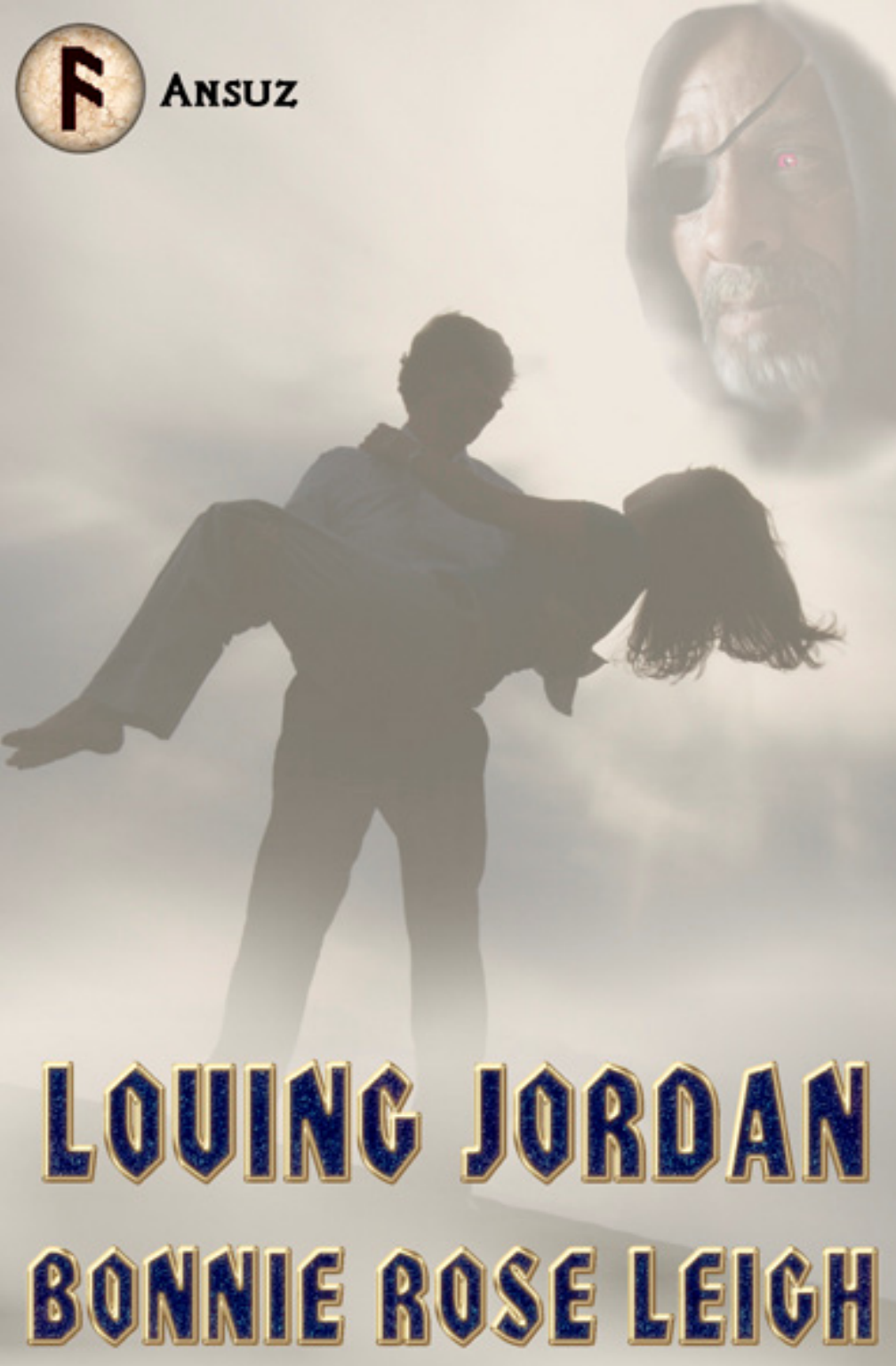




ANSUZ



LOVING JORDAN
BONNIE ROSE LEIGH

LOVING JORDAN

Rune Series – Ansuz

By

Bonnie Rose Leigh

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Loving Jordan

Rune Series - Ansuz

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DEFINITION OF THE RUNE ANSUZ

Ansuz--(A: The As, ancestral god, i.e. Odin.) A revealing message or insight, communication. Signals, inspiration, enthusiasm, speech, true vision, power of words and naming. Blessings, the taking of advice. Good health, harmony, truth, wisdom.

Ansuz Reversed or Merkstave: Misunderstanding, delusion, manipulation by others, boredom. Vanity and grandiloquence. (Odin is a mighty, but duplicitous god. He always has his own agenda.)

Odin is considered the father of the Gods in Norse Mythology. He is widely known for the visions he's given, the wisdom he imparts and his love of manipulating situations and people. In Loving Jordan, Odin receives a vision. Through Odin's manipulation of both people and circumstances, we learn two basic facts. If you take the advice of others and ask for help when you need it, it will make you stronger. And loving another is a reward in itself.

This book is dedicated to all my readers. You're the reason I write the stories down rather than let the characters run loose through my mind.

PROLOGUE

In the highest level of the Norse universe, surrounded by a high wall of closely fitted stone blocks, dwelled *Asgard*, the homeland of the Warrior Gods. Behind these walls, Odin, the father of the Gods, sat on his throne in *Valhalla* and contemplated his latest prophetic vision.

It was commonly known amongst the Gods that he oft times used his visions to manipulate circumstances to suit his needs. This time would be no different. But how to go about it without irritating the Norns, the Norse Goddesses of Fate?

Odin sighed in irritation and ran his fingers through his thick gray beard. If only he'd paid more attention to his human lovers after he'd ended their affairs, he wouldn't be in the mess he was in now.

His two ravens, Huginn and Muninn sat atop his shoulders and he turned to them with a baleful glare. "How could you have known about this and not informed me? You fly throughout *Asgard* and the human world to bring such news to me."

He pounded his fist against the arms of *Hlidskjalf*, his golden throne. "You're not named Thought and Memory for nothing, you know."

Odin snorted and went back to sifting his fingers through his beard when the birds did naught but ignore his outrage. What he needed was firsthand knowledge of all the participants, then he could formulate his battle plan. And as the God of War, battle plans were his specialty.

As the idea took root, Odin nodded in satisfaction. Yes, a trip to Earth would solve many of his current problems. Chief among them, escaping the wrath of his wife, Jord once word reached her about this latest proof of his indiscretions.

Why did the woman demand fidelity anyway? He had more than one wife for a reason. Or was it just his human lovers she despised?

He shrugged. No time to contemplate that now. He had arrangements to make.

As he made his way out of the hall, he turned toward the wolves keeping pace at his side. Freki and Geri accompanied him everywhere and were his only true companions. "How should I appear to the humans, on this trip, my friends? An elderly war veteran, a homeless man, or there's the ever-popular grieving widower. Remember the time I appeared as...?"

CHAPTER ONE

Although the holidays had come and gone, Jordan Michaels couldn't yet return home. Her job as an intelligence officer and civilian linguist for the NSA demanded most of her time and energy, so she looked forward to the times she could return to Castlevue. The small town, located in Upstate, New York, where both her mother and baby sister still lived, had become her refuge away from the stress of her job.

Unfortunately, the joyful holiday she'd expected to share with her family became something altogether different when her sister failed to come home from high school on the last day before Winter Break. Both the state police and the small town Sheriff's Department were investigating Bridget's disappearance, but still no leads had surfaced.

Jordan burrowed her face even deeper into the fur collar of her coat, as she made her way

through the snow-covered trail the teens often used on their way home from school. It didn't matter that others had searched this spot countless times. She hadn't. She needed to be doing something, anything, to find her sister. And to tell the truth, she didn't think she could handle listening to her mother's heart wrenching sobs another minute.

So here she was, in below freezing temperatures, trudging through two feet of freshly fallen snow in the hopes that something would jump out at her. Some clue the lesser-trained local police had missed.

Sometimes, she wished she lived in the same fairy-tale world her mother seemed to. How many times since her sister's disappearance three weeks ago had her mother called on the Norse God, Odin, for assistance?

It seemed all Jordan's life she'd heard stories about how the mighty war god had seduced her mother and left her pregnant with his child – with her. She snorted. Like the Norse Warrior Gods really existed. If Odin were really her father she'd eat shit for a week... well, on second thought, maybe she would go without chocolate for a week. She couldn't see eating shit as a possibility under any circumstances.

The sky began to darken as heavy clouds moved in, and Jordan picked up her pace. They

were predicting another two to three feet of snow by morning with temperatures well below freezing. She hoped that if her sister still lived, she was at least being held somewhere warm.

Shivers raced down her spine at the thought she might never see Bridget again. So many of her happy memories revolved around the love she had for her sister. To lose her to such a terrible fate when she'd dedicated her life to stopping senseless violence would shatter her.

Jordan exited the wooded path just outside town and spent the next twenty minutes walking toward her car. She'd left it parked in the high school parking lot to walk the path her sister habitually took on her way home. Although the trip had been a waste of her time, it got her out of the house, and for that she needed to be thankful.

With as depressed as her mother had become, she didn't dare leave her home alone. Thank God one of her mother's bingo buddies had stopped by. It had been the first opportunity she'd had to escape in days. And how terribly selfish and cold did that sound?

Jordan grimaced at her own self-centeredness and vowed to think about someone other than herself and her fears for a change.

She had almost reached her car when the muffled sounds of running feet and muted shouts reached her.

Shit... From the sounds of it, someone needed help. The timing was coincidental to say the least. Fate, she'd learned long ago, had a way of making you prove the truth of your words.

Without a thought for her own safety, Jordan ran to the back parking lot of the school, where the noise seemed the loudest. Two teenage boys stood over an elderly man lying on the pavement, their faces twisted in sneers of disgust. Each had a foot planted on his chest, forcing the old man to huddle on the wet ground.

Shit. Where were these kids' parents? How could anyone treat others this way? "Hey, you little shits, get off of him." When neither boy seemed to want to do as she said, she took her cell phone out of her pocket and started dialing 911, all the while moving closer to the trio.

"Nine-One-One. What's your emergency?"

"Two kids are beating up an old man behind the high school. You might want to send someone out here."

With a snap of her wrist she closed her cell phone and closed in on the boys. She probably should have offered the cops more information but she had a very bad feeling things could get messy.

She wanted to be able to kick some ass if she had to, and she couldn't do that if she was standing on the other side of the parking lot, with

a phone to her ear. She just might get some use out of all those hours she'd spent in the gym to keep fit for her job. That thought was almost nice enough to make her smile.

But when the taller of the two boys lifted his foot to stomp on his victim's chest, outrage replaced humor. "You do that, boy, and you won't be just going to jail. You'll have a stop at the clinic first." *'Cause I'm in just the right mood to beat the shit out of someone.*

"Go away, lady. This ain't your business. We're just asking what he did with the missing girl." He scowled down at the old man. "Where's Bridget, you piece of shit? She was a friend of ours."

Her lungs squeezed in her chest. Her sister? They thought this guy took her sister. Rage flooded through her body. Her hands began to shake. Then reality intruded with a thump.

This old man no more took her sister than she did, 'cause he sure as hell wouldn't be hanging around here if he had. Not to mention he looked like he hadn't eaten a decent meal in weeks. His skin was shriveled with age, his one eye filmy with a cataract. A badly frayed black patch covered his other. And if she wasn't mistaken, his clothes hadn't seen this side of the nineteen-seventies.

No, these boys were looking for a victim and the poor old man happened to be in the wrong

place at the wrong time.

"I don't think so, gentlemen. Move away from him, and do it now."

Whether they finally decided to take her seriously, or the sounds of approaching sirens got their attention, the pair quickly backed away from him. "Now, I suggest you two go sit on those steps and wait for the cops to get here." She pointed toward the rear of the school.

"Don't think so, lady," the apparent leader of the duo sneered.

"Yeah, we're outta here," added his companion, his voice wobbling with fear and uncertainty.

Before she could blink, the two hoodlums raced around the opposite side of the building from where she could hear the siren approaching. By the time she turned back toward their victim, he was struggling to sit up.

She rushed to his side, worried he may have gotten seriously injured. He looked so frail. It wouldn't take much to cause internal injuries. "Please, sir, don't move yet. They might have really hurt you."

"Young lady, I'm old, not hurt. The ground is covered in slush and snow and my old bones aren't a bit happy right now."

When he continued to try to stand, Jordan decided to give in. He had lived long enough to know whether he was seriously injured or not and

it had to be damn cold lying on the wet pavement. After pulling the transient to his feet, Jordan wrapped her arm around his waist and led him to her rental car.

He'd be a lot more comfortable, and certainly warmer, sitting in her rental while the police took his statement. Using the remote on her key chain, she started the engine and unlocked the doors while they were still several yards away.

When he looked at her in amazement, Jordan chuckled. "You've got to love technology. Pretty soon you won't even have to steer your car, it will take you right where you need to go."

"In all my years, I've never seen such a wonder."

"This... This is nothing. They now make robots that can vacuum your rugs and mop your floors." Once they reached her car, Jordan gently eased the stranger into the passenger seat and aimed the heating vents toward his shivering body.

"The car should warm up soon. You just sit right here and I'll go flag down the cops."

"Thank you, young lady. It's nice to meet someone compassionate. It's so rare these days."

Jordan watched as his words trailed off and his head dropped to his chest. The poor man was exhausted from his ordeal. Well, she'd let him nap it off in her car while she dealt with the police, then maybe she could talk him into letting her

treat him to a hot meal.

Afraid the approaching siren would wake him, she gently eased the door closed then headed for the police car just pulling into the lot.

Good thing there wasn't a gunman holding her hostage. It'd taken nearly ten minutes for the lone car to arrive and the station was less than two miles away. Shaking her head at the limits of small town police departments, Jordan jogged over to the now parked cruiser and waited for the deputy to call in his arrival.

By the time Jordan managed to tell the officer what she'd witnessed and escorted him to her car, the stranger was gone.

She sighed, hanging her head in frustration. Well, she thought, so much for trying to do the right thing.

* * * *

Less than ten feet away, the Norse God, Odin, smiled in satisfaction. Yes, this child of his would do.

Rubbing his hands in glee, Odin looked down at his grinning wolves. "All is going well, don't you think? Now, on to stage two." With a wink and a chuckle, Odin and his companions disappeared, the stirring wind the only evidence of their departure.

CHAPTER TWO

“This just isn’t my day. Hell, my week.” Staring out his frozen windshield, Ryan Connors, ex-Army soldier and war veteran, contemplated the possibility of just turning around and going back the way he’d come.

No one expected him, and in this weather, going forward on the hopes of finding Castlevew when he couldn’t even see two feet in front of his headlights was foolhardy. But something drove him onward, an urgency he didn’t understand, but felt all the same.

That sense of awareness, that voice of warning, had saved his ass and those of his buddies more than once in the deserts of Iraq. He couldn’t ignore the feeling urging him on, urging him to visit a town he’d never heard of before.

He woke in his apartment just outside of D.C. in a cold sweat this morning with the certain knowledge that he was needed in that small town.

And, like an impetuous fool, he set out, without checking the weather or even grabbing a spare set of clothes and a toothbrush.

The snow began to fall even harder, making it impossible to do more than creep along at a snail's pace. He considered just pulling over and waiting the storm out, but the infernal tugging in his gut told him time was his enemy.

An hour later, and only five miles closer to his destination, Ryan admitted defeat. With visibility reduced to zero, and an engine sputtering with its need for fuel, he eased to the side of the road.

He'd lived in the Northeast most of his life, and other than his rotations in the deserts of war-torn Iraq, he'd never left. Yet, he'd never witnessed a storm blow up this suddenly or leave so much of the white stuff behind this quickly. Even the snowplows must have been caught unawares as he hadn't seen one of them pass him by in hours.

Once off to the side of the road, at least where he thought the shoulder was, he pounded the steering wheel in frustration. With nothing left to do but wait, he sat back in his seat and closed his eyes for some much needed shut-eye.

The tat-tat-tat on his window some time later woke him from his doze. He could clearly see the pink shimmer of dawn just over the cloudless horizon. How long had he slept? Hours must have passed while he waited for the storm to move.

When the tapping rattled his window again, he shook himself out of his stupor, turned on the engine, then lowered the power windows.

A grim faced state trooper leaned his head inside the lowered window and inhaled. What the hell? What was the cop doing? Smelling his breath?

The officer swallowed convulsively a few times, then took a jerky step back. "Sir, I need you to step out of the car."

Ryan nodded in acquiescence, but inside his temper began to rage. This was just completely ridiculous. Don't they ever get stranded motorists out here?

Without making any sudden moves, Ryan stepped out of the car. He didn't serve in Iraq and return relatively unscathed only to end up dead by an edgy cop with an itchy trigger finger.

"What's this about, Officer?"

"I'll ask the questions. Now turn around, spread your legs, and put your hands on the hood of your car."

Ryan sighed but did as he was told. This week just kept getting better and better. While the nervous deputy, who didn't look old enough to shave let alone handle a gun, patted him down, Ryan thought about all the things he could be doing right now.

He could be on his way back to Washington

D.C. to sack out in front of his TV with a brew in one hand and the remote in the other. The Eagles were due to wallop the Packers in just a few hours.

He could be getting naked and horizontal with his brother's secretary who came on to him with irritating regularity. How many times had she shoved her number into the front pocket of his jeans to cop a feel anyway?

He could even be out looking for a job instead of sitting at home contemplating the inside of his navel. He shuddered at the thought.

Hell, anything would be better than this, wouldn't it? And when the cop reached down and squeezed his balls in a search for contraband, he was positive.

"You're clean," he said, stepping back.

Ryan turned and glared at the pubescent officer. "I could have told you that. Mind telling me what that was all about?"

"Sorry about that, sir. But any stranger parked out this way is considered suspicious until proven otherwise."

"Why's that? Is there a Meth lab or something hiding in the woods nearby?"

"No, sir. A teenage girl's gone missing. You're only a mile or so from her home and the storm passed hours ago. I had to check you out, sir."

Ryan sighed. At least the kid had a good

reason. "That's alright. I spent hours driving last night, and the storm moved in so fast, I didn't have time to get to the next town. I guess I fell asleep waiting."

"Another two miles down this road will take you to downtown Castleview, such as it is."

"Thanks, Deputy. Is it all right if I head in now?"

With his nod, Ryan settled himself back behind the wheel. "Good luck on finding that girl. I hope things turn out well."

Such a shame, he thought, as he pulled back onto the road and pointed the car toward town. Glancing in his rearview mirror, he was amused to find the deputy had decided to follow him into town. Not that it mattered. It wasn't like he was on his way to rob the local bank. He couldn't even imagine himself leading a life of crime.

Kidnappers, drug dealers, child molesters, and terrorists had to be the worst dregs of their society. Yet, Uncle Sam sent its soldiers overseas to protect the weak and the oppressed, while here at home, criminals left behind victims of their own. It didn't seem right, which is why he opted not to reenlist. Instead he wanted to do something to help those who needed him here at home.

Could the missing girl be the reason he was here? And if so, how the hell had he known to come to this tiny village just off the Hudson River?

He'd had to do an online map search to find the place when the New York state maps didn't yield a clue as to where to find it.

Was it actually possible his subconscious wasn't what spoke to him to warn him of danger, but something or someone else? Was he being manipulated to do someone else's bidding? The very idea sent shivers of anxiety down his spine.

No, that couldn't be it. The "voice" had never steered him wrong. He'd like to believe that if urged to do something against his moral code, he'd be able to refuse. And thoughts like those are why he'd never really delved into his abilities.

His thoughts came to an abrupt halt at his first glimpse of Castlevew. If he didn't know better, he'd have thought he stepped back in time. Main Street, USA was alive and kicking here.

On one side of the street a one-pump service station sat next to a penny candy store and an old-fashioned pharmacy. Across the street from there, was an honest-to-god malt shop sandwiched between a barbershop and a beauty salon. And in the distance he could see at least three church steeples. "Welcome to Mayberry."

Squealing breaks followed by a hard jolt and screeching metal quickly snatched his attention back to the road and not the local architecture.

"Dammit." This was just not his day. First the cop felt him up and now his engine was

practically sitting in someone else's back seat.

And just his luck, the cop who'd frisked him earlier had witnessed the whole thing and was already stepping out of his vehicle, ticket pad in hand.

No sense sitting in his car. He needed to make sure he hadn't injured the other driver when he rear-ended them.

Ignoring the gaping deputy, Ryan rushed to the other car, but from the looks of things his little car had taken the worst of the damage. The Volvo didn't look to have a scratch.

The driver of the other car slowly opened their door and he thought for sure some little old lady had whiplash now because he'd been gawking at the quaint buildings. That thought quickly flew out of his mind when a goddess stepped out of the car.

The air left his lungs in a rush and a hard-on the size of a Louisville Slugger filled his pants. God, she had the clearest sapphire eyes he'd ever seen. Short black curls framed her pixyish face, and rush red lips Angelina Jolie would be envious of, completed the stunning package.

And the rest of her, though on the tiny side, was absolutely perfect. Even beneath her parka he could see the outline of her lush breasts and diamond hard nipples.

He wiped his suddenly sweaty palms on his

pants and approached her like he would a skittish horse about to be mounted for the first time. And boy, would he like to mount her.

"What the hell is wrong with you?"

"What?"

"You idiot! Why don't you watch where you're going?"

That did it. She may look like a goddess but she sounded like a termagant. And he'd had about all he could take today. "Look, lady, what were you doing stopping in the middle of the damn road? I don't see a stop sign or a traffic signal anywhere around here."

"Maybe I should have just ran that little boy and his ball over then so you could watch that . . . that plastic boobed hussy running down the road?"

"What hussy? For Christ's sake, lady, I was looking at the buildings not some bouncing bimbo."

She snorted. "Like I believe that. You're a man, aren't you?"

"I'll show you just what this man can do." He stepped forward and inhaled her enticing scent. His cock jerked in his pants at the idea of forcing her to submit to him.

A voice he thought he'd heard the last of quickly stopped him in his tracks. "That does it. You both are under arrest for disturbing the

peace.”

Yup. This day was just getting better and better. With a resigned sigh he turned back to the pubescent looking deputy and held out his hands. “Whatever you say, sir. Whatever you say.”

* * * *

As he locked the handcuffs around Ryan Connors’ wrists, Odin smiled. Yes. Things were shaping up perfectly. His chosen warrior and his half-human daughter would be forced into close quarters for at least the next six hours.

He wanted to rub his hands in glee. The life of a God could be very fun indeed. Now, if only Freki and Geri could be here to witness his brilliance. Unfortunately, even his wolves needed to eat sometimes and they were out hunting down breakfast. His body didn’t require either food or sleep, just a steady supply of wine.

“Now, you two come along quietly. I want no trouble out of you.”

“Yes, Deputy Fife.”

The Warrior and the Goddess snickered behind him. At least, they still had a sense of humor.

CHAPTER THREE

Jordan couldn't believe the way her day was going. Instead of spending the next few hours looking for clues to her sister's disappearance, she would be spending God knows how long in some cell.

What the hell had the guy been thinking? She snorted. *Looking at buildings, my ass.* And speaking of asses, the newcomer had one seriously divine looking one of his own. His faded denim jeans cupped his firm cheeks so lovingly, she wanted to reach out and pinch them just to see how muscular they really were.

With one last longing look at his swagger, she leveled her gaze at his back. Or it would have been if he hadn't had his head turned, watching her with a heated intensity of his own.

Man, he was one gorgeous male specimen. He had to stand nearly six and a half feet tall, with a

linebacker's shoulders and a weightlifter's thighs. His hair was black as pitch, cropped close to his head. He had the look of a career military man in bearing and attitude.

But his face was perfection personified. Full lips, quicksilver gray eyes, and a lean face came together so beautifully one would think he'd stepped out of every woman's secret fantasies. Laugh lines around his eyes showed he had a sense of humor, and the scar through his right eyebrow lent him an air of danger and mystery. What more could a woman want in a man?

Her netherparts began to tingle and her pulse quickened. *Oh, this is so not happening to me.* First off, the ass ran into her car. Second, her sister was out there missing, and could be suffering unknown horrors right now. And third, she didn't do the whole man woman thing. It wasn't that she was a lesbian or anything-not that there was anything wrong with that-but she just wasn't good at relationships with men.

Their motives and desires oft times clashed with her need for independence and respect. Hell, she got just as horny as the next woman, but her vibrator didn't issue demands and ultimatums.

Not that she didn't think she'd enjoy raunchy sex if the right person demanded it, but she'd never felt that connection with someone to actually let loose and give herself over to someone

in that way. One day she'd take a lover, but for now, twitching clit or not, it wouldn't be this guy.

With that resolution fully in mind, Jordan continued to follow the child deputy and the inept driver, hoping against hope this was just a bad dream. A dream in which she'd wake any minute now, safe at her home outside D.C., with the certain knowledge none of the events of the past weeks had ever occurred. *Ha! That's as likely as the Packers winning the Super Bowl this season.*

When they entered the reception area of the two-celled sheriff's office, all eyes immediately focused on the trio. *Talk about being the center of attention.*

Tell me about it.

Jordan stumbled, stopped in mid-step and looked up at her car's assailant in slack-jawed horror. *What the hell?* She couldn't have heard what she thought she had. It was stress, just stress.

If you think so. But, lady, I've been hearing your thoughts about vibrators, and raunchy sex for the last five minutes. I don't know what the fuck is going on, but anytime you want to take that lover, you just stop on by my place and I'll give you a ride like you'd never believe.

Jordan could feel the blood rush to her face. Hell, her face wasn't the only place blood was rushing to, but she wasn't about to admit to that. Not out loud and certainly not to him.

You... you... pervert. What else could she say?

Raunchy sex was on her mind. But, how could it not wander in that direction when the man had a drool-worthy ass and shoulders more than capable of sweeping a woman off her feet? Besides, how was she supposed to know he was some kind of psychic wunderkind or something?

Hey, I wasn't the one thinking about sex. He paused. Well, maybe I was. But not where you could hear it, anyway.

You ass. Stay out of my damn mind.

Hey, I'm not the one peeking inside your head. It feels like a hot spike stabbing my brain every time one of your wayward ideas intrudes. So, keep your damn thoughts to yourself.

If what he said was true, she had no idea what to do. It's not like this had ever happened to her before. She was probably the least psychic person she knew. Hell, a banana could predict the future better than she could.

A banana?

It's just a figure of speech. And would you stop that?

I'll stop commenting as soon as you stop broadcasting.

"Are you two done glaring at each other? I have a patrol to get back to. When the sheriff gets back from lunch, he can book you. I have better things to do. Like towing your cars out of the middle of the street and looking for a missing girl."

As though he'd just realized who she was, the

police officer looked her in the eye, a frown of confusion marring his face. "Hey, aren't you that missing girl's sister?"

"Yes. I am. You think you could just write us a couple tickets or something? I really need to be with my mother right now."

"I'm sorry, miss. I just couldn't do that. You two were causing a public disturbance and I need to do my job, no matter who's involved."

Jordan sighed. "I understand, Deputy." At least it was worth a try.

Nice try.

Oh, shut up.

"Deputy, if it's not too much trouble, could you look out for an elderly transient while you're doing your rounds this morning. That's what I was doing in town today to begin with. He was attacked by some kids yesterday and I wanted to make sure he was okay."

"That's right nice of you, ma'am. If I see him, I'll make sure he's tucked up somewhere nice and warm tonight."

"Thanks."

"No problem." He walked over to the first of the two cells and unlocked the door. "Now, in you both go."

"What? There are two cells. You can't put us in there together."

"Of course I can. We need that one open in case

a suspect is found in your sister's abduction."

"But... But... I don't even know his name."

And like an obliging citizen, the ass held out his hand for an introduction. "I'm Ryan Connors."

She grudgingly shook his hand and muttered, "Jordan Michaels." After quickly dropping his hand, and with shoulders slumped, she walked into the cell and plopped onto the nearest metal bunk.

She knew when she was beat and life was too short to fight a war she couldn't win. Besides, if she did have to be locked up with someone, better to have a piece of eye candy to ogle than Big Bertha and her toothless grin.

Ryan's answering snicker sent a shiver of longing down her back. If just the sound of his voice made her quiver, what would his touch feel like?

"Lady, you sure do have an active imagination."

"Do you have to speak? Can't you just sit on your bunk, or hell, even the floor, and be quiet? I have to think."

"Sure, I can do that. But you might want to stop thinking naughty thoughts. Your nipples look like they're about to rip holes through that nice sweater you're wearing."

Her face flamed in embarrassment. "Do you mind? For God's sake, there are people that can

hear you sitting not five feet away." *If you're going to talk in my mind, that would have been a damn good time to do it, you know.*

"Sorry."

But, by the gleam of laughter in his eyes, he wasn't the least bit contrite. For some reason, this Neanderthal liked to push her buttons. Fine, he could be that way. She'd just ignore him until the sheriff returned, then she'd get the hell out of here and away from this fruitcake.

Hey, that wasn't nice. Not nice at all.

She snorted.

"I was just trying to distract you." His voice grew serious, his expression stern. "I'm really sorry about your sister. If someone from my family had disappeared you'd know as sure as shit I wouldn't want to be locked away, where there's no chance I'd be able to help. I really do apologize for running into the back of you."

Jordan sighed and leaned her head back against the bars. "It's okay. It's partly my fault anyway. I was searching the alleys for that homeless guy I mentioned and didn't see the kid until it was almost too late to stop. It's not like you had a whole hell of a lot of warning."

"Still, if it wasn't for me, you'd be out there doing something, instead of sitting in here worrying about things you can't control."

Ryan's voice was laced with self-loathing and

her heart went out to him. He may seem like an arrogant ass, but he really did feel bad about the accident.

"Look, if you really want to make it up to me, you can help me find my missing mugging victim when we get out of here. I need to make sure he's alright at least, since I can't do anything for my sister until she's found."

After a few seconds pause, Ryan's voice grew deep and thoughtful. "I might be able to do more than that."

The hairs on the back of Jordan's neck and along her arms quivered. Whatever he was about to say would somehow change her life. She didn't know how she knew that, or why all of a sudden she seemed to have these abilities, but somehow she did. "What do you mean?"

"I might just be able to get your sister back for you."

Her stomach clenched in painful spasms. Her heart thumped against her chest in throbbing surges. After a moments silence, she licked her suddenly dry lips. Her voice wobbled with both hope and disbelief. "How?"

CHAPTER FOUR

Ryan hesitated, unsure how to begin. “You’re going to think I’m crazy, and honestly, in your place, I’d think so too.”

Jordan shrugged and lay back, resting on her elbows. “Hell, I think we’ve already established that crazy seems to be the order of the day. Or have you forgotten my *gift*?”

“Funny you should call it that. I think I may have one too, though I wouldn’t admit that to anyone outside this cell.”

“You think? You don’t know?”

He could tell by the way her lips curled as she spoke, she doubted every word coming out of his mouth. “Look, this isn’t easy for me to admit, alright? Up until I *heard* you, I thought my gut reactions and survival instincts were just that...instincts.”

“And now you think it’s something more?”

She sounded so skeptical. He wondered if she’d

ever trust him enough to allow him to help her. "I think it's a possibility. And if I can use it to help you find your sister then perhaps I can use it to help others too. I need a new direction in my life and I can't see myself not helping those in need. It's why I became a soldier. It's why I came home."

Jordan ran her fingers through her hair, closed her eyes, and sighed. "That sounds all well and good, Boy Scout, but—"

"Look, what do you have to lose by allowing me the chance to help you?" He needed her to agree to his aid. That driving need burned brightly in his gut. Somehow, she would need his help in retrieving her sister. He knew it in the deepest part of his soul, just as he knew they'd soon become lovers.

He'd never before believed in fate, but perhaps everything he'd done in his life had led him to this moment in time, to this woman. And perhaps he hadn't gotten enough sleep. That must be it, because he was beginning to sound like a sentimental sap.

Stop looking for excuses, young man. You know you have a gift. You know it's time you started using it.

Shocked at hearing a powerful voice reverberate through his mind, Ryan gasped. He could feel the authority of the man's voice hit the nerve endings along his spine. The hair on the

nape of his neck stood on end, and even his fingertips and toenails began to tingle.

Jordan looked at him, her eyebrows quirked in confusion. "What?"

"What? Oh, nothing." Unable to tell her within earshot of the watching cops, he decided to speak to her telepathically. *Not only am I hearing you in my head now, but someone else has decided to speak to me as well. Someone very opinionated at that.*

Do you know who it is?

Ryan couldn't help but laugh. The three cops sitting behind their desks all turned in his direction. With their mystified expressions he'd obviously laughed out loud. If he kept this up, they'd think him crazy. *Of course I don't know who it is. Do you think I hear people speak to me like this all the time? Hell, in the last hour, the two of you have managed to shock the hell out of me by doing so.*

Sitting up, Jordan blinked then gave him a slow and devastating smile. *I bet I could really shock you if I tried hard enough.*

Are you flirting with me?

She straightened her back and glared over at him. Well, that didn't bode well for the flirting. He sighed. *Guess not?*

No. I was going to tell you that you want to hear shocking, how's this for shocking? My mother thinks that the Norse God, Odin, is my father. She always told me Odin had a habit of blaring his opinions into her mind, whether she welcomed them or not. What you

said just stirred that particular memory is all.

Odin? Your mother believes that Odin fathered you?

Like I said, I told you it would shock you.

Ryan tilted his head and really looked at her. *You know, you do have this otherworldly vibe thing going.*

She snorted. *You're not trying to tell me you believe her, are you?*

I didn't say that, but after today, my mind isn't as closed to the seemingly impossible as it used to be.

Jordan just shook her head, and leaned back against the wall, closing her eyes. *Whatever. Just wake me up when the sheriff shows up so we can get out of here.*

Speaking of which, how long did the sheriff get for lunch anyway? The accident happened well over an hour ago. "Hey, Officer?"

"Yeah, what do you want?"

"When do you expect the sheriff to get back here?"

"Well, today is his biweekly luncheon at the nursing home over in the next county. He won't be in the office until at least three this afternoon."

Ryan looked down at his wristwatch. "That's over four hours from now."

The slightly overweight and balding deputy shrugged his shoulders and went back to one-finger typing on the keyboard of his computer.

"So much for getting some breakfast, I guess." When no one deemed to respond to his sarcastic

comment, he decided to follow Jordan's lead, and closed his eyes.

Perhaps when he woke, he'd find himself still in his car along the side of the road or better yet in his apartment in D.C. But even as he thought it, he knew nothing about today was a dream.

That's right, boy. Get some rest. You're going to need it before all is said and done.

Choosing to ignore whoever kept intruding into his thoughts, Ryan settled back further against the cool wall and tried to sleep. But questions and worries kept him from getting the deep sleep he needed.

If Odin is the one speaking to me, why has he spent the last few years keeping my ass in one piece?

If he remembered his Norse history, Odin's mission was to fill his hall, *Valhalla*, with soldiers to fight in the battle of Ragnarok. This battle was supposed to be the doom of the Gods and the beginning of the end of the Cosmos. So why save a soldier he could use in this great and mythical battle? Hell, why was he even worrying about this? The chance that Odin was Jordan's father and for some reason chose him to help her sister was preposterous.

At this point, nothing about this situation made sense and until he got some decent rest it wouldn't. With that thought firmly in his mind, Ryan drifted off into a restless sleep.

"Rise and shine, ladies and gents."

The familiar voice of Sheriff Dunning jolted Jordan from her fevered dreams. Having never had erotic dreams before, she was unsettled to glance up and see the figure of her heated imaginings looking into her eyes. She could feel the fiery blush work itself up her neck and flare across her cheeks, and quickly glanced away only to clash with the humorous gaze of the sheriff.

Once again she forced her gaze to the floor. No way could she look either of them in the eye after imagining, in great detail, the feel of every vein in Ryan's cock as he pounded her into oblivion. The things he'd done to her body in her dreams had left her panties soaked and her cunt aching with emptiness. She'd just met the man, been involved in a car accident and had a missing sister, what was wrong with her?

"So, why are you locked in my cell, Ms. Michaels?"

Chastising herself for letting her mind drift, she lifted her head, met the sheriff's gaze. "Your deputy arrested us for disturbing the peace, though come to think of it, he didn't even bother with paperwork, just stuck us in here and told us to wait for you."

The sheriff turned and glanced around at the three deputies sitting at their desks. "Which one of these blockheads did it?"

She scanned the room and swiftly determined their arresting deputy was still out on patrol. "I guess he's still on patrol."

When Sheriff Dunning gave her a confused look, Jordan began to get a bad feeling. Thankfully, Ryan chose that moment to speak up.

"You do have another deputy on duty don't you?"

When the sheriff shook his head, her stomach seemed to sink to her feet. She licked her lips in nervous apprehension. "You don't have another deputy? Not even someone augmenting your regular officers?"

"No, ma'am. The four of us are the only police officers in Castlevue. The State Police patrol the streets and answer nine-one-one calls after hours."

Then who the hell were we interacting with? He wasn't the kidnapper, was he?

It's possible, but I'm beginning to wonder if your mom might know more about what's going on than you've given her credit for.

You're talking about her belief that Odin's my father?

It's looking more and more possible. When her lips lifted into a sneer, he interjected, He is said to be able to shift into any person to blend in while he travels.

Well, where has he been for the last twenty-six years of my life then?

Hey, don't snipe at me. I didn't say he was a good father, just that it's a possibility he's yours.

All she wanted to do was wring his neck. He didn't actually believe this nonsense, did he?

It's not nonsense, young lady. Now, get yourself out of that cell and get to your mother's house. No one even bothered to tell her where you were and she's worried sick.

Jordan didn't know what to react to first. The strangely compelling voice, or the fact that a stranger dared to issue her orders.

You are not real.

If your imagination could snort at you, then hers chose that moment to do so. Had she finally let the worry of the last few weeks snap her mind completely? Then again, would she question her mental state if she had slipped a cog?

You keep telling yourself that. And if you don't say something to Sheriff Dunning soon he's going to start to worry about you. You've had a blank look on your face for several moments now.

Jordan quickly scanned the cell. *You can see me?*

I'm a God. Of course I can see you. Now stop asking me stupid questions and take Ryan to your mother. She knows more than she thinks and Ryan can do more than he knows.

Now, isn't that totally vague and unhelpful? When she received no response, she once again focused on the sheriff. "It seems someone decided to play a cruel joke on us then. Do you mind just letting us out of here? My mother has to be worried sick that I haven't returned home yet."

"Oh, dear. She doesn't know you're here?"

"No, Sir. And it's been hours."

"Well, let's get you on your way then."

He turned toward the deputies seated behind him. "I want every one of you to get out there and find out just who thought he'd get away with impersonating an officer. At least one of you must have gotten a look at him." He started to turn away then stopped. "Oh, and call a cab for Ms. Michaels before you head out. She's been locked up here long enough."

Turning back to Ryan, he frowned. "Where are you heading, Son?"

"I'm taking a vacation. I thought I'd find a bed and breakfast or a little motel nearby and relax."

"Well, you could do that. Surely you could, but there is a problem with that."

Sheriff Dunning paused his explanation, took a pack of gum out of his front pocket and unwrapped a piece. Once he folded it up and popped it in his mouth, he offered each of them a stick. When they both shook their heads, he shrugged, put the rest of the pack in his pocket and continued.

"The state police and the FBI just took over all the rooms at the only bed and breakfast we have, and the motel is closed down during the holidays. It won't reopen for at least another week or so."

"And there is no place else?"

"Not close by. Further up in the Adirondacks there are several campgrounds with cabins to rent if peace and quiet is what you're looking for."

Jordan knew she was going to regret this, but what else could she do. "You can stay out at the Double M with us. It's plenty big and we're far enough out that you can get that rest you came looking for."

When Ryan flashed his gorgeous white smile and his dimples made an appearance, Jordan was certain that life would never be the same again. And it scared her to death.

"Well, that's right neighborly of you, Ms. Michaels," added the sheriff.

"It most certainly is, Sheriff Dunning. And I can't wait until I can thank her properly."

As they left the cell behind and headed toward the front door to wait for the cab, she had to wonder...why did something so erotic and tempting also sound so ominous?

CHAPTER FIVE

The ride to the Double M farm was fraught with tension, yet Ryan couldn't think of any better way to accomplish his goals. He needed to know what leads the investigators were following as well as any information Jordan's mother may unwittingly still have that might locate her missing daughter.

Of course, being in close proximity to Jordan would also further his chances at moving them from strangers sharing a house, to lovers sharing a bedroom. And if his throbbing dick was any indication, he very much wanted to become her lover as soon as possible.

Even thinking about taking Jordan as a lover made it nearly impossible for him to sit still. He must not have been doing as good a job at that as he thought though because she kept sliding curious and oft times amused glances in his

direction.

With a frustrated sigh, Ryan watched the scenery pass by. The two-lane blacktopped road changed to a one-lane dirt road and finally narrowed to a pot-holed dirt track that led to a rambling white farmhouse. What once may have been a small two-story farmhouse appeared to have gone through many additions, both upward and outward. He didn't quite know what to make of it, but several adjectives came to mind.

Unsure just what to say, Ryan stepped out of the car and waited for Jordan to join him. "Well, it's interesting."

Jordan shook her head and chuckled. "You can say it. It's a monstrosity."

"You'd think they'd at least try to match the siding each time they added something to it. I see both white and pink siding, cedar shingles, and even what appears to be part of a log-home."

Jordan turned toward him just as the sun reflected off her eyes, making them sparkle. His heart stuttered and when she smiled, he swore her sapphire gaze captured the beauty of the heavens themselves. "And you've only seen the front. Each generation in our family has added something to the house, and the original farmhouse was built in the late Sixteen Hundreds, so that's a lot of additions."

"I'm almost afraid to find out."

"Nah, it's not so bad. The house itself used to be a living museum, but once it passed to my mother she sent all the antiques into storage and completely gutted and remodeled the interior. It's only the outside she hasn't changed."

After paying the cabbie, and waving him away, Ryan shoved his hands in his coat pockets. The urge to reach out and pull her into his arms was nearly irresistible and he didn't think she was ready for that yet.

Once the cloud of dust settled, Ryan followed Jordan up the porch steps and waited while she unlocked the house. "So, why hasn't she changed the outside then?"

Jordan continued to fuss with the rusty lock, and just as the key turned she glanced his way. "She figured that her ancestors were probably rolling in their graves because of the remodeling of the interior, she didn't want to stir their ghosts by doing more than was necessary."

Jordan said this with a lighthearted chuckle but he felt her underlying tension. There was no doubt she loved her mother, but he didn't get the sense that she understood her.

With a nonchalant wave of her hand, Jordan ushered him into the spacious entry. From the outside, you'd think hillbillies had designed the house, but the interior shouted elegance and sophistication.

The entryway was spacious and extended upwards all the way to the second floor. Pale ivory walls on both sides of the hall held black and white photos, both modern and old-fashioned. A beautiful archway covered in large river rock led into the living area of the house. All in all, the house promised both luxury and comfort. "This is amazing, Jordan."

Jordan sighed, slipped off her heavy white parka and hung it on a peg next to the door. "Yeah. I miss not being here when I'm in D.C. working. When I was born she had the whole house remodeled to keep me safe. I kept asking her where she came up with the cash as a single parent to do all this, and all she'd ever tell me was that my father took care of it."

Ryan shrugged, then slipped out of his jacket and hung it on the peg next to hers. "Maybe he did."

"Momma, I'm home," Jordan hollered as she walked beneath the arch and toward the rest of the house.

Ryan followed close behind, anxious to both explore his temporary home and to meet the woman who may have birthed the child of a Norse God. When he spotted pictures of a much younger Jordan holding a tiny newborn hanging above the fireplace, he headed toward them.

"Momma, Momma, where are you?"

When Jordan's voice shifted from welcoming to curious and then edged toward panic, Ryan hurried to catch up to the worried woman.

"Where are you, Momma?"

From around the corner, a harried woman, not much taller than Jordan's own five-foot frame, rushed toward them. Her baggie sweats and oversized fleece sweatshirt in no way hid the voluptuous woman beneath.

Though in her late forties, she still carried the bloom of youth. A rosy flush spread across her cheeks and her long black tresses had the tousled look of a recently well-loved woman. Her midnight blue eyes had a slumberous tilt, and her rosebud lips were still wet and swollen. Was there a man somewhere in the house right now?

He'd gotten the impression from Jordan that her mother lived alone. Did she have a secret lover? And why keep a lover secret at all?

Jordan didn't seem to see anything amiss about her mother. Maybe because as a man, he'd been the cause of such a becoming flush on a woman's skin, he could recognize it for what it was. "Where were you, Momma?"

"I'm sorry, sweetie. I was just lying down for a nap, and didn't hear you come in. Worrying about Bridget the way I've been, I guess I was more tired than I realized."

Jordan pulled her mother into a hug, then

stepped back and dropped her arms. "That's okay, Momma. I wanted to introduce you to Ryan. I invited him up from D.C. to help with the investigation."

You little liar. Ryan stepped forward and held out his hand. When she placed her hand in his, he lifted it to his lips and placed a chaste kiss upon it. "It's nice to meet you, Mrs. Michaels."

"Oh, pshaw... Just call me Mary. I never married."

"A beauty like yourself... I don't believe it."

Who's lying now? Aren't you laying it on a little thick?

Quiet. You may not have noticed, but she smells of sex and I doubt she told you she was seeing someone.

No. No, she didn't.

"I'm so pleased you could come out and help Jordan. Do you two work with each other?"

"In a manner of speaking, ma'am. I'm sure you understand that I can't go into mission details, though."

"Of course, of course." Mary backed up and straightened the hem of her top. "If you follow me, I can show you to the spare room." She took a few steps in the directions of the winding staircase, then stopped, a questioning look on her face. "Don't you have any luggage?"

"No, Ma'am. I've been out of the country and just got word about your crisis. I jumped in my car

and headed out without even stopping to pack a bag."

"Then where's the bag you had while you traveled?"

Answer that one, hotshot.

Shush. "Can you believe it... the airline lost my luggage."

He wasn't sure she believed him, but Mary nodded and started back up the stairs. He left Jordan behind, but he could feel her watching his ass until he reached the top. Only once he rounded the corner did the sense of being watched dissipate.

"Is it okay if I put you next to Jordan? A bathroom connects the two rooms, so you'll have to remember to lock the door when you go in there."

"Sure, that's no problem." He pretended to look in the closets and even went so far as to duck his head into the bathroom, before turning back to her. "So, is it just the three of us here until we get Bridget back?"

Mary, who still stood just outside the room, glanced down the hall as though looking for someone, then turned back to him. "What? Oh, yes, it's just the three of us, for now."

"Is everything okay, I mean other than the obvious distress over your daughter's disappearance?"

A guilty flush spread across her cheeks and she refused to meet his gaze. "Yes, of course. Is there anything you'll need then?"

"No, ma'am. I'll probably call the cab back in a while and have him take me to the nearest rental car agency. I had a bit of car trouble in town."

"Well, there's no sense going through all the trouble. Just use one of the vehicles in the barn."

"I don't want to put you out."

"Oh, it's no trouble. There are more cars in there than I'll ever use."

"Then I'll gladly accept your offer. I think I'm going to splash some water on my face then I'll be right down. Perhaps you can show me around this magnificent house of yours?"

"Oh, I'd love to, but I have something I need to take care of. I'm sure Jordan will show you around. She knows the history of the place as well as I do, if not better." With a jaunty wave of her hand, Mary walked down the hall and slipped into the last room on the right.

Now isn't that curious?

Yes, it is, young man. Less than thirty minutes after stepping through the door you've already noticed the oddness of my Mary's behavior.

Your Mary? You do realize don't you that she knows something about what's going on? And from what I've witnessed she isn't your anything at the moment.

Of course, I do. I know exactly what's going on. But

until a neutral third party offers proof, I can't act against another God, based upon my visions.

Another God is involved?

Just find Bridget. She may not be my daughter, but she's important to Jordan and she is my daughter, albeit one I thought dead these last twenty-six years.

How can you not know your own daughter lived? Aren't you supposed to be the all-knowing father of the Gods?

That's what I brought you here to find out. Your loyalty and integrity among your fellow soldiers will stand as proof that your words ring true when the time comes to present your evidence to the other Gods.

Ryan swallowed past the lump in his throat, and dropped onto the bed. And what happens if my words are believed false?

You die.

Oh, joy. Ryan dropped his head into his hands and focused on the pale gray carpeting beneath his feet

The choice is yours, Ryan Connors. Will you fight for a stranger even knowing that in the end, no matter whether justified or not, you may still die?

CHAPTER SIX

Ryan didn't need to stop and think about his answer. He'd dedicated his life to helping others, regardless of his own safety. That wasn't to say he was reckless, or he had a death wish, just that his personal safety didn't compare to a missing child's.

I'll not let this child remain missing, to be tortured and brutalized. I will find her and bring her home, whether it leads to my death or not.

Then get some rest, my son. Your mission will not be an easy one, and many obstacles will stand in your way before all is said and done. The road you travel will be neither straight nor easy, but will lead you to a future you won't have planned for.

Now, isn't that perfectly vague of you?

I am a God. Vague predictions are a specialty.

Odin's chuckle reverberated down his spine, sending goose bumps pebbling along his arms. With a shake of his head, Ryan stood up, walked to the bathroom, and splashed cold water on his

face.

After a few seconds of watching the water circle the drain, Ryan lifted his head, and stared blindly into the mirror. Time to face this mystery head-on. And the first thing he needed to do? Figure out who the unknown lover is and what role he played in this disappearance.

With a firm nod of his head, he reached down, turned off the taps and dried his hands on the towel hanging to the right of the sink. *Jordan?*

When he received no response back, he shook his head and decided to find her the old-fashioned way – by snooping.

As he made his way toward the stairway, Ryan poked his head through the open doors that lined the hall. He really wanted to search the room Mary entered, but she may still be in there and he couldn't chance her finding him spying on her – not yet, anyway.

First things first, search for Jordan then the mysterious lover. Only after he'd snuck a peak through all the open doors, did he head down the stairs.

He found Jordan just inside the living room, the picture he'd admired earlier clutched in her hand. A trail of tears flowed down her cheeks, as she silently wept. Her shoulders shook with her suppressed sobs, and his heart went out to her.

Without a word spoken between them, Ryan

walked behind her, wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her back against his chest. They stood there for long, silent minutes and when her tears finally began to slow and the shuddering began to lessen, he turned her in his arms.

“Are you all right, Jordan?”

Her pain-filled gaze met his and he swore in that moment he could see straight into her soul. “You feel as though you’ve failed her, don’t you?”

Her eyes welled with tears and her voice cracked, “I should have been there to pick her up that afternoon, but I chose to stay and finish translating and transcribing an intercepted communication. If I’d left on time, I would have been here to pick her up from school.”

“You can’t blame yourself.” Unable to witness the pain in her eyes a moment longer, Ryan pulled her back into his arms, his hand holding her head against his pounding heart. Even though they were practically strangers to each other, it felt right to hold her in her distress.

With his other arm wrapped around her waist and his face nestled into her curly locks, Ryan did his best to console her. Hell if he knew if he was doing it right though. All he could offer her at the moment was the warmth of his body and maybe some words of reassurance. “We can’t know what’s going to happen, Jordan. You could have gotten held up in traffic just as easily, and still not

managed to pick Bridget up. Besides, the blame lies on the shoulders of her kidnapper and no one else's. You're smart enough to know this."

Jordan nestled her face further against his chest and heaved a wrenching sigh. "You're right. I know that in my mind, but my heart..."

"Our hearts oft times do what they damn well please."

"Exactly."

Ryan's breath hitched when he felt Jordan place a tiny kiss against his beating heart. As though she just realized what she'd done, she tensed in his arms. He could feel her emotional withdrawal, and although he'd rather hold her, he knew she needed to gain a little distance. With reluctance, Ryan stepped back and loosened his hold.

"Are you all right now?"

Jordan licked her lips, took a deep breath and nodded. "Yeah, I'm good. Thanks."

"No problem." Ryan raised his gaze from hers and quickly scanned the room. "Is there some place we can go, somewhere we can be alone?"

He could see the confusion in her eyes. She probably wanted to know just why they couldn't talk here. But the simple truth was, he didn't know if her mother could be trusted or not, never mind the fact her lover could be lurking around a corner.

Until he discovered whom Mary was secretly

seeing, they'd need to keep the details of the investigation to themselves. *Trust me. We could talk telepathically but if someone came upon us, they'd get suspicious. Better to pretend we're off on a rendezvous than draw suspicion right now.*

I understand. "There's a gazebo about a hundred yards behind the house. It's a nice place to relax. Sometimes you can watch the deer grazing in the fields."

"Sounds good." Ryan reached down and took her hand. Keeping it firmly in his, he led her to the entryway where their coats still hung by the door. After helping her don her parka, and putting on his own, he once again took her hand in his and led her out into the frigid early evening air.

Don't you think you're taking this rendezvous idea of yours a little too seriously?

Ryan looked down at Jordan. He could feel a smile stretching the corners of his mouth, but he just couldn't help it. It felt so right to hold her hand, their fingers intertwined as they followed the stone walkway that ran behind the rambling old house. And how juvenile did that sound?

What do you mean?

The whole handholding bit, the intimate smiles. You know exactly what I mean.

Oh, that. Well, I have to admit I like the feel of your hand grasped in mine, so shoot me.

Jordan shook her head, but didn't try to pull her hand away. That was a good sign. Right?

Damn, soon he'd be acting like a kid in junior high too nervous to ask the most popular girl in class to the winter dance.

Although the January air had a bit of a nip to it, the waning sunlight let off just enough heat that they'd be relatively comfortable during their discussion. So long as the wind remained calm, they'd have a good thirty minutes before the cold chased them inside.

For some reason, Ryan pictured a tiny rundown gazebo with peeling white paint that seated four on a good day, but he was amazed at the beautiful structure before him. Completely glassed in, the Gazebo could easily seat ten and could be used year round.

Inside, wicker loungers and rocking chairs were situated amongst potted plants, a refreshment bar, and even a portable outdoor heater. Hanging vines hung from the rafters, and vibrantly colored pillows lent the room a wonderfully homey feeling.

"This is not what I expected to find out here, Jordan."

"I know. This wasn't here when I graduated high school and went off to college. I came back home last summer for the Fourth of July and found it when I went to stroll through the corn fields."

"Your mother didn't tell you she had it built?"

"No, and when I mentioned it after my walk, she acted like she had no idea what I was talking about."

Ryan walked to the wicker rocker closest to the outdoor heater and sat down, pulling Jordan onto his lap with him. When she started to rise, he wrapped his arms around her. "Please. Just let me hold you. I know we're strangers, but believe it or not, I need to have you near me right now."

"This isn't near you; this is on top of you."

Ryan sighed. "Do you really want to get up?"

He didn't think she was going to answer. At least, not the way she did. She dropped the hand she'd tried to pry his arms away with, and sighed. "I don't understand what's going on. Not with my sister. Not with my mother. And definitely not this insane attraction I feel toward you."

His breath hitched, his heart pounded, and he swore his legs were shaking. After clearing his throat, Ryan gave her waist a quick squeeze. "Well, at least I know I'm not the only one suffering from it then."

Jordan gave a mirthless chuckle. "No, you aren't."

As though by admitting her attraction freed something within her, Jordan relaxed in his embrace and rested her head against his chest.

After a few minutes of contented silence, Ryan felt Jordan tense in his arms. "Okay, tell me why

we needed to be out here away from the house."

He dreaded this conversation, but he couldn't put it off. She deserved to know everything he did. "Your mother had a lover hidden upstairs, then denied it."

Ryan could feel the tension running through her. He even thought he could feel her pain, but that was insane. Wasn't it?

"How do you know?" she asked, her voice trembling.

He nuzzled his chin against her temple then dropped a quick kiss there, before straightening his spine and pulling her closer into his embrace. He knew she could feel his turgid cock beneath her ass but when she didn't pull away from him, he relaxed.

"When she showed me to my room, she wouldn't step inside. She kept looking up and down the hall, as though expecting someone to step out of one of the rooms. Then she couldn't leave me fast enough, even refusing to show me the rest of the house, so that she could slip through a cracked door at the end of the hall."

"What door at the end of the hall?"

"There is a door, at the end of the hall, on the right hand side."

Jordan jerked upright and turned to face him. A look of abject horror crossed her face.

"That can't be."

Now he was confused. "And why not?"

"Ryan, that door should never be opened. It's been locked for years and years and the key lost. It's the only room in the house my mother refused to remodel. In fact, no one has walked through that door in more than two hundred years."

He had a really nasty feeling churning in his gut. He was not going to like what he heard next, and he didn't have to be a seer to know that. "Why has it been closed off?"

Jordan gulped, looked away. Her face was pale, her lips drawn into a thin line, when she turned back to him. "It's said that if ever a person were to enter that room, they'd forever consign their souls to the Goddess Hel. Whoever enters that room is never the same and soon their loved ones suffer tragic and gruesome ends."

He shot her a confused look and she elaborated.

"Hel is known as the Queen of the Underworld...or of Hell."

"And your mother knows about this legend, this curse upon your family?"

Jordan grimaced. "Yes, she knows. Her grandmother several times removed entered that room one day, and never came out. She disappeared. Within three weeks, her husband, oldest son, and daughter all died in various tragic and bizarre accidents. No one ever went in there again."

Ryan pulled Jordan's stiff body back into his embrace, hoping she'd find comfort in his arms. Several tense minutes later, their grim thoughts were interrupted by an ear-piercing shriek of such intense fear, they both jumped to their feet and raced back to the house—back to Mary.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Jordan ran toward the house as though Hel's hounds were nipping at her heels. She could feel Ryan's breath against her neck, could feel his reassuring presence at her back and thanked the Gods she wasn't alone. She couldn't imagine what could cause her mother to scream so horribly, but whatever it was, it couldn't be good.

She slammed through the front door, and raced up the steps. Her mother's voice echoed up and down the hall. The screams weren't coming from her room, but the cursed room Ryan had said he'd seen her enter.

It hurt to discover that Ryan's words to her were in fact truth. In the back of her mind, she wanted to believe he'd been mistaken. That her mother wouldn't do something so foolish as to jeopardize either herself or the lives of the daughters she professed to love.

When they reached the forbidden room, Jordan

tried to turn the handle. It wouldn't budge.

Her mother's muffled voice could be heard through the door. Jordan turned to look at Ryan when she heard yet another muted shout. This time, they could hear a little of what Mary was saying through the locked door. "I said stay back, damn you."

"Dammit," Jordan muttered, still trying to get the doorknob to turn. She rammed her shoulder against the door, but it didn't even shake in its frame.

"Here, get out of the way. I'll kick in the door and go in first."

Jordan shook her head. "No, I can't let you do that. If you go in there, you chance losing your soul to Hel."

"The curse is against your family, Jordan. The chances are higher you'll be attacked if you go in there."

She knew he was right, but how could she ask him to put himself in harms way. He didn't know her. He didn't know her mother or Bridget.

Get over yourself, Jordan. I'm going in there. Now, get out of my way.

When she apparently didn't move fast enough for him, he lifted her by her waist and set her aside. He lifted his foot, and just as he kicked it through the door, shattering the bottom half, his voice whispered through her mind. *And, Jordan, I*

know you a lot better than you think.

Ryan continued to kick his way through the door, until it was shattered enough that he could squeeze through the opening he'd made. "Shit," she heard him mutter. Unable to stand the suspense, and figuring the danger was at a minimal since there were no sounds of fighting, Jordan crawled through the shattered door, and right between Ryan's spread thighs.

She could just imagine what they looked like. Him standing at the shattered door, his legs wide, hands on hips, with her head, poking out between his legs.

Jordan's gaze immediately sought out her mother. She found her, naked but for the sheet she'd wrapped around her, with her back against the headboard of a wrought iron bed.

"You said you wanted an animal in bed and when I oblige, you scream your fucking head off. Women!"

Jordan swung her head toward the irate male voice. An ash-gray demon—or what she assumed was a demon—stood at the foot of the bed, a furious expression on his face. She gasped, and met Mary's horrified gaze from across the room. Anger and disgust at her mother warred with fear for everyone's safety. How could her mother sleep with such a creature?

He looked like he stepped straight from a

child's nightmare. Ivory tusks protruded from his bony forehead. His elongated face ended in a pointy chin. She could see his razor sharp teeth when he snarled his displeasure. But the red beady stare that met hers almost stopped her heart.

Good God! What had her mother done and how in the hell was she going to get them all out of this?

"Oh, get a grip, woman. I'm not going to attack you. And for Goddess' sake, get the hell out from between your man's legs. My dick is hard enough, even with your mother's caterwauling. I don't need to see such a provocative sight right now."

As though his words had a magnetic affect, her gaze immediately dropped to his cock—his very large, very intimidating cock.

Jordan swallowed. How the hell had her mom taken a dick that huge inside her? It had to be thicker than Ryan's wrist, and longer than his damn forearm. *Jordan, you're going to give me a damn complex if you keep staring at him that way.*

She snorted. *More like give myself nightmares.* When it appeared the demon creature really wasn't going to attack, Jordan backed out from between Ryan's legs. When Ryan continued to block the doorway, she reached in front of her and pinched his ass. "You can let me in now. I think I deserve some answers. Like why my mother

opened a gateway to Hell in the middle of our house?"

Ryan slapped her hand away from his ass, but did step aside and let her enter the room on her feet this time rather than her hands and knees.

Just to tweak him, Jordan reached back and slapped his ass as she walked past. *You really don't want to do that, Jordan. I might be tempted to take you up on your unspoken offer.*

You and what army, buddy? As she walked toward her mother who still had her back pressed against the headboard, Jordan did her best to school her features. She didn't want to show either her fear or her anger. Perhaps there was a reasonable explanation for today's events, though she couldn't think of one off the top of her head.

Although frightened, her mother looked perfectly fine. Jordan sighed, then turned her gaze back toward the demon. She could feel a blush sweep across her cheeks so she dropped her gaze to the floor. No way did she want to get caught staring at his equipment again. It embarrassed her enough the first time.

"Could you put some clothes on please... or something? As impressive as that is," she said, pointing in the general direction of his shaft, "I really don't want to see it anymore."

She heard him give an aggrieved sigh, then a muttered oath. "You can look now."

Ryan's startled gasp had her lifting her head, prepared to fight their way out of the room if she needed to. But that wasn't the cause of his surprise. She'd bet her next paycheck on it.

A golden Adonis now stood before her. Gone were the horns and fangs, the pointy chin and ash-gray skin. He was a hunk if she'd ever seen one. His hair had a hundred different shades, ranging from bleach blond, to mocha brown and was cut short in a tousled look. He had lush lips, high cheekbones, and a strong chin. Not an ounce of fat marred his perfect body.

What a body, indeed. He'd only covered himself with a pair of well-worn jeans, the top button undone. His abs looked hard as marble. His arms were muscular, his shoulders wide. He didn't have the width of a professional football player but he sure had the muscle tone of one.

Good Lord! No wonder her mother couldn't control herself around this man if this was how he normally appeared to her.

"Oh, well." Jordan turned her head away and winced at Ryan's furious expression. Guilt washed over her. *Wait a minute. What the hell do I have to feel guilty about?*

Shaking off those confusing thoughts, she once again glanced over at her mother, who'd managed to use the demon's transformation to throw her clothes on. "So are you going to tell me what the

hell is going on around here? How are we supposed to find Bridget if you're keeping secrets? And we won't even get into the whole demon sex thing, right now."

Mary winced, and turned her head, but not before she caught the tears welling in the corners of her mother's eyes. Jordan felt a twinge of shame.

And so you should, Jordan. Whatever she may have done, she's still your mother.

You're right, Ryan. I shouldn't have spoken such cruel words.

Before she could apologize the demon thing spoke up. "This is not your mother's fault. How dare you take such a tone with her!"

"You're right. I apologize." Properly chastised, Jordan walked over to her mother and pulled her trembling body into her arms. "I'm sorry, Momma," she whispered.

Mary nodded, but stepped out of her arms. Jordan felt lower than dirt. With no way to make it up to her mother—at least, not right now—she did the only thing she could in such a situation. She sat on the bed, crossed her arms and began interrogating the demon.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“Who are you?” Jordan ran an impatient hand through her windblown curls then snorted. “Never mind that. Hell, *what* are you? We’ll start with that question and move on from there.”

“You know, being rude probably isn’t the best way to go about getting information from me.”

“Probably not,” she said, her voice laced with just a bit of mocking laughter. “But in all honesty, if you’d intended on harming us, you’d already have done so.”

She must have had him there because he turned away, then with shoulders slumped, sighed in resignation.

“Fine. I’ll answer your questions, but then I want answers to some of my own.”

Jordan grunted. *He has some nerve making demands, don’t you think?*

Well, he can demand all he wants.

True, Ryan. Very true. She’d allow him to ask his questions, but until she learned exactly what was

going on, she wouldn't be answering anything that might be used against them.

With a grimace, she scanned the old-fashioned bedroom. She could swear she felt the eyes of the condemned staring at her from every corner of the room. If it wouldn't look completely cowardly, she'd jump off the bed and run screaming from the room. But she was made of sterner stuff and she'd be damned if she'd let her quivering nerves show to the others.

It is not cowardly to let others know of your fears, my daughter. True strength comes from learning to ask for help when it's needed.

I do not hear you.

Of course you do. Remember, my daughter, to whisper my name when things seem most dire. I shall not fail you again, Jordan. You have Odin's word on that.

Without so much as a by your leave, the All-Father's voice disappeared from her mind. She could no longer feel the strength and power that filled her for those few seconds in which they spoke and in its place felt a malevolent presence try to invade her mind. Shaking her head to try and shrug it off, Jordan returned to the conversation her father had interrupted. "You've got a deal. As much as I'd love to hang out in here though, I really don't think this is the best place to have this conversation. Do you?"

"I agree. As a matter of fact, this is the last place

you, of all people, should be."

While Jordan tried to figure out just what the demon meant, the room emptied of all but her. She watched as her mother scuttled out of the demon's reach and rushed out the door. He followed close on her heels. Only Ryan stayed behind, standing just outside the doorway. "Don't you think we should follow them, Jordan?"

Shit, he was right. What the hell was she doing just sitting here? "Definitely." Jordan stood and walked over to the door where Ryan waited on her, doing her best to ignore the malevolent presence continuing its assault on her mind.

This was definitely not Odin. His power had a warm embracing feel and he slid into her mind with ease of recognition almost. This *being* invaded her soul, spreading cold and fear like a poison through her body, but was unable to tap into her thoughts.

She shivered in dread, pulling the door firmly closed behind her as she stepped out into the hallway.

"Are you all right, Jordan?"

Ryan must have noticed her reaction. *How odd, he can read my moods so well. I wonder if that's why I feel so many conflicting things for him? One minute I want to jump him, the next I want to run, because he makes me feel too much.*

Jordan cleared her throat, and ran her trembling

fingers through her hair to hide her fear. "Yeah, I am now." Should she tell him about the entity in the room?

"You might as well tell me what happened in there, because I know something has you shaken up, and I really don't think it was your mother's lover, such as he is."

Jordan blew her bangs off her forehead as she made her way down the stairs and toward the shouting voices in her living room. "Someone was in that room with us. Someone who doesn't like my family, and me, in particular."

"How do you know?"

She shrugged. "I'm not sure. I just do I guess. If Odin really is my father—and I'm not saying that he is—then perhaps I have some sort of powers of my own." *And doesn't that just make me sound as though I'm ready to be sent to a mental institution? Yes, my name is Jordan and I'm the daughter of the Norse God Odin...*

You can sure pick the strangest times to drift off into your own sarcastic musings, don't you think, daughter?

Stay out of my head until you're invited... please.

I will be silent, but I must know everything that is going on. The Norns insist that more than one God is interfering in the lives of mortal men.

So, you're the only god allowed to manipulate things to suit himself?

There is a difference between interfering to right an

injustice than meddling for no other reason than to create havoc and destruction. This you know, without being told.

Well, if you're going to listen in, please do so quietly.

By the time Jordan reached the living room and the quarreling lovers, she'd managed to center her mind. All thoughts about the cursed room and her meddlesome father were shoved to the back of her mind until she could take the time to worry about them.

At least a minute passed before her mother and her lover noticed them standing in the entryway, which only happened after Ryan let out an ear-piercing whistle to get their attention.

"Now, if you two can control yourselves long enough for Ryan and I to get some answers maybe we can figure out what in the hell is going on."

The blond demon / man nodded his agreement and after glaring at her mother one last time, as though saying *I'm not through with this discussion*, he moved to take a seat at the far end of the couch. And in typical female fashion, her mother chose to leave the couch all together and sit in the rocker, clear on the other side of the room near the fireplace.

Looking over her shoulder, she glanced toward Ryan. Man, every time she looked at him, she wanted to run into his arms and just let him hold

her. And how pathetic did that make her?

Clearly in no hurry to sit down, Ryan stood sentry, his back against the curved archway, his feet crossed at the ankles, and hands shoved in the back pockets of his jeans. When he noticed her looking at him, he winked and flashed that smile she was coming to love. *Love? What the hell? She was definitely not going to fall in love. Not now. Not ever.*

Never is a long time, daughter.

Yes, it is. And I thought I told you to be quiet.

With a negligent shrug of her shoulders, she turned toward their guest from Hell... literally. "Okay. What's your name and what are you doing in this realm?"

"My name is Forseti. At one time I was the Norse God of Justice, Peace, and Truth. Balder is my father, and Nanna bore me."

Jordan raised her brows in surprise. *How exactly can a God become a demon?* "And you look like a demon, why?"

"Because the Goddess Jord does not like to be told no."

She sighed in frustration. *Couldn't he just give a full explanation without making her draw out the information morsel by morsel?* "And what exactly is that supposed to mean?"

"Quite simply, I refused to have an affair with a married woman. When she tried to trick me into

sleeping with her, by masquerading as my current lover, I accused her of using her powers to cause harm. Before I could shift place out of *Glitnir*, my hall in *Asgard*, Jord cursed me."

"She cursed you how?" Jordan asked. Now the story was beginning to get interesting. She looked over at her mother to see her reaction to Forseti's tale. She seemed enthralled, as she leaned forward in her chair, her fingers gripping the wooden arms.

"I was unprepared for such tactics, having spent my life ensuring justice and peace reigned in the Nine Worlds. I'd spent my days providing solutions to man's problems never looking into the misdeeds, manipulations and downright cruelties of the other Gods, and for that I now live as an Incubus, forced to carry out Hel's demands."

"And what exactly does Hel have planned?"

"Hel plans on stealing your soul, Jordan Michaels, and gifting it to the Goddess Jord in recompense for handing me over to her. It's a fitting gift, don't you think? Force the one God who refused to love Jord to use the mother of her husband's lovechild as the instrument of her revenge. In this way, she punishes me, her husband, his lover, and the result of their affair, all without sullyng her hands directly."

"Diabolical really," Ryan said, before stepping forward and casually dropping his arm over

Jordan's shoulder, and pulling her into his embrace. "And is that your plan, Forseti?"

"Funny you should mention that. I have a proposal, a strategy if you will, and it goes something like this..."

CHAPTER NINE

Several hours, and many arguments later, the group had what they thought was a reasonable plan to force the hands of both goddesses, Hel and Jord. Now, they had to determine if Bridget's abduction was related to this whole revenge scenario, or was an entirely unrelated event. And no one so far had been able to come up with a way to find out.

Ryan's eyes were getting droopy, his neck was stiff, and his back ached. How long had they been at it, anyway? Ryan took a quick peek at his watch and grimaced. *Hell, no wonder. It's close to three in the morning.*

Yes, Ryan. Why don't you try to convince my daughter to go to bed? She won't do anyone any good if she's too exhausted to function.

You're right. Besides, a few hours of uninterrupted sleep is just what I need.

When there was no response from Odin, Ryan reached up and rubbed his neck. Glancing over

toward Forseti, he wasn't surprised to find him still wide-awake and bushy-tailed. As an incubus, Ryan imagined, he probably spent many a night that way. Did he even need sleep?

Mary, who'd eventually moved out of the rocker and to the couch—as far from her lover as possible, of course—now lay with her head resting on his shoulder. Sometime during the long hours of plotting, they'd gravitated toward each other.

"I think it's time we turned in," he said, turning toward Jordan. He could have saved his breath. Sometime in the last few minutes, her long night must have caught up with her. Cuddled into the arm of the loveseat, Jordan slept, her head pillowed on her arms, her knees tucked up into her chest.

Her lips were parted, a slight smile tilting up the corners. Her skin glowed a dusky pink. Her tousled black curls rested against her cheek, and her tiny fingers were pressed beneath her chin.

She looked so peaceful, so beautiful lying there, he didn't have the heart to wake her. Ryan stood slowly, as not to disturb her sleep. "I'm going to take her upstairs. I'm sure you can find suitable sleeping arrangements for the two of you," he said, nodding toward Mary. "Just stay out of the room we found you in earlier. Until we know where Bridget is and who has her, we can't implement your plan."

"I understand, Ryan Connors. Now, take your woman to bed, while I see to mine."

Ryan's cock twitched in response to Forseti's innuendo. He'd like nothing better than to make love to Jordan, to slide his shaft into her welcoming sheath, to feel her convulse around his length, to hear her plead for release. But she wasn't ready, and until then, he'd have to make do with his own hand or cold showers. It would be well worth the wait in the end.

As carefully as he could, Ryan lifted Jordan into his arms, cuddling her against his chest as he made his way through the house and up the stairs. She nestled her face into the crook of his neck. Her warm breath tickled his ear, sending more blood to his already aching shaft. But she continued to sleep, blissfully unaware of the painful need she'd caused by simply being in his arms.

He had to get her to her room and out of his sight before he woke her up and demanded she ease the fire raging through him. He was so hard right now; he could fuck her into tomorrow and still keep going.

At the top of the stairs, he adjusted her boneless body in his arms then headed toward her bedroom. *Thank God. Another few seconds and she'll be safe behind closed doors and I can take a long, cold shower.*

Moments later, he reached her room, adjusted

her in his arms so he could reach the doorknob, and turned it. Nothing happened. *How odd. Why would she lock her door?*

Rather than wake her to ask—not that he thought anything could wake her at the moment—Ryan shrugged and headed for his own bedroom. *Well, there's no hope for it. I'll just take her through my room to the connecting bathroom and hope to get inside from that direction. And if that fails, I'll just put her in my bed and sleep on the damn floor.*

Luck was not on his side. By the time he'd walked through his room, the bathroom, and reached her bedroom door he was in such agony he thought he'd die, only to discover this door too was locked. Beads of sweat clung to his forehead. His heart pounded an uneven rhythm. His thighs trembled, and his arms quivered. His dick pulsed with the need to thrust between her legs.

What the hell is wrong with me? I've never felt such an intense desire. It can't be natural.

That's when it hit him. *What the hell was the meddlesome God up to now? Only one way to find out—ask him. Odin... you interfering old man, what the hell are you up to?*

Show some respect, boy.

Ryan snorted. *Maybe when you do. Now what do you hope to get out of this?*

Just the best possible mate for my only daughter. Ryan didn't know whether to be infuriated or honored. Either way, he couldn't, wouldn't allow

Odin to control his cock.

Resolute, Ryan carried Jordan back into his room, careful not to jostle her too much as he pulled the covers down to the foot of the bed. When he had her in the center of the bed, he stared down at her.

He kept his hands fisted at his sides. The need to touch her overwhelmed him. The need to press his lips against the hollow of her neck, to run his fingertips over her dusky nipples, had his dick as hard as steel.

He lowered his head and did his best to breathe through his mouth, to not inhale any of her intoxicating scent. His hands shook. His legs quivered.

He took a step back, needing space, needing breathing room. Odin may have turned his dick against him, turned him into a ravenous beast, but he wouldn't succumb to the need. Now, he just needed to get her out of her clothes without spilling his seed in the process.

As quickly as he could, he stripped Jordan out of her heavy sweater and jeans. He left her panties and bra on, more for his sanity than to protect her modesty. If he'd had to strip her undergarments from her too, he might not have been able to resist her, whether she lay there unconscious or not.

After tucking the blankets around her, Ryan stood and shrugged his shoulders, trying to ease

the tension centered at the nape of his neck. When she continued to sleep on, completely oblivious, he had to wonder if Odin hadn't forced her to sleep just as he turned Ryan's own libido against him.

Knowing he needed to regain control of his desperate hunger, Ryan left Jordan to sleep in his bed and headed toward the bathroom. He needed a shower... a cold shower.

Twenty minutes later, Ryan crawled onto the bed, making certain he stayed atop the covers.

* * * *

Jordan woke to a strange noise. It sounded like someone groaning. She rolled over, snuggling her head into her pillow. Her bra pulled tight, making her uncomfortable. Why was she sleeping in her bra? Reaching up, she unfastened the front clasp and almost sighed as her breasts spilled out from the tight, binding lace. She must have been exhausted to fall into bed still wearing it.

Just as she began to drift back to sleep, another moan rent the air. *Okay, that is not my imagination. And come to think of it, how did I end up in my room to begin with?*

The bed began to shake, and another painful groan paired with a muttered oath reached her ears. What the hell?

Jordan rolled over and jerked to a sitting position. How the hell did she get in the guest room? Ryan's frantic movements on the other side of the queen bed interrupted her confused thoughts.

Although she should be upset to find herself in his bed, she couldn't help but worry. Was he having a nightmare? Was he in pain? It sure sounded like it.

When he moaned yet again, she couldn't help but reach out to him. Only in the periphery of her mind did she realize the only thing protecting her modesty was a pair of cotton candy pink satin panties.

Reaching over to Ryan's side of the bed, she gently shook him. Still, the moaning and thrashing persisted, too deep in sleep for her light touch to wake him. She tried again, shaking him a little harder. "Ryan... Ryan, wake up. You're having a nightmare."

"Oh, God. Oh, God, please..."

"Please what? Ryan, dammit, wake the hell up." Why wouldn't he wake up? She could hear the pain in his voice, the desperation, and it worried her.

"What ... What? Everything all right, Jordan?"

She let out a sigh of relief. "Yeah, but I was going to ask you that. Were you having a nightmare?"

Ryan shook his head. "Not exactly." Gathering the blankets around his waist, Ryan sat up against the headboard and turned toward her. His eyes appeared to glow in the heavy darkness of the room. "You might want to cover yourself though."

"What? Huh?"

"Jordan, your father zapped me or something and if you don't cover up right this minute, I am going to fuck you senseless."

"Excuse me?" She couldn't have heard him right. Then his words registered, "Oh, shit." She dove under the covers and pulled them up to her neck. "Why the hell didn't you say something sooner?"

Even though heavy shadows filled the room her eyesight began to adjust to the dimness. His lips were curved into a self-depreciative grin. "Yeah, I should have. Blame it on the rock hard dick I'm wielding, if you want."

As though his words had the power to control her, her eyes dropped to the tented blanket covering his lap. She licked her lips in appreciation. He must be freaking huge. *I wonder what he'd feel like thrusting that cock inside me?* She shivered as she let her imagination run wild.

She could imagine him flipping her on to her stomach and lifting her hips in the air. He'd thrust into her weeping cunt. No foreplay. No unnecessary words. Just hot, furious fucking.

Her clit pulsed in need. Her juices slid down the inside of her thigh. She couldn't hold back the moan of need.

Her little moan must have pushed him over the edge because the next thing she knew, he'd reached for her. His hands clamped on to her forearms, his forehead pressed against her own. In a strangled voice, he warned, "I don't think I'm going to be able to stop myself from loving you, Jordan. If you don't want that, don't want me, then run."

Her clit quivered in response to his blatant desire. What should she do? Her body knew what it wanted. It wanted a good long fuck, but her mind hadn't yet decided.

She licked her lips, a nervous habit she'd yet to kick. His eyes flared in response. "What's your decision, Jordan? Stay or go, the choice is yours, but make it now."

Oh hell, she could blame herself in the morning. "Kiss me, Ryan."

CHAPTER TEN

Ryan's nostrils flared, his eyes widened in surprise. Sweat trickled down his spine, goose bumps pebbled down his arms and legs and he shivered. He felt his cock pulse as blood poured into it with every beat of his heart. He couldn't have heard her right. Or did he? He swallowed past the lump in his throat. "What?"

"I don't know whether this is Odin's work or my own desire, and frankly, right this minute, I don't give a damn. I'm desperate and from the looks of things," her hand reached out to stroke the length of his painful erection, "so are you."

His whole body shuddered beneath her touch. Even with both his underwear and the blanket covering his shaft, her hand gave him more pleasure than he ever remembered finding. More pleasure than he'd found clasped within the silken wet warmth of the women he'd bedded in the past. It had to be Odin's influence. The sensation

of her soft caress through the blankets covering him couldn't surpass years of sexual experience. Could it? And why did he have to question everything?

You question everything because you know this isn't real. This desire you feel is brought on by that meddling father of hers. This is your body, damn it. Since when do you allow others to control it?

He looked over at her and tried to fight the burning in his gut that urged him to fall on her like some beast. It didn't help his flagging control to see her pebbled nipples or hear her moaning in need as she caressed his throbbing cock.

God, he knew he was going to regret this. With superhuman effort, Ryan reached down and pried her fingers from his shaft. "We can't do this, Jordan. You're not in your right mind. Neither of us is, to tell you the truth." The words came out little more than a muttered gasp as he tried to control his raging hormones.

Jordan let go of his now painful rod and sat back on her heels, her head tilted to the side in obvious confusion. "What?"

Why was he even putting them both through this torture? *Because you know you can't take advantage of her, and that's exactly what you'd be doing if you fuck her while she's under her father's influence.* He could really strangle his subconscious right now. Sighing, Ryan reached toward Jordan,

and pulled the covers up, hiding her generous curves from his view.

Her eyes seemed to fill with pain when she pulled the covers up beneath her arms and pinned the sheet in place. "You don't want me."

Her voice had no life, none of the passion and need from just moments before. He watched in silent agony as she scooted to the edge of the bed, pulling the sheet along with her. Before he realized this beautiful woman was about to slip through his grasp, she stood and made it halfway to the bedroom door.

When he made to rise, to go after her, to at least explain why he couldn't go through with it, she turned toward him. With a tiny smile filled with both devastation and understanding, she nodded toward him. "At least you were smart to wear underwear to bed. Don't worry about it, Ryan. Just forget I asked... no begged for it. I keep an assortment of toys in my room for just such an occasion."

He almost choked when she made that declaration. Toys? A woman who admitted to using toys? God, what a turn on!

She took another step and reached for the doorknob. "You're right, you know. We can't let my fa—" She shook her head. "No, we can't let Odin make the decision for us."

Ryan didn't know what to say. He watched as

she reached out with trembling hands and turned the doorknob. Or at least she tried to. He could see her fingers turn white as she tried to get the handle to budge. It seemed Odin wasn't going to make it that easy on either of them.

Jordan's shoulders dropped and she banged her head against the door, making it quiver in the doorframe. Ryan winced. That had to hurt.

When her shoulders began to shake, Ryan couldn't stay on the bed another moment. The thought of something like this bringing her to tears nearly ripped his heart from his chest. Climbing out of the bed, Ryan crossed the room and put his hands on her shoulders.

She jerked once, then sighed, relaxing beneath his hands. "Could this get any worse?"

His hands tightened on her shoulders before he dropped them and took a step back. "I'm sorry, Jordan."

She lifted her head, turning her face toward him. She gave him a wry smile and shrugged her shoulders "Well, it's not like either of us asked for this to happen. We'll just have to make the best of it, I guess."

Ryan looked away, his gaze darted around the room looking for anything to distract him from the curves showcased by the sheet Jordan had hurriedly wrapped around herself. What in the hell were they going to do, locked in a room

together for God knew how long?

You could just give in and make love to my daughter, son.

I've about had it with your machinations, Odin. I'd not push your luck with me right now.

Odin's voice grew deeper, heavy with displeasure. *I gift you with my precious girl, and you have the nerve to throw her back in my face.*

No, I am not throwing her back in your face. Do I look like a total moron? The woman is a goddess, regardless of her parentage. I just want what's between us to occur naturally. Is that so hard for you to understand?

He could feel Odin's anger, followed quickly by resignation. Ryan never would have believed a Norse God would back down this fast, especially at the insistence of a mortal.

Fine. Have it your way, but you should know something. I did nothing to influence my daughter. It was her decision and her decision alone to ask you to make love to her. I do have some scruples, few though they may be, young man.

"Why do you have such a strange look on your face, Ryan? What are you thinking?" she asked.

By this time, she loosened her hold on her sheet and it began to slip down her upthrust breasts. When she then began worrying her bottom lip, his cock jerked. It was all he could do to stay standing in one spot. Everything within him demanded he go to her and shove his cock past those luscious

lips. Still, he found the strength to refuse his body's demands.

Just as suddenly as Odin appeared in his mind, he'd left. Only a hint of reprimand still vibrated through his psyche. Ryan sighed and focused once again on Odin's daughter. Should he tell her Odin hadn't influenced her? Did he even believe the father of the Norse Gods?

After a moment's thought, he gave a mental shrug. Yeah, he did believe the wily bastard but he wasn't about to upset Jordan further by letting her know her father wasn't making her hot and bothered. And that bit of news gave his already throbbing cock another jolt of energy. That she wanted him without the interference of her father turned him on more than he thought possible. He gritted his teeth and tried to smile.

"I'm fine." He took another step back. He needed to put more distance between them before he did something completely un-suave and jumped her where she stood regardless of his intention to leave her luscious body alone.

She cocked her head in the adorable way she had. "Are you sure?"

Ryan took another step back, the back of his knees hitting the bed. He dropped on it like a stone, and laced his hands together between his knees, his head bowed. "Yeah, everything is fine." He looked up and met her gaze with his own. "If

you can discount the fact that you're stuck in here with me and I want to tear that sheet off your body and mount you. Then yes, everything is perfectly wonderful."

Jordan's face grew flushed. She cleared her throat and looked everywhere but at him. Finally, after an eternity of waiting for her to meet his gaze, she dropped her head to her chest and rocked back on her heels. Fortunately, or unfortunately depending on how you looked at it, she still had the sheet firmly gripped beneath her arms.

Either she was very interested in something on the floor, or he had finally managed to stun her speechless. He figured taking her breath away was too much to ask. "What? Nothing to say, Jordan?"

Her head jerked up, her heated gaze met his. She licked her lips and his cock twitched. "I've already offered myself to you and you refused. What more do you want me to say?"

Ryan shrugged. "Hell if I know. You can reassure me that we can be reasonable adults and stay in the same room without mauling each other, maybe."

She fisted her hands beneath her breasts, drawing his eyes to her pebbled nipples. Her eyes twinkled and her cheeks turned rosy. "I can't do that, I'm afraid."

Closing in eyes in defeat, Ryan let out a mental

sigh then opened his eyes only to find her staring at him. He turned his head away and swallowed thickly. "Somehow, I had a feeling you were going to say that."

"I know. What if we both help ourselves out?" Her face turned a color near crimson. He must have looked as confused as he felt because she began to stammer. "You know, we could, uh—" She turned her head away. "Play with ourselves or something."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Jordan couldn't believe she just said that. She kept her eyes focused on her unpolished toes and prayed for the courage to stand still and await his response. Seconds passed while she waited for him to answer. *Could the ground hurry up and swallow me whole now... please? And why the hell hasn't he said anything?*

Finally, when the suspense and humiliation got to be too much, she raised her head and met his gaze from across the room. His very intense, very heated, gaze.

Maybe this whole mutual masturbation thing wasn't such a good idea after all. *Especially if he continues staring at me as if I'm his favorite dessert and he's battling a serious case of sweet tooth.*

She felt her cheeks flush. Her heart skittered in her chest. Her stomach began to churn and cramp. But worse of all, she could feel her clit spasm in need. She wanted to drop her eyes, but couldn't find the strength of will to do so. She swallowed

past the golf ball size lump lodged in her throat, praying he'd say something, scared that he wouldn't.

That's it. I can't take his silence and unnerving gaze any longer. She stomped her foot, uncaring the sheet was just barely covering her nipples now. "Aren't you going to say anything, dammit?"

Ryan grimaced, reached down and adjusted himself. If possible, he looked even more aroused than moments before when he once again faced her.

"What do you mean, exactly?" He licked his lips and let his gaze wander from the top of her head, pause at her breasts and work it way to her feet and back again. "I don't want there to be any misunderstandings as to exactly what you're suggesting here."

Astonished, Jordan quirked her eyebrows. *What was there for him to misunderstand?* She rolled her eyes. She would never understand the male of the species. "In plain English, I'm planning on sliding my fingers into my slick pussy and fucking myself on them. If you're as horny as I think you are, then I suggest we both get off. There's no reason for either of us to suffer."

She paused a moment, her gaze traveled over his body yet again, focusing on his growing erection. She licked her lips in anticipation. Maybe she could still talk him into letting her suck his

cock before the night wore off, but first she had to get him worked up, thus her attempt at getting him to watch her masturbate. "Is there?"

If he didn't agree to this she didn't know what she'd do. She burned from the inside out. Her whole body was on fire. She wanted nothing more than to lie back on the bed and bring herself off.

She sighed. To hell with it. That's exactly what she would do and, if during the course of her exhibition he decided to attack her, she'd help him.

When he still hadn't answered her after a few more seconds passed, she shrugged and moved toward the bed, toward him, the sheet dragging behind her. "Well, if you don't want to watch, I suggest you lock yourself in the bathroom or close your eyes."

Even with her insides cramping with fear at her outrageousness, she dropped the sheet, letting it pool at her feet. With shaking fingers, she slipped her fingers beneath the waistband of her panties and slowly shimmied out of them before tossing them in the corner. Let him look his full and see exactly what he'd turned down, or at least hadn't accepted. Yet.

She sauntered slowly toward the bed, giving her hips a provocative sway. Let him think what he wanted. She didn't care anymore. She was so damned horny she could die, and just might, if she

didn't find relief soon.

Lowering herself onto the mattress, she scooted toward the center of the bed as he watched her, his eyes wide.

"Are you really going to do this?"

She nodded. "I have to. I can't stand it anymore."

Holding his gaze, she slid the heels of her feet along the mattress, spreading her legs. Slowing when she saw she'd caught his attention. Stopped.

"It's so hot in here. Don't you think so?" Her hands moved to cup her breasts, squeezing them, molding them between her palms. She threw her head back and moaned as she pinched her nipples between her thumbs and forefingers.

A strange choking sound drew her attention and she looked up to see Ryan staring between her spread legs. He licked his lips. More cream flowed from her exposed slit and he groaned in reaction. When his breathing grew more labored, she started to move her legs again.

She almost smiled. She'd have him eating from the palm of her hand before the night was out—if he didn't decide to eat something else. The thought made her shiver, giving her courage to reach down and slide her fingers through the wet flesh between her legs.

She closed her eyes, unable to bear watching him lick his lips as he stared at her, his fingers

circling the massive hard-on that her impromptu exhibition had given him. She bit her lip and moaned when her fingers circled the hard nub of her clit. Sweat beaded on her forehead, as her hips rose to meet the rapid thrusts of her fingers.

She wanted to laugh with delight when she heard him mutter, "Oh, to hell with it," and felt the bed dip beneath his weight, but she was too close to reaching orgasm to stop.

"I have the horrible feeling that we're both going to regret this in the morning, baby," he said, his warm breath wafting against her thighs. "But I can't stand watching you do this while I wonder what you feel like, or better yet, taste like."

Pushing her legs further apart, he lowered himself between her thighs. Puffs of warm air caressed her flesh, sending shards of rippling pleasure through her aching pussy. He chuckled then leaned closer to give her slit a long, slow lick with the warm velvet of his tongue.

Jordan groaned. "Yes." She grabbed his hair and held him to her. Squeezing her legs together, she trapped him in place as he continued to lick and suckle the small nub that she knew would send her straight to heaven. "Please, Ryan. Make me come. I can't stand it anymore."

He lifted his mouth from her pussy, and she lifted her head to look down at him. Her juices glistened on his mouth and chin. His mouth was

drawn in a firm line, but his eyes twinkled with mirth. "Do you need me, Jordan, or do you need an orgasm, baby?"

"You."

When he only tilted his head and continued staring into her eyes, into her soul, she spoke the truth. She dropped her head back to the mattress and sighed in frustration. "Both, Ryan. Both."

He grinned. "Ah, now the truth is out. You don't want me for my rapier wit and true companionship, you only want me for the orgasms I can give you."

Her face burned at his accusation and she made a face. "Look, mister. I can get orgasms from my toys and they don't give me any lip."

He raised his brow and lowered his head back to her creaming pussy. "But it's my lips you're going to love, baby."

She groaned when he thrust his tongue through her wet pussy and suckled her clit into his mouth. He gently pushed one finger into her vagina, massaging the inner walls of her clasp channel. Her hips jerked and he held her in place, his other hand splayed over her pelvic bone.

"Yes, Ryan, yes!" she keened as he thrust another finger into her. Her head thrashed on the pillow, she would die soon if he didn't give her relief.

She could feel the pressure rise as her driving

need to come rose to almost unbearable levels. Just as her channel tightened around his fingers, he stopped and pulled away. "What? Why di—"

"Sssshh, Jordan. I'm not leaving you." He gave a pained chuckle. "I just want to be inside you when you come. I can only imagine how tight you're going to be around my cock. You're so wet and ready, I'm not sure how long I'm going to last once I get inside you."

"Well, stop talking and do it already. I hurt, Ryan. Make the ache go away. Please." She didn't care if she had to beg. If he didn't fuck her soon she'd take matters into her own hands and ride him until he begged for mercy. Either way, she was going to get off before this need killed her.

She spread her thighs as he moved to kneel between them. He kissed her, plunging his tongue into her mouth as he pressed his cock against the opening of her empty vagina. She squirmed beneath him, raising her hips in an attempt to force contact between them.

He chuckled, his mouth against her breast. "Patience, Jordan. I plan to go slow. Very slow. In fact, I plan to tease you until you scream."

Her head thrashed on the pillow. Her thighs trembled and she clenched the sheets between her fists. Screaming wouldn't take long if he kept up his sexy talk. She might just scream the house down if he didn't fuck her now. Hard. Fast. Hot.

That was how she wanted it.

"I don't want slow, dammit! I want hard and fast. Give it to me. Now!"

He threw his head back and laughed. "As you wish, love. As you wish." He moved slightly, pressing the rigid flesh of his shaft against her nether lips. She gasped as she felt him slowly sink into her depths. He groaned, biting his lip as he continued to enter her and all she could do was hold on. Hold on and pray that he fit because she'd never felt so full, as impossibly stretched as she felt now.

As though he knew what she was thinking, he spoke to her in a worshipful whisper. "Oh, God. You feel so good. So fucking good. You can take me, Jordan. Just breathe and relax your muscles just a little bit more, baby."

Jordan bit her lip and tried to go boneless beneath him, finding as soon as she did, he slid the rest of the way inside, filling her to capacity. "Oh... that feels so good, Ry."

Just as slowly as he'd entered her, he started to pull out. Her muscles clenched around his shaft, reluctant to let him go. When only the head of his cock was lodged inside her sheathe, he rotated his hips then drove himself into her in one forceful thrust. She groaned, unable to keep quiet as he began to thrust. In. Out. In. Out. Over and over he drove into her, keeping her on the edge of orgasm.

She wrapped her legs around his waist, grabbed him by the shoulders and drove up with her hips, meeting him thrust for thrust. Her body quaked. A light sheen of sweat coated her skin. The harsh sound of skin slapping skin echoed through the room. The only other noise either of them heard was groans of enjoyment and the creaking of the bedsprings beneath the mattress.

Ryan lifted her legs to his shoulders and placed his hands beneath her bottom, changing his angle of penetration. His sweat dripped onto her stomach as he continued to pound into her ruthlessly, striving for release.

When she thought she could take no more, she found she could. Reaching between their bodies she pulled on her clit. Her body spasmed. Her muscles clamped down desperately trying to keep his shaft deep inside her. Blood rushed to her head and her eyes closed as wave after wave of euphoria rushed through her.

Ryan groaned. "God have mercy, woman." His hips jackknifed into her, faster, harder and deeper than before as he strove to find his own release. She felt his cock grow impossibly wider, harder as more blood rushed to it. She felt his shaft flex as he finally reached climax. His warm seed flooded her already sopping channel, mixing with her own fluids and she quivered beneath him. Spent.

When she opened her eyes, she found herself

lost in Ryan's gaze. His lips were but a fraction of an inch away and it was all she could do not to reach forward just a bit and place her lips against his. "Are you okay, Jordan?"

Unable to keep herself from showing him affection, she placed her hand against his cheek and smiled. "I'm much better than okay."

He nuzzled her hand and placed a kiss in her palm. Her heart stuttered then began to beat as fast as a hummingbird's wings. Why was she so affected by this man? What was it about him that had her wanting to throw away all her rules about getting involved in a serious relationship?

"Good." Leaning down, he lightly pressed his lips against hers. It was butterfly soft and oh so sweet. She could still taste herself on his lips and rather than be disgusted like she thought she would, it made her even hotter knowing he'd been so hungry for her.

Before she could open her mouth to his, he pulled away, separating their bodies. Her nether parts tingled, her thighs ached but she wouldn't change the last hour for the world.

Ryan eased to her side, pulling her into his arms as he spooned her from behind. She could feel his semi-erect shaft pulse against her backside and smirked. Hopefully, it wouldn't be long before he was ready for round two.

"I'm glad you two finally got together, but

your timing couldn't be worse. Someone just snuck up to the front door then hightailed it. I believe they may have left a ransom note at the door. Anyone care to go get it?"

Jordan shrieked. Pulling up the sheet, she covered her head and groaned with humiliation. Standing at the foot of the bed, looking upon them was the old man she'd helped the other night. The homeless man she'd been searching for when Ryan ran into her on Main Street.

There was no doubt in her mind now, that he was Odin, the *Alfadar*. "It's your fault we were distracted in the first place," she muttered from beneath the covers.

The old man snorted. "You can believe that if you want of Ryan. But I didn't do a thing to influence you. You're my daughter and even I wouldn't manipulate your attraction to another man. I think all fathers are the same in that regard."

"You mean, you didn't—" She pulled the sheet from her face to look him in the eyes.

"No, I didn't. Everything you felt tonight was your own doing. But enough about that, you have more important matters to see to. If you want to find your sister I suggest you go fetch that note."

With that said, Odin, the Father of the Norse Gods, disappeared, vanishing in a brilliant flash of light.

Ryan cleared his throat, drawing her attention back to him. "We might want to follow your father's advice. It must be important if he's gotten involved. Don't you think?"

Jordan licked her lips then nodded. On shaky legs, she stood, dropping the sheet to the floor as she began a frantic search for her clothes. "You're right. Let's go find Bridget and bring her home where she belongs."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Ryan swallowed, curling his hands into fists by his side so he wouldn't reach out and drag her back into his arms. Never had he had sex—no, made love—and felt so satisfied, so content afterward. The second he'd filled her with his cock, he felt as though he'd finally found the place where he belonged, the fit he'd searched for in all the other woman he'd ever bedded.

Seconds passed while he watched Jordan shimmy into her panties and bra. Unable to look away, his blood hammered through his body. It filled his wayward cock as he watched her swaying curves.

When she reached down for her jeans, he snapped out of his daze. Now wasn't the time to fantasize about their next bout of lovemaking. Digging through the blankets and pillows that had somehow ended up on the floor during their lovemaking, he started looking for his clothes.

By the time he pulled on his own clothes, minus his socks since one seemed to have walked off on its own, the bedroom door stood open and Jordan was nowhere in sight. "Shit." Tossing his useless sock on the bed, he ran out of the room, intent on protecting Jordan any way he needed to.

Just because Odin said the kidnapper dropped his note and left, didn't mean he hadn't come back. No way would he allow anything to harm her if he had anything at all to say about it.

Jordan was just reaching for the doorknob, when Ryan skidded to a stop at the head of the stairs. "Don't touch that door, Jordan."

She whipped her head in his direction, her mouth gaping open and her eyes glinting with malice. "What did you just say?"

Ryan sighed, frustrated, then ran his hand through his hair as he made his way down the stairs. "Jordan, I'm not trying to order you around, so you can just shove your righteous indignation up your ass. We don't know if there is someone out there lying in wait. Let me do what I'm good at, let me protect you."

Maybe he shouldn't have spoken so bluntly, but she needed to be aware of the dangers. Someone, either with or without the help of Norse Gods, managed to snatch her sister in a tiny town in the middle of nowhere. Until they captured the kidnapper, no one was safe.

When she offered him a somewhat reluctant nod and stepped away from the door, the tension in Ryan's shoulders eased. He didn't want to argue with her, and definitely didn't want to do anything that would turn her away from him, but her safety must come first.

He looked out the tiny peephole in the door and saw nothing. After glancing through the window several feet to the left of the door, he still saw nothing. God, how he hated to just open the damn thing without knowing exactly what was on the other side. Still, his inner alarms weren't clanging. If they had been, Jordan wouldn't still be standing in the foyer behind him. He would have dragged her to the back of the house and out the rear door in a blink.

He reached for the handle, slowly turning the knob with a resigned sigh. There was nothing for it. He had to open the door. The longer he waited, the colder the kidnapper's trail became. Slowly, so he could slam it shut in a hurry if he needed to, he pulled the door open a crack and peered out.

There was no one on the porch. No suspicious looking packages, just a crinkled, partially torn piece of — what appeared to be — a plain white sheet of paper covered in blood.

"Oh, my god!" Jordan rushed to his side and reached down to scoop up the paper.

"Don't!" He wrapped his arms around her.

"Please, baby. Don't touch that, not until our hands are gloved. We don't want to ruin any evidence," he whispered. He rubbed her back in a soothing motion while he held her away from the blood stained message. The last thing he wanted was to destroy any evidence that could lead to her sister's safe recovery. *If it wasn't already too late.* Jordan whimpered in his arms and only then did he remember that somehow, she could read his mind.

"Damn it, baby. I didn't mean that. She's fine."

Jordan nodded. "She has to be, Ryan." She lifted her tear filled eyes to stare into his. "She just has to be."

Ryan heard the muffled pounding of running footsteps and lifted his head toward the ceiling. "Your mother and Forseti must have heard your cry. They'll be down here any second."

She stiffened in his arms, and he knew she was doing her best to pull herself together before her mother appeared. He couldn't help but pull her deeper into his arms, wrapping himself around her. "Sssh, baby. It'll be all right. I'll make it all right for you. You have my word on that." Ryan felt her nod against his chest then rested his chin atop her head, offering her whatever comfort he could.

He continued to hold her, rocking her against his body as Mary and Forseti ran down the stairs.

Mary had on a long dress shirt—probably Forseti’s—and only a pair of faded gray sweats covered the incubus. They’d obviously either been asleep or busy making love. And he so didn’t want to go there with his thoughts. There’s nothing like visualizing your lover’s mother in bed with her lover. Can you say, gross...

“What’s wrong, Jordan? Ryan?”

Before Ryan could answer Mary, she looked through the open door. The blood stained note was in plain sight. “No. No, no, no, no, no.”

When Mary went to make a grab for the missive, Forseti pulled her into his arms, keeping her from reaching for it. “Dammit. Let me go. Let me go, damn you.”

“No, Mary. Think. Stop and think. If you touch that before your hands are covered, you’re corrupting any evidence that’s on there.”

As though all the strength in her body left her at once, Mary collapsed against her lover. If he hadn’t had his arms so tightly around her, Ryan doubted she’d still be standing.

Quiet sobs echoed through the entryway. Even though he didn’t know Bridget, and in fact barely knew anyone in the house, he felt compelled to offer whatever comfort he could. “We don’t know anything yet, Mary. For all we know, that isn’t even Bridget’s blood, just someone’s idea to torture you, to make you reckless.”

Jordan stepped back and Ryan reluctantly released her, confident she wouldn't make a dive for the note. She gave him a wry but heartfelt smile then turned toward Mary. *Thank you, Ryan. I think I went a little crazy there for a minute.*

I'd do anything for you, Jordan. You have to know that by now.

"Ryan's right, Mom. This could be nothing more than the kidnapper's attempt to rattle us."

Mary lifted her head from where she'd buried it against Forseti's chest. "Do you really think so?"

He could feel the conflict in Jordan. She didn't want to lie to her mother, but neither did she want to give her false hope. *Tell her we won't know until we call in the cops. Until then there's no sense in speculating. Either way you'll be there with her and together you'll get through this.*

Thanks, Ryan. How did you get to be so smart anyway?

Wonderful parents and good genes, though I watch a lot of daytime talk shows too. It's amazing what cable television can teach you these days.

Smart ass.

"Well, we won't know until we call in the FBI and the local cops. We need to let them handle this. And no matter what we find out, we'll handle it together."

Mary cleared her throat, stepping out of Forseti's arms. "You're right. I need to call the police." She started to walk away then stopped

and reached for her lover's hand. "Will you come with me? Please?"

Forseti nodded and together the pair headed toward the living room. As soon as her mother was out of sight, Jordan lowered her head and let the tears flow. Ryan closed the door so she couldn't see the note any more. "Come here, Jordan. Let me hold you."

She shook her head, denying her need for comfort, denying him his need to comfort her. He wasn't about to let her start building a wall between them now. Ryan reached out and snagged her arm, forcefully pulling her into his embrace. Almost as soon as he wrapped his arms around her waist, she snuggled into him, pressing against his body as though she was trying to sink into his skin.

"Thank you, Ryan. If you hadn't been here, I might have done something foolish. And I have no idea how I would have known what to say to my mother."

Ryan smiled against her temple, placing a quick kiss there before he straightened. "You would have handled things just fine."

"Ryan, I want you to know that I—"

When she didn't continue Ryan gave her a quick squeeze then loosened his hold. "You don't have to say anything you don't want to, or aren't ready to yet." Even though he wanted to hear how

she felt about him, wanted to know that when they'd made love it was because of an emotional tie not just a physical one, he could wait until she was ready. Though the wait might very well kill him.

When she let out a relieved sigh and he could feel the tension in her back and shoulders ease, he knew he'd made the right decision. "Jordan, I'm not going to lie to you. I like you. Hell, I might even love you. But I'm not going anywhere, not unless you kick me out of your life and even then I'm going to do everything in my power to convince you to take me back. You can have all the time you need."

Ryan cleared his throat, dropping his arms from around her waist as he stepped away from her. "Now, why don't you go see what your mother is up to. Oh, and she might want to have Forseti disappear for a bit and throw on some clothes before the cops get here."

"Clothes, right. I think her answering the door wearing a man's shirt might have them asking questions better left unanswered."

As Jordan turned toward the living room, Ryan couldn't help but wonder just whose blood was on the note. Why would a kidnapper leave his DNA at the scene of a crime on purpose? And if it were Bridget's blood, would she still be alive once they finally managed to locate her?

Opening the door, Ryan looked down at the torn and bloody paper. Why did he have this feeling that whatever it said, Jordan's life now hung in the balance? Ryan slammed the door. He closed his mind to that possibility as forcefully as he shut the door. Nothing would happen to Jordan. Nothing. The only way Jordan would be injured was if they did so over his dead body.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Jordan grabbed the coffee pot and headed to the sink. She needed some caffeine. Shoving the pot under the faucet, she filled it to the twelve-cup level and stalked to the coffee maker. Water spilled everywhere as she tried to fill the reservoir with trembling hands. "Damn. I need to get a grip."

Once she'd cleaned up the watery mess, she looked around the kitchen. Other than a few dirty dishes, there was nothing else needing her attention. Her mother always made sure the house stayed cleaned and even with her youngest daughter missing, that hadn't changed. And why was she worrying about the state of the house when her sister may have serious injuries and was out there all alone?

Because you need to keep your mind busy, daughter. There is no need to feel guilty that you've chosen to do busy work to keep from fretting. Have faith in yourself.

Have faith in your man. All will work out and will unfold as the Norns have decreed.

Bowing her head, Jordan groaned in exasperation. *Don't you have anything better to do than listen in on my thoughts?*

No, I can't say that I have.

That figures. Jordan snorted, tossing the dishtowel onto the counter before walking back to the sink. She turned on the taps, and poured a healthy amount of soap over the few sandwich plates sitting in the basin. And if she could see out the window and watch for approaching cars, while she did the dishes, then all the better.

Odin?

Don't you think you should start calling me Father?

Shaking her head, Jordan continued asking the question that had nagged her for the last hour. *How do you know how things will turn out?*

Don't you read your Norse Legends?

Picking up the dishcloth, she lathered up the rag and went to work on the plates. *Can't say that I have. I tended to tune out anything I heard that mentioned your name. I thought Mother was delusional so I chose to ignore all Norse mythology.*

Here is the short version of my abilities then. In order to gain knowledge and wisdom, I hung from the branches of the World Tree for nine days. When I regained consciousness, I realized I'd been gifted with the secret of the Runes. I was also gifted with three gifts with which to help mankind. One of those is my ability

to go into a prophetic trance. I've also got dominion over weather, magick, justice, the arts, and poetry – though I haven't written a poem in ages. I really should find time to do that soon.

Fed up with his tangent, Jordan quickly rinsed the plates and stacked them in the dish drainer, then began to wash out the sink. *Can we get back on target please? How do you know Bridget will be fine?*

Because I've seen it. You'll just have to trust in me, trust in my powers and the visions I see.

After drying out the basin with a dishtowel, she leaned forward, propping her arms on the windowsill. Unable to get a good look at the stars, she rested her forehead against the cool glass and wistfully sighed. *Trust is something you earn. I won't just hand it to you because you say I should or because you believe I'm your daughter.*

Just have faith in the Gods, and faith in your man out there.

He isn't my man.

Who are you trying to convince? Me or yourself?

Jordan didn't know the answer so chose not to say anything at all.

* * * *

Using their newly formed mental bond, Ryan tracked Jordan to the kitchen. He stood in the doorway, watching as she finished cleaning up. When she leaned toward the window, and looked

toward the pre-dawn sky, his heart clenched. She looked so sad. Her brows were drawn down, her eyes looked misty, and even her shoulders were slumped as though the weight of her thoughts were unbearable.

"Jordan, is there anything I can do to help?"
Please let there be something I can do that will ease her pain, even just a little bit. I can't stand to see her eyes so full of worry.

Apparently startled out of her thoughts, Jordan jerked her head in his direction and gave him a wry smile. "No, I don't think so. Have you seen Mom or Forseti? I haven't seen them since they disappeared somewhere upstairs a few minutes ago."

Shaking his head, Ryan walked over to her, standing behind her so he could wrap his arms around her waist. With his chin resting on the top of her head, he looked out into the brightening morning light. "No, but I heard someone moving around up there right before I came in here."

Jordan nodded, slowly relaxing her weight against his chest. "Why do you think it's taking the cops so long to get here, Ry? It's been nearly half an hour. We don't live that far from town." His cock twitched behind the zipper of his jeans. The feel of her lush curves rubbing against him was having a very noticeable impact.

After placing a quick kiss to her temple, Ryan

stepped back, releasing her from his hold. If he hadn't moved away from her when he did, she would have noticed the woody he was doing his best to ignore.

As soon as he stepped away, Jordan turned to face him. She looked even sadder than when he walked in and he could feel her confusion through their bond. *Good, perhaps she'll take my pursuit of her seriously if just backing away so I can get a hold of my wayward cock affects her mood.* "My guess, I'd say they're waiting for a forensic team to follow them. They aren't going to want to make any mistakes when it comes to catching this guy."

When Jordan looked away and nibbled on her bottom lip, he thought for sure he'd bust the seams of his zipper. Her lips were so luscious and when she worried them like she was doing now, they swelled, becoming pinker and plumper than before. God, she was trying to kill him.

If he didn't know that she had something on her mind, and if they weren't waiting on the cops, he didn't think he could have stopped himself from laying her on the kitchen counter and fucking her senseless. And how selfish is that? Even as he thought of what tortures Bridget could be suffering at the hands of her kidnappers, his libido showed no signs of listening to his mind or his conscience.

"Besides the obvious with your sister, what has

you worried Jordan?"

She quickly glanced at him then looked away, her gaze darting around the room before finally settling at her feet. When seconds passed and she hadn't answered, he figured she wasn't going to. Even though he could understand her hesitancy, he didn't like it, not one bit. "Why did you pull away?"

Reaching out with one hand, Ryan lifted her face so he could look into her eyes. "I didn't want to offend you, baby. If you haven't noticed, I'm sporting a hard-on from hell. I didn't want you upset with me because you think I've reverted into some sort of sexual fiend bent on having my way with you."

She gave him a soft smile. "I wondered why you did that." She glanced down at his groin and pink dusted her cheeks. "I didn't really notice that before," she said, waving her hand toward his crotch.

His cock jumped at the sudden attention and he nearly groaned with the effort to keep the damn thing under control. He almost laughed at himself then. Like he could really control the damn thing. Ever since he ran into her on Main Street, he hadn't had one bit of luck getting it to mind its manners.

Ryan didn't know what to say, beyond the obvious begging. Thankfully, he didn't have to

because the first patrol car had just started up the driveway. "They're here."

Jordan's shoulders stiffened. Her flush paled. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and nodded. "You make sure Forseti is hidden and get my mother down here while I talk to the cops."

Knowing she needed to feel in charge of something, Ryan didn't get upset over being given orders like a toddler, he just reached forward, gave her hand a squeeze then turned and walked out of the room. She may greet the authorities by herself, but in no way, either physically or mentally, would he leave her to face the coming events alone. The sooner he made sure Forseti was out of sight, the better.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Jordan waited until Ryan left the room before walking to the kitchen door. After straightening her shoulders and taking one last fortifying breath, she opened the door and stepped out into the frigid pre-dawn air. With her hands shoved into the front pockets of her jeans, she waited on the small stoop as the late model police sedan and two very new and shiny, black Sports Utility Vehicle's came to a stop.

She wasn't sure what she'd expected, but she certainly didn't think Castlevew could afford such modern vehicles to process a crime scene. The driver's door of the patrol car opened. The hinges creaked and popped, whether from misuse or stiff from non-use she didn't know.

Even the SUV's looked as though they just came off the assembly line. Snow covered the ground, the roads were heavy with salt, and yet, not one bit of dirt or slush covered their paintjob.

What in the hell? Something is not right. Not right at all. Come on, Jordan. Think, dammit.

Rather than keep her fear to herself, she did the one thing she didn't think she'd ever do. She called out for help. *Ryan? Od – father?*

Yes?

Yes?

A wave of relief washed through her when she heard both their voices answer her immediately. She could get used to this. Jordan choked off her gasp, unwilling to even let her mind wander in that direction when so much in her life was so uncertain.

Something's wrong about this whole situation. Before she could say anymore, the officer got out of his car and started to walk toward her.

His hair was black as pitch, his uniform pants were two inches too short for his legs, and his arms looked like they were about to bust out of the seams of his sleeves. His eyes were hidden behind shades, even though the morning sun had yet to rise.

His face, though almost too perfectly symmetrical, held no expression. He wasn't about to give anything away. He continued to walk up the drive and she quickly turned her attention to the other vehicles. No one moved. The doors remained closed. Still. Silent. *Oh, God.* Her entire body began to tremble.

Daughter, what's wrong?

Jordan, baby? What is it?

These vehicles look brand new, and the deputy that just stepped out of his car is giving me the willies. Is it –

Unable to voice her fears, she kept her eyes locked on the cop as he made his way toward her.

What were you going to ask, Daughter?

Before she could answer the cop stepped on the stoop, stopping less than a foot away from her. With exaggerated slowness, he pulled his shades off his eyes, and tucked them in his shirt pocket.

When his gaze met hers, the shock pierced her. Shock and panic. *Jesus. What is this guy?*

I'm on my way, Jordan. I'll be right there, baby.

Hurry, Ryan.

The cop's eyes glowed red. She could literally see red and orange sparks flickering in the whites of his eyes. This time, she couldn't contain her gasp, a gasp of pure terror.

Her legs trembled.

Her heart pounded.

Her hands shook.

"Ma'am. I need you to come with me." His voice rumbled low in his throat, almost an animalistic growl. Her stomach pitched, somersaulting and she thought she might throw up the coffee she'd managed to choke down while waiting for him to show up.

Jordan took a step back, smashing her back into

the kitchen door. She reached back, fumbling for the doorknob. "I don't think so."

Before she could get her hand around the doorknob, the cop—or whatever he really was—grabbed her hand, yanking her away from the door and against his chest.

She pushed against his chest and nothing happened. With her one free hand, she reached up and yanked on his hair, pulling out a hunk and he didn't so much as flinch. Oh shit.

Dad, I need help here. There's no way Ryan can get here in ti—

The ground beneath her feet heaved and buckled. Rolling waves of earth ran over the ground, aiming straight for her house, for her. Small fissures began to open in the slushy yard, and steam began to fill the air.

Unable to retain his balance and hold on to her squirming body, he tossed her to the ground, and backed off the stoop. His lips curved into a sneer. After lifting his hand in a salute, he lifted both hands into the sky, threw back his head, and laughed. As the ground churned beneath his feet, knocking small plants over, and shaking the tree-lined drive, he yelled into the heavens, "You have not won, Alfadir. We shall defeat you. Of this, you have our word!"

In a flash of light, all three vehicles and the thing that attacked her, disappeared. Before she

could scramble to her feet, the ground tremors stopped. The kitchen door smashed open, bouncing against the wall of the house.

Ryan?

She could hear the confusion, the fear in her voice and she didn't care. She didn't care if he thought she were weak, or girly. In fact, it was a relief to be herself with this man, to let her see the woman beneath the federal agent badge she carried.

"Jordan, are you all right baby. I couldn't get through the door. I couldn't do anything to help you. Dammit," he cursed, gently lifting her to her feet from where she still laid sprawled on the back stoop.

"Where did they go, Ryan? Where did that thing go and what the fuck was he?"

"I don't know, baby. I don't know. But, I think your father has some more explaining to do." He ran his hands down her arms, her legs.

"What are you doing, Ry? Where is my mother?"

He winced, kept his eyes downcast.

"I'm making sure you haven't broken anything. What does it look like I'm doing?" Ryan's voice shook and she could feel the worry through their bond. Only once he'd patted her down from head to foot and back again, did he straighten to his full height.

She watched as he scanned the acreage surrounding the farm. The ground was undisturbed, appearing exactly as it had before the sudden quake. Even the plants that had been uprooted stood just as they had before the creature and his companions—whoever they were—arrived.

“Ryan, you didn’t answer me. Where is my mother?”

“Forseti locked her in the cursed room and is keeping her in there until we find out what’s going on. He said something about it being magically sealed. Something about it actually being a portal in between the nine worlds, whatever that means.”

Wrapping her arms around herself, Jordan shivered. “What are we going to do, Ryan?” Jesus, just who had her sister? Hell, was she wrong in hoping Bridget still lived?

Stepping toward her, Ryan opened his arms to her. All she wanted to do was step forward and have him hold her against his heart. Did that make her weak? Did admitting she needed his comfort take away from who she was as a person? She didn’t know, but right now, she couldn’t seem to care. Worry and fear ate at her, stealing her hope, tearing her soul from her body a little at a time until she didn’t know how she’d continue to go on. How must her sister feel? Did she believe

Jordan would come for her or had she too lost her belief in others?

Stepping into his outstretched arms, Jordan rested her head against his chest, taking comfort from the rapidly beating heart beneath her ear. This was right. This was where she belonged.

It's never wrong to hope, Jordan. Wrapping his arms around her even tighter, he pulled her closer to his body. Heat seeped into her frozen skin and she shivered. He kissed her on her temple, pressed his lips against her ear. "Let's get you inside, baby. It's freezing out here and all you have on is a thin sweater and jeans."

With as big as Ryan was, he was always so gentle with her, so caring. She could get used to this. Instead of the thought panicking her as it did before, warmth surged through her. Warmth and happiness. It was then she realized Ryan was still listening in on her thoughts, and even that didn't bother her.

"Yeah. Let's get inside and find out where the real cops are. I doubt that it's the cops we spoke to. Someone obviously has our phones rerouted somehow, though how they did it without our knowledge, or the feds, I don't know."

"We'll figure it out, Jordan. Together."

Jordan nodded, then walked into the house, her thoughts in chaos, her emotions in turmoil. Still uncomfortable asking for help, she knew in this

instance, she'd willingly take any she could get. Even if that help did come from a Norse God and an Incubus. Swallowing her pride, she made her decision. Turning in a circle, she lifted her head toward the ceiling. "Forseti? Father?" she called out. "I need your advice. Hell, I need your help."

* * * *

Ryan's breath seized. He could feel her uncertainty, her fear, yet she didn't let that stop her from doing what she knew she must. Her compassion and her love for Bridget, her desire to right this wrong, made her his perfect match. And by God, he'd do whatever he had to so he could stay in her life; even defy the Gods if he must.

*It won't come to that, Ryan. Have faith in us.
Us?*

Never mind about that. Just know that you aren't alone. Remember that Ryan, no matter how it looks, you aren't alone.

What aren't you telling me?

Silence was his only answer. So be it. He'd wait to see how things unfolded, even though his very nature demanded he act.

While Jordan waited for Forseti and Odin to make an appearance—and he had no doubt they would—he rummaged through her kitchen cabinets until he found exactly what he'd been searching for. With a quart-size zippered

sandwich bag in hand, he turned toward Jordan. She raised her eyebrows when she saw what he held. Nodding toward the baggie, she asked, "What's that for?"

"I think it might be a good idea to collect the evidence ourselves while we wait. We've wasted enough time as it is."

Jordan bit her lip. "Do you think that's wise? I want to find my sister more than you, but I don't want to do anything that could make it harder to find her."

"I don't think we have a choice here, Jordan."

He could feel her reluctance but sighed with relief when she straightened her shoulders and stepped toward him. "You shouldn't touch it. I don't have any hospital gloves, but you could pick it up with a pair of tweezers."

"Do you have a pair in your bathroom?"

"Yeah, in my makeup bag on the bathroom sink."

Ryan headed toward the front of the house, Jordan right on his heels. He hurried through the hallway and through the arch that led to the front entry, knowing they needed to retrieve that note before it conveniently disappeared. "Obviously, the phone calls going to and from here are being intercepted. We won't be able to contact the real authorities until we leave here, but we need to secure this message without screwing up any

evidence." He grimaced, not happy about the fact that right now he could only depend on his military skills and the abilities of a Norse God, and in Forseti's case, a demon, "Jordan, can you run up the stairs and grab your tweezers? I'm gonna stand guard over the note until you get back."

Jordan shrugged, before heading to the stairs, taking them two at a time. Ryan quirked a brow, surprised she hadn't insisted she be the one to stand guard.

Would it have done any good?

Ryan snorted. No.

That's why I didn't argue. I know when to give in. Besides, you know I'd kick you in the balls if you touched it before I got there. And I know you'd tear the kidnapper's head from his shoulders if he tried to get it back.

You're getting to know me that well, huh? Should I be worried?

Once she reached the second floor and disappeared around the corner, heading down the hallway, Ryan opened the front door. Knowing she was going to skin him alive, but unwilling to chance the letter held news that would destroy her, he crouched down in the doorway, hoping he'd be able to see what was written on it.

What he could read chilled his blood.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Before Ryan could get back to his feet, he heard three sets of feet run down the stairs. He hung his head, knowing he'd been caught.

"What is it, Ryan? What does it say?"

He probed her mind, watched her expression. No anger marred her features or was in her thoughts. Only concern. Concern and fear bled through their bond.

Mary, unwilling or perhaps unable to cope with what she must have assumed was news of her daughter's death paled. With an inhuman whimper, her eyes closed and she collapsed in Forseti's arms. When Jordan would have moved to help, Forseti shook his head. "No. Don't worry about your mother. She's fine. She's just been through too much in too short a time, and seeing the fear on your man's face, she assumed Bridget to be dead."

After lifting Mary into his arms and seating

himself on the bottom step, he nodded toward the note still lying on the porch. "What does the missive say?"

Ryan turned his head away, and swallowed past the lump lodged in his throat. "I thought you were keeping Mary locked in the cursed room?"

Forseti chuckled, amusement laced his voice. "You try keeping this hellion locked in a room when she can hear her daughter racing down the hallway. It isn't possible. Better to accompany her so she remains safe while she discovers what's going on than let her sit up there and worry."

"Ryan?"

Jordan's voice cracked and he knew she was close to breaking. Keeping the truth from her was not an option. But man, he didn't want to tell her. He knew exactly what she'd say when she read it, what she'd insist on doing.

"They want an exchange."

"How much money, Ryan? I have some savings."

Ryan shook his head. "No, baby. They don't want money." He paused, knowing from the look in her eyes she knew what he'd say next. "They want you."

* * * *

Jordan sat on the wicker chaise lounge, put her

head in her hands and cried. How could she even think of leaving her sister in the hands of such maniacs? Yet, she knew she couldn't trust them to keep their word. Anyone who would kidnap and threaten to kill an innocent, like Bridget, did not deserve her trust.

Still, she knew if she didn't do as they asked, her sister could die and it would be her fault. All her fault for not being strong enough, brave enough to trade her life for her sister's. She knew she couldn't live with that guilt. If they killed them both, so be it. At least she wouldn't live with the knowledge of her cowardice and her sister wouldn't die alone, feeling abandoned. Could there be anything worse than that?

She wiped the tears from her eyes and looked up when the door opened and Ryan stepped in, accompanied by a gust of frigid winter air.

"I hope you don't mind. I saw you come in here a few minutes ago," he said as he closed the door behind him. He looked around the cozy enclosure and whistled. "Nice. I've never seen an enclosed gazebo quite like this one before, though I'm pretty sure I mentioned that the last time we were in here." He reached down to adjust the portable heater and took off his jacket. "Mind if I join you?"

She shook her head. "Be my guest. The place is big enough for a dinner party. Have a seat." She waved her hand toward the other furniture. Her

eyes rounded when he sat next to her.

"I like this seat better. I hope you don't mind." He wrapped his arm around her shoulder and drew her close. He pressed his lips against her ear, whispered, "There's no sense in feeling guilty. You can't change what happened and there is no way to change what is. We need to concentrate on changing what can be."

Jordan shrugged away and removed her coat. It was getting warm since he'd turned up the heater. Knowing these last few hours were all she'd ever spend with Ryan, she moved back into the secure comfort of his arms and sighed.

"I know. I just want her home."

"At any cost?" He squeezed her tighter. "You can't let them win. You can't trade your life for hers. For all we know, she's already—"

"Don't say it!" She pulled from his arms, scooting to the far side of the lounge and held her hand up. "Don't you dare say it!" Her voice broke. She wouldn't, couldn't believe that.

Ryan reached over and pulled her back into his embrace. She let him hold her, offering whatever comfort his presence could.

She concentrated on the warmth of his arms around her, the smell of his cologne. His heart beat steadily beneath her cheek and she concentrated on the rhythm, immersing herself in his essence.

She wanted one last night with him. Wanted to make love with him one more time before she—*Don't think about it. Just do it. If you can't tell him you love him, show him.*

She looked up and met his gaze. "Make love to me, Ryan." Scrambling out of his arms, she stood up, went to the nearest window and closed the blind. "Right here, right now." She moved to another window and twisted the lever to close its blind as well.

Ryan stood and followed suit. Soon, all the blinds were closed and they were alone, isolated from the outside world, surrounded only by the padded wicker furniture and the sexual tension thickening around them.

She moved into his arms and rested her head on his shoulder, trying to keep control over her emotions. If she cried now, he wouldn't make love to her and she needed this, needed him.

Heat pooled in her middle as he wrapped his arms around her, his large hands splayed over her back, the curve of her hip. He moved them in slow circles soothing her until she relaxed into him. His soft kisses started at her temple, moving down over her cheek, to her jaw, before covering her lips.

Wrapping her arms around his neck, she groaned into his mouth when he pulled her hips against the hard evidence of his arousal. His

erection pressed against her lower stomach and she nearly collapsed, her legs trembling with her need of him. Pulling free, she yanked her sweater up over her head, uncaring that a few buttons of the cardigan popped loose and fell to the floor.

This may very well be the last chance she had to show him how much he meant to her. How much she wanted him in her life. She may be shy at voicing her emotions, but she had no problem showing them.

She unbuttoned her jeans. Sliding the zipper down with a metallic hiss, she shimmied out of the tight pants and kicked them halfway across the room. When she looked up, she became suddenly shy at Ryan's intense stare. What would he think of her wanton behavior? Would he think less of her for her sudden hunger, this desperate need eating her alive?

"What?" she asked, nervously wetting her lips. She looked around to find her clothes. "If you don't want to—"

"Shh . . . Oh, baby. I never said I didn't want to make love with you. I just can't believe that you're standing here in front of me, wearing nothing but that sexy underwear set." He scrubbed his hand over his face. "I've never seen a more beautiful woman in my life. I'm debating on whether or not I should pinch myself so I can wake myself up. This is surely a dream."

Her face burned at the compliment. He never failed to surprise her. Perhaps that was what she saw in him. Well, that and his lean, hard body and huge cock. Her face heated even more at the thought. What in the world was wrong with her? She shouldn't be this damn horny with her sister missing and her mother screwing . . . well, whatever it was Forseti happened to be. He wasn't human, that's for damn sure.

She stood as if transfixed as he slowly undressed. He shucked off his shirt, tossing it to the floor. He raised his face, looked her in the eyes, and slowly unbuttoned his jeans, opening them to her hungry gaze. When she knew she had his attention, she slowly licked her lips. His body tensed. His dick grew impossibly longer, thicker.

A sense of power nearly overcame her at Ryan's response to her action. With a wicked wink and naughty smile, he lowered his jeans past his thighs. How did he always seem to know exactly what to say, what to do, to make her feel comfortable?

When he stood naked before her, she reached back to unclasp her bra.

"Don't."

She paused and gave him a questioning look.

"I want to finish undressing you." His intense stare traveled from her lips, to her breasts, then down to inspect her very toes before moving back

up to meet hers. "I want to peel your skimpy panties from your luscious body with my teeth." His mouth lifted at one corner. "I want you under me, your legs thrown over my shoulders, screaming my name."

Her breath hitched. Her knees buckled. She whimpered as he closed the distance between them and pulled her into his arms for a scorching kiss. Holy hell. What did this man do to her that he had her melting at just a look, a touch?

Ryan groaned as he pulled her tight against his chest. He palmed the back of her head, tilting it to the side to give him better access to suckle at the curve of her neck. She whimpered in his arms as her cream seeped from her pussy, coating the inside of her thighs. What this man did to evoke such a response from her, she would never know.

He nipped her lips, begging entrance to the heated moisture of her mouth. She opened for him, her tongue meeting his as they tangled together within the honeyed depths.

She could taste his toothpaste, a hint of the coffee he must have sipped before looking for her. It all blended together, her taste and his, her urgency and his, until she couldn't imagine ever forgetting his taste, his touch.

She melted in his arms, her body becoming limp and pliant as he held her, kissed her, using his mouth on her as no other ever had.

Every slant of his lips, every tiny nibble of his teeth, showed her his need. The primal force between them rocked her to her core and she slumped in his arms as her legs finally gave out. She tightened her arms around his neck as he lifted her into his arms and carried her to the double wicker lounge where he'd found her just moments before.

He sat with her in his lap and nibbled at her lips, his hands roaming over her back and over the curve of her hip. Turning, he laid her on the green cushion covering the lounge and moved over her, his hands and mouth caressing her, seeming to worship her trembling body.

"I love the way you respond to me, baby. The way the goose bumps rise on your flesh when I kiss you, when I whisper in your ear. The way your arms tremble and your legs quiver when you're wrapped around me."

Jordan couldn't believe what he could do to her. His voice, his words had power over her every response, her every emotion. The way her body came to life when he was near her, how she couldn't wait to feel his touch, his caress, sometimes scared her. But it exhilarated her as well. Did she affect him the same way?

She wondered if it was natural, the craving, the longing she felt for this man she barely knew. Or, was it a by-product of whatever strange

connection they had with their minds? Whatever it was, it was heady and frightening, delicious and horrifying.

Her head thrashed on the cushion. Air caressed her breasts when her bra seemed to melt away. Her nipples pebbled, becoming hard points and he covered first one then the other with his mouth and hands. She shivered as pulses of heat ran from where his lips pulled on the rosy tip of one breast straight to her clit.

With one last pull, he lifted his head, moving his face over to her other breast. Fire ripped through her blood when the moist heat of his mouth closed over the rigid bud and she groaned. Thrusting her fingers through his hair, she held him to her, desperately seeking relief. Her clit throbbed, pulsed out a rhythm matching the pull of his mouth on her flesh.

She nearly screamed with anticipation when he kissed his way down over her ribs and stomach, trusting his tongue into her navel. She squirmed beneath him, torn between the desire to both pull his mouth back to her breast and leaving him to finish what he wanted to do.

“God, I didn’t think you were serious,” she said, panting as he grasped her panties with his teeth and began to pull. A husky chuckle greeted her comment and she groaned. Christ, the man even laughed sexy.

When he finally removed her panties, he settled between her legs, his cheek resting on her thigh. Warm air caressed her needy flesh and she shivered.

"I'm going to make you scream, Jordan," he whispered against her creaming pussy. "I'm going to make you scream and cum like you never have before."

She whimpered in frustration, in desperate need. Why didn't he do it already? Her body already cried out for him. She thrust her hips up in invitation, in demand. He chuckled again. His warm breath caressed the inside of her thighs, brushing the curls of her pussy. Her clit throbbed with anticipation and finally, when her every nerve shrieked in desperation, he lowered his head.

Just the rasp of his tongue over her sensitive flesh was enough to make her scream. She needed this, needed him. Here. Now. He drew the throbbing nub into his mouth. Her thighs opened further, making room for his broad shoulders as he suckled her clit.

The feel of his mouth was exquisite, decadent. His experienced tongue seemed to dance over her until it drove her to a pinnacle, then up and over the peak. Her thighs clenched around his head, trapping him between her thighs. She screamed his name, her hands fisted in his hair.

He kissed his way back up her quivering body and she groaned when he pressed his lips against hers, licking her bottom lip before slipping inside and twining his tongue with hers. It was strange, tasting herself on his lips, yet decadent somehow. She moaned against his lips, thrusting her hips up against him as her body searched for yet another release.

"You taste like heaven, baby," he whispered against her lips. He pressed soft kisses to her collarbone and neck, moving up to press an opened mouth kiss behind her ear. He moved between her legs. Grinding his hips into hers, he pressed his hard cock against her pelvic bone.

Her hips lifted, searching for him, frantic to feel him filling her. Why didn't he do it already? Why didn't he just ram his hard cock into her up to the hilt? That's what she wanted, what she needed.

Jordan whimpered when he lowered his head to suckle her breast again. She wrapped her arms around him and, grabbing the cheeks of his ass, she pulled him tighter against her, as though she would pull him completely inside her if she could. Hell, perhaps she would if it would relieve her of this burning need, this churning desire in her.

Finally, when she was sure she would scream her frustration to the world, he pressed the head of his cock against the opening of her dripping channel. He attempted to slide into her slowly, but

she wrapped her legs around his waist, tilted up her hips and met his first thrust.

Her hands roamed his body. She touched him everywhere. His arms. His shoulders. The curve of his hip. She had to touch him, caress him. She needed to.

The feel of his muscled flesh beneath her fingers drove her closer to the edge as he moved his shaft inside her. His slow thrusts drove her over the edge again and again as he reached between them and thrummed her clit. Her legs quivered, grew weak. She barely had the strength in her arms to hold onto him, to keep their bodies merged.

Still she needed. Wanted. Would this desire she felt for him never end? Did she want it to? Soon, all thought was thrust from her mind, leaving nothing but the pure sensation of Ryan's body pounding against hers.

His measured thrusts were designed to bring her over again and again. Still, he sought no relief. Sweat dripped from his skin to hers. Grunts, groans and moans filled the gazebo and still he continued to thrust into her again and again until she was sure she would die from it. Perhaps she already had and this was heaven, because hell certainly would not feel this good.

Finally, she noticed the telltale signs of his nearing climax and she screamed in triumph. His muscles tightened and, gritting his teeth, he

growled against her breast as his own orgasm overtook him. Still he continued to thrust, even as his cock bathed the inside of her pussy. Perhaps, he too worried this may be their last time together, for even when he began to soften inside her, he didn't withdraw. Instead he lay atop her as their breathing slowed and the sweat on their bodies dried.

Minutes passed and neither spoke, too caught up in their emotions, the sense of intimacy that still wrapped around them. Too soon, Ryan shifted, withdrawing from her body. He rolled to his side, dragging her into his arms. "I love you, Jordan."

Unable to find the words she was desperate to say, she nodded, pressed her lips against his chest directly above his beating heart. He sighed, and she knew she'd hurt him. Why couldn't she just say the words? She knew she loved him.

Eons later, or maybe it was only minutes that passed, the steady rhythm of Ryan's breathing slowed. When she was sure he slept, she slowly pulled away from him. Standing at the end of the chaise she looked upon her lover, the man she'd die loving. She closed her eyes, whispered to the heavens that he'd go on with his life, find another woman to love, one worthy of him.

With a single tear running down her cheek, she opened her eyes, took one last glance at his

sleeping body and began to gather her clothes. Once dressed, she walked to the French door, looked over her shoulder at her man. In a choked whisper she finally found voice to her feelings. "I love you too, Ryan. Be happy."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Ryan waited until the click of the door echoed through the gazebo before he opened his own tear-filled eyes. He could feel her pain, her belief that she was doing the right thing. It tore him apart to know she'd sacrifice herself, their love, rather than try to come up with a plan that would keep her safe. Didn't she care about him at all?

Almost as soon as he thought that, he felt ashamed. He knew she loved him. Even if she weren't ready to say the words to his face, she had said them. And every time she was near he could feel her love for him in her touch, in the shy glances and the heartfelt sighs.

Sitting up, Ryan ran his hands through his hair, hung his head in thought. Wouldn't he do the same thing if the situation were reversed? Wouldn't he give up his own life if it would keep her safe? Damn right he would. But still the pain,

the feeling of abandonment persisted. Well, that was his problem, and he'd work through it, but first he had to find his woman and talk some damn sense into her.

Decision made, Ryan gathered his scattered clothes, dressing as quickly as he could. She had at least a ten-minute head start on him. Would she go into the house before she left, leave a note for him and her mother, or would she just take off and head to the abandoned gravel pit where the exchange would happen?

Ryan snorted. He knew full well no exchange was planned. The kidnappers only wanted to grab another hostage. But why? Why did he—or she, he had to remember a woman could be involved, just as easily as a man—want Jordan specifically? Had she gotten into something and not been aware of it, or did all this circle back around to Odin and the politics and backstabbing going on in his world?

Knowing time continued to tick down as Jordan put distance between them, he stomped into his boots, not even bothering to lace them. He'd try the house first. Even if she'd already left, the others would know how to get there. She wouldn't face the kidnappers alone.

Sooner or later, she'd realize that where she went, he'd follow, wherever it led, even into the thereafter. Hopefully, that day was not today. He

had a lot of plans for Jordan, for their future, among them getting her to admit her feelings to his face.

Leaving the warm gazebo, Ryan jogged down the path that led to the house. He slowed his approach, a sense of unease whispering across his nerves. His stomach heaved and he knew danger waited around the corner. Thank God his internal radar was still working. At least he knew there was a trap waiting for him inside. It gave him an advantage, even if it was a small one, unarmed as he was.

Ryan eased around the corner of the house, wishing it wasn't full daylight. It'd be so much easier to sneak up on whoever was waiting inside the house if he could use the cover of darkness to mask his approach.

He pressed his back against the cold vinyl and tried to concentrate. He needed to know just what kind of danger awaited him and from which direction it would come.

It took him a while, but he finally calmed his mind enough to search for the negative energy he'd always associated with someone's evil intentions. Shit, it wasn't him in danger. It was Jordan.

He had to warn her. She was in the house and someone stalked her. But who, and where were they?

Jordan, I don't know where you are, but someone is in there with you and I don't mean your mother and her hell-borne boyfriend.

The wait seemed interminable before she answered. I know. I'm trapped in my bathroom. I came up here for my gun. I heard footsteps in my bedroom and managed to dive into the tub without being seen.

Are you armed?

No. I couldn't get to my gun in time.

He got the impression of her huddled in the tub, hiding behind the shower curtain. But how long would it be before the intruder thought to look there for her?

Is there anything in there you can use as a weapon? Spray Deodorant? Razor Blades? Anything?

Nothing that won't leave me in full view when I try to get out of the tub to get it.

Okay. Give me a moment to think. Just hang on, baby. I'll get you out of this. Where the hell was Odin? Why wasn't he here protecting his daughter?

Dammit, I can see the freaking lockbox from here. One of these goons has the damn thing in his hands right in front of the open bathroom door.

How many are in there with you? Can you see?

I'm not sure. I can see one, but I can hear two voices. They're muffled. My guess is they're trying to be quiet.

Have you tried contacting Odin? Maybe he can create a diversion until I can get in there.

A wave of frustration and disappointment

blasted through their link. *He's not answering. What took you so long to answer me?*

What? Jordan, you didn't call me.

Of course I did. Who else would I call when I'm in trouble? Besides, this way I don't have to worry about getting a cell phone signal. I just need to think about you and what I want to say and you hear me.

Ryan poked his head around the corner of the house, eyeing the front door. He could see movement in the glass and quickly ducked back out of sight. Closing his eyes, he hung his head, rubbing the blade of his nose in thought. *Not this time.*

What?

Jordan, they were able to block you from sending out a call for help. I initiated this contact with you. I'm maintaining the link.

Terror whipped through their bond. A shaft of intense pain pierced his mind. He groaned, unable to hold it in as his legs buckled and his knees hit the ground. *Jordan? Baby? Answer me, dammit.*

There was nothing. He couldn't hear her. Couldn't sense her. Somehow, the link connecting their minds, their very souls, vanished. His eyes filled with tears as he struggled to his feet. To hell with being stealthy and creeping in there. If their link severed because she'd died, his life was as good as over anyway.

Don't do anything foolish, son.

Where the hell are you? I can't feel Jordan. How

could you abandon her this way, dammit?

I haven't. But in this I cannot interfere. It is why I chose you, son. Only you can save your woman, now.

She's gone, dammit.

No, but she soon will be. And remember this. Jordan has the blood of the Gods running through her veins. She has the power inside her.

Power? What power?

I can tell you no more. Now go to her.

Easing around the corner, Ryan dropped to his hands and knees, being careful to keep below the windows. Until he found a way in that wouldn't get him killed, he didn't want anyone to catch sight of him. As he made his way through the rose bushes beneath the picture window, rocks jabbed his palms, and thorns gauged his skin leaving rivulets of blood dripping down his arm.

A few seconds later, Ryan stopped. He could go no farther and remain undetected. A two-foot wide window bracketed both sides of the door. If he tried to grab the handle, he'd be easily seen by anyone who happened to look outside. "Damn vague bastard," he muttered, careful to keep his voice below a whisper. *He's a God. Who's going to stop him from giving some straight answers? Like who's inside, where they might be, and where the hell Jordan is being kept.*

He had to get inside that house. *I sure wish I had backup.* Knowing he was out of time, Ryan did the only thing he could think of. He stood up, grabbed

the door handle, and stepped inside.

“Jordan, honey, I’m home.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Jordan shifted, tried to rollover, certain she'd heard Ryan call out to her. She couldn't move, could barely breathe. Her arms and legs were stiff, her head ringing. She tried to open her eyes and winced. Unable to stand the stabbing pain, she lowered her lids half-mast. Her vision was blurry, and the entire right side of her faced ached. "What the hell happened?"

Again she tried to move her arms and legs and couldn't. Only then did she realize she'd been tied up and stuffed inside her own bedroom closet. Shadowy light shone though the slats in the closet doors and she could make out the silhouettes of several people as they stood surrounding her bed.

She tried to call out to Ryan and met darkness. The bond she'd begun to rely on didn't shimmer between them. Pain hammered at her soul, crushed her spirit. Tears welled in her eyes and she let them silently fall, not wanting anyone to

know she'd regained consciousness. Muffled shouts and the sound of flesh striking flesh echoed through the room.

"Where is she?"

A sharp slap. A hard grunt. A groan of pain. It all made its way to her prison.

Jordan drew in a sharp breath. She'd swear that was Ryan's voice, his cries of pain. But how had they caught him unawares? Hadn't he warned her she was in danger? Why couldn't she remember what happened, how they captured her?

The last thing she recalled clearly was diving into the tub and trying to call for help. Anything after that felt more dreamlike than real. At least they had no hope of capturing her mother. But how the hell were she and Ryan going to get out of this mess if she couldn't call for help?

More shouts, a heavy thump reached her ears. Jeans clad legs were dragged past the closet door, leaving furrows in the carpet. They dropped Ryan to the floor. He lay within inches of her, separated only by the slatted door. Blood trickled down for the corner of his mouth, and his faced looked heavily swollen. She thought she saw his eyes flutter, but that could be wishful thinking on her part.

Closing her eyes, Jordan tried to shut out the vision of Ryan looking so battered. It wouldn't help her concentration. If she could just figure out

how to get out of the damn ropes tying her hands and feet to each other, she'd be able to at least cause some sort of distraction.

Squeezing her eyes shut even tighter, she tried to picture her hands and the ropes that bound them. If she could concentrate, feel the shape of the knots, visualize what they'd look like, maybe she could untie them and get the hell out of here. But she couldn't get her fingers to obey. Her hands were almost completely numb.

She couldn't give up. Ryan needed her. Tears slipped from her eyes as she struggled against her bonds. She could feel blood dripping from the abrasions her struggles were causing. Still she tried.

Long agonizing minutes passed. She could barely move. Her shoulders felt as though they'd been pulled out of their sockets. In frustration, she stopped fighting the rope, and bit her lip to muffle her moans. The pain in her hands was nothing compared to the pain she felt at her inability to help Ryan. *Dammit. I just want the rope to fucking disappear. Is that so much to ask?*

Unbelievably the bonds began to loosen. Sensation rushed through her fingers, sending shafts of burning pain through her hands, arms and legs all the way down to her toes. What the hell?

Within seconds, she felt the rope give a final tug, drop onto the carpet. "Who —"

She turned her head, expecting to see someone behind her. No one. She struggled to a seated position. She scooted to the wall, still trying to get the feeling back her in legs. Leaning against the wall she looked at the blood-soaked rope lying so innocently in front of her. How had it come undone? What was going on?

She reached down and touched it, it was real. She rubbed her wrists, wincing at the pain caused by her abraded flesh. *What the hell?*

Pressing her back against the wall, she concentrated on getting her hands and feet to wake up. It was all she could do to keep her cries of pain from escaping her lips when the pins and needles sensation in her extremities began.

She stared through the slats, willing Ryan to open his swollen eyes so she would know he was still alive and wishing he knew enough to keep them closed. They would begin beating him as soon as he woke again. She knew it. She couldn't allow that to happen.

If she could figure out how she managed to untie her ropes maybe she could cause a big enough distraction that she could surprise the thugs inside her house. Closing her eyes, Jordan focused on the layout of the house. If she could cause a large enough disturbance in another part of the house, maybe one or more would go off to investigate. Shrugging the tension out of her

shoulders, Jordan relaxed, picturing her bedroom.

She focused all her energy on where she knew her bedroom door to be. Was it open or shut? Did it matter? Rather than focus on the door, which wouldn't get their attackers to leave the room, she turned her mind's eye to the hallway. What was in the hallway, exactly? She tried to remember every detail. Pale yellow walls lined with dozens of family photos. Four doors. The stairs leading down to the first floor. The scuttle-hole that led up into the attic.

A plan began to form in her mind. But first she needed to test her theory. Staring at her shoes, she concentrated on untying her shoelaces. If she could do that, then the rope that had bound her hadn't come undone from outside forces but by using her own will.

Sweat beaded upon her forehead, as she concentrated on loosening the ties. Minutes passed. Nothing happened other than giving herself the beginnings of a headache. What was she doing wrong? Maybe she was trying too hard. Before she'd wished them gone, and they loosened on their own. Perhaps she just had to *will* the end result, not worry about the *how*s of it.

Once again she closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and visualized her shoes untied, their laces dangling on the carpet. When next she looked down, her shoes were not only untied, but gaping

open. Jordan smiled in triumph and kicked her shoes off. *Damn, I'm good. Now to cause that distraction.*

Needing to know when the area cleared out, she didn't close her eyes this time as she pictured the hallway in her mind. She needed to lead them away from the room and into another part of the house if at all possible.

She wanted the pictures to move. Needed them to move. When the sound of shattering glass reached her, she winced.

"What the hell was that?"

Her mother was going to kill her if any of the photos and old time portraits were ruined but if it aided in their escape it'd be worth whatever scolding she'd get.

"I don't know, boss. There ain't nobody else here. We made sure of that before we dragged him in here."

"Obviously you missed something. Go look and take Vince with you."

She sent another picture hurtling to the floor, and another, moving ever closer to the portal room. The sound of shattering glass grew dimmer. Her mother was going to kill her if any of the photos and old time portraits were ruined.

"Fool, what are you waiting for? Go. Now."

Shrugging her unease away, she concentrated on the doors leading away from her bedroom. She

didn't want to lead them to the Portal Room, but what choice did she really have?

Unable to see what doors were open and which were closed, she did the next best thing. Opened and closed them all. Repeatedly. Over and over the doors in the hallway—and even the ones downstairs—began to open only to slam shut a second later. Hopefully, it would buy her a little time to try and get her and Ryan out of this mess. Then she was going to hunt Odin down and make him set things right.

"You can come out of the closet now, little human. I know you're responsible for what's going on."

Jordan bit her lip, indecisive. There went her element of surprise. Now what should she do?

"If you want your lover to live more than five minutes, you will do as I say. Now."

Shit. Shit. Shit. Now what? Scrambling to her feet, Jordan focused on the closet doors, and willed them open. Unfortunately, she used a bit more force than she needed because they ripped right off the wall and hurtled across the room. Glass shattered as one of the folding doors crashed through the window while the other landed harmlessly on the bed.

She glanced down at Ryan, terrified her ill attempt at distraction would be too little too late. He winked at her. Her eyes widened in surprise

and she quickly looked away. Her gaze landed on the creature standing less than an arm's length away.

She shuddered in revulsion. With skin as gray as ash, fiery red eyes, shocking white hair and black horns, there was no way he could be called anything other than a demon.

"Quite an entrance, human. But you're not human are you?"

Jordan swallowed, scared out of her mind. Something inside her though, some secret part that felt empowered, reared its head. "Neither are you, but I have to say..." She paused to look him over from head to toe and back again. "I'm much better looking."

"You bitch." He started to move toward her. Ryan reached out, grabbed him by the ankle and tugged. The demon stumbled, fell to one knee. His burning gaze met hers and she could see his hatred, feel it like a living, writhing thing. "You will die. You'll freeze in the pits of *Helheim* and I'll be there to savor your screams of despair."

Jordan snorted. She flicked her glance back to Ryan. *Back away from him, Ryan. I can handle this.* Nodding, Ryan slowly dropped his hand from the demon's ankle and pulled himself across the floor. Once he'd moved far enough away where she was certain he'd be safe, she turned back toward the creature.

He'd gotten to his feet and now loomed over her. Rage, anger and hatred poured through her mind, flooding her entire being with heat, filling her with blistering power she had no intention of controlling. "No. You'll burn." And suiting action to words, his skin began to smoke. From inside out, the fire began to rage until a living pillar of flame writhed upon the floor, screaming in agony.

Jordan looked on, sickened by her actions but seeing no way she could have avoided it. She swallowed the bile filling her throat as the smell of burning flesh and clothing assaulted her. *Oh, God... What had she done?*

You did what you needed to.

The sound of Ryan's voice once again loud in her mind filled her with so much relief her entire body began to tremble. She rushed to his side, helped him to stand. *Thank God you're all right.*

"If you want something done right, you have to do it yourself."

Jordan gasped, turned her head toward the new threat.

Oh, shit.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Ryan shuddered in revulsion. His eyes widened in disbelief. “What the hell is that?”

Next to him, Jordan gagged. Her eyes watered. Pulling her into the shelter of his arms, he faced the horrid creature in front of him. With the head and body of a hag, the woman—if you could call it that—stood on decomposing legs. The smell of gangrene combined with the burning flesh of the demon was almost more than he could bear.

The creature sneered at him. Its teeth were coated with green slime and its face drooped on one side as though melted by acid. “Who are you?”

“I am Hel, Goddess of *Helheim*, Queen of the Underworld. All bow to me. And soon, so shall you.”

Jordan tensed, her muscles bunched. *Oh, shit. What are we going to do, Ryan?*

Can you reach your father?

I don't know.

Hel raised her arms and began to sway, chanting in a language he'd never heard before. The hairs on his arms stirred. His gut cramped. *Hurry, Jordan.*

Dammit. Why isn't he ever there when I need him?

That's it. Didn't he say reach out to him in the time of your greatest need? If you can't bring him here, maybe it's because you're supposed to take us to him.

As the decaying goddess' voice rose, Jordan concentrated on her father, pictured his face, and willed her and Ryan to his side. As the room began to fade around them, the banshee wail of the Goddess Hel pierced the heavy veil of darkness surrounding them. Searing pain ripped through his eardrums, through his mind. Ryan gritted his teeth and tightened his hold on Jordan. No way was he letting go of her. Not now. Not ever.

* * * *

Forced to await the hands of fate, Odin paced his throne room in his great hall, *Valhalla*. Warriors looked on, their expressions grim. No one approached the Warrior God. No one dared. Freki and Geri, his faithful wolves and companions, lay at the foot of his throne, staring at him with bemused expressions.

"You'd worry too, my friends."

His two ravens, Huginn and Muninn flew overhead. Power rushed over his skin. His wolves stirred. Finally, his tension began to ease, for only an incoming portal summoned by one of his blood could open in *Valhalla* without his permission.

"Finally, they're here." Rubbing his hands together in anticipation, Odin waited as a window bridging the human realm and *Asgard* opened in front of him. He only had a second to admire the rainbow bridge before Jordan and Ryan staggered through the portal and it winked out of existence.

"Welcome to *Valhalla*, Daughter." Turning toward Ryan, he offered him his forearm in a warrior's greeting. Despite his injuries, Ryan's grip was firm, his stance unwavering. "And welcome to you as well, Ryan Connors."

Jordan's voice rang through his vast hall, reaching every warrior in every chamber, as if carried by a wave of magic. Her voice held power, ancient power and she wielded it with a skill that left Odin, the most powerful of Norse Gods, awestruck.

"I call on the mercy of the Norse Gods in putting to rights a grievous wrong done to me and mine by one of your own."

Odin smiled. He knew his one amber eye twinkled with mirth and satisfaction. Others had always said one could tell the All-Father's mood by looking into his one good eye.

Turning toward his daughter, he held open his arms in greeting. Though he knew he pushed his luck by manipulating her into a hug, he couldn't help it. She was a daughter to make a cynical God proud. After a quick sidelong glance at Ryan, and his nod of encouragement, Jordan stepped forward.

With supreme satisfaction, he wrapped his arms around his daughter for the first time. How he loved it when a plan came together so perfectly.

"Welcome home, my child," he whispered, thankful he could hold her within his arms at last. Loosening his grip, Odin cleared his throat and stepped back. "We don't have much time. You and Ryan must leave for *Helheim* right away if you hope to save Bridget. "

Jordan shifted, tilted her head, a furrow marring her brow. "You can't have arranged all this just to save my sister. What's in it for you?" Ryan stiffened at her side, but didn't say or do anything to naysay her. Smart boy.

Odin snorted. "Of course there's something in it for me. Prophetic visions are not used for personal gain. Only a cataclysmic event, one foretelling the coming of *Ragnorak*, can trigger the visions."

"And *Ragnorak* is what?" she asked.

"Quite simply, it is the end of all life. The earth will plunge into darkness. And the gods will battle their enemies, doing their best to protect the

humans and each other. Only a few will survive. We must do all that we can to prevent the destruction that's prophesized."

Jordan nodded, but her expression was distant. What was going on in that mind of hers? Unfortunately, he didn't think prying into her thoughts would win him parent of the year points, and though he was a master manipulator, he didn't want to influence her thoughts or feelings.

"Fine. Where do we need to go and how do we get there?"

He quickly glanced at Ryan to gage his condition. He hated sending an injured, unarmed warrior into battle, but unfortunately he had no choice. Even Gods had to follow the laws the fates decree. "You will have to travel to the Underworld."

"You want me to go to Hell?"

Ryan snickered.

Odin smiled.

"You asses," she huffed, though he could hear the laughter in her voice.

His smile slipped as he thought of the upcoming danger to his daughter and her mate. His voice and expression grew harsh. "Yes, you must travel to *Helheim*. There you will find not only your sister, but the one who has caused all this mischief." Turning toward Ryan he continued, "You must watch all that you can,

listen to every word spoken, and when an admission of guilt is made, only then can you call on the Norns. Do you both understand?"

Jordan fisted her hands at her sides, nodded and returned to Ryan's side. Stiffening her shoulders, she reached out to Ryan, took his hand in hers and gave it a quick squeeze. After an encouraging nod, her voice once again rang out through *Valhalla*. Her voice soared over all the lands, from the highest peaks of *Asgard* to the Lowest Depths of *Helheim*, announcing to one and all her intentions. "Hear me. I am Jordan, Daughter of Odin, and I seek justice. Justice will be mine."

Odin smiled as once again a portal opened. With a firm nod, Ryan and Jordan stepped through the gateway to Hell, united in both heart and mind.

* * * *

The first thing Jordan noticed was the cold. A cold so deep that the marrow of her bones throbbed in agony. The loud wails of the damned echoed off the cavern walls. The unending darkness and the tormenting cries of the dead reached into the deepest part of her soul. Never would she choose to rule such a place, cause such agony to another. Beside her, Ryan shuddered.

As they made their way through the caverns, no one approached them. Although she'd never been here, never even knew such a place existed, Jordan knew exactly where she needed to go.

Whatever happens today, I want you to know I love you, Jordan.

She stopped. Started to speak. Ryan covered her quivering lips with his fingers. "No, don't say anything. I just wanted you to know."

Jordan swallowed. Looked down at her feet. Glanced back up and captured his gaze. "There are some things I need to say, some things I have to get off my chest before —"

Ryan shook his head again. "It'll wait, baby. We have the rest of our lives to say what we need."

She shook her head. "But, what if —"

Again he cut her off. "No. Don't go in with any doubts. Keep your fears deep inside where no one can see them, sense them." He paused, stared into her eyes. "Do you understand?"

She swallowed, licked her lips. "I think so."

"Good." He tugged on her hand when she couldn't seem to get moving again. Tugged again, until she finally started moving toward Hel's inner sanctum. Her thoughts, her emotions were in chaos. What if they never made it out of here?

Jordan, you can't think like that.

Ryan was right. She had to get a grip before the goddess noticed her fear and exploited it.

Visualizing an impenetrable safe, she locked away all negative thoughts and emotions, keeping only the desperate desire to save her sister and the burning need for justice uppermost in her mind.

It seemed like they walked for miles before the murky darkness led to the shadowy gray entry of Hel's domain. Sprawled on a black velvet chaise was the Goddess Hel. Her eyes were fixed on a huddled form chained to the wall in a distant corner.

"What have you done to my daughter, you bitch?"

Jordan gasped. She searched the dim interior of the dank cave until her eyes came to rest on her mother and Forseti, both locked in cages suspended above the cavern floors by thick metal chains.

"Not nearly as much as I'll do to that bastard daughter my husband birthed on you. This one may yet live, the other will die the moment she shows her face to rescue the lot of you."

Again a surprised gasp passed Jordan's lips. Beside her, Ryan tensed. Hel hadn't spoken. "So she's come. Come forward and meet your doom."

Out of the deepest recesses of the cavern stepped a giantess. At least ten feet tall, Jord had to lower her head to walk beneath the suspended cages. Her face had hard pains. Her short hair of muddy brown looked as though it hadn't seen a

comb in many days. Her face was round and without any real definition. Her black eyes glittered with malice. She had no waistline and no boobs. She wore a utilitarian, shapeless one-piece uniform of unrelenting black. There was not one feminine feature to mark her as a woman other than her smoky voice.

Ryan gave her hand one quick squeeze then dropped it. She could feel his love, his faith in her blazing through their bond. That belief, that passion and love, would see her through the coming ordeal. If nothing else came of today, if she died down here in Hel's domain, she would die knowing that she was truly loved and that was truly the greatest gift she could ever receive.

Go get 'em, tiger.

"Of course I came. Only a coward sends someone in their stead." Jordan took another step toward Jord, then another. When only a few feet separated them, she stopped, looked up, determined to meet the bitter goddess' hateful stare.

Taking her life in her hands, she said the one thing guaranteed to piss the giantess off. "Are you a coward, Jord?"

"How dare you speak to me, you insolent bastard?"

Jordan tilted her head, smiled. "Well, I am a bastard by birthright. But I came to you. I didn't

hide behind others in the deepest recesses of Hell, or send someone else to do my dirty work for me. You did that."

"And what if I did? All I have to do is wrap my hands around your puny throat and extinguish your insignificant life," Jord sneered, looked at Bridget's quivering body, before lifting her hands and sending her mother's prison careening into Forseti's.

Jordan fisted her hands by her sides, then relaxed them. She couldn't let the goddess know that she was affecting her. "Then why haven't you?"

Jord lowered her hands and once again focused all her attention on Jordan. She could feel Ryan's unease through their bond, but she tuned it out, needing to focus on the here and now.

"Because I want to see you suffer as I have suffered. I want you to witness your family members die one by one, to hear their agonizing screams echo through Hel's domain for Eons to come."

"So all this..." Jordan said, gesturing her hands toward the cavern, toward her mother and sister, "... the kidnapping of my sister, trapping my mother down here in Hel, changing Forseti into an incubus was so that you can get vengeance on me. What the hell did I ever do to you?"

"You were born. Your very existence threatens

my future. Even if it means destroying your entire bloodline in the process, when *Ragnorak* comes, I will survive, and I *will* rule the Nine Worlds."

Next to her Ryan sighed, relief and satisfaction roared through their link. *You did good, baby. Now let me do my job.*

My pleasure. But I have one more question I want answered.

Go ahead, but make it quick.

"Why did you trap Forseti in the form of an incubus and set him to seduce my mother?"

"Because your birth was prophesized long ago. The portal was created, and Forseti transformed into a demon so that all would be ready when the time came."

"So you killed my ancestors, created the curse, just to punish me for being born."

Jord sneered. "I only wished more of your line had died, and even then that wouldn't be punishment enough for what I have suffered."

Are you satisfied, baby?

Not really, Ryan, but this place is really creeping me out. I need to get my sister and mother out of here.

"I call upon the Norns. Let them witness Jord's confession."

A cold breeze whipped through the cavern. For one moment a flash of light blinded her before a wave of searing heat wound its way through the room. From the other side of the cave, Hel cried

out, "Nooo..."

When Jordan could once again see, Bridget was wrapped in her mother's arms, Forseti wrapped around them both. Both Jord and Hel now hung suspended within the metal cages.

In the center of the cavern, standing in a circle of golden light, stood three women. As one, they turned to her and Ryan. "Who calls upon us?"

After giving her a wry smile, Ryan stepped forward, stopping directly in front of the most beautiful women Jordan had ever seen. "I do. I call upon the Norns for justice and punishment of those who would tamper with fate."

"And who are you?"

"Ryan Connors."

"Step forward, Ryan Connors, and let us witness all that has transpired."

Ryan nodded, stepped into the circle of light. Jordan, torn between making sure Bridget was safe and unharmed and watching over Ryan, hesitated. But one glance at Bridget's beaming face and she knew her place was at Ryan's side. Stepping forward, Jordan reached for Ryan's hand, squeezing it in reassurance as he so often did for her when she needed it. As one, the three women reached out, each placing a hand upon his head.

Ryan's knees buckled but he didn't waver. He held firm as the minutes passed. Only Hel's

constant weeping and the bitter muttering from Jord filled the silence. Together the three women stepped back, joined hands and surveyed all within the dank cavern. Finally, they returned their gazes to their witness. "Thank you, Ryan Connors. You have served the gods well. Step back so that we may render our decision and mete out the proper punishment for those that have dared to tamper with the fates of man and the Gods."

A startled gasp from the other side of the room caught Jordan's attention, and the unwavering focus of the three Goddesses of Fate. *Now what?*

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“The Norns!” Forseti hissed, pulling Mary behind him. “For god’s sake, don’t move, don’t speak. Don’t do anything to draw their attention.”

Jordan saw Forseti’s reaction and moved to put herself between the Norns and Ryan. The last thing she wanted was to have them decide he should take his place in *Valhalla*. Over her dead body.

The three women looked her way. “That can be arranged, Jordan, daughter of Odin.” Waves of cold swirled around them, stirring their hair and robes as they stood before them in the same pose, wearing the same expression. Each of the women looked exactly like the others, the only difference between them was the color of their hair.

They turned their attention to Hel and spoke as one. “You are charged with treason and false imprisonment against your own kind. How do you answer these charges, ugly one?”

Hel stood before the Norns and twisted her face into a sneer. "What can you do, consign me to Hell?" She laughed, baring her rotted teeth, assaulting the others with her hideous breath.

"Hel, you shall be confined to the underworld, stripped of your identity and powers. There your minions shall deal with you as they deal with the other beings consigned to your realm. You shall suffer this punishment for the next five hundred years. Your apathetic nature bids us to waste no more time on you."

With a hideous banshee wail, Hel was sucked deeper into her realm, the cries of the damned grew louder before the din settled and once again became silent.

The three women turned to Forseti, again speaking in unison, their musical voices became softer as they looked on him with favor.

"Forseti, once a kind and handsome god, you have consigned innocents to Hel's realm."

Forseti stood straighter, looking every inch the man who was sure he would receive a death sentence. Mary reached out, grasped his hand and moved up beside him, though he attempted to keep her hidden.

"You can't punish him for that." She struggled against Forseti's hold, determined to plead for mercy on his behalf. "He was cursed," Mary said, pointing toward Jord. "It's all her fault."

Jordan cringed when the Norns gaze bore down on her mother. "We can and will do as we please, human." Their eyes blazed with certain retribution before they softened. "But, however, we agree."

Forseti's relief that they didn't strike down her mother was evident. He squeezed her hand and gave her a look that clearly said, "Shut up."

"Mary Michaels, we shall deal with you after we have dealt with Forseti."

Jordan bit her lip, not wanting to piss them off any more than her mother already had.

Turning back to the incubus, they raised their hands. Suddenly, the cold and stench of the underworld dissipated and they were surrounded by fresh air, the Norns having brought them from the dank confines of Hel's abode to a meadow filled with wildflowers.

"Forseti, you shall be restored to your old self and confined to *Valhalla*, your immortality intact, your powers stripped. For a time."

Mary gasped and tears filled her eyes when she realized she would never see her lover again.

"You can't do this. I love him." She glanced at Forseti. "Tell them you love me!" She was desperate not to lose her love.

"You dare question the sentence of the Norns?" They stared at Mary, their eyes blazing.

Jordan wanted to go to her mother, to help her, but something held her back. Something told her

that she would not be doing her mother a service if she interfered.

Forseti stepped in front of Mary in an attempt to protect her from the three sisters. With a sharp cry, he faded to nothingness and Mary stood grasping at nothing but air.

"No," she cried, dropping to her knees in despair.

"Mary Michaels, few women have loved so completely that they would risk the wrath of the Norns in an attempt to save their loved one. You have proven yourself worthy to join Forseti in *Valhalla*. We grant you immortality to spend as his consort. Go to him with our blessings."

Jord gasped and fumed at every punishment. "You call that justice? Is it justice that my mate impregnated that slut you just sent to my home?" She sneered at Jordan. "Next you'll tell his misbegotten bastard daughter that she's welcome there as well." She turned her back ready to leave. "I wash my hands of you all." She began to fade.

"You will stop, Jord!" the sisters raised their voices and the bitter goddess froze in her tracks.

"Release me. You have no right!"

"We have every right. You have meddled in the affairs of the fates. For that you shall answer for your crimes." The three women stood back to back, their hands raised in the air. A cool breeze lifted their hair until it blended, red, blonde and

black in one long, thick braid.

"Jord, your punishment has been wrought. You shall suffer the pain and indignity you have subjected Forseti to for these many years. A succubus you'll become, irresistible to every man but one." They waved their hands in a strange pattern and Jord suddenly transformed into stunningly beautiful woman.

"No, no, no!" she shouted, looking down at herself.

Jordan suppressed a smile. The once giant goddess looked like a centerfold, a veritable sex kitten, in her stiletto heels and a barely there dress. Large, full breasts bulged above her neckline, looking like they were about to burst out at any moment and long, tousled, blonde hair hung down to curl around her waist.

"You can't do this to me. It would be torture. You know I can't stand the touch of men."

The Norns ignored her pleas, continuing with her sentencing. "Your sentence is to stay in this realm for as many years as Forseti suffered your wrath, servicing any man who wants you." They all smiled mirthlessly. "And *every* man will want you."

"No!" Jord shouted once more before too she faded away.

The fates then turned their attention to Bridget, Jordan and Ryan. "Since you all have been born of

supernatural beings, you shall not suffer the loss of your memories."

"We have all what?" Ryan asked. Jordan wondered what in the hell they were talking about and Bridget looked completely overwhelmed.

"Quiet. We have not given you leave to speak. In time you will all discover of what I speak, but that time has not yet come." Once again the three sisters of fate spoke as one. "Bridget, your future awaits. Let not what happened these past weeks hamper you, but guide you in your choices. Decisions await you. What you make of your life now, will ultimately decide your fate. Choose well. As you are still young and will need guidance, you shall reside with your mother until it is time for you to fulfill your destiny. "

With a wave of their hands, Bridget too faded away, leaving only Jordan and Ryan to await the Norns decree. "Jordan, you are the daughter of a god, a goddess in her own right. You have much power. And with power comes great responsibility. You too must choose wisely. You shall live in *Valhalla* until you master your new abilities. Only then will you be free to live as you will."

Jordan stepped forward, blocking Ryan from their view. "I will not leave Ryan." When he made to grab her wrist, to pull her back to his side, she shook out of his hold. "No matter where you send

me, I'll find my way back to him. On that you have my word."

The three sisters smiled. "Of that we have no doubt, but that isn't your fate."

"Ryan Connors. You have proven loyal, honest, and brave. We deem you a worthy mate for Odin's daughter. Your love for her shines through your every look, your every touch. You too shall reside in *Valhalla*, but not as one of Odin's soldiers, languishing while you await *Ragnorak*. You'll be consort to Jordan, the new Goddess of the Earth, if that is your decision."

Jordan tensed. Her mind, her body rebelled. What if he didn't want her? She couldn't, wouldn't force him to stay by her side. But she needed to tell him how she felt. He deserved to know he'd always be loved no matter his decision.

Jordan turned on her heel, faced her man. When he started to speak, she shook her head. "No. Let me say this. It's long overdue."

Jordan peeked over her shoulder, wary of what the Norns might do then returned her attention to Ryan. She could see so much patience and understanding in his gaze. And dared she hoped love as well. After wiping her sweaty palms on her jeans, she stepped forward, placing one hand on his cheek, the other over his heart.

"I'm sorry it's taken me so long to voice my feelings." Looking deep into his eyes, she

swallowed passed the lump lodged in her throat then continued. "No matter what decision you make, no matter who you're with or where you are, I want you to know you're loved. My one regret when I thought we'd die in the Underworld was that I hadn't told you how much you mean to me. How much I love you."

Stepping forward, Ryan closed the gap between them and wrapped his arms around her. Lowering his head, he looked deep into her eyes. "How could you think I'd ever let you go, baby? You're mine. Now and always."

Epilogue

Behind the stone walls of *Asgard*, seated upon *Hlidskjalf*, his golden throne, Odin closed his eyes as images of future events played before him. Not since he learned of Jord's deception regarding his daughter six months ago, had he'd witnessed anything of the future. Only dire circumstances—events that if not changed would bring about *Ragnorak*—could he foretell, and since Jord's sentencing those many months ago, the threat of war had lessened.

Letting the vision come, the Alfadir relaxed, a wry smile tilting up the corners of his lips. Though the things he could see were not pretty, they were not insurmountable. Though very little could he actually change without the Norns approval, he could set the stage for others to set things right. Now all he had to do was find the right group of people to see his plan through. He did so love a challenge.

About the Author

Hi there. My name is Bonnie Rose Leigh and I've been writing since I was just a tyke. I live in a small town in Upstate, New York and spend most of my time on the computer either writing, or visiting with my friends. If I'm not busy on the computer, I spend my free time reading. It doesn't matter what genre the book is either, though I am partial to romance novels. If I'm not in my office, I can be found sprawled in a chair with a book clutched in my hand and a cup of cocoa sitting nearby.

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