

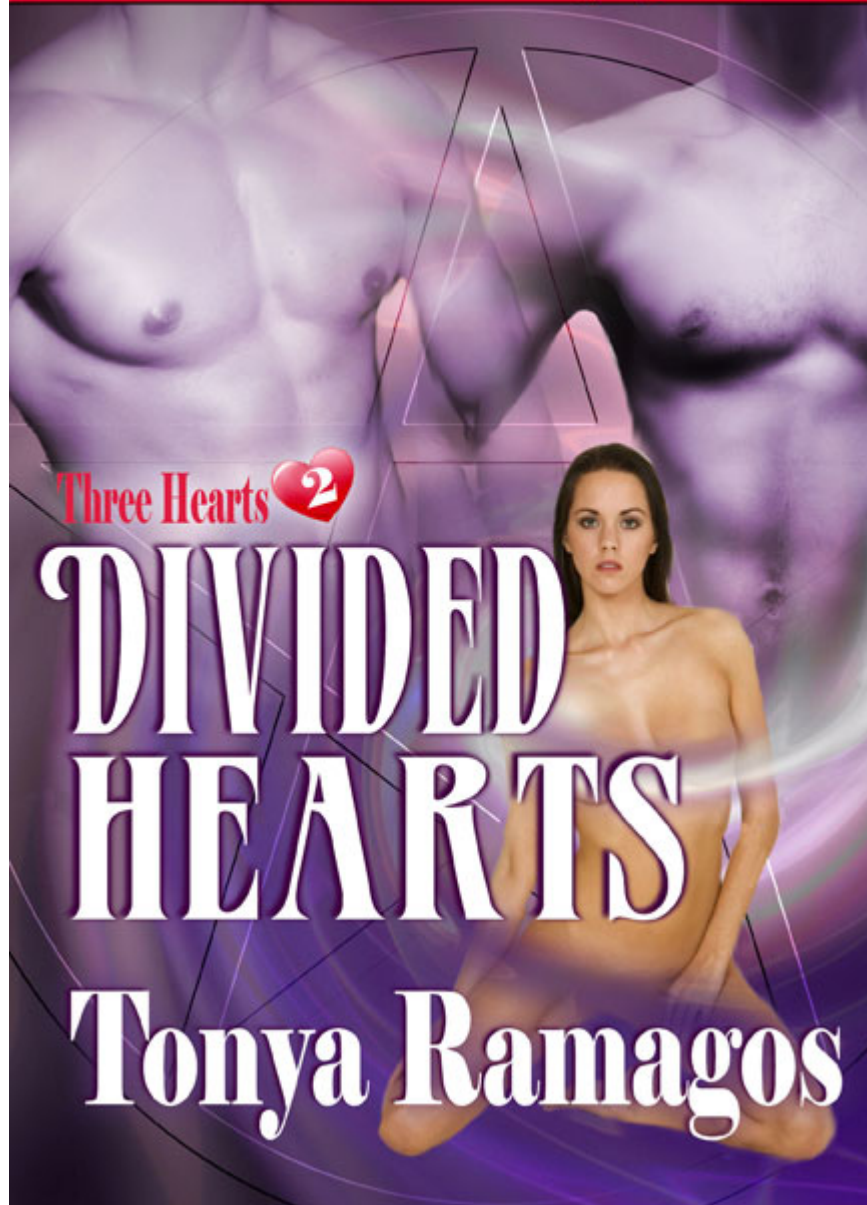
Siren Publishing

*Ménage Àmour*

Three Hearts 

# DIVIDED HEARTS

Tonya Ramagos



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*Three Hearts 2*

**Tonya Ramagos**

**MENAGE AMOUR**



**Siren Publishing, Inc.**  
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# **DEDICATION**

To Debby and friends. I hope this one fulfills another of your fantasies too.

# DIVIDED HEARTS

*Three Hearts 2*

TONYA RAMAGOS

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## Chapter 1

Lust did a delightful dance in Karan's stomach, her hands itching to touch, to create. She studied the inked lines on the oversized parchment. Scrawled notes, labels and diagrams joined to fashion a clear picture of the fabulous structure it would become once built. A clear picture in at least the creator's mind, anyway. Her eyes scanned the plans, noted a couple of flaws in the design of a room off the west wing and reached for a quill to make the corrections. An adjustment here, a tweak there. Oh! She could add another partial wall in between those as well. Perhaps curve it in a half circle and...

"Do not dare pick up that quill."

The sharp reprimand snapped Karan into awareness, all ideas for adaptation and creation fluttering away like dust blown by a strong wind. The strong wind, she realized at once, issued from her older sister's currently thin lined lips. Gods, but Aithne could be such a nag sometimes!

"Really Karan, you have to dress." Calliope, the youngest of the three sisters, glared at her disapprovingly. "The celebration will begin at nightfall."

Karan cast a glance out the window of her third level bedchamber on the west side of the palace. The sun had already begun its slow dip behind the distant mountaintops. She amused herself for a moment, chanting a silent mantra for the sun to return to its place of day high in the bluest of skies to remain forever shining bright over their land. Her amusement slackened quickly, however, at the knowledge she possessed no such power. She could not even spell the sun to rise a half an inch let alone the great distance it would need to keep them forever in daylight.

"I am dressed." She looked back at the parchment, her attention instantly focused on the design. A stone walk leading to the back. Yes, with an archway that would stretch...

"You cannot wear that to the celebration. For guardian's sake, Karan, you will be looked at askance!" Irritation began to settle in Aithne's tone.

"I am looked at askance anyway." Karan shrugged but did not look up.

"Perhaps if you dressed like the daughter of a goddess queen rather than the son of a peasant, that would not be so."

Karan glanced down at the comfortably stained woolen shirt she wore with a pair of brown leather breeches and boots. She supposed she did look like the son of a peasant. "I hate gowns. They always get in my way."

"But you must wear one tonight." Calliope stepped to her and pushed strands of dark hair from Karan's face. "Do you not wish to look radiant on such an important night?"

Karan barked a laugh. "Next to you, I would not stand a chance." Calliope was the most beautiful of the three, hair as brilliant as sunlight, skin as fair as alabaster, and eyes of cornflower blue. Next to her, no one noticed Karan or even Aithne, though Karan always thought Aithne to be next in line for the beauty throne. Her tumble of long, fiery red hair with highlights of browns and gold, and eyes of

sparkling green with flecks of gold gave her both an odd and equally stunning appearance.

*Then there is me*, Karan thought. She moved away from Calliope to the mirror. The reflection that stared back at her had a head full of dark hair the color of tree bark, eyes so bright gray they were often confused with lavender, and skin darkened by her many hours in the sun. Scratches and scrapes marred what could have been the perfect flesh of her arms and even one narrow jagged line along her jaw she had gotten when the branch of a tree slapped her in the face during her journey for fresh sculpting and building wood that morning.

"But tonight you will," Calliope argued. "For tonight is your night. All eyes in all the lands will be for you."

Karan's stomach churned at the thought of so much attention. "Not if I do not go."

Calliope gasped, obviously horrified. "What do you mean if you do not go? You must go! It is your duty as one of the daughters, as one of the land."

"Is it because of the spell?" Aithne asked far more calmly when Karan did not answer. "Are you afraid?"

She was, Karan admitted silently, though not entirely for the reason her sister suspected. "I do not wish any of this. I do not want to wear some fantasy gown. I do not want to attend some lavish party. And I certainly do not wish a man."

"How could you not wish for a man, for love?" Calliope's voice filled with wonderment now.

Understanding, Karan turned on her, and softened. "I never have. You know that, dear sister. It is you who has always longed for love." Calliope's eyes turned dreamy with the truth. Karan rounded on Aithne. "You found your love."

Aithne's wide smile reached her eyes where Karan could almost see tiny hearts dancing in place of her pupils. "I did, yes. I found my love and so much more."

"I do not want that." Frustration built in her chest. She spun and stomped to the window. The sun was barely visible behind the mountains now. "I wish for my life to remain as it is. I like my life and I do not want a man coming into it wreaking havoc and messing me all up."

"You will change your mind," Aithne predicted. "When you find him, when you first look at him and he looks at you and every time after, when you feel the quiver that starts in your heart and shakes you to your toes, you will change your mind."

Karan seriously doubted that but she kept the thought to herself. "Perhaps I am not meant to find him. Perhaps there is no one for me. Have either of you ever considered that? Maybe I do not wish for anyone because I already know there is no one."

"But there is someone for everyone. There is love for all. Someone who will be your everything, who will give you everything."

"I am my everything, Calliope, and there is nothing I wish for that I cannot give myself."

"I believe, dear sister, that is where you are wrong. Your fingers may be quite skilled at many things, but I assure you they can in no way give you the immense satisfaction that your true love's cock can provide."

"Aithne!" Calliope laughed her surprise then gave a small groan. From the dreamy expression that overtook her features, Karan guessed she had fallen into her own fantasy realm, imagining the immense satisfaction her true love's cock would provide her when her turn came.

Karan stared at her older and apparently wiser sister, and bit the inside of her cheek to hold back the grin. Though she would rather gnaw on tree roots than admit it, Aithne did have a point. A very irritating, extremely sexually frustrating point.

"Fine." She moved to the foot of the bed where her gown for the evening lay stretched out and waiting for her. It was purple, no doubt



to match her almost lavender eyes, made of satin and lace. She hated lace! "Fine," she repeated, allowing her annoyance to sound in the word. She reached to remove her shirt and the door to the chamber opened. Her mother Ina, the goddess queen, stepped inside and closed the door behind her.

She was radiant, Karan thought as her hands fell to her sides, abandoning the act of undressing to take in her mother's appearance. She was beautiful, even more so than Calliope with her glimmering golden hair, eyes neither blue nor green nor gray but seemingly every shade in between. She wore a gown of the finest materials, a soft pink with deeper reds to accent and trim. The colors of female power, of delicacy, of love all entwined. Karan had been wrong, she decided as she studied her mother. It was not Calliope's beauty that would foreshadow her own but the queen's.

Ina's eyes widened slightly, the only indication of surprise she allowed to show. "Karan, you are not yet dressed? The guests have already begun to arrive."

"I was just getting to that, Mother. I lost track of time." It was not a lie but a partial truth. She *had* lost track of the time, more simply because she had not cared of it. Building, creating, planning was what she enjoyed most and true love, destiny, or whatever you called it, she could not foresee a man allowing her to continue with such fancies. Men wished to control. They wished for obedience, servitude and children. *She* was in control. She obeyed no one, served no one. She harbored no desire for a child let alone many, which was why she simply did not want a man.

"She is frightened."

Karan rounded on Calliope. "I am not frightened." She ground the words through gritted teeth. That too was a partial truth. The curse cast upon her at birth--thank you, Daria--the spell that fated her to suffer a heart so divided that fear shall be her death did not raise much alarm. She could not suffer a divided heart if she gave her heart to no one, after all. No. The tiny niggles of fear she felt was in that she might

actually experience that pervasive tremor Aithne spoke of, the one that would clearly indicate her true love, her destined man. How had her mother described it the night of Aithne's joining celebration?

*It is a feeling in your belly. A quake, a tremble that possesses the heart and the mind. It is a quiver down to your toes of a power the likes of which you have never before felt nor will ever feel in the presence of any other. It hurts and excites, terrifies and pleases. You will know, my precious, when you feel it, you will know.*

Could she fight it? Karan wondered. Would she be able to resist?

Of course, she would, she decided stubbornly. She was her own woman, in control of her own life and no amount of destiny, fate or curse would change that.

"You have every right to be afraid." Calliope countered her anger with a cool voice of sweetened reason. "Look at what has been cast upon you, what you must face. What we all must face in the end." Her voice dropped to barely a whisper on the last and Karan knew her sister was thinking of her own time still to come. The curse upon Calliope was the greatest, gravest of them all. Yet she eagerly awaited her turn.

Well, Calliope could have it, Karan decided. If only they could skip hers altogether.

"I am not frightened," she repeated vehemently, though she was silently beginning to wonder whom she was trying to convince by her insistent bravado. She turned back to her mother. "I do not want this. Not the celebration, the mate, the curse, I want none of it."

"Nor do I, daughter." Ina stepped to her and pulled her into a tight embrace. "You must know I would order all to go home if I could."

Karan closed her eyes and allowed herself a moment to revel in Ina's sweet, flowery scent. It comforted her, her mother's scent as much as her mother's arms. "You are the queen. You can do whatever you wish."

"Someday when you hold the throne you will see how wrong you are about that." Ina breathed deep, let it out slow. "Tonight is your

celebration. It is the night you are to meet your fated love. The celebration is custom in our land, has been for more millennia than either you or I have lived. It is expected. All who are heir to the goddess throne have such an event when they come of age. I cannot cancel it no matter how much we fear the outcome."

"It could be worse. Our court could still follow the law of arranged joinings," Aithne reminded her. "If not for Mother, that is how it would be for us. Can you image your mate being chosen for you without any say from you?"

"Is that not how it is anyway?" Karan pulled back from Ina's embrace and cocked a brow at her sister. "We still have no say in our mate. It is left instead to fate."

"Yes, but it is the magic of love that chooses our mate now," Calliope said. "Not which land will benefit most by its king joining with the heir to the throne of the goddess queen. Love is the true law, as it should be, as it was for Mother."

"But it was my love for your father that brought about the curse that now shadows each of you." Ina's arms, still around Karan's waist, stiffened.

Karan gazed at her mother, saw for the first time since she entered the chamber the fear in the queen's eyes, the sadness, and the blame. The blame. Because Ina had defied law. Rather than join with Prog, king of a neighboring land whom the reigning Goddess Queen Daria had arranged, Ina had chosen Andrew--a man she loved, a man who was truly her intended, a man who was not full-blooded God but a mixed-breed of God, Fae, and mortal.

"Do not do this to yourself, Mother. You worry of the curse upon us, of my part in it. Do not, for as I see it, if I have no plans to join with my intended, to give away my heart then the curse cannot come to pass."

"You think to break the curse by not joining with your true love?" Aithne asked in a mixture of contemplation and skepticism.

"I do not see why it would not be considered a possibility. You broke your part of the spell." *And it damned near killed you before you figured out how.* The memory caused bile to rise in Karan's throat.

Aithne had been poisoned. Ubelious, a deadly concoction that, when ingested, killed from the inside out. There was no antidote for the poison. Only one's inner power to heal could reverse the effects. Though demigoddesses, neither of the three had been born with any powers of which to speak. But Aithne found such power in her own desires, she broke the death curse upon her when she had sorted out those desires, and used them to cure herself.

"Perhaps refusing my intended is the way to break mine."

\* \* \* \*

She let them fuss over her as a mother and sisters were prone to do. To Karan's way of thinking, if she were going to suffer through this celebration for them, she would endure no more harm in allowing them to fret over her appearance.

"There." Calliope beamed a wide grin over Karan's head in the mirror. "What do you think?"

Karan studied her reflection for several heartbeats, turning her head to the right, to the left, considering all angles before she was forced to admit her little sister might have been right after all. She would look radiant this night. Calliope had pulled Karan's long, uneven dark strands into an intricate twist with spirals curling on either side of her face at the ears. It should have appeared too girlish for her, too childish, especially with her oval-shaped face and high cheekbones. Instead, the effect was mesmerizing!

"Not bad. It is chic, sexy." She met Calliope's gaze in the mirror and wagged her brows.

Calliope looked confused then shook her head and laughed. "Chic? I know not exactly what that means. You and your strange

words again. But I do know what sexy means and I agree. You are definitely sexy."

"What do you think of the gown?" Ina stepped back as Karan got to her feet. "It was made, of course, with tonight in mind just as Aithne's when she had her celebration."

Karan took in her reflection once more, this time from her neck to just below her hips. Again, she found herself silently admitting she had been wrong. The heart-shaped satin bodice fit perfectly, exposing strong, well toned shoulders. The neckline dipped low to reveal a tantalizing valley between her breasts. Lace outlined the neckline, a thin strip that accented and drew attention rather than giving it the frilly girly look she so despised. The waist fit snug, the skirt tapering at her hips then flaring out just enough to offer free movement, but not so much as to get in her way. The hem, to her delighted surprise, stopped just below her calves rather than dragging the floor as royal gowns always did. In a thought, she decided it too was sexy.

She sighed dramatically. "Looks like I am going to knock them dead tonight." She caught the reflections of her sisters and mother in the mirror behind her. Ina winced, Aithne lifted an amused brow, and Calliope looked confused again.

"Where do you come up with such phrases?" Calliope muttered.

"Your father will be waiting outside to escort you to the celebration." Ina stepped closer and wrapped an arm around Karan's bare shoulders. "Are you ready, my daughter?"

Karan breathed deep, pursed her lips, and let the air rush from her lungs. "As ready as I can be, I suppose."

"You look great." Aithne moved up behind her and skimmed a quick kiss over Karan's cheek.

A warmth washed through her, comforting, easing any fear that may have collected in her belly. It was the comfort of her sisters, her mother, of doing what was right, what was just, of performing her duty as the demigoddess of the lands of the goddess queen.

They walked together out of the bedchamber, Karan stopping briefly near the door to slip on shoes of a deeper purple than the gown and a heel that added a good inch and a half to her height. In the hall, she found her father patiently waiting for her, his hands folded in front of him. His slightly robust and tall frame was clad in his royal robes, a crown on top his fiery curls. Of the three, Aithne took after him most. But when he smiled as he did now at the sight of her, Karan could see her own smile on his face, in his expression.

"There is my middle daughter," he greeted, crooking an arm for her to accept. Karan placed her hand at his elbow and leaned in for a cheek kiss. She was barely shorter than he without shoes. The heels put them at exactly the same height. He turned his head, returned the kiss and pointedly looked down. "How did the queen convince you to dress as a girl this night?"

"She threatened to take away my quill, ink, and parchment."

The king laughed, a hearty sound that rippled down the nearly empty hall. "Though I know that to be a joke, I can imagine it would be one of the few threats to work."

"The whole destiny, duty, love thing worked too," Karan grumbled as they began to walk slowly down the hall. She could hear the guests already starting to gather in the grand ballroom below. Distant voices, a few chuckles, and a soft melody of harps and horns.

"Yes, I can see how that too would do it." They were nearly to the end of the hall, almost to the spot where the wall would end. She would then be afforded a view of the crowd below and that crowd their first peek at her before she reached the tall staircase that would take her down. He stopped and turned to her. "There is something I wish you to think about, something to remember as you follow through with this night."

"Father?" The tone of his voice, so serious, so insistent, set off alarm bells in her head. Though King, her father was a laid back soul, rarely brisk or harsh about anything, especially with his daughters, especially with her.

"You fear--" He broke off when she winced at the word, put his free hand over hers at his elbow, and squeezed. "There is nothing wrong with admitting to fear but because I know you will not," he smiled, "I will say it for you. You fear the man meant for you though you know not who or what he is. Trust in this, my daughter, he is your destiny for a reason. He, above all others, has been chosen for you. Love does not pair those who are not worthy of each other."

"Are you saying my love will not wish me to be someone I am not?" Though she did not see how that could be, she kept her tone neutral, her expression blank.

"Aye, that is exactly what I am saying."

"Do you not worry of the spell as Mother does?" *As I do*, she added silently and had to suppress a wince, because even to herself, she had not truly admitted concern over what had been cast upon her, over what might come.

"I shall not tell you that love will never harm you. That would surely be a lie for it is often the one who loves you most who will cause you the most harm. Do think on this though, to not love, to not allow yourself to recognize your true heart will surely cause you an agony beyond any. Aithne has proved that and did so by nearly sacrificing her life."

Stunned, Karan blinked at her father. It was the first he had spoken of Aithne's near brush with death, of how close he had come to losing his first born. "But how did she prove what you say? The curse upon her spoke of a desire so great it would cause her death. In the end, it was not desire but a poison that nearly killed her."

"No. You are wrong, daughter. Did she not gain the power to heal herself when she realized her true desire? Aithne desired two men. Desire is an emotion far from love itself. Only when she allowed herself to love one of those men did she gain the power to break the curse."

It was a new outlook she had not thought of. She wondered if Aithne had thought of it in that particular way. Had Calliope, or the queen? "You never said this to any of us."

"I did not see the need. Aithne is safe now. She is healthy, with child, and has the man of her heart's desire."

"My part of the curse speaks of a divided heart. If I do not give my heart, how can it be divided?"

"Ah, but daughter, your heart is already divided. You are caught between your duty to love and your desire never to mate. There can be no better definition for a divided heart than that."

"Andrew, are you to keep her talking in this darkened hallway all night?" Ina approached, her voice scolding but with a lace of teasing to match the twinkle in her eyes when she reached them. "The people of our land await."

"Yes. Yes." He gave Karan's hand, still resting in the crook of his elbow though gripping it a bit harder now, a light squeeze. "We shall go. You do look lovely this night. Have I told you that yet?"

Karan forced a smile. Had he referenced her beauty? With all he had said she could not remember and was not so certain she cared. "Thank you, Father, and you shall be the most handsome man at the ball."

"You are too kind, daughter, far too kind." He began to walk, slowly leading her to the end of the hall.

It felt as though she were approaching her death, taking her last steps to an awaiting guillotine. Could he be right? Was her heart already divided? Before she could even begin to contemplate the question, they reached the top of the stairs.

The music below, a curious mix of drums, strings and brass, stopped in mid-song, a single horn stepping in to blast the announcement tune of the royal family. Karan forced her grip at her father's elbow to slacken though it wanted to squeeze, to jerk. She wanted to run. They paused on the first step, fixed their attention on the awaiting crowd. People, old and young, tall and short, robust and



slim, full blood and half-breed, stared up at them with seemingly bated breath. The women looked both envious and excited, the men each hopeful and ready.

Karan's gaze scanned the faces. She wanted to linger on the women for they presented no threat, no harm. As she skimmed over the expectant expressions of the men she found herself thinking, *Do not dare. Do not dare feel anything for these men.* It was all she could do not to cover her belly, not to focus on the pervasive tremor she would feel the minute her eyes latched with her intended's.

Silently, she continued to will her senses to remain dormant. Slowly, with a gentle urge of her father's arm, she took the next step down, and the next. Closer, easier to focus on the faces. Handsome faces. Dark hair. It was the men with dark hair that caught her attention most, caused her gaze to skitter to a halt. By the guardians, she loved dark hair on a man. Long and short, royally groomed and warrior messed, it did not matter. But, while she felt a healthy stir of hormones kick around in her bloodstream, nothing shook her. Nothing awoke that had never made its existence known before. Other men moved forward in the crowd, the better to see, and the better to be seen. Nothing.

Was it possible? Could it be?

Only when she reached the last of the stairs and met the last of the gazes staring back at her did she dare to believe. He was not there. Her destined heart was not present.

Karan smiled and accepted the hand of the first man who asked her to dance.

## Chapter 2

He had escaped. Barely.

Nerves still pumping, fear and anger warring for paramount emotion in his blood, Eric slammed the door behind him as he entered his split level Tampa home and headed straight for the fridge. He wrenched open the door, pulled out a cold one, popped the top, then leaned his forehead against the cool metal of the closed freezer door, and shut his eyes.

Stupid, stupid, stupid! He hadn't thought, hadn't *wanted* to think. For years. Years! He'd made the wrong decisions, ignored the right ones.

"And where did it get you, Ace?" he asked himself aloud. Heaving a sigh, he turned, let the refrigerator door close, and then leaned back against it.

Where had it got him? Unemployed, embarrassed, shamed, in court and running scared. Okay, maybe the last part was a bit overdramatic. He wasn't running. Yet. But he probably should. He should pack up, leave town. Maybe go visit his sister in Idaho for a while. If she would have him. He could become a potato farmer. Hell, with his recent reputation, he'd be lucky to find anyone with access to a news station who would hire him for anything more.

He could take the money he had left, buy up some land and build a nice big house shaped like a potato. What better way to complete the image? He could harvest his own crops, sell them to whatever bidder would dare buy from him and become a recluse. No doubt he would be a recluse. He'd turned his back on everyone else, alienated them, hurt them.

He brought the beer can to his mouth, drank deep, his eyes closing again to flashbacks of his sister, his parents. They had been so proud of him. His college graduation, his contracting days, times when he worked his ass off to make it to the top of his field. The day he signed on with the Burns Architecture and Design, the day he made full partner. He'd made it to the top before he reached his mid-thirties. The day the men in the signature black suits, crisp white shirts, and dark glasses showed up on the location of his latest project.

Eric opened his eyes, effectively cutting off the snapshots of the key points of the last decade of his life. No more. Not now. He couldn't take it anymore, needed time to think of something else, time to put his mind to rest. When his gaze landed on the hanging pentacle flanked by the plaque figures of the divine goddess and god across the island kitchen, he felt the final arrow slice through his soul. With it came the lonesomeness, the shame, the despair.

*You could go back. They would take you back.*

Would they? Would the coven to which he'd belonged accept his return? Cal had sounded so certain when they discussed it last. But it had been so long, Eric had done so much. And the craft...he had neglected it for so long, buried what he was, what he possessed. Because the one and only time he'd used it he'd broken the only cardinal rule. He'd caused harm. Not directly, not intentionally. Neither of those facts mattered. It only mattered that he *had* done it. He'd followed Anakin Skywalker and taken the path to the dark side. Worse, or maybe not so much, he wasn't sure, he hadn't used the magic inside him to do it. Still, by the Lord and Lady, he had done it all and he was paying the price.

"And throwing one hell of a pity party because of it," he chastised himself. Disgusted, he chugged down the rest of the beer and tossed the can in the trash at the end of the long row of cabinets to his right.

The pentacle caught his eye again, light glinting off the points. When it began to glow, he wasn't surprised but elated. It had been so long since he'd felt the power, since he'd accepted it, embraced it.

Power he'd forgotten, buried away inside, hidden in the dark. It pulsed through the air in the kitchen, seemed to crackle from the weight even as the reverberation seeped through his flesh, and moved through his body. Inside him, it was as if a mirroring light awakened. A chalice, once spilled and left empty, filled in his chest.

He was back. At the very least, well on his way. Gaze drawn to the sliding glass door on his left, he peered through it, and took in the fading light of the cloudless sky, the emptiness of the backyard. A new moon tonight, he knew. A time for new beginnings, for breaking old ties, diminishing bad habits and starting fresh.

"No time like the present," he muttered and for the first time in weeks, possibly even months, he knew what he had to do. With a plan firmly gripped in his mind, the powers gifted to him at birth snugly enveloped in his body, the magic surging inside him looking for an outlet, he went for his ritual tools and headed outside.

\* \* \* \*

How was it possible that a girl could feel as though she did not belong in a place that practically belonged to her? As Karan danced with first one tall, handsome, dark haired man after another, she wondered it odd that she could love so much the land, the place, the people and feel exiled from it all. She simply did not fit. Her manner of speaking, her choice of dress. She became thrilled by things a woman should ignore, ignored that which she should want, especially as the daughter of the reigning goddess queen. And because of it all, she often felt out of place in her own land, her own world.

"A woman with beauty such as yours should not think so much."

The voice, both amused and serious, broke through her reverie. Karan pulled back and met the gaze of the man who held her. Hakan, future king of the land of Tolynn and brother-in-law to her sister Aithne, looked back at her, his eyes glimmering with the quiet laughter she heard in his tone.

He had been the third in Aithne's triangle, the desire that nearly killed her. Karan could understand why. Ebony hair slicked back and styled short in the way of royalty with stern features, commanding eyes and thin lips that any woman would wish to sink her teeth in. As she gazed into those authoritative eyes, she fantasized for an instant that he had been meant for her. She actually felt her juices stirring in her belly. But there was no quivering or pervasive tremor.

Then she snapped out of it. It was the eyes, she decided. The demanding, dominate gleam that set her off. A small part of her, a minuscule piece she would admit only to herself, might wish for a man but never one such as Hakan. Never one who would expect servitude rather than equality.

"I bet you say that to all the ladies."

Confusion flickered through his expression before he quickly masked it and smiled. "You are uneasy that you have not found him yet."

"Uneasy." Karan barked a laugh. "Try relieved." But even as she said it, she found herself meeting still more gazes in the crowd of dancing couples around them, waiting for a jolt, a pull, a quiver. The largest part of her thanked the guardians that she felt nothing at all.

"He shall show and when he does you will know."

"Writing poetry now, Hakan?" She shot him a wink and a grin.

"Wishing to become a joker?" he countered and, before she could answer, he spun her in a quick dance step that had her laughing again and having more fun than she had all evening.

"Touché. And what of your true love, Hakan?"

A light, brighter than any star in the sky, shone in his eyes at the mention of Sylvia. "She is magic. She is fate. She is everything."

Karan could not imagine a man being her everything. She opened her mouth to say so when she felt it. A tug, a quake in her blood, a tremble of limbs, and a pull just behind her navel. Her vision blurred out of focus before everything went black.

\* \* \* \*

Eric placed the last candle on the ground at the northern point, lit the wick with a match, and stepped back. Preferring to perform his rituals skyclad, he shed his robe. With his ritual knife in hand, he began to walk a small circle around the four candles he'd set to represent the elements--green at the north for the earth, yellow at the east for air, blue at the west for water, red at the south for fire--softly chanting.

*Here is the boundary of the circle.  
Naught but love shall enter in,  
Naught but love shall emerge from within.  
Charge this by your power, old ones.*

As he walked, he felt the power build, saw the glimmering silvery light rise from the ground to create the circle he cast. When he finished, he moved to the center, called upon the elements to join him in his rite, facing each as he spoke.

*O Watcher of the North, Guardian of all earth  
I call upon you to join my circle tonight  
And join in my magical workings and spiritual endeavors.*

He repeated the same, substituting the correct direction, the correct power for each element, and watched. He felt it as the ground shook, the air kicked into a gentle breeze, a light mist began to fall, and the fire of the candles grew to a brilliant flame.

"Still got it, don't you?" he muttered and couldn't suppress a shit-eating grin of satisfaction. He turned to the altar set in the center of the circle, faced the northern point and stared into the zigzag stream of smoke wafting from the amber incense he lit for happiness, protection, emotional balance, and peace.

She materialized. There was no other way to describe how she simply appeared out of nowhere. And talk about a gift from the Gods! Eric blinked at her, unable to formulate a single coherent thought beyond the simplistic, completely inane, *Wow*. She wasn't beautiful,

at least not in the traditional sense of the word. Her face was too long, her lips a bit too plump, her cheekbones too high for her eyes. And those eyes, so gray in color they appeared purple in the flickering flame of the candles.

No. Beautiful was certainly not a word to describe her. Arresting perhaps, stunning, definitely dick-throbbing. She looked up at him and he felt more than power, more than lust in the quick jolt of his gut. It was a quiver, a freaking earthquake in his bones that shook him from his head clear down to his toes. She sat as though a chair had been pulled out from under her, her legs bent, hands on the ground behind her. If not for the time period gown--a time long before the twenty-first century--he might have thought her an angel, an apparition. He expected her to be scared, freaked the fuck out, having fallen from the sky as she seemed to do. Instead her expression was startled, a bit uneasy, even half annoyed but he saw no harm, no fear.

"Hi." Her voice seeped into him like melted butter to bread. Her gaze raked him, starting at his face and doing a leisurely slide down. His dick leapt to attention as her heated appraisal passed over his groin, traveled down to his feet and worked its way up again. He saw in her incredible eyes when her attention focused on his cock, purposely flexed it to see what her reaction might be. Her gaze jumped to his but he saw no embarrassment in her expression, no blush to her alabaster skin.

Confident woman, Eric thought. "Hi, yourself."

She angled her head and drew her brows together. "Who are you? And why are you naked? Where am I?"

"Eric, ritual, backyard." He chewed his cheek for a moment and studied her. Gods, but he couldn't help study her. The tendrils of deep brown hair--he supposed it might be considered chestnut or perhaps a burnt sienna--spiraling at her temples, the jagged scratch to her angular jaw, and the smooth line of her neck. His mouth watered, his tongue stinging as though attacked by a swarm of bees at the desire

that washed through him to lick that skin, to taste that flesh. "And you would be?"

"Karan."

"Karan." Eric lifted a brow. Karan. A Celtic name for tyrant. Just what he needed. "You want to tell me how you got here, Karan? Where you came from?"

"You want to put on some clothes?"

Eric's lips twitched but he managed to hold back the grin. Barely. "I should probably close the circle first. Then we can go inside, have a drink, and you can tell me what brought you here."

\* \* \* \*

Karan did not have the slightest clue what brought her here. More, she did not even know where here was! His backyard. That had been his answer. She wanted to tell him, "Well, duh, tell me something I cannot figure out on my own," but she had checked her tongue.

She watched him now. Hard not to when such a prime slab of male perfection paraded in front of her wearing not a stitch of clothing. And, ah yes, he was definitely male perfection. She settled back on the crisp, cool evening grass and drank in the hard lines, ruthless ridges, and wicked muscles of one of the finest bodies she had ever seen until she felt positively drunk. He was sculpted like a God, chiseled with pristine detail and pussy-creaming sexuality. Black hair fell shaggy and windblown around a face with dark chocolate eyes, gorgeous cheekbones, and a squared jaw. When her gaze settled again on his cock, long and hard and thick, oh boy, her head went a bit wonky for a minute.

Just as her belly had done at the sight of him, she remembered and wished she had not. Damnit, it was him. She was sure of it. Of course, she had needed little more than the stupefying, juice exploding quake in her belly the moment their gazes met to know it. And with that



knowledge came a hard, fast determination to fight it every step of the way.

He moved about the circle he had cast with a surety she found admirable. Her presence seemed to matter not to him, his state of undress even less. Karan felt his power as he chanted words, bid the elements thank you and farewell, and the glimmering silver light surrounding them along with the flickering candle flames dimmed and went out. When the circle was broken, he moved to a dark pile of material on the ground, and bent to scoop it up. As he slipped into an ankle-length robe of midnight blue, she bit her tongue to prevent herself from begging him not to.

The gleam she spotted in his eyes as he walked toward her made her think he had read her thoughts. For all she knew, he could have. And talk about righteously unfair play! She, a freaking demigoddess born without any powers of which to speak, and he, a--well, she knew not exactly what he was--gifted with the ability to read minds. It would be about her luck.

"Can I give you a hand?"

"No thank you. I have two." She did not know what made her say it. The words simply spilled from her mouth of their own accord. It was the irritation, she decided, coupled with that damned pervasive tremor that threw her off balance, put her on guard, and landed her right in the middle of Snippyville.

"Funny." He held out a hand, his eyes meeting hers, a tiny twitch making itself visible at the corner of his lips.

Shapely, naturally pale and entirely too kissable bow-shaped lips, she noted and, bracing herself for a quake that would surely shake her insides to jelly, put her hand in his. Even expecting it, even ready for it, the contact was a stunning razor sharp bolt of electricity. It traveled from their clasped hands, up her arm, through her body, pieces breaking off to cloud her mind, swirl in her chest, heat between her legs.

"Something here," Eric whispered, his voice more sure than surprised.

Any hope she may have harbored that it could be a one-way affect died. Anger and frustration kicked up a dueling contest in her midsection and she yanked at his hand as she got to her feet only to ram into a solid wall of rigid male muscle. Her breath caught and a trickle of--was it fear, excitement, both?--rippled through her blood. Their gazes locked and in that instant she caught a flash, a vision that had her nipples beading and her sex growing wet. Eric, his face contorted in sheer pleasure as he drove his cock in her sopping pussy, his large and experienced hands groping her flesh, taking her, claiming her.

"Something big here." His face was so close to hers now that she felt the warmth of his breath on her lips. A breath. That was all it would take. All she need do was breathe and her body would reflexively move enough to enclose that miniscule of space between their mouths.

Karan jerked back, wrenching her hand from his. "Calm your hormones," she muttered and saw the twitch at the corner of his lips begin again. "And you still have not told me where here is."

"My house." He grinned, a boyish curve of his lips that was both sexy as hell and mischievously frightening. "Let's go inside, grab a drink and I'll tell you more." He held out his hand for her once more but this time she merely gave it a glance, then looked back at him. "Oh come on, I won't bite. Not yet anyway."

She hesitated, weighed her options, and decided she did not have many. Out of the ones she did, there was only one she was willing to consider. With a sigh, she took his hand, closed her eyes as her body filled with a powerful white-hot light, and allowed him to lead her inside.

"Want a beer, wine, soda?" He released her hand as they stepped through the slider into his kitchen, and moved to the refrigerator. At least she thought it to be a refrigerator. Stories her father told her from

a very young age of the things found in other lands, other worlds flooded her memory and she sifted through that knowledge now, gaining definition for things she saw.

Awed, Karan scanned the room, the objects it contained, and the man who looked back at her over his shoulder awaiting her answer. "Soda," she repeated, and then heard a kind of answer in her head. "Coke."

"Pepsi, actually, and Mountain Dew."

"Oh, okay. Wine please. Wine would be wonderful." She sounded dazed even to her own ears. Probably because she *was* dazed, she reasoned. After the feel of his body pressed against hers, the tingling warmth of his breath, the almost kiss. Now she was attempting to act as though none of that happened, as though she felt nothing from this man, *for* this man.

Bemused, she took in her surroundings, marveled by the fact that she recognized it, and knew what the items were though few of them existed in her lands. Her memory of her father's stories continued to serve her well. Who knew they would someday be such a help?

The kitchen was large, eat-in style with a table in the center beneath a skylight dark from the black of night. Stainless steel countertops lined the walls. Gleaming stainless steel appliances fit the pattern with mahogany cabinetry and marble flooring.

Eric pulled two wine glasses from a rack, opened the fridge and peeked inside. "I've got a bottle of white chilled. Red is room temperature. What's your preference?"

Karan eyed him, suspicion tangling with her unease. "So many questions. Are you always this accommodating when guests drop by unannounced?"

"Guests don't generally appear out of thin air in my backyard. Or drop out of the sky. Or whatever the hell it is you did. As for being accommodating," he poured the wine, handed her a glass, "I'm just getting started."

Her heart tripped and damnit but her belly did a slow, delicious roll at the heated promise behind those particular words. Since her mouth had gone suddenly dry, she raised her wine glass to her lips and sipped. To her surprise, he stepped away, backing up to lean against the counter. Her gaze was drawn down to the bent knee that peeked from the folds of his robe. Such a sexy knee, she thought, strong, muscular, with dark curls covering the otherwise smoothly tanned flesh.

"So Karan," he began and she snapped out of her trance, meeting his gaze to find an amused grin tilting his lips. "Care to answer my other questions now?"

Cool, confident, he was, Karan thought, even a bit arrogant. Well, she could be too. She lifted her chin, a defiant gesture her father would have recognized and even been amused by. Eric's eyes glinted and she saw he too found it humorous. It made her narrow her eyes, square her shoulders. If he thought her a compliant, easy female, he had another thought coming. "What questions?"

"Where you came from, for starters."

"I come from the land of the Gods," she said and heard the stately tone in her voice. Her mother would have been so proud. "I am Karan, middle daughter of three born to the reigning Goddess Queen Ina."

Eric pursed his lips then lifted his glass to his mouth and sipped as he studied her over the rim.

"You do not seem surprised by this," Karan noted aloud. Why had she expected him to be? She could not really say. Still, his calm reaction, the almost calculating look in his eyes baffled her. Then those eyes changed, his gaze sliding down her in a slow dip that had her blood following suit and settling in her center. Her core startled to life, a fire roaring with such intensity she nearly squirmed before she caught herself. Wetness pooled, her nipples throbbed, her heart raced. "Stop that!" At her fierce exclamation his attention jumped back to her face.

He grinned. "Stop what?" he asked so casually and with such quiet amusement in his eyes it was infuriating.

"Stop looking at me like that."

"And exactly how am I looking at you?" He lowered his glass and his gaze fell as well, slipping again in that snail-paced glide that had her breath quickening and her pussy aching.

"Like that! You are doing it again. Like you want to shove your cock inside me as far as you can get it and then some."

Eric glanced down at himself, shifted, looked up again and his grin widened. By the guardians, he was so sexy. "Maybe I do want to shove my cock inside you as far as I can get it and then some."

Karan's stomach did a slow, deliciously excited roll. Gods, but she had thought the look was bad. Hearing him say those erotic words, repeat the same words she just said in that cool, easy tone turned her insides to slush.

"He doesn't think it's such a bad idea."

"He who?"

"My cock." He waited a beat, probably to see if his words would draw her attention to the part of his anatomy in question.

Of course, they did. Karan caught herself looking, staring was more like it, as though she were attempting to develop powers to see through his robe. Guardians save her, she was in big trouble here.

"So you're a goddess. You don't talk like any goddess I've ever heard."

"You have talked to a lot of them, have you?"

He tipped his glass toward her in a mock toast. "Got me there. No. You would be my first. Directly speaking in the last few years, at least."

Karan seriously doubted she was his first. Those wide hands with their long fingers, the mouth with its so kissable bow-shaped lips had to possess experience beyond her wildest imagination. And her imagination could become pretty wild. It threatened to go bonkers now as she pictured, could almost *feel* his fingers spreading her wet

folds, plunging inside her flaming core and his mouth closing over her breasts, sucking and nipping until she writhed beneath him, until she came screaming...

She could not say what snapped her out of her reverie. Maybe it had been a sound, possibly a slight movement. Perhaps simply the knowledge that if she continued to let the image drive her, she would find orgasm right there in his kitchen from not even a touch of his fingers to her flesh but the mere desire to feel so.

"I am not a goddess." She sipped her wine, cleared her throat, proud of herself for holding onto the thread of the conversation while such erotic pleasures played through her mind. "I am only part goddess. A demigoddess, I am called. My father, the god king, is half Fae, half mortal."

"So you're one-third goddess, Fae, and mortal. Quite a mix of blood there. Got any powers out of all that? I mean besides your obvious ability to do the whole beam-me-up-Scotty routine without the transporter module."

"The whole... What?" Karan wrinkled her brows. Her memory seemed to be failing her on that one. "Who is Scotty?"

Eric chuckled and the sound, deep and breathy, moved over her like a sensual wave. "Never mind that right now. Your powers, do you have any others I should know about?"

"No. I have no powers at all." Karan actually felt her face move into a sulk. She let her gaze drop to her glass, hoping to hide her disappointment. Aithne danced into her thoughts. She had gained the power to heal when her part of the spell was broken. Would Karan gain some sort of power too? Did she even want any powers if having them meant giving away her heart?

"Let me run this back, make sure I understand." Eric pushed himself off the counter, retrieved the wine bottle from the fridge, and topped off his glass as he spoke. "You're the demigoddess daughter of a Goddess and a half-breed--sorry if half-breed sounds offensive but let's simplify here--with no power to speak of and yet you appear out

of nothing in the middle of my backyard, my circle. The last is pretty powerful magic there, sweetheart."

When he angled the bottle toward her in offer, Karan nodded and held out her glass. The wine was different than that in her land, more potent it seemed, and sweeter. She could feel the effects tingling in her head, making her nose numb. She should not have another glass. She needed to keep a clear head. Still, knowing that, believing that, she drank down a good inch of the new glass before she spoke.

"I was dancing." She closed her eyes and saw herself as she had been on the dance floor at the palace, enveloped in Hakan's arms and laughing, both elated and confused that her intended had not showed for the celebration.

"You were dancing," Eric repeated. Rather than carry the nearly empty bottle of wine back to the refrigerator, he placed it on the table then pulled out a chair. "Why don't you sit down?"

Though he worded it a question, it sounded more of an order. Still, Karan sat. She waited until he took the chair at the end of the table, scooted it around until he sat next to her before she continued. "One minute I was dancing with Hakan and the next--"

"Hakan? Who's Hakan?"

"The future king of Tolynn. We were having a celebration and--"

"What were you celebrating?"

Oh no, they were not going there. "Must you keep interrupting me?" Karan snapped, annoyed. "That is not important. What matters most is that I was poofed right out of Hakan's arms and found myself here. Well, in your backyard."

"Poofed, huh?" Eric grinned.

"What would you call it?" She set her glass on the table, crossed her arms and glared at him. First he interrupted her. Now he was laughing at her. Men! No wonder she cared not to have one.

"Poofed fits well to me. I'm just surprised you used it. That's all. Do all people in your world talk like you?"

"You do."

"But I am not of your world."

Karan looked around. Nothing here was as it appeared in her lands. "This is earth, is it not?"

"Yep. Every polluted, over-populated, glorious mile." His lips kicked into the most seductive, most tempting smile yet and he reached for her, lightly grazed the backs of his fingers down her cheek. "Allow me to be the first to welcome you to our great world. I hope you come in peace."



### Chapter 3

A soft moan tangled in Karan's throat and she leaned into his touch before she could stop herself only to find his hand had dropped away. The turmoil it wreaked inside her did not plummet so easily. His touch was like a poison, seeping into her flesh, drugging her wits until her body felt numb and her mind could think only of having him inside her throbbing channel. What had they been talking about? For several long moments she could not remember, lost as she was in the mesmerizing aftermath of that little, tender touch.

His world. Yes, that was it. She was on earth now. Of the worlds she knew, she had thought this to be earth but it gave her senses a different, not so unpleasant, jolt to hear it confirmed. "My father told me accounts of this land when I was a little girl," she told him. He picked up his glass, sat back as if settling in for a story. Idly, she twisted the stem of her own wine glass in her fingers, slowly spinning the glass on the table as she remembered. "At the time, I knew not that he was part mortal. Funny that I never once questioned how he knew of this world. The story time, it became a special time, just he and I. My sisters never cared for them much, the stories he told. They went to mother instead. They wished for tales of handsome men, of delicate beauties and love."

"Fairytale."

At his quietly spoken word, Karan looked up. "I am sorry. I do not know this word."

"Fairytale? It's what we call that kind of story on earth. Cinderella, Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, all princesses of some

form in some difficult situation from which only her prince charming can rescue her."

"Fairytale," Karan repeated and nodded. "Yes. That sounds right."

"You didn't want to hear those?" His brow lifted in intrigue. "I thought all girls *lived* for fairytales."

"Not I. I have never dreamt much of love. Father told me instead of the ways of this land. He spoke of the people, of how they labored, built. There is--what is the word for artificial knowledge--technology?" She looked at him for confirmation and he smiled slightly and shrugged.

"I suppose that could be one definition for technology." He reached for her leg, brought her ankle to rest on his knee, and slipped off her shoe. "It's more like machines, computers, television, that sort of stuff."

"And women work as men?" That was the part she had found most fascinating. The idea that a woman was allowed to labor as a man rather than be expected to serve and tend to the home.

"These days, yes, but it wasn't always that way."

No, she remembered now. Her father had not always spoken of the mortal land the same. Many years had passed, years upon which his tales had continued into the night, before the work of women came into play.

"He must have some way of watching this world from ours even though the doors were closed long ago," she said more to herself than Eric. "Otherwise, how would he know of the changes? What are you doing?" She cocked her head to one side and eyed him, only now realizing his hand covered her foot. The heated thrill of his touch, sustained and harder now, traveled up her leg, and had her nearly climaxing with anticipation.

"Something women of this land seem to enjoy." He shifted in his chair a bit for a better angle. "I'm massaging your foot."

Her eyes wanted to drift closed. Karan fought the urge even as she thought she knew why women of this land enjoyed such a thing. It felt so impossibly good! His fingers worked the tired muscles in her toes, the bottom of her foot, the top. The pressure he applied was slight, just enough for pleasure, not enough for pain.

"Is this a prelude to sex in this land?" She could easily understand that as well. Though he touched only her foot, she felt her entire body begin to relax. Too much more and she would need to make a conscious effort to prevent herself from slinking out of the chair!

He shot her another of those boyish grins that dripped with sexual promise and wicked temptation. "It could be if you'd like though that wasn't my intention. My plans can be easily altered, however."

"No," she said quickly and gave into the urge to let her eyes close, her head falling back to lean against the headrest of the high-backed chair. "Your plans are fine as they are."

"Are you sure?" His hand inched up her ankle.

Too easy, she thought even as she struggled to keep her breathing steady, too easy to let him do as he wished. She opened one eye warningly and the hand moved down to her heel.

"I can show you around upstairs."

The man was nothing if not persistent. She smiled despite herself. "The kitchen is fine. I like your kitchen." She opened both her eyes though the delicious things his hand did to her foot prevented her from raising her head. She ended up staring into the blackened skylight wondering when feet had become such erogenous zones and why men in her own lands had not yet discovered them. "I do not know you well enough to follow you upstairs," she said weakly, relaxed. It was a lame excuse but the best her muddled mind could come up with just now.

"Yes, you do." The seriousness in his tone had her attention flying to him. When their gazes met, his dark chocolate eyes were somber, daring.

Her heart gave a startled trip of alarm.

"You know me as I know you. We've known each other all our lives."

"I do not know what you are talking about." She pulled her foot from his hand, his lap, and let it fall to the floor. Stupid move because now she was no longer getting her foot massaged. Smart move because she needed distance and fast! He had felt it, that quiver to his toes just as she when their gazes met in the backyard. His declaration confirmed it. Not that she had really harbored any question or doubt. But damnit, she could not deal with this now. She would not!

"Yes, you do." He leaned back in his chair all casual like, not an ounce of concern on his face, and picked up his glass, sipped. "But we'll table that for now. You mentioned a door. I assume you mean a portal leading from your world to mine. Could that be how you got here?"

Fuming and confused, Karan did not answer him. She limped around his kitchen, the only sound that of her one heel as it came in contact with the marble floor. She wanted out of here, *needed* to get out of here. She needed to go home, back to the palace, to the celebration, to Hakan's comforting arms.

"You know, superstitious people believe it is bad luck to walk around with only one shoe on." There was a hint of laughter in his voice and it only fed her quickly rising temper.

Karan stopped, turned, and stepped out of her other shoe. She considered hurling it at him before she checked herself, and gave it a kick that sent it sailing across the floor to join its mate beneath the table instead. "Is that better?" she asked coolly and resumed her pacing.

"Better." He smirked. "Kudos to you for not throwing it at me, too."

"What? Did you read my mind?" Though she suspected he had in the backyard, she had to ask this time. That was all she needed. To have her thoughts invaded, especially when said thoughts centered on

taking out this bubbling anger on him in a bout of sweaty, marathon sex.

"No. That's a power I wasn't given. I read your face. What happened, by the way?" He fingered his jaw at the same place that hers had been scratched.

Momentarily distracted, Karan skimmed a finger over the spot and winced at the tiny resulting sting. "A tree branch got me. I was not watching where I was going."

"It looks pretty angry."

"It is fine." His concern touched a chord in her, played on it in a tune of sweetness and zeal. She disliked that about him. The way he had of soothing her temper, turning her complacent when what she wished to be was spitting mad. She balled her fists, planted them on her hips, and leveled a glare at him that would have had most men squirming in their seat. "What do you mean, you read my face? There are not any words written there."

He simply arched one titillating brow, the corners of his lips kicking into a lopsided smirk of enjoyment and captivation. "Not words, no. More like expressions. Anyone ever tell you you're an open book?"

"I know not what that means." She huffed.

"It's an idiom. I guess your father's stories didn't quite cover all of those. Sorry. Forget it." He waved a hand dismissively. "About that door, the one you said your father must have a way to watch through."

"It was closed millenniums ago. All doors between worlds were closed for all eternity."

"Then there's no chance that's how you got here? Maybe it reopened."

"That is impossible." Karan shook her head, dropped her hands, and began pacing once more. "Many have tried to resurrect the doors. Many lost loved ones when the paths were sealed, trapped on one side or the other, not in their own lands, their own world for all of time."

"Is that how your father came to be in your world instead of mine?"

Karan nodded. "Those who made him, at least. It was they who became trapped. His mother was a mortal, his father a Fae. The most powerful of our world have tried. All have failed."

"Okay," Eric said slowly. "So how else could you have gotten here?"

"I know of no other way. Unless..." She stopped and spun to face him, what felt like a giant lightning bolted idea flashing in her head. "You did it. You pulled me through."

"Ho now." Eric laughed and shook his head. "I'm not that powerful, sweetheart."

"But you are. You must be. You were in a magic circle. You were *doing* magic."

"A ritual to the Lord and Lady, an observance, a New Moon rite, that's all. Whatever you want to call it, the magic I did--or was about to do seeing as you poofed into my circle shortly after I invoked the elements--had nothing to do with bringing a hottie from another land into my world. Honey, you're barking on powers I don't have."

"Then what powers do you have?" Karan snapped, then for some reason she could not explain, instantly felt remorse. "Forgive me. I should not have spoken to you that way. It is just, my sisters, my mother, and my father."

"You figure they're worried about you."

"Would you not be if someone you loved vanished before your eyes? I was dancing, Eric. One minute I was dancing and laughing and having a good time."

"With Hank," Eric interrupted dryly.

Karan stopped and cocked her head. "Hakan," she corrected and bit her lower lip to keep from grinning. Jealous. He was jealous! The idea was positively humorous. It was heartening actually, a welcomed diversion at a time when she needed a bit of distance from her worry, her fear.

"Whatever." Eric dismissed his mistake with a flourish of his hand. "Who is he anyway? A boyfriend? A lover?"

"He is the heir to the throne of Tolynn. That is all. And it matters not. The point is we were dancing one minute and the next I found myself within your circle. I disappeared, Eric. The people of my world, my friends, my family, they must be positively frantic!"

"We could find out. I think," he added almost as an afterthought. When she shot him a questioning look, he added, "I can scry. See what we can see."

"You have the power of vision?" Excitement surged through her blood. It would help. She knew it would. To know what was happening in her world, to know her people, her family were all okay. For the first time, she realized a new worry within her. She had assumed she was the only one who disappeared into thin air but what if she was not. What if something had happened to her sisters, the king and queen?

"It's been a while since I, well, let's just say the power is a bit rusty."

"But you will try?"

Eric knocked back the last dregs of his wine, set the glass on the table, and stood. "I'm willing to try."

"Thank you!" Karan rushed to him, threw her arms around his neck and froze. Her reaction had been reflex and instantaneous, fueled by hope and excitement. Now it was the thrill of the contact, the heat that radiated from his body, the promise of unadulterated erotic bliss she saw in his eyes that stimulated her desires. She was spellbound, the pure ecstasy of being in his arms, of feeling his body pressed to hers, line for line and curve for curve. By the guardians, she wanted to be horizontal with him right here and right now.

*Take me.* The words were on the tip of her tongue. Because it was exactly what she wanted. At that moment in time, she wanted him inside her more than she ever wished for anything. Against the wall,

on top of the table, on the floor, in the chair, she cared not as long as his hard, yummy, meaty cock was inside her saturated folds.

"Don't thank me yet, goddess." His voice sounded raspy with his own needs. She saw them move through his eyes and felt them in the rigid planes of his body. "When I please you, then you can thank me."

Something inside her gave a violent spasm at the anticipatory idea of the many ways he could please her. Starting with that truly incredible mouth, she thought as her gaze flicked to his lips. To taste it, feel it on her as he suckled her breasts, licked his way down her body to the raging heat between her legs. "You are pretty sure of yourself." She tried for flippant but knew the breathiness in her tone gave her away. "And I'm not a goddess."

His hand slid up her back, slipped beneath her hair, and fisted around the strands at the nape of her neck. "In time I will show you just how confident I am." He yanked her head back, not too hard but enough to have a small gasp escaping her lips before she could catch it. A dart of erotic pleasurable pain shot through her straight to her feminine core. "And you're close enough to a goddess for me." A look of predatory triumph moved through his eyes as his mouth came down on hers.

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Goddess or not, Eric thought as he licked his way inside Karan's mouth, she tasted divine. The warmth of her enveloped him, suffocating him until he had to react or die from the need. He took more forcefully and intently than he should ever treat a woman such as her, but he couldn't find the stop switch inside him to flip. No, it was the crazed switch, the demanding, had to have and dared not take no for an answer switch she'd turned on. So he rode it, taking from her what he wanted and reveling in the feel of her soft, curvaceous body as it molded to his, her taut nipples pressing against his chest, her hands holding like a lifeline to his shoulders.



He'd thought she might resist at first, expected her to fight, and the excitement of that sent his cock into a rapturous cavern of throbbing need. He liked it when a woman resisted, playfully of course, or perhaps even seriously as long as she was easily convinced to give willingly. He liked to dominate, to control, and he could tell in an instant, despite the defiance that sparked in Karan's eyes, she was a woman who would do with a bit of being controlled.

While she didn't fight him, what she did was far from acquiesce. Her tongue blocked his way inside her mouth, meeting his tongue in a wrestling match worthy of the WWE. Her fingers dug into his shoulders, pushing and then pulling as though unsure if she wanted to get away or get closer. And the sounds she made, sweet goddess in Summerland, those quiet moans and sighs into his mouth, the little sharp squeak she gave when he nipped her bottom lip had his balls twitching as if a whip had been laid across their tender flesh.

It was she who broke the kiss and not a moment too soon he figured with a great deal of regret and a whirlwind of howls in his cock and gut. Another minute, hell another second and he might have taken more than she was willing to give just yet, or at least more than she would allow herself to give. She wanted it, wanted him as badly as he wanted her. He knew it as certain as he did his own name. There was something there, something strong, vicious, primal and far deeper than mere sexual attraction. The depth he didn't want to analyze right now. So he would tackle the sexual first. A man's approach he supposed but if it worked...

"You had to do that." She said it on a resigned sigh rather than making it a question. Still, he answered.

"Yeah, I had to do that." He released her hair, let his hand fall back to her waist, and dipped down to kiss the tip of her nose. She had a great nose. Perfectly shaped and just the right size for her amazing face. He knew a handful of plastic surgeons in the city and even a few professional models that would be envious as hell. "I'm going to do a lot more too."

Her chin when up. Defiance flashed in those lavender eyes. "I am not going to have sex with you."

Bluntness, yet one more thing he found insanely attractive in a woman. "Yes, you are. Just not tonight." He brushed his lips to her forehead this time, stepped back, and eased his arms from around her. The absence of her body, of her heat was immediate and fierce. "I'll go get my crystal."

Eric left her standing in the kitchen looking flummoxed, her skin slightly flush from both her temper and the kiss. Her hands were balls of nerves at her sides. She had hardly moved a muscle when he returned seconds later with his sphere of solid quartz, a cone of frankincense incense, and a purple candle to aide in psychic powers and divination. There had been a time when he hadn't needed the extra tools to center his energies. Before he'd abandoned the craft and begun to ignore the power that lived within him, he could simply stare into the quartz and see what he wished to see.

That act, he reminded himself with a quick jolt of his own nerves, had been one of the reasons he'd walked away from who and what he was. The picture the crystal had shown him last, well, it was best not to think on that now. He'd always known peering into the future might show him something he would rather not see but what he'd seen then...

It wasn't the future he wished to see now but the present, a time parallel in another world. Where he expected the ever present chill of natural rock, he found the quartz warmed in his hands almost instantly. He felt the power returning, unveiling in his hands, his chest, and his mind. A niggles of fear laced around his heart. Even with the power, what if he couldn't see? He didn't want to let Karan down. She looked so hopeful when he returned to the kitchen.

"Should we go outside again?" she asked as he set to light the candle, the incense. He placed the quartz ball on its stand and sat in the chair before it.

"I can do this fine in here." He put his hands palms down on the table on either side of the ball and waited for her to sit across from him.

"What about the circle? What about..." Her gaze slid pointedly over his robe, one brow slowly rising in question.

Eric bit back a grin. "Working skyclad isn't a necessity but if you would rather I disrobe..."

"No, no!" she said quickly, her cheeks growing pink.

The contrast, the tree bark brown of her hair, the intoxicating lavender of her eyes, and the tinge of pink to her cheeks sent him spiraling down a fantastical path to Get-it-onville. Did the rest of her body turn such a wonderful shade of pink when embarrassed? When aroused? He let his gaze dip to her chest, to the smooth expanse of flesh that disappeared into the bodice of her dress. His mouth watered, went dry, watered again as his mind filled in the missing components to the mental sketch forming in his head. Plump, rounded, firm breasts, large pebbled darkened nipples, *Gods*, he wanted to sink his teeth into her!

"You're doing it again."

"I can't help it." Eric shrugged and pulled his gaze back up. He nearly laughed out loud when he saw she'd crossed her arms, angled her head, and was all but tapping her foot on the floor. Her jaw was set, her lips thin but amusement danced in her eyes. "I was clearing my thoughts."

"Projecting them is more like it," she said dryly. "I told you not to look at me in that fashion."

"Fine, tomorrow I'll take you to Victoria's Secret, you can pick out a new fashion. It'll be my treat."

"And Victoria's Secret would be?"

"Lingerie shop. Sexy, sultry, classy. Bras, garter belts, panties. Do you have those items in your world?"

"I do not know of the first two but the last we have. Of a style, yes."

"What kind of style?" Eric didn't think he'd ever wanted x-ray vision more. His gaze raked her body, saw only generous maddening curves hugged and concealed by purple satin and lace.

She smirked, sat, and pointed at the crystal. "Concentrate."

"Believe me, darling, I'm concentrating." But he breathed deep, took in the heavy aroma of the frankincense that perfumed the air, closed out all light around him but that of the flickering candle flame, and focused on the quartz.

Karan walked to the kitchen doorway, paused, turned to him and crooked a finger for him to follow. She led him up the stairs to his bedroom, stopped at the foot of his bed and slowly began to remove her dress.

His pulse raced, excitement surged, and he blinked. Talk about projecting, he thought and pushed the vision from his thoughts, tried again.

There was Karan, naked and tied to his bed. Her eyes were heavy lidded, her lips slightly parted, her legs spread, and pussy exposed.

His cock gave a violet jump and he looked away from the crystal.

*No, no, no shithead. Focus.*

He took deep breath, struggled to clear his mind, and tried again. Maybe if he used the words.

"Images in stone I wish to see. Happenings of the present away from me. Visions of truth show yourself to me. This is my will. So mote it be!"

The smooth surface of the sphere misted, swirled, settled. Mortimer Burns leaned his expansive bulk back in his highback swivel office chair, phone at his ear, and an expression of murder on his pudgy face. Before him on the desk lay the plans for the multi-million dollar complex Eric developed. Plans the bastard obviously intended to continue now that Eric had taken the fall in the court system.

"Shit!" It wasn't over yet. He'd been stupid to ever think it could be.

Blood pumping, mind reeling, Eric pushed back his chair, and stood to pace. On the other side of the table, Karan got to her feet.

"What is wrong?" Her voice rang with alarm. "What did you see? Tell me, Eric. Is it my sisters, my mother, my father?"

"No," Eric barked, and then forcibly calmed his temper. He walked around the table, gently grasped her upper arms. "No. It's nothing like that. I didn't see any of them."

"But you saw something." Her eyes danced, her gaze searching his for the truth. It was a truth he would give damned near anything for her never to know.

"Maybe it's too soon." He let his hands slide up and down her arms, warming her chilled flesh. "I'll try again tomorrow, okay." Unable to resist, he pulled her to him, held her close. Though he meant to offer her comfort, he found a comfort of his own with her in his arms. Gods, what were these indescribable emotions wrapping around his insides like rubber bands? And why was he feeling them now, with her? He knew he hadn't pulled her through some door between worlds but she was here, nevertheless. She'd been sent to him, given to him. But was it for some unknown purpose, or to simply drive him insane with desire?

"If you are not going to do more--what did you call it, skyclad rituals?--would you mind putting on a pair of breeches?"

"Breeches?" Eric pulled back and cocked a brow. "Do you mean pants, jeans, trousers?"

"Whatever." She stepped out of his arms and turned her back on him, but not before he caught the light blush to her cheeks.

"Does it bother you?" Amused, he walked up behind her and pressed her back to his front. Without her heels, she was nearly his height. At six-two he'd rarely ran across a woman he didn't have to bend down to get close to. Instead, he merely needed to lean in to nuzzle his face in the side of her neck. She smelled of flowers and herbs, of the frankincense incense that perfumed the air, of intoxicating woman. For a moment, he simply lost himself in her

scent. "Does it turn you on to know I'm wearing nothing beneath this robe?"

"Perhaps." The admission surprised him but it was the catch in her breath, the ragged fall of her shoulders as she exhaled that pleased him most. "But I can handle it."

Eric smiled against her neck. Yes, defiant and cocky with it. Gods, he was falling head over bare feet for her already! "Can you?" He dared to touch her more, to let his hands slither up her stomach, her abdomen, over her breasts. It pleased him to feel her shudder beneath his hands, to hear the soft little sound she made as he nipped the tender flesh at the side of her neck, licked the same spot, and then caressed it with his cheek. "Are you sure?"

\* \* \* \*

Karan was sure of nothing. How could she be when her concentration deserted her in favor of the wild sensations rocketing through her limbs? His large hands covered her breasts fully, kneading them, sending pinpoints of ecstasy to rain through her body, saturating her folds. His teeth raked her neck, closed over her shoulder, and bit. She sucked a breath through her teeth.

"P-positive." Who was she fooling? Certainly not him. Not as long as he touched her, tasted her, held her pinned against him. Distance. She needed distance and a lot of it. "Let me go." She tried to turn in his arms, but he held her still, like a straightjacket with a heartbeat and a lot of heat. A hell of a lot of heat.

"I will if that's really what you want." His hands traveled down to her hips. She could move now. If only her legs would cooperate. "You feel it, don't you? There's something wild between us, Karan, something instantaneous and crazy. I know you feel it too."

What she felt was his cock, hard as iron and pushing into the small of her back. The wild, wicked urge to grind against that cock had her hips moving, pressing back.

"Ah Gods," he groaned, his fingers gripping harder to her hips. "Keep it up sweetheart. I'll bend you over that table and turn those looks I've been giving you into reality."

The looks, like he wanted to shove his cock inside her as far as he can get it and then some. Yes, she could feel that want echoing through the slick creases of her sex. It would be so easy to give in, so easy to submit. She was not a submissive. By the guardians, she could not let him have his way so easily. If it were only sex, if what was between them was only sex. But he was right. There was something more. Something far more and she knew exactly what that more would be. The loss of everything she was, all she wished to be.

She stilled against him, her head leaning back to rest on his shoulder, her face turning to him. Mistake. The word blared through her mind like a warning alarm for war. Looking at him when she was this close was a huge mistake. She meant to tell him to release her, meant to use the eye contact to emphasize her own control. Instead, she felt herself tumble into the darkened depths of his chocolate eyes. His power over her, the sheer dominance he possessed held her captive as much as his arms now winding their way around her once more.

"I want to touch you." He folded himself around her, his actions mirroring his words as one hand traveled up her front to her breast and squeezed.

Karan's eyes closed on their own accord. Exquisite tendrils of pleasure clouded her mind, loosened her resolve. His other hand danced down to palm her sex through the material of her dress. She moved. She could not help herself. Her hips rocked, gyrating into his palm, riding on the pressured strokes as the orgasm sprang to life in her middle.

"That's it, Karan. Move for me." His hand dipped beneath the bodice of her dress and pulled her breast free. The calloused pad of his thumb flicked over her nipple until it became so taut it hurt. Then

his forefinger joined his thumb and he rolled her nipple as though it were a marble between his fingers.

Karan let out a strangled cry as her head rolled on his shoulder. "Eric!"

"That's what I want to hear." His voice was harsh, hot against the tender flesh beneath her ear. "I want you to scream my name, Karan. I want you to beg me to fuck you."

"No." She shook her head though her mind was so foggy with pleasurable bliss she could not be sure what she said no to.

"You will, perhaps not tonight but soon. Pull up your skirt for me." When she did not respond, his fingers clamped on her nipple, twisted, and pulled. Explosions of white-hot light appeared in the darkness behind her lids as her eyes closed on the pleasurable pain of the assault. "Do it, Karan."

It was not a request but a command and the thrill of it sent an erotic passion more visceral than any she ever felt rushing through her. It should anger her, his assumption she would do as he pleased. Instead, she found herself obeying his order in a breathless anticipation of what he would do next.

His fingers slipped into her pubic hair, wiggled between her pussy lips, and delved inside her core. "Yes." His moan echoed hers as he pumped his finger into her. "Ah baby, you're so wet, so hot."

Her legs trembled. Her body shook. She reached around, cupped the back of his neck in her hand for purchase, and still felt as though she might slink to the floor. Her other hand fisted the material of her skirt so tightly she felt the material stretch. "Eric--" She managed no more than his name before he pulled his finger out of her channel only to probe her body again, this time with two fingers side by side. He stretched her, filled her. His fingers wiggling, circling, touching sensitive nerve endings she had not known were inside her. "Eric!"

"That's it, Karan. Let me know how good it feels." His hand on her breast raked her nipple, twisted, pulled, and the wicked sensations joined that between her legs until she writhed against him in euphoric



desperation. His teeth raked her shoulder, her neck, her ear. "I'm going to fuck you soon, Karan. Just like this. Imagine that. My cock inside your hot pussy, thrusting inside you until you beg me to let you come. You won't come until I tell you to. It will be my way, baby, my say, on my order."

No. The defiant word was on the tip of her tongue but she could not speak it, could not think beyond the immense building of passion in her core. His thumb raked over her sensitized clit and began a pressured massage as his fingers thrust harder in her core. "Yes!"

His laughter was warm and triumphant. "You want to fight me, don't you?"

"Yes. No. Oh, Gods!" What was happening to her? She did not want this. Everything inside her wanted this. She needed to fight. She needed to come. She wished to move. She collapsed against him.

"You can't. I love that you can't. It's inside you as much as I want to be at this moment, since the first outside. I can't explain it any more than I can understand it. I want you in ways I can't comprehend. For now, I'm taking this, giving you this. Come for me, Karan. I want to feel your juices fill my palm, drip down my hand."

In this, she had no choice but to obey. Her body betrayed her even more than her mind, her heart. With a rough brush to her clit, a possessive yank to her nipple, a vicious piston of fingers into her pussy, the orgasm seized control. It spewed from her in a liquid hot ecstasy that had her screaming Eric's name and convulsing against him. Her body shook, jerked, spasms rendering her useless to anything beyond total submission.

Slowly, he pulled his hand free and only then did she manage to open her eyes. The aftershocks of the orgasm continued to rock her muscles. Her breath came in ragged spurts and her heart pounded so loudly she could barely hear anything else. She turned her head on his shoulder, the movement feeling as though she were barely attached to her own nerves.

Eric's gaze met hers. His eyes were glassy from his own arousal, a storm brewing in their depths that she knew would wreak havoc on her later in the most delectable and satisfying of ways even if it did leave her mind and heart in a turmoil. He brought his fingers to his lips, kept his gaze locked to hers as he licked them clean of her juices. "Thick, sweet, delicious, I knew you would be."

"Think of that when you get yourself off later." She did not know where the comment came from or how she managed to say it in such a calm, even haughty manner. A flash of something moved through his eyes. Challenge? Defeat? She could not be sure and figured it best to leave it at that. Teasing a man in his unsatisfied state would not be wise. She had gained a diminutive amount of control with that pithy comment. She would leave it at that.

He smiled, the most wickedly tempting and dangerous curve of his lips she had seen yet, and nodded slightly. "You can bet I will. Compose yourself. I'll show you to your room."

"Eric, I need to figure out how to get back home." Despite the amazing orgasm he had given her, the sheer promise for so much more that radiated in the atmosphere of the kitchen, getting home--or at the very least, discovering what was happening at home--was still her greatest concern.

"We'll work on that tomorrow." He stepped back slowly, his arms falling away from her as if carefully watching to see that she stood on her own before he got too far away. "For tonight, follow me upstairs."

## Chapter 4

It surprised her to be led to a room down the hall from his. Eric noted the quiet shock on her so expressive face. The guest room wouldn't have been his first choice for her to spend the night but for tonight it was the safest, the smartest. He'd never been a man to take the safest, smartest path in the past. Recent events seemed to have changed his way of thinking.

"This room has an adjoining bath," he told her as he moved to said bath and flipped on the light switch. "You should find everything you need inside." It occurred to him that she may not know what to do with such things as a sink, a shower, a toilet. Did they have indoor plumbing in the land of the Gods? Surely they must! He decided rather than embarrass them both, he would let her figure things out. If she had questions he had no doubt she would ask.

When she stood just inside the open bedroom door and watched him in silent appraisal, he went on. "There are several spare outfits in here you can borrow. They should fit." He indicated the closet then pointed to the dresser. "A few undergarments are in there too if you don't mind another woman's things."

This got him a raised brow and pursed lips. "Another woman? What other woman?"

Eric's lips kicked into a grin that matched the one in his belly. "Jealous?"

"No more than you are about Hakan."

"You got me there. Point for you, in case you're keeping score." Somebody might want to start, he thought. Between the two of them, they could rack up quite a game of snappy comebacks. "The clothes

belong to my sister. She lived here until recently and left a few things behind." His gaze slipped, fell down Karan's body, and he instantly regretted his lack of restraint when his dick pulsed so violently he nearly groaned. "You're about the same size though your breasts are a bit larger than hers." And that was enough talk about that, he told himself and moved passed her to the door, stepped into the hallway. Safest. Smartest.

"My room is there." He pointed to the closed door at the end. "Make yourself at home. Let me know if you need anything." He turned to leave, stopped, and turned back when she said his name.

"Eric, I just wanted to say thanks for everything." She hesitated a bit on the last then put strong emphasis on everything. The gleam in her incredible eyes nearly did him in.

A dozen snappy comebacks caught in his throat, fought their way to the tip of his tongue, but he swallowed them all. Now was not the time. Tomorrow he would even the score. "You're welcome, Karan. Let me know if you need anything," he repeated and turned once more to leave. Unable to resist, he shot her a glance over his shoulder. "I'm going to think of you now. You're welcome to join me if you like."

Her musical laughter followed him as he made his way down the hall to his room. Once there, he shut himself inside and went straight for his own adjoining bath. A cold shower wouldn't help ease this throbbing heat inside him so he didn't even bother. Moments later, after slipping out of his robe, he stepped instead under an almost scalding hot spray. He stood there, letting the hot water wash over him, the pounding of the shower directly on his head. Images of the night's events played in reverse through his mind like an old fashioned slideshow--Karan writhing against him, convulsing in his arms as he brought her to orgasm. The vision he'd seen in the crystal, his former boss and the certainty he'd felt the motherfucker wasn't yet done with his attempts to ruin Eric's life. Karan again, this time

appearing out of nowhere in his magical circle. The first circle he'd cast, he reminded himself, in close to three years.

Was she a gift from the Gods? When he pictured her wickedly tempting body, her amazing lavender eyes, her silky dark hair and those hands, the answer came to him without thought. Yes, she was definitely a gift. But why now? Why her, a demigoddess for Summerland's sake! And what was with these emotions twisting in his chest, the poetic bullshit that spilled from his mouth so many times tonight. *You know me as I know you. We've known each other all our lives. You feel it too. Something here. Something big here.*

Hell, an earthbound woman would think him off his rocker for saying such crap. Maybe he was, he considered as a hint of temper rose inside him. Geezus, he couldn't make sense of any of it right now. Hadn't he decided already not to analyze this shit tonight?

He stepped forward, angled his head out of the spray, raked his hair out of his eyes, and opened them. He didn't know why he felt a sinking in his gut when he found himself alone in the shower. He knew when he'd made the offer that she wouldn't join him, at least, not in the flesh. In his mind's eye, however, she did come to him. A small hand with slim capable fingers curled around the shower curtain and pushed it back. Karan smiled at him, that wickedly sultry curve of her lips that made his dick jump and his balls contract almost painfully. She was naked, all smoothly shimmering skin, plump rounded breasts, and dark tempting pubic curls.

Eric took his cock in his hand, folded his fingers around his shaft, and began to stroke as the Karan in his fantasy stepped into the shower with him. In his mind he turned with her, salivated as the spray from the shower streamed down her naked flesh. Her hands covered her breasts and his hand pumped faster on his cock. Hers moved down her body, an agonizing slithering tease, dipped between her legs, fingers disappearing between her folds.

He could still taste her on his tongue, her warm milky essence. Still smell her sticky-sweet cream after the liquid explosion he'd given

her less than an hour ago. He remembered that now, lost himself in the satiny slickness of her channel walls, and heard her soft whimpering sounds followed by great breathless gasps of pleasure as the wave of pure ecstasy built in his balls and flowed from his cock. Only when he heard the deeper, far more animalistic growl did he snap back to reality. The reality in which he stood alone in the shower, his own hand wrapped around his cock, and the evidence of his first fantasy in years swirled down the drain.

\* \* \* \*

Eric swung open the front door and was greeted by the bleary eyes and lopsided grin of his closest friend.

"Dude, you look like shit!"

Leave it to Cal, Eric thought as a scowl etched itself between his brows, to be blunt and to the point. He generally found the other man's frankness to be a refreshing treat from most people he knew, even enjoyed it. Generally. This morning, however, Eric figured he could have used a little less honesty. It would have been nice, too, if Cal looked like his partner in the dung pool rather than Mr. Pristine and Well Groomed despite his sleepy green eyes. Bedroom eyes as the women often called them. Coupled with a gym-toned body he'd dressed in a pair of khaki Dockers with a pullover tee advertising the latest craze in men's athletic footwear, a pair of said footwear on his feet, and hair darker and longer by several inches than Eric's, and Cal was a lady killer to the max. Or a man killer, depending on which direction he chose to swing on a given evening.

"Rough night." Indeed. A torture of a night racked with sweaty dreams of sheet tangling action with a woman a mere few feet down the hall. He'd actually found himself lying awake at one point damned near begging her through telepathy--an ability he didn't have--to come to him. Come being the operative word in that fantasy fest. It had been pure torment of a sort he had never before experienced, the

sexual need inside him so great even the time he spent with Rosie palm and her five sisters in the shower hadn't managed to abate. But he'd survived the night and retained his gentleman status. He damned well better get loads of points for that one too!

Eric pushed open the door wider but rather than step inside, Cal leaned a shoulder against the frame, his lopsided grin widening. "I'll say." He chuckled. "You should have been with me. I had a rough night too though mine was scrumptiously one for the books."

"Stop bragging." Eric's scowl deepened. He would have been with Cal, in the early days anyway. Back before he'd traded in his fun for a life of riches and crime.

"Hey, you called me." Cal shrugged, stepped through the door but stopped and shot a glance over his shoulder. "Before freaking sunrise, might I add? Did you have a few screws come loose under that mussed up hair or what?"

"You crawled out of bed, got dressed, drove all the way over here, and you're just now realizing the sun isn't up?" Eric released the doorknob to shove a hand through his tousled hair.

"Sleepwalking. You would be amazed by the things I can do in my sleep. Got coffee?"

Eric glanced down at the cup in his hand then held it out for Cal. "Take this one. I just made it."

Cal took the cup and drank deep as he moved further into the foyer. "Wow! That'll wake me up. Dude, this shit is strong enough to go ten rounds with the champ." He turned and lifted a brow. "Or was that you who went ten rounds before picking up the phone?"

"Cut it out." Eric chuckled and shut the door. "Man or woman?"

"Women, plural." Cal wagged his brows. "You should have been with me. Blonds, both of them with amazing racks, sinful lips, and eagerly submitting souls."

Eric sighed wistfully. "It's been too long."

"I'll say. I'll give you all the juicy details but first you've got to tell me. What gives, bro?"

"Keep your voice down." Eric shot a pointed glance to the ceiling. "Come on." He motioned with his head through the formal living room toward the kitchen door.

"Woman or women?" Cal adapted Eric's earlier question to fit, knowing Eric preferred to swing with the female persuasion.

"Woman, singular." Eric answered over his shoulder as he walked to the kitchen and fixed himself another cup of coffee. "She's upstairs in the guestroom."

"The guestroom! My man, what's happened to you? Surely you aren't losing your touch. Need some ideas? Maybe a few lessons on bedding the babes?"

"As if!" Eric topped off Cal's cup then motioned to the slider. "Let's take this outside and I'll explain."

He led the way, keeping silent as they moved onto the back deck. The sun was just peeking over the horizon, bathing the sky in a ray of pinks, oranges and blues. A few clouds added sprinkles of light gray and early morning birds chirped in the distance to create a calm, early morning peace.

For a long heartbeat, he stood absorbing that peace. He wondered if Karan enjoyed sunrises. Did they have them like this in her world? He almost snorted aloud at the thought. She lived in the world of the Gods, for crying out loud. Sunrises there no doubt put this one to shame.

"You cast a circle." Cal tipped his coffee cup at the remnants of Eric's magical circle in the yard. The pentacle on the ground made of mountain stones, the candles long ago extinguished that still sat at each of the four points, the altar of stone and wood he'd left in the center. "Did you do a full-moon ritual last night?"

"Started to, at least." Eric sipped from his own cup, black and strong, as the image of Karan appearing from nowhere sprang to mind.

"Thinking of coming back?" Cal's tone was conversational now, easy, and comfortable as was his stance leaning on the rail to the



deck, his forearms resting and cup held over the side. He looked to Eric, his expression as uncomplicated as his tone.

"To the coven?" Eric gave a half-laugh that held absolutely no hint of humor and shook his head. "I'm not sure I'm man enough to eat that much crow."

"I doubt much would be required. It's the whole harm against animals and man deal, you know."

"The high priestess might change her mind when it's all said and done." Eric looked out over the yard, considering. "It's not over, Cal. Not by a long shot." He told his friend what he'd seen in the crystal the night before.

"He's going to go through with the plans." Cal didn't sound surprised in the least. "I guess you had to figure he would. He's got loads of dough sunk into that project. Even with the corners he originally cut."

"Yeah, corners I took the fall for," Eric said dryly. "I'm not going down alone, Cal."

"I never thought you would." Cal slapped Eric on the back of his shoulder, a gesture between men, between friends. "Anything I can do, let me know. I'm here for you, bro."

"You always have been." Eric sipped his coffee and waited a beat as emotions swamped him. When he felt pretty sure he could speak again without his voice betraying him, he asked, "What do you know about demigoddesses? Specifically one named Karan. Ever heard of her?"

Cal wrinkled his forehead and Eric could almost see him flipping through mental books and file drawers on the Gods in his head. "Seems like," he began slowly. "Wait! Yeah, I do seem to recall that name. One of three sisters born to..." He trailed off and held up a finger as he thought. "Born to a goddess of love and a Faerie or something. No, a Fae I think. Their names were Ina and Andrew."

Leave it to Cal, Eric thought, to have the full scoop. "So what's their story?" It wasn't prying. Nor was he going behind Karan's back.

In truth, it was a wonder he didn't know of her already. He did, after all, believe in all goddesses, all gods, in other lands, other worlds. He'd read about them, researched many for as much religious enlightenment as pure entertainment.

"They are the daughters of the cursed hearts."

A chill spread through Eric, a fear so gripping and sudden it had his heart racing.

Cal turned toward him, propped his elbow on the rail, his cup inches from his lips, and leaned a hip against the braces of the deck. "Also known as the spelled hearts or simply the three hearts. Their grandmother, I guess she would be called, Ina's mother Daria, cast a spell over the daughters."

"What sort of spell?"

"A pretty nasty one. I don't remember it exactly. One to die of desire, the second to suffer a split, and the last to face a monster, or something like that." He shook his head and sipped the coffee. "Obviously that's not the true spell. I'd have to look it up to give you the whole of it."

"But why curse her own grandchildren, her heirs?"

"I don't remember." Cal pursed his lips. "I think it had something to do with them not being of full royal blood or something. Half-breeds given that their father was Fae. Mortal too, if memory serves. The whole racist deal." He chuckled dryly. "Pretty sick how prejudices go as far back as even the Gods, huh?"

"Yeah," Eric agreed only half listening now. "Pretty sick." She'd been cursed because her mother was a goddess, her father half mortal and half Fae. And which was she? The one to die by desire? Given the furious tug to his gut he experienced every time he'd looked at her last night, the damned near violent way everything inside him shook like an off the scale earthquake, he would understand the possibility. Was she to suffer a split? That part, he was pretty sure Cal didn't have quite right. What kind of split? A split could mean almost anything. Or was she the one to face a monster? Was it a literal monster like the ones in

any B-rated creature flick or a monster in a more general, personality sense?

"Why?"

Eric startled at the single, curious word. "Why what?"

"Why this early morning time travel through mythological figures? Surely you didn't call me over here for a lesson into the Gods before sunrise."

"The sun has risen," Eric pointed out mildly. He propped his bare toes on one of the lower bracing deck rails. "And that's exactly why I called you over. Interesting choice of words, by the way, seeing as how time travel, or a closely related event is the start of it."

"Did you have a projection experience last night?" A hint of alarm crept into Cal's tone. "You know that kind of trip is dangerous without a spotter, someone here to call you back if you're gone too long."

"No, nothing like that," Eric said quickly to put Cal's mind at ease. He'd done it once not long after discovering he had the powers of astral projection. It was an amazing feeling, as though flying with no weight or worry, of concern, even of body. To see the world from the outside rather than in it, of it. It had been so amazing, he remembered, that he'd gotten caught up, nearly forgotten to return. But what Karan had done was more than astral projection. She'd materialized, mind and body, actually traveling through time and worlds. "She's here. Karan, she's the woman in the guestroom."

He watched the ease in Cal's expression fall away but, rather than disbelief, or even shock, what replaced it was intrigue with a little trace of surprise.

"The demigoddess Karan is in your guestroom."

Eric slowly nodded, sipped his coffee, and gave Cal another moment to ingest the information.

"You have a demigoddess in your guestroom," Cal repeated, then let out an impressed chuckle. "Well hell, I suppose you haven't lost your touch after all."

Eric smiled. "Now who needs lessons?"

"I bow to you." Cal did, in a mock imitation, grinning from ear to ear. "Okay, half bow since she's in the spare room down the hall when she should be in your room. Still, a *demigoddess*, I'm impressed. Care to explain how you managed that one?"

Eric told him, beginning with the ritual and ending with leading her upstairs. He left out the play in the kitchen, of course, and his visit with Rosie palm. Some things were kept secret even between the best of buds.

"She just appeared out of nowhere? Poof and there she was?"

Eric nodded. "Poof and there she was."

"And neither of you know how?"

"Not a clue. Nor do we know how to send her back."

"What's she like?"

Eric thought for a moment, let a clear picture of Karan form in his mind. He turned around, leaned his back against the rail, and crossed his feet at the ankles. "Rambunctious, feisty, blunt, sexy."

"I wondered when we would get to the physical." Cal's brows rose as he studied his friend. "And?"

"She's a fighter, determined, loyal to her family." Eric paused, considered, and drained the last of his coffee. "She smells incredible and her eyes, they're this odd shade of not quite gray, not quite purple. I've never seen anything like them."

"And you just met her last night? She slept in the guestroom."

"Much to my disappointment. She said she's not going to have sex with me."

Cal barked a laugh. "Well damn, I'm forced to revert to my earlier statement. You *have* lost your touch."

"No, my touch is just fine." *Especially when it's her warm, creamy flesh beneath my hands.* "Besides, it's been less than twenty-four hours." He glanced over his shoulder and clocked the position of the sun. "Hell, it's barely been twelve."

"And already you're gone on her." There was as much surprise in Cal's tone as keen observation.

Eric sighed, hooked a finger through the handle of his cup, and let it dangle at his side. "I keep asking myself why. Why now? Why me?"

"Yeah, I wouldn't mind the answer to that one. I thought I was doing aces with my blond babes and you get a freaking demigoddess dropped on you from the damned sky!"

"Now I have to figure out what to do with her."

"I could give you some pointers," Cal offered.

Eric chuckled. "Yeah, I just bet you could. This is the way wrong time for a woman, any *woman*, to pop into my life figuratively or otherwise. And the way that one makes me feel--" He broke off and shot a look in the general direction of the guest bedroom. "Let's just say it's the last thing I need right now and leave it at that. Things are about to get bad around here, Cal." He turned to his friend. "Real bad and, not only do I not know how she got here or what to do with her, I don't have a clue how to send her back. All I do know is this is the last place in *any* world she needs to be."

"What can I do?"

There it was, Eric thought, that easy, ready to step up to the plate no matter what the cost attitude that made Cal such a special person, such a close friend. "I hoped you could figure out how to poof her back through the door, the air, the damned UFO that got her here. Do some research, read up on the--what did you call them?--cursed hearts."

Cal clicked his tongue and nodded. "I can do that. What are you intending to do in the meantime?"

Her. The word leapt to the tip of his tongue as if on a spring. Cal knew it too. The gleam in his eyes and the amused chuckle said as much. "I believe I'll work on evening out the score."

"You do that." Cal moved to the slider. "One of those pointers I mentioned, take the time to enjoy the gift. Rambunctious, feisty, sexy women are always the best tied and writhing beneath a man."

"Damned right they are." And tied and writhing beneath him was exactly where Eric intended to have Karan at least once before she left his world.

Cal pulled open the slider and stepped inside. "Let me know if you need any help with the ropes."

## Chapter 5

Karan nearly turned around and headed straight for the bedchamber to lock herself inside. Though she cared not to admit it, even to herself, it was the only way she would be able to keep her hands off of him. Just look at him! She paused in the open doorway of what appeared to be some sort of office to do just that.

He stood before a tall table in front of a large picture window overlooking a garden with what she could scarcely make out was full of a variety of plants, flowers, and herbs. A few trees added the right amount of shade and something lay over the ground shooting sprays of water in all directions.

His back was to her. His bare back, she noted immediately and allowed herself to focus there for several arousing, juice boiling seconds. Smooth skin tanned by time in the sun, ripples and lines that moved ever so slightly when he breathed or shifted. Broad shoulders she remembered digging her nails into last night led to a strong back, a narrow waist, and hips clad in some sort of breeches that formed to his truly delectable ass in such a way that had her mouth watering and screaming for a taste. The breeches covered his legs and fit snugly down to his ankles. His feet she noted were bare as well.

How was it, she wondered as bolts of white-hot lightning built in her fingertips, the need to touch, to explore all but sizzled out of her. How was it that the man could turn everything inside her to quivering jelly partially clothed as easily as he had done fully naked? By the guardians, the man was beyond hot!

He turned, only his head, a glance over his shoulder. Had she made a sound? Perhaps allowed the low moan of approval to spill

from her lips without realizing? She could not say for sure but whatever caught his attention, whatever made him turn, the full force of all that male power was focused on her now. She barely swallowed another groan.

His lips kicked into a slow grin and her heart followed suit, the beat jolting in time. His eyes sparked and she felt the echo of that flash sizzle through her bloodstream. She could not help it. In that moment, everything inside her, all she was, all she would ever be fell hostage to the sensations of exquisite lust, love, body and soul.

"Can I just say that you are one amazing looking man?"

That slow smile bloomed, reached his eyes and the spark ignited. He turned all the way around, lifted a thigh to rest casually on the table, and looked at her. "Coming from a woman accustomed to being surrounded by Gods, I take that as one hell of a compliment."

"I suppose it was meant as one."

"And can I just say I was thinking the same about you?" His eyes embraced her. At least that was how it felt as he looked at her, her flesh crawling with an incredible purely sexual pleasure that rippled all the way down, crested and splashed in her core. By the time his eyes met hers she felt breathless, warm all over and tingling with a violent need to be touched.

"Nice choice, the clothes." He tipped his chin and licked his lips.

Karan watched his tongue slowly slide along his bottom lip and imagined it dipping between her saturated folds, flicking over her throbbing clit, diving inside her weeping channel.

"I had no idea my sister left behind anything so sexy." His gaze traveled her body again as he considered. "I can't say I mind not knowing before now. I wouldn't have found those clothes anywhere near as appealing on her."

Karan glanced down. She had chosen a pair of breeches--jeans, she thought they might be called given the roughness and color of the material--and a solid navy top made of a cloth she did not recognize. The top fit like a second skin, snug and hugging to her breasts,



curving to her sides, and stopping a half inch above the waistband of the jeans. She wore nothing on her feet. It was how she preferred to go about her day, barefoot and comfortable. She could not think of a time when she had been more comfortable in clothing and yet he found her sexy.

"I expected you to go for a dress. Blue jeans just don't seem to fit with the whole demigoddess image."

"I do not like them much." She moved through the doorway of the office and caught sight of something that appeared to be drawings on the table behind him.

"You don't care for contractions either," he commented, amusement in his one. "I noticed that. Something else about you I find incredibly sexy." He laughed and shook his head. "Stupid thing to turn me on but there you go." He shrugged, reached for a cup on the table at his side, and sipped.

Karan angled her head, studying him now as she stepped closer. "Contractions? Would that be the odd ensemble of silk and lace things in the top drawer of the bureau upstairs? The things that appear to be some sort of ball cover or cups?"

Eric choked. "Breasts covers or cups. A type of ball, I suppose as the female species has no other sort. They're called bras. Useless contraptions really if you want my opinion. Nevertheless, women of this world insist on wearing them. Now *contractions*, those definitely have their uses. Makes talking time a great deal shorter. Words like don't instead of do not, can't rather than cannot." He shrugged again. "They come in pretty handy."

"Whereas the bra contraptions, as you put it, merely get in a gentleman's way." Karan stepped toward him and let a bit of a smile curve her lips.

"You're a quick one." He toasted her with the cup, his own lips grinning but his eyes filled with a far differed emotion. Heat, desire, raw need, all three flickered in those dark chocolate depths as she took another step, closing the distance between them.

Feeling reckless and just a bit dangerous--Karan supposed falling hostage to a man could raise such emotions in a fighting woman--she added a hint of a sway to her stride, and let her hands travel up her own body in a leisurely climb that had his chocolate eyes melting. "Are you sure I do not, don't," she angled her head, waggled her brows, "need to wear a bra?" Her hands stopped under her breasts, turned up to cup the mounds. "I should try to fit in with the women of your world while I am here, don't you think?"

He gulped. It was as audible as it was visible and immensely satisfying. His eyes changed, something mixing in to swirl with the heat, the desire. Control, she realized and had to fight the urge for a big gulp of her own. A deep, dark and wicked control.

"I think you are absolutely perfect as you are." He watched her, unmoving but for the slow rise and fall of his broad shoulders, the easy expanse of his drool-worthy chest with each calm breath.

Testing herself, testing him, Karan curled her arms around his wide neck when she reached him and pressed her breasts into his chest. She could feel his heartbeat. It had to be his in a steady, rhythmic thump for her own was beating far faster in her chest. "I thought of you after you left me last night. Did you think of me?"

"Oh yeah, I thought of you." His gaze flicked to her mouth. He held the cup in one hand, resting it on his thigh, but his other arm had snaked around her waist. He tightened that hold, drew her in the V of his legs until she felt his cock, stiff and long, against her belly. "I'm thinking of you now, too. Do you want to know what I'm thinking?"

Breathless now as a need that echoed the one she had seen in his eyes tangled her insides, blurred her mind, and sent her core on a spasmodic rush, Karan nodded.

"I'm thinking there's this saying in my world. We call it a cliché. It goes something like this." His arm drew her closer still until she was pressed against his upper body so tightly she felt molded there. His face was a breath from hers, his eyes serious and dark and pulse-

throbbingly sexual. "You're playing with fire this morning, Karan. That fire would be me."

Karan did not know where he was going with this. She did not even know what a cliché was. The only thing she knew for certain was that fire burned and right now she could feel the proof of that flame licking its way up her sodden channel, into her aching core. "Are you saying you will burn me?" It surprised her as much as it pleased her to hear the question come out steady, sultry, even if a bit too breathy.

"Keep playing with me, darling, and I just might. You should know I like games, Karan. I especially like games where I'm in control." His hand slid down, cupped her ass cheek, and squeezed.

Because of the tightness of the jeans, she easily felt the warmth of his palm, the control he spoke of vibrating through her ass, slithering to her center. "I do not take orders from any man." But even as she said the words, her body betrayed her. Her insides trembled, her pussy convulsed, and the mere idea of what she would do under his order brought her that much closer to orgasm.

His lips thinned, not in anger or disappointment but in challenge. His eyes gleamed with it and when he spoke his voice was low, husky and bursting with confidence. "That's why this game between us is going to be so much fun. You might be ahead in points now but I promise you, sweetheart, your lead won't last."

Was she in the lead? As she stood there, her body as one with his as it could get save for him being inside her--oh guardians, she wanted him inside her--fighting with every ounce of her control not to tremor in his arms, she wondered how she ever gained the lead.

"I will have you where I want you very soon and you'll do exactly as I say once you're there."

"In your dreams." Damnit, those words had not sounded as calm and steady as her last. Probably because absolutely nothing about her was calm or steady anymore. He had broken through her guard, put a chink in her armor, and her resolve was slipping way too fast.

He did not smile, did not laugh when he said, "You bet your sexy ass." He kissed her, a possessive crash of his mouth to hers. He took, demanded, and commanded with his lips, his tongue, and his teeth until her head spun in so many directions she could not keep up. Then he released her, so abrupt, so completely as though he had his fill and was ready to move on. His hand dropped from her ass and she all but felt him move back even though he never budged an inch from his resting spot against the table.

Karan stared at him, baffled, mind whirling, and body aching. The man was... He was... Well, she did not know exactly what he was. Infuriating, sexy, arrogant, maddeningly handsome, egotistical, fascinating, and a giant pain in the ass! Her ass actually gave a quick spasm at the last. No, she doubted he would be a pain there. A pleasure, white-hot and sanity stealing was probably a far better description. *And we are not going to think on that.*

He watched her, his expression lightly amused and heavily heated, as he brought the cup to his mouth, sipped, and offered. "Coffee?"

Steadier now, she stared at him. "Coffee?" Puzzlement came into her voice, her own expression before she found the answer in her memory. Her father had spoken of such a brew. "Oh yes, a morning beverage made of crushed beans and water. I do not think I would care for it much."

He glanced into the cup and grimaced. "Given that description, I doubt I would care for it much either."

"Is that not how it is made?"

"Well, yeah but, well, I guess you don't think of how things are made. You just drink them, or eat them, whatever the case may be. Here, try some anyway."

Karan took a tentative sip. "It is not bad, I suppose." But even as she said the word, her nose wrinkled and she smacked in an attempt to rid her mouth of the taste.

Eric laughed. "Guess it isn't for you after all. Most women drink it with cream, a little sugar."

"What is cream? You mean like milk?"

Eric shook his head and waved off her questions. "Never mind. I forget as much as you know there is still a lot more about this world you don't understand."

"You could show me." At the gleam that returned to his eyes, Karan's stomach did a slow, lovely roll.

"I'm working on that."

Karan rolled her eyes. "Do you always think of nothing but sex?"

"I'm a man. Sex, sports and beer, it's all we're supposed to think about in this world."

Whatever the world, whatever the distance between them, Karan supposed men would always be men. "I meant you could take me out and show me around your world." She took the cup from him again, sipped and found the second swallow not to be nearly as revolting as the first. Moving around him, she peered at the drawings on the tabletop, and gasped. "These are plans! Building plans."

"Yeah, it's what I do. I'm an architect. Was an architect," he grumbled.

"Was?" Karan shot him a look.

He shook his head. "Not now. You recognize this stuff? I mean, plans on paper, blueprints, designs."

"It is what I do as well." He was good, she noted as her gaze danced over the designs laid out before her. Not a palace or a grand stadium but a building with many layers. Though she knew little about the structures in his world, she could almost picture how this one would look simply by studying his drawing. "You have a good hand," she said absently.

"Thanks. I'll show you just how good later. You're telling me you're an architect too? They actually have those in the land of the Gods?" He held up a hand and shook his head. "No, don't answer that. Stupid. Of course there are architects in your lands even if they aren't called such. How else would shit get built? What I meant was you, a demigoddess..." He shook his head again. "It just doesn't compute."

Karan's spine stiffened. "I am not sure what compute means but guessing from your reaction you think because I am a demigoddess, a female, that I should not know how to do more with my hands than please a man and take care of children, of home."

"Whoa!" Eric laughed. "Don't go all liberated woman on me. I apologize if I insulted you. That's not what I meant. Besides, from what I know about goddess, there have been some pretty tough ones through the millenniums that did a hell of a lot more than please a man and look after children and home."

"There have been many." Karan sighed. "But that does not stop others, men especially, from seeing a woman as less."

"Yeah, I guess that's the same in any world."

"Women are--what did you call them?--architects here?"

"Some are. Women do as much work as men these days. Though their time is made a lot harder because of the viewpoint like what you deal with in your world."

"But to be allowed to design, to plan, to build." Her hands itched so badly she rubbed them together and heard the wistfulness in her own tone. "What I would not give." She whirled on him, an idea forming bright and excitedly in her mind. "Show me."

"What?" He chuckled.

"Show me the things people in your world build. Show me the things women build. Take me outside, to your city. Now! Let us go now."

\* \* \* \*

He took her and had the time of his life. She fascinated him, entertained him, even as she drove him mad with desire. Gods, she was exactly what he needed, what he'd always wanted, at exactly the wrong time in his life.

Karan was dazzled by the buildings, the art, and the people. She swooned over the skyscrapers downtown, melted at the design of the

dome covered Florida College, goggled on bridges and overpasses. He took her through parks, down busy city streets, and fell in love with her enthusiasm, with her jubilation, with her.

"It is breathtaking!" She beamed at him from across the table outside a strip café on Bayshore. "I cannot take it all in. There is too much."

"Exhausted yet?" He lifted his wine glass to his lips to hide his grin.

"Are you joking? Where will you take me next?" She all but bounced in her chair, her eyes shining, and her lips wide with an energized smile.

Eric laughed. "How about we enjoy our lunch, relax a bit, and decide that after?"

"Okay." She lifted a shoulder, let it fall but her expression remained radiant. "Tell me about you." She speared a bit of lemon peppered chicken and ate it. "Wow! This is delicious."

"Food for the Gods," Eric agreed. "There's not much to tell you about me that you don't already know." Not much that didn't involve his traitorous, snub-nosing, law-breaking past, that was.

"Nonsense. What of your family? You mentioned a sister." She glanced down at herself. "I must thank her someday for leaving such comfortable garb behind for my borrowing."

"I'm sure she would be delighted to know a demigoddess is wearing her things." Eric took a bite of his rare steak, thought briefly of Maria and how she would react if he told her about Karan. "Her name is Maria, by the way. She lives in Idaho. Picked up and headed north a while back with a guy she met down here on business. They're married now with a baby on the way and plans for a dozen more."

"Thirteen children! She sounds like Aithne. My sister." She hastened to explain. "She is the oldest of us. She recently joined with Dustin, the captain of the guard of Tolynn and is now heavy with his child. She wants at least six more." She shook her head and grimaced. "I cannot imagine one, let alone so many."

"You don't want children?" He did. At least, he'd often thought he would have one when he reached where he wanted to be in his career, met the right woman, and decided to settle down, start the whole family, home and hearth deal.

Screwed up the first count, he thought and picked up his wine again, took a healthy gulp. Was there any point wondering about the rest? As he gazed at Karan across the table, he knew he couldn't stop himself from wondering about the rest. He'd succeeded in the second after all. He'd met the right woman.

"Someday, perhaps, but that would be rather difficult as I do not plan ever to join."

"You mean marry? I thought all women wanted to get married eventually, especially a demigoddess."

"Not I." She shook her head vehemently. "I do not wish to be chained to any man. What of your mother, your father? Where are they?"

Abrupt change of subject, Eric noted. Was that because of him, of the something far deeper than attraction that ran between them or because of the spell, the curse her grandmother had put upon her heart?

"Both have passed to Summerland," he answered, deciding to let her have her change of subject. Keep it light, fun. That was what he wanted out of their day for now. "Father crossed over after a long bout with heart disease and mother left our world shortly after. Natural causes, the doctors determined, though she was barely in her sixties and seemed healthy as a horse. Maria and I believe she simply died of a broken heart. Lost without my father, you know."

"That is sad." Karan's expression was sorrowful now, pitying.

Eric shrugged. Light, fun. Not easy to keep it that way when talking about the death of two people he loved even when he truly believed they would return to this world when the time was right for them to begin again. "He was her heart and she his."

"They were both magical then?"



"They were, yes. Both were born into the Path. They met young, married young, and died young. Destined, soul mates, they each believed there was only one in each life meant for the other."

"Destiny should not be so cruel as to chain a person's heart to another," Karan grumbled and speared another bite of chicken. The defiance and anger behind the movement would have pushed her fork through the plate had it not been made of porcelain.

Pissed about her fate, Eric thought with a stir of amusement. Because she knew she was fated to be with him? Well, he supposed that wasn't something to be all too happy about right now given his current path of circumstances.

"How about a walk on the beach?" He suggested and watched her anger crumble beneath the idea of another stroll. "I know you prefer the city, the buildings and all and I'm sure you have beaches, sand and water, in your world but..."

"A walk in the sand would be lovely."

\* \* \* \*

Was it the walk, the sand, the water, or her companion that made the afternoon so lovely? Karan wondered later as she strolled along beside Eric up the back walk to his yard. She had not realized his land backed up to the beach. A scattering of rocks, a jagged ledge leading to the water, and a strip of sand to the side lay hidden by the thick spread of trees she had noticed rimming his yard the night before. He led her hand in hand now down a path through those trees, though a back gate in the fence, and into the growing darkness of his back gardens.

"I had the loveliest of times today." She gave his hand a gentle squeeze before attempting to pull her own hand free.

"It doesn't have to end yet." Rather than letting her hand go, he tightened his grip and yanked her against him.

Her body collided hard with his, then melted in a kind of recognized mold as his arms enveloped her and his lips came down on hers. The kiss started gentle, tender then heated to the point of molten lava in a matter of heartbeats. Guardians, the man started a fire within her that her body simply could not fight!

She had to fight. She could not give in. The consequences, the curse, her own life, all would hang in the aftermath of her choices. She could not let that happen. Holding onto her heart, that was what she must do. Forget that the tongue currently doing extremely delicious and devious things to her mouth belonged to the man whom she knew the guardians had chosen to possess her heart. Destiny did not deserve to rule her life. She ruled her life, her future, and her choices.

Karan pulled back, eased out of his embrace and away. "Eric, there are things you do not know, things you do not understand." Why was she telling him this? Would she explain her actions? Would she admit to the knowledge that he was her chosen?

"Yeah, we have things on both sides neither of us have shared or are willing to right now." He moved to her, reached to bring her in again, but she stepped back. "I'm fighting too, Karan. I have been since you first appeared..." He looked down at her feet and then met her gaze. "Right there last night."

Karan glanced down and saw she was indeed standing in the same spot in which she had appeared in his circle. "Maybe you should repeat the ritual, the circle, the chants you did last night. Perhaps you can reopen the door that will send me back."

"I didn't open the door in the first place. I didn't bring you here but I can't say I'm not glad it happened. Damn it!" He swore, shoved a hand through his hair, and turned only to turn back to her once more. "I don't want you here. Not now. Not when... It's just not a good time for you to be in my life."

The words stung. Why did they hurt so badly when what she wanted was to be out of his life? She did not want him any more than

he wanted her. She knew in her heart they were both lying to themselves. Her cursed heart beat so rapidly and furiously in her chest she wished she could yank it out, cease its life. "Then let us figure out how to send me back."

"I didn't mean I don't want you." This time when he moved to her, reached for her, he gave her no time to step back. He caught her, his large hands on both her upper arms, and held her tight. "I do want you. More than I have ever wanted any woman. But it's dangerous to be with me right now."

You do not know the full extent of the danger, Karan thought as she stared into his eyes and saw the worry, the pain, and the torment that echoed her own. Did he? Could he know about the curse? No, it was not the curse he spoke of but something different, something threatening in his own life.

"That is all the more reason we should uncover a way to send me back to my own world. If you do the ritual, repeat the steps you took last night exactly as you took them--"

"You just want an excuse to see me naked again."

Karan stopped and blinked at him. Though his eyes remained troubled, his incredible lips had curved into a mischievous leer. There was one thing about the man, she decided. He let nothing keep his attitude or spirit down for long. "Something tells me I do not need an excuse for that to happen."

His leer morphed into a full-blown grin. "You got that right." He pulled her against him and this time when he took her mouth he did not start with the gentle, the tender. He claimed her instead, leaving her no room for maneuvering out, no chance for refusal or argument. His tongue possessed her. His lips controlled her. His hands coaxed, guided, insisted, and she gave.

He folded around her, slithering them both to the ground, and she let him. When his hands moved to paw at her breasts through the material of the borrowed blouse, she arched in invitation. Her blood surged, heated to boiling and spilled over to sizzle through her body

in a steamy need for pleasure only he could give. It was not what she wanted. It was exactly what she wanted. It was what she would take, exactly what she would give. Her body. Sex. She could do that, do this, without letting free her heart.

She did not fight him when his hands pushed under the shirt and roughly found her breasts. His fingers kneaded, squeezed, and rolled her nipples until they stood as erect as stone and pulsated with a sensitivity that boarded pain. She let her hands go, moving over the taut muscles of his shoulders, his back, and dipping under his shirt to feel heated flesh. He groaned, the low rumble of sound amazing, electrifying.

"Eric." She sighed his name as his hand dunked between her legs and covered her mound through her jeans.

"Don't tell me to stop. Gods Karan, please don't tell me to stop."

The pleading, the sheer anguish in his tone surprised her. Had she been about to tell him just that? No. Whatever words might have followed his name, stop was not one of them. He would though, she knew with utter certainty. She had only to say the word and despite his needs, despite his desires for control, he would obey.

In what else could she get him to submit? She wondered with a wicked surge to challenge. She had him begging, she realized. In what other ways could she make him lose control?

Her hands were on his shoulders and she used them, pushed against them at the same time thrusting her body to his until she had flipped him over, until she lay on top. The light of surprise in his eyes was so bright it cut through the dimness of the quickly setting sun.

"Nice move. You're stronger than you look."

"I have been told so." She spread her body over his, angle for angle, and curve for curve. She was vibrating with heat and need, her insides quivering with longing and discontented passion. "I want you naked, Eric. You were right about that. Am I to fight for it or will you give willingly?"

"You're toying again." The light in his eyes flicked to dark in an instant, dangerous and playful with a hint of triumph. "I'll let you have this point but the next one is mine."

"Let the games begin." She had seen the phrase on a poster in the city earlier in the day and thought it fit perfectly in the moment. His husky laugh delighted her. His quick intake of breath as she rose up just enough to slink down his body pleased her more. She found the fastener of his pants, had it worked free, the zipper down in a quick and satisfying half-second. He helped her remove them, wiggling his hips as she slid the pants down his legs, left him to kick them off his feet.

She meant to go for his shirt next but found herself distracted by his impressive cock. Long and thick, she could not force her attention farther let alone her hands. She curled her fingers around his shaft and smiled as he sucked a breath through his clenched teeth. She stroked it, studied it. His cock pulsed in her hand, the vein that ran along the underside engorged and deep purple as was the head. A bead of pre-cum sparkled on the tiny slit and had her mouth watering at a glance, needing to taste, to drink.

He must have seen the evidence of her intention in her eyes because his voice was both warning and plea. "Karan."

"My toy, my rule." She leaned in and positioned herself until her mouth hovered a breath away from sucking him inside. "Now we play," she said and swallowed his cock.

## Chapter 6

Worlds exploded. Hers, his, others he didn't even know existed. His balls tensed in a fit of shock and exquisite pleasure that drove him wild and mindless. Her mouth was warm and slick, her tongue like a ribbon of satin as it glided over the head of his cock and around his shaft. The muscles in her throat milked as she sucked him deep, deeper than he ever thought she could. And the sensations, ah Gods, his entire body fell prisoner to the uproar of feelings clashing inside him.

He wanted to stop her. Oh, who the hell was he kidding? The last thing he wanted to do was stop her. Maybe this wasn't quite going as he'd planned. Maybe he wasn't in control. Maybe this was the surefire way for him to lose this round in their little game. But he could lose gracefully with the best of them, he decided and gave himself over to the sexual abyss.

"Gods, Karan, that's good." She worked him faster, her sultry lips clamping on his shaft, squeezing as she sucked him down, easing as she drew back. He managed to lift his head from the ground, wanting to see, *needing* to watch. It was eroticism to the max, a potent image of woman and demigoddess, the same yet different, powerful and wicked beyond his wildest dreams. She looked at him from beneath her lashes, her lavender eyes deep purple now with her own desires and he nearly whimpered. He never whimpered!

"Suck it, baby. Ah yes, take it deep." She did. In one swift swallow that came without warning, she took him all the way in until her lips met with the flesh of his body and his head fell back on the ground damned near hard enough to knock himself out. It was the

rage of fire through his cock and balls, the sharp sensations that gripped him inside and out that kept him hovering on the edge of lucidness.

Her hand moved between his legs and found his sac. She palmed his balls, rolling them around like marbles in her fingers. Combined with the assault of her devious mouth on his cock, it was too much. He reached for her, locking his hand in her hair, holding her in place as she sucked, licked and did amazing things to his shaft and the head of his dick that there were no names for.

It built within him, the river of seamen that crashed against the walls of his control. His balls tightened from it, his cock shuddering and tingling from the fight to hold it back. "Karan." He said her name as much in warning as a growl of pleasure. "That feels so good. Too good. I'm going to come in your mouth, Karan. Is that what you want? Do you want to taste my seed?"

She nodded, groaned, and sucked him faster.

The dam broke. In a violent crash of the final wave against the stone wall of his will it burst out of him. He cried out. When was the last time an ejaculation made him cry out? His hand in her hair fisting, his free hand groping at the grass as his body shook, his cock convulsed and his liquid satisfaction flowed into her mouth.

\* \* \* \*

Karan sat back on her heels, delighted by the reaction of the man stretched out on the ground before her. Her mouth was coated with his seed, her throat thick with it, and her belly far from sated. Between her legs was a throb so viciously intense it could not be ignored even if she thought to leave their sexual explorations at this much like they had done the previous evening. She needed more. Her body needed more. Could she give more? Would she?

Eric's gaze met hers and held. For a moment she wondered if he could read the turmoil beginning inside her. He was battling a

dilemma of his own. She had come to realize that much today, tonight. His declaration it was dangerous to be with him right now, yet he still wanted her. Her own knowledge being with him could be a grave choice for her life, yet she still wanted him. Could they have each other? Could they give each other what they needed, what they desired and leave it at that? Sex. They could share that much, *would* share that between them and walk away. She would return to her lands, leave him to his and the battles that faced them, if those wars continued to thrive, would be fought in their own time, their own place.

For now there was a battle before her to be won, a battle in which she was definitely in the lead. Karan pushed all other thoughts, fears, confusion and doubt aside and let a mischievous grin unfold on her lips. "Did I up my score with that one?"

His laugh came quick and spent, a breathy burst of tickled amusement. "And then some. You are truly amazing!" He reached for her, a hand sliding over her thigh, the only part of her he could reach given their current positions. "But I'll recover. Points and sanity. Just give me a second." He breathed deep and let it out on a shuddering chuckle. "Just give me a second."

Karan crawled to him, intending to remove his shirt, the only article of clothing he still wore. In a move as quick as lightning, he had her pinned to the ground, his hips between her thighs, his cock, already beginning to stiffen again, pressed to her jean-clad pussy.

"Nice move." She echoed his earlier words. "I would say you are stronger than you look but that would not be the truth." Not with all those rippling muscles and hard angles. "You do not seem as exhausted as I thought you to be. Perhaps I did not rule my toy well enough."

"You did." He wrestled his shirt off and tossed it aside. "Now it's my turn to play." He sat up, straddling her hips, none of his weight resting on her as he palmed her torso. His hands glided, tickled, teased



as he pulled her shirt up, stopped it at her eyes, and used it as a makeshift blindfold.

With her arms stretched over her head, the material of the shirt both binding her arms and blinding her eyes, Karan found herself suddenly at his mercy. The thrill drizzled through her in short spurts of ecstasy, heating her flesh even as a light breeze blew in the night to chill only to be heated again.

His hands moved down her body, a slow slide like pure satin, over her breasts, her abdomen, down her sides. At the waistband of the jeans, he stopped and, with the swiftness and skill of an experienced lover, had them off of her before she could manage her next breath.

"You would think after the fantastic blowjob you just gave me I would be able to control myself enough to go slow." He spoke barely above a whisper, almost as though he were muttering to himself rather than talking to her. His hands moved between her legs and pushed them apart as he scooted his way into position.

Karan felt all of this with senses she had not known could become so intense, so discernable with her sight cut off by the makeshift blindfold. Every other sensation was magnified, her brain registering each sound of breath and beat, each touch of flesh to flesh. She knew when he leaned over her, reveled in the light weight of his body against hers, waited with baited breath for his move. "Eric?"

His cock pushed at the entrance of her pussy, only the tip, barely enough to spread her sodden folds. "I can't." He ground the word through clinched teeth.

She heard the anguish, the battle in his tone, the fight for control, for restraint. Can't. Cannot. Bullshit! She lifted her hips, catching him off his guard and drawing his cock inside her opening. He sank inside her a full inch, perhaps two before his hands caught her hips, and pushed them back to the ground.

"Tricky, aren't you?" He laughed. "I wasn't ready for that yet."

Needing to see and unwilling to play his little game when her body screamed in deep seated need for penetration, Karan torn the

shirt from her arms and face. With her hands free, she caught his ass. "Yes, you are and so am I." Putting strength against strength, she pulled with her hands, pushed up with her hips, and he thrust inside her.

Cries, grunts, moans, neither discernable as his or hers blended together as one to fill the night air. Pleasure on the most exquisite level raced through her. The sudden invasion of his thick, long cock into her channel caused her back to arch, her mind to fizzle, and her breath to catch in her throat.

"I gather you don't want slow, don't want gentle." He grunted the words as he drove his dick deeper, harder, and faster.

"Yes!" Karan nearly shouted the word, then bit back a scream when he slowed his thrusts, turned them softer, shallower. She dug her nails into his ass and yanked. "The yes was because it felt good. Not because I wished you to go easy."

"Have your way for now as it's what I want to. Then I'll have my way."

Before she could venture a guess as to what his way might be, he caught her legs in his arms, lifted and plunged inside her, his deepest dive yet.

This time she did scream, an unintelligible cry as rapturous waves of splendid pleasure surged through her. His hips pistoned, his cock pounded inside her pussy, rubbing the sodden walls of her channel, and ramming against the barrier of her cervix with each inward plunge. It was pleasure and pain, mind-numbing and soul stealing and exactly what she wanted.

"Eric, by the guardians, Eric, that feels so good. Please don't stop!" Her head lolled on the ground, thrashing from side to side in a vain attempt to keep insanity at bay. "More. Harder. Faster. More!"

He gave her more. Lifting her legs higher, his hands moving under her ass to hold her in position, he rammed his cock in her pussy. Now it was the sounds of bodies slapping and breaths panting that filled the night air.

"Come for me, Karan. Let me know how good it feels."

Almost there, she thought and centered all concentration on the riot of sensations blasting through her, the feel of his cock invading her body, filling and consuming her. A band tightened inside her, wrapped her in an envelope of ecstasy so wondrous when the release snapped, every ounce of resistance in her body went with it. Flames tore through her as her body let go, her muscles quivering, and her mind lost.

Eric's body tensed between her thighs, his hands gripping her ass so tightly it was another pointed sensation as he gave himself over to the demands of his own needs. He growled, a low, rumbling sound, as his seed flowed deep inside her pussy, his body shuddering as the relief overtook him. He collapsed over her, slowly lowering her legs to the ground, his heart pounding in time with hers, breaths ragged and mingling.

His head lay nestled in her hair at the side of her neck, his rapid breaths warm against her flesh. He kissed her, a soft brush of his lips that brought goose pimples to the surface of her arms, her legs. "Okay." He panted. "Now I'm exhausted."

Karan laughed. She glanced at the articles of discarded clothing on the grass around them and saw with a tickle of amusement that her shirt had landed to drape off the limb of a short holly bush. She considered reaching for it, putting it back on, and then dismissed the thought. Naked and comfortable with it, she sat back on her hands and stretched her legs out in front of her.

"Should we be worried that someone might see us like this in your backyard?"

Eric gave a sleepy grunt followed by what might have passed for a laugh. "It's pretty private back here. The fence, the trees, the brush, much of them were planted and built for exactly that purpose. Still, a person can see here and there if they have half a mind." He rolled his head to look at her and cocked a brow. "Does that bother you? Knowing someone besides me could be admiring your incredibly sexy

and very naked curves right about now? That they could have watched you go down on me, watched us have sex moments ago?"

Karan thought about it and found she did not have to consider long. Her belly gave a slow, lovely roll at the idea of being watched by a stranger.

Eric gave another of those low chuckles. "No need to answer there, goddess. You find it exciting. I can see that much in your eyes. Something to consider, I suppose, a new level to add to our little game, another way to score." His head turned back as his attention refocused on the sky, now dark with only sparkles of stars for light. "Does it look the same in your world?"

Knowing he meant the sky, Karan tipped her head back. She liked the way he swayed into different conversation after a sexual dig that had her pussy going slick with wetness, her channel burning with excited need. "It does," she answered him slowly, studying the sky, remembering, and comparing. "And then, it does not. There are more stars in our skies, sometimes so many that it turns night as bright as day though it is a silvery light rather than the brilliant gold of the sun." Her gaze danced over the darkness, searched, sought. There, in the far distance she could just make out a slight sliver of moon. "Your moon is waxing now, building after last night's new moon."

"It will be another night or two before we will start to see it clearly."

"There are many moons in my world. Not just the one. It always fascinated me how their phases coincide." And kicked a fear behind her heart she had managed to ignore, to bury since last night. The spell. She had but one phase of the moon's time, new moon to new moon before it would run its span. Before, she thought as the fear chilled her blood, she would face whatever grave end of which the curse spoke. She had to get home. Suddenly, the sheer urgency of that slammed into her like a physical punch. How could she defeat the curse that bound her heart, threatened that of her life, of her sister's in a world not her own? Her gaze was drawn to Eric. He was part of it.

Somehow he *was* it. Of this world or hers, it mattered not. He was hers. She knew it as clearly as she knew she did not want to know it. She wanted him, the furious desire as strong as her desire *not* to want him.

"I'm not the only one with a look."

Karan blinked and pulled herself back to the here, the now. "Pardon?"

"Last night you scolded me for looking at you as though I wanted to shove my dick inside you, or that was the gist of it anyway."

"And yet no amount of scolding stopped you. You looked at me that way most of the day."

"Was that what got you so riled up tonight? The knowledge that I was thinking of being inside you most of the day?"

"It added a helping hand, yes," she admitted. A helping hand, the whole damned arm! She did not need to possess the power to read minds to know when he looked at her and thought of sex. He had kept her emotions on edge, her needs hanging just below the surface waiting for attention, waiting to be sated.

"You have this way of looking at me too. Not the same as mine though I will admit to being immensely disappointed by that. To know you were looking at me and wishing I would shove my cock in you would be beyond flattering. Instead, you think too much, too deep, too serious. It's what you're doing now." He sat up, shifted until he was beside her in an almost mirroring pose, legs stretched out, and arms back to hold his weight. "You look at me and you wonder what's between us, what to do about it. You wonder how to fight it, how to fight me."

"I am--what did you call it?--being an open book."

"That you are." He moved again, this time standing and before she knew what he was about to do, he scooped her off the ground and into his arms.

Karan let out a surprised, "Eeek!" Her head spun and she laughed. "What are you doing? You sure recover fast."

He did not answer but stood there with her securely in his arms and stared into her eyes. Speaking of looks, she thought an instant before he crushed his mouth to hers.

"One thing I like about you, Karan," he said against her lips. "Well, there are several but for starters I like how easy it is to erase those too serious thoughts from your mind. It's pretty easy to transform that look to one of heat and passion too even if the hint of battle remains." He brushed his lips to her nose and grinned. "There's no need to fight this time. You'll just lose in any case."

"You think so?" The promise of fun and sensual heat was back in his eyes, in his voice. She even felt it in the confidence of his walk as he moved them inside.

"I know so." He stepped through the slider, somehow managing to close it behind them while holding her tight. "My toy, my rules this time."

"I am no man's toy." Karan buried her hand in the short hairs at the nape of his neck and yanked. She sank her teeth into his bottom lip and let her free hand glide over his chest to his nipple. She caught the tiny swollen bud and gave it a pressured twist as he had done to hers earlier.

His arms flexed around her, tightening as a low rumbling growl sounded from his throat. She muffled the sound with her own mouth, clamping it over his, and controlling the kiss with a heated desperation that allowed no chance for conquer. Her tongue licked, teeth scraping along his cheek, his jaw, his ear.

"God, Karan. Wait!" He tried to pull back but her hand in his hair held him still. He would have to put her down to get away.

He did but not on the floor as she had expected. He walked with her to the counter and set her down. The granite was a block of ice to her bare heated ass and she sucked in a breath at the jolt to her system.

"Damn you." He ground the words through teeth that grazed her neck then moved to sink with a vicious bite to her collarbone. "I told you it was my turn, my rules."

"And I told you I am no man's toy." Her nails raked over his flesh even as she battled to kiss, to taste. It became a war of wills and skill. Who would get their mouth on who, which one of them would gain control of the situation, of the game until they were both panting, their lips swollen, and skin red in places where teeth made contact a little too rough.

"I can't get enough of you. Twice already and still I want more." Eric pushed her legs apart, pulled her to sit on the edge of the counter, and rammed his cock into her spread pussy.

Karan's head fell back and rapped against the cabinet, but all she felt was the intense pleasure of the thick meat in her channel. His cock rubbed the walls of her inner core still slick with her last orgasm, not yet slick enough to accommodate such furious thrusts so soon after. It was pain and pleasure, a rough abrasion that did not last nearly long enough as her body quickly reacted to the ravenous sensations, pumping out juices for lubrication.

Her hands dropped to his ass, nails biting into flesh as she yanked him hard with each inward thrust of his hips. The pace he set was wild, reckless, a race to the finish that had her mind spinning out of her head even as the exquisite passion built within her to explode around his cock.

He came with her, a violet thrust so deep in her channel it nearly sent her tumbling over the edge again. His body jerked, quivered, and sweat coated his flesh. Hers too, she realized as her head slowly settled on her shoulders once more. Heart pounding, she rested her forehead to his shoulder and simply breathed.

"Okay," Eric said after several panting moments. "Okay. Maybe we should try that again."

Karan lifted her head and pinned him with a disbelieving glare. "You cannot be serious."

He laughed, a down in the gut riot of sound that she found herself amazed he even had the energy to produce. "Oh, I am serious, and while going at it a third time definitely has its appeal, I meant that we should try again to make it upstairs."

He reached beside her head, opened the cabinet, and pulled out a red bag held closed by a black clip. "Munchies," he informed her though she did not have a clue what the word meant. "Can you walk? I would carry you but we would probably stand a better chance of actually making it to the bed if I don't."

The man was insatiable, Karan thought as she hopped down from the counter onto legs that turned out to be far steadier than she expected them to be. He stopped by the refrigerator, grabbed a red and white can of drink, and then led the way up the stairs.

\* \* \* \*

Eric figured to curb the edge of hunger he'd worked himself into with a few handfuls of nacho cheese flavored Doritos, ease back to some semblance of revitalizing energy with the pound of sugar offered in a can of Coke, then go at Karan for round three. Or was it four? He adapted said plan when she nodded off in his bed after declaring nacho chips to be her new favorite food, and decided to give her a little time to rest. Having her asleep, or more accurately waking her from that sleep, worked perfectly into his plan in any case.

He dozed too for awhile then eased out of bed and tiptoed to the master bath. He ran the water in the sink to cold, the splashes to his face doing more than reviving him. They soothed, greeted and enabled his mind to clear if only for a moment from the overwhelming thoughts of Karan. He didn't notice the stopper was down in the sink until the water pooled a good four inches deep. Rather than pull the stopper, he switched off the faucet, then rested his hands on either side of the porcelain bowl and stared into the water.



It swirled, first in the wake of the now gone drip, then in wider and faster circles as his focus changed and the vision came. It was the same as that which he'd seen in the crystal only this time it came unbidden. The importance of that, the weight of any vision appearing when not called, was not lost on him. The urge to wipe it clean, to back away gripped him but he held strong. Second time. The same scene. Something more he should catch. Something he needed to know.

Eric studied the vision. The office picture looked the same as it had the many times he'd stepped inside it over the years. The man at the desk appeared no different either, a bit beefier, suit getting tighter as were the lines in the chunky face. Evil face, Eric thought and wondered how he'd managed to never settle on that devilish gleam in those beady eyes before. The answer was easy, of course. He hadn't wanted to see.

He did now. Both saw and wanted to see. Pushing all else aside in his mind but for the vision that continued to hold him captive, he searched deeper. Frustration grew when he spotted nothing to clue him into the bigger part of the problem. Perhaps if the vision came accompanied with sound. Sometimes they did or at least they had back when his practice of the craft and his powers had been honed. Was it the phone conversation in the vision he needed to know?

When the phone rang, the shrill sound had him spiraling back. The vision vanished in a blink. He straightened, absently tugged at the sink stopper to let the water drain as he turned and left the bathroom. At a pace a little faster than a walk, he made his way to the cordless on the bedside table. It rang three more times before he picked it up and punched the talk button. As he brought the receiver to his ear he noted Karan hadn't moved an inch since he'd left the bed even with the noise of the phone.

Guess you aren't a light sleeper, he thought then spoke to the caller. "Macklin." He half expected to hear a raspy, broken voice on the other end, the voice of his former boss and current nemesis.

Instead, the, "Eric, Eric Macklin?" was said in a tone that resonated of pure baritone authority.

"Yeah, who's this?" He reached down and tipped back the square faced old fashioned alarm clock on the table. Barely seven in the morning. Hell, he must have dropped off for longer than he'd realized. On the other hand, who would want him on the phone at this time on a Monday morning?

"Special Agent Rupert Norway, Tampa FBI division."

Eric's world gave another violent spin. No, it wasn't over yet. "What can I do for you, Special Agent Norway?"

"I believe it may be a case of what we can do for each other. I would like to meet with you. Perhaps you could come to the bureau office down town."

It was more a casual order than invitation. Eric had dealt with enough cops and the likes in recent months to learn to read between the lines. Norway wanted to meet at his office. He hadn't come to Eric's home. Not under arrest for anything. Yet. Under suspicion? Possibly, but for what? A case of what they could do for each other, the agent said. What could he do for the FBI that he hadn't already done for the local police? More to the point, what could the FBI do for him?

Lots of questions, he thought, and only one surefire way to get the answers. "I can be there in an hour." On the bed, Karan stirred, drawing his attention. She didn't wake. He would have to wake her though. No way could he take her with him for this one, but he couldn't leave her sleeping either. What if she woke while he was gone? "Maybe a little longer," he amended and clicked off the phone.

Eyes fixed on Karan, he slowly lowered the cordless to the table. She looked, he decided, like a dream with her long brown curtain of hair spilling over the deep blue pillow cases. Her tanned skin looked even smoother in sleep, seeming almost to glow. The sheet covered her but the swell of her breasts peeked out to tease. He'd intended to

do exactly that this morning. To tease her out of sleep with his hands, his mouth, his cock.

*So much for good intentions.* He sighed, turned to find a pair of pants and actually felt his cock slump between his legs in a pouty defeat. He dressed in classy casual going for the Armani jeans, Calvin Klein button shirt in a woodsy brown that nearly matched Karan's hair, and white socks he intended to cover with a pair of Nikes when he made it to the shoe closet downstairs. No need to go all out classy with the three piece suit since he was currently unemployed, with a rap sheet and one hell of a bad rep. To his way of thinking, the suit would only succeed in making him look like a pompous ass today.

He strode back to the bath, pushed a quick brush through his hair, and added a little gel to make it lay flat. Satisfied he now looked as casual as he could while still appearing professional rather than looking thoroughly rumpled after a night of marathon sex, he eased onto the side of the bed and laid a soft hand on Karan's shoulder.

## **Chapter 7**

Karan fingered her way through the spare closet in the guest bedchamber and the dozen or so articles of clothing hanging inside. After careful study of a few, she settled on a pale pink top made of cashmere, according to the tiny strip of paper sewn to the inside, and a pair of jeans a couple of shades lighter in blue than the ones she wore yesterday. The top, the pink, would generally be a color more suited to Calliope but the style with its deep squared neckline, fitted sleeves, and trimmed sides was exactly the look Karan wanted.

The jeans, she discovered when she slipped into them, came only to her hips leaving her belly and a small portion of her abdomen bare as the chosen top hit her at the mid-section. At first, she thought the clothing to be too small. Then she took a look in the mirror and knew in an instant both fit just right. She had seen women in the city dressed similar on their outing yesterday. Ah, yes, and there had been this one woman, the blonde with the interesting tie in her hair...

Inspired, Karan dashed to the adjoining bath, to the drawer beneath the sink containing dozens of ties, clips and a variety of other intriguing hair frills she had stumbled across the previous evening. Odd, she thought as she selected a tie in a pretty blue that matched her jeans. Why would Eric's sister leave so many belongings behind when she moved out? Lucky for her she had, Karan decided and stuck the tie between her teeth to free her hands. Calliope would have a field day with all the different accessories in the drawer. She would have also taken far less time to twist and style Karan's hair. Then again, Calliope was a girly girl.

Still, she had not done a bad job on her own, Karan decided and dropped her hands, turned her head to the right, then left in a studying inspection. Chic, sleek, and way sexy, Eric would definitely think so. She grinned, and then watched the smile fall from her lips. What did she care what Eric thought? Except, she did care. Damnit, she did! What she should be caring about most was getting home, back to her own world. Yet, she had tried only once to find a way to return. The rest of the time she spent with her hormones on a rampaging need to be with Eric. Her heart thumped, her belly flopped and her head, well, she could not say exactly what her head was doing, what it was feeling. Confusion was paramount along with an innate queasiness. There was fear too and an immense sense of loss, of being lost. By the guardians, she was so divided about everything!

Her face paled. She watched in the mirror as all the color drained out of it at the choice of that one word in her thoughts. Divided. The spell. Gods! She heard a sound downstairs. A door opened and closed, followed by a shuffle of feet. What timing, she thought bitterly and spun from the mirror. She treaded heavily out of the bathroom, anger fueling her steps. It occurred to her in the back of her mind that Eric had not been gone long. What was it he had said when he woke her? He would be away for at least an hour, probably more. It could not have been half that, she gauged as she stomped down the stairs with bare feet.

She froze on the bottom step. She did not scream, though a hint of one stung her throat along with the arrows of fear that darted through her. Not Eric, she noted immediately. The man who stood partially in the foyer, half in the living room was a good inch shorter than Eric with hair of deep ebony that fell in long, silky looking waves around an almost boyishly handsome face. His body was lean and ripped and occupied a pair of black leather boots, black jeans and a snug-fitting black shirt. A pair of dark wire-rimmed sunglasses hid his eyes. He caught sight of her in an instant and the smile that spread his thin lips

had her heart tripping from more than fear. Attraction, dagger sharp and white-hot speared straight to her core.

"Hi. I knocked." He tipped his head at the now closed front door then held up a hand. Karan caught the glint of sunlight on something silver dangling from his fisted fingers. "When you didn't answer, I let myself in."

"You have a key." She felt a slow trickle of relief. That was the something silver.

"Two actually. The other one stays at my place. Long story." He waved it away before shoving the key in the pocket of his deliciously tight jeans. "I'm Cal. Caleb actually but everyone calls me Cal. I'm a good friend of Eric's."

"He is not here." Karan relaxed her hold on the stairs when her fingers began to throb. She had not realized she had been squeezing it so hard.

"He called me, asked if I would come stay with you while he's out, said he would rather you not be alone. I'm Cal," he said again and took a step closer. He removed his glasses and let the earpiece dangle off one finger at his side. When he met her gaze, Karan felt a riot of wonder and liquid lust flow through her to settle in her middle. "You must be the goddess, Karan."

His eyes were absolutely incredible! A mesmerizing shade of ice blue surrounding a sea of black pupils all enclosed in a seeming cloud of white. Karan actually thought she saw tiny images of four poster beds in their depths. Icy, she thought and yet so hot she felt her blood sizzle as they stared at one another. There was no quiver, no pervasive tremor in her belly, no quake beneath her feet. There was only a hard slap of lust in her gut, to her breasts, between her legs.

"Demigoddess," she corrected automatically. She moved off the last step and stopped again. "Eric told you about me? Who I am? What I am?"

"You were sleeping when I was here yesterday. Had a bit of a rough night, I was told." He grinned, one brow inching up and Karan

would have sworn she saw a mischievous and entirely too knowing glint in those take-me-to-bed eyes. How much had Eric told his close friend when he called him this morning? "I'm sorry he didn't give me the pleasure of meeting you yesterday. Real sorry." His penetrating gaze took her in from head to toe in one quick slide that had her fighting back the urge to writhe where she stood. It should have come across as pompous, egotistical, and even mildly insulting but instead it was somehow charming. *He* was charming. "You sure don't look like any goddess I've ever pictured, demi or otherwise."

"So I have been told." No matter the time or the world, Karan thought. Always the odd one, never to act as expected. Never to speak as expected. Never to look as expected. Was she so wrong to find satisfaction in that fact even as it irritated her blood to a slow simmer?

"It works for you." Cal shifted, leaned a shoulder against the wall, crossed his ankles, and studied her. "That look, the jeans, simple yet very sexy blouse. Bet you like it a hell of a lot more than the, shall we say, stately gown you were wearing when did your little *abracadabra* appearance into the backyard."

"My little *abracadabra* appearance?" Karan cocked her head and planted a fist on her hip.

"Yeah, you know, Houdini and the whole..." He trailed off, shook his head. "No, I guess you don't know. How did Eric put it? When you poofed into his magic circle."

"Does Eric tell you everything?" She found herself more irritated by the idea, so much so that her temper spiked and the simmering changed to that of a slow boil.

"Mostly." Cal frowned. "At least he did at one time. We're just getting back to that. Anyway, he told me how you got here though he wasn't real clear on that."

"He is not sure how." Tired of standing in the stairway, Karan walked past Cal and moved into the living room.

"Yeah, I got that." Cal followed her. "What about you?"

"What about me?" Karan started to pace the living room floor. Not because she was nervous, though the jittering in her belly and the drizzle of lusty dew collecting in her center each time she focused on Cal, each time she let herself fall onto the mattress in those eyes, was cause enough to rattle her nerves. She paced because the carpet felt like a little slice of paradise to her bare feet. Smoky gray in color and so plush her toes sank in with each step. It sure beat the stone flooring in the queen's palace.

"Do you know how you got here?"

She lifted a shoulder and intended to leave it at that. Just because Eric told him everything did not mean she had to. But the words tumbled from her lips before she could stop them. "He pulled me through."

"He pulled you through," Cal repeated. "Eric pulled you through. Sorry to keep parroting you. Just making sure it all sinks in right."

She winced. In truth, she was not positive of that fact though she could still see no other way, no other reason for what happened, for how she came to be in his backyard last night. No, two nights ago. Now was not the time to think about what she had done in his backyard *last* night.

"Because of the circle, the ritual." Cal pursed his lips--shapely even if thin and thoroughly nippable--seemed to consider and then nodded. "Yeah, he could have done it, I guess. He's always been a powerful witch. You have no powers of your own."

It was said as statement rather than question and Karan bristled. "A fact of which I am constantly reminded."

Cal smirked. "You don't sound like a demigoddess either." At the bland glare she shot him, he chuckled and rushed on. "I know. I know. Another fact I am sure you are continuously told. What about his?" He perched casually on the arm of the buttery leather sofa. "Have you considered that you're meant to be here? Maybe it was the spell, or part of it, that somehow pulled you through a doorway between the worlds believed to be forever closed."



Karan's pulse roared in her ears. Her heart slammed against her breast bone and her vision swam. For a finger snap, she actually thought she might pass out. "The spell," she whispered, her voice as horrorstruck as her mind. "You know about the spell?"

Cal eyed her, his expression a mix of caution and concern. "Hey, I didn't mean to freak you out." He got up quickly from the arm of the sofa and was standing barely a breath from her in a blink. "Are you alright? You look awfully pale. Here, you need to sit down."

She let him lead her to the sofa. Her hands balled into fists, enclosing her suddenly sweaty palms. It felt good to sit as her legs had started to wobble along with her stomach. What was wrong with her? She had not reacted this way when her mother had told her and her sister's of the spell the night of Aithne's celebration. She had been ready to fight, determined no curse would rule the outcome of her life.

And that was it, she realized with a sudden bone chilling clarity. That was the reason she was feeling as though she had just been dealt the news of the coming apocalypse. She could not be here, in this world because of the curse. She just could not! If that were true then the spell would be ruling her, fate taking control and leading her to her death.

"How do you know about the spell?" Her voice was quiet, barely audible to her own ears, yet she knew he heard her. He sat beside her on the sofa, one arm lightly curled around her waist, the other on her knee as he leaned in to see her face.

"I read about it." He pushed a stray strand of her hair behind her ear and let his fingers graze the side of her neck as his hand fell away. "I spent most of the night leafing through books, reading up on you, your sisters, your parents, your world."

Karan closed her eyes. It was simply too much to take in. He knew of the spell. Few in her own world even knew of the horrible curse the Goddess Daria had put upon her and her sisters at birth. It was something never talked about among her people. She and her sisters had not even known until the night of Aithne's celebration.

Yet, Cal knew. A man in a different world, a different time, a different dimension knew and he'd found out through reading books!

"I knew some already but I'll admit I wouldn't have researched it as much if Eric hadn't asked me to," Cal went on.

Eric asked him to. Karan felt her heart dip lower in her chest. "Does he know?" *Something here, something big.* Some of the first words Eric had spoken to her that night in the circle. He did know. He had to. *You know me as I know you. We've known each other all our lives.* More words he had spoken, more proof that he knew on some level at least that they were meant.

"He knows of the spell, or curse, whatever you want to call it. The cursed hearts is what the writers of mythology named it. Others deemed the story to be the three hearts. I told him about it yesterday morning but I couldn't remember the exact wording or the way it all went down at the time. According to documented stories, your grandmother cursed you and your sisters. One of you is to suffer at the hands of desire, the second to suffer a divided heart, and the third to face a monster of her destiny. Is that right?"

Unable to speak, Karan nodded.

"You're the middle one, aren't you? The one cursed with a divided heart. Nothing in the books tells how it all ends. Obviously because the end has not yet come no matter the time or world we live. But the books do mention something about parties. Wait, they're called celebrations. Yeah, celebrations in which each of you were, or are to meet your intended. That's when the spell, or curse, starts."

"It is the customary celebrations of our joining to our intendeds." Karan opened her eyes and looked straight into Cal's. "I was dancing at my celebration when I was taken from there and landed here."

"You were with your intended?"

"No. I was dancing with Hakan, heir to the throne of Tolynn. He is brother to Aithne's intended. The one meant for me did not seem to have attended the celebration."

"Because he was in a different world, casting a magic circle and preparing a new moon rite," Cal said softly as realization dawned. "Eric is your intended."

Because she did not yet want to admit that aloud, because she would rather eat dirt than to tell Eric's know-it-all friend he had guessed correctly from the start, Karan pushed to her feet and resumed her pacing on legs that were once again steady. "Do these books say anything about how to travel through the door between worlds? Do they say anything of how I got here, how to return?"

"The books don't even say anything about you being in our world. There isn't enough information on the ramifications of the spell for that. There is some speculation that the spell can be broken but there isn't even a clue on how it is or can be done."

"I have to find out how to get back. I have to know what is happening in my world. Eric tried to look through his crystal but saw nothing."

"I could try."

Karan spun on her heel. "You have the power of vision, too?"

"Divination. My powers lie in the cards. Tarot cards," he explained when she cocked her head in question. "Wait here."

He bolted out of the room only to return in what seemed mere seconds later holding a stack of rectangular papers with graphic images drawn on top. "My deck." He gestured with the stack, sat down in the center of the sofa and began to shuffle the cards on the table. "I figured Eric would leave them where I put them."

Karan lowered herself to her knees on the opposite side of the table to watch. He laid out a spread of ten cards then leaned over them, his expression going contemplative as he studied each one in turn. She had seen this done. Other beings in her world used this form of divination often. Though the pictures on the cards appeared to be nothing more than that to her, she knew in Cal's mind he saw their meaning and a far different picture.

"First, I will tell you that your family is okay. They were a bit shocked when you vanished into thin air at the party but once they figured it out the chaos was over."

"They figured it out? They know what happened?"

Cal nodded. "They know you crossed over. Like us, they aren't sure how you did it or how to get you back, but they know where you are. Your father, the king, he's of this world too, isn't he?"

"He is part mortal."

"He's keeping his head over this, assuring everyone you are and will be fine."

"That sounds like my father." Karan frowned, unsure if she felt proud of him for attempting to keep everyone calm or aggravated by his seemingly lack of concern to have her back in their world.

"The future is unclear," Cal went on. "Stuff about curses and destiny, junk we already know." He shrugged, winced. "Sorry I can't be more help than that."

"No, no," Karan said quickly. "What you have seen is enough for now. I know my king and queen, my sisters are safe and they know where I am. I cannot ask for more at this point."

"Except for a card from fate with an arrow pointing to the right door to get back."

This time Karan shrugged. "In my experiences with fate, she rarely gives us what we want."

\* \* \* \*

What did she want? Karan pondered the question as she piddled around Eric's house after Cal left. She had convinced Cal she would be alright, that she needed time alone. It had been what she wanted at that moment. Now, with the silence so thick in the house it felt as though a heavy blanket pressed down to smother her, she wished she had not talked him into leaving.

And there she went with her confusion again, she thought with a huff. A clock on the wall in the living room chimed the one o'clock hour. She jumped at the single sharp sound then shook her head at herself even as she covered her heart with her hand. She was nearly climbing out of her skin at the slightest sound. Next she would be running from her own shadow. She would have never reacted in such a way in her own palace. There, she would have drawn a sword and fought whatever startled her rather than turn tail and haul ass.

What she needed to do was relax. Eric had been gone much longer than the hour he had anticipated. She should be using this time away from him to collect her thoughts, her feelings, figure out what to do about the mess she had found herself--what was Eric's word for it?--poofed into. And Cal, by the guardians, had given her a lot to think about. Some of what he said she had already known, most of it, in truth. He had been so gentle, so sweet, so charming. And those eyes, oh my, talk about lust developers!

Karan made her way to the kitchen. As she walked, she found herself imagining those eyes looking down on her as he positioned himself between her thighs and guided his hard cock into her drenched opening. She bet he would be an amazing lover. That lean, well-toned body, large calloused hands, bitable lips. The imagery had her leaning against the refrigerator and closing her eyes.

She saw him walk through the kitchen door, saunter to her with a sexy grin on his thin lips and a devious gleam in his bedchamber eyes. Her hand rose to her breast as, in her fantasy, it was Cal's hand that held her tit, massaged and fondled. His other hand, *her* other hand cupped her pussy through the material of her jeans. Her hips began to gyrate, the pressured caress of his palm, *her* palm to her aching heat a smooth and escalating ride. She could almost feel his lips on her flesh, tasting, licking, nipping as his hand pressed harder, moved too now in time with her hips. The denim of her jeans rubbed, the friction a new experience in tormented pleasure to the most sensitive, softest flesh of her feminine lips and her swollen clit.

Cal's mouth closed over her breast, his tongue a flick of velvet to her engorged nipple and she opened her eyes on a gasp. Eric stood in the doorway watching them. His expression was one of tense heat and devilish need. He locked his gaze with hers as he walked to her and she knew in that moment they would both take her.

Karan came, her body shuddering against the closed door of the refrigerator. Her head tipped back as she rode the violent but sensual wave of release until the spasms subsided and she could breathe once more. When she opened her eyes, the kitchen was empty. No Cal. No Eric. Her pussy contracted, one last fierce jerk of her muscles as the last of her cream drained from her, soaking the crotch of her jeans. She glanced down and saw that her shirt was bunched around one breast where she had fondled herself. Straightening the material, she took a deep, steadying breath.

"Wow!" She let out the breath on a staggering laugh. "Now I need a drink."

She turned on feet that felt glued to the floor and opened the refrigerator. A pitcher of something yellow occupied the top shelf and she removed it, sniffed, and caught the strong scent of lemon. Pouring a glass, she replaced the container then moved to the sliding door. She should probably change, she thought as she stepped outside, get out of these jeans. They would smell of sex now, her sex, her cream. She felt it thick and gooey between her pussy lips, against her feminine folds. The mere erotic slickness of it brought a low burn to resurface in her core, a tease to keep her on edge until she could have a cock inside her again?

Deciding the sexual edge might be just what she needed right now to dull the blades of her confusion, she kept the jeans on. Should she feel guilty? she wondered as she slowly meandered down the steps to the grass. She had just masturbated to a fantasy involving Eric's best friend. Sure, Eric had stepped into the fantasy at the end and was ultimately what sent her on a spinning ride to Orgasmville but it had been her lust for Cal that started her.

No. She absolutely would not feel guilty, she decided in a spurt of defiance. She was not committed to Eric. Fuck what the guardians and fate had in mind for her. She would not give into them unless she chose to. She had never felt anything but satisfaction and a wicked pleasure in her fantasies about men. Why should she feel any different now? Besides, it was not as if she had made a move on Cal while he was here. He had held her, comforted her and she had not touched him once. Nothing had happened between them. Not unless you counted the giant tsunami of ferocious lust that crashed inside her each time she met his eyes, each time she allowed herself to gaze at his body.

She actually found herself remembering his eyes again, sliding into another fantasy about them peering down on her as he drove his dick inside her when her mind was yanked back to reality. She froze and nearly toppled off the bottom step as her gaze fixed on a shimmering arch of golden light.

Not sunlight, her mind registered instantly. Not some sort of artificial light either. It sparkled like dozens of stars lined in the pattern of an arched doorway directly in the spot where she had landed in Eric's circle only two nights before.

The glass of lemonade slipped from her hand and spilled onto the grass at her feet as it landed. The doorway. It had to be. It was her way back, her way home. She sprinted for it, caring not about stickers or rocks or anything else hidden in the grass. She was but a breath away from it when the lights slowly faded, the arch vanishing.

"No." The word came on a choked sob as a heavy weight of doom, despair, and defeat landed on her shoulders. She sank to the ground, tears welling in her eyes, slowly trickling down her face. "No. No. No." Her chance to go home, she was almost certain of it, was gone forever.

\* \* \* \*

The bastard put a price on his head, a fucking contract hit. Eric didn't know why that came as such a surprise. He had known it wasn't over. Thanks to Mortimer Burns, he had lost his career, his self respect, his pride. Now he could lose his life.

*No, be a man about it, Macklin. You did all of that by yourself.*

The FBI wanted to protect him, in exchange for certain information, of course. The last thread of information Eric possessed that could send Mortimer Burns straight to the federal penitentiary. If said information was used correctly. Problem was Eric didn't have enough faith in the feds to use the data right. He could give them the name of the big enchilada, so to speak, the man at the top. But the feds would go for the little man first. Take out the small players and work their way to the top. That was how they worked. And in the mean time, the big cheese would be on Eric's ass like the glaze on a donut.

Protection. Yeah, the FBI could protect him alright. But what about Karan? How did one protect a demigoddess from another realm? That question stayed with him through his ride home and his subsequent cell conversation with Cal. It coupled with a dozen others, one question of which that had his blood boiling even as his mind simmered over the ludicrously of it all until he stepped through the door of his house.

She was gone. He felt it immediately, the absence of her presence on the air. He could smell her, the sweet, flowery scent of the herbal shampoo in the upstairs guest bath, the lotions and creams she had obviously helped herself too. Even knowing so, he called out for her, his heart thumping wildly when she did not respond. Cal had left her, only for an hour, he had said. She had wanted her privacy.

So many things, Eric thought aimlessly as he treaded through the corridor, the living room, the kitchen. So many things could happen to a demigoddess in a strange city.

When he spotted her through the slider off the kitchen, his heart nearly stopped from sheer relief. She sat on the grass in the backyard,



arms laced around legs drawn to her chest, her face tipped to the sky. *Thank the goddess. Thank the gods.*

Knowing it was nearly ninety degrees in the shade in the late afternoon sunlight, he snatched a bottle of water from the fridge before heading out the slider to join her. "Karan, what are you doing?" The look she shot him squeezed at his heart. The sorrow, the desperation in her usually so confident, so hopeful face nearly brought tears to his eyes. "What happened? Something is wrong. Tell me."

"It was there." Her voice was small, quiet, and thick with emotions he couldn't decipher. "It was there and I missed it."

"What was there, honey?" Eric lowered himself to the ground beside her, snaked an arm around her waist, and pulled her to sit in his lap. Her shirt was soaked with sweat, drenched tendrils of her hair matted to her temples and cheeks. "You're burning up. Geezus, Karan, you can have a heat stroke out here. If you wanted to be outside you should at least sit in the shade and have a glass of water on hand."

"I had one. I dropped it when I saw the doorway." She stared at nothing in particular. At least, nothing he could see.

Eric glanced to the steps off the deck and saw the fallen glass on the ground. Then her words jabbed through the heat in his brain. Doorway. She had seen a doorway. "The door between worlds? You saw the door between worlds?"

"I must have imagined it," Karan said weakly. Her hands fisted on her thighs, one giving her knee a punch so hard it made Eric wince before she laid it flat only to have her fingers wadding her pant leg. "I was so certain. I came outside after, well, I wanted to be outside. So I made a glass of lemonade and came out to sit. It was here, right here! A shimmering archway like a door, exactly where I came through."

"Then it vanished before you could get to it, before you could pass back to the other side." And thank the Gods it had. He remembered the emptiness that had all but slapped him in the face when he'd walked into the house.

But what if he hadn't found her? What if she hadn't missed the doorway? Even as the 'what if' game kicked off its first of who knew how many innings in his mind, his arms tightened around her. He let his forehead rest on her shoulder and brushed a light kiss to her upper arm.

"What if it was my only chance? What if, because I missed it, I will never be able to get back?"

*What if game, inning two*, Eric thought and closed his eyes. He breathed deep and lifted his head. A single tear slid down Karan's cheek and he reached to brush it away with his thumb. His hand stayed there to cup the side of her face, to turn her to look at him. The sheer devastation in her incredible eyes tore at everything inside him. "Then you will stay here, with me."

He watched the surprise of that move over her expression, felt the equal sensation swirl in his own belly and up into his chest. He wanted her to stay with him more than he would have thought possible. It wasn't a good idea. Not with the contract on his head. Who knew what would happen to him tomorrow, next week, or next month? All he knew for certain was that he couldn't lose her. Gods, he loved her! He couldn't explain that any more than this perverse desire washing through him to protect her. What he'd said to her, everything he'd said had been true. There was something big between them, huge. And that something was love, instant, violent, and perverse love. No doubt about it, she was his and he, well, he was her destined.

When the word skated through his thoughts it was trailed by a vicious wave of anger. Her destined. He knew it to be so with everything inside him and she knew it too, yet she hadn't told him. He'd had to hear it from Cal instead.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Maybe it wasn't the time to bring it up, to confront her, but he had to know. Somehow he knew that everything hinged on that fact, on that damned party she was attempting to keep so secret.

"Tell you what?" Genuine confusion sounded in her voice as her gaze searched his.

"About the party, the celebration was what you called it."

"Then obviously I did tell you about it." The bite that replaced the confusion, the flicker of temper that dried the tears in her eyes, said she may have told him but she knew full well what she had said had not been everything.

"You didn't tell me it was some kind of mating celebration. You were supposed to meet your intended at that party, supposed to marry the guy."

"I did not tell you because it is none of your business." She pushed herself out of his arms, his lap, and stood.

Eric was on his feet just as quickly, a hand darting out to catch her arm before she got away.

She gave his hand an evil scorching look that should have had steam coming from his fingertips but she didn't pull away. "How did you find out?"

"Cal called me on my cell after you kicked him out of here. He told me everything."

"I did not kick him out. I convinced him to give me some time alone. I should have known he would call you," she muttered, sighed. "You told him all about me."

"I did. There isn't much we don't tell each other." Eric felt a blade stab in his gut at the secrets he'd kept from Cal in the recent past, all stuff pertaining to the shit he got himself into clean to the price on his head now. He'd told Cal of the hit contract though and everything else. Never too late to make good, he thought and mentally snapped the blade in half. "Friends are like that. I also needed his help. He's the most knowledgeable person I know when it comes to mythology. The question remains, why didn't *you* tell me, Karan? We talked about what you were doing right before you ended up here, we discussed the fact that you were dancing with that Hakan guy--" He broke off as a new wave of anger crashed with jealousy in his blood.

"I told you it is none of your concern." Now Karan did wrench her arm from his grip. She turned her back on him but didn't move away.

"It's my business, my concern when it's me who is meant for you."

Karan gave a derisive laugh. "Do not kid yourself, Eric."

"Did you think it was Hakan?" Eric heard the way he all but snarled the guy's name but he couldn't help it. Where had this fierce possessive streak come from? He'd never been the jealous type before.

"No." Karan answered him slowly, her teeth clamped tight. "I did not think Hakan was my intended. It matters not to me who the guardians chose for me to wed. I have no intention of joining with any man, in any land, any world and you can stop thinking you are the one if that is what you got in your head."

Denial, fierce and hot, sliced the warm summer air between them. Eric knew he shouldn't find it amusing but he did. Equal parts laughter, admiration and irritation kicked up a curious mix in his veins and left him feeling drunk and just a bit queasy. He closed the distance between them and rested his chin on her shoulder. Her body felt hard, rigid against his. It was like attempting to cuddle with a freaking rock! "You don't have to admit it, Karan. I know it anyway without you saying the words and that's good enough for now. I'll want to hear it eventually, of course, but for now--"

"I will not be controlled," she said in a defiant whisper that grew stronger, louder as she continued. "I will not give up who I am, what I want for any man."

"No one is asking you to. I would never ask that of you." He nuzzled his face in her hair, spoke softly in her ear, and hoped she could hear the truth, the promise in his words.

"I have dreams, goals, things I...things I wish to do, to have." Her breath hitched, the last words coming on a choked sob.

"And you can do all of them, have all of them with me." He turned her slowly to face him. Though she put up some resistance in the stiffness of her body, she twisted.

Karan stared at him, eyes gleaming with disbelief and shock. "You would not take them from me?"

"Never." Eric hooked a finger under her chin and brushed a kiss to her slightly parted lips.

"I do not believe you." She jerked back and took a full step away. "You would join with me and then you would control me, what I do, where I go, how I live."

"I don't remember asking you to marry me in the first place." Eric heard the exasperation in his tone but didn't try to hide it. For God's sake, he was as damned confused as she was! Destined or not, did they really have to move from poof encounter to marital bliss in less than forty-eight hours? Yeah, he was totally gone on her. Yeah, he knew he was her destined or whatever it was they called it. But marriage? He'd never thought to get married, let alone to a woman two days after meeting her.

"Asking?" The single word had her expression bright with confusion. "What do you mean?"

"Exactly what I just said, I don't remember asking you to marry me. You're talking about marriage, or joining as you call it, and we've barely had a freaking date! By the Gods, Karan, I can't keep up." He shoved a hand through his hair and let it fall back to his side. "Look, people in this world, in my world don't just get married. Someone has to ask first. Usually it's the man but sometimes it's the woman. It's called a proposal. The man buys a ring, and then he pops the question. The woman either accepts or rejects."

"There is a choice?" Bafflement had her eyes going wide.

"The days of arranged marriages went out of style in our culture a long time ago." He stepped to her again, one arm going around her waist, the other hand floating up to cup the nape of her neck. "All those hopes, dreams, you can do them all with me, have them all," he repeated. "All you have to do is stop fighting."

She shook her head. "But in my world there is no choice. There is but one who is meant for you, one you will join."

Eric closed his eyes and reined in his temper. "You're in my world now." He ground the words through the sparks of frustration and desire inside him and kissed her.

## Chapter 8

Karan buried her hands in Eric's hair and lost herself in the kiss. For one brief, intoxicating moment, she cared not whose world she stood in. She wanted only to forget her confusion and fear, to give herself over to the sheer passion and sizzling needs.

He tasted of that crazed promise land, a riot of rapturous luxury she had only to allow herself to take. His tongue moved over hers like wet velvet, soft and sensual. His lips pressed to hers, creating a suction that was both possessive and thirsty, a claim to which she could not yet admit.

His world. It came rushing back to her in a liquid wave of unadulterated trepidation. Yes, this was his world. Here she had choices. Here she could have all her heart desires and more. But what of her own world? There she would be bound by her duty to love her destined heart. There she would have no choices. There was her home.

Karan wrenched her mouth from Eric's, pulled out of his embrace, and steadily stepped back. "I cannot. I need...I need to think, to..."

She stumbled. Leaving him to stare dumbfounded after her, she spun on her heel and dashed into the house. Through the kitchen, the corridor, up the stairs, into the guest bedchamber she had used her first night here. Only when she slammed closed the door to the adjoining bathroom, locked it, did she stop. She leaned against the door, her breath heaving, tears blurring her vision.

Her lips tingled from the force of his kiss. She could still taste him inside her mouth; feel his hands at her neck and her lower back.

Crossing her arms at her waist, she bent forward, closed her eyes and breathed. She would not cry. She would *not* cry.

"Guardians, help me." The prayer was but a whisper that turned to a mantra as she continued to stand there, hugging her arms to her middle, eyes closed tight. When the worst of the ragged breaths evened out, when the hottest of the tears retreated, she straightened. She felt dirty, exhausted, her mind deadened from confusion and grief.

She would shower, she decided and numbly began removing her clothes. One of the many things about this time, this world she had quickly found to her liking. It had taken her long, studied minutes the first night to manipulate the water controls. This afternoon it took less than half as long. She stepped under the spray and let out a quiet sigh of relief as the water washed over her, as the tension slowly melted to swirl down the drain.

When she heard the door slam open, she winced at the bang it made as the knob struck the wall, but stayed where her was. It did not surprise her that Eric had followed her, did not even surprise her that he had come into the bathroom though she had pointedly locked the door. It was his house after all.

With her eyes closed, she sensed more than saw him step into the shower with her. Her nipples tightened and a slow burn began in her core at the knowledge that he would be naked now too. She wanted to reach for him, to feel the comfort of his strong arms around her. Only that comfort came with a price. She had learned that outside. The price of confusion, of surrender, of doubt, of trust.

His arms moved around her, one catching her neck, the other her waist exactly as he had done outside. Except this time, rather than pulling her gently toward him, he yanked. Her eyes flew open as her body collided with his. In seconds, they were both wet, bodies rigid, and heated with far more than arousal.

"What are you doing?" Karan scooped locks of her hair from her face to glare up at him. A lesser man would have surely cowered



under the intense fury of her stare. Instead, he pinned her with a look that shot the intensity of hers running for cover. "Take your hands off me."

"You're not getting away that easy." His hold on her was unyielding as was his tone. "We weren't done out there."

"I told you I needed time to think." She pushed against his shoulders in a vain attempt to step back. It was like pushing against an unmovable stone wall and the effect was far more exciting than she ever could have dreamed.

"Oh, you'll have your time to think but not until I finish what I started." His mouth claimed hers. A force to be reckoned with that refused to give an inch. He took her lips, her tongue more roughly than he had before, bruising, biting, and feasting until her mind spun and her breath left her.

He spun her around, out of the shower spray and backed her against the wall. His hand on her neck rolled, caught her hair, fisted, and tugged. Karan gasped into his mouth, the sharp edge of pained stimulation slicing through her core. His lower body pressed against her, sandwiching her between him and the wall. She could not move, she realized even as she gave his shoulders another push, attempted to tug her head free. Both were half-hearted attempts to escape and both sent slivers of delighted pleasure to rain through her when she met with the resistance of his body, his hand.

His teeth nipped her bottom lip, and then raked flesh as he fed upon her jaw, her neck. His hand moved from around her waist to glide up her front, find her breasts in a squeezing, pressured caress.

She should stop him, she thought wildly with the last ounce of her sanity. This was exactly what she did not want from a man--this groping, controlling, dominating push into submission. She should not allow it. She could not! So why was she? Her own hands began to move, one diving into his hair, pulling his head more firmly to her body on a rush of need to feel that race of pleasure once more. She scraped at his flesh with her free hand, nails biting, fingers gripping.

Every now and then she would give him another push just so she could ride in amazed satisfaction on the quick thrill of his control.

"Mine." He ground the word through his teeth, his warm breath flowing over her sensitized nipple to harden and tease. "My toy tonight, Karan. My rules."

Gods, but the thought of him doing as he pleased with her, as he had promised to do to her since first they met made every nerve ending in her body sizzle and scream. She could not give in so easily. "No." She gasped and nearly cried out when his teeth closed around her taut nipple. The sensation was violent and dark, a wicked line of pleasurable pain that had her pussy creaming and burning for release.

"Yes." His hand shoved between their bodies to cup her sex. "Mine," he said again and ground his palm against her feminine lips.

She could not stop the grind of her hips, the return pressure of her pussy to his hand. Her body betrayed her but her mind did not have to. Not yet. "I will not be ruled." Though she continued to fight, to deny, she could hear the subtle submission easing into her voice. It angered her to the point of boiling blood and rising voice. "Let go of me! I want your hands off me now, Eric."

He did not listen though his hands did still on her flesh. He raised his head and fixed her with a glare so hot she felt her toes begin to burn. "That isn't really what you want."

"Where did you go today?"

A shadow moved through his eyes, a flash of gray in the otherwise chocolate depths. "That doesn't matter."

Oh but it did. She felt his body tense against hers, not from the sex now but her question. She could not say why but she was nearly certain that it mattered a great deal. "You will not tell me?"

"You don't need to know." His head lowered to nibble along her collarbone, her shoulder.

"You will not trust me but I am to trust you. You said I could have everything with you." It was a low blow and she knew it. Still, it was

true. His head lifted again and she watched a slow glide of that comfort she had wanted swirl with the temper in his eyes.

"And I meant what I said. The one has nothing to do with the other."

Somehow she did not believe that but she let it slide for now.

"We were talking about choices, dreams. I would never try to take those away. There's a difference between ruling a woman's life and showing her dominant pleasure in bed." His hand cupping her pussy began to move once more, a pressured and slow gyration that had liquid ecstasy flowing from her channel to coat his palm. "It is the last that I will show you. You've been fighting me from second one, Karan. Stop fighting me and let me show you pleasures the likes of which you could never imagine."

"You are so full of yourself." And it was just one more thing about the man she found incredibly arousing. By the guardians, were men with such big egos not supposed to be unattractive to women!

His eyes sparkled, a keen mischief glinting in their dark depths. "Or you can continue to fight. A little resistance adds to the excitement for me."

She did not think, did not even know she had it inside her at that moment to do so. In a move as swift as an arrow, she brought her knee up, stopping it so close to his balls she felt a tickle as they brushed her skin. His eyes widened, a sheer look of intense surprise. The quick intake of his breath that accompanied the expression pleased her. "Does this type of resistance do it for you?" she asked sweetly.

Eric blinked at her. She caught the twitch in the corner of his lips an instant before he began to laugh. Not a slight chuckle either, though the fact he was laughing at all shocked her brainless. No, this laugh sounded as though it began somewhere around the point where her knee held poised steady to bring him down and seemed to roll up his gut, his chest and throat, and out in a noise so full of amusement with a trace of fear that Karan goggled at him.

"What could possibly be so funny?" Baffled, she watched him with drawn brows and narrowed eyes. After a second she actually had to fight to keep her own lips from twitching.

He took a deep breath, let it out on a whoosh, and then simply laid his eyebrow to hers. "By the Gods, Karan, that's one thing I love about you. You're quick, feisty, and absolutely amazing. Now, would you mind lowering that knee? It scares me. Not only that but it makes it a bit difficult to think."

"It is supposed to scare you." And as for thinking, she figured it was about time he found as much trouble in that area as she. She stared at him for another long moment feeling his now shallow breaths against her face, and then slowly lowered her knee.

"Thank you." His sigh of relief was obvious, amusing, and largely satisfying. "How about this? I do something you don't like." He plunged a finger inside her sodden channel so abruptly and unexpectedly that she bucked against it, against him, against the wall. "I do something you don't want." He yanked at her hair, pulling her head back and raking his teeth roughly down her neck. "All you have to do is say no."

The man was a wonder, angry and downright dangerous with it one minute, laughing and charming the next. Then, before she could even blink, before her mind could register the change he was fire, his hands tangible flames stroking, possessing, burning her everywhere they touched. And his mouth, oh dear sweet guardians, his mouth shot her beyond wonder, beyond thought and straight to insanity.

"I--I have already told you no," she managed weakly. Shards of the most erotic liquid pleasure sliced at her channel as his finger worked her. A second, and then a third, finger joined the first, spreading her as they wiggled, stroked and pumped.

"You didn't mean it then, did you, Karan?" His voice had taken on that cool edge she recognized as control and she felt the sizzling effects of it in her blood. How could cold be so hot? "Tell me you

didn't mean it." He angled down, caught her nipple between his teeth and bit.

Pain. Pleasure. When had they become one in the same? It flowed through her like a speedy river crashing over rocks, taking down barriers until she felt as bare on the inside as out. "I did not," she heard herself answer in a voice not quite normal, nowhere near level. What had she done? More, what was she *doing*? That single admission gave him the control he wanted. With that single admission she had submitted.

His head lifted, his hand in her hair pushing her head up until her blurry gaze fixed on his triumphant one. "Then it will be as I say. If you want me to stop, say no. Otherwise, my toy, my command."

He withdrew his fingers from her pussy on the last words and she immediately felt their absence, her hips atomically dipping and writhing in search of that sweet penetration. When she found his fingers again she nearly expelled a huge sigh but rather than enter her, they slipped between her saturated folds and found her clit. He caught the swollen nub with the pad of his thumb and the side of his forefinger and gave it a delightful squeeze. Karan's body rocked, trembled, a scream crawling from her throat as the orgasm burst from her.

\* \* \* \*

There were so many things Eric wanted to do to her he almost didn't know where to begin. To dominate a woman like Karan, to come against such defiance and determination, to battle a will as strong as her was a treat the likes of which his kinky sexual soul had never experienced. She'd pissed him off, leaving him rock hard and aching in every vital cell in the backyard. He'd followed her to the bathroom to let her know just how much and take exactly what he wanted, exactly how he wanted it. Right now what he wanted was hard, dominate sex with the woman of his destiny. He could think of

no other way, certainly no better way, to drown out the bullshit of his day.

Because that much was true, he pushed everything else from his mind even as he delved his fingers into her convulsing opening. Her warm, sticky essence leaked from her like a crack put in a dam, coating his hand. Her inner muscles contracted around his fingers and he imagined them doing the same to his throbbing cock. Soon, he promised himself. Soon he would feel those muscles milking his cock until he shot his seed inside her, but not yet.

His mouth watered as the idea to taste began to solidify in his cravings. As the hunger in him grew, he pulled his fingers out of her sweet heat and framed her body with his hands, starting at her hips and dragged his hands up. He didn't stop when he reached the gentle curve of her armpits, but rather continued up, urging her arms to follow until she held them above her head. Her gaze locked with his, uncertain and expectant with the tiniest flicker of that defiance that excited him all the way to his tightly strung balls.

Eric closed his hands around her wrists and glanced around. This bathroom wasn't set up for what he wanted to do but he could improvise. "Turn around." She did but kept her face on his so when she stopped she looked at him over her shoulder. "Trust me." Her arms quivered with a deep breath then she turned to the wall she now faced. He guided her hands to the towel bar low and secure on the shower wall. "You'll want something to hold onto."

"What are you going to do?"

Trepidation trembled in her voice but it was the huskiness, the unmistakable arousal that made him smile. "First, you don't speak, you don't make a sound unless I say it's okay or unless you wish me to stop. Do you remember how to make me stop, Karan?"

She nodded but made no sound, no words.

Fast learner. He'd known she would be. Still, he wanted to be sure she felt the comfort and certainty of the promise he'd made her. "What do you say if you want me to stop? You can say it now."

"No." She said it firmly without even a hitch in her breath. Oh yes, if he crossed the line she would have no qualms in letting him know it.

"Good." He leaned in and brushed his lips tenderly over her shoulder. "That's very good. Now, hold onto the bar. Yes, like that." He slowly released her wrists and hesitated to be sure she obeyed. "Don't move. Don't make a sound." He gripped her hips, pulling them back until her body arched enough that her shapely ass was on display for him. He had plans for that ass, for all of her. Gods, he'd never wanted a woman so badly!

Eric turned to the cooling spray of the shower at his back, adjusted the controls until it warmed, and then adjusted the showerhead so the spray fell only at the mouth of the tub. As he lowered himself to sit on the bottom, scooted back between her legs, he let his hands dance over her flesh and couldn't resist a few quick swipes of his tongue to her inner thighs. She quivered, her breath hitching, but she didn't move, didn't make a sound. He smiled.

"I'm going to taste you now." To show her, he swiped his tongue from the thin strip of skin between her anus and pussy forward, stopping just before he reached her clit. *Must be careful to stay away from that swollen treasure.* He knew the clit to be the most sensitive area of a woman's body, the one place a man could manipulate to bring a woman to a brisk and violent orgasm. Much like the one he'd just given her.

"You are not to come until I say. Do you understand?" He waited and smiled again when she said nothing. She was more compliant than he'd expected her to be. It made his balls tightened to the point of agony. Compliant now perhaps but a niggling suspicion in his mind told him she wouldn't remain that way long. It was quite possible, he decided with a skating thrill he'd never before felt, that he would pay dearly for this later. "Answer with a yes if you understand, Karan."

"Yes."

Simple, spoken in a tone that held no hint of embarrassment or fear, only the heated edge of arousal and anticipation...it was exactly what he wanted. He tipped his head back, circled her legs with his arms to hold them spread, and dove in. He worked her, with his mouth, his tongue, his teeth, treating her receptive flesh with a reckless abandonment as if he feasted on his favorite all-u-can-eat buffet. She tasted better than any food he'd ever come across. Sweeter, creamier, and salty enough to make his blood pressure raise enough to orbit the moon.

Unable to resist, he drug his tongue over her engorged clit. It pulsed at the lick, grew even more when he circled it, drew it between his lips, and gave it a pressured suck. Again, he felt her suck in a quick breath but she still didn't move, didn't make a sound. He knew she was close and because he did, he retreated from the delicacy of her clit. He paused and took the time to simply look at her, a moment for her orgasm to fade as he didn't want her to come just yet. Her mound was covered in a thin layer of coarse dark curls, the lips beneath pouty swollen and pinkish from his recent assault of his mouth. A layer of white cream coated the curls. Sloppy, he thought as he studied it. Sloppy of him to have missed even a drop of her delicious ecstasy.

Her lips flexed, closed, opened, and he grinned. She was waiting, wondering, anticipating but she wouldn't say anything. Good girl. Still, he would have to punish her for her defiance since her arrival. Eric had no doubt she would enjoy that moment as much as he when the time came.

He moved a hand between her legs, delved his fingers inside her folds then walked them back until he grazed a tip over her anus. Ah yes, a much deeper intake of breath on that one. The excitement made his hand itch to close around his aching cock. Gods, he wanted to work her slowly, to please her slowly but the resistance was killing him!



"Relax, Karan." He murmured the words softly as he drew lazy circles around the outer rim of her anus. He didn't need to ask if she'd ever been touched there. Her reaction, the sweet tremor of her legs, the ragged rise and fall of her body as she struggled to breathe said it all. It was more torture than the taste of her scrumptious juices, more agony than the feel of her smooth flesh beneath his hands to know he would be the first to show her such pleasure.

"I'm going to take you here." He eased a finger inside, just the tip, testing, assessing. She stilled, trembling and breath until, if he didn't know better, he would have sworn instant fear had struck her dead. "Not now but soon. You'll enjoy it." For now, he would play, prepare, and stretch.

He reached down, scooped the thick drops of pre-cum that coated the head of his throbbing cock onto his fingertip then used it as lubrication on her anus. He entered her in a slow but steady plunge to the first knuckle of his middle finger and watched in intense fascination as her pussy gushed with liquid ecstasy. Oh yeah, this would make her come, no doubt. He needn't play with her clit when his finger was in her ass to bring her to that trembling world of wicked and violent release.

Her asshole was tight as he had known it would be and his dick flexed, throbbing beyond sense to penetrate, to fuck. He growled, a low rumbling that crawled up his chest and out his throat before he could stop it. "Gods, and when I do, Karan, I promise you sweetheart I'll enjoy it too."

"Eric, please." It was plea and demand, the words sounding wrenched from the bottomless depths of her desires, her needs.

It was nearly enough to make him give in. Almost. "Did I tell you to speak, Karan? Answer me now."

"You did not."

Careful, girl, he thought, pleased by her choice of words. She remembered not to answer with a no, remembered what that one word

would make him do. She didn't want him to stop. Oh no, she wanted more, she wanted to come.

He considered letting her but decided against it just yet. Having her on the edge this way, begging him to give her release was far too good. "You will have to be punished, Karan." He stroked her ass cheeks smoothly with the palm of his free hand, feeling and sizing as he contemplated his next move.

"Punished?"

He tisked and then swiped his tongue over the saturated opening of her pussy, caught a lip between his teeth, and bit. "It will be more severe the more you speak out of turn." He wiggled his fingertip in her ass and felt her body tense, shake. "Tell me how good that feels. You like it, don't you?"

"Yes."

"You'll like it better when it's my cock instead of my finger. We'll go to the bedroom now where I can take you the way I want." He slipped his finger from her ass and heard, for the first time since he'd given her the order not to make a sound, a soft whimper of disappointment.

\* \* \* \*

"Crawl onto the bed. Lie on your stomach and stretch your arms over your head."

Karan scanned the wrought iron headboard as she climbed onto the mattress, the coolness of the silk sheets a welcome to her overheated skin. She saw the metal rings, two at either side of the headboard and one in the middle, and her stomach did a slow flip. Was it excitement, anticipation, nerves, or trepidation? Perhaps it was all of them.

She should take those rings and squeeze them over his domineering head, not obey his orders in a breathless expectancy of how he intended to use them on her. Her orgasm had dulled to a low

simmering flame in her core. Her mind had cleared if only marginally so that she could think clearly if she gave herself the chance.

So she would not give herself that chance. She positioned herself on the thick mattress, extended her arms above her head, and waited. What would it hurt to play his game? She was enjoying herself after all. She would have never expected to, would have expected the act of submitting to a man to grate rather than arouse. And it was not like two could not play at his little game. She would get her chance. She would make sure of it.

"You did well in the shower. Maybe you would here too without the use of these but, to tell you the truth, I've been dying to see you bound to my bed." The mattress dipped under Eric's weight. She heard the clanking of metal, felt the cool contact of the fluff covered cuffs to her wrist an instant before she heard the faint click. After securing both her hands, he leaned over her until their faces met. Tenderly, he brushed a stray hair from her temple and let his finger glide down her cheek. "Let's make this a bit easier on you. If I ask a question, you have permission to answer. Are you comfortable?"

Karan licked her lips and swallowed. "Yes. May I ask a question of my own?" She could see it pleased him that she requested permission first. It surprised him too, if the quick blink and arched brow were any indication.

"You may."

"Where did you go today?" When the gray gloom returned to sweep through his eyes, she raised her head and rested her chin on her outstretched arm. "You were gone much longer than you said. Where were you?"

"Not now, Karan." A muscle in his jaw flexed. "Let it go."

She did not like the hard edge of anger she saw in his features, not the arousing anger of the dominance inside him but a primal rage. Because she did not want to spoil the moment, she smiled. "Thank you for sending Cal to sit with me. I like your friend."

"Do you now?"

Something in his tone sent alarm bells chiming. It took only a heartbeat to figure out what. Jealously. "I do."

He rose, shifted. Bound as she was, Karan could no longer see him but she could feel him. His hands moved down her body, a slither of palms and fingers from her shoulders down her back to the base of her spine. "How much did you like him?"

No, not jealously, she realized as she craned her neck to see behind her. She could just catch his profile out of the corner of her eye. He watched her, his hands kneading the muscles in her lower back, an almost frightening mischievous grin spreading his lips.

"Very much. He is nice and..." She purposely hesitated before she said, "very handsome. I have always enjoyed men with dark hair. Perhaps that is why I find you to be so attractive."

"Perhaps." One hand grazed over her butt cheek and her ass muscles involuntarily tensed. "Did you enjoy him more than I know?"

"You mean, did I have sex with him?" Karan remembered her little fantasy against the refrigerator door, the sweet orgasm she had given herself while picturing Cal. "I did not."

"But you would like to."

It was not a question but more a statement of fact. Was she that obvious?

"You would like to have his hands on you as mine are now." Eric's voice dropped, turned husky, and heated. "You would like to have his cock inside you." The hand on her ass pushed between her thighs, found her pussy, and plunged two fingers inside with no warning or finesse.

Karan bucked, cried out, and then writhed against those fingers as they stopped lodged inside her channel.

"Wouldn't you like that?"

She would. By the guardians, she would. His hand landed on her butt before she could answer. The sting of the slap had her bucking again, writhing in the tingling aftermath. It did not hurt exactly. More, it surprised and thrilled her.

"Wouldn't you like to have Cal's cock inside you where my fingers are now, Karan?" His fingers pumped her pussy, several hard thrusts in brisk succession.

"Yes. Oh Gods, Eric, yes!" She dug her knees into the mattress, struggled to push back on those fingers. He spanked her again, a sharp rap of hand to flesh that echoed softly through the room.

"Maybe I'll see what I can do about that. For now, Karan, I'm going to give you your punishment for not obeying earlier. While I spank you, I'm going to fuck you."

He smacked her, a light tap followed by a stronger one, alternating butt cheeks until she was nearly screaming from the amazing erotic sensations overtaking her body. Lunacy drove her mind, panting steered her breaths, and her senses rode the chariot to Orgasmville. White-hot flames erupted in her bottom to lick between her legs, scorching her core. She strained against her bindings, wriggled over the silk bed sheets, and thought to curse him for not allowing her the use of her hands. *More*, was the one word her mind latched onto. She wanted more. A spasm tightened her clit, exotic juices flowed from her pussy, and it was not enough. Nowhere near enough.

When his fingers retreated to be instantly replaced by his cock in one violent thrust she actually screamed her thanks. "Eric!"

His hands moved to grip her hips, to hold her still as he pounded his thick, long cock inside her. Her ass stung with the aftermath of his spanking, a surprisingly delicious tingle that lingered to heighten the level of passion coursing through her. He did not take her easy or slow but with a fierce urgency, roughly fucking, and taking as he said he would. Their moans mingled, breaths labored, bodies slapping together.

"Come for me, Karan." His voice sounded tight from the battle of holding off his own release. "Come for me now."

She was close. So close. A few more thrusts. Yes! His hand connected with her ass cheek, a single smart smack that dissolved any remaining barrier between pleasure and pain and she soared. The

orgasm tore through her, drawing a scream from her throat that echoed through the air. Her body jerked, bucked, convulsed and her pussy latched onto the cock inside her, milking him to his own release. She heard it in the low animalist groan, felt it in the hot spurt of liquid that filled her already saturated channel, reveled in it when he collapsed on top of her.

She had submitted, allowed a man to control her. She should be furious with herself but instead she felt an odd sense of relief. It was as if she had allowed something to be set free that she had kept caged inside her for far too long. Her determination to stand on her own, to make her own choices, follow her own path remained strong in her heart and mind. But maybe, just maybe, in the bedchamber she could allow someone else control. Just for a little while.

## Chapter 9

"We'll repeat the ritual tomorrow night." Eric felt Karan's hand still on his chest, the fingers that had been playing lazily in his dark curls freezing in mid-motion. She lay in the crook of his arm, her lithe body molded to his side. One leg draped over his thigh, the heat of her flesh warming him like no other fire could. That heat chilled as her body went rigid.

Three full seconds passed before she spoke, her voice soft and unreadable. "Do you think it will work?" Her fingers resumed their play but the movement held a tension now as did the air in the room.

"I don't know." Eric stared at the ceiling, hardly seeing the pebbled finish. What he saw instead was beyond that layer of his home, beyond the layer above that to a darkening sky that would soon reveal a sliver of moon and a sprinkle of stars. "I can duplicate everything I did that night. The incenses, the candles, the incantations and chants..."

"The lack of a robe."

Because her voice held a hint of teasing, Eric chuckled. "Yeah, that too. What I can't duplicate is the phase of the moon. It will be another four weeks before we reach new moon again." And four weeks was far too long to wait before sending her back to the lands of the gods.

Inside his chest, a vise closed around his heart and squeezed. He wondered if she could feel the pain seeping through his skin with her hand positioned as it was. He'd made the decision about the time that she fully submitted to him tonight. Realized that as much as he wanted her, as much as he believed he was her true intended heart, he

couldn't keep her. Not here in his world. Not with all the danger he faced, all the problems yet to be solved. She had to go home and it seemed up to him to get her there.

"In twenty-five days the curse upon me will be broken one way or another."

Eric angled his head to look at her, but he saw only the top of her head. Surprise rendered him speechless. It was the first time she had mentioned the curse. Should he pretend he didn't know of it? Should he reveal he did? Going with instinct, he asked, "Are you scared?"

She gave a breathy laugh full of more derision than humor. "I wish I could say I am not. I swore to myself I would not be. I am fated to die of a divided heart. According to my father, I have already sealed that part of my fate."

"How?"

"By my refusal to be joined with a man. He thinks me to be torn between my own desires and my duty as a demigoddess of my royal family to love."

"And are you?"

"I do not believe so. I am loyal to my family, to my destiny. But I do not believe fate should be so cruel as to force me to change what I wish for, who I am, for a man."

"Stubborn," he teased and gave her arm a light squeeze. What it must be like, he wondered, to be the daughter of a deity. To be cursed by your own grandmother and forced to face death or give up one's self. Was that how the spell would truly end for Karan?

"Would you go with me?" She lifted her head, pinned him with a glare that had his heart tripping, and his stomach churning from everything but arousal. "If we can find the door between worlds, would you wish to follow me?"

Gods, what a question. Would he go? He'd wondered about it a time or two in the last three days. More, in the past twelve hours. Since he'd found out the true state of the shit storm he'd created, the price on his head, begun to consider the effects all would have on the



rest of his life. It would be an easy escape, he mused now. Zip off to the land of the gods. There would be no trace of him in this world, no clue left behind as to where he had gone, except for Cal of course. Cal would know.

He stared at her and lost himself in the swirl of hope, indecision, and longing in her eyes. He wasn't sure he could define each emotion to their cause but felt certain he read them correctly. "Would you want me to go?"

Now it was surprise that moved through their lavender depths. She hid it quickly, erasing it, and all the other emotions from her expression until her face was blank. "Would it anger you if I said that I am unsure?"

"No, because I would know it's the truth. How about we find the door first? Then we'll decide what to do about us." He guessed there would only be a split second of time to make that decision. If and when they found the door, they would have less time than the blink of an eye to get her through it. And if they found that door in the midst of the ritual as it had appeared last, he figured there would be no way for him to go with her as he would be needed to keep the circle whole, the ritual intact.

Karan nodded and laid her head back on his shoulder. "You have the power of sight, of vision through your crystal. What other powers do you hold?"

Glad for the change of subject, at least for now, Eric settled his head back too and returned to staring at the ceiling. "Fire, I can control the other elements as well, at least in part. But fire was always my true element."

"Yet you used matches to light the candles, the incense. Why not use your power instead."

"Because I'm so rusty at it I would likely burn more than the candle wick or incense stick." He laughed. "It's been a while. The last time I tried I nearly caught the backyard on fire."

He felt her grin. "Perhaps you should have tried to light something a bit larger than a candle."

"I did. It was the charcoal grill on the deck. I didn't have any matches handy and wanted to grill a steak. Thankfully the fact that it's a deep cast iron grill kept the fire contained."

She lifted her head again, her grin spreading. "Then I suppose a grilled chicken breast similar to the one I had at the restaurant is out of the question."

"We would be safer going back to the restaurant."

"Safer." Her eyes glinted. She pushed herself to her elbow and then slid her leg over his thighs until she reached the other side. Before he could think what she intended, she had slithered and slid until she lay on top of him. "I always found I do not prefer the safe path of life." She leaned down and nipped his earlobe. "I like to live on the edge. Fuck me again, Eric. Take me to that edge."

Oh baby, he'd created a monster. His arms moved around her, his eyes closing, his breath sighing out of his lungs in a contented whoosh. Gods, he didn't want to lose her. Gods, how could he ever keep her? As his hands moved to her hips, gripped, lifted, positioned to lower her on his already erect cock, he knew she wasn't the only one destined to die of a divided heart.

\* \* \* \*

Strong, lightly calloused fingers danced over the sensitive flesh of her folds. Karan gave a whispered moan as she slowly awoke from what had to be an amazing dream. An abrasive palm much like the fingers worked over her butt cheeks. Her ass was still tender after Eric's earlier spanking. Not painfully so but in a way that drew pinpoints of pleasure to each sensitive cell in her bottom.

She lay on her stomach. Her sleepy mind registered that as fact next. Her hands were stretched above her head, bound with what did not feel like cuffs as before but more some sort of cloth or soft rope.

She tipped her head back, opened her eyes to look, and saw only darkness. Only then did she realize something covered her eyes. More, her mind noted next with the first trickle of alarm, her legs were bound as well. The same cloth-like harness closed around her ankles. Her legs were spread wide open. She tried to close them and found, while there was some give to her bindings, there was not enough for her thighs to touch.

"You're okay. Karan, you're not alone. You're safe and okay." The hand smoothed over her ass, soothing, comforting as was the voice. Eric's voice, she recognized immediately and the spurt of alarm morphed into a dart of searing arousal.

"Does it frighten you? The blindfold, I can remove it if it scares you."

It did but only marginally. She breathed deep and concentrated on the myriad of sensations coursing through her. She was fully awake now and this was definitely no exquisite dream. All grogginess had given way to insurmountable awareness and erotic waves of intense excitement. There was still fear. Yes, she felt that white-hot race of her pulse, the icy cold fingers parading in her blood. But the fear only heightened her arousal, brought it from a low hum in her channel to an aching throb.

She opened her mouth to speak, to say no, and then thought better of it. His promise, all she had to do was say no and he would stop. She doubted that would apply here but she found surprisingly she was not willing to take the chance. "It does not frighten me," she said instead and heard the breathy quiver in her words that might have said otherwise.

"Good. I have a surprise for you, but I don't want you to see it until I'm ready."

Enjoying the new game, Karan gave another low moan, this one more in protest and playful petition. She wriggled her ass when his palm grazed over her crack, one finger easing inside for a quick dip.

Her muscles relaxed and she started to breathe again. "What kind of surprise?"

"You'll find out when you're ready." His other hand joined the first, moving to her pussy to play with her folds. Her juices were already beginning to leak from her core. He caught her pussy lip between his thumb and finger, tugged, and had her writhing, panting.

"I am ready." By the guardians, she had been ready the moment she opened her eyes to discover herself tied to Eric's bed. And the blindfold... Oh sweet glorious Gods, not being allowed to see brought every other sense her body possessed to a soaring new level of pure erotic intensity.

"Do you think so?" He made a clicking sound with his tongue, a considering sound. "Perhaps we should see." The finger lightly rubbing between her butt cheeks went for a brisk and vicious dive. Karan's lower body came up off the mattress in sheer reflex and shock, but the bindings on her ankles prevented her from rising too far. It was just as well too because the movement had only succeeded in driving his finger deeper into her forbidden hole. It was much deeper than he had gone previously but the pain, the pleasure of it was what had her crying out, wanting to pump against it. She might have done the last if he had not pulled the finger free.

"Too tight. Gods, I love tight, Karan, but I don't want to hurt you, sweetheart. I'm going to fuck you there in a while. That's part of the surprise, but not all."

Her bottom ached with a fire so far inside her that her core smoldered from it. She knew the size of his cock. Her pussy had labored to stretch to accommodate the thick girth of his shaft. At the thought of her ass doing the same, every muscle in her body clenched and a fresh coat of excited juices flowed to saturate her pussy lips.

The binding on her ankles gave a little more. Then his hands moved to her hips, guided her body until she was positioned on her knees, her ass in the air. The soft bite of the restraints on her ankles told her she had once again reached the point where they would give

no more. He must have loosened them a bit, she figured, to give her more ability to get into place.

His hand moved over her ass, her back, easing her upper body to rest on the bed. She was not sure how long she could retain this position. When his hands returned to her ass, spread her cheeks apart and something cold grazed over the flaming opening, she forgot all about positions, her mind centering on speculations of what the object was and what he intended to do. Not a finger. Her mind registered that quickly enough. The chill spread, a thick liquid with a strawberry scent that drifted to her on the air.

She wanted to inquire about it, realized he had not told her she could not speak, and asked anyway. "What is that?"

"The strawberry smell is fragranced lubrication oil. The thing going inside you is a butt plug."

Pressure, a wild mix of cold and hot, intense pain and mind-blowing pleasure, began in her anus and ricocheted through her pussy, back and forth, back and forth. It increased as the butt plug filled her most forbidden hole. By the time it was fully inside her, she was writhing on the bed, her head lolling, her fingers so tightly fisted in the bedcovers she felt her nails digging into her palms and an orgasm beating through her core.

"Come if you need to, Karan. Sweet Gods, I didn't expect you to like that so much." Eric's voice was strained, husky.

"Please." Mindless, her pussy and ass flaming, she started to beg. Later she would likely be mortified but now she needed to come. The orgasm was there, hanging on by a single unbreakable thread. "Please." When he reached between her legs, found her clit with the pad of his finger and began to massage, she nearly wept in gratitude. She shattered, her body quaking, her breath catching as the orgasm burst from her channel in a rush of stupendous elation.

"That's my girl," Eric crooned.

Trembling, breathless, the echoes of the orgasm lingering, she wanted to collapse but could not find the energy even for that. She

managed a few testing moves, the plug that remained inside her sending another shiver of thrill through her with each breath, each shift of her body. How could she still find the intrusion enjoyable after the convulsing release that should have left her thoroughly sated and exhausted?

The mattress dipped behind her when, what felt like broad shoulders moved between her legs. His tongue licked a slow line up her inner thigh to her saturated folds and drove inside her before she gathered the wherewithal to think. He was skilled, his lips closing around her clit in a suction that had her wobbly and crying out. His fingers spread her folds, catching them between thumb and finger to tug as his tongue moved to plunge inside her channel.

He feasted, eating away the last evidence of her orgasm while his roughly tender assault had another quickly building in its wake. His tongue retreated to be replaced by fingers. At least two, side by side, thrust into her pulsing channel to wiggle and pump and work her to another violent release. The plug continued to add to her pleasure as sweat collected on her flesh and dripped onto the sheets.

"Eric, please." His fingers were relentless, his mouth returning to feast on her in such a way that thought and movement became a thing of the past. He controlled her mind, muscles, release, slowing just when she might reach that peak to let her crash and burn before quickly pulling her up again.

Karan only dimly noted the shift of the mattress near her head, hardly realized the heat radiating from the body that sat there. Between her legs and in her backside, a riot of pleasure and erotic pain rocked her. It consumed her every spasm and liquid discharge, gave only a little though the climb back up was so very much.

"Does it feel good, Karan? Do you like the double pleasure, the plug in your ass, the tongue in your pussy?"

"Yes, I do. Oh Gods, Eric!" Only when the tongue and fingers slowed to a snail's pace of teasing torment did she begin to wonder. Eric spoke but his voice sounded too close to be coming from where

the tongue continued to do delicious things to her sensitized flesh. And how could he speak so clearly with his mouth clamped on her pussy, his tongue in her fiery hole? "Eric?" She made his name a question this time though the exquisite thrill dancing through her gave it a breathy sound.

"I'm right here, Karan." His hand petted her head and toyed with the strands of hair on the pillow near her face.

He was at head of the bed, close enough to play with her hair, close enough she felt the semi-coarse hair of his leg lightly brush her forehead. But at the foot of the bed, between her legs... Rather than allow the thought to form, she asked the question. "Then who is...?"

"I guess you figured out we aren't alone." There was a mixture of amusement and heat in his voice, a thick arousal.

Karan wished she could see him but, as hard as she attempted to see through the dark blindfold the more blackness she seemed to find. "There is someone here with us," she repeated inanely. Of course there was. Eric could not be in two places at once. The thrill kicked into a fast paced dance of shock and pure adventure. Even as she wondered who the other someone might be, a single name boogied into her mind. "Cal." It had to be Cal. Who else would Eric invite to his bedchamber, into his action?

"Got it in one." Cal's breath set off pinpricks of sizzling embers in her feminine lips. He gave her pussy a long, leisurely lick from front to back and she writhed from it, a low and appreciative moan escaping her lips. "Want me to stop?"

"Want me to show you how vicious a demigoddess can be?" Karan countered with her own question that had both men chuckling.

"I gather you're okay with your surprise." Eric brushed a light kiss to her cheek. "Something told me you wouldn't mind Cal joining us for tonight."

"I certainly do not mind, though I am surprised that y--ou are f--ine with i--t." She ended up stuttering the last words as Cal's fingers and tongue returned to their dawdling play of her pussy. He had taken

to drawing lazy lines from her inner thigh to the folds of her sex, both tickling and driving her mad.

"Want me to stop for a few minutes and let you guys talk?" Cal asked.

"Want me to repeat my questioning threat?" Karan responded and smiled despite herself.

Cal sucked a hard breath between his teeth. "Ooo, the lady is a vixen."

Eric chuckled. "You have no idea, my friend. Are you really surprised I would share you with Cal?"

She was though she could not say precisely why. Perhaps it was because Eric so thoroughly got off on dominating a woman in the bedchamber. A man so eager to possess and control was not generally so generous as to hand over half of that control to another man.

"Cal and I have shared a few women in the past. It's not all that uncommon for us."

"Do you say that to make me jealous?" It did, she realized as an unhealthy stirring kicked up in her belly. Stupid really, as she had not thought to be Eric's first. In truth, she would not have wanted to be his first. She preferred the skilled to the fumbling, the experienced to the beginner. And Eric was definitely one of incredible experience and skill. She had begun to discover rather quickly he was a man with many and varied layers and far more exciting than she ever wished to admit.

With that thought came a sense of wonder so chilling and frightening it brought goose pimples to the surface of her skin and a sinking in her stomach. What was she doing? She had given herself to him, allowed him more control over her than she had ever gave anyone. Worse, she had done so willingly and enjoyed it! All her life she had but one bone deep determination, she would not, absolutely would *not*, be ruled by a man. The bindings at her ankles and wrists seemed to clamp more tightly as if reminding her of her current



position. Her determination had a huge gaping crack and the man wielding the hammer was Eric Macklin.

"Does it make you jealous?" Delight sounded in his tone. When she did not answer, he went on. "There are things I wanted to do to you, pleasures I wish to give you that I can't do alone." He fisted his hand in her hair and tugged her head up to kiss her lips before guiding her head back to the pillow. "Rise to your elbows, Karan. There is enough slack in your wrist restraints for that."

She *had* to stop this. She was allowing herself to fall too far, give too much, allowing him to take too much. Even as she made the decision, she was following his order, lifting her upper body until her weight rested on her elbows.

"Turn your head toward me." His hand returned to her hair and pulled, guiding her to look where he wanted even though she could not see.

Something smooth and slightly wet slid over the crease of her lips. She licked on reflex and tasted the sticky sweet taste of pre-cum.

"I want you to suck my cock. Suck me while Cal eats your pussy. Open your mouth for me." He pulled her head to his body, his cock slipping between her lips. Between her legs, Cal drove his tongue into her channel in a brutal thrust that had her swallowing Eric's cock in a single gulp.

"Gods, Karan! That's it, baby. Suck it. Sweet Gods, that's so good."

All thoughts of resisting, of putting an end to her madness fled in the presence of his pleasure, of her own, of Cal's. She craned her neck, the better to take Eric's cock as deeply as she could. He was magnificently large and long and so exquisitely hard. She closed her lips around his shaft, let her teeth lightly rake down his length and reveled in the hiss of sound he made. Her tongue circled the engorged head of his cock, toyed with the thick vein that ran along the underside, dipped into the narrow slit on the head to lap at the pre-cum and draw out more.

She felt his hips begin to work, thrusting into her mouth in almost perfect time as Cal's tongue into her pussy. Her hips attempted to move of their own accord but found movement to be pinned by Cal's shoulders between her spread legs coupled with the bindings on her ankles. Still, the slight sway she managed drew her focus to the plug in her ass and the sheer burn of the superb sensations it brought her.

"You taste amazing," Cal gushed against her pussy. He licked her as if she were a melting ice cream cone. His teeth joined in for a quick nip that sent her writhing and moaning around Eric's cock.

"Your lips are wicked." Eric groaned, his grip on her hair easing. "Wait, baby. I don't want to blow my load yet."

But Karan wanted him to. She could not tell him so with his cock lodged deeply down her throat so she showed him instead, resisting his attempts to pull away, to urge her head away. Her pussy muscles contracted around Cal's tongue and he thrust harder, faster, adding a finger to the wild attack on her channel until she was convulsing. The orgasm came out of nowhere. It burst from her, spewed out of her to douse Cal's tongue, likely his face as it was buried between her legs so beautifully.

Her lips clamped on Eric's shaft, the speed in which she sucked him down, drew him back out increasing in time with the spasms of her core. The first spurt of his cum surprised her, a hot liquid rush down the back of her throat. She swallowed and pulled back to give herself room to taste as the next gushes filled her mouth. She drank until nothing remained, until his cock went soft between her lips.

"Damn you," Eric said on a half-laugh, the word quivering and breathless. "I told you I didn't want to do that."

"But I wanted you to do that." She ran her tongue along her lips and tasted the remnants of his come. "Hmm, delicious."

Cal laughed. "She is a wicked one."

"She's just getting started."

Karan let her upper body fall back to the mattress, her head landing on the pillow with a very comfortable flop. "Are you two trying to kill me?"

"We aren't through yet, sweetheart."

The bed shifted again as Eric moved off. She felt Cal start to slide beneath her, the hard planes of his body slithering between hers and the silk sheets. He raised her as he inched into position until she lay almost flat on top of him, her bound arms stretched on either side of his head. Only her ass remained slightly in the air. She lifted her head from where it had ended up on Cal's shoulder in all his repositioning. To her immense relief he finally removed the blindfold.

She opened her eyes slowly, blinked rapidly when even the dim light of the candles lit on the bedside tables blinded her, and then gazed down at Cal.

"Hey there, gorgeous." He grinned, a wide and goofy spread of his lips that had her laughing and shaking her head. His lips glistened with her juices, his face flush with lust and heat. *And he called me gorgeous.*

"Hey there yourself." She dipped her head and licked her way into his mouth, making sure to slap up her own juices on her way in. The taste of herself on his skin simply added to the mountain of arousal within her that refused to fade in the presence of these men tonight.

He reached above his head and untied her hands. "I hope you don't mind. I want your hands on me."

Because she had fantasized of doing exactly that, Karan cupped his face in her palm and kissed him again. She reached between their bodies with her free hand and let her fingers play over the rigid bumps of muscle in his chest and shoulder. This time she tasted only Cal in the kiss, a thoroughly male, innate flavor that satisfied her taste buds and glided down her throat like a cool and refreshing drink of water.

"Oh yeah, that works."

Karan smiled as she broke the kiss and gazed down at his goofy grin. "Does it now?"

"You better believe it. Give me another one."

Before she could comply this time, a quick bite at her left ankle had her shooting a look over her shoulder. Eric freed first her left and then her right ankle with the speed and tender touch of a man who knew what he was doing. Then his gaze lifted and met hers. Her insides gave a pervasive quiver more extreme than the one she felt the first time she saw him. It rocked her from the roots of her hair to the tips of her toenails, and all she could think was *wow*. Any idea that might have remained about stopping this evaporated in a flash of rising white-hot erotic flames.

*All those hopes, dreams, you can do them all with me, have them all.* She could not say why his words echoed in her mind now and before she could consider it, consider them as they related to this, Cal's hand moved beneath her hair to the back of her neck.

"It's my turn right now." His voice held the slightest edge of command, nothing as domineering as Eric's, but a hint nevertheless. Arousal turned his stunning eyes an amazing darker blue that put her in mind of a deep, uninhabited ocean.

Karan sank into those eyes, started to drown, and his cock sank into her. He was thick, almost impossibly so, deliciously hard, and stupendously long. Her channel expanded, her muscles contracting and then releasing to accommodate his girth. It was a snug fit, made even tighter by the plug in her ass. He pushed all the way inside her aching channel in a single thrust of exquisite, mind-numbing rapture. His hand at her waist pulled her body down on his stiff cock, driving deeper in her core. She actually felt her eyes glaze as the tremulous rush of flowing liquid began, lubricating her body and coating his shaft.

"Ah, yes." Karan moaned, closed her eyes, and reveled in the electric sensations sizzling through her. They moved together in a slow glide of body into body, sounds of passion reverberating throughout the bedchamber.

"Geezus, you're tight." Cal ground the words through clenched teeth. Sweat collected on his chest and transferred to Karan's breasts. "Eric. For a minute."

"I'm on it." Eric's hands gripped Karan from behind, stilling her movements. "Wait. Steady now."

She did not understand his need for more soothing instructional words until the quick stab of pain in her ass followed immediately by a wicked dart of pleasure and finally a release of pressure had her eyes popping open. Eric removed the plug from her anus.

"Now try." Eric's hands dropped and Cal plunged.

Karan cried out, the sensation of the single brisk stroke taking her by surprise. It was easier now, without the plug in her other hole, and she realized Cal's cock was not as thick as she thought. Not that it detracted from the pleasure. Oh no, the man certainly knew how to use the tool gifted him. Long, deep, tormenting thrusts sent her sensory organs on a whirlwind of pure confusion and utter delight.

"Ride me, Karan." Cal panted. "I want you to ride my cock. I want to feel you take me deep. Real deep, baby."

Oh yes, she definitely wanted the same. Karan sat up, straddling his waist, spreading her knees as far as they would part to pull his cock all the way in her throbbing core. She splayed her hands on his chest, let her nails dig in, and began to ride.

"Goddess in Summerland!"

The gasped words made her smile and ride harder. She could think of no better satisfaction than watching a man lose it, feeling him writhe between her thighs. She pushed her knees into the mattress, lifted her body up until his cock nearly fell out of her sodden pussy, and let herself fall. His hips came off the bed at the same time and the resulting piston had them both nearly screaming from the intense pleasure.

Eric's arms moved around her, hands closing over her breasts. He squeezed her breasts, holding them as he would a horse's reins and

pulled her forward. She had a split second to wonder of his intentions. Then he rammed his cock into her anus.

Karan screamed, bucked, wriggled as both men thrust their cocks into her body. There was no pain, none that hurt in any case. There was only mind blowing pleasure. The men set the pace for hard, fast, and rough. Eric held her still while they had their way with her. He pounded his long, thick cock into her ass, relaxed enough now by the plug to take him as Cal drove his cock wildly into her pussy. She could not have moved if she wanted to. Not that she wished to. With two dicks inside her, she could think of nothing but the amazing wonder of it, of the rapidly building orgasm that promised to be one of the most violent she ever experienced.

When it came, she was not disappointed. It controlled her, ceasing her muscles until her body went taut, her toes curling, and her nails biting into Cal's chest. Cal came with her, his release blinding with hers on a roar that sounded of more lion than man. Eric followed mere heartbeats later, his teeth clamping down on her shoulder, growling as he shot his semen into her anus.

## Chapter 10

Karan could not sleep. It was amazing since she was so thoroughly sated from the hands and glorious cocks of her lovers. Every inch of her body hummed with satisfaction and an enchanting tenderness that told her she would eventually be sore in places she might not have known could be.

She eased to her elbows, careful not to shake the bed. Cal lay on his stomach on her left, his face peaceful and as boyishly charming in sleep as it was when awake. Eric lay on her right, one arm beneath her pillow, the fingers peeking beneath and resting lightly on Cal's shoulder. It made her wonder if the men were ever intimate with each other. Or did they simply share women between them? She supposed she would simply have to ask.

A quick glance at the clock with large red numbers on the table on Eric's side of the bed told her it was nearing four in the morning. They had not been asleep long. Hands, mouths, and cocks kept them busy well into the night. She considered waking the both to go at it again. Eric's cock lay soft against his thigh. Seeing it made her mouth water. She wished to close her lips around it, suck it, and revel in the feel of it growing impossibly hard and long inside her mouth.

She shifted her focus to Cal, to his delectable rear end. Perhaps if she turned herself carefully between them until she reached Eric's cock, she could position her lower body almost in Cal's face. Would he take the hint if he awoke with a glistening pussy in his face? She had to stifle a laugh at the idea. Maybe she would do just that. But first, she needed to pee.

It was not easy scooting to the foot of the bed without waking either of the men, but she managed. By the time her feet touched carpet, the need to relieve herself had grown to an almost burning pain in her bladder. Still, she took another precious fifteen seconds to dash down the hall to the bathroom in the spare bedchamber, not wanting the men to stir when she flushed the toilet.

Too restless to return to bed, she opted to roam the house, pawing her way in the dark until she was downstairs where she figured it safe to turn on a light. She dipped into the kitchen for a glass of water and then crept into Eric's office. She wanted to get a better look at the plans he had spread on the drawing table. A lamp jutted out and up from the back of the table and she reached for the switch, twisted it on. She could picture it so easily, so clearly. The way the building complex he had sketched would look once constructed. The size of the offices, the fountains scattered about the grounds, the shrubs and various foliage he thought to plant in strategic places for maximum beauty and effect.

When her hands began to itch to pick up a pencil, she appeased them, grabbing one from a holder on the desk. She pulled out the stool at the table, sat down with pencil in hand and continued to study the plans. There. If he added a few square feet here, cut the wall down by half and added a few sheets of glass he could better utilize the space and open it to more sunlight. And here, she thought as her gaze moved over the drawing. Would he mind if she added a few light sketches close to his? Would she mind if someone did such a thing to plans of hers without asking?

Immediately deciding the answer to both question to be an unequivocal yes, she pulled out the thin drawer beneath the drawing table, took out a sketch pad. It would not be difficult to put her ideas here then Eric could transfer them to his own sketch should he choose to use them.

She shifted, wishing for a more comfortable position in which to draw, and managed to knock her knee on the edge of the table. The



resulting shake had a file tumbling off the back side, its contents scattering on the floor.

Cursing with words she had not known to be part of her vocabulary, she replaced the sketch pad in the drawer, massaged her aching knee and slid off the stool. Not until she bent down to collect the fallen papers did she see the photos, the schematics, the newspaper clippings. Puzzled, she curled on the floor, started to read.

*Architect caught in Burns conspiracy.*

*Eric Macklin indicted for fraud, money laundering, and tampering with building codes.*

*Former Burns Architect, Eric Macklin found guilty of code tampering.*

There were other headlines, all with the same general theme, each pertaining to Eric. He was a thief, a criminal! He had tampered with building codes on a project, lied to authorities, and pocketed money that was not his.

Karan's eyes stung with tears. Liar! As if all the other stuff was not bad enough, he was a liar too. No wonder he would not tell her where he had spent most of the day. He had likely been out stealing from someone, perhaps setting up another shady business deal.

He had lost his job, if the article that boasted about the former Burns architect were correct. That was something, she supposed. But why was he not in jail? Was that not what they did to criminals in this land? Reading further, she discovered he had been given six months probation for the code violations but the remainder of the charges against him had been dropped. Why?

It took mere heartbeats for the hurt to begin to morph to a fitted rage. She trusted him, even started to wish she could figure out how to take him with her should she ever find a way back to her own lands. She let him have her, let him *control* her. She shivered at that, utterly revolted by her own stupidity. She had known better of course. Was this not merely proof of the myriad of reasons she had always been so determined never to join with a man?

"Damned pig headed toad." She snatched up the photos, the clippings, the plans, shoved them into the file, and started to stand. A noise behind her had her twisting but not in time to dodge the hand that covered her mouth. She gasped and her nostrils burned with a putrid scent. Before she had the time to think, to wonder, her vision blurred then dimmed to black.

\* \* \* \*

"The bastard has her. What the fuck are you going to do about it?" Eric pounded a balled fist into the cherry wood top of his desk. He would've preferred to plow it into FBI Special Agent Rupert Norway's face. Instead, he glared at the agent, and waited for an answer.

Agent Norway clocked in at about two hundred twenty pounds of what appeared to be mostly solid muscle if the way his MIB suit fit him was any indication. His hair was dark and short, his eyes equally dark and sharp. He looked like a buffer version of Tommy Lee Jones in the blockbuster hit *Men in Black*.

When Eric first met with the man at his office, he'd entertained the notion of seeing Norway pull out a long silver probe-like object with three showy buttons from his pocket. He'd then slip on a pair of dark lens sunglasses and erase Eric's memory with a push of one of those buttons and a quick flash of blinding light. As he stared at the man now, anger and fear fighting for paramount emotion in his blood, he almost wished to have his memory erased.

Instead, Norway leaned casually back in the buttery soft leather chair across from Eric's desk and stared back at him just as casually. "For starters, Mr. Macklin, I intend to stay calm."

Eric bit back the dozen retorts that sprang to his tongue. Stay calm! Easy for him to say. He didn't know Karan. He hadn't been with her these last few days. He didn't love her.

"Raging at one another or pounding that fist into my jaw isn't going to accomplish anything."

"Maybe it would make me feel better."

The corner of Norway's lips twitched. "It might." He nodded, his voice as affable as his posture. "However, feel better or not, if you do that you will certainly secure yourself a place in the city jail. Can't say it will get your girlfriend back either."

Eric continued to stare, gritting his teeth and giving his jaw muscles one hell of a workout.

"He's right." Cal moved behind the desk, put a hand on Eric's shoulder, and leaned in to whisper. "We need his help, man. Until one of us can see where he's taken her, we'll need the cops to find her."

Eric took a deep breath and nodded. He saw the look pass through Norway's eyes and knew the question he wouldn't ask. He wondered if Eric and Cal were involved. It wasn't derision or even revolution but simple curiosity. "Fine. *Fine*." He took another breath and let it out slow. Cal was right. Until one of them could manage a vision either sent to Eric by powers or shown to Cal in the cards, they would need the police and since the FBI were looking to deal he would be stupid to screw up his chance for their help. Eric was an architect not an investigator and the Feds were already hot on Burn's heels. "Where do we start?"

"She's your girlfriend." Norway pursed his lips and seemed to consider. "I was unaware you had a female in your life."

Any other time, Eric might have laughed at the agent's choice of words. They were subtle but probing, a tool of a good detective. His use of the word 'female' was no doubt intentional, as was the quick, meaningful glance he shot Cal. He was fishing, a cast of his line in the direction of Cal to see if Eric would take the bait. Eric had never cared much for worms. "A recent development, Agent."

"How recent?"

"A few days."

Norway blinked, the one sign of surprise he allowed to show. "Quick work. How did you meet?"

Eric hesitated, a basic blunder of anyone under questioning about anything and he knew it. But how the hell was he supposed to answer. He couldn't very well tell the FBI Karan was a demigoddess who appeared out of nothing in his backyard!

"Didn't you tell me Maria introduced you?" Cal prodded.

"Your sister in Idaho?" Norway leapt on the information like a dog with a big juicy bone. "It's been several months since you've paid her a visit, hasn't it?"

Eric wondered if the FBI had record of the last time he'd taken a shit. He glanced at Cal, another questioning blunder but he used the split second to get his feet back under him. It felt odd to even need that split second of time. Generally Eric was fast on his feet, a quick thinker in any given situation, apparently except when the woman he loved went missing.

Cal gave him an apologetic look that clearly said, *"Sorry for bringing your sister into this"*. While he would have rather had it another way, at least Cal thought of something. Now Eric had to follow through.

"I met her on my last trip north. We exchanged a few e-mails, got acquainted." And if Norway got suspicious enough to check e-mail records, Eric was sunk. It was best to ease his suspicions now. "Karan was looking for a way out of potato country."

"Can't blame her for that one," Call mumbled.

Eric shrugged and continued. "I had extra room. We clicked, became involved after that."

"Fast work," Norway repeated.

"I like fast."

"Some men do. You believe Burns has kidnapped her."

It wasn't a question but a statement. Still, Eric responded, his temper sparking. "You know fucking well he has her. He's after me. What better way to get to me than through my woman?"

Norway nodded slowly, his gaze never wavering from Eric. "True enough, an old cliché but usually quite effective."

"There's a price on my head, a contract to kill my ass. You're the one who told me about it."

"That's true enough too." Norway pushed forward in his chair and rested his elbows on his knees. "Tell me something, Mr. Macklin, why would a contract killer break into your house in the middle of night when you're upstairs sleeping and take your girlfriend? Why not simply kill her or maybe just knock her out and then kill you as he's no doubt been paid to do?"

"How the hell should I know?" Eric pushed a hard breath from his lungs and raked a hand through his hair. He sat down slow in the chair behind his desk, his mind reeling. "I have no idea." His gaze flicked to the file on the floor by the drawing table, a file she'd obviously found, a file she'd been looking at when they nabbed her. Whoever they were. No. Not whoever. Burns' men. He was bone deep certain of that.

"Could it be because she knows something?" Norway prodded. "What is it you haven't told us, Mr. Macklin? You know more that you still haven't shared. What is it you know?"

\* \* \* \*

Karan came awake slowly. For the briefest of instants, everything seemed familiar. She saw only darkness and knew a blindfold covered her eyes. She felt the restraints around her wrists, her ankles. A smooth material covered her flesh. The silk sheet on Eric's bed, she decided and figured either he or Cal had covered her fearing she might catch a chill. Impossible when sandwiched in a bed between two amazing bodies of pure male heat.

Only, she did not feel either of those bodies against her now. Were they standing to the side of the bed watching her, waiting for her perhaps? She started to speak but realized her mouth felt too thick, too dry. She wanted to lick her lips but something obstructed her

tongue. Something was shoved in her mouth and it certainly was not the cock she expected. She was tied, gagged, and naked.

A ripple of excitement moved through her. Was this a new addition to Eric's little games of control? He had certainly taken the score through astronomical numbers by winning their last game. She was actually enjoying this play of dominance and submission. By the guardians, she needed her head examined!

She turned said head to the side, hoping for a stream of light to cut through the material of the blindfold enough for her to make out the silhouette of her lover or lovers. The light she received instead had her biting back a scream. Pain sliced through her forehead like a super sharp dagger. She squeezed her eyes shut against the agony and felt the first darts of alarm arrow through her blood as the memory rushed back.

A hand, strong and wide, closing over her mouth and nose. The putrid scent that caused everything to go fuzzy and then black. She sniffed, smelled the lingering remains of the stench, but beneath it, she smelled more. The air reeked of an enclosed space, musty and damp. A faint musky scent cut through the stink. Cologne, Eric called it, but not the same scent as the one he wore. Not Eric's house. Not Eric. *Dear guardians.*

"You're awake." The voice was harsh and deep, clipped and nasty enough to have her wishing she had pretended to sleep. "Had a nice nap, didn't you?" Though the voice sounded closer, it dripped in octave, became huskier, raspier. Guardians, help her, more aroused. "Not all that pretty though, are you?"

Not all that pretty? Who asked you? It was a stupid comment to center her thoughts around, even more stupid to bristle from it. Especially since most of the time she agreed. Still, it helped to have a bit of temper swirling in her blood, washing away the fear, until his hand closed over her right breast. It was the same hand she had felt over her mouth and nose in Eric's office and she knew he was the same man who had taken her. But taken her where?

"But you've got one hell of a body. That's for sure." He squeezed her breast and she gritted her teeth. No way would she give him the satisfaction of knowing how his touch was making bile rise in her throat. "You walk around naked all the time, or what?"

*You always end every statement with a question?* It helped to snipe at him even if only in her mind. It gave her a way to fight back even if she could not get the words out aloud with the gag in her mouth. It gave her another place to put her focus instead of on the hand that remained on her breast, squeezing, caressing.

"Boss said I shouldn't touch but you don't mind, do you?" His other hand grazed over her left breast before sliding down her stomach to cup her sex.

She wanted to whimper, to scream, to kick his ass! Instead, she forced herself to lie still and quiet. Better not to fight. He might like that. Best to remain placid and unresponsive.

"Pretending you don't like it, aren't you. That's okay. Boss said I can have my way with you when he's through. He's got his own plans for you, babe. Gonna use you to get that bastard Macklin. Then you're all mine."

He jerked his hands away and Karan let out a breath she had not realized she held. She sensed it when he left her alone again and said a silent prayer of thanks to the guardians. As she lay there, afraid to move, afraid to admit the fear inside her, she began to think and to plan.

She had to get out, to get loose and away. Too bad she did not possess the power of transport. She had done it once, she mused, at least in a form when she found herself in Eric's backyard, inside his circle. Had he made that happen? Or had she? How had the door between their worlds truly come to be?

The words of the spell upon her reverberated in her mind like a mantra. *One will suffer a heart so divided that fear shall bring her death.* Was this the fear of which the spell spoke? Aithne nearly died before breaking her part of the curse. A deadly poison nearly took her

life. Was this her time, she wondered. How did being kidnapped work into the part of a divided heart?

She did not want to be here. Who would? Her heart certainly was not divided about that. But she did fear being here. Oh guardians, did she ever have fear moving through her veins. Was it enough to cause her death? Or was the death by fear less literal? Perhaps it was not the fear that would bring her final death but the man with the rough, roaming hands. He said he would have his way with her when his boss had Eric. Would he kill her then?

She wanted to go home. Except, she was no longer sure where home was anymore. Was it the queen's palace in the land of the gods? Or was it Eric's house?

The palace of course, she told herself briskly. She may like it here, in this world. She may even feel more herself, as though she truly belonged here more than in her own land. She was more content, happier even. But she could not stay here no matter how she longed to. More, she would not stay in this land with a liar and a thief. With both anger and purpose merging to band together in her mind, she returned to her life's determination to never join with any man and focused on her plan to get out of this world.

\* \* \* \*

Eric stopped short in the doorway to the living room. Cal sat on the sofa, face in his hands and the tarot cards laid out in a Celtic cross spread on the table before him. He hadn't left and the knowledge of that, the weight of that settled in Eric's chest, wound around his heart. He'd betrayed Cal, cut him out of his life, even said some pretty nasty things over the past couple of years and yet his friend stuck by him when Eric needed him most.

He didn't move, knew he didn't make a sound, but something he did alerted Cal to his presence. Cal looked up and straight at him. His usual sunny and often mischievous expression was dark and wrought



with worry and sadness. Eric recognized it instantly because he'd seen nearly the same expression on his own face in the mirror each time he caught his reflection in the days since Karan disappeared. Days. Nearly a week's worth of endless, lonely, arduous days without her life, her spark, her spunk.

"They won't tell me anything." Cal shot a furious glance at the tarot cards as if they withheld eyewitness information to some gruesome incident. Eric supposed to a witch with Cal's powers of divination through the cards, they were doing exactly that. "They tell me the past, someone new and exciting will come into your life to offer adventure and hope. That can only be Karan. They tell me the present, a tragedy of betrayal and grief, of thievery and darkness. That would be the current situation, your involvement in it, mine and hers. But they don't tell me where she is. Not even a fucking hint! And as for the future," he laughed but there was no humor in the sound, "it's as muddled as every damn thing else."

"Yeah, I've been running into the same problems." Eric scowled, walked to the wet bar near the fireplace on the far side of the room and poured two snifters of Patty's. He'd tried everything he knew, all he possessed to find her using his powers. He'd even attempted to speak mind-to-mind. It wasn't a power he'd ever fully mastered but it had been worth a shot. His visions in the crystal gave nothing more than darkness broken only by slight slivers of light. Once, the vision came to him complete with a musty smell tainted with a trace of sea water. His visions without his crystal were no better, simply dark nothingness, a window to nowhere.

"What good is it to be a witch if your powers don't work when you need them?" Cal took the brandy Eric offered and sipped. His knuckles turned white around the glass, his grip tight. "I feel like Superman in a cell made of kryptonite, stripped of all I am and all that could be of any help, except its worse because I know the power is still there. I'm just having problems with the electric company."

Eric sipped from his own glass. He could sympathize. He felt the same way. Too bad they couldn't simply pay a past due bill and their powers would come back on line brighter and stronger than ever. He studied Cal over the rim of his snifter as he took another drink. "Are you in love with her?" The blunt question had Cal staring back, blinking. "Did you fall for Karan that night?"

"Dude, I fell for that woman the first time I spotted her coming down those stairs." He jerked his head in the direction of the stairs in the corridor leading to the second floor. "Not like you though. It's not the same. I told you when you told me about her, when you asked me about her story, that you were gone on her. Yeah, I fell for her. She's got an amazing body, great face and she's fucking out-of-this-world in bed. She's got a kick ass personality, too. But she's yours and you're hers. I know it, you know it, and like it or not, she knows it too."

Eric closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. "I've got to find her, Cal. She doesn't know anything about Burns, what I did, what I know. She shouldn't even be involved."

"They got any leads yet?" Cal didn't have to spell it out for Eric to know 'they' referred to the federal agents staked out in his kitchen.

Eric shook his head and sighed. "No, nothing new, in any case."

"They will. The bastard will slip." Cal knocked back the remaining brandy in his snifter. He gathered the tarot cards, reshuffled the deck, and laid out another spread. "Until he does, we'll keep trying."

It sprang into his mind as clearly as the shrill of the telephone filled his ears. A beach house, two rooms at most, condemned and located at the end of a private section of the Clearwater Beach. A shell drive wound through a thick forest of trees to the front of the wrap around deck. A shiny black Explorer was pulled in the drive.

"Macklin, it's him." Norway barked from the doorway. "We're ready to trace the call."

There was no need. Eric knew where she was.

## Chapter 11

The place appeared deserted but for the lone Explorer parked in the drive. Eric whipped his car in behind the SUV and cut the engine. He shot a glance in the rearview. If they had followed him, they would have caught up by now. Outrunning the cops wasn't nearly as easy as they made it look on the movies.

Heart hammering, he stepped out of the car. Speaking of movies, he felt as though he were living one. Female lover held hostage in a rundown cabin by the sea, male lover in trouble with the bad guys coming in to save her. Yep, it was one of the oldest clichéd plots in Hollywood. He could only hope his and Karan's ending worked out as the ones on screen often did.

"Hold it, Macklin." The voice was deep, piggish. Eric would have recognized it anywhere. He heard the chamber of a gun slip into firing position and froze. Mortimer Burns and his two hundred fifty pounds of flab and jiggle stepped around the front edge of the condemned beach house.

"Where is she?" Eric raised his hands, palms out and felt fleetingly like Tom Selleck in a *Magnum P.I.* rerun. It would have been entertaining if he hadn't been so worried about Karan. What had the bastard done to her? If he hurt her Eric wasn't sure what he might do.

"You mean your dark little princess? Oh, she's fine." Burns' pudgy lips spread in a disgusting grin. "She's just fine. Brutus has her inside. He's waiting to make her happy. *Real* happy."

"You said you would let her go." Blood roared in Eric's ears and he forgot all about Hollywood and old private investigator movies and

how perfectly this moment fit with them. "I'm here Burns. I'm what you wanted. Let Karan go."

"And why would I do that when I can have both of you?" Burns stepped closer, the sunlight playing at his back, casting a glow around him that was tarnished and dirty. Eric was seeing his aura and it was as evil and broken as the man it surrounded. "That little lady of yours is going to make one nice playmate for Brutus. We'll call it a reward for his services these last days."

"No! He better not touch her." *Gods, please don't let him touch her.* What if he already had? What if he'd beaten her? Or worse, what if he'd raped her?

Eric felt the rage ignite inside him, fueling his power of fire. *Tamp it down.* He had to tamp it down. She was inside that house. Starting a fire in an area surrounded by trees and rotting wood might be a way out of here but not until he got to Karan, not until she was safe.

"Where is she?" His demand reverberated through the hush of the tranquil air. "Let me see her, Burns. I want to know she's okay."

Burns studied Eric out of beady eyes Eric imagined cutting out with a spoon. "Brutus, bring out the whore."

Eric winced at the term but said nothing. Karan was far from a whore but if Burns and Brutus had their way they would likely make her into one. The front door of the beach house slammed open. His heart tumbled to his feet and cracked. Karan stumbled in her attempts to stay on feet tied together with rope. Her hands were bound in the same way in front of her body. She wore only a robe, his robe he noted, recognizing the black silk robe he'd laid over the arm of one of the office chairs the morning he'd called Cal over. He hadn't even noticed it missing.

Though tied at the waist, the neckline dipped in a V nearly to her abdomen, the smooth side of her breasts peeking beneath the lapels. Her hair was disheveled, her incredible eyes red and puffy, her skin blotchy and smeared with dirt and grime. It tore at him to see her that way, ripped at a part of him he hadn't known existed.

"Karan." The whisper sounded wrenched from him, even to his own ears. He felt as though it had been. His chest ached, his eyes burning, he took a step toward her.

"That's far enough, Macklin."

Eric stopped, but he didn't take his gaze off Karan. She wasn't looking at him. Why wouldn't she look at him? "Gods, Karan, tell me they didn't hurt you."

"They did not hurt me." She said the words briskly, anger making them steam, but it was the bitterness lacing her next words that drove a dagger into his gut. "*You* hurt me, Eric."

Stunned, Eric could only stare as realization of the truth twisted that dagger in his belly. He'd hurt her. More than being kidnapped, held hostage, and Gods knew what, he'd hurt simply by not trusting her, not telling her of the trouble he'd been in.

"I'm sorry. Karan, look at me please. I'm so sorry." Maybe the pleading in his voice touched her heart, or perhaps she merely wanted to see him grovel, but she looked at him and the sheer defiance in her gaze nearly knocked him on his ass. She had a plan. He saw it. Oh, she was angry with him, deeply hurt too, but she'd buried those emotions beneath her instincts for survival and detest for controlling men.

And she had been controlled these last days. Tied and held hostage, likely told when she could eat, when she could piss or sleep. Eric might have showed her the pleasures of allow a man to dominate her in bed but what Burns and Brutus had done crossed every line the woman possessed and then some.

"This reunion is touching, Macklin." Burns spat at his feet and snarled. "But we really don't have time for it. You've got Feds shackled up at your place. I want to know what you've told them. *Everything* you've told them. Then we're going for a nice little swim."

\* \* \* \*

She had not been wrong about Eric. He *was* a liar, a thief, a criminal and many of the other things she thought of him in the last days. He was also her heart. Her true heart. Like it or not, they were destined and she would willingly toss her soul to the monsters of Underworld before she would lose him.

Karan listened as Eric and Burns hashed out years of treachery, of breaking the law and walking away clean. The headlines she read in the file of articles had been right. Eric had sidestepped building codes, covered up shortcuts, and helped to skim money from clients. He admitted to the acts, confessed to knowing of others involving more money laundering and scheming. It was when he found out about murder that he'd drawn the line.

"I was wrong about you, Burns." Eric gave a short, humorless laugh. "You're just a little fish trying to swim in a pond of sharks."

By the guardians, was he trying to piss off a man with a gun? Karan fought not to gape at Eric as she struggled to free her hands without being seen. Burns' attention was focused on Eric, as was Brutus'. Brutus still held her tight, one muscular arm the size of a small tree trunk curved around her neck, putting a slight squeezing pressure on her throat.

"I'm a lot bigger than you think, Macklin." Burns held the gun on Eric pointed at his head. One shot. It was all it would take and Eric would be dead. But how did they get the bastard to lower the gun?

"Maybe. The FBI seems to think so but I thought you were the man in charge." Eric's voice was smooth as honey. Now that he knew Karan was okay, saw the determination in her eyes, his panic and fear seemed to have vanished. "For a long time, when I realized the things going on behind the scenes, I thought it happened under your control. But it didn't. You're in balls deep and sinking with the mob."

The who? Karan did not have a clue what the mob was but it obviously was not good. Neither was the fact that she could not get the rope binding her wrists to budge. If she had something sharp, she

could cut them away. If she had only thought to bring the sliver of metal with her she had found against the wall. She worked for hours with that tiny piece, rubbing it over the rope in hopes to cause enough friction to snap the ropes.

Friction. Fire! The thought occurred to her in a burst of sheer brilliance. That was it! Eric had the power of fire. He could burn the ropes, free her hands and feet, and then they could fight their way out of this.

She stared at him as the words continued to fly between him and Burns, angrier now, less in control. They had to do this fast. Closing her eyes, she willed him to hear her as she thought of her plan, repeating it in her mind like a mantra.

"Hey, you aren't going to sleep on me are you?" Brutus' arm gave her neck a quick jerk. "Maybe I should take you back inside. Bet you won't go to sleep on me in there. Boss has what he wants now."

Wincing, blood curdling in her veins, Karan fought to ignore the snide remarks and seething promise and concentrate on Eric. He looked at her, a quick flick of his gaze, and surprise flashed through his eyes.

*Are you nuts?*

\* \* \* \*

Eric heard Karan's voice in his head but knew he mistook her words. Burn the ropes? She wanted him to burn the ropes that bound her hands and ankles, ropes tied so tightly to her flesh that, even in the distance, he saw the abrasions starting to turn to welts. She'd have far worse welts than that if he attempted to use his power over fire to free her.

*It is our only chance, Eric.*

*The hell it is, Karan. We'll find another way.*

*There is no other way. Burn the ropes and we can fight.*

*Fight? He has a gun. So does the bear of a man who has you in a chokehold right now. You expect us to fight muscle against two guns?*

*Do you see any other way?*

He didn't but it was the last thing he wanted to admit. If he could free her somehow, they would have no choice but to fight their way out of this. He supposed he could torch them. And the fact the thought even occurred to him was mere proof of exactly how desperate he was starting to feel.

*Have a little faith, Macklin.*

*This from the daughter of a Goddess.*

*You bet your sweet ass. That has to offer some luck somewhere.*

Eric could only hope as he stared at Karan's ankles, focused his powers and willed the fire to come.

\* \* \* \*

Karan felt the heat at her ankles, her wrists, and heard Brutus sniff an instant before the ropes gave way. The scent of scorched threads distracted Brutus enough that his arm around her neck loosened. She capitalized on the moment by dipping her head forward and slamming it back hard into his face.

He roared, released his hold on her neck, and she spun. Knowing a busted nose would not keep a big man like Brutus down for long, she brought up her knee, hard and fast and square in his crotch.

The shot fired behind her had her whirling again to find Eric and Burns in a battle of sheer strength over the gun. She had to get to him, to help him. They had to get away from here. Even as she thought for Eric to use his powers, maybe to heat the gun so it scorched Burns' palm, she was dashing down the steps of the porch toward them. She reached the last step when her hair was yanked nearly out of her skull.

Karan cried out as her head snapped back. Brutus recovered fast.

"You little bitch! You fucking whore! I'll kill you for that." Blood flowed in mirroring streams from both sides of his nose and his eyes



were flooded with tears of pain. But the bear was standing and she was in trouble.

"Karan!" Eric's voice was strained in his attempt to fight the gun from Burns.

Karan tried to look at him but Brutus' hold was too strong. He wrenched at her head again--if he did it one more time he would snap her neck--and her breath caught in her throat. His free hand gripped her robe, tore it from her body and started to grope her. His palm bruised her flesh, raking over her breasts, her pussy. He would take her this time for sure, fuck her and then kill her. While Eric watched. Guardians, help them.

"Let go of her, you son of a bitch!" Eric screamed at Brutus and she had a moment to lift her head, a moment to see him. He had divided his attention, allowed Brutus' assault on her to distract him and Burns once again held the gun, pointed now directly at Eric's temple.

*We tried. It was all we could do. I love you, Eric.* She caught a tear leak from his eye to slide down his handsome cheek, an expression of more grief than anyone should ever feel on his face, and he vanished.

## Chapter 12

Karan landed on her ass in Eric's backyard. The force of the blow reverberated up her tailbone but it was nothing compared to the pain in her head and her neck. Even that dimmed behind the sheer relief and surprise when her watery gaze landed on Eric.

"Karan! Holy shit, are you okay?" He scrambled across the grass to her side, his hands immediately moving gently over her body, searching for injuries. "You're not okay. You're hurt. The bastard hurt you."

"Eric, wait! I am okay. I will be okay. Only bruises, a few cuts, abrasions. You--" Her voice broke and she caught his face in her hands, forced him to look at her. "He had a gun to your head. I thought he had killed you."

"So did I. I was sure we were done for and then you, well, you disappeared."

"As did you." She gave a watery laugh. "Nothing like poofing the life out of a party."

"Gods, Karan." Eric rested his forehead to hers but he laughed too. "How did we get here?"

"You brought us here. Your lip is bleeding." She swiped her thumb over the trickle of blood on his bottom lip, winced as he did at the dart of pain.

"Baby, I didn't bring us here. I told you I don't have that kind of powers. It must have been you."

Karan shook her head and then immediately wished she had not. Pain pinpricked through her brain like a rainstorm of splinters. "You did it before. It is you who brought me here to start."

"I could argue you brought yourself here. But none of that matters now. What's important is that we're here and we're alive. That was a close one. Too damned close." He glanced around, managed a crooked smile. "Home sweet home."

"I need some clothes." Despite the sunlight, she was starting to shiver from a bone deep chill she could not be sure would ever go away. "I need a shower." She could still feel his hands on her. Brutus' hands as they pawed over her flesh, threatening to harm, to scar. Would she ever feel clean again?

"I know you do, sweetheart." Eric gently pulled her into his arms and held her close. "The clothes we can do now but the shower will have to wait awhile. It looks like the house is empty. The Feds were here. Um, police," he explained when she slanted him a questioning look. "Guards of the city, you might call them, and Cal was here too. I don't see any sign of them through the kitchen slider. We have to go somewhere. Burns will be after us. We'll go inside, find you something to wear, and get the hell out of here."

"Where will we go?" Karan stood on legs that were as shaky as they were achy. "Does Cal have a place?"

"He has an apartment in the city." Eric led her to the house, pulled the slider open for her. "We shouldn't go there, though. It's the first place Burns will check. We'll go to the police."

"Why aren't they still here?" He was right. The house was deserted but she could see evidence that people had been inside. Lots of people if the amount of coffee cups and pastry boxes scattered about was any indication.

"They probably tried to follow me when I left. I had to sneak out. Burns called, tried to toy with the Feds. He knew they were here, knew they would try to trace the call."

"How did you find me?"

"I had a vision, a clear one finally. Cal and I both tried almost since the moment we discovered you'd been taken. Cal with his cards, me with my crystal or just with a vision sent. Both of us were getting

darkness. I even got the scent of mustiness and sea water. We didn't know they were clues to your location. We didn't put it together until I got the last vision when the phone rang."

"It was dark in that house, always dark, even after Brutus removed the blindfold."

"The mother fucker blindfolded you?" Eric was in front of her before she could blink, the back of his fingers grazing lightly down her temple. "Gods, Karan."

Her eyes filled. She could not stop them. The flood on the dam broke and she all but threw herself into Eric's arms.

"Okay." He crooned softly, his hand petting the back of her head. "It's okay. Let it out, baby. Let it all go. I bet you haven't cried since he took you from here."

Unable to speak, she shook her head. She had not, would not allow herself to cry or give Brutus the satisfaction of knowing he had gotten to her.

"You are one amazing and incredibly brave woman, Karan." Admiration dripped from his voice. He waited until her sobs slowed, simply held her and crooned nonsensical words of comfort. "Look at me." He hooked a finger under her chin and tugged her face up. "There's something I haven't had the chance to tell you. I love you, too."

Guardians, she had forgotten she told him. Just before they left the front yard of the condemned beach house to land in his backyard, when she thought they would be the last words she would ever say, ever think, she told him she loved him. And she did, she thought now. With all her heart, all her soul. As she gazed into his eyes she felt the final thread holding fast to her determination snap.

"Now, let's get you dressed." He eased out of her arms, hesitated, then disappeared into the laundry room off the kitchen. He returned in seconds with the jeans and blouse she wore her first day in his house. "Do you need some help to put these on?" Even as he asked, he attempted to dress her.

"Eric, I can get it." The look that moved through his eyes tore at her heart but he nodded and stepped back. "We'll go to the police. I'll do whatever I can, tell them everything I know if it will help them get Burns. Then we'll come back here and find that doorway for you."

Her heart gave one violent slam into her breastbone then stopped beating. At least it felt as though it did. How could he tell her he loved her one second and talk about sending her away the next? "Eric, I--"

"But there's something you should know, Karan." He stepped to her again, lifted a finger to her lips. "I'm going with you."

\* \* \* \*

"I wish I could've been a bird in a nearby tree when you vanished in plain sight like that." Cal hooted with laughter and clanked his Gibraltar glass of Crow Royal to Eric's. "I bet Mortimer Burns shit his pants."

"It was a moment." Eric grinned and sipped.

"Do you think the cops believed his story? He told them of how we disappeared, after all." Karan folded her legs on the sofa, her focus dancing from Cal who sat in a recliner near the television to Eric sitting beside her.

Eric shook his head. "They believed us. We fought our way out and escaped. The bloody nose, fat lip and aching balls you gave Brutus added to the believability of our story. As did the blows I managed to land on Burns' face in our struggle over the gun."

"People don't believe as much in magic in our world as they do in yours," Cal interjected. "Even when they're confronted with it, they still tend not to believe."

Eric slipped his arm around Karan's shoulders and drew her against him. "He'll get what's coming to him now, Burns and that son of a bitch, Brutus. With any luck there will be a bigger, meaner, uglier motherfucker than Brutus waiting to make Brutus his little cell bitch."

"And Burns," Karan tipped her head back to look at Eric. "Will he be put in this jail you speak of too?"

"Oh yeah." Cal nodded. "With the evidence the Feds uncovered at his home and office, the information Eric gave them, and the witness accounts, he'll be lucky if they don't put him *under* the jailhouse."

Karan shifted on the sofa, not moving from Eric's embrace, but turning so she faced him. "I still do not understand everything. I know you stole some plans for some kind of project Burns' company was working on. I know you--what did the articles call it?--cut corners on some building codes and broke some laws and covered them up. But what did you still have on Burns?"

Eric drained his glass and set it on the end table beside the sofa. He'd known the time would come when he'd have to go through all of this with her. He should've done it more than a week ago. But not even the delicious burn of the Crown Royal in his throat gave him the courage he needed to see the look of detest and disappointment he would surely see in her eyes.

His gaze flicked to Cal. He'd already seen those emotions in Cal's face long before now. Today, however, his friend's expression was understanding, his eyes bright with love and the undying bond of true friendship.

"I didn't steal the plans." Maybe defending his actions wasn't the best place to begin, but he needed to get this out first. "They were my plans. I designed the business complex, from solid ground up. Everything about it was mine."

"Then why did those papers in your office say you did? Why were you arrested and tried in court for stealing what was yours?"

"Because I couldn't prove they were mine. Burns set me up. He doctored the plans. He had others working on the project, people I thought were working for me, to back him up rather than stand with me. I skirted around building codes. That I did do." And admitting that now, confessing that to her, left a taste in his mouth worse than bile.

"It wasn't the first time. I got greedy. Burns offered me full partnership in the architecture firm if I could land certain accounts, ensure we were given certain projects, and then make those projects happen by certain dates. In order to pull it off, I had to sidestep codes, deceive a few clients, and alter plans after the state gave us the go ahead on a different set of blueprints. He had a couple of inspectors in his pocket, so to speak, code enforcement guys who covered for him on their end or simply turned their heads and said nothing of what they really saw."

"They lied," Karan said softly.

"They lied." Eric nodded. "I lied. Then I got caught. That, too, was a setup. I was just too stupid and hung up to realize it until it was too late. I took the fall for a lot of things and couldn't prove anyone else was to blame but me. Hell, I'm damned lucky I'm not under the jail myself right now."

"Why are you not?"

"The FBI was already investigating Burns. I didn't know it. Nobody did. But they already suspected he was up to something and they were keeping close tabs on him. When the shit came down on my head, the bureau boys stepped in. They offered me a deal, a little probation, some fines, to tell them everything I knew about Burns and the company. I took the deal." Eric shrugged.

"But you still didn't tell them everything you knew." Cal chuckled. "My friend, you do have some balls toying with the Feds that way."

"Instincts. I didn't listen to them much for several years, but I listened then. I knew it wasn't over, wouldn't be over even when I took the fall. I found out a few things just before everything went down, some stuff that led me to believe Burns was mixed up with the Mafia. It made sense, I suppose. Men like Burns with the holds he wielded and the connections he had are often a part of organized crime. It wouldn't have done me much good to tell the Feds what I suspected at the time."

"But it was your ace in the whole when he took Karan."

"You could see it that way. It's all points of view from there. As it turned out, yes, it was information needed to take the bastard down for good. But it was also the information that had Burns putting out the contract kill on my ass."

"He would've done it anyway. Burns wouldn't have been satisfied with letting you walk after only damaging your reputation, giving you a bit of probation and a few fines."

"Probably." Eric nodded. He turned to Karan and grazed his thumb down the side of her face. "I should have told you everything. I just," he sighed and shook his head, "didn't know how. It's a lame excuse but it's the truth. It's past time for the truth between you and me. I put you in danger. I wasn't honest with you, didn't tell you what was going on with me, and because of it you nearly died."

"You lied," Karan agreed, her gaze fixed and serious. "You broke laws in your world, hurt people you loved, others you did not. You made some pretty large mistakes, but you came through when it mattered."

"I came through because I love you." Eric brushed his lips to hers and felt the electric spark sizzle through him.

"And I love you."

"Well, that's my cue." Cal slapped his thighs and stood. "I'm out of here. Call me if you need me." He moved to the sofa and bent to kiss the top of Karan's head. "Don't go disappearing through that door of yours without saying goodbye."

"Are you sure you will not stay?" Karan gazed up at Cal and even Eric saw the teasing play in her eyes.

"Don't tempt me, gorgeous." He straightened. "I've got a coven meeting. There will be another same time next week. I'll expect to see you at that one." He punched Eric's shoulder as he passed by.

"You'll see me." Eric vowed. He'd have to swallow another dose or two of crow but he'd be there. Provided he remained in this world. "You could've tempted him," he told Karan after Cal left.



She shrugged and stood. "I could have. But I would rather tempt you." As she spoke, she started unfastening the buttons on the shirt she wore.

Eric's attention was riveted on her long slender fingers as they manipulated the buttons in a way that was so fucking sexy his cock leapt to instant attention.

"I want you to watch me, Eric. I want you to want me, to need me." She shrugged out of the shirt and let it fall in a pool at her feet. She'd showered and changed when they returned from the station and dressed in only the shirt, *his* shirt, and a pair of red silk thongs. Smooth, flawless flesh met his gaze now, made his mouth water, and his hands ache to touch.

"I want you to touch me." Her hands mirrored her words, gliding up her thighs, over the red silk, up her abs, stopping to cup her breasts before snaking down her body once more. "I want you to beg for me." A devious glint sparked in her eyes and he chuckled, albeit shakily.

"Gods, I've created a monster."

"No." She climbed onto the sofa and straddled his lap. "You simply unleashed the monster inside me."

\* \* \* \*

Karan felt like a monster as her hands traveled up Eric's shoulders and folded around his neck. Her blood pressure spiked with heated arousal, the needs she wanted him to feel already alive in her heart, her belly, her sex. She nipped his bottom lip, loving the low groan that sounded from him as she licked his teeth and then pushed through their barrier and into his mouth.

She took what she wanted, what she needed without invitation or tenderness. She put into the kiss all the rage inside her over his indiscretions, his dishonesty, her own realization she had given her heart to her fate. Her tongue worked savagely, tasting mirroring emotions of her own in the deep recesses of his mouth. He was angry

with himself for the things he had done, with what happened to her, and probably more she had yet to discover.

They fed from one another, tongues tangling, teeth raking, lips suckling until the rage between them simmered, morphing to a low boil of passion. Breaking the kiss, Karan licked her way over the stubble on his chin and jaw, down his neck while her hands made quick work of his shirt. She pushed it off his shoulders, craving the skin-to-skin contact more than ever before. Her breasts pressed to his chest, the warmth of his body bringing her nipples to a taut and throbbing state as she continued to lick her way over his flesh, this time up the side of his neck to his ear. She drew his earlobe between her teeth and bit.

"Karan! Ah, Gods." He shifted beneath her, his cock impossibly hard inside his slacks and pressing against the satin of her panties, framing to her sex. "I do want you. I do need you. Shit, I can't have you."

Several heartbeats passed before his last growled words penetrated the sexual fog in her mind. Slowly, she lifted her head and stared at him. "Why can you not have me?" It surprised her, the sudden surge of fear that iced the heat in her veins. He stared back at her, his eyes swirling with so much love, so much sadness it was impossible to separate the two.

"The door to your world, the path between our lands, it will show again on the next new moon." His hand snaked beneath her hair, gently cupped her neck. His other hand tenderly caressed her arm, up and down, up and down, a slow glide that should have warmed but only caused her to suppress a shudder.

"How do you know?" Her heart was pounding now, so loud she hardly heard anything else. Not from arousal as before though. No, this was terror causing her heart to race, abject fear and a faint undercurrent of hope. It was what she had wanted, what she needed, to find the door again. Except the next new moon would symbolize the end of her time and mark the beginning of Calliope's. Would it be

too late? Even if the door appeared as Eric believed, would she be able to cross through? Would he?

Eric shook his head. "I just do. Call it another of those instincts. I'll repeat the ritual like we talked about. It will have to be exact which is why we will need the new moon again. But it will work. The door will appear and you can go through."

"We can go through." She corrected him automatically but, even as she did, she realized how badly she wanted exactly that, wanted him. "You said you would be going with me."

"I can't." He averted his gaze as if unable to look her in the eyes while he shattered her heart.

And her heart did shatter. With those two simple words, she felt her heart split in two inside her chest. The sudden and sheer pain of it stole her breath, brought a mist of tears to her eyes. "What do you mean, you cannot?"

"I have to stay, Karan." His hands moved to her waist and he lifted her as if she weighed no more than a feather, set her beside him on the sofa, and stood. Gods, he looked so sexy with his shirt hanging open, half tucked into his slacks, his hair tousled from her exploring hands. She drank him in with her gaze, realizing she needed the warm liquid sight to sooth her parched mouth. It had gone dry with his words, fear and bafflement draining all saliva from her glands. The sight of his rigid muscles, of his slightly hairy flesh that rippled when he moved helped her to think, oddly about his words rather than sex.

"Why, Eric? Why do you have to remain in this world?" She already knew the answer, in her soul, in the portion of her heart that lay bleeding for him, for here. Still, she needed to hear it.

"I'm needed here." He shoved a hand through his messed locks. "This shit with Burns, they have him but without my testimony he's likely to walk. I can't turn my back on that. It's not just him but those higher in the mob that will go down from this."

Karan got to her feet and walked to him. "Will you be safe? With him under the guards of your police, will you be safe?"

"Yeah, I believe so." He gripped her shoulders, pulled her into a tight embrace. "I have to do this, Karan. I have to finish it. I turned my back on so much this last year, ignored so much. I can't do it again. I can't leave until it's through."

"And will you come then?" She nestled her head against his chest, breathed in his scent of musk and spice, sweat and man. "Will you try to reopen the door a third time and come to me when it is done?" She felt his surprise at her question, even heard it in his quick intake of breath. He kissed the top of her head and then left his lips to rest there. His breath warmed her scalp when he spoke.

"I hadn't thought that far ahead. Without you here I don't know if it would work."

She was not so sure it would work even with her here but she kept that to herself for now. She turned her face into his chest, let her lips brush lightly over flesh, and then began to trace the hard lines and angles with her tongue.

"Gods." He groaned again, his head falling back, arms tightening around her waist, hands dipping to frame her butt cheeks left exposed by the skimpy thong. "I meant what I said, Karan. I do want you. I do need you."

She caught his nipple between her lips, licked it to a hardened pebble, and then nibbled it with her teeth. "But you cannot have me."

"I'm changing my mind on that." His hands squeezed her ass. "I *will* have you." He reached up, wound a hand in her hair, and pulled. "I already have you."

Yes, he did. Possessiveness swirled in his eyes, pushing out all other emotions, winning the war over him, over her.

"We are destined. I still believe that. I am your destined mate."

Though she knew it too, believed it, she could not stop the flash of defiance she felt move through her expression, sizzle like an electric shock in her veins. She never wanted a mate. It was easier to grasp onto that defiance, to resist, to deny. But she already admitted she

loved him. Under the duress of certain death, she reminded herself quickly.

Eric took a step back, enough that she no longer felt the heat of his body pressed to hers. His hand remained in her hair, his grip tight, as with the other hand he caught the thin strip of satin at her hips and snapped it. The thong panties fell away leaving her naked, exposed, wanting.

"I have to do this, to see what happens here comes to an end." The tenderness was back as he released her hair, his fingers dancing down her neck, and over her shoulder. "You understand that, don't you?"

She did. More, it touched her in places she had not wanted a man to reach to know how strongly he felt he needed to finish what had begun. "You have a duty to your world, to yourself." Just as she had a duty of her own, to her world, to herself. A duty to love, to mate.

"That's right." He trickled fingers down her front, traced lazy circles around one already taut nipple. "I also have a duty to you, to *have* you." His finger closed on her nipple, a quick and electrifying twist that had a surprised gasp escaping her lips even as a trail of fire ignited from her breast to her pussy. "I'll find a way to you again, Karan. If I can open that door for you and send you back, you won't wait for me long. I'll find a way through it when I'm done here and then we'll have that joining the people of your world expect."

Thrills, white-hot and incredibly intense, rocketed through her. His hand seemed to melt on her breast, soothing, caressing as his other hand moved over her body like a warm and decadent cream. When he let both hands fall away and took another minute step back, it surprised her so much the thrills skittered and crashed headlong into the tumbling arousal in her belly.

"There's something more you said you wanted. It's just occurred to me that I failed to ask exactly how you meant it."

Try as she might, she could not wrap her mind around what he said. The man had so many layers, so many mood changes, she could never keep up. Because the sharp edge of defiance had met with the

disappointment and churning unfulfilled desires in the crash, she grabbed onto it. "I do not think you have failed in any way. If anything, I think you are trying to give me more than I want."

A light dawned in his eyes. "Ah, you mean marrying you."

"I do remember you saying it was a choice, that a woman had the option to refuse." Her chin went up, as did her eyebrow as she watched him. The corners of his lips twitched but he did not smile. The resulting expression was so incredibly sexy she had to restrain herself from simply sighing and giving him everything without question or hesitation.

Instead, she stood her ground, enjoying the eroticism of the moment. Him standing before her half dressed while she wore nothing at all. Sparring with him this way offered great fun and arousal beyond her wildest imagination. For a fleeting instant, it crossed her mind that it would likely be this way between them always.

"That's in my world. We aren't staying in my world." His eyes went from light to dark in a blink, devious and sexy and plain wicked. "You said you wanted my hands on you." He lifted a finger, glided just the tip of it down the cleft of her breasts, her abdomen, her belly.

She shivered from the tickle, from the thrill as it rushed back with enough force for her thoughts to scramble. This time when his hand fell away, she gave a soft whimper of protest before she could stop herself.

"Where do you want my hands, Karan?"

A new game, she mused, studying him. Because she would rather play than talk and she really, *really* did want his hands on her, she reached for them. They could play for awhile. She would let him add some more points to the invisible running tally they seemed to have and then she would go for the kill. She felt that kill coming to life inside her, was not quite sure exactly all it meant or what it intended yet, but knew she would figure it out.

For now, she brought his hands to her breasts and held them there. "I want them here." Her eyes slowly closed as he squeezed both

breasts in simultaneous pressures of pleasure. She caught his wrists, tugged his hands down, and left one to rest on her hip while she led the other between her thighs. "I want them here."

He turned his hand in hers, plunging two fingers into her weeping channel without ceremony. Her knees nearly buckled as pleasure danced up her body and made her cry out, her head falling back. Damn him! She would have to give him a point for that one. Even as she mentally awarded the score, her grip latched onto his wrist, pulling his fingers from her sodden pussy. It cost her dearly, the absence of the penetration already leaving a vicious ache in its wake and she figured she deserved points this time.

Opening her eyes, she met his gaze. His eyes had gone as dark as a starless night, his own arousal making his pupils dilated, his lids heavy. She held his gaze as she guided his hands around her to cup her ass again. "I want your hands here, too."

Even as she managed the last, he yanked her hard against him. One hand moved, dipped, and a finger drove into her tight anus. The position was all wrong for good probing but he managed to enter her enough that a small scream crawled from her throat. Her head fell to rest on his chest and her hips rocked back into nothing as the finger quickly retreated.

"And where do you want my cock?" His hands were back on her hips again, slippery with the juices that remained after his plunges into her receptive holes.

Damn him! He had done it again. She could not think for the gradually escalating hum in her body, the sheer longing to stop playing this game and have his cock inside her. Because she needed to feel just that, her hands went to his trousers, made quick work of the belt, button and zipper. Sticking her hand inside his briefs, she pulled his cock free and curled her fingers around the thick shaft. When his eyes rolled in his head, she bit back a grin. More points for me, she thought and increased the pressure, pumping his dick with her palm

until he let out a dangerous growl and caught her wrist, stilling her hand.

She let go, brought her hands to his chest and gave him a hard push. Caught unsuspectingly and off balance, he stumbled back. She went with him as he fell back, both of them laughing. She straddled his thighs, reared up and took his erect cock inside her sodden channel with one exquisite plunge that had laughter turning instantly to loud moans.

"Ah, Gods, Karan!" They seemed to be his trademark words for the evening. Mentally, she marked herself another point for making him say them again.

"This is where I want your cock, Eric." She stilled with him buried balls deep inside her, her palms braced on the mouth-watering rigidity of his abdomen. "Inside me, all the way inside me." She moved, just a little, lifting her hips, slowly lowering them, and sighing at the delicious feel of his thick hard shaft stretching her pussy. "Deep inside me." She ground against his hips, taking him as far inside her as possible and only when her heavily lidded gaze met his did she realize he could not possibly be inside her any deeper. He was already in her soul, her heart. He *was* her heart.

Even as he caught her waist and rolled them over until he took top spot, she marveled at her mate. He had been right about that. They would join now but not in her world. In his.

"I can't get enough of you." Eric eased his cock out of her channel, drove back in, and nearly howled at the pleasure. "Never enough."

He would give up his friends, his life, and his world for her, to be with her in hers. Except, this was her world now. This was where she belonged, where she fit. She brought a hand to the side of his face and cupped his cheek. "I will always be here to give you more." She made the vow with her words, her touch, her heart, and felt the change inside her.

Invigorated by it, inspired, she bucked against him, pounding his dick inside her even as she used every ounce of her strength to roll



them over once more. "My game. My rules." She started to ride, fast and hard, needing the immense pleasure of being one with him. She did not want easy or slow but rough, commanding, and she took it that way, loving the strangled sounds he made, the bites of his fingers in the tender flesh of her hips.

When he rolled them a third time and slowed their pace, she did not know if she wanted to laugh or scream so she did both. "No fair!" She bucked again, pushed at him, but he held her down this time, his lower body arched and unmovable, his hands pinning her arms to the floor.

"My game. My rules," he countered with a devious grin that had her stomach doing excited flips and her blood steaming with lust. "What to fight about it?"

"You would only enjoy that." And so would she. It was right, all of it, her feelings, her staying, him. She would miss her world, her parents, and her sisters. She felt a vicious and painful jolt at the thought of never seeing them again. Her own bedchamber swam into her memory and she closed her eyes as Eric buried his face in her hair and started to move slowly inside her.

The sudden chill to her back had her eyes springing open, a gasp firing from her lips.

"What the fuck?" Eric's head came up, utter astonishment and confusion etched in his expression. He looked around and then calmly gazed down at Karan. "Care to tell me where we are this time?"

Stunned, Karan shook her head, her eyes scanning the bed beside them, the table near her head, and the long mirror across the chamber reflecting the door. "My bedchamber." The words were barely a whisper as realization gripped her. "We are in my bedchamber in the palace."

"We're in your world, your home?" Eric looked around again, nodded, and then brought his gaze back to her. His cock was still inside her buried to the hilt, his hands still pinning her arms though they held them now to an icy cold and achingly hard stone floor rather

than the comfortable cushioned carpet of his living room. "I don't suppose you know how we got here."

By the guardians, she loved this man. Karan drew her bottom lip between her teeth to hold back a chuckle. He was so calm, so collected. Did nothing faze the man? She nodded. "I think I do this time. I did it. I brought us here."

"Okay," he said slowly, watching her. His face wrinkled, lips pursed. "I don't suppose you know how you did it."

She did. She was as certain of it as her love for him. "Power. The spell. I am staying with you, in your world. It is where I belong."

Eric shook his head. "Whoa, wait. Sweetheart, you're babbling. When did you decide this? What power? What about the spell?"

"In your living room minutes ago. It gave me the power to do this because it broke the spell." And sealed her heart, she realized too. Her heart was no longer divided about Eric, about her desires, about mating, about the different worlds. "You were willing to give up everything to be here with me in my world."

"I still am."

"I know but it is your world where I belong. It is there that I fit, that *we* fit. When I realized that it made me a bit sad, to know I would never see this place, my family, again. I thought of this room..."

"And poof we're here."

Karan laughed. "It looks that way."

Eric lifted his head and slowly scanned the room. "Great architecture, the peaks of the ceiling, the texture of the walls, furnishings aren't bad either."

"Hey!" Karan lifted her hips and ground his cock into her pussy. Still hard, she noted with immense satisfaction as the slivers of rapturous sparks fluttered through her. It got his attention as she knew it would.

His eyes glazed over, a low rumbling sound making its way up his throat. "Sorry. So how do we get back?"

"You mean to your world?" She had not considered that, but she knew she must.

"Yeah, what if you picture my bedroom instead? Will we end up there?"

"We shall see." She closed her eyes, brought a clear picture of his red silk sheeted bed into her mind's eye. At the last instant, she added Eric to the image, his hands bound to the headboard with the strips of leather she knew still hung from the wrought iron posts. The cold, unyielding stone turned soft beneath her back, sinking with her weight. She opened her eyes and frowned.

"I guess that answers that." Eric grinned down at her. "We're back. Why are you frowning? Isn't this what you pictured?"

"Not exactly." So maybe she was not able to change their positions, only the place in which they occupied. Then again, she considered, perhaps she simply needed more practice.

Eric pulled back until his cock nearly slid out of her and then eased back in once more. Oh yes, practice was definitely what she needed. "Do you realize what this means?" His voice had dropped to a seductive whisper as he moved, in and out, in and out, setting a snail's paced rhythm that had the orgasm clawing its way through her channel in agonizing scrapes.

"I can truly have it all with you." Her eyes swam with tears as she gazed up at him, every nerve ending in her body on sensory alert for both the sexual and emotional. "My heart is no longer divided. I am no longer afraid. Because of this, my part of the spell has been broken and I have been granted the power to travel between our worlds."

"We'll build a great life together, Karan." His head dipped down to brush his lips over hers. "Here, there, anywhere, we'll have all you've ever wanted, do everything you've ever dreamed."

Yes. She believed him. Together they would have it all. "You have not asked me yet."

He knew what she meant and he smiled, that slow and deliciously sexy smile that brought her one clawing closer to ecstasy. "Marry me, Karan. Will you marry me, join with me, and be my wife?"

Her heart leapt, flipped and did a boogie dance in her chest. She had expected fear, uncertainty, and hesitation. Even after all she had come to know, to feel, to believe, she would not have expected such bone melting joy and intense pleasure at the idea of joining with her heart's desire. "Where is the ring?"

He laughed and it was such an amused sound it made her grin. "Gods, I have unleashed a monster."

Because he was weakened by his amusement, she caught him off guard, pushing him again until she flipped him over, and regained her top position once more. It was she who pinned his arms this time as she leaned over him, her breasts rubbing tantalizing over his chest. "Yes, Eric. I will marry you, join with you, and be your wife." She kissed him, a tender brush of her lips to his that turned to the intensity of molten lava. "But I still want the ring."

"I'll head for the jewelry store first thing in the morning. Unless you plan to poof us back to the lands of the Gods again. Maybe you want to see your parents, your sisters."

"I do. Of course I do." She eased up and let her hands glide over his chest even as she began to ride his incredible cock. "Are you sure you do not want to finish this first?"

"Oh, yeah." He groaned, caught her by the hips and together they rocked both their worlds.

## THE END

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Bestselling author Tonya Ramagos spends much of her time daydreaming about one plot or another. Give her a cup of hazelnut flavored coffee and a keyboard and she is at her happiest. When she isn't writing, thinking about writing, or plotting what to write, she can be found taking on the mother role with her two boys and the husband, too. She enjoys taking long walks on the nature trails near her home in Chattanooga, TN, playing computer games, swinging on the playground, dancing, and curling up with a good book.



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