with the snappiest sense of humor she'd ever come across. He reminded her a lot of her late grandfather with his gentle mannerisms and quick wit.

"Well, if it isn't my favorite Nubian queen," came his standard accented reply. "What do you have for me today?" He tore his eyes away from the portable T.V. sitting obscured on his granite desk between surveillance screens.

"I'll need six signatures. I have another load in the truck."

His brows furrowed. "Do you need any help?" he asked, already rising to his no more than five foot three inch height.

Aman suppressed a smile at the thought of the frail man trying to lift even the smallest box from her truck. "No, I wouldn't want to take you away from your post."

He pondered her response, nodding his agreement as an afterthought.

"Anything good on the boob tube this morning?" she queried, stacking boxes to the side of his desk.

"Everyone is buzzing about this advertisement in the *New York Times*. Apparently it was posted in several high profile newspapers around the world," he

supplied, glancing briefly back at the television before checking each package, noting which department would need to be called on each item.

"You're kidding me." She gaped, leaning over the counter to get a look at the anchor people as they went on.

"...well, if I met the criterion I would probably call." The brunette female newscaster smiled prettily.

"I know I would," the older male anchorman added jovially. "And for any of you ladies who might have missed that number before, here it is." The screen switched, blazing an 800 number.

"How's that for free publicity?" Joe commented.

Aman shook her head at the screen. Of all the newsworthy topics in the world, this was what topped the headlines.

* * *

Sergei's headache from the day before hadn't subsided even with the extra hour of sleep and his morning workout regimen. Unwilling to fight with New York's perpetual rush hour traffic, he'd opted to take a cab into the city. He didn't look forward to the numerous messages he knew awaited him, either business or those generated by Jean's ads. Not only did he have to contend with the responses from Jean's little endeavor, but the media had grabbed hold of the story.

He'd nearly fallen off his treadmill that morning as he watched the Early Edition. To make matters worse Alexi had him on speed dial and seemed to be calling every hour on the hour. Before the day was out he would need to have the agency hire more temps to screen calls and remember to buy stock in Tylenol...

Sergei pushed through the revolving doors, so distracted he forgot to hold back on his supernatural strength. The force of his shove propelled the man in front of him through the glass turnstile, with Sergei immediately on his heels. Leaping over the fallen man, he found himself thrust firmly against the shorts-clad backside of a very leggy, very irate woman.

"What the..." the woman exclaimed, trapped between the high desk and the wall of his large body.

"I'm so sorry." He took a step back to allow the dark-skinned female the opportunity to turn around. The rest of his apology was cut off as the extremely beautiful and obviously angry woman came into full view. The very sight of her had his cock thickening to full erection. He hadn't responded that strongly to a woman since his youth.

"Hey, why don't you watch where you're going next time? You --" She paused in mid sentence, as if she'd suddenly lost the ability to speak.

Sergei was used to this reaction from women, encountered it daily whenever one got a good look at him and his odd colored eyes. Normally he paid little attention, unless he found himself in need of assuaging some of his baser lusts. Lately, he hadn't cared for female companionship. He'd been too preoccupied with the knowledge Fledglings actually existed, and helping his best friend safeguard his own woman. His current reaction to the silent woman so close to him was unnerving.

Aman's heart drummed frantically against her chest, a sudden throbbing emanating from a spot just above her breast. The man was gorgeous. She stood staring up into the most striking green eyes she'd ever seen. Were they natural, or some oddly colored contacts? "You could at least help the poor sap you plowed over," she admonished, recovering quickly.

"What?" His brows furrowed, making him look as if he didn't fully understand her. She picked up on the accent and decided to gesture this time.

"Help him." She pointed to the man, who had already managed to scramble to his feet with little damage to his person, although his briefcase looked as if it had seen better days. It lay askew with its contents strewn across the glossy marble lobby.

"Good Lord!" he exclaimed, looking over his shoulder. The chaotic mess seemed to propel him into action. "I'm sorry about that," he apologized as he bent, gathering papers. Aman noted how clearly he spoke. Definitely no language barrier there.

"It's perfectly all right, sir." The man hurriedly scooped up his papers. "I can get these. Please don't bother yourself."

"Nonsense." The larger man continued his assistance, hazarding a look in her direction. His gaze seemed to hesitate on her legs, traveling slowly up in an appreciative manner she recognized.

"Be right back, Joe," she said to the guard, feeling the sudden need to put as much space between herself and the stranger as possible.

Hurrying back to her truck, she leaned against it for several moments trying to gain control of her rapidly beating pulse. She'd never had that type of reaction to any man before. Not even on the few dates she allowed herself had her body responded in that fashion.

Get it together, girl. He's just a man. A white man! she thought. *Okay, a fine white man!* she amended.

"Are you all right in there?" the somehow familiar baritone voice asked from the truck's rear hatch.

Aman reacted with a start. "Yeah. Why wouldn't I be?" She busied herself with stacking the next load of items on the ledge of the truck.

"I hit you pretty hard. Perhaps you should see a doctor."

"It was nothing, really. I've had worse."

"When?"

"What?" She looked up at him with startled, questioning eyes. The action was a big mistake on so many levels.

She stood transfixed by his angry emerald gaze. The man really was knock-down handsome. His skin was tanned to a lightly golden perfection, which in New York wasn't easy to achieve unless you spent your lunch hours in a tanning bed. His blue-black hair shone in the daylight, reminding her of ravens' wings; he wore the thick strands pulled back into a ponytail that hung just below his shoulders. She wondered what it would look like down and tossed by the wind. His features, like his accent, were

very Eastern European. With a strong, defined nose leading to full lips that seemed to only accentuate his stalwart features, he was definitely not some pretty boy.

The phrase "all man" echoed in her mind. "I grew up in the projects. Trust me, I can take much worse," she finally provided. Not that it was any of his business.

Sergei nodded, his instant temper cooling somewhat. He recognized that city edge in her and knew that this woman was not some fragile flower, although he felt compelled to treat her as such. No harm would come to her so long as he drew breath.

Admittedly, he had never been intimate with or even dated a black woman, but there was something about this woman that positively had his blood boiling. He was drawn to the movements of her full figure as she busied herself with loading boxes. Although he didn't doubt she could perform the laborious job quite well, something in him was opposed to her being subjected to such physical work.

"I hope you don't reside there currently."

"Where, in the projects?" She stood, stretching a kink out of her back. "No, I live in the luxurious Bronx now."

Although Sergei heard her response, his eyes were drawn to the large, firm breasts that strained underneath the fabric of her uniform top as she arched her back. His cock jerked in response to her movements, and he fought the urge to join her in the truck's rear for a little mid-morning delight.

Aman swore under her breath. Leave it to a man to be drawn to such an innocent action. *He probably thinks I did that for his benefit*, she thought. "Look, you've done your civic duty. I'm not planning to sue or anything. So if you don't mind, I have work to do here."

For a moment she thought he would protest. Finally he asked, "What is your name?"

He could have asked her the winning lottery numbers and she wouldn't have been more surprised. For a moment she thought to give him a bogus one -- anything to get him away from her as quickly as possible. In the end she thought better of it. If he really wanted he could waltz in there and confirm with Joe. "Aman."

"Aman. Beautiful. Is there a last name that goes with it?"

"Why?"

"Because I'd like to know the name of the woman I intend to court."

Had she heard him correctly? Did he say court? For that matter did anyone say *court* anymore? She'd had her share of guys asking her out but his approach was new. "Well, I guess that will remain a mystery because I don't plan on being courted by you or anyone else for that matter." She tried to sound annoyed. Dear God, her heart was racing, and that damned throbbing seemed to have intensified. She fingered the source of the ache, wondering if possibly she had been injured.

He arched a brow at her reply, as if he hadn't expected it.

Arrogant bastard, she thought, turning her attention to the remaining stack of boxes waiting to be transferred to her dolly. Guys like him were probably not used to hearing rejection. "Like I said, I have work to get done," she reiterated, looking down at him from the truck's edge.

"Let me," he stated, before easily lifting her from the vehicle's rear. She slid down the length of him in aroused shock. Never had any man dared to pick her up -- she doubted any could in the effortless manner he'd just done. She felt the contours of his body through the tailored suit he wore as she grasped his full biceps to anchor herself. It should be against the law to look like he did, she thought. God, would she ever reach the ground? Seconds seemed to pass into minutes. Her breath caught in her throat when she slid over his arousal.

That can't be real!

Feet finally firmly planted on the ground, she found herself cradled in his embrace. "If you don't mind," she finally managed, still pondering the beast that now pressed firmly against her belly.

"Not at all," he answered.

One moment she reveled at the notion of putting some space between them, the next her mind went blank at the warm feel of his lips pressing against hers.

Sergei took advantage of her delayed reaction to slip his tongue between her lips. The first taste of her sent electric currents through his entire body, the aftershocks causing him to pull her closer to him, if that were possible. He deepened the contact of their lips on a groan, his tongue stroking hers in deep thrusts. He registered her complete surrender and wished they were in the safety of his office so he could further explore the treasures her compliant body had to offer.

Too soon the real world came crashing in, the normal sounds of New York's traffic seeming to intensify. Sergei pulled back reluctantly, conscious of Aman's sense of propriety. If it were up to him he would pull her into the stuffy rear of the truck and make her scream his name above the city noise. "Your name?" he demanded roughly.

"Jacobs. Aman Jacobs," she replied breathlessly. Wide copper eyes stared up at him, her tough as nails attitude lost in the wake of their kiss. "How dare you?" Her voice was weak.

"Trust me -- you will find out all I dare." As much as he hated to, he walked away before he did something that might completely shock her and the entire city.

* * *

"I didn't know you were acquainted with Mr. Romanov," Joe began after Aman entered the building with her final batch of deliveries.

"Who?" she asked, still trying to clear her befuddled mind.

"Sergei Romanov."

"I don't know him," she admitted without making eye contact.

"But didn't I just see you..." Joe's words trailed off at her embarrassed look. Heat rushed up her collar, and she'd never been more grateful for her dark coloring than at that moment.

"Sign here, please." She thrust the electronic board under his nose.

"I did already, remember?"

She could barely remember her own name at the moment, let alone what had transpired before her mind-blowing encounter with Sergei Romanov. She looked down

at her board. "Oh... yeah... that's right." She turned on her heels, pushing the dolly in front of her.

"Aman, Mr. Romanov wants to see you in his office."

Joe's comment caused her to stop in her tracks. "I have work to do," she muttered over her shoulder.

"What should I tell him?"

"Tell him... tell him I'm not interested," she managed clearly before beating a quick retreat to her waiting van.

* * *

"Okay, give already," Sam demanded at the end of their aerobics.

"There's nothing to give," Aman answered, the lie slipping easily from her lips. She couldn't tell Sam she'd allowed a total stranger to kiss her smack dab in the middle of downtown. Sam would have a field day with questions, and all Aman wanted to do was put the experience behind her.

"Fine. You wanna keep whatever it is bottled up inside of you, go right ahead, but when you're up at midnight don't come crying to me," Sam huffed, readjusting her haphazard ponytail.

Whatever, Aman thought. By tomorrow the day's events would be a distant memory.

* * *

At eleven thirty she silently cursed Sam and her little jinxing red-haired self. The woman must be half witch. Aman sighed, downing another glass of warm milk. At this rate if she ever got to sleep she would be getting up throughout the night to run to the bathroom.

Hard as she tried to dispel it, the memory of Sergei Romanov's kiss continued to plague her until she finally gritted her teeth in frustration. Picking up the phone, she punched in her friend's number.

"Aman, do you know what time it is?"

"What? It's not even midnight." She glanced at her bedside clock to verify.

"It's eleven fifty-two. If my parents wake up I'll never hear the end of it."

"Well, you wouldn't have to worry about it if you had your own place."

"I swear before all that is holy if you called me to pick a fight..." Sam retorted, her voice rising.

Aman sighed. "I kissed a stranger today."

"You did what?" Sam practically yelled.

"Your parents," Aman reminded her.

"Who was he?"

"A businessman named Sergei."

"Oh, Russian... Go on, purge. It'll make you feel better."

"The thing is, there isn't much to tell. One minute I was in my truck and the next I was in his arms. It's not like I wanted it to happen."

"So you didn't reciprocate?"

"No... well, yes, but I was caught off guard."

"That's a new one. Did you enjoy it?"

Did she answer honestly, admit she enjoyed the press of his body against hers, the feel of his tongue pushing in her mouth? Should she try to explain the raw desire welling up inside her from the outline of his hard cock pressed snugly against her belly?

"It was okay," she finally answered.

"So what happens now?"

"Nothing, except hopefully some sleep."

"Are you going to see him again?"

"Sam, you're acting as if we went on a date. Our paths will probably never cross again. Good Lord, I've been delivering to that company for years and hadn't run into him until today. The entire incident was a fluke."

"Stranger things have happened."

"Not to me, they don't. Now, let me go to sleep. I have work in the morning."

Surprisingly enough, she did exactly that.

* * *

In his gargoyle form, Sergei sat perched atop his favorite thinking post on the Empire State Building. He'd flown aimlessly about the city that night, on constant vigil. Months earlier he and long-time friend Lorn De LaRue had stood at alert in this very spot after receiving word about potential succubus activity. Although the information had turned out to be a ruse to kidnap Lorn's mate, Sergei felt something monumental was about to come to pass.

His thoughts drifted to Aman Jacobs. He wondered if he'd occupied her mind as much as she had his own that day. He was surprised how much that one kiss had affected him. His cock stirred beneath his loincloth at the idea of plowing into her warm, moist pussy.

He hadn't been surprised when she ignored the invitation to come to his office, expected her to reject the very desire he knew coursed through her body. When he'd finally managed to let her go, the thought hit immediately that she could be a Fledgling. Lorn had told him about the instantaneous desire he'd felt for his own mate, his inability to think straight when she was near, and how her very scent had him jerking off to her image when he tried to keep his distance.

He would know soon enough, he vowed. Either way, Aman Jacobs would be his for the taking.

Chapter Three

Aman took quick stock of her item roster as she sat in front of the glass skyscraper where she'd made first contact with Sergei Romanov.

Only five boxes. I can do this in one trip. She flipped her pad closed. It was just after ten am -- thirty minutes later than she'd arrived yesterday -- but she knew she could make up the time. She smiled at her cleverness. No self-respecting businessman in the Big Apple would arrive to work at such a late hour.

With little exertion she slipped the medium-sized packages onto her dolly.

"Hey, Joe," she greeted brightly, determined not to let the uncomfortable situation of the day before seep in.

"My Nubian queen, how are you today?" His olive skin shone as if he'd just applied a generous helping of moisturizer.

"I can't complain. I have five for ya." She slipped him the electronic clipboard. "Oh, crap!" One of the smaller parcels had a "hand delivery only" notice. "Make that four. I have to walk this one up myself."

She glanced at her watch, then looked cautiously around the lobby. Only a few people milled about, but none was Sergei Romanov. *Okay. Just get in and get out.*

The elevator ride up was swift, bringing her to the top floor in record time. She stepped into the corridor that led to the plush executive offices, following the markers to her destination.

"I have a delivery," Aman said after the receptionist's cheery greeting. The woman sat like a sentry on the opposite side of the double glass doors marked Executive Suites.

The middle-aged woman examined the package. "One moment, please." She picked up the phone. "Your delivery has arrived." The woman paused as she listened to the response on the other end. "Yes. All right. I'll send her right in."

"That's not necessary. I can just leave it with you."

"No, he wants it personally delivered."

Of course *he* would, Aman thought, as the secretary indicated the short hall that would take her to her destination. She hated these pompous bastards. He'd probably bought some pornography that he was too afraid of someone accidentally opening.

She read the nondescript return label on the package.

Definitely porn.

Aman knocked on the black unmarked double doors. After seconds the doors opened of their own volition. She stepped into the plush office, which could probably hold three of her entire studio apartment. The automatic doors closed behind her.

"Alexi, we'll have to discuss it later. The delivery I've been waiting for has arrived." She heard the familiar voice before locating its owner.

Sergei Romanov stepped out of an adjoining room, disconnecting the call on his cordless phone. The terminating beep echoed through the silent office.

The asshole had set her up. "Your package, sir," she stated in a monotone that belied the combination of emotions warring within her.

"Good morning, Aman." He took in her shorts-clad frame from head to toe. His slow perusal sent a warm shiver up her body, igniting the throbbing that seemed to afflict her in his presence. She touched the spot below her collarbone.

"Something wrong?" His eyes followed the absent pattern her fingers were making on her chest while he closed the distance between them.

"My only problem at the moment is my van full of packages sitting on a busy New York street."

"Don't worry. No one will touch anything."

Because you command it, Oh Great and Powerful Oz? She opted for, "Better safe than sorry." She extended the package as a reminder to why she was there.

Sergei took the item, tossing it effortlessly behind him on his chair, reaching for her outstretched arm with the other hand.

Aman gasped at the fluidity with which he guided her into his arms. She molded against him, fitting perfectly to his muscled frame. "What do you think you're doing?" she asked breathlessly at the close contact.

"Reminding you," he said before capturing her mouth in a kiss that demanded her complete surrender. For several seconds she pushed against his solid chest before giving in completely to his forceful mouth and questing tongue. She sighed into him, relaxing in his hold. He nipped at her bottom lip, trailing kisses down her neck.

Something completely primal coursed through Sergei's body at her compliant response. He wanted more, had to have more, would have all of her. One hand slid down soft rounded hips, inching to the firm flesh of her *derrière*. He kneaded her backside while pushing her up into his ever-hardening cock, gently undulating his hips until she moaned in pleasure.

Her response was like music to his ears because he knew without a shadow of a doubt she wanted him just as badly. "Mine," he murmured against her creamy flesh. "All mine."

Aman scarcely had a chance to register his possessive words before he lifted her completely in his arms, leaving her no choice but to wrap her long legs around his waist. He carried her the short distance to his large desk. "Sergei," she uttered, not certain if it were a protest or encouragement.

"Yes, *RA*dost' moyA. I want to hear you call my name, scream it to the heavens so all will know to whom you belong." His voice was low, sounding rough to her ears.

Like a man possessed, he shoved all obstacles from behind her, laying her onto the newly cleared space. Aman stared mesmerized at the transformation in his eyes. The emerald coloring had given way to a green so dark they appeared black. Those eyes fixed her with an immobilizing intensity. So caught up was she that she didn't notice Sergei expertly undoing the buttons of her blouse until it was too late.

It took effort to tear his gaze away from hers, but he had to in order to confirm what he already knew deep down to be true. The winged birthmark blazed at him like a beacon of light, and his heart soared at the thought of fully claiming the woman he already considered his.

His gaze traveled down to feast on her large, rounded breasts, clad in black lace. Annoyed by the fabric's concealment, he lengthened an index nail, slicing through the offending material. Her brown globes sprang free for his enjoyment.

She was perfection, more than he could have hoped for in a woman, and she was all his. Never before had he felt such a strong need to protect and possess. His days would be spent on ways to please her and his nights on wringing orgasms from her sweet body.

"Beautiful," he murmured, drinking in every inch of her body.

Aman felt as if she were witnessing her own downfall at the almost predatory way he watched her. Her heart pounded in anticipation of his mouth on her already taut nipples. A voice somewhere in the deep recesses of her mind warned her to fear this dominant man who looked ready to devour her body and soul.

He smiled at her seductively, showing perfectly white teeth and fangs.

No, that couldn't be... she blinked her eyes to clear the image, certain they were playing a trick on her. Optical illusion or reality, there was no time to confirm before Sergei took one turgid nipple between his lips.

"Ahhh," she gasped, arching her back at the initial contact. His mouth was wonderfully warm as his tongue teased the erect nub. He massaged the other nipple between his forefinger and thumb, tweaking the flesh. Her moans grew louder.

"Mine," he said around one areola. "Say it," he coaxed while her head rolled on his dark desk.

His attention shifted to the unmoistened flesh of her other breast, latching on to the aroused nipple. He sucked the nub in and out of his mouth until she squirmed beneath him.

"Oh, yes." It had been a long while since she'd been this intimate with a man. A long time since she'd had an orgasm without the aid of her imaginary gargoyle lover who'd visited her in her dreams for longer than she could remember. No man had ever come close until now.

"You will accept me," he rasped against her breast.

Aman thought she would die at the double pleasure she experienced when he pushed her breasts together, allowing him access to both nubbins at one time. His tongue laved her nipples until she dug her hands into his thick hair, loosening the silky fibers from their banding.

"Say it," he growled, the vibration from his words coursing through her sensitive flesh.

Oh, God, yes! her mind and body screamed, although her mouth couldn't form the words.

The tension built, coiling through her body. Her wet pussy throbbed in anticipation of what was to come. She tried holding on to the mounting pressure, to savor the incredible sensations, but his glorious sucking was too much. He tugged both peaks simultaneously, adding the pressure of his teeth, biting gently.

"Oohh," she yelled her climax, undulating her mons into his rock hard abs. Her hot, wet pussy contracted rhythmically on itself.

The sound of her orgasm and feel of her warm core pressing firmly into his body made him want to bury his cock in her. He unsnapped the opening of her shorts with one hand, eager to feel the moist evidence of her climax.

Sergei scarcely had time to register the opening of his office door before --

"Is everything... excuse me, sir," the middle-aged receptionist proclaimed at the intimate sight.

"Leave!" Sergei bellowed over his shoulder, causing the woman to snap into motion.

The thud from the slamming door was enough to pull Aman out of her own post-climactic haze. "Oh, no," she groaned, turning her head to one side, staring out at

the view offered by their altitude. She pushed at his chest with all the force her weak limbs could muster. It was useless.

"Please let me up." She hated to beg, but needed to be as far away from this man as possible. For a moment she thought her plea would be ignored. After several seconds, he finally pushed himself up to stand between her parted thighs.

Aman covered her exposed skin with the flaps of her shirt, fumbling to refasten buttons on her blouse after realizing the bra was ruined. She would discard it later, she thought, when she was a safe distance from him.

Safe? The word rattled in her brain. She would never feel safe as long as he was around.

Sergei wanted to tear away the offending garment obscuring his view of her breasts. She was his mate. No Fledgling would respond to a Protector who wasn't her true mate the way she responded to him. He knew her mark throbbed for him, saw how she touched it in his presence. Yes, this Fledgling belonged to him, was made for him alone.

"I... I have to get back to work."

"The only thing you *have* to do is remain with me."

"Look, what just happened shouldn't have and won't again, so don't think you're getting anything else from me."

"That's where you're wrong, *RAdest' moyA*. I plan on getting everything your voluptuous body has to offer and more. You belong with me."

A shudder ran through her body at his declaration. Her mind raced with thoughts of what he would do, what she had already allowed him to do to her. Hell, if his secretary hadn't interrupted she would be filled with his cock at this very moment. Their close proximity made evidence of his arousal hard to ignore, and she knew she wasn't out of danger yet.

"Please, I have to go. I really need this job," she admitted truthfully. If her boss knew how she'd just spent company time she would be cleaning out her locker by the end of the day.

"Kiss me." It didn't sound like a request.

"What?"

"Kiss me and you may go."

Ready to end the humiliation at responding so eagerly to him, she closed the slight gap separating them, noting the soft fullness of his mouth. She meant it to be a brief kiss, but she held her breath, knowing he had the power to press for so much more.

"I'll accept that as a down payment," he said, pulling away gradually.

Aman fixed her gaze on a building in the distance while she busily righted herself, tempted to ask if there was a back exit. She'd brave the forty-flight trek down the stairs to avoid the knowing look she was certain to get from his secretary. Normally, she wouldn't care about others' opinion of her, but being caught on the office table of a man she didn't know was not a common occurrence, at least not for her.

"I'll walk you out."

"No." Her head whipped around. Making direct eye contact was probably not the safest move if she wanted to leave with some pride still intact, but she did. Once-emerald eyes had transformed to an almost obsidian hue, and Aman felt like an animal trapped by a hungry predator. "I can walk myself out," she managed, caught in his steady gaze, afraid a sudden movement on her part would unleash something dangerous.

She smoothed her now buttoned uniform shirt over her body, waiting with bated breath for his response.

"You may go, for now." He took several retreating steps, the natural emerald color of his eyes returning.

Aman resisted the urge to thank him for her freedom as she hurried from his office without a backwards glance. She didn't need to turn around to know his heated gaze followed her out the doors. She whisked past the secretary's desk, careful to keep her back straight and head held high, ensuring her last impression would not be one of shame.

Safely in the confines of her truck again, Aman sagged against the sticky vinyl seat, taking several deep, calming breaths. What the hell was going on with her? What was it about him that made her lose all resolve? No other man had impacted her that way. She paused in her train of thought, remembering the fangs he hadn't tried to conceal. The man had fangs! She'd seen enough vampire films to recognize the long pointy canines. And what about the way his eyes changed colors? There was nothing normal about him, and yet he seemed familiar somehow. She wasn't one to normally go in for that paranormal, aliens amongst us crap, but what she'd just experienced couldn't be explained away as an optical illusion. Hell, she could still feel the graze marks of his incisors on her breasts.

Chapter Four

"Okay, Lucy, you got lots of s'plaining to do." Sam leaned against a nearby locker, arms crossed, while Aman changed into her street clothes.

"What are you talking about?" Aman didn't try to feign interest in her friend's latest tirade as she laced her shoes. Her day had gone from bizarre to chaotic. The dalliance with Sergei had caused her to be beyond late on all of her deliveries, which every client made sure to point out. To make matters worse a major traffic accident added an additional hour delay, which had "the chauvinist" bugging her on two-way all day. Not to mention the near twenty minute reaming she'd gotten from him at the end of the day which she was certain would have been worse if he'd been able to take his eyes off her braless breasts that seemed to stand at full attention since her earlier encounter with Sergei.

"Do you know how many carriers would kill to have your route?" he'd said to her.

She did. For the past seven years, she'd heard her co-workers with less seniority bellyaching over the neighborhoods they were forced to go into. Aman remembered those routes well. She'd only been granted the coveted position after a more senior carrier retired.

"You're right, Mr. Williams. I think you should give it to someone else."

"What?" He stood, mouth agape.

"I've been thinking about it for a while now. I believe Carlos was interested in trading with me."

"And you're willing to just give it up to him?" He made it sound as if she were going to have sex with the man.

"Sure, if he still wants it. I'll have the request for a change on your desk tonight."

He'd stared at her as if she'd grown an extra eye.

"Now, if we're done here, I've had a really long day."

And she'd walked out of the office.

"You traded your route with Carlos?" Sam ranted in between sniffing bouts. "You know how long I've been wanting a route like that," she pouted.

"Trust me, I did you a favor by giving it to Carlos."

"A favor? How can you even say that when you know about my eighty-year-old flasher, or the stay-at-home mom who spends her day buying things on the Home Shopping Network just so she'll have someone to talk with when I deliver her purchases --"

"I know, I know, but nothing compares to why I gave it up. Just trust me."

Her friend's dogged resolve pulled Sam out of her self-absorbed rant. "What happened to you?"

"Nothing worth talking about." Aman slammed her locker shut.

"It's that Russian guy, isn't it?"

"I swear you're clairvoyant." Aman stared at her in disbelief.

"What did he do this time?"

"It's not important. What matters is that I don't have to worry about him anymore." She couldn't wait to get home to finally put her bizarre day behind her.

"Did he cross the line?"

"It doesn't --"

"He did, didn't he? Well, you're not going to stand for this." Her fair skin turned a bright shade of angry red.

"Damn, can we just drop it, please? Just promise me one thing -- you won't put in for that route, too?"

Aman could tell her friend wanted to question her further, but was glad when she elected not to. After several quiet moments, Sam suggested they forgo the gym that evening and grab something to eat instead. Tired and very much ready to closet herself in her tiny apartment, Aman declined the offer. She knew her actions would only

warrant further suspicion but decided to chance it anyway. Maybe one day she could share her experience, but today wasn't it.

Her subway ride home was made in deep thought. It wasn't until the conductor announced her stop that she realized she'd been fixated on her thoughts while staring blankly out the window at the passing scenery. She remained distracted through her short walk home from the subway station. Today, she didn't notice the catcalls of the teenagers standing on the corner, or the sincere smiles from the elderly gentlemen who continued their daily battle of chess on the stoop next to her own.

The moment her front door closed she began the process of pulling off clothes, dropping the articles in her wake. She made her way to the bathroom, her thoughts still occupied by the events of the day. The shower came to life in a stinging rush of frigid water, but Aman didn't mind the cold pelts on her warm skin since it helped to further clear her mind.

She waited until the water warmed before lathering herself with the fragrant shower gel. Her tender breasts ached as she bathed them gently. She remembered how Sergei had brought her to an exquisite orgasm from the mere touch of his mouth and tongue. The recollection of how she lay writhing on the desk beneath him started a sensuous humming in her body. The slow throb between her thighs intensified as the memory washed over her. He'd regarded her with those peculiar green eyes that darkened to onyx as she watched. She still thought it was inhuman.

"Get a grip, girlfriend," she mumbled softly before exiting the shower to towel off. There were a million and one things for her to do around her tiny apartment, the least of which included indulging an overactive imagination. Instead she busied herself with several projects until a surprising dent had been made in the items on her to do list. Feeling partly like herself again, Aman decided the best thing for her would be to put the day behind her and pretend it had never happened. After all, it wasn't like she'd be seeing Sergei again. She'd made certain of that by giving up her precious route.

* * *

Sergei checked his watch for the millionth time in what he learned was only fifty-two seconds. Where was she, he wondered from his vantage point in the lush interior of his SUV. He peered over his shoulder and down the street to see if he could make out her form in the early evening light. He'd found her address easily enough, on the Internet no less, and gritted his teeth at how accessible she was to the public. When she hadn't shown up to deliver his package that morning he shouldn't have been surprised, but seeing the Latin man enter the room instead of Aman put him in an immediate sour mood.

Although normally an even-tempered sort, Sergei didn't bother to hide his displeasure. Impatiently, he questioned the flustered carrier until the man looked ready to bolt. He'd left in such a rush that he dropped the parcel on his way out. When Sergei contacted her employer, he found the man on the other end to be less than forthcoming with information as to Aman's whereabouts. Now he sat outside her apartment, edgily waiting for her to arrive.

His need to be with her was overpowering. Like nothing he'd ever felt in his life. He wondered if all Protectors felt this way about their mates. His cock hardened at the very idea of seeing her again. He committed everything about her to memory, from her long legs that he couldn't wait to have wrapped around his waist as he plunged deeply inside her, to the minuscule dimple in her left cheek that made its presence known when she bit her bottom lip nervously.

He'd lain awake all night replaying the events in his office over in his mind. She was so responsive to his touch, and her pleasure was an aphrodisiac. His cock throbbed at the thought of having her completely, milking every drop of pleasure from her compliant body. The need to be inside her overshadowed the logic of what he knew must eventually come. He could not risk making the same mistake his friend, Lorn, had made with his Fledgling. No, he would be up front and honest about everything, taking the steps to explain away any doubts or fears she would surely have.

Sergei's first sight of her walking up the sidewalk had his incisors threatening to burst forward -- the desire to bind her to him radiated through his entire being. His

hands tightened on the steering column as he watched a group of young men leer at her passing form. The industrial-strength plastic and steel crushed underneath the weight of his grip, but he barely noticed. He lunged from the vehicle when one of the bold young men reached out to grab her wrist. Sergei heard the sweetly veiled threat she gave to her would-be captor. The man's immediate release of her arm had Sergei's gait swallowing the pavement at a more leisurely pace.

He noticed the moment she spotted him. They were only a half block apart, and everything seemed to move in slow motion. The smile slipped from her lips, and her dark skin visibly paled at the sight of him -- not quite the response he wanted from his mate.

For a moment Sergei thought she would turn and run in the opposite direction. Instead she paused, visibly squaring her shoulders, and continued toward him with purposeful strides. He stopped to wait for her, taking precious moments to get his racing heart under control. The look on her face told him she wasn't pleased by his presence, yet he could feel the nervous energy and underlying sexual tension flowing through her.

Aman didn't want to believe her eyes. Although a part of her had known she would see him again she hadn't expected it to be so soon. She silently cursed herself for being so distracted by the young man on the corner. If she'd been more focused she would've noticed the dark Bentley sitting in front of her apartment. Hell, the car stood out like a beacon in her blue-collar neighborhood. She touched the spot just below her clavicle that throbbed almost painfully with every step while her gaze locked with the arrogant man who stood in her path.

God, it wasn't right for one man to look so damned good. He stood dressed in dark business slacks with a smoke-colored button up shirt. He'd undone the first two buttons of his shirt and rolled the sleeves to just below his forearms.

She noticed everything about him in one quick assessment before coming back to those arrestingly peculiar eyes. She'd never seen anything like them.

Her eyes dropped to his mouth, filling her mind with scenes of them on his desk when he'd brought her to earth shattering orgasm. She shook off the memory, reminding herself to stay in the moment and get as far away from him as possible. The look he wore was all too familiar and she knew dismissing him wouldn't be as simple as she wished. She stopped a good three feet away from him, just out of his reach, certain she could make a quick escape should he decide to become all grabby.

"Let's go upstairs." No greeting or explanation of what he was doing at her apartment. His command, albeit gentle, held the authority of a man who expected her to easily comply.

"I don't think so. What are you doing here?"

He stared at her for several seconds as if silently communicating with her. The throbbing on her chest eased until it was a dull ache. "I came for you." Although he hadn't moved she took an additional step back. "...to talk," he added, a gentle smile spreading across his lips.

She wasn't fooled. *Don't you dare*, she warned herself. *There is definitely something not right about this man... if he even is a man.* "I don't see what we could possibly have to talk about, but if you have something to say here is as good a place as anywhere."

"I won't hurt you, Aman. You don't need to be afraid of me."

"Thanks for the bit of reassurance, but nonetheless I'd prefer to talk out in the open."

His smile only seemed to brighten. "I think it's yourself you're afraid of when we're alone together."

"Of course you would. You're a man, after all." A handsome man, she reminded herself needlessly. "I'm sure you believe every woman in a half-mile radius finds you completely irresistible."

"The only woman I'm concerned with is you, *RAdost' moyA.*"

Aman had heard the expression enough to know it was an endearment, although she wasn't certain of its meaning. "That's too bad for you, because I have no desire for you or any other man to take an interest in me."

Amusement spread across his face. "I hope you don't believe you can convince me you are gay."

Oh, brother. "Whether I am or not is none of your business."

"Unfortunately, I must contradict you on that point. You see, everything about you is my business." He hadn't moved, but Aman could have sworn she felt fingers tenderly stroke her jaw line, trace the curve of her neck, slide down to the swell of one breast. She gasped aloud in disbelief, electric desire flooding through her body.

"The way you respond to me is intoxicating."

Her mind was playing tricks on her -- he couldn't possibly be touching her. The imaginary hand on her breast tweaked her nipple, causing Aman to jump back as if burned. "I'm done talking with you," she said in as firm a voice as she could muster. What the hell was going on?

"I believe we should have this discussion in a more private location." The invisible pressure on her breasts suddenly stopped as he spoke.

"I don't know how things are done where you're from, but in America when a woman says she's not interested, you should listen."

"So you're telling me you have no interest in me." The smile on his face vanished.

She wanted to lie, to let him know once and for all that his attraction was one-sided, but the words stuck in her throat, refusing to surface. Why? Why did she suddenly feel like a heel? After all, she didn't know him from Adam. Not to mention there was just something about him she couldn't quite put her finger on. Whenever he was around her body began to experience strange sensations, things that went beyond normal attraction.

"I'm sure I don't need to tell you you're a fairly handsome guy, but the big brooding muscular type just doesn't do anything for me." Was that the best she could come up with? Who the hell did she think she was kidding? The man standing before her was every heterosexual woman's dream come true.

"So you think I'm handsome?" The smile that broke across his face was brighter than that of a child who'd just received heavy praise.

She rolled her eyes. He was obviously being obtuse on purpose. "Look, Mr. Romanov --"

"Do you really think we need to be so formal?"

"The bottom line is, I'm not interested." She'd stopped just short of saying "in you," but the implication was there and should suffice.

"It looks as if your neighbors are taking a particular interest in our conversation," he said, although she was uncertain how he knew since his eyes never left hers.

Aman hazarded a look around and noticed several curious stares from neighbors across the street. Even old lady Jenkins stood with her window curtains open, obviously watching their exchange.

"Perhaps you should go then," Aman said in a firm tone.

"I will, after I've had a chance to speak with you." The smile on his face belied the seriousness in his tone. "Do you honestly think I would do something harmful to you with so many witnesses around?"

Was that supposed to put her mind at ease? "All right, you can come up and say your piece, but after that leave me alone."

"After you." He stepped aside to allow her to precede him.

Aman hesitated. She noticed he hadn't agreed to her condition, but hoped once he had his say he would leave her be. Sergei followed silently behind her as she walked up the flight of stairs that would take them to her efficiency apartment. She didn't need to turn around to know his eyes followed her every movement. She could feel his stare on the sway of her hips. He was far too close, closer than necessary, and she silently gave thanks that their journey would be a short one.

"Well, we're here," she began before the door was even closed, wanting him to get on with it. Her tiny apartment felt even smaller with his enormous presence seeming to take all the space. Normally, she liked the fact that her place was small

enough to give her full view of everything. But with Sergei's questing eyes analyzing every bit of her décor, Aman felt completely exposed.

His eyes went over her full-sized bed in one corner of the room, partially hidden by a partition. He didn't hide his frown. She didn't care whether he liked her place or not -- it was clean and served her purposes.

She did a quick sweep of the tiny enclosure. In one corner was her tiny kitchen, with a small stove, refrigerator and just enough counter space to hold a microwave and her dish rack. Typically when company was present she would unfold another partition to close off the kitchen area. But she hadn't expected to have a visitor that day. Her small kitchen table doubled as an eating area and desk housing her computer and printer. Her actual living space consisted of a small love seat, leather chair, and her one indulgence -- a 32-inch flat screen television, where she spent many hours watching DVDs of old movies like *Mahogany*, *Claudine*, and anything Jerry Lewis ever starred in. There were only two doors in her apartment. One led to a closet that was surprisingly large for her space and the other to a small bathroom.

"You have a lovely place." Sergei offered the compliment although Aman was certain he was merely being polite. Someone like him could probably never imagine living this way.

"I'm sure it's not as glamorous as anything you have but it's my home. So are you going to tell me what you came here for?" She didn't see any reason for false pleasantries. He was an unwelcome guest in her home and would be treated as such.

"I wanted to discuss what transpired between us in my office yesterday," he continued after the shock of seeing her pint-sized apartment faded. No one, especially not his mate, should live in such cramped conditions, he thought.

"Look, if you came to apologize there's no need, and if you're worried that I'll seek legal action for sexual harassment you can put your mind at ease."

Sergei held back a chuckle as her words sank in. Did she really think he was remorseful? His only regret of that day was over the interruption that had prevented him from fully enjoying her lush body and binding her to him.

"Although I never meant to cause you embarrassment, I will not apologize for what happened."

The surprise on her face was obvious, yet she remained quiet while waiting for him to continue.

Sergei felt suddenly nervous. He wanted to make sure everything was done right from now on. He resisted the urge to carry her the short distance to her bed and bury himself in her body, although he gave one last lingering look at the obscured bed in a corner. The thing looked as if it would barely be able to hold his frame normally -- there was no way it could stand up to the pressure of him riding in between her sumptuous thighs.

Stay focused, he tried to remind himself even as his budding erection pressed persistently against the front of his slacks. "I came to ask you out to dinner."

She stared blankly back at him as if he hadn't spoken. "What did you say?"

"I was hoping you're free tomorrow night for dinner."

"You can't be serious."

Sergei didn't think he'd ever been more serious about anything before in his life. She was his Fledgling, his mate. He would do whatever it took to have her belong to him fully. An internal war waged within his body. The gargoyle in him wanted to claim her as his own, to whisk her away from the cramped one-room apartment she lived in. Yet the man in him knew the importance of winning her heart and mind. He mentally shook off his baser urges, knowing that this was the best way, at least for now.

"I'm sorry you wasted your time, driving all this way --"

"There's something you should consider before you say no," he interrupted with his mild mannered tone. "I'm a very persistent man."

"Are you trying to tell me that if I say no, you're going to keep this up?" At his casual shrug she rolled her eyes heavenward. *God give me strength*. "You know there are laws against this sort of thing."

"I'm sure there are."

He didn't even have the decency to look worried, just continued to stare at her with those piercing green eyes. With her luck he probably had diplomatic immunity, and was used to getting away with whatever he wanted. She believed him when he mentioned his persistence, could see the determination etched in his face.

Why her? There had to be plenty of women who were ready, willing and eager to have him show interest in them. She wasn't glamorous, rich or even from his social circle. "And if I agree to this date?"

"Then I promise to show you the time of your life," he responded with a natural air of confidence.

"And will you leave me alone once this is over?"

"You're so certain that you won't enjoy our time together?"

She wasn't sure if she could be certain of anything where he was concerned. If someone had asked her a week ago if she believed a sexy six foot five inch stranger would make love to her on his desk she would've said with certainty, hell, no. So how could she be positive of anything now?

"What I do know is that I don't need any complications in my life. I'm happy with the way things are, and I won't let anything or anyone upset that."

Sergei nodded his understanding, yet she duly noted that he remained quiet. She could have forced the issue but knew it would be pointless. For whatever reason, this man was bound and determined to insinuate himself into her life. She would just have to make damn sure that he realized it was the worst decision he'd ever made.

* * *

Aman let out a sigh of relief when, some ten minutes later, Sergei let himself out of her apartment. For several moments, when he was there, she was sure he would make some sort of advance, saw the attraction in his eyes when he looked at her. She'd tensed when his gaze kept falling to her bed. Yet he'd maintained the distance she placed between them. Was he trying to lull her into some false sense of security where he was concerned? She worried her bottom lip nervously as she fell onto her plush love seat. She realized she wasn't immune to him, had found herself hoping he would treat

her to another of his intoxicating kisses. As much as she wanted his touch, she didn't like the fact that he seemed to have a magnetism that practically beckoned her to him. Her thoughts fell again to the idea she'd toyed with yesterday. Perhaps his pull over her wasn't normal. Was it possible there was more to him than what she could see on the surface? She dismissed the thought again. There was no point in filling her mind with improbable notions. The reality of the matter was that in two days' time she had a date with Sergei Romanov, and she needed that time to formulate a plan to get him permanently out of her life.

Chapter Five

It was like pulling teeth to get Sergei to agree to meet her at the restaurant, although he did insist upon having a car pick her up, arguing that a woman should not ride the subway at night. The custom limousine came for her promptly at six-thirty that evening, and she half expected to see Sergei's large frame unfold from its back seat as she peered out her apartment window.

The restaurant Sergei selected was exactly what Aman had pictured in her mind -- upscale and very intimate. The waiter led them to a secluded table that she was certain was meant to ensure their privacy went undisturbed.

"Well, I'll say one thing for this guy. He sure pulls out all the stops when trying to impress a lady," Sam said as she slid into one of the two seats.

Aman nodded her agreement. She'd come up with the idea of having Sam chaperon the date as a deterrent to any intimate plans Sergei might have in store. The day before, she'd discussed her dilemma with her friend as they made their trek to the gym for their ritual workout.

"You know, you're the only heterosexual woman I know who would bring another female to have dinner with her and a sexy, wealthy bachelor."

"I don't think I mentioned anything about him being sexy," Aman commented.

"You didn't have to. Just the way you're acting lets me know something about him is definitely fierce. And I know you -- if he were the average Joe Blow you'd have scared him off with one look, am I wrong?"

Aman sighed. "No, I just don't understand why he can't take no for an answer."

"It's all in the delivery." Sam giggled. "I can't believe I'm explaining this to you of all people. So we're going to proceed with operation cold shoulder?"

"Sure are. By the time this dinner is over, Sergei Romanov will regret the day we met."

"So you say. I personally can't wait to meet this man who has you in such a tizzy."

"Don't worry. You're about to get your chance." Aman looked just beyond her friend's shoulder to the overwhelming man being escorted to their table.

"Damn, I knew I should have taken the other seat." Sam started to turn to get a look at their benefactor, but Aman motioned for her to sit still.

As much as she wanted to, Aman couldn't take her eyes off Sergei's approaching form. She wasn't the only one drawn to the raw power and sex appeal he exuded. Several of the restaurant's patrons paused in conversation as they spotted him. He seemed oblivious of anyone else in the dining establishment as his gaze zeroed in on her. Aman's heart rate quickened with every step he took. If it wasn't for Sam's loud gasp, followed by her gentle sniffing, Aman was certain she would've been completely lost in his eyes.

"What's wrong?" She looked to her friend, who was most assuredly having a sniffing fit. "Is it your allergies again?"

"What? Oh yeah... my allergies."

"Do you need anything?"

"No, I'll be fine."

"Good evening, ladies," Sergei greeted when he finally stopped in front of their table.

Again, Aman found herself trapped in his penetrating stare, nearly forgetting her friend's earlier discomfort. She thought she was prepared for the up close and personal view of Sergei again but was proven wrong by the somersaults in the depths of her stomach.

"I see you've brought a chaperon along for the evening." He addressed Aman, signaling for their waiter to bring another place setting and chair.

"Yes. I mean, I forgot Sam and I had previous plans for dinner. I didn't think you'd mind." Aman recovered from the initial shock of seeing him again. *Damn, you would think this was my first time seeing the man*, she thought.

"Not at all," came his smooth reply.

"Sam, this is --"

"Sergei Romanov," her friend filled in, to her surprise, twisting in her chair for a better view of their new arrival.

"You two know each other?" Aman looked between the pair.

"More like I know of Mr. Romanov," Sam provided in a tone Aman couldn't quite place. Wonderment? "I'm very familiar with his philanthropic work."

"Oh." Aman looked to Sergei for further explanation as he took a seat.

"Yes, I guess you could say that Mr. Romanov is a humanitarian, a champion of all human causes, if you will."

When she looked to Sergei he merely nodded. Great! Rich, gorgeous and charitable. This man had to have a flaw somewhere.

"I knew that there were those of you doing this... type of work in the general region but didn't know New York was a home base."

"Anonymity serves its purposes."

"Of course," Sam said, becoming suddenly distracted by her menu.

For several seconds Aman set expectantly hoping for more information that would give her insight into this man. The waiter's reappearance interrupted the pregnant silence. Sergei was not turning out to be what she'd expected at all. Underneath that very persistent, sexy exterior was a man who apparently used his wealth to help others in need. She found herself glancing at him several times as he ordered his meal. She wondered if he actually got down in the trenches in his volunteering or if he were a checkbook supporter. Although she couldn't see him dishing out food at a soup kitchen line, she was certain he was the hands-on type.

Her eyes dropped to those hands as he gave the waiter his menu. They were large and strong, with fingers that looked as if they were used to doing more than just pushing paper.

"Are you okay?" The increasingly familiar baritone voice whispered the words.

"Yes," she answered abruptly, hurriedly averting her eyes to her friend, who stared at them across the table wide-eyed. What the hell was wrong with her? Okay, granted Sergei was probably the most attractive man either had seen in months, maybe years -- all right, ever -- but that was no reason for Sam to go all meek, not when she was normally little miss chatter box.

"My God!" Sam exclaimed quietly, as her eyes darted between the pair.

"What is it?" Aman wanted to know. Did she have something on her face? She was temporarily distracted by the brush of Sergei's arm as he adjusted himself in his seat.

"How long have you two known each other?" Sergei began.

"Just about five years," Aman answered when it was evident Sam had lost her ability to speak. "We actually met at work."

"So you're a carrier, too?" Sergei directed to their still-silent dinner companion.

Sam responded with a brief nod of her head.

Aman sent her friend a look that silently begged for her to snap out of it.

"Do you date often?" This finally coming from Sam, and directed at Sergei.

"Not in a long while."

Aman considered his answer. Was a long while a few days? A few weeks? A few months? There was no way in hell this man had gone without dating for more than a month, let alone several. She tried picturing the type of women he probably went out with on a regular basis. Images of tall leggy blondes with anorexic figures came instantly to the forefront. Maybe even fair-skinned black women with long relaxed hair and willowy frames -- certainly not women like her.

"I guess that makes two of you, since Aman doesn't date much either," Sam provided.

Aman noted Sam's unusually reflective mood with a bit of irritation. She was supposed to be running interference, not fixating on whatever sudden thought had entered her mind. Some cock blocker she was turning out to be. And what about Sergei? Hell, as much as she tried to dislike the man, she couldn't find fault with him. Dare she say it -- he seemed perfect, well, except for his inability to keep his body parts to himself. She could have sworn he was brushing up against her intentionally, probably could have ignored it if her damned heart didn't start to flutter with every contact.

At that very moment his thigh was pressed firmly against hers, leaving her with few options since she'd already repositioned herself a dozen times in an effort to give his bulky frame more room.

"If you'll excuse me for a moment," Aman blurted out when the combination of her now racing pulse and the butterflies somersaulting in her belly seemed unbearable. At least the throbbing above her chest had slowed somewhat, no longer keeping pace with her out of control pulse.

"Of course." Sergei unfolded his tall length as she rose.

"I think I'll join you." Sam bolted up. Aman didn't miss the brief eye exchange between the two before they left the table.

"Okay, what the hell is going on out there?" she started in on her friend as soon as they entered the empty lady's room.

"You won't believe me if I told you," Sam answered as she pressed her forehead against the wall before muttering something under her breath Aman couldn't make out.

"Try me."

Sam turned to look Aman squarely in the eyes. "How does he make you feel?"

The sudden question took her aback, and she stared back unblinkingly for several mute seconds. "You mean besides irritated?"

"I'm serious, Aman."

"So am I. I swear that man is relentless to the point of annoying."

"Then you *are* attracted to him."

She opened her mouth to deny the assessment but found the lie stuck in her throat.

Sam swore aloud. "That's what I was afraid of. Tell me -- does your body react oddly to him in any way?"

"What do you mean by oddly? He's an attractive man -- hell, every woman in the room was practically swooning over him."

Sam crossed her arms over her chest, looking every bit the miniature tyrant.

"All right, I'll admit I'm attracted to the man. I'd have to be dead not to have some sort of physical reaction to him."

"Go on," came the expectant whisper.

"You're like a dog with a bone tonight, Sam."

"So humor me. What are your symptoms?"

"You make it sound like an illness." She paused before launching into her response. "I can't believe I'm saying this... I feel like a schoolgirl, I guess. My palms get sweaty. My heart feels like a speeding train, if that makes any sense, and as funny as this sounds I get an ache -- no, more like a throbbing whenever he's around."

"When you say throbbing --"

"It's not what you're thinking. Okay, well, maybe I do start throbbing there, too, but what I'm talking about is above my waist."

"Show me."

Aman shook her head at her friend's odd questioning. Sure, Sam had always been a little quirky -- eccentric, even, with her off the cuff comments -- but she'd grown quite accustomed to it. At least she thought she had. Wordlessly Aman indicated the spot just above her breastbone, gasping when Sam stepped close to pull the modest neckline aside to reveal the small, wing-shaped birthmark.

The door swung open at that moment, admitting one very prudish-looking woman who appeared to be in her late fifties. She paused momentarily before huffing off to one of the stalls, muttering under her breath. Aman made out the word "deplorable" before the woman was closeted in her booth.

"What are you doing?" she hissed at her friend, dislodging the finger hooked in the neck of her dress.

"Your birthmark. The sensation comes from there?"

Aman shrugged as she readjusted her dress. "I guess so. Why?"

"Has he seen it?"

Heat surged through her body as she thought about everything Sergei had seen and done the day she lay underneath him in his office.

"Maybe. Why?"

"We gotta get out of here," she whispered.

"What about Sergei? We can't just leave."

"We have to. It's now or never. He'll know soon that I've cast a distortion spell."

"You did what?" She stared back at her friend as if seeing her sprout horns. "You're not making any sense."

"I'll explain later." She paused as the stall opened and Ms. Prude exited, not giving either woman a sideways glance as she left the restroom without washing her hands. Talk about deplorable.

"We have to go now, Aman. Trust me. I'll explain it to you later. I promise."

Aman felt as if she were skipping out on a bill as they made their way from the bathroom and past signs clearly marked employees only. She was certain the highbrow maitre d' would come screeching after them as they slipped into the kitchen, maneuvering by a bustling kitchen staff. To her amazement not one person gave them even so much as a curious glance as they went about preparing minuscule portions of prettily arranged food.

The unusually warm night air enveloped them as they rushed through the exit.

"Okay, do you wanna tell me now why we just left like two bandits?"

"Not now." Sam reached for her wrist. Aman stumbled from the force of her friend's tug but followed the woman's lead onto the busy New York street. With the expertise of a native, the smaller woman waved down a passing taxi, practically diving

into the back seat. Sam rattled off her address to the caramel-skinned driver, who gave them a curious look before pulling away from the curb.

"All right, Butch Cassidy, what the hell is going on?"

Sam muttered something unintelligible as she waved her hands in the driver's direction. Instead of the curious looks Aman expected from the man, he continued to stare out the front window, his once relaxed posture now completely erect as he ignored his passengers.

"I'm surprised the spell worked on him," Sam mumbled.

"Okay, Sammy, you're weirding me out on so many levels over here. What spell?"

"The one I used at the restaurant. I wasn't sure it was strong enough to work on Protectors."

"Protectors? Do you want to enlighten me now since I don't have the foggiest idea what you're talking about?"

Sam began slowly, as if to give her a chance to digest each word. "Protectors are one of the ancient beings that maintain the balance of things on the planet. Most people refer to them as gargoyles."

"Gargoyles," Aman repeated. At her companion's nod she continued, "Why do I get the distinct feeling that you're not joking?"

"Because I'm not. This may be hard for you to fathom, but there are many other sentient life forms co-existing on this planet with humans."

The image of creepy crawly creatures slithering about taking human hosts came immediately to mind, causing a chill to run down her spine. The picture dissolved slowly to be replaced by a flash of Sergei's overwhelming physique. Nothing creepy or wormy about him, that was for sure. But she'd said gargoyle. Was that a species distinction or did he really sprout wings out of those broad shoulders? What was she thinking? Sam was obviously pulling her leg. Other creatures, her ass. She was a sane, completely grounded woman who knew mythical beasts like gargoyles only existed in

fairy tales and her fantasies. An image of Sergei flashed before her eyes, one of his prominent fangs and black eyes. It couldn't be true.

The fluttering in the deep recesses of her belly illustrated the combination of emotions warring within her. What if this were true? What would it all mean? For years she'd been treated to erotic fantasies of her very own gargoyle lover. His hybrid human-gargoyle form was a source of many a nightly delight. She'd nearly hated rejoining the waking world after being with him. If she were honest with herself, she would admit her lackluster enthusiasm in dating was directly related to the first erotic manifestation of her dream lover. Could there be some link between Sergei and her dreams?

"So my meeting him wasn't accidental? He'd planned the whole thing?"

"I can't really say either way. Maybe it was all a coincidence." She paused. "I'm really just piecing this all together, but I think the gargoyles are behind this whole woman hunt hoopla."

Aman cursed under her breath. "You're kidding me."

"I'm afraid not, and I think that birthmark of yours is much more than that."

Aman's hand shot up to the concealed mark above her breastbone.

"That little thing seems to be an identifier, perhaps a way for gargoyles to recognize potential mates," Sam went on.

"Mates?"

Sam nodded slowly.

"Shit, so because of a frigging birthmark I'm going to have mythological beings following me around like dogs in heat?"

Sam shrugged. "I don't think so, but we can very well find some answers tonight."

"You're telling me there's some quick stop we can go to bone up on these things?"

"Yup. Unfortunately, I'm not too well-versed in gargoyle history."

"So where are we going?"

"To the best source -- my parents."

"Do I want to know why your parents would be such experts on the topic?" The thought of her pretty red-haired friend mutating into some man-eating, two-headed griffin creature or worse was unsettling.

Not giving her companion a chance to answer, Aman hurried on. "No, I think the gargoyle thing is all I can handle for now."

Her friend's sudden laughter filled the cab, breaking through the mounting anxiety wreaking havoc on her nervous system.

* * *

"I wasn't expecting you back so soon," Sam's mother greeted them as they made their way into the family room where she sat in the circle of her husband's arms. If it weren't for their neatly arranged clothing, Aman would've had the distinct impression that they'd just interrupted a very intimate moment. Candles burned strategically in the room, and the low hum of an ethereal tune crooned in the background.

"And what an added surprise. We haven't seen you in a while, Aman," Emma Jennings said, rising from her position half on her husband's lap, causing the younger women to avert their eyes from the hugely obvious erection evident in the man's pants.

Lucky woman, Aman thought. She'd guessed the couple to be in their late fifties based solely upon Sam's near thirty years, although neither looked a day over forty. Emma was one of those amazingly beautiful women and Sam had definitely inherited her fiery red hair and petite, buxom frame from her mother. Her father on the other hand was the epitome of virility despite his usually quiet, reserved demeanor.

"Mom and Dad, we need your help," Sam began without preamble.

"Sure. Anything." Emma led them to a small dining table in the adjoining breakfast nook.

"We need to know everything there is to know about gargoyles, and we need to know fast."

"Sam," her parents yelled in unison. From the corner of her eye, Aman saw Dek Jennings bound to his feet as if a fire had been lit beneath him. He really was an intimidating person despite his mild mannered ways.

"It's okay. She already knows about gargoyles -- sort of."

Her mother didn't look convinced. "And why would she possibly know anything about them?"

"Because there is one pursuing her pretty hot and heavy, and we think it has something to do with her birthmark and the ad that was placed in the paper."

The room grew suddenly quiet. Even the once gentle sound of music in the background ceased.

"You carry the mark of the Fledgling?" Aman wasn't sure when Dek had joined them at the table but his unwavering gray eyes bored into her own as if he could find the truth in them.

"What's a fledgling?" she asked no one in particular.

"They are the only known beings able to mate with Protectors and breed."

"Where is this mark?" Aman was certain that it was Emma who spoke although she was too busy turning over the bit of information she'd just gotten to be certain. Without hesitation she pushed the neckline of her dress down enough to grant full view to everyone in the room.

There was a gentle gasp before the silence in the room became deafening again.

"Then it is true. I thought it only just a rumor and wishful thinking on the part of a dying race." Dek was the first to speak.

"Dying? What do you mean?" Aman found herself asking. Certainly they were wrong -- Sergei looked the exact picture of health. Hell, this whole thing couldn't be right. Other sentient beings secretly co-existing with humans, gargoyle protectors, fledglings. At any moment she half expected someone to step from behind a door and shout, "Gotcha!"

"Protectors are one of many species of life walkers whose purpose it is to maintain the balance of species on this planet. They are a very formidable race of

beings, nearly impossible to destroy -- at least they had been until the Fledgling Suicides," Emma volunteered softly. "Only the Protectors truly know what led up to the women's deaths, but what is known is that without them the race is doomed. As I remember it told, Protectors searched for mates the world over but it was all in vain -- that is until last year when it was rumored that a Fledgling had been found and mated with a Protector, somewhere in Europe I believe. I thought it was a hoax until the ad in the paper. My God, a Fledgling in our very own home."

"Are you trying to tell me that I'm some kind of creature Sam mentioned, that I'm not human?" The possibility was mind numbing.

The older couple looked taken aback, each exchanging brief looks with their daughter.

"No, Fledglings are very much humans," Dek answered. "But they possess certain chromosomes that make it possible for you to successfully mate with a Protector once triggered."

"And if I don't want to, what then? Is there some sort of ritual I need to go through to make sure I'm left alone?"

"What the hell is wrong with you youth nowadays!" Dek roared, suddenly appearing to grow in stature. His sudden outburst had all the women jumping. "Have you poisoned her mind, Samantha Celeste Jennings? This is no joking matter. I have granted you your respite in hopes that you would eventually see the importance of your own destiny. Perhaps I have been a fool in so doing, and now look what is happening. You're trying to corrupt your friend from a path where there is only one way to travel."

"Dad... Papa, please, this isn't about me."

As her pulsing heart calmed itself, Aman stared between father and daughter. Was Sam a Fledgling like herself?

"Dek, please. We need to focus on the matter at hand." Emma laid a calming hand on her husband's forearm.

"Not this time, wife. I have allowed my softness for you and our child to overrule the inevitable and look what has happened. I will not stand for much more of this."

"Papa," Sam called as he whirled away from the group of women. Several seconds later they heard the slamming of the front door.

"Don't worry, Sammy. Give him a chance to calm down. The night air will do him good."

"But he seems so angry this time." Her brows furrowed as she looked longingly at her mother.

The older woman nodded her agreement. "Perhaps it is time for you to give your father's words consideration."

Aman was torn between wanting to know more about the conflict in the Jennings family and the niggling feeling in the back of her mind that her window of freedom was growing smaller.

"Tell me," Emma asked. "Where is the Protector who has been courting you?"

"I don't know if courting would be the right word, but he's back at the restaurant, or at least that's where we left him," Aman answered.

"What do you mean where you left him?" Accusing eyes focused back on Sam, who looked every bit the stubborn child.

"I did a small distortion spell I prepared, just in case the guy turned out to be a complete stalker. At the time I didn't know he was a Protector. Although I did prepare for the eventuality of an otherworldly creature."

"You used a distortion spell on a Protector." Emma sank into her chair. "What in God's name would possess you to do that?"

Sam shrugged her shoulders. "I thought Aman should know everything before it was too late for her to turn back."

"I'm afraid that choice may not be up to her."

"Hello, I'm still here." Aman didn't like the direction the conversation was heading.

"I'm sorry, my dear. I wasn't trying to be rude. It's just that it looks as if Sammy acted before thinking in this matter."

"I don't know. I think she did the best thing under the circumstances. My only concern now is how to get Sergei out of my life. For some reason, I doubt this distortion spell thing will have a lasting effect."

"You're right. If anything, it will serve to annoy him once it wears off. I wouldn't be surprised if he were on his way here at this very moment."

Aman cursed under her breath. *Great. Just frigging great.* "Can I use your phone to call a cab?"

"Of course, but it will do you no use to run since gargoyles are great hunters. Some of the best, in fact."

"Surely you can do something to help her, Mom. Maybe there's a spell or an incantation -- something."

"Perhaps, but it would be foolhardy for me to interfere."

Aman nodded her understanding. She couldn't expect other people -- or whatever the hell they were -- to get mixed up in her problem. It was enough that they'd given her some information about what she was up against. Only, their story seemed to leave her with more questions than answers, like, why had the Fledglings committed suicide in the first place? These men/creatures couldn't be too noble in character if they were responsible for a mass suicide of women.

"About that phone," Aman reminded no one in particular.

"I think it's too late for that now," Emma said softly as she stared past the sliding glass doors that led to their patio. Outside, the night sky loomed ominously.

Chapter Six

Aman shifted in her seat, barely catching a glimpse of a large form in the starry night before the figure landed on the lawn. There was no mistaking who those broad shoulders belonged to. Every step the shape took toward the glass door brought him more into focus. Aman gasped at the wide expanse of wings that began to recede into non-existence. The glass door slid open seemingly of its own volition, and Aman bit back her startled cry at her first glimpse of Sergei in mid-transformation. He reminded her of her dream lover, only his features seemed more harsh and untamed as his near onyx-colored eyes honed in on her. Emma was the first to mobilize, rising to her feet with swift elegance.

"Hello, Protector. Welcome to my home," she began, looking every bit of calm serenity.

"Good evening, Mage," he replied easily, not taking his eyes from a seemingly frozen Aman.

"May I get you anything? Perhaps something to cover yourself from the night's chill?" Emma offered despite the balmy evening.

A slow burn began somewhere around Aman's toes, curling its way through her body as her eyes finally drifted from his to take in his very naked appearance. Was it possible for a person to be so heavily sculpted? she wondered. Yet he wasn't a person, she reminded herself as her eyes eased over a muscled chest and arms, their definition not marred by the slightest bit of hair. She bit her inner cheek hard when her eyes came to rest on the rather large appendage protruding from the only bit of fur present on his body.

Dear Lord, that wasn't a cock -- more like a weapon.

"Thank you, Mage, I accept your generosity."

"Emma, please."

"And I am Sergei Romanov, mate to Aman Jacobs." He bowed slightly, not in the least disturbed that he stood in front of three women completely naked.

"Please make yourself comfortable in my home. Come, Sam."

Sam croaked, tearing her eyes away from his perfection, "We can't leave him alone with her."

"I suggest you go with your parent, as your presence only reminds me of your deceit this evening."

Even during the exchange with Sam, Aman was certain Sergei's complete attention remained on her. With a willpower she hadn't known she possessed, she drew her gaze away from his towering nudity, directing her attention to a candle across the room. Fixating on the flame's steady burning seemed to be what she needed to find her voice again.

"The Jennings have explained your unique situation to me," she started.

Silence.

"And while I can empathize with your plight, I'm not able to give you what you need. I hope you have the success you are seeking in your ad campaign." She waited on pins and needles for a response.

"Perhaps I have taken the wrong approach in attempting to gain your acceptance of the inevitable," he said, as if voicing his innermost thoughts instead of talking to her directly.

Something in his words didn't sit well with her but before she could question him she found herself lifted from the cushioned softness of her chair and tossed haphazardly over his shoulders as though she weighed no more than a few pounds. Aman gasped for breath as her stomach made contact with his hard shoulder.

"Stop! What are you doing?" Sam called as Sergei walked calmly over the threshold into the evening stillness. Aman managed to raise her head just enough to see her friend's stricken face as Sam attempted to rush after them. Any hope of help was immediately squelched at the restraining hold mother placed on daughter.

"We can't just let him take her," Sam protested. "Do something."

Sergei stopped to give the pair the briefest regard. "You need not concern yourself with the future well-being of my mate as you will be too busy seeing to your own needs."

She saw her friend visibly stiffen before turning questioning eyes on her mother. That was her last image of Sam before Sergei launched them into the night air.

This couldn't be happening. Aman repeated the mantra as she hugged his waist for dear life, her cheek plastered to the hardness of his lower back. Sergei's abrupt take off had slid her further down his back, yet he seemed completely oblivious, maintaining a loose hold on her ankles. The thin material of her dress slid up to rest on her hips, leaving her stocking-covered rear exposed to the cool evening elements. She wasn't certain when she'd lost one of her black slingback pumps but was infinitely aware of her manicured toe poking through sheer black hosiery.

She wanted to wail at him for his lackadaisical treatment of her. Was this going to be her future with him? Tossed around the way a child would a rag doll, with little regard for her wants? Another thought hit her just as quickly -- perhaps he wasn't treating her with care because he planned on getting rid of her. All he would need to do was drop her right there and from their distance in the air there would be no hope of survival. The latter thought had her squeezing his warm body even tighter. She wasn't exactly certain when they descended to city level since her securely closed eyes left the passing scenery to her imagination, but she could make out the audible sounds of city night life just seconds before their gentle touch down. She stumbled backwards as he set her on her feet.

"Where are we?" she asked inanely, taking in the sparsely decorated concrete patio that gave an amazing view of the city around them.

"Home," came his gruff reply, causing her to whip her head back in his direction. For several moments she stood in awe of his magnificence as a gargoyle. She'd been aware of the subtle transformations in his body when he plunged into the air, but

seeing him now in his complete beastly persona left her awestruck. Face to face with the gargoyle, she had every right to be frightened but the uneasiness in the pit of her stomach had more to do with the uncertainty of her future and less to do with his new physical appearance.

She'd thought him impressive as a man, but seeing him as the mythological gargoyle was enough to render her speechless. His normally tall height had to reach beyond seven feet in this altered state. His lightly sun-kissed skin took on a grayish hue, giving him the illusion of being made from granite. Where Sergei the human was broad, Sergei the gargoyle was massive. Her eyes rested on the distorted features of his face, looking for some evidence of the man within. His normally emerald eyes had darkened to inky black pools, studying her silent reaction.

"You must be chilled after our flight. Come inside and I will draw you a bath."

Was he crazy, she thought, even as the suddenly cool night air began to seep into her bones. "I'll be fine," she tried to reassure him.

"Oh, but I insist." Neither stood near the glass door, but it swung open of its own accord in invitation to the new arrivals.

With as much dignity as she could muster, Aman limped unevenly into the masculine interior of the penthouse suite. The plush surroundings screamed wealth without being intentionally ostentatious. In many ways it reminded her easily of Sergei.

"This is your home now. Any changes you choose to make are fine with me." He spoke from somewhere behind her as she stepped further into the large living room with its vaulted ceilings and thick carpeting that enveloped her virtually bare feet. It was no wonder he'd looked around her own apartment with such distaste, when twelve of her little studios wouldn't fill up this one room.

"Our rooms are at the end of the hall on your right."

She didn't miss the way he'd emphasized the "our," but thought better of correcting him at the moment, not when it was so obvious who had the upper hand in their current situation. Without so much as a backwards glance she hobbled on shaky legs in the direction Sergei had just indicated. En route, she passed a variety of open

doors, giving them all cursory looks. Although curious by nature she resisted the urge to step into any of the rooms for a closer inspection. Something within told her there would be plenty of time for exploration before she was able to escape her current situation.

Escape. The word echoed in her head as she stepped into the spacious master bedroom. Dear God, this was truly the thing that dreams were made of. Never in her wildest imaginings did she think she would visit a place like this. She paused, taking in each carefully selected item. All the major pieces of furniture were made from a dark polished oak that gleamed to perfection as if each piece had just been newly cleaned. A gargantuan bed lay between two uncovered bay windows, its frame looking large enough to accommodate Sergei in either of his forms. She couldn't resist the urge to trace the thick coverlet as she stepped in for a closer look. Aman could almost see the two of them on the raised unit, bodies intertwined in the age-old primordial dance of male and female.

"Get a grip," she reminded herself, snatching her hand away from the bed as if it burned. Annoyed with her own thoughts, Aman easily found the bathing room, which was just as impressive as the other portions of Sergei's home she'd seen. She was surprised to see the large sunken tub steaming in an aromatic, bubbly confection. How had he managed that, she wondered as she secured the lock on the door. Feeling somewhat safe in the enclosure, she made quick work of tugging off her dress, ruined stockings and bra. She slipped soundlessly into the velvety warmth of the tub, welcoming the water's scented heat, not holding back the sigh that erupted as all her muscles relaxed for the first time in hours -- days even.

When finally she emerged from the bath, she felt like a queen of centuries past. Never before had she enjoyed a bath so much. Even the downy thickness of the dry towel made her feel decadent; she almost hated the idea of putting her dress back on.

"What the hell?" She stared at the empty floor where she knew her dress and other articles of clothing had dropped. Hell, even her remaining shoe was missing. "I know I'm not cracking up," she muttered to herself, securing the oversized towel

around her body. She re-entered the bedroom half expecting to find Sergei there dangling her items in front of her. To her surprise, the room was just as she'd left it, with no sign of Sergei or her clothes, although she was certain he'd had something to do with their disappearance. A thorough investigation of the room left only more unanswered questions.

"Well, if he thinks I'm coming out there in nothing but this towel he'd better think again," she fumed aloud, snatching one of the numerous dress shirts from his closet. To her delight the shirt hung just below her thighs, concealing much more than she'd expected. She buttoned the shirt fully over her braless form, appreciating how much room the garment afforded her.

"In the kitchen," Sergei called to her as she entered the now empty living room.

She followed the sound of his voice to a kitchen that could only be described as a chef's wet dream. She paused in its doorway, taking in Sergei's human self again. Apparently he'd taken advantage of the time to freshen up as well, she noted from his wet unbound hair and the towel that hung dangerously low on his waist. He stood at the kitchen's island putting the finishing touches on a monstrosity of a sandwich.

He looked up at her. "I take it you still haven't eaten anything this evening." Aman could only shake her head in answer. "What would you like to drink?"

"Um... water is fine." She watched from her vantage point in the doorway as he filled one glass with clear liquid.

"You can't eat from there, Aman." He gathered up the plate and glass, taking them to a breakfast table with an amazing view of the New York skyline.

She paused in her silent advancement when Sergei took the open seat in front of the plate he'd just set down. "Come and eat," he urged, patting his towel-covered lap.

It took half a heartbeat for her to register what he was suggesting.

"Thanks, but no." She whirled on her heels but got no further than the entryway when she felt her body being twirled back around. Ready to give Sergei an earful for all his manhandling that evening, she was again rendered silent by the sight that greeted her. He hadn't moved, or at least it didn't seem he had.

"As your mate, it is my responsibility to see to your every need whether you want me to or not." He stared back at her with those emerald eyes that in retrospect should have been her first clue that he was anything but human.

She felt a gentle nudge at her back and found herself walking forward on leaden legs. If there had been any doubt before who was behind the opening doors and her disappearing clothes it was all made clear at that point. Obviously his talents didn't just rest in his ability to morph into the hulking gargoyle. One of his corded arms snaked forth to pull her securely on his lap.

Aman bit her bottom lip.

"I might not be much of a chef, but I think you'll like the sandwich much better than your own flesh." He picked up half of the behemoth, bringing it inches from her mouth.

"I've been feeding myself since I was two," she informed him.

"Is that all? Then it's obvious which of us is the more experienced." He gave her upper thigh a gentle squeeze, taking advantage of her light gasp to ease a corner of the sandwich into her mouth.

Aman's mouth snapped closed, taking in a small portion of the food. As she chewed, the combination of savory meats, tomatoes, cheese and lettuce had her stomach responding in loud, grateful encouragement.

"Take another bite." The gentle coaxing was all she needed. The next bite was just as tantalizing as the first, its mixture of food only spurring on her hunger. Once she'd demolished the first half of the sandwich he offered her the cool, refreshing water, which she thirstily drank down. She'd only made it halfway through the second piece when her belly began registering the first signs of being full.

"I couldn't," she protested when he attempted to feed her another bite. "Really."

She was grateful when he didn't insist that she finish the remainder of the food. With the meal concluded, she made an attempt to rise from his thigh, only to find herself drawn fully onto his lap.

"No," she protested as her backside came in full contact with his very stiff erection.

"I don't believe you know how arousing it was to watch you eat from my hand."

"I'll remember that the next time you offer," she bit out as one arm locked around her waist, ensuring her captivity. She was completely taken aback by her current predicament as his hand skimmed her now-bare upper thigh. Her attempt to clamp her legs together was thwarted by an unseen force. Instead they were spread wider, allowing his questing hand easy access to the bared flesh of her innermost thighs if he so desired.

He nuzzled her neck, tracing its outline with his firm mouth until she whimpered. The buttons on the shirt fell open of their own accord, gradually revealing her soft brown flesh for his enjoyment. Her pulse rate quickened as the shirt dropped completely away from her skin. The arm at her waist had relaxed, giving way to another seeking hand, one that teased the softness of her belly, setting off the hundred and one butterflies that seemed to have taken up permanent residence within her.

"Please, Sergei, this isn't what I want."

"No?" His voice sounded thick near her ear.

"No. I just want to live out the rest of my life like before. I promise to keep your existence secret." She caught her breath when the hand on her stomach reached up to lift one of her heavy breasts, kneading the firm flesh. When the pad of his thumb brushed the sensitive peak of one dark nipple it was like a fire ignited somewhere deep within her.

"My little Fledgling, even if it were just that simple, I couldn't let you go. You belong to me." His words were punctuated by the light swirling of his thumb on her distended nipple.

Unable to resist the wonderful sensations his finger was eliciting, she arched into his touch hoping that he would add pressure. As if reading her mind, he squeezed the plump nipple between his forefinger and thumb, plucking it until she writhed against

him. Her rounded backside pressed firmly against the rock hard erection. All consideration of her leaving was temporarily forgotten.

"Open wider for me." The hand on her thigh pressed forward until his strong fingers could tease the puffiness of her labia. She did as he ordered, spreading her legs as wide as they could go, leaving her feeling completely brazen. She knew he was purposefully toying with her, gaining from her body what her mind and mouth refused to admit. When his finger slipped between the swollen lips of her pussy she was lost. She wanted him, despite her protests to the contrary. There was no point trying to lie to herself.

Her groan of pleasure was like music to his ears. He used his middle finger to glide between her folds, skimming the top of her clit on its downward descent to her sweet nectar. She enfolded his thick finger easily, her vaginal walls contracting around him. She was wet already, but by the time he was through with her he planned for her cunt to be dripping for him. He slid in and out of her several times, simulating the deep penetrating strokes he intended for her much later that evening. Right now was just an appetizer.

Her heated scent assaulted him, instantly intoxicating his senses. God, how he wanted to taste her, to suck her engorged clit until she erupted for him. All in due time, he tried reminding himself and his cock that strained painfully against her backside. He reluctantly withdrew his finger from her steaming core, enjoying the suctioning sound it made and her gentle protest at the loss.

"Not to worry - we're only just getting started." And true to his word his finger began a new campaign on her sensitive clit, stroking its underside in the most vulnerable region until she ground frantically against his hand to increase the pressure. Meanwhile he continued to pluck at one pebbled nipple.

Her breathing became labored, signaling the first of many orgasms for her that evening. With the agility born of his species and the grace of a man in the throes of lust he managed to lift his woman easily with one hand while wiping the table clear with

the other. The distinct sound of dishes making contact with the floor drowned out her startled gasp as Sergei positioned her on the table for a feast of his own.

Aman barely had time to brace her weight on her elbows before one leg was hefted over his muscled shoulder, the other spread wide to allow him full access to her throbbing nether regions.

"Please, don't stop," she begged when he paused for what seemed like minutes, drinking in her exposed cunt.

"Beautiful," he lamented as he spread her vaginal lips. "And all mine." He dove between her thighs like a man obsessed. Gentility was not on the menu that evening as his tongue lapped at her swollen clit.

"Omigod." Her head fell back at the decadent sensations his assault caused. Her orgasm hit her with such force her eyes rolled back in her head as she panted her way through each wave. Sergei made a satisfied sound as he slurped up the free flowing juices produced by her orgasm, his tongue plunging in and out of her channel.

When she was certain he'd gotten every drop, expected to feel his long heavy cock penetrating her, she was granted another tongue lashing, more frenzied than before. He sucked greedily at her clit before twirling his tongue around it, over and over until she was so far gone that her arms couldn't support the weight of her body. Sergei lifted her rounded ass completely off the table, hoisting her free leg over his other shoulder, diving in further. His tongue moved steadily against her clit before dipping into her pussy to sample the bounty of his efforts.

"I'm coming, oh, God, yes," she wailed, gripping the sides of the table as her second orgasm coiled through her body, blood rushing to her head leaving her with a sense of euphoria as the spasms racked her body. As before, Sergei dove in for the nectar produced by his efforts, but by that point she was too far gone to care. She didn't protest when he cradled her weary body next to his as he carried her through the penthouse to the master suite.

Aman almost hated the care with which he was now treating her. It wouldn't do for her to develop serious feelings for him, not when she didn't intend for their

acquaintance to be a permanent one. Even as the thoughts ran through her mind like a monologue she couldn't resist nestling her head against his hard chest. He handled her as if she were the most fragile piece of porcelain, easily holding her with one arm while he drew back the thick coverlet on the bed.

She groaned at the sudden loss of his heated flesh, heavy lids rising to take in his nude form. She wasn't certain when he'd lost the towel. His veined cock stood at attention, looking completely formidable in its splendor. She wet her lips in anticipation. Despite her earlier reservations she was eager to have him inside her, rutting hard between her legs. The mere thought was getting her moist all over. Was this her second or third wind kicking in? She felt like a complete wanton, staring at his straining cock like a sex-starved madwoman.

"Are you just going to stand there?" she finally asked, gaze traveling up the rest of his well-formed physique until it stopped on eyes the color of midnight.

Okay, so maybe she was a certified harlot where he was concerned, but who could blame her staring at his sinfully gorgeous body. His own gaze only encouraged her audacious behavior.

"I don't think it wise to look at me in that manner, my dear." His gaze was pure predatory lust. Her heart jumped in excitement. She wet her lips again, pulling herself onto her knees, fingers laced behind her back to give him an uninhibited view of her plump breasts.

Already erect nipples began to throb as his eyes feasted on her full, heaving breasts. No one would have ever labeled her a submissive, maybe because the average man would never fit the bill of her master. Maybe she just needed the right inspiration, like a masterful gargoyle with a thick long cock to do her nice and proper. Whatever the reason, something very primordial in her wanted to be dominated by him, even if only once.

Although he hadn't moved from his position standing at the side of the bed she had the very real sensation of two hands lifting and palming her hefty breasts. She

moaned as her nipples were teased relentlessly by invisible hands, the pleasure only enhanced by Sergei's lust-filled gaze.

"Your breasts are so sensitive, it drives me crazy to watch you yield to me." His voice was heavy, dripping with sex appeal, when he finally joined her on the bed. Hands cupped her body to lift her just enough to bring his hungry mouth in contact with her aroused nipples.

Aman moaned even louder this time, breasts thrust forward while she basked in the wondrous feel of his mouth sucking her taut nipples until they throbbed in tandem with her wet pussy. Unable to restrain herself, she allowed her fingers to sink into the thick, rich texture of his hair. His cock pressed expectantly into the trimmed thatch of hair on her mons. She couldn't resist the urgent need to grind against him. The low growl that started from somewhere deep in his throat vibrated over her stimulated flesh until she could feel the tension of a third orgasm building in her loins, ready to burst forth and take her to that blissful Eden.

"I want you inside me," she managed huskily. When it didn't seem as if he would stop, she tugged none too gently on his hair. The rough treatment only seemed to intensify his focus. "Please."

He pulled back abruptly, causing her to hiss as if in pain. "Do you want me?" His words were so low and distorted that she barely understood him.

"God, yes."

"You are mine." It was a passionate declaration, yet she felt that there was so much more. "Tell me. I have to hear your words," he rasped.

Words. To hell with words, she thought, tugging on the hair twisted between her fingers. When he didn't budge, wouldn't give her what she so desperately required, she did the one thing she hoped would get him back on track. "Damn you. Yes, I'm yours. I'm yours."

That was all the encouragement he needed. In one swift movement she found herself prone with Sergei buried between her thick thighs, yet holding back from what

she wanted most -- the feel of him surging deep within her, filling her body in a way that no other could.

Aman gnashed her teeth in mounting frustration. "Don't stop, please. I want you."

He stared down at her with an intensity that left her wondering if she'd said or done something wrong. He bent to kiss her lips, and she opened up to him eagerly, happy for the contact. His tongue teased the inside of her mouth, which only heightened her frustration to a frenzied plateau. God, she'd never wanted anything so much in her life.

He trailed kisses down her cheek. "Don't worry, my sweet, you will have me for all of our lifetimes."

His words barely penetrated through her passionate, crazed thoughts. Suddenly she felt the very real, very sharp prick of teeth on the side of her neck just as he entered her pussy.

She cried out from the mixture of pleasure and pain. Her cunt stretched slowly to accept his unbelievable girth, moistening even more as he suckled her flesh.

A portion of the way inside he pulled back, only to return with a thrust that had Aman's eyes rolling up in her head from sheer bliss. She could feel his teeth sink further into her tender flesh even as he slid deeper inside her slick folds. When he had completely impaled himself within her heat she couldn't hold back a moan that seemed to begin from the tips of her toes. She felt his brief pause as he pulled back, only to plunge in again in one fluid motion. This time he didn't stop withdrawing and thrusting after only a few plunges, and the orgasm that had only hovered in the background burst forth as if an invisible floodgate had been opened.

"Oh" was all she could manage as her climax hit her hard and long, soaking her pussy with a rush of her woman's juices.

Sergei growled somewhere deep in his throat as she coated his thrusting cock. Her cunt spasmed around him in rapid pulsations until she thought she would pass out from the pleasure.

He finally tore his mouth from her neck, leaving it throbbing in his wake.

"Mine," he grunted out in his half human voice, lifting her hips off the bed for better leverage as his thrusts became more demanding.

She was spent, and her body rode through the last of her powerful orgasm, yet she still found herself enjoying the very primal way he drove into her. He watched her through hooded eyes, pinning her with an impassioned gaze.

"All mine," came his grunt as he thrust forward one last time before tossing his head back in a howl of completion. Save a few wisps of drenched strands, his hair tumbled heavily down his back while he emptied his seed into her womb. Still she contracted around him, greedily milking his very essence until his body relaxed completely. They stayed that way for several moments, heart rates slowing until they reached a normal tempo again.

Aman sighed sleepily when he rolled her with him on the bed until she lay atop his body. She didn't complain when his cock remained buried in her body. Too tired to argue that they couldn't possibly sleep in that position, she decided to let things slide for a while. Besides, she rather enjoyed the feel of him deep inside her. If she'd had the energy she was certain she could show him a thing or two about the merits of their positioning. Her lids drooped dangerously close to shutting when she decided to shift off his surprisingly comfortable body. Who would have thought muscles upon muscles would make such a wonderful pillow.

"Where do you think you're going?" His gruff voice rumbled in his chest against her ear, and vise-like arms wrapped quickly around her waist, anchoring her in place.

"I can't go to sleep like this," she protested, although she gave up quickly since her limbs felt too heavy to put up a valiant fight.

"Why not?" He sounded genuinely confused. He had to be kidding.

"Because." She sighed, not able to come up with a response. Why in God's name was she so tired? "Suit yourself," she murmured, lulled by the soothing rise and fall of his chest. It would serve him right if all of his extremities went to sleep, and she'd be there in the morning to say "I told you so" when blood resumed normal circulation.

Sergei gave a snort that Aman had a hard time translating in her current state.

"For the record, this doesn't mean I agree to this whole mate thing." She was sure the sudden yawn that ended her sentence didn't sound very convincing.

"Shh, *RAdost' moyA*. You talk too much for one so tired."

"What does that mean exactly?"

"*RAdost' moyA?*"

"Ummhmm."

"My joy, because that is what you bring to my life. Now get some rest, before I forget you need it."

Whatever, she wanted to say but couldn't stave off the drugging effects of sleep any longer. Tomorrow she would put everything right, starting with gargoyle boy.

Chapter Seven

Aman struggled to wakefulness, trying hard to push the vestiges of sleep behind her. Something wasn't right -- even in her dream state she could feel it. She resisted the desire to bury deeper into the softness of the bed and covers.

Okay, girl, enough of the sleeping beauty routine. Time to rise and shine, her inner voice greeted. On a groan she opened one eyelid tentatively to test the brightness in the room. She was happy to find not one annoying stream of sunlight intruding. Her other eye popped open with a little less trepidation. Propped up against a nest of pillows, she felt like a true Nubian queen, and she didn't hide the smile that spread across her lips at the thought for her comfort. He really was making it hard to dislike him. Her eyes swept the semi-dark room. She was alone. Leisurely, she stretched, wincing as various muscles in her body made their disapproval known. Good Lord, it may have been a while since she'd been with a man, but damn.

He's no ordinary man, the little voice reminded her. "Boy, don't I know it," she muttered. The hoarseness of her voice surprised her, as if she hadn't used it in a long while. Clearing her throat, she wished she had something to drink. *Well, wishing won't make it appear,* she thought, mustering up the strength to push herself off the bed. She was surprised exactly how much she could see in the dimly lit room with the dark draperies drawn tightly and no visible light filtering in from any direction.

Prepared to slip off the side of the bed, she paused at the sight that welcomed her. On the nightstand sat a tall glass of water and what looked to be a blueberry muffin. Her smile broadened. Not exactly breakfast in bed but it sure looked appealing to her. On cue her stomach growled loudly.

And apparently just what the doctor ordered, she thought, reaching first for the water. The cool contact of liquid on her lips, tongue and throat felt like a slice of heaven.

She drank thirstily, draining the glass in record time, before exchanging it for the muffin. The poor pastry didn't stand a chance against her ravenous appetite. She made short work of the sweet treat, even going so far as to suck her fingers free of any crumbs.

The appetizer did nothing to quench her hunger -- if anything it only served to add fuel to the fire. Which meant she'd have to seek Sergei out or risk her stomach's angry protest. Food first, then setting Sergei straight, and then home. Seconds later the pressure of her bladder had her reassessing her to-do list.

With her own clothing still MIA she opted for another of Sergei's button up shirts, reminding herself to keep a good room's distance between them or run the risk of giving into some more of his sexual distraction. When she finally stepped into the living room she was greeted by the racy rhythm of some trendy alternative music she vaguely recognized. Not quite what she'd thought Sergei would listen to, but she was finding out he was full of surprises.

"I'm too tired to search every room for you, so if you wouldn't mind showing yourself," she called over the music.

Aman hadn't lied -- she really was fatigued, finding herself using the arm of a sofa to prop herself up when all she really wanted to do was sink into its plush softness. Had he drugged her? The thought left a bad taste in her mouth, but was quickly replaced as she stared out the large picture window to the very dark sky lit by the skyline. How long had she been asleep? Had a full day passed her by? How was that possible? More questions began pushing their way to the front of her thoughts and she could feel her anxiety growing.

"You should still be resting," the very female voice chastised as a girl barely out of her teens rounded the corner Aman knew led to the kitchen. Blonde hair flowed to the budding woman's waist in a thick, shiny mass. Although she was youthful in appearance there was something about the woman that belied Aman's first impression. This was definitely no mere child.

"Although I'm certain your mate will be happy to know you've finally rejoined the waking world, he'd hardly approve of me letting you overexert yourself."

"By mate I'm assuming you mean Sergei."

The woman's mouth curled up at the edges, and although she remained several feet away Aman didn't miss the amused look on her face. "Look, I don't know what he's told you but there's nothing serious between us."

The woman quirked an eyebrow as she openly took in Aman's tired appearance.

"I know what it may look like, but I am not Sergei's mate. Where is he?"

"He left a little earlier to see to a matter of some importance. Otherwise he wouldn't have thought to leave your side."

"How very gallant of him. When will he be back?"

"Of that I'm not certain, but I do know he plans to call soon to check on you."

"Let him call, but I won't be here. I'm done with all this supernatural mumbo jumbo." Aman headed in the direction of double doors she assumed would lead her to freedom. She heard the other woman's deep sigh although she did nothing to stop Aman's exit.

She was right -- the doors opened to a short, wide hallway, and at its end stood the silver framing of an elevator. She'd never been more excited to see such a sight in her life. With her means of escape looming only a few feet away she felt a surge of energy course through her body, propelling her forward. As if sensing her presence the doors slid open, inviting her into the metal cubicle.

"Please state your destination," a female synthesized voice requested.

"Lobby."

"Voice recognition failed, please state your destination."

"No." Aman moaned her anger, her heart dropping into the pit of her stomach.

"Please enter the security override," the voice offered just as a miniature keyboard slid from a hidden console.

"Damn him."

"Goodbye," the voice responded as she walked back through the opening doors into the hall again.

Not one to easily concede defeat, Aman headed for the only other door beside the ones leading back to Sergei's apartments.

Although she knew the door would be locked, she held out a small hope the fire exit would yield some success. The reality of finding it locked made her want to pummel the damned thing until it gave way from the force of her rage.

You might as well come back inside, Aman. I'd really hate to have you collapsing in the hall from exhaustion, not to mention having Sergei's fury visited upon me.

Aman's head snapped to the open doorway leading into the penthouse but found it empty.

Great. So now on top of everything else I'm hearing voices. What next? Little green gremlins? She shook her head in self-pity.

Trust me, if you saw a gremlin in real life you'd know there's nothing little about them. And what a foul-smelling lot in their original form. By the way, you're not going mad. I'm sorry I didn't get the chance to properly introduce myself earlier. "I'm Sara," a young woman said from the doorway.

"And I'm going to pass out," Aman managed as the hallway swirled around her before going dark.

* * *

The next time she woke she did so with a lot more ease. She lay on her side in Sergei's massive bed, calling on the memories that led up to her fainting. Fainting! She'd never done that before in her life. She was experiencing a lot of firsts because of Sergei Romanov, most of which were ripping apart her normal little world. She'd think about it all later, but for now she had to find a way out.

"Hmm, so you're finally awake." She would have recognized the voice behind her even if an arm hadn't snaked around her waist to pull her into his embrace.

Her pulse went into instant overdrive, heart pounding in her chest. Through the fabric of his shirt she could feel the outline of his chest against her back. With her blouse

hiked up around her waist, the thickness of his cock nestled between the cheeks of her naked ass. She forced herself not to move but could feel him stiffening against her backside.

"I didn't mean to frighten you, *RAdost' moyA*." His voice was gentle, and he buried his nose in the softness of her hair.

"No? Well, you did," she answered, finally gaining control over her racing heart.

"Shall I make it up to you?" he whispered seductively, sending a shiver of excitement down her spine.

Ignoring his question, she decided to hit at the heart of the matter. "When can I go home?"

"You are home, Aman," he answered after a pregnant pause.

"I meant my home, where my things are."

"I've had your belongings brought here."

"You what?" she yelled, rolling away from him with speed she didn't know she possessed. The maneuver left her tumbling unceremoniously to the floor. She didn't give shock a chance to settle in before she was on her feet staring at Sergei where he lay propped on one elbow, the coverlet draped dangerously low around his waist. Her eyes drank in his splendor appreciatively before snapping back to his green gaze.

"You had no right to touch my things, or to even be in my apartment without my permission."

"No?" His arrogant look said otherwise.

"No! I want everything returned and put back in place."

"That may be rather difficult, considering."

Something told her she wouldn't like the rest of his unfinished sentence. "Considering what?"

"Your place has already been rented out, real estate in New York being what it is."

"You can't be serious." His expression didn't waver. "I have a lease. You couldn't possibly have terminated that. Number one, you're not authorized."

"Authorization is a funny thing. As the new owner of said building, I can continue to lease to whom I see fit. If you'd read your lease agreement closely there was a clause under the change of ownership section to that effect. I'd be happy to show it to you."

"I'm sure you would," she hissed, shaking her head in disbelief, mind whirling to process the implications of what he was saying. "Fine. I'll get another place. You can't corner the market on every building."

"I'm not interested in every building." She knew what he didn't say. No matter where she went, he would be there.

"You are mine, Aman, my mate, the mother of my future children." He rose from the bed as he spoke, stalking her as a predator would skittish prey.

"And if it's not what I want?" She watched him carefully, reading the intention in his darkening eyes.

"That is not an option."

"Like hell it isn't. This is my life, and if I choose to live it alone that is my decision to make."

"No, *RAdost' moyA*, that is where you're wrong," he continued gently, his voice taking on a soothing quality. She found herself fighting the urge to give in to him. "Already we are bound to one another. As we speak, your body is making the final adjustments to allow you to carry my seed within you."

She didn't bother to question him because somehow she knew he spoke the truth, could feel the changes occurring within her. Gone was the fatigue of before and in its place was something altogether different. A heightened awareness, a sharpening of her senses was developing. That didn't mean she had to like it or even give in, for that matter.

"You know I'm not lying and yet you would still try and deny us."

"I don't deny an attraction between us, but how am I to know or accept what is real or not without the space and time to sort through all of this? You've had your entire life to prepare for this. I've only had a couple days."

"An unfortunate circumstance indeed, and could I but change history we would not be having this conversation. You would have been groomed for your future as my mate from the cradle." He was getting close, too close, and she forced her eyes to stay trained on his, not wanting to be distracted by the majesty that was his body. God, why did he have to look so damned good?

"But I wasn't, and therein lies our problem."

"Agreed. Tell me how I can make this adjustment easier for you, and I will." How she would have loved to believe him.

"Let me go, let me take the time I need to come to terms with everything."

Aman had her answer even before he spoke. If eyes truly were windows to one's soul, she knew he would never let her go willingly.

"I cannot do that, *RAdost' moyA*. You are too important for me to be so carefree with your life."

"Then I will spend the rest of it trying to get as far away from you as possible."

"And I will spend mine on constant alert." He stopped with only a few feet separating them.

"I won't ever be able to give myself to you freely as a prisoner."

"I will take whatever you wish to offer," he growled as he reached for her.

Anticipating his attack, Aman leapt at the last possible moment from his reach, feeling the brief brush of fingertips against the sleeve of her shirt. Her means of escape were limited; passing by him meant certain capture. Decision made, she bounded across the bed with agility she'd normally not possessed, eluding another of his attempts to grab her. Victory was hers, she thought. As her feet touched the ground she lit to the door with determination. A triumphant smile rose on her face when the knob turned easily underneath her fingers, but the joy was short lived as the swift jerk toward her yielded nothing. The damned thing wouldn't budge. She twisted the knob again, jerking at it several times before giving up on her only escape route. Behind her Sergei was quiet; she knew he waited for her next move. With flight no longer an option she

had one choice left. She twirled, surprised to find him standing directly behind her -- not exactly what she'd expected.

"As you said, dearling. I've had my entire life to prepare for this moment."

"Now what? Rape? Because that's the only way you'll have me."

His voice was unbelievably calm. "I'll keep that in mind, but I don't think it will have to be an option."

"You arrogant son of a bitch." Before she knew what she was doing her palm connected with his cheek. The impact of the blow forced his head to one side. The apology on her lips was stuck in her throat when he righted his head and onyx-colored eyes locked with her own. Incisors lengthened to pinpoints protruded from his mouth.

"If rough is how you want it, my dearling, I am willing to oblige."

Aman's gasp was a mixture of surprise and something akin to primal desire as Sergei forced her, none too gently, against the door behind her. His lightning movement left her securely trapped. He'd managed to wedge a powerful leg between her thighs, arms secured above her head by a single restraining hand that might as well have been steel clamped around her wrists.

"So this is the way it shall be between us? Speak now, because this will be the last time I ask you on this matter."

Her attempt to shake herself free of his hold was futile and only added to the anger festering over her helpless predicament. "Go to hell," she spat, using the only weapon at her disposal. "Why you would think for one minute that I'd want your hands on me is beyond my comprehension. I meant what I said. For as long as you keep me locked away I'll be looking for a way out, and trust me when I say I'll find one."

"By God, woman, do you ever stop?" he roared a second before his mouth covered her own, effectively silencing her.

His lips on hers sent a jolt through her body. How she hated the way she responded to him. Try as she might, she felt her anger dissipating with the demanding pressure of his mouth. In a last ditch effort she tried forcing her mouth away from his hungry kiss but that only served to get her jaw captured in a surprisingly gentle hold.

Sergei nibbled at her bottom lip until she wanted to beg for more. As if sensing her capitulation, he covered her lips again, slipping his tongue easily into her warm mouth.

He was an intoxicating drug to her senses, and God help her but she was turning into an addict. The hand at her jaw drifted down the column of her neck, his feather-like touch brushing her shoulder, arm, and over the swell of her hip. His kiss deepened, demanding more from her eager mouth.

Without breaking the contact of their lips he slipped his free hand between their bodies, pushing up the cotton material of the oversized shirt, hesitating momentarily at her thigh. His questing hand stilled briefly when the barrier of her shirt prohibited him from further movement. Aman felt the pop of buttons as Sergei separated the garment with no obvious regard to its future use. He cupped the firm swell of her breast, teasing the nipple until she arched against him for more of the same. She panted to catch her breath when he decided to add his mouth to the nipple taunting that was driving her insane.

With her wrists still securely bound by one hand she had no choice but to only be a recipient of the agonizing pleasure he was dishing out. Her moans filled the room, mingling with his own growls of pleasure at her response. Weak thighs parted wider, allowing his leg more intimate access to her.

"Omigod," Aman crooned when the powerful appendage began a gentle undulation between her legs, coating it with her arousal.

She could feel the reluctance when he pulled away from her throbbing breast, whimpering her own protest at his abandoning mouth and tongue.

"Look at me, *RAdost' moyA*." Until that moment, Aman hadn't been aware she'd closed her eyes, head thrown back against the door in complete abandonment. The last thing she wanted to do now was talk, not when her body was demanding release.

"No," she cried as his hand released her breast, eyes snapping instantly open to send him a pleading look.

"Would you like me to continue?"

What? her hazy brain questioned. At her silence, his other hand dropped from her wrist.

"Sergei, you can't."

"Can't what?" The rough response came back, and Aman wanted to scream against the injustice of it all. God help her, she wanted him, at least physically. Her body craved his like no other in her past.

"Don't stop." Her hands shook as they traveled over his muscled chest, grazing hardened nipples. His quick intake of breath let her know he wasn't unaffected -- well, that and the huge erection prodding at her belly.

"I want to feel all of you." Allowing her hand to travel between their bodies to touch the top of his cock, she rubbed the evidence of his stimulation over its tip. The look in his eyes made her feel like the most desirable woman alive. She slid her hand down his shaft, trying to swallow him with her fingers. He throbbed in her firm grip while she pumped him slowly. Not without his own method to incite, he increased the pressure between her thighs with his leg. Aman was so turned on she thought she would explode on his muscled thigh. Her desire was only intensified by their uninterrupted gaze, each seeming to feed off the other's emotions.

"You're playing with fire, little one," he rasped.

"I'm a big girl." She tightened her hold on him until he groaned deep in his throat. She continued to pump his engorged length until he suddenly lifted her off her feet by her waist. Aman gave a low, throaty laugh at his impatience to get her across the room to their bed.

"If this is the only way I can have your surrender, so be it," he announced before kissing her swiftly, effectively taking her breath away. The contact was fierce, dominating and all too brief for her hungry senses. Without ceremony, Aman found her bare bottom bouncing on the mattress.

"I want to see that lovely ass of yours." She knew a command when she heard one, and in her heightened state of arousal she didn't challenge his order. Instead she discarded the ruined nightshirt, her movements slow and methodical. If he wanted to

see her rear she was sure as hell going to give him a full view. With the wantonness of the temptress she'd become, Aman shifted her position until she was on her hands and knees.

"Is this what you want?" she taunted, thrusting her ample bottom back and forth as if she were riding his swollen cock. Over her shoulder she enjoyed his watchful gaze, loved the tiny bit of semen accumulating over the tip of his overly aroused penis. She wet her lips in anticipation of what was to come, hoping he wouldn't keep her waiting long. How she could want him so much sexually and be willing to walk away from him just as easily was beyond her.

Sergei felt he would explode right there, shooting his seed all over her backside instead of deep within her tight body where it belonged. No matter how much she protested, she was still his woman; the powers that be had deigned it so and he would prove it to her.

His hands latched on to her firm round hips, pulling her closer to him. He heard her faint intake of breath, smelled her musky excitement and knew she was wet for him. He kneaded her soft, round ass with firm strokes, garnering another lusty moan from her lips, and could wait no longer.

With a restraint he was surprised he still maintained, he spread her legs wide and was happy with how easily she submitted to him. Without prompting, she pushed her ass further in the air, leaning forward to offer herself to him. He spread the moist lips of her folds to expose her hot, pink channel for his view. His entry was painstakingly slow, and he savored each inch that buried him deeper into her. Her tightness engulfed him with little resistance thanks to the extra lubrication.

"Oh, yes," she cried in a whisper, head falling forward. It aroused him even more to hear her enjoyment. Her fingers gripped the coverlet when he finally impaled himself completely in her warmth. He needed to take things slowly, to remember that despite the way her body eagerly received him he was still larger in size than human males and her body was just getting accustomed to their joinings. But damn if she didn't feel so warm and tight around him. She eased forward, dislodging half of him

before pushing her ass back against him until he was buried deeply in her pussy once again.

"Woman," he croaked, but couldn't manage a coherent thought, let alone formulate words when she repeated the action. He gripped her hips to still her but found his own body leveraging itself to join her lusty movements. He plunged deeply into her pussy, each thrust taking him closer to the precipice. Determined not to make the journey alone, he reached under her body, his hand lodging between her thighs as he sought her clit. Moist heat drenched his fingers when he reached his target.

Aman jerked against the thick middle finger rubbing her excited clit. He stroked her steadily from behind while fingering her nub until she felt as if her legs would give out beneath her from the extreme delight.

"I'm coming, oh, I'm coming," she moaned as her body tensed against his multiple ministrations, her orgasm washing over her so suddenly she could only ride the waves of its effects. Sergei pounded into her in quicker strokes as her vaginal walls contracted repeatedly around his cock. Seconds later he was howling his own completion, letting his seed flood her womb in a warm flow.

If it weren't for his restraining arm she would have crumpled beneath him. Her ebbing orgasm left her oh-so-sated and decadently weak. Aman silently basked in the aftermath of their lovemaking, not protesting when Sergei pulled her on top of him.

He stroked her back while she contentedly listened to his heart rate settle to a steady rhythm. In that moment all was right with the world. Gone was the tension that surrounded them when the everyday reality of their lives was present. In that instant they belonged to one another. Absently she circled his puckered nipple with her forefinger, wishing things could stay as they were.

Her stomach growled loudly, vibrating against his taut abs. Well, so much for utopia.

"Perhaps I should feed you."

"Perhaps," she agreed, but neither of them moved.

"I'll have to make sure the refrigerator stays well stocked. From my friend's accounting, carrying our young increases your appetite beyond that of a human pregnancy."

Her finger stilled in mid-pattern. She clenched and released her jaw but held her tongue. Now, why did he have to go and say something like that? She was tempted to blurt out that she was on birth control so the chances of her getting pregnant were slim to none but instead she eased away from his body. "Where did you say my things were?"

He nodded toward the closet, pulling himself into a sitting position. She felt his silent scrutiny as she walked to where he'd indicated, disappearing in the closet's deep interior where she found every article of clothing she owned hung or stashed away in the dresser.

She quickly selected a baggy T-shirt and a pair of stretch pants she wore to relax and re-emerged to find him in the same position. Damn, it had to be a sin to be so handsome, she thought, catching his look. Raven hair fell thick just beyond his muscled shoulder blades. Green eyes seemed to study her as if searching for an answer. The completely motionless way he sat reminded her he was no ordinary man. She became instantly aware of her nudity, using the clothing she'd just gathered to partially shield herself. His eyes seemed to darken a shade at the move, but he remained in place although Aman got the distinct impression he would rather dispose of the items.

"I'm going to freshen up," she said suddenly, finally breaking the silence. She didn't wait for his response, making a hasty retreat to the bathroom.

She felt refreshed when she finally made her way into the kitchen. Relief flooded her to see a clothed Sergei busily chopping vegetables. Well, maybe he wasn't fully dressed -- her heart flipped at the sight of his bare back. She bit her bottom lip as she observed him, seeing muscles flex and relax with his effortless movements. A quick toss of his head had hair shifting to grant her a brief view of his profile while he popped a cucumber in his mouth.

"Are you going to stand there all evening while I slave over our meal?" he asked after several seconds, not missing a beat as he continued with his preparations.

"You look like you're doing just fine without my help." She stepped further into the kitchen, but remained a safe distance away. She wanted to maintain her resolve, which became a moot point whenever they were near each other. "In fact, I don't think you need me at all."

She saw his whole body visibly tense. Every move seemed controlled; he put the knife aside, pivoting in one easy motion. "That is where you're wrong, *RAdost' moyA*. I need and want you in so many ways I think I will be consumed by it."

Aman didn't attempt a response, accepting what he said, quietly reminding herself he was just talking pure biology. There was no way he could have fallen for her so quickly; that was just not how things worked. Granted, maybe sexually they were compatible -- perhaps explosive was a better word -- but that was beside the point. She was a realist and could accept great sex at face value.

"What are you making?" she redirected. They were treading on dangerous ground.

Sergei didn't answer right away, looking as if he didn't want to change topics. She released a breath she hadn't known she held when he finally spoke. "Steaks are in the broiler, I just need to finish up this salad."

"Well, put me to work," she offered, finally venturing to where he stood.

They worked in contemplative silence until Sergei suggested they have their meal on the balcony. She eagerly agreed, not quite ready for a repeat of their last meal.

The moon hung bright and heavy in the night sky, and faint sounds of New York after dark wafted to her ears, seeming to reverberate off the side of the buildings around until they reached them. It was a warm night with traces of humidity that let her know the morning would probably be a scorcher. It hit her at that moment that she didn't even know what day it was. Had two nights passed, or more? What was she going to do about her job, or had Sergei taken care of that, too? Probably. Dear Lord, would any aspect of her life be her own again?

"What are you thinking?" The question brought her back into the moment.

"I was just thinking how unusually warm it was." It wasn't a complete lie -- it had been a passing thought.

Sergei nodded. "It's the werekin mating season -- quite unpredictable, actually, as is the weather it produces."

"Werekin?" She found herself mesmerized as he took a bite of his steak, the succulent piece of rare meat disappearing behind gleaming teeth. Was it natural to get a rush by watching a man eat?

"You know them as werewolves, although I must say the human myths have truly distorted what they are."

"The same way we have with gargoyles?"

"Precisely. Contrary to some beliefs, we are not demonic creatures -- well, most of us aren't." Her eyes rounded in surprise as she wondered what he meant. When she saw the smile spread across his lips she realized he was teasing her.

"I've never thought of gargoyles as evil. Quite the contrary." It was his turn to look surprised. "I guess a part of my subconscious was preparing me for our meeting."

He seemed to wait for her to continue. When she didn't he gave her a very pointed look. "So you don't have opposition to my species?"

She knew he referred to her earlier comment in the bedroom and looked away guiltily. "No, why should I? After all, you all are the champions for mankind, right? A very noble endeavor."

"Then what exactly is your objection to our mating?"

"It's purely personal. I hadn't planned on letting any man or gargoyle disrupt my life. I've spent too many years putting my life on hold for other people and I'm not getting any younger."

"Why do you think your life would be put on hold because of our joining?"

Well, at least he had the nerve to look genuinely perplexed. "You're joking, right? Already you've uprooted my apartment and I'm fairly certain you've taken the same liberties with my job."

His silence was answer enough for her.

"That's what I thought."

"Perhaps I should have consulted you about your employment but I didn't think it would be much of an issue since you'd planned to take a leave to finish school."

Aman opened her mouth to ask how he knew that bit of information, but closed it just as quickly. Her life was probably an open book for him. She knew he had the resources to get any information money could buy, and who knew what the extent of his gargoyle abilities afforded him.

"And what about school? Should I just forget about that, too?"

"Absolutely not." He pushed a now empty plate away. "With the proper protection, I don't foresee any problem in you furthering your education."

Her stomach knotted at his words. "You mean like guards?"

"Of a sort, yes."

Great! When she wasn't under his watchful eye she'd have his minions to contend with. *Boy, is this getting better and better*, her inner voice snorted. Amazing how he couldn't seem to understand her desire to put as much distance between them as humanly possible.

"Do you really think that would be necessary?"

"Absolutely, and it's not something I'm willing to compromise on," he said with finality. Was there anything he was willing to concede on?

"There are some items in my locker at work I would like to get."

"That's already been arranged."

She nodded, staring beyond him to the city lights. "I do have family who'll be concerned if I just drop off the face of the earth."

"And you are free to call and visit with them," he said after an exasperated sigh. "But for their own safety I must caution you against revealing too much."

Instantly brown eyes locked with green.

"Calm yourself, *RAdost' moyA*. It wasn't a threat. I only meant some things are better left unsaid. Do you really want to confuse them by revealing all you've just learned?"

She thought about it. Her siblings would think she was off her rocker for one, but if they did believe her, did she want them to live with the knowledge -- hell, the paranoia -- that people around them weren't what they appeared to be? She couldn't do that to her family.

"Well, it looks like you've thought of everything." God, she hoped not. There had to be something he'd forgotten, some hole in his plans that would give her a window of opportunity to leave.

"You sound disappointed."

"Am I supposed to be overjoyed at all the changes happening without my consent?" She pushed away from the table, going to the balcony's railing where she fought back the threat of tears. She hadn't cried in years -- not since her mother passed away.

"Aman." The gentle touch on her shoulder alerted her to Sergei's presence behind her. "I want you to be happy here with me."

"I guess there are some things even you can't control," she sighed.

Corded arms wrapped around her waist, pulling her against his hard warm flesh. "At least I know one thing that can bring you joy, if only temporarily." His voice rumbled against her ear, setting her heart off at a thunderous rate. The feel of his teeth nipping her ear got an instant reaction from her. She closed her eyes, allowing the heat to seep through her. Her pussy contracted on itself.

"You've done something to me," she groaned as one hand traveled the length of her stomach, easing past the elastic waistband of her trousers and panties, dipping past the V leading to the source of her heat. She opened to him instinctively, making room as two large fingers dipped between her nether lips to zero in on her clit.

"This can't be normal," she denied breathlessly even as she ground into titillating fingers.

"Oh, but it is very normal for us, has been written before our creation." He trailed lips down her neck. "You are mine, Aman, as I am yours."

His stroking became more insistent, fingers grinding against her clit until her legs threatened to buckle. His fingers switched their focus, two digits sinking deeply into her pussy until she began contracting around him, on the edge of a premature orgasm. He palmed her gyrating mound while sliding in and out of her heat.

"Oh, yes," she moaned through the orgasm wrenching its way through her body. "More," she begged insatiably, knowing she couldn't be satisfied until she had him buried deep inside her.

She didn't protest as her pants were enthusiastically jerked down her legs, instead stepping out of them, all the while tugging at Sergei's own sweats. The two made quick work of discarding the garment, shoving it urgently over his hips. Their desire for each other at that moment could only be rivaled by the need to take their next breath.

His clothing forgotten, Sergei quickly hoisted her in the air until her legs locked around his waist. She glided onto his cock, stretching for more of him with each step he took. Aman gripped the muscles on his shoulder tighter when he pushed her none-too-gently against the sliding glass door. His fingers bit into her hips while he slammed her over his thrusting penis, impaling her so deeply she was overwhelmed by the fullness of him. The sounds of their coupling drowned out everything else.

"Omigod," Aman groaned, feeling the rise of a new orgasm threatening to burst through her.

"That's it, baby, ride it," he growled before capturing her lips with his own mouth. His kiss became as wild and untamed as the passion unleashed by his pounding body. Unable to stave off the inevitable, she let her orgasm wash over her, through her. Her vaginal walls gripped him, wringing his own orgasm out in unison. He roared his completion, and she was certain she could feel him flooding her body.

She went limp in his arms, resting her head on the solid mass of his shoulder while he carried her to their rooms. Reluctantly, Aman admitted to herself that she'd

never felt so completed before in all her life. As much as it shouldn't, she and Sergei together made sense. Whether it was biology, instant attraction or just pure lust, somehow she suddenly knew it was right, that they could work. But before she could admit that to him she would need to bring the Neanderthal gargoyle up to speed on modern day relationships. His "you my woman" attitude just wasn't going to cut it, and she was willing to do whatever was necessary to show him how important her independence was to her. She had a feeling they would both enjoy the journey.

Nia K. Foxx

Nia K. Foxx is the proud mother of three beautiful, very active children, all under 10 years of age. They currently reside in a picturesque, small town burg of Michigan, where they enjoy biking, swimming, fairs and traveling in their minivan. Ms. Foxx holds a BA from the University of California, Santa Cruz, in International Politics and Literature. She began an interest in writing romantic stories at the age of twelve, trying her hand at erotica only recently. Ms. Foxx has written several unpublished novellas and novels, mostly writing for her own enjoyment until now. Nia loves to communicate with other readers of erotic romance and encourages anyone to email her at nia@niafoxx.com or read free excerpts on her website at <http://www.niafoxx.com>.