



Loose Id

MARILYN LEE

FANTASY KNIGHTS 2

ENDLESS
LOVE

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ENDLESS LOVE**

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Loose Id^(R)
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Chapter One

West Africa, circa 1891

Prey animals screamed in terror. The smell and sounds of predators killing and feeding surrounded Tanginika as she carefully made her way through the moonlit jungle. Her dark gaze darted from side to side each time the sounds of broken branches reached her ears. The jungle was alive and dangerous. Each step, no matter how carefully placed, might bring her to the attention of one of the many nocturnal hunters marauding through the night. Or her scent, carried on the warm night breeze, might be transmitted to the narrowed nostrils of some hungry night prowler.

When she was almost in sight of her destination, a low, terrifying roar sounded to her left. She froze, suppressing the scream trembling on her lips. Before she could decide which way to flee, she heard bodies rushing through the jungle, and then two large lionesses sprang from the foliage, one on either side of her.

She knew her willful disobedience warranted punishment. But why couldn't her retribution happen *after* she'd had one last night with him? Would he find what was left of her body or would the lions have dragged her away, leaving him to think she'd obeyed the village elders and forsaken him?

She stiffened. Her life couldn't end like this when she was so close to their meeting place. She cast a swift glance around. A large tree stood within a few hundred yards. What were her chances of reaching it and scrambling up its trunk before the lions overtook her?

As if in answer to her silent query, the two lionesses padded forward, flanking her. She was about to die. So be it. As befit the daughter of a warrior, she would do her best to kill one of the lions first. She lifted her shield from her shoulder and drew back her spear.

With a low roar, the lioness on her left charged. She tossed the spear with all her strength. Without waiting to see if it found its mark, she turned and fled, running in a zigzag motion.

As she raced toward the tree, snapping undergrowth signaled the lions charging in pursuit. Her foot caught in a tangle of branches, and she sprawled forward on her stomach. She quickly rolled onto her side and curled her body into a ball. She held the shield over as much of her body as possible in an effort to protect herself from the coming mauling.

A strange roar filled the air moments before a breeze swept under the shield. Lightning flashed and an abrupt wind whipped up, sending branches and leaves swirling all around her in a violent display.

The breeze settled over and around her. A sense of well-being replaced her fear. The sound of the pouncing lions receded. She uncurled her body, rolled onto her back, and cautiously sat up, holding the shield in front of her.

Still facing her, the lions slowly retreated as if being driven back by a powerful, unseen presence. She leaped to her feet, narrowing her gaze. She saw the faint outline of a large, majestic bird hovering a foot or so above the ground. Flapping an impressive pair of wings, it advanced on the predators.

At the edge of the clearing, the lions turned and bounded into the surrounding jungle. The lightning ceased and the wind abated. Her spear rose off the ground and hovered in front of her.

She should have been afraid, but the spirits had clearly chosen to smile upon and protect her. Who else but the spirits could command and control the elements and use a bird to instill fear in charging lions?

She accepted the spear. "Thank you," she whispered, bowing her head briefly.

The bird flapped its wings, creating a soft, gentle breeze that swept over her body with the tenderness of a lover's caress.

Unnerved by the unwanted feeling of intimacy, Tanginika quickly turned and retraced her steps. She had to continue, because each step brought her closer to the object of her need and desire. Knowing the spirits were with her empowered her. She moved through the night with renewed purpose and less fear.

Finally, she spotted the mating hut in a small clearing. Suppressing the urge to rush forward, she paused. She scanned her surroundings for any sign of trouble or prowling animals. A plume of smoke rose from the hole in the roof of the hut. Several fires burned around the exterior of the hut to keep predators at bay.

All seemed as it should be. Still she hesitated, gripped by a sense of disquiet. She frowned. Glancing around, she realized the bird endowed with the spirit of the wind had vanished. She was alone again. That was the cause of her new fear. She gripped her spear tight and crouched, her gaze darting from side to side. Puckering her lips, she whistled.

Intently listening to the night sounds of the jungle, she waited. The air was alive with a myriad of sounds. If only she heard the sound she most longed to hear. She gave the signal again. There was no response.

Just as she was about to retreat and start the treacherous journey back through the jungle to her village, the fragrant night air carried the welcome sound of a deep whistle.

She saw the sight she'd risked so much to see.

A tall figure, armed with a rifle, emerged from the jungle beyond the hut.

Her heart raced with joy. The tall, handsome male with the smooth, dark skin had captured her heart two years earlier while attending one of her father's peace conferences.

"Malikinder," she cried in relief and rushed across the clearing toward him, dropping her spear.

He strolled forward, his tall figure tense. He caught her around her waist, hugging her close with one arm.

Feeling the tension in his body, she lifted her face to his. "Malikinder?"

"He's still here."

She frowned. "Who's here?"

"Him."

She glanced quickly around. They seemed to be alone. "Who?"

He lifted his gaze skyward. "I'm grateful to you for preserving her precious life, but she is still mine. Leave us in peace, Stormreaper."

She shivered. "You shouldn't attribute unworthy motives to the spirits, Malikinder."

He glanced down at her, a smile softening his handsome face. "You're here at last, and that's all that matters."

Reassured, she melted against him.

He cupped a palm over her behind. His firm mouth moved over hers, warming and tasting her lips.

She opened her mouth, clutching at his shoulders as his tongue swept between her lips. She trembled, eager to share the forbidden pleasure with him again.

Releasing her long enough to place his rifle on the ground, he slipped his hands down her body to hold her by her waist. He deliberately thrust his hips forward, the

silent signal that he was about to begin the dance of love, which would culminate in him slipping between her trembling legs and deep into her body.

She responded by moving her hips in a circular motion against his. Feeling him beginning to come alive against her, her stomach muscles tightened. Soon, he would be long, hard, thick, and ready to fill every inch of her wet, aching core.

Stretching onto her toes, she linked her arms around his neck and pushed herself off the ground.

Slipping his hands under her skirt, he cupped his big palms against the bare skin of her rear.

Her flesh tingled at the warmth of his touch. She wrapped her legs around his big, powerful body.

He dragged his lips from hers and walked toward the hut. They only made it as far as the entrance before he dropped to his knees.

They separated and quickly removed their clothing. Then, both kneeling, they sat on their haunches staring at each other. During the long months of their forced separation, she had often lain in her bed, pleasuring herself. With her eyes closed and the image of his big, dark, sleekly beautiful body burned into her mind, she had pretended the hand between her thighs belonged to him. In the delicious reality of being with him, there was no longer any need to pretend.

Noting his dark gaze on her naked body, she lifted her arms above her head and swayed from side to side. Then she leaned close, pressing her breasts against the hard muscles of his chest. Her nipples hardened at the contact with his slick flesh.

He caressed her breasts, playing with her nipples before he slid his hands down her body to part her legs.

She sucked in a breath, feverish with the need to feel him inside her again.

His fingers traced a path up her thigh to the tangle of hair covering her core. He stroked his fingers inside her.

Fire spread up from her core as he gently probed her flesh.

Trembling with need, she closed her eyes and rubbed her palms over her breasts. She licked her lips. A flash of moisture filled her core, preparing it to welcome his thick length. When he slid into her, she would hold him close and freely offer him her total surrender.

His warm, deep voice washed over her like a soft, seductive jungle breeze as he whispered words of love and adoration.

She lifted her face. "Please..."

Still stroking his fingers inside her, he bent his head. He licked her lips before he nibbled at her mouth. He whispered softly to her of its lushness...its fullness...its sweetness...its ability to heal all his hurts and hungers.

She moaned against his lips, sliding her hands over his back to the hard, round mounds she'd become accustomed to gripping while he lay between her thighs, thrusting slow and deep into her.

He deepened the long, sweet kiss, gently sucking at her tongue.

She gasped and pushed her hips forward, aching to have him assuage her need. She tightened her muscles around his fingers, which slid in and out of her wet core.

Eager for the ultimate delight, she slid her palms over his flesh, parting his nether cheeks. She rubbed her breasts against his chest and trailed a finger down the crease between his taut cheeks. Locating the tight, puckered opening, she circled a finger against it.

He silently whispered her name. "*Tanginika. Tanginika.*"

With a deliberation she knew would have the desired effect, she thrust her finger forward with enough force to pierce his tight nether opening.

He shuddered and pulled away from her, breathing fast.

She smiled at him. "Malikinder?"

The tenderness in his answering smile caressed and adored her as he gently laid her onto her back. "It's time, my lovely one."

She centered her gaze on his lower body. His manhood rose long and dark from a mass of hair between his muscular thighs. With its big, thick head, it beckoned to her.

Tanginika bent her knees. Her legs quivered apart. She slipped two fingers inside her body. Pumping them until they were wet with her fluids, she removed them and rubbed them over her pubic hair.

Watching his nostrils flare, she smiled. The scent of her aroused core always seemed to heighten his passions. She lifted her hips off the ground, making pumping motions to encourage him to mount her and become one with her again. "Take me."

"My lovely, lovely one." He positioned himself between her thighs. He rested his weight on one hand. His other hand gripped the big, dark shaft protruding an impressive length in front of his body.

Her stomach muscles tightened; her core pulsed and ached for his penetration. She reached out a hand to caress his balls. They were tight and heavy. Soon, their contents would rush up his shaft and shoot down it and into her wet tunnel.

"Please," she begged.

"I live to please you, my love." He leaned forward, bringing the warm head against her entrance.

She bit her lip and then moaned softly as he eased into her wet passageway.

He paused, staring down at her. "Am I hurting you?"

Lost in the magic of what they were about to share, she silently shook her head.

He continued entering her with care, mindful that before she'd tearfully but joyfully given herself to him many months earlier, she'd never had another lover.

With most of his hot shaft pulsing inside her, he paused again, giving her body time to adjust to what she had come to think of as her sweet invader.

She felt an almost painful fullness that sent tingles of delight down from her core to her curled toes. Impatient to feel him sliding in and out of her, she thrust her hips upward, forcing the last few precious inches inside her.

A pleasure so acute it felt like pain radiated through her. Tossing her head back, she slipped her legs over the backs of his thighs. Moving her hands up his back, she clutched at his shoulders, grinding her hips against his. "Malikinder...my love...my joy...my reason for living...love me."

He held still, whispering sweet words of love and desire to her.

While his words warmed her, she wanted more. To encourage him to begin the delicious motion she'd spent so much time longing for, she tightened herself around his long, thick length.

He groaned and laid his weight on her.

She welcomed the weight of his big body.

Bending his head, he tasted her parted lips.

She responded eagerly, grinding her hips against his.

His first forays into her body were gentle and sweet, allowing her to fully savor and enjoy each long, slow stroke. Ripples of pleasure danced down her spine as he rotated his powerful hips and pushed back inside her...so deep she gasped, half-afraid he was too big...there was no more room for him inside the tight confines of her body. Yet she ached for deeper penetration.

He dragged his lips away from hers and trailed them down her neck to her breasts. He twirled his tongue around her right nipple.

She shuddered, a rush of moisture filling her core. "Oh...oh."

He drew her nipple into his mouth. As he sucked on it, he intensified his movements, thrusting into her with short, quick strokes.

The insistent heat of his lovemaking ignited the inner fire that burned only for him. The flame spread quickly through her, rushing down from her body to her core,

setting it ablaze. She clung to him, her fingers digging into his shoulders, teetering on the edge of a blistering inferno.

He slipped his hands under her body, cupping her bare bottom in his warm palms, and quickly shoved her into the roaring fire with a series of rapid movements.

She sobbed with joy as the hot flames of desire and need surrounded and consumed her. She surrendered joyfully to it. The searing heat of her climax burned away everything but her need and love for him.

He clutched her tight. With his lips flaming against her breasts, he shuddered and exploded deep inside her...again...and then again...and yet again.

Sweet, sweet delight. "I love you...I love you," she chanted.

He collapsed on top of her, his big, damp body totally covering hers. His lips moved against her ear. "Tanginika, my *sheenea*."

Sheenea, she who completed him. She smiled, happy and content.

He kissed her neck. "My love...my only love."

"As you are mine, Malikinder."

"You complete me, as only you can, Tanginika."

They lay with him still inside her, sated and happy to be together again. The knowledge that she must soon untwine from him and make her way back through the jungle was somewhat unsettling. But for just a little while longer, she could continue to lose herself in him and keep the outside world at bay.

They were still locked together when a series of whishing sounds intruded on her senses.

Malikinder stiffened. "We've been discovered." He lifted his head and stared skyward. "Cast your infernal jealousy aside and protect her again, Stormreaper. Please..." He started to withdraw from her and then moaned, collapsing back on top of her.

The sound of running feet filled the air, along with battle cries. Warriors who were at war with both their peoples had discovered them. They must rise and defend themselves. She pushed at Malikinder's shoulders. She couldn't budge him. He felt heavier than usual.

She struggled to slide from under him and then froze. She could no longer feel his heartbeat. Something warm and sticky flowed from his body onto hers. Blood. Torrents of blood poured onto her.

She screamed in panic. "Malik...Malikinder..."

Several pair of hands reached down and dragged his body off hers. She was jerked to her feet.

The warrior daughter of one of her father's fiercest enemies confronted her. She knew the woman coveted Malikinder.

Tanginika shook off her grief and stood with her head held high. She would die with the courage and dignity the daughter of a king should always display. She looked into the dark, malevolent eyes of the female she knew intended to kill her. "Aja."

Aja, flanked by several warriors, some carrying rifles, others with spears, held a heavy spear, one usually wielded by a male. She bore little resemblance to a high priestess.

"Tanginika, you've strayed too far from home once too often, and now you will reap the reward you deserve. Beg for it, and I may grant you a few precious moments to make your peace with the spirits."

Tanginika prepared herself for the fate her disobedience deserved. Her deepest regret lay in the grief she knew her sister Imena would suffer when Tanginika didn't return.

She lifted her chin. "I am already at peace with the spirits, Aja, and I will not beg."

Aja frowned. "Not even for your life?"

She shook her head. "No."

Aja sucked in an angry breath. "Then prepare to join your spirit gods."

"I am always prepared to face what I must."

"Then what are you doing so far from home, Tanginika?"

"Remember, Aja, we are all part of one. What you have done to Malikinder and what you do to me, you do to yourself."

Aja laughed. "I do not believe in your 'we are one' view, Tanginika. I now send your spirit back to the lake...goddess." She mocked the meaning of Tanginika's name as she lifted her spear.

Tanginika kept her gaze locked with her rival's as Aja sent her spear flying toward her breasts.

A sudden low roaring obliterated the night sounds of the jungle. A soft, almost iridescent light appeared before Tanginika. The powerful spear shattered against it, falling to the ground, inches from her feet.

After a startled silence, Aja shouted to her warriors. She caught the rifle one of the warriors tossed at her and leveled it at Tanginika.

Realizing that, despite her many transgressions, the spirits did not wish her to die, Tanginika turned and fled across the clearing toward the jungle. Bullets and spears, flattened by the shield protecting her, fell harmlessly to the ground around her.

Only when she'd reached the protection afforded by the thick foliage did she turn to look behind her.

Aja's warriors cowered in fear. Aja herself stood by the fire with her head held high, displaying no fear. "Tanginika! Witch! Spawn and servant of dark, unclean spirits! I will have my revenge. I will have it even if I have to march into your father's territory to do it."

Tanginika glared at Aja, forcing herself not to look at Malikinder's body.

Aja reached down. She lifted Malikinder's head and deliberately pushed it into the fire.

Tanginika swallowed a sob of grief and rage. She rushed forward but found her way blocked by the unseen, impenetrable barrier.

"No, Tanginika. There is no time."

"I have to help him."

"He's beyond your ability to help. He'd want you to be safe. Flee."

Tanginika felt rather than heard the words. Nevertheless, the spirit's desire was clear. Her eyes welling with tears, she turned and ran into the jungle. She hugged the certainty of Malikinder's inability to experience pain to her.

"Hurry. Hurry. You must hurry, sheenea. I can only protect you as long as I can remain here. The others already know of my intervention. They're calling me home for an explanation. I can't remain here much longer. Hurry. Hurry."

With the voice of the spirit who had saved her echoing in her head, she fled through the night. As she did, she silently called out. *Malikinder! Malikinder, I'll never forget you, and I'll love you forever...forever...forever...*

She felt a faint response: *"Remember, my lovely one. As long as you remember me, I will continue to exist, my sheenea. Remember me..."*

Chapter Two

Present day, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

“Guess what drop-dead, sexy-as-hell Norseman is back?”

Erin Benson took a slow, deep breath. It didn't help. Her heartbeat quickened. Nervous excitement raced through her, setting her nerve endings on fire. She knew the *he* in question was their upstairs neighbor, Aleksander Storm. A picture of a tall, gorgeous hunk with blond hair, penetrating silver-gray eyes, a big, sculptured body, and a slow, sensuous smile popped into her head.

He was back. Finally.

“Did you hear me, Erin? Your sexy Norseman's back.”

Erin had to swallow several times before she turned from buffing her nails at her bedroom vanity. Her twin sister, Erica, waltzed into her bedroom and sprawled on her bed.

If only he were *her* Norseman. *No*. Her interest in him felt wrong, yet the moment their gazes had met and locked nine months earlier in the laundry room of their apartment complex, she'd felt a shock of recognition. A joyful surge of delight had

followed. For several timeless minutes, they had stared into each other's eyes. She'd felt confused, excited, and afraid.

Aleksander's slow, intimate smile, combined with his touch as they shook hands, had sent tingles all through her and conjured memories of almost forgotten nights spent waiting for an opportunity to slip away from the village and into his arms. Even as the thought entered her head, she rejected it. For all his charismatic appeal, Aleksander was a stranger.

Nevertheless, Erin had stunned her family by abruptly ending her exclusive ten-month relationship with Mark Hillman the same night of her brief meeting with Aleksander. She had then waited for Aleksander to ask her out.

As the weeks turned into months, she had reminded herself that her vague memories of a lost love had centered around a tall, handsome African prince with beautiful, sleek ebony skin. Aleksander had blond hair and fair skin and had no visible means of support. With her luck, when he disappeared for weeks at a time, he was probably on drug runs.

Five months after she'd ended her relationship with Mark, Aleksander had arrived at her door with flowers. "These are for you."

"African violets!" she exclaimed. "I love them."

For a moment, she'd half expected him to say he knew. "They're beautiful, Aleksander," she went on.

He spoke in a husky whisper that ignited a tiny flame in the pit of her belly. "As are you."

He lifted her fingertips to his lips. "Have a drink with me."

With the word no trembling on her lips, she'd looked into his gray gaze and was lost. "Yes," she whispered.

He smiled and brushed his lips against her fingertips.

A jolt of electricity danced down her spine.

Fifteen minutes later, they'd sat side by side on his sofa sipping a drink.

Or she had sipped a drink. He'd dipped his tongue into his glass, circled his drink along his lips, and then sat consuming her with his eyes.

The flame in her belly flared as he'd brushed his cheek against hers and whispered to her in a soft, unintelligible language.

She'd put down her drink, her heart racing. Then, as if they had a mind of their own, her arms had linked around his neck.

He'd responded by rising and sweeping her up into his arms.

His ability to lift her with such ease had surprised and delighted her. She'd brushed her lips against his neck as he carried her out onto the balcony to a large double-wide chaise longue.

Lying there with him under the stars in the cool April night, faint memories of another night with another lover tantalized her. When Aleksander murmured her name, she turned onto her side to face him. She touched his cheek. He clearly found her as attractive as she found him. So what was the source of her conflicted feelings?

He'd drawn her into his arms before she could decide.

The clear outline of a long, hard cock pressed against her, igniting long-dormant primal passions in her. She made a soft sound of encouragement.

Slipping a hand in her hair, he stared down into her eyes. He bent his head but paused with his lips a breath away from hers.

Erin knew he waited for permission to continue. She gave her consent by parting her lips in an open invitation.

He caressed her cheek.

The sudden gentle breeze that surrounded her felt familiar and welcome. Rolling onto her back, she parted her legs. A soft rain caressed her skin.

He positioned himself between her thighs with his cock pressing against her.

Yes. Oh, yes.

He lowered his upper body until her breasts cushioned the hard muscles of his chest.

She stroked her hands down his back to his tight buns. *Yes! Take me!*

He gently, tentatively touched his mouth to hers.

She closed her eyes, enraptured by the warmth and tenderness of the caress.

He dragged his tongue along her parted lips while he slowly rubbed his cock against her.

She moaned.

He kissed a path across her cheek to her earlobe.

She slipped her hands up his body to rest on his shoulders, eager for more intimacy.

He nibbled at her ear before kissing his way back to her mouth.

While she savored the foreplay, the soft rain kissed her skin. She clutched his shoulders, enjoying the taste of whiskey on his lips. Nice, but she needed more. She extended her tongue and ground herself against his cock.

He responded by sliding a hand down her body.

She lifted her hips.

He devoured her lips with a slow, rapacious hunger that set her entire body ablaze.

She moaned against his mouth, her pussy flooding. She returned his kisses with a need that had gone unsatisfied for far too long. Kissing and grinding against his cock, she lost herself in his heat and passion, matching it with a fervor of her own.

Even as she burned with physical need for him, she felt an emotional connection and desire for him that made coherent thought difficult. Certain all her needs were about to be satisfied, she struggled to slip her hands inside his trousers and briefs.

He lifted his hips, and she felt him sliding his zipper down.

She sighed and slipped her hand inside his briefs. With her palms against his taut ass, she stiffened and opened her eyes.

He lifted his head. "What is it?"

She pulled her hands from his briefs. "I just saw a flash of lightning overhead."

To her surprise, he smiled. "Really?"

She pushed at his shoulders. "We should go back inside."

"Why? Are you afraid of storms?"

"No. I've always thought they could be beautiful and majestic, but at the same time, I have a healthy respect for lightning."

"As well you should." He caressed her cheek. "However, the only storm you need concern yourself with is the one brewing inside me."

A faint rumble of thunder sounded in the distance. "But —"

"You're safe with me, Erin. You'll always be safe with me."

His deep voice carried the comfort of a warm, rain-kissed summer breeze.

She relaxed.

"That's it. Trust me."

There was no reason why she should, but she did.

He smiled before he kissed her with a slow deliberation.

She clung to him, her lips parting under his.

He swept his tongue between her lips, settling his body against hers.

With the storm raging overhead, she stroked her hands over his shoulders and upper back.

The insistent ringing of a phone intruded on her senses.

He stiffened and dragged his thrusting tongue from her mouth.

"Don't answer," she urged, sliding her palms down his back to clutch his ass.

He took a deep, shuddering breath and stared down at her.

She rubbed herself against his cock. "Let it ring."

Noting the regret in his gaze, she knew her plea would go unanswered. "I can't," he whispered in a brusque voice.

She lifted her head to nibble at his lips. "Let the answering machine pick up."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

He sighed. "It might be my...daughter."

"Your daughter?" Shaken, she extricated herself from him. "You have a daughter?"

He stared at her in silence while the phone continued to shrill for several moments. "I'm not married," he assured her.

Someone had borne his daughter.

He responded just as if she'd spoken her concerns aloud. "I'm not married."

She glanced at his bare left hand. Many married men didn't wear rings.

He shook his head. "I don't wear a ring because I'm not married."

She bit her lip.

The phone continued to ring.

He rose from the lounge. "I have to answer that."

She watched as he crossed the balcony to pick up the cordless phone from the table where it lay.

She sat up on the lounge, wrapping her arms around her knees.

He kept his back to her and his voice low. After a brief, soft-voiced discussion, he put down the phone. He inhaled before he turned to face her. "I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to leave."

She blinked. "What?"

He crossed the balcony and extended a hand to her. "There's an emergency. I have to return home."

"To Norway?"

"Norway?"

"Isn't that home?"

"No. It isn't."

"Is your daughter all right?"

He raked a hand through his hair. "I need to go to her."

She gave him her hand.

He lifted her to her feet.

She stared up at him. "Is there anything I can do?"

He flashed a brief smile at her. "Yes." He caressed her cheek. "Wait for me."

"Wait for... How long will you be gone?"

He shook his head. "I don't know."

Great. He wanted her to wait indefinitely.

"I'll return as soon as I can, but I will return, Erin. I promise."

Damn if that didn't sound as if he'd be gone for more than a few days, or even weeks.

"I'll return as soon as I can." He sighed. "I'll walk you to your apartment."

So she'd allowed him to walk her to the apartment she shared with Erica.

She stood outside the door, uncertain if she should lift her face for a kiss or offer him her hand or a quick cup of decaf or —

"I don't have time for any of that. I have to go," he told her.

No time for even a quick kiss to reassure her?

He hesitated before he bent to press a gentle kiss against the corner of her mouth.

"Wait for me, Erin."

She leaned into him, turning her head to touch her lips against his.

He sucked in a breath and stepped away from her. *"Wait for me."*

"Alek..."

"Wait for me." He turned and walked away without so much as a promise to call her.

The urge to rush after him had been difficult to overcome.

After weeks spent tensing each time the phone rang and haunting any part of the apartment complex where she'd encountered him in the past, she'd come to the painful realization that he was deliberately avoiding her. Her certainty that he'd regretted whatever impulse had driven him to invite her to his apartment had hurt. Or worse, he'd probably lied to her, and there was a wife to go with the daughter he'd never mentioned.

"Hey, girl, will you get your head out of the clouds? I'm not talking because I like the sound of my own voice – even though I have to admit it's wonderful and exciting."

Erin dismissed the memory of her last embarrassing meeting with Aleksander and stopped pretending to buff her nails. She blinked at Erica. *"What?"*

"I said he's back from his family emergency. Contrary to his ex-wife's hysterics, his daughter's life was never in danger. Honestly, Erin, you'd think a grown woman could handle a broken arm without going to pieces, wouldn't you?"

Erin nearly drowned in an ocean of relief. So he hadn't lied, nor had he been avoiding her. There was a daughter, but no current wife. *"How long has he been gone?"*

"Don't you know?"

To the minute. *"Why should I?"*

Erica shrugged. *"He's been gone for nearly three months."* Erica cast her dark gaze toward the ceiling. *"Can you imagine a modern woman who would insist a man stay so long for a broken arm?"*

Erin chose her words carefully. “Do you think that’s the only reason she wanted him to stay so long?”

Erica shook her head. “Probably not. The man is a certified hunk, but I wouldn’t worry. She is, after all, his ex for a reason.”

Erin lowered her gaze. “How old is she?”

“His ex?”

“No. His daughter.”

Erica struggled. “Haven’t got a clue. Do you want me to find out, Nika?”

Erica’s sudden use of the nickname sent her back into the past. When Erin and Erica were five, they’d seen a program with a pretty African girl named Tanginika. Erin had felt such a strong affinity for her, she’d immediately asked to have her name changed to Tanginika. Her parents had been kind but uncooperative. She’d then asked everyone to call her Tanginika. Her parents had again refused – as had everyone except Erica.

Unable to pronounce Tanginika, Erica had immediately started calling her Nika. After they entered college, by unspoken mutual consent, Erica had gradually dropped the nickname. Hearing it now warmed Erin and reminded her of how supportive and loving her twin had always been.

“Nika?”

She shook her head. “No. Thanks.”

Erica rolled over and sat up, placing her back against Erin’s headboard. “Do you think the bath salts and that horrible oil came from him? They did have an LA postmark.”

Two weeks after her near surrender to him, Erin had returned home to find a beautifully wrapped gift package waiting for her. She’d opened it to find two exquisite blue crystal vases inside. One had been filled with exotic bath salts. The other had contained sensual oil.

Each vase bore the imprint of what appeared to be a majestic waterfall at the base of a mountain. The labels read: Crystal Falls Bath Salts and Crystal Falls Bath Oil.

Erica had declared the contents of each vase smelled foul.

Erin had found their aroma soothing and had been disappointed that the card accompanying the items had been blank. She'd never discovered who sent the salts, but she loved soaking in them.

"Get your head out of the clouds and stay with me, girl," Erica complained.

Erin blinked and shook her head. "I'm sorry. What did you say?"

"So he's back from LA with this absolutely gorgeous tan that would do George Hamilton proud. He looks good tanned...all buff...kind of sexy."

Tanned or not, he looked good in a pair of swimming briefs that showcased his long, muscular legs and displayed his magnificent physique. And the hint of a hard-on she'd noted more than once when she encountered him at the pool.

Erin sighed. How often had she lost herself in erotic daydreams since their interlude on his balcony? Of course she wasn't ready to admit that to Erica.

"Have you seen him yet, Nika?"

Only in her dreams and fantasies. "No. He's been away. Remember?"

"Well, he's back now, and it's time you made a move before someone else latches onto him."

"Like who?"

"Like Aja Mangrabber Miller." Erica practically spat the name out. "You should have seen the indecent way she ogled him in the elevator. I wouldn't have been surprised if she'd suddenly reached out and grabbed his crotch."

Erin felt her top lip curl. Although both she and Erica had disliked the other woman on sight, she knew their reaction had been driven by Erin's primitive reaction to her. She wasn't sure what it was about the other woman that generated the irrational dislike she felt. She just knew she hated her.

Admittedly the tall, slender Aja was gorgeous enough to be equally at home gracing the cover of an upscale fashion magazine or gliding down any catwalk. While uncertain of the origin of her dislike, Erin was certain it wasn't rooted in jealousy.

"If that skinny, self-centered bitch goes anywhere near him, I'll —" Noting the satisfied gleam in Erica's eyes, Erin allowed her voice to trail off.

"She was in the elevator batting her false eyelashes at him not ten minutes ago. It was all I could do not to shout at her that he was taken and then reach out and slap her right into next week."

Erin balled a hand into a fist. "Did he seem interested?"

Erica took a slow, calming breath before she continued in her normal tone of voice. A slow smile spread over her face as she shook her head. "He barely spoke to her. He was too busy asking how you were."

Erin sighed in relief.

"But that doesn't mean she won't persist until she changes his mind. So when are you going out with him?"

Erin shrugged and turned to consider her reflection in the vanity mirror. She wore her dark hair short and natural. Her skin was clear and the color of milk chocolate. She looked out at the world from a pair of dark eyes. Mark had often called her gorgeous. She knew most men found her attractive. She and Erica were identical twins, and Erica had been a runner-up in a number of beauty pageants during their college years. Four months earlier, Aleksander had certainly seemed to think her pretty. Would he feel the same when they met again? Or would Aja manage to turn his head in her direction?

"Erin!"

She turned back to face Erica. "What?"

"Do you regret breaking up with Mark?"

Strangely enough, she didn't. She shook her head. "I know everyone thought Mark and I would eventually get...ah..."

“The word you’re trying so hard to avoid is married.” Erica sighed. “I can admit now that I was highly upset when you ended your relationship with him.”

Erin blinked. “You were?”

“Hell, yeah! He’s a handsome, straight black man with a fantastic job who thought the sun rose only when you opened your eyes.”

“But you were so supportive when I ended our relationship.”

“Hey, girl. It wasn’t easy, but what else could I do? When the sky is falling, I have to hold it up so it doesn’t fall on you.” Erica shrugged. “It’s my job to be there for you. I’m the older twin.”

Erin smiled. “Yeah – by about two or three minutes.”

“Whatever. Being the older twin has certain responsibilities. It’s my job to stand by your side and support your decisions.” She gave an exaggerated sigh. “Even when I think they’re beyond dumb and bordering on reckless.”

Erin laughed. “Be serious.”

“I am being serious. Mark was quite a catch, and my heart nearly broke when you told me it was over between you two. I was so upset with you until I saw Aleksander.” She sighed. “Then I understood why you needed to be free of all other romantic entanglements so you’d be free when he made his move.”

Erin shook her head. “Don’t start trying to analyze everything to death, Rica. I’ll start dating again when I’m ready.”

Erica arched a brow. “Get real, girl. If I left these things to you, you’d die an old maid. Or worse yet, Aja would have time to sink her fake claws into him, and I am not having that.”

Erin grimaced. “I’m thirty, not ninety. I think I have a few years left before I have to start worrying about being an old maid.” Aja was another matter.

Erica waved a hand dismissively. "I hate to be the bearer of bad news, girl, but every single or unengaged woman over twenty-five is in danger of becoming an old maid."

Erin groaned. "Give me a break."

"I'll do better than that. I'll get you another man – if it's the last thing I do."

"And if I don't want one?"

Erica grinned. "You're getting one whether you like it or not. So get with the program. Now, let's get back to your big, handsome Norse hunk."

"He's not mine."

"A very minor technicality we'll soon remedy." Erica, who wore her hair in a mass of short dark curls, tilted her head. "Do you think he's from Viking stock? Just looking at him awakens fantasies of being sexually and ruthlessly plundered and loving every damn second of it. Do you feel me?"

And how!

Erica grinned, just as if Erin had verbalized her agreement. "So we're on the same page. If I didn't already have the sexiest man alive, I might be a little jealous that he's going to be your man."

Erin's heart raced at the thought. She lowered her lids, afraid of what Erica might see in her gaze.

"So why haven't you gone out with him, Nika?"

"For the very simple reason that he's never asked me out."

Erica blinked and sat up. "Are you sure?"

Asking her to his apartment for a drink that had nearly turned into a meaningless sex romp did not constitute asking her out. "I may be in danger of becoming an old maid, but I think I'm still young enough to know if he's asked me out."

"You know I don't believe in destiny or past lives, but the moment I saw him, I just knew you two belonged together, Nika."

Erin smiled. Although she and Erica had always been close, having Erica call her Nika again served to strengthen their bond.

Erica frowned. "Maybe he'd ask you out if you stopped giving him the cold shoulder."

Or maybe he'd just ask her to hop into bed with him. The way her love life was going lately, she just might oblige – no questions asked. "Who says I give him the cold shoulder?"

"I do." Erica leveled a finger. "I don't know how I know, but I know he'd be good for you. I feel it in my bones, Nika."

That made two of them. Yet even as she felt Aleksander was *right* for her, memories of another love lingered on the edge of her consciousness, making her uncertain if she should pursue a relationship with Aleksander. "Don't worry, Erica. I'll be fine."

"I know you will – as soon as you get back into the dating scene."

"Erica –"

"The place to start is at the pool party next weekend."

Erin frowned, shaking her head. "About that –"

Erica gave a firm shake of her head. "I've bought you a sexy new bikini that will show off all your assets."

"Bikini? That thing you bought is a few pieces of string at best. Calling it anything else – even a bikini – is a gross misnomer."

"So? What's your point?"

"My point is that I'd be practically naked wearing your so-called bikini."

"So? The entire point of a pool party for single women is to be as close to naked as possible. So don't you start with me, Erin. You promised you would go, and you're going – even if I have to drag you kicking and screaming. And you're wearing your new, revealing bikini. End of debate." Erica rose.

With a reluctant smile on her face, Erin watched her twin stalk out of the room. Heaven help anyone who got in Erica's way when she was on a mission. Erin's smile vanished, and she sighed. If she didn't go, she'd never hear the end of it. So she'd go and try not to think about Aleksander unless he sought her out.

If the spirits were kind, he'd ask her out and give her an excuse to skip the party. She closed her eyes. Once they were alone, hopefully they could pick up where they'd left off. Maybe he'd hold her close and slow dance with her to a long, sexy song with a pulsing beat while a majestic and exciting storm raged outside. Then he'd kiss her breathless and make love to her until she blew apart with the power of an exploding star.

Erica reappeared in Erin's bedroom door. "Terrale and I are eating out tonight. Come with?"

She smiled and shook her head. "Thanks, Rica, but not only am I not in the mood to make an unwelcome third, but I have a program that's almost debugged."

"Ahhh. You want to be here in case Mr. Tall, Blond, and Gorgeous comes calling?"

Erin cast her gaze toward the ceiling. "Lord...give me strength."

Erica held up a hand, an unrepentant smile lighting her eyes. "Okay. You have *work* to finish. Don't stay up too late debugging computer software. I'll see you in the morning."

She smiled. "Have a great time, Rica."

"I always do with Terrale." She blew Erin a kiss.

* * * * *

Alone in the apartment, Erin got her laptop and went to work on the balcony. As a senior program analyst for a new start-up software manufacturer, she was only required to spend two days a week in the office.

Sitting on the balcony at a table with a large umbrella that shielded her from the hot July sun, Erin struggled to keep her thoughts off Aleksander. Encouraged that he'd asked Erica about her, she was certain he would soon come calling.

The day passed without any word from him. She forced herself not to get lost in wondering if he was with Aja. If he was, there was nothing she could do about it.

After a solitary dinner, she took a long soak and slipped into bed.

She lay awake for a long time before she finally drifted into a fretful slumber filled with nightmares and memories...

Chapter Three

Despite the danger, grief and longing had driven Tanginika to once again make her way through the jungle to the mating hut where Malikinder had died a year earlier. To her surprise, the hut still stood in the clearing, which had not been reclaimed by the jungle.

Her eyes filled with tears as she stood recalling the horror of that night. Why had she come? There was nothing left for her there but grief and pain. She sobbed, turned, and hurried through the jungle, tears spilling down her cheeks.

The tears became a blinding flood. Grief overwhelmed her. She sucked in a breath and leaned against a tall tree with a hand pressed against her lips in an effort to silence her sobs. Bringing attention to her presence might result in a sudden, violent death.

"And you must live, my sheenea. You must live and love again – without me."

She gulped in a breath and straightened. Her heart pounded with hope. "Malikinder?" She cast a wild look around. There was no sign of Malikinder. She knew he was dead, yet she could feel him. "Malikinder? Where are you?"

"You must live, my sheenea. Give your heart and your body to another who loves you just as much as I always will."

"But I don't want anyone else. I want you, Malikinder. I can't love anyone else."

"Yes. You can."

"No. My heart and body belong only to you."

"Undress and turn around."

"Now?" She glanced nervously around her. *"Here?"*

"Trust me. You'll be safe."

After a brief hesitation, she slowly obeyed. She stood naked in the moonlight with her breasts pressed against the trunk of the tree.

A gentle rumble sounded in the distance.

She glanced up.

Lightning lit up the night sky.

She shivered.

"Don't be afraid, my sheenea. You are safe with me and with him. Close your eyes and allow yourself to be surrounded and protected by two who love you more than you can imagine."

She frowned. *"Two? I only want you, Malikinder."*

"Obey, Tanginika."

She closed her eyes.

Even as the thunder rumbled in the distance, a gentle breeze surrounded her. Warmth brushed against her shoulders. It kissed over her nipples until they pebbled before trailing slowly down her body.

She trembled as the warm caress came to rest between her legs.

The familiarity yet strangeness of the touch sent a jolt through her. She caught her breath and swung around, expecting to find Malikinder standing behind her. She was alone. Yet she wasn't.

"Trust us. Turn around. Close your eyes. And believe...believe."

She turned to face the tree but kept her eyes open.

Warmth spread up from her ankles to her thighs.

She bit her lips, feeling her passions rising.

The warmth touched her core.

Desire flared in the pit of her belly before it raced upward to cup her breasts. She shivered. Her nipples hardened. She parted her lips. The gentle breeze fluttering over her body in a series of caresses left heat in its wake. Intrigued by the magic of what was happening to her without Malikinder's presence or touch, she closed her eyes.

Need for satisfaction consumed her. Reality blurred and disappeared. In the middle of the dangerous jungle, she found herself in a world inhabited only by her and Malikinder. Malikinder. Her love. Her love...

She imagined his big hands caressing her breasts...rolling her nipples between his fingers...sliding down her stomach to cup between her legs. With her eyes closed tight and the thunder shutting out the sounds of the nocturnal night, she could almost feel him.

Tanginika frowned. She *could* feel him. She opened her eyes and looked down.

Her heart raced with joy. Real hands cupped her breasts. A real body pressed against her back. The eager lips nibbling at her neck were real.

She parted her legs, eager to know the joy of being loved by him again. "It's been so long. Take me...make me yours again."

He gripped her hip and ground himself against her bottom, allowing her to feel his thick, hard length.

"Oh..."

He licked the side of her neck. "*I need you.*"

She felt his length rubbing between her nether cheeks, in search of her opening. She gasped, her core flooding. "I'm yours. Take me, my love."

He licked her neck and pressed his length against her core.

Determined to enjoy the unexpected pleasure, she closed her eyes, enjoying the slow, sweet slide of his length into her.

When his powerful hips stopped moving, she felt herself stretched over his hard warmth. She moaned.

She felt a sense of satisfaction from him, which confused her. *"You're mine. At last you're mine."*

Why at last instead of again? *"Malikinder?"*

"Don't talk. Let's just feel, my lovely one." He slid his hands down her body to link his fingers with hers.

She shivered as he eased in and out of her with a gentle passion. She loved feeling stretched around his flesh. She ground herself against him, reaching back to clutch at his body.

He raked his teeth along the side of her neck while he surged deeper. Reaching around her body, he rubbed his thumb against her pleasure nub.

The storm raged around them, fueling her passions. Her stomach muscles tightened. Wonderful sensations built in her. Soon...just a few more thrusts, and she would know the joy that only a man who loved her as he did could give her.

She trembled with anticipation.

He abruptly slipped out of her.

She cried out in protest. *"No!"*

He turned her around. *"Look at me, my sheenea. See a different me who loves you still."*

When she opened her eyes, a strange male with gray eyes, pale skin, and hair the color of sunburned grass faced her. She jerked back against the tree, lifting her hands to cover herself. She burned with shame to be naked with this strange white male. She had allowed him to touch her intimately. Worse, she had enjoyed it.

"Malikinder!" she cried out. *"Where are you? Help me...please."* She tried to slip away.

The stranger held her in place. He spoke to her in a soft, comforting voice. "You mustn't be afraid of me, sheenea."

She stared at him, poised to push past him and flee into the jungle.

He shook his head and spoke to her in Malikinder's deep, warm voice. "I would willingly surrender my eternal essence to protect you. You mustn't be afraid of me, sheenea."

Now he *felt* like Malikinder. She frowned, confused. "Malikinder? I don't understand. You sound and feel like you, but you're not you."

"This is how I'll look from now on, Tanginika."

She shook her head. "I don't want you like this. I want the old you with the skin like mine." She touched a trembling hand to his pale skin. "This skin is too pale..."

"This skin is of no importance, sheenea. None. Nothing has changed between us that need worry you."

How could he say that when everything had changed? "I want the old you. Not this one."

"You are loved and cherished now as you always have been." He stepped back, extending his right hand. *"Come to me willingly and let me show you the depth of my continuing adoration."*

She shook her head. "No."

"Come to me."

She bit her lip. "Malikinder?"

"Come to me, my sheenea."

She hesitated. "I don't understand."

"There's no need to be afraid of me." *"Trust me...trust me."* He projected a wave of warmth at her, which ignited a fire in her core that consumed her doubts and fears.

She knew he wasn't Malikinder, yet the knowledge that she wanted to be with him shamed her.

"There's no need to be ashamed with one who would willingly surrender everything for just a moment of time with you, sheenea."

His words touched her and made her feel cherished and adored. How could she resist a male who felt such devotion to her?

"As long as I exist, you will always be loved, cherished, and adored, my lovely one."

She believed him and wanted to be with him in the most intimate way possible between a woman and a man.

"Then trust me, my love."

She placed her hand in his.

He lifted her hand to his mouth.

The touch of his lips against her fingertips sent a shiver of pleasure and anticipation through her.

"Trust me."

She was still confused, but she felt safe with him. "I do."

He dropped to his knees in front of her.

She stared down at him, her heart racing.

He looked up at her. *"I'm yours to command, my sheenea."*

She reached out a trembling hand to touch his hair. It felt soft.

"I adore you, sheenea, as only one of my kind can."

She trembled with the shameful knowledge that she ached to be one with this strange male. She longed to feel him swelling inside her...to feel his lips on her breasts...her nipples...her thighs.

Fearful of what she was about to do, she remembered that she had Malikinder's blessing. "Show me," she whispered, stroking her fingers through his hair.

He cupped his hands over her rear.

She inhaled, slid her palms over the shoulders as broad as Malikinder's had been.

He leaned forward, sliding his tongue along her slit.

She closed her eyes, sighing with contentment. Yes. Yes. This is what she wanted and needed from him.

He eased his fingers inside, testing her readiness for him.

She curled her fingers in his hair while thrusting her hips forward. "Take me...please."

Keeping one hand on her bare rear, he used the fingers of his other hand to part her folds.

She opened her eyes and stared down at the stranger kneeling in front of her. Malikinder had been her only lover. It felt odd to take pleasure from being intimately touched by another male.

He licked and nibbled at her sensitive flesh until desire tightened her belly. She made a small helpless sound and ground herself against his face.

His warm lips settled over her pleasure knob.

She shuddered.

In response, he thrust his fingers in and out of her as he sucked at the sensitive bulb above her core.

She arched into him and came against his warm, probing lips.

He quickly rose and lifted her left leg. "*Open your eyes and look at me.*"

The voice no longer belonged to Malikinder. Lost in the afterglow of her release, she no longer cared. She just wanted the magic and bliss to continue.

"Look at me."

She obeyed, opening her eyes.

Staring into her eyes, he rubbed his shaft along her slit.

The breath caught in her throat. He was going to enter her.

He reached down to take one of her hands in his. "*Touch me, sheenea...hold me...feel my need to be one with you.*"

The thought of touching his pale cock, so different from Malikinder's, excited her. She reached down to close her fingers around him. He felt warm, thick, and hard against her palm. She brushed her thumb along the big head.

He groaned, still staring down into her eyes.

Around them, the rage of the storm increased, almost as if mirroring the intensity of emotions she felt and knew he did as well.

"Feed my hunger for you. Take me inside, my sheenea. Surround me with your warmth."

She positioned the head of his length at her entrance.

"Do it. Take me inside. Love me and fulfill me as only you can."

Unable to deny the urgency in his plea or her own need, she pressed him against her entrance. "Oh..." Feeling him lodged just inside her body, she tingled.

He gently pushed into her and lowered her leg.

"Oh..." To fully savor the delicious taboo of having him inside her, she slipped her arms around him, rubbing her breasts against his chest.

His heart pounded against her. His eyes almost seemed to glow with the violence of his feelings. He cupped his palms over her bottom and held her body tight against him. *"Mine...mine...you're mine at last...my sheenea...mine...all mine...if only for a brief period."*

"Yours forever."

He bent his head.

She opened her mouth. As his hard cock pulsed between her legs, she wanted his tongue in her mouth.

He devoured her lips and sucked her tongue into his mouth while he slid his length back and forth into her with a force that sent waves of pleasure tinged with pain through her.

She closed her eyes and surrendered completely to him. She tightened her internal muscles around him.

He pushed in and pulled out of her with a rapidity that took her breath and quickly sent her soaring toward yet another eruption of pleasure. Within seconds, she was lost in the intimate delight raging through her. She wanted more. She convulsed around him and shoved her hips forward, eager to have him surge deeper into her.

His hands tightened on her bottom as he rotated his hips and then thrust deep into her core.

She gasped as pleasure and pain sliced through her. Her thighs shook. Her stomach muscles tightened. Close to the most incredible pleasure of her life, she dug her fingers into his back.

He pulled his hips back, pulling all but the head of his shaft out of her before he pushed quickly back into her.

She sobbed against his mouth and shuddered. Her release rushed over her with all the passion and power of the storm now raging out of control all around them.

Clutching her ass to keep her hips pressed tight against his, he licked a path across to her neck.

Still buffeted by her climax, Tanginika was only vaguely aware of his lips moving against her skin moments before his teeth sank into the side of her neck.

She gasped. After the first shock of feeling her blood flowing out of her body and into his mouth, she experienced a surge of delight. Then she was aware of countless detonations deep inside her core. She shuddered and clung to him, lost in the sweet, illicit pleasure in which they both gloried. To have him coming inside her as her blood rushed out of her body. Surely the spirits must be pleased with her to allow her to enjoy such exquisite happiness.

* * * * *

Erin woke, her body drenched with sweat, her pussy flooded, her heart hammering. Lying in her darkened bedroom, she struggled to recall the dream. Or had it been a nightmare? No. The interlude in the jungle with the storm raging around her

and her lover had been too wrought with pleasure to even be in the same sentence as the word *nightmare*.

Or had it been real? She touched her fingers to her neck. Her skin was smooth and unbroken. No matter how real it had seemed, it had been a dream.

She turned to look at the clock radio on her nightstand. Three forty. She slipped out of bed and walked to the bathroom for a towel. After wiping the sweat from her body, she returned to the bedroom to strip off her top sheet. Then she slipped into bed again, lying on the fitted sheet.

Half an hour later, she lay thinking of Aleksander. Why hadn't he made an effort to contact her? Had he lost interest in her? How could she possibly face him again if he had? She'd have to avoid him. When they met, she'd pretend their encounter had meant nothing to her. She wouldn't give him the satisfaction of allowing him to see he still held her interest. Comforted by the cold-shoulder treatment she'd give him when they met again, she turned onto her stomach and slowly drifted back to sleep.

Chapter Four

“So you’re starting to remember?”

Erin met the gaze of Devoni Mitchell, the friend who sat across the kitchen table from her. Several months earlier, Voni had found the man she called her soul mate. Voni kept her apartment and cell phone but had quit her job. Since then, Erin and Voni’s four cousins had learned to accept her frequent and extended absences while she disappeared with Flame.

The five women were very close, and Erin knew that while Voni’s lover had been introduced to them as a tall, dark, handsome black male named Marcus Starling, he preferred being called Flame. Voni had told Erin he often appeared to her as a tall blond with silver-gray eyes.

When Voni had first met Flame, the friends had discussed the possibility that several of them believed they’d lived before or that to be truly happy they might have to take a leap of faith. Voni had taken hers with Flame.

Studying her friend’s smooth, dark, pretty face and sparkling eyes, Erin knew Flame fulfilled all Voni’s fantasies and made her deliriously happy. Erin felt she herself had once known just such happiness.

“Erin? Are you starting to remember?” Voni asked again.

Erin sighed. "I don't know. I'm confused. Last night I had a dream that... I don't know if I should be reaching out to Aleksander or turning away from him and waiting for..." She shook her head.

"For what?" Voni probed.

"I don't know. That's the problem. I have all these conflicting feelings, but I don't actually *know* anything."

Voni nodded. "For who might be a better question."

Erin sat her coffee cup down, grimacing. "That's not very helpful, Voni."

Voni patted her hand. "I know. What can I do to help?"

"I don't know if anyone can do anything to help. I think maybe I just needed to talk to someone who wouldn't think I'm crazy."

Voni smiled. "Well, that would certainly be me."

"What's it like? Being with Flame when you're not on Earth?"

A smile spread across Voni's face. "He's incredible."

"When?"

"All the time, but especially when he's himself. Don't get me wrong; I love when he takes the human form of Marcus or Flame, but when he's really Flame?" She sighed. "That's when the wonder of loving a living spirit astonishes and delights me most."

"Go on."

"I can't really explain what it's like being with him when he's natural, but I can feel him all around me." She wrapped her arms around herself, her smile widening. "I think what I like most about the experience is the wonder and joy of losing myself in him. I feel as if he's part of me and I'm part of him. There's no more incredible feeling, Erin. I wouldn't trade being with him for anything." She frowned and lowered her hands. "Does that make sense?"

Recalling vague memories of a similar experience, Erin nodded slowly. "Yes. Strangely enough, it does. I think I've felt like that once. I just don't know who with or what I should do now."

"You mean about Aleksander?"

"Yes, about him. Of course I might be worrying for nothing. He's back, but he hasn't contacted me." She shrugged. "That fact alone probably tells me all I need to know."

"What do you think his failure to contact you should tell you, Erin?"

"That I shouldn't waste my time wondering how to respond in the unlikely event that he finally calls me. Besides, Erica said Aja was on the elevator making a play for him. Maybe she succeeded."

Voni remained silent.

Erin decided she was taking the time to choose her words carefully.

"I really wouldn't worry about that if I were you, Erin," Voni said when she finally spoke.

"Why not? She went after Mark the moment we broke up."

"I know you don't like her, Erin, but you're not exactly being fair."

Erin stiffened. "What do you mean?"

"I mean you'd ended your relationship with Mark, Erin. He was up for grabs. It's not as if she put the moves on him while you two were still a couple."

Erin bit back the urge to assert she was sure Aja had made a play for Mark before their official breakup. "So you think I'm unreasonable where she's concerned?"

Voni shrugged. "She always seemed nice enough, but since you dislike her so much, that must be a facade. Exactly why do you dislike her?"

"I have no idea." Erin grimaced. "I guess that tends to indicate maybe my dislike for her is a little...unfair."

“Ah. Then maybe the reason is yet to be revealed. In the meantime, there’s really no reason why you shouldn’t call Aleksander.”

“You mean, besides the fact that he disappears for long periods and I’m beginning to fear he might be a drug dealer or —”

Voni leaned forward. “He disappears? What do you mean by disappears?”

“I mean he goes away for weeks...sometimes months, and he doesn’t appear to actually have a job.”

Voni frowned. “That doesn’t make him a drug dealer. There might be another explanation, Erin.”

“Such as he’s some woman’s boy toy? That’s the one I’m trying not to think about.”

Voni shook her head. “That’s not what I meant. I’ll ask Flame about him.”

Erin tensed. “You’ll ask Flame? Does he...? You think Aleksander might be... Why would you ask Flame about him?”

Voni sighed. “Flame might know where he goes when he disappears.”

“Why would Flame know that?”

“I don’t know that he does, but it wouldn’t hurt to ask.”

Erin shook her head. “There’s something you’re not telling me.”

“Okay. Flame once mentioned a living spirit who had waited a few hundred years to be reunited with a lost love.”

Don’t get excited, Erin. “And?”

“And...I don’t know why, but I thought of you and your belief that you’d lived before.”

Erin caught her breath. Was it possible that she had not only lived before but had also been loved by a nonhuman male? “Is Flame with you now?”

“No. He’s at home.”

“And where exactly is home for him, Voni? Where do you go when you’re with him?”

“To a place called the Blue Desert. It’s not his original home, but it’s where he takes me when we’re not on Earth.”

“Why does he go there?”

“Every so often, he has to abandon his human form.”

“Why?”

“He’s old enough and has enough skill to be able to maintain a corporeal form for an indefinite amount of time, but it requires him to expend an incredible amount of energy.” She shrugged and smiled. “And it’s not necessary. I find it very sexy when we’re together in his natural form. He also feels what he calls a spiritual need to be himself sometimes.”

“You make your relationship with him sound so normal.”

Voni nodded. “It feels normal. I love and adore him as much as I know he does me. I’m very happy with him.”

Erin smiled. “I can see that you are.”

“Maddeningly so. Even if I could, I wouldn’t change a single thing about him.”

“I’m happy for you, Voni.”

“Thanks. So what are you going to do?”

“About Aleksander?”

“Yes.”

Erin shook her head. “I have no idea. Part of me wants to see him, while another part feels as if seeing him is wrong.”

“What’s wrong with just doing what feels right? That’s what I did with Flame. If you want to be with Aleksander, be with him.”

“It’s not that simple.”

“Why not?”

“Because I have this feeling that even though I’m attracted to him, he’s not the man I’ve been waiting for.”

“Why does that matter if you feel something special for him?”

“I’m not sure I do. It might just be lust with a capital L.”

“I asked Flame about you and him before, but he didn’t want to *out* another spirit and wouldn’t tell me what he knew unless I promised not to tell you. I couldn’t do that, so he wouldn’t tell me anything. I’ll ask him again, and this time I’ll press him really hard. If he knows anything, I’ll let you know. If he doesn’t, it’ll probably be a few weeks before I return.”

“Thanks.”

Voni nodded. “No problem. Now what are you going to wear to the pool party?”

Erin grimaced. “Don’t you start on me too,” she said.

Voni smiled. “I won’t – as long as you go.”

Erin cast her gaze toward the ceiling. “Like I have a choice? You know Erica. She’ll never give me a moment’s peace if I don’t go.”

“I’m delighted to hear it. You need to get practically nekkid and shake your ass at a few appreciative males.”

Erin laughed. “I do feel the need to unwind a little.”

Voni glanced at her watch. “Then I’d better get out of your way.”

She walked Voni to the door.

“Have a ball at the party and make sure you do all the things I never had the nerve to do.”

“I just might do that.”

She and Voni hugged each other before she closed the door after her.

* * * * *

Two hours later, Erin filled the tub with her favorite scented oil and the bath salts from her secret admirer and happily sank into their sinfully slick, wet comfort. She enjoyed the sound of a sudden, soft rain falling outside the bathroom window.

Lying with everything but her head and shoulders emerged in the salts and oil, she felt almost like the pampered and adored wife of a king of old. With her eyes closed, she could almost picture herself lying in a stone pool in some faraway place while the male who loved and adored her lay beneath her with his hands cupping her breasts while he rained tender kisses against her neck. Overhead, the stars stared down in envy at the two lovers.

As he reached between their bodies to slide his cock into her, she moaned. She tilted her head in a silent invitation.

He accepted, sinking his incisors into the side of her neck.

Yes. Oh, yes...

* * * * *

The ringing phone Erica had installed in the bathroom roused Erin from a light doze. She groaned in protest before she decided not to answer. She closed her eyes again, sinking back against her cushioned head and neck rest.

But the phone kept ringing. On the eighth ring, she sat up and snatched the cordless phone off its cradle hanging on the wall just over the tub.

She glanced at the caller ID before she answered. She made no effort to hide her annoyance. "The saints preserve me. I should have known it was you. What do you want?"

"Well, hell, girl, I love you too!"

As it often did, the sound of Erica's husky voice was enough to curve Erin's lips upward into a smile. She softened her voice when she responded. "Sorry, but I'm enjoying the comfort of a lovely bubble bath."

"Lucky you. Water all warm and slick the way you like it?"

She sighed with contentment. "Oh, yeah, girl."

"And filled with those foul salts and horrible oil that only the maker could even pretend to like?"

"You haven't soaked until you've soaked in them, Erica. You should try them."

"I couldn't get past the smell."

"Okay. More for me."

"Hmmm. Feeling all relaxed with the world firmly shut outside the bathroom door?"

"I was until I was so rudely interrupted by you."

Erica laughed. "Tough cookies, girl. How long will you be?"

"Why? Oh, wait. Let me guess; you're on your way home, and you've left your keys here again."

"Stop reading my mind and get out of the tub." She paused. "Ah..."

"Go ahead," Erin told her. "Ask."

"Okay. I will. Have you heard from Alek yet?"

"No. I haven't."

"Damn! What's he waiting for? An engraved invitation?"

"Maybe."

"Then send him one already."

She sighed. "Or maybe he's just not interested."

"Oh, girl, believe me. He's interested all right."

"What makes you so certain of that, Erica?"

"Every time we meet, he looks at me with this sort of hunger in his eyes. He has to be lusty for you."

She was no longer sure of that. "Really? Remember, girl, we're identical."

"What's your point?"

“What makes you think he has the hots for me and not you?”

“Me?”

“Yes, Erica, you.”

“What? He can’t be thinking of me when he gets that horny look in his eyes.”

Although many people had difficulty telling them apart, Erin had always thought Erica was more attractive than she. Erica was certainly more outgoing. “Why not?”

“Why not? What kind of asinine question is that, Nika? I’m engaged! That’s why not!”

Erica sounded so scandalized, Erin was hard-pressed not to laugh. For all her airs of being thoroughly modern, Erica had an old-fashioned streak she did her best to hide. “I have news for you, girl. Men have been known to fall for women who are already taken.”

“Maybe so, but I know it’s not me your Norseman is thinking of when we meet. I know when a man has the hots for me. I don’t get those vibes from him. So don’t bother trying to sidetrack me. It’s not going to work. I’m determined to see you two become a couple if it’s the last thing I do.”

“You can’t make a man interested, Rica.”

Erica answered in a soft voice. “Trust me, Erin; he is interested.”

“Rica—”

“Never mind more questions now, Erin. I’ll be home in ten minutes, and I don’t expect to be kept waiting.”

Erin sighed. “Make it fifteen minutes and I might actually be sufficiently relaxed to get out of the tub and let you in. Bye.” Smiling, she ended the call, turned off the ringer, placed the receiver in its mount, and lay back in the tub. The water caressed her body. She closed her eyes. Now this was beyond nice. Of course, if Aleksander shared the tub with her, it would be even nicer. But clearly that was never going to happen.

Fifteen minutes later, she had just wrapped a towel around her damp body when the apartment bell rang. She frowned. How had Erica gotten past the locked entrance door without her key?

As Erin walked through the apartment, the bell rang several times. She grimaced. It was just like Erica to drag her out of her bath and then get impatient when the door wasn't answered quickly enough to suit her. Well, she was going to give her impatient twin an eyeful.

"All right. Keep your skimpy panties on, girl. I'm coming!" she called as she tossed the towel aside. Removing the chain and locks, she whipped the door open.

She froze. Instead of Erica's scandalized face, she found herself looking up into Aleksander's handsome face.

He stood staring down at her in silence, his gaze roaming slowly over her large, firm breasts and down her less-than-flat stomach before coming to rest on the wild tangle of hair between her legs. His nostrils flared – as if he could smell the remnants of the salts and oil on her damp skin.

She shivered, feeling as if his piercing gaze stripped away all her defenses and pretenses, exposing her deepest emotions along with her most secret thoughts, hopes, and desires. She longed to toss herself into his arms and offer him her heart, body, and soul, just as she'd done so long ago.

She frowned, her mind a jumble of confused thoughts and emotions.

"Damn!"

The one word, spoken in his low, sexy voice, should have snapped her back to the realization that the most attractive man she'd ever seen stood staring at her dark, naked, nearly full-figured body. Instead, it released a wellspring of emotion. What a sweet delight it would be to surrender to the desire she felt emanating from him. That would require abandoning barely remembered beliefs and needs a part of her found impossible to release.

"Damn," he said again.

The second damn did not sound complimentary.

She roused herself sufficiently to slam the door. Pressing a hand against her racing heart, she leaned against the closed door. Her cheeks burned and her legs shook. How would she ever be able to face him again? Every time she encountered him at the pool or in the parking lot or hallway, she'd blush down to her toes. He'd probably smirk.

A rapid tapping on the apartment door startled her. She jumped away from the door and snatched up the towel she'd tossed onto the floor. She wrapped it securely around her body before she responded. "Go away, Aleksander."

"No."

Somehow the one-word refusal infused her with hope and dissolved some of her confusion.

"We need to talk, Erin."

She moistened her lips. "There's nothing to say."

"There is. Open the door, and we'll discuss it."

Despite herself, she obeyed.

Chapter Five

He studied her in silence for several moments before he spoke. "If I'd known how charmingly you answered the door, I would have come calling early and often."

After the long, uncertain weeks she'd endured, his clear amusement annoyed the hell out of her. She glared at him and spoke from a wellspring of raw emotion. "Where the hell have you been?"

"I've been away."

"No shit, Einstein."

He laughed.

Annoyed, she closed her right hand into a fist. She then pressed it against her side. Otherwise she'd punch him. "Where have you been?"

His smile faltered. "Where have I been?"

"Yes! Where have you been, Aleksander?"

"I...ah...I've been with my...daughter."

She narrowed her gaze. Most people didn't need to pause or appear to be choosing their words so carefully when speaking truthfully. "Why didn't you call?"

"An emergency at home required my presence."

So he considered where his ex was home? "Don't they have phones at *home*?"

He shrugged. "Calling would have been difficult."

"Why? Are you really divorced?"

"I have no emotional or legal ties to anyone else." He caressed her cheek. "Why don't you trust me?"

He had the gall to ask for trust after weeks of silence? She pushed his hand away. "You haven't exactly given me a reason to trust you. Have you?"

He sighed. "I'm not aware of having done anything to earn your distrust, Erin."

"I hear you've been flirting with Aja Miller since your return."

He arched a brow. "You couldn't have heard any such thing, because it's not true."

"Well, she's been flirting with you."

"Am I supposed to be responsible for the actions of women who waste their time trying to charm men who have absolutely no interest in them? I've never given her any reason to believe I find her attractive."

"Do you find her attractive?"

"No, I do not find her attractive."

"What don't you like about her?" she challenged.

"She's skinny with small breasts and a flat ass. As if that weren't bad enough, her skin is..."

"What?"

He shrugged. "Too light for my personal preferences."

"She's too light?"

"Her skin is far too light. I prefer women with much darker skin."

"You do?"

"I do, Erin. So there's no reason for me to waste my time with her when you're just a few floors below me."

Although pleased by his admission, his long silence still stung. "You say all the right things, Aleksander, but actions speak louder than words."

He raked a hand through his hair. "I was hoping you'd be happy to see me, Erin."

Happy? The word seemed inadequate to describe her current level of delight that he'd finally come to see her. Afraid her eyes would reveal her feelings, she averted her gaze.

He lifted her chin so he could gaze down into her eyes. "Erin? Are you happy to see me?"

She drew away from his hand, lowering her eyelashes. "I should probably explain about answering the door naked —"

"There's no need."

He was probably right, because she had the uncomfortable feeling he had already probed her thoughts. Nevertheless, she wanted to explain. "I don't usually answer the door naked."

"Don't you? I can't imagine a more charming way to have a door answered."

Her cheeks burned. "I thought you were Erica. She called to say she forgot her keys again and..."

He arched a brow. "Really?"

She sighed. "I know what you must be thinking, Aleksander —"

He smiled. "I doubt it, unless your mind's in the gutter along with mine."

She sucked in a breath. "So you're going to go out of your way to make this as difficult for me as possible?"

"No." He lowered his gaze to the tops of her breasts. "I was hoping you'd be ready to admit to being glad to see me, Erin."

"Is that why you stayed away so long?"

"No, it's not."

"Then why did you stay away so long?" She bit her lips, realizing how selfish and inconsiderate she'd been. "Is your daughter okay now?"

He spoke after a noticeable pause. "Yes."

What was he hiding? "What about your ex-wife?"

"What about her?"

"Did you enjoy seeing her again?"

He shook his head. "How long do we have to spar before you'll unwind enough to even admit to being glad to see me?"

She swallowed quickly and looked into his eyes. "I'm sure you already know how I feel about your return, Aleksander."

He trailed the fingers of his left hand along the tops of her breasts. "And?"

She shivered and quickly drew away from him. "And what?"

"And when are you going to admit how you feel?"

"I just did."

He shook his head. "That was barely a start. I need to hear you actually admit how you feel. Why is that so difficult for you, Erin?"

If he thought she was going to expose herself in that way... She shook her head. "What if I ask you to leave me alone, Aleksander?"

"What if I tell you that I can't do that? What if I admit that I've been as patient as I can be? It's been a long time since we saw each other."

"That was your choice, Aleksander."

He tightened his lips. "Believe me, it wasn't. I would never have willingly stayed away from you for even a day."

"Really? Then why the hell haven't I heard from you before now?"

"I had no control over that."

"How can you expect me to believe that *and* believe that you're not married or committed in some way to another woman?"

"For me, there is no other woman."

She blinked up at him. Why did she want to believe him when common sense dictated otherwise? "What?"

He took her right hand and held it against his chest. "Please give me hope that my long wait is finally over, Erin."

She sucked in a breath at the yearning she heard in his voice. "I...I don't know what you want me to say or do, Aleksander."

"Do you believe in love so strong it can withstand the ravages of time and even death?"

"Do I...I...? Part of me does."

"Good. Do you know who I am?"

She shook her head.

"Do you know who you are?"

She nodded. "Of course I do."

He caressed her cheek. "Are you sure?"

"I may be confused about you and your motives, but I'm positive I know who I am, Aleksander."

"Do you know what you mean to me? What you've always meant to me?"

"What?"

"Do you have any idea what I've given up for the chance to be with you again?"

She stared up at him. Emotions long hidden and denied started to unravel at his words. Confused, she frowned. Yes, she'd always felt as if she'd lived before. Yes, she'd experienced a familiar ache the first time they met. Nevertheless, while Aleksander was the stuff of which a horny woman's fantasies were made, her fantasy knight was black.

Her yearning for both males felt selfish and greedy. It would probably doom her to a life of disappointment. She needed to choose Aleksander or continue to wait. Standing with Aleksander reaffirmed her belief that she'd lived before. Given that certainty, didn't loyalty demand she wait for her ebony knight to come riding back into her life? She should not be sidetracked by a base sexual attraction to Aleksander.

He sucked in an angry breath. "A base sexual attraction? You find our mutual attraction base?"

Erin's cheeks burned. She struggled to shield her thoughts and emotions from him. She needed to keep him at a distance until she understood what she wanted for the future. She frowned. Had she spoken aloud or had he just read her thoughts?

He shook his head. "You've had plenty of time to figure that out, Erin. My patience is exhausted. Now I want what I've waited so long for."

Why did he have to talk in riddles? Why did she feel so needy and confused? She sighed. Keeping him at a distance would be so much easier if wanting him didn't feel so natural and right.

"It feels natural and right to want me because it is."

She shook her head. "Please don't probe my thoughts, Aleksander."

"Why not? Haven't I earned that right?"

The terse, indignant question startled her. Why did he believe he had the right to invade her private thoughts? A hidden fear kept the question unasked. She stepped away from him. "What brings you here, Aleksander?"

He closed his eyes briefly. He inhaled and exhaled slowly before he opened his eyes and responded. "You and your sister bring me here."

"Erica?" She felt as if he'd sucked the air from her lungs. He wanted them both? "You came to see Erica? Why? Surely you know she's happily engaged."

"What? Erica?" He frowned, shaking his head. "I'm not interested in your sister, Erin."

“But you just said —”

“It would be hard to miss the ring she wears with such pride and joy, Erin.”

“Then why mention her?”

“She called to tell me you wanted to see me. So naturally I came right away.”

Her relief was short-lived. So he wouldn't have come if Erica hadn't meddled. That didn't say much for his so-called attraction.

He studied her in silence before shaking his head slowly. “Damn if you don't make a man jump through hoops for your attention.”

She longed to slap him so hard —

He shook his head. “Don't even think about hitting me, Erin. And don't jump to erroneous conclusions. Yes, Erica called me. At the time she did, I was already on my way out the door to come see you.”

She decided it was better not to dwell on what Erica might have said to get him there. “Why didn't you come before her call?”

“I wasn't sure what reception I'd receive.”

“You were right to be concerned about that, Aleksander.”

“Why? The last time we saw each other —”

She struggled not to lose herself in lustful memories of their last encounter. “That was a mistake.”

His gaze narrowed. “No, Erin, it wasn't.”

“It shouldn't have happened.”

“The problem with that statement is that nothing actually happened.”

Nothing had happened, because they'd been interrupted. Perhaps the spirits had intervened and saved her from making a mistake when she would have tendered her complete surrender.

“No! Nothing and no one is going to keep us apart again.”

She blinked. "What?"

"The spirits be damned."

She sucked in a breath. "Look, Aleksander, I'm sorry if I led you astray, but..."

"But what? You're no longer interested?" He gave her a cool, hard stare. "I know better than to believe that."

Damn his arrogance. She lifted her chin. "Since you know so much, you might also know that I prefer to date black men."

"Why?"

"Why?"

"Yes, Erin. Why?"

"Why? Well, because I..."

He glanced briefly to his left and right. "Do you really want to continue this conversation in the hallway when you're nearly naked?"

She didn't, but she feared losing her remaining control if she invited him inside the apartment. "No, but —"

"Then invite me in."

She wanted to invite him inside. She also wanted to invite him into her life, her arms, and into her body. "As you so ungallantly pointed out, I'm not exactly dressed for company."

He arched a brow. "Your shyness is charming, but this wasn't exactly the first time I've seen you naked," he pointed out.

"Yes it is! I had all my clothes on the last time we saw each other."

He shrugged. "That's not what I meant. I've had the pleasure of seeing you naked on many previous occasions."

"You have not!"

He sighed. "If you only knew how much I've endured for the opportunity to see you again, you'd take pity on me and ask me in."

Responding to a sharp edge of pain and loss in his voice, with which she was all too familiar, she relented. She stepped inside her apartment.

He followed her inside. He leaned against the closed door, staring at her. "Now tell me why you think you prefer to date black men."

She shrugged. "Isn't it obvious?"

"No. It's not. Explain it to me."

She saw sincerity in his steady gaze. How could it be possible that he didn't understand her preference? "I...well..."

He stared at her in silence for several moments before he responded. "Please go on. I don't understand. Why should something as inconsequential as the color of my skin be an issue between us, Erin?"

"Why should the color...?" She moistened her lips. "Because..."

"Yes? Because what?"

"If skin color is so important to you, why would you find my having a similar preference to date black men strange?"

"What?"

"You said Aja Miller's skin wasn't dark enough to suit you."

"It's not."

"Well? Yours is too..."

He stared at her. "Too what? White?"

She compressed her lip.

"It's not only Aja's skin color which turns me off. She's also skinny with no curves worth mentioning. And she's conceited enough to imagine she's irresistible. You are the only woman I find irresistible."

She ignored the thrill his words generated. "What makes me so different?"

"I admit that the color of your skin and the texture of your hair is what originally attracted me to you."

“Then why do you imply my preference for black men makes me shallow?”

“I didn’t say you were shallow, but you must know that skin color is no basis for choosing a life mate.”

“Yet that’s what attracted you to me.”

He shrugged. “Surely you’re not going to admit to being as shallow as you apparently think I am.”

“You like full-figured black women?”

“I’m not talking about black women, in general, of any size, Erin. I’m talking about you in particular.”

Hell. He sure knew how to cut right to the chase. “If you’re going to talk like that, Aleksander, you’re going to make it impossible for me to remain firm.”

He grinned. “That’s the idea.”

“Aleksander—”

He stroked the backs of his fingers along her cheek. “I think you are beyond beautiful. At home, everyone is very ordinary with fair skin, blue or gray eyes, and straight hair. All the females are thin with a distressing lack of curves. There’s not a decent-sized ass or a pair of large breasts anywhere.”

“Not many black people in Scandinavia?”

“Scandin...” He frowned. “What makes you think I’m from Scandinavia?”

“Aren’t you?”

“No.”

“You’re not Norwegian?”

“No. I’m not. Why did you think I was?”

“Well...you’re very fair, blond, tall, and Rica calls you my...” She trailed off.

“Your Norseman?” He smiled. “So she, at least, knows we belong together.”

"I...she...never mind what she thinks she knows." Clearly Rica had called to get her out of the bath so she'd be in a position to answer the door with just a towel when he arrived.

"All right. When I first saw you...I've already admitted I'm shallow enough to be moved by your physical beauty, but I know your beauty is more than skin deep. You are far too generous of spirit to hold something I can't change, such as my skin color, against me. My skin tone doesn't govern anything about me except the way some people perceive me."

He rubbed his thumb against her lip. "Don't let it be more important to you than what kind of person I am or how I treat you, Erin. Shouldn't that be more important than skin color?"

She shook her head. "I don't want you to misunderstand me, Aleksander. I'm not..." She paused. He was right. What difference did the color of his skin make when some elemental part of her had been drawn to him the moment they met? That something went beyond the purely physical attraction she couldn't deny. Given that, why should she allow anything to stop her from exploring an attraction and desire that felt so natural?

Or it would if she didn't feel as if she had unresolved issues with another male she could neither quite remember nor fully forget. Until she came to terms with herself and her possible past, how could she give her heart to Aleksander or any other man?

He sighed. "You're not ready yet to give me your heart?"

"I wish you wouldn't do that."

"Do what?"

"Invade my thoughts."

"I just want to understand you so I can be everything you want and need in a man."

She flashed him a quick smile. "That's a sweet sentiment, Aleksander, but at the moment, I'm not sure what that is."

"Okay, so you're not ready to part with your heart. I want it, and I'll have it sooner or later, but for now I'll make do with possessing your beautiful body."

His seductive words made continued resistance difficult. She struggled to retain a sense of balance. Why did she feel this sense of belonging and coming home with him? It would be so nice to lean against him in total surrender.

She curled her right hand into a fist in an effort to stave off the urge to stroke it down his chest. "I need some time to think this through, Aleksander."

He shook his head. "No. No more time, Erin."

She stared at him. "That wasn't a request."

"It's also not going to happen."

"What?"

"Why bother thinking when you can feel?" He trailed his fingertips along the tops of her breasts.

She shivered and overcame the urge to close her eyes and lean into him. "Aleksander...please...you're making this very hard for me."

He lifted his fingers from her skin. "Do you want me to stop?"

She swallowed hard to still the "no" trembling on her lips. "I...I don't know what I want."

He touched the top of the towel covering her body. "Then why shouldn't I help you decide, since there's no doubt at all about what I want and need?"

She pushed his hand away. "Alek—"

He pressed a finger against her lips. "I've waited so long for you. If I have to wait a little longer to win your heart and soul again, so be it. However, I'm not waiting a moment longer for your body. That, I'm going to have now."

"Your impatience is flattering, but you haven't been waiting that long. We've only —"

"You still have no idea how long it's been for me."

"It's only been nine months since we met, and you took your own sweet time to invite me to have a drink with you."

"It's been far longer than nine months." He sighed. "I had hoped you'd started to remember."

"Remember what?"

He shook his head. "I'm forbidden to tell you."

"What? Forbidden by who?"

"It doesn't matter."

"Oh, I think it does."

"No. It doesn't matter. Nothing matters at this moment except your giving yourself to me."

Her heart raced and her legs shook. "Aleksander —"

"No more talk." He bent his head, brushing his lips against her neck. "I want your body right now."

Chapter Six

She pressed her hands against his shoulders. "Aleksander —"

"Shh." He slipped his arms around her as he rained warm, hungry kisses along her neck.

She trembled. "Aleksander...you're making it so hard to say no."

"That's the plan." He dragged his tongue along her neck. "Don't say no. Say yes." *"We belong together. Recognize that fact and say yes, my lovely. Say yes now."*

"Say yes now." The words seemed to resonate directly into her thoughts. She couldn't ignore or deny them. Nor did she want to. She leaned against him. "I want to surrender to you, but a long time ago..." She trailed off. How could she admit she half believed herself in love with a man who had lived and died hundreds of years earlier without sounding crazy?

He cupped a palm against her cheek.

She stared up at him.

He spoke to her in a language she shouldn't have understood but did. "He's dead to you."

Although softly spoken, the words sliced through her with the pain of a sharp knife thrust deep into her heart. She caught her breath, jerking away from him. "No!"

“Yes. Yes.”

She shook her head.

“It’s true.”

In his gaze, she saw his knowledge of her belief in the past and her desperate hopes for the future. But was it a future with Aleksander or *him*? She shook her head. “I can see what you’re trying to do, but it’s not going to work.”

“You’re misunderstanding me, Erin.”

“No. I’m not. You’re trying to destroy my belief in the past.”

He responded in a gentle voice. “The past is gone, and he’s dead to you.”

She caught her breath. A part of her subconscious knew who they were discussing and ached with a long-held grief at the mention of his death. “But he’ll live again – just as I have. He’ll find me. He has to.”

“I have no wish to cause you grief, but living beings die.”

“I know that, but dreams and real love don’t ever die.”

He sighed. “I wish that were true. But it’s not. Sometimes choices made result in the death of both. Sometimes, a lucky few are given a second chance to experience a love of a lifetime.” He caressed her cheek. “You and I once had a love like that. We can again.”

The tender words surged along her nerve endings, sending a shiver of need and longing through her. She felt weak and hungry for him. Or was it the other male who inspired the feelings?

As she met Aleksander’s voracious gaze, her resolve strengthened. She shook her head again. “No. A love like that only happens once in a lifetime. It’s already happened for me with him.”

His shoulders slumped, and he briefly closed his eyes. When he met her gaze again, she noted the determination there. “At this point I’m not asking you to forget

him completely. I'm only asking for a chance to show you what we can mean to each other again."

"Again? Why do you insist on talking as if we've had a past relationship?"

"Because we have. That's why we were both so drawn to each other when we met again in the laundry room."

"I think I'd remember if that were true, Aleksander." She compressed her lips. "Now I'd better get dressed." She half turned away.

He reached out to turn her back to face him. "I know what you shared with him was special, but we can make memories together that are just as special. We did it once, and we can again. I can become your new one—as you are and always have been my only one. For you, I would gladly surrender my eternal soul."

Why did the thought of being his one fill her with such delight and joy? "I...I can't, Aleksander. My heart is already taken. I've tried, but I can't seem to love anyone else." Which probably explained why ending her relationship with Mark hadn't been more difficult.

He spoke in a low, almost growling voice. "My patience is nearly exhausted. I'm going to need you to try a little harder, Tanginika."

She stiffened. "What did you call me?"

"I called you by your true name, Tanginika." He cupped her face between his palms and stared down into her eyes.

"My name is Erin, and I've already given my heart to him."

"If you'll search your memories, you'll remember how unselfish he was. You'll remember how much he loved you. He'd want you to be with someone who loved you more than he did his freedom and his life. That's how he loved you. It's how I do as well."

Her heart beat a wild tattoo against her rib cage. His words resonated with a deep-seated need inside her. Yet her desire felt disloyal. She should step away from him. Desire for him consumed her instead.

As she struggled with her conflicting emotions and needs, she recalled the dream she'd had where her former lover had encouraged her to love again. He'd been there urging her on when she and her new lover made love for the first time. But who had been that new lover?

She looked up at Aleksander.

He nodded. "Remember, my lovely, and give your body and your love to me again."

Unable to resist the desires he stirred in her, she rested her palms against his chest. "Alek..."

"Give yourself to me."

She leaned into him, her lips parting. "What are you doing to me, Aleksander?"

"I know you're confused and conflicted. I was lost, lonely, and confused for a long time until I realized that sometimes a being is lucky enough to enjoy an enduring love more than once. That's the kind of love you and I were about to explore when we were torn apart. It's the kind of love we'll share now and for all eternity."

"No." Even as she whispered the denial, she moistened her lips and stared up into his eyes.

"Yes, my lovely. I've loved once like that. I thought it was once for all time, and I nearly lost my sense of self and will to live when I lost you. Then I was freed to seek you out again. The moment I saw you again, I felt renewed and reborn. I spent far more time than you can imagine living in hell without you. But that's over now."

He took a deep breath. "Reward me for all the pain and anguish I've endured, Tanginika. Tell me you're mine at last with no shadows, ghosts, or lost loves between us."

“Nine months isn’t that long, Aleksander.”

“I’ve waited a long time – even by my people’s standards.”

She smiled. “*Your* people? Do Scandinavians measure time differently from everyone else?”

“I’m not from Scandinavia.”

“Where are you from?”

“Some place much farther than Scandinavia.”

“You say that as if you’re talking in code, Aleksander.”

He sighed. “If I tell you I’ve lived for a very long time, you’ll begin to doubt my sanity.”

“I think you’re forgetting who you’re talking to.”

He caressed her cheek. “Every second of every year, since I first saw you, I knew you were the one individual in the universe – the only one who could and did complete me, my sheenea.”

Sheenea. The word carried a sweet, familiar intimacy that made her heart and spirit sing with joy. She needed no explanation from him to know the depth of meaning vested in the word *sheenea*. She knew the joy of being his sheenea. But how did she know that?

“Because your heart and your inner being tell you so.” He trailed a finger down her face to her cleavage. “Just as they must surely tell you that it’s time to give yourself to me.”

She wasn’t sure her heart told her that, but her body certainly did. She lifted her chin, parting her lips slightly. “What...do you want?”

“I want your pussy. I want to fuck it and you until we’re one again.”

“Oh...Aleksander...”

He turned her so that she stood with her back against the closed door.

Her heartbeat quickened.

He pressed his body against hers as he bent his head.

She swallowed hard.

He brushed his lips against hers in a soft, brief kiss.

Tiny embers ignited in the pit of her belly.

Aleksander traced the outline of her lips with the tip of his tongue. *"Mine. Be mine again. This time all mine for all eternity."*

A surge of electricity jolted through her. She rubbed her hands against his shoulders. Realizing what she was doing, she pulled her lips away. "Aleksander..."

He sighed. "I can't wait any longer. I need you to be ready for me now."

The pain in his voice stirred an almost hidden similar emotion in her. "I want to, but—"

"But you never got to say a proper good-bye to him." He raked a hand through his hair. "You need that sense of closure before you can accept what you and I can mean to each other, don't you?"

"You said he was dead. How can I possibly say good-bye to a dead man?"

He shuddered. "If I give you a chance to say good-bye to him and to spend a last few hours of love with him, will you then be ready to be mine as we both know you should be? You must be, or I'll lose my mind and do something I shouldn't."

His words made perfect sense to her. He understood about her past and was offering her the chance to say good-bye to her lost love. What were the ramifications of her accepting his offer?

"You can make your peace with the past, and you and I can embrace our shared oneness. You want to be part of our one again. Don't you?"

"I...I don't know."

"I do." He closed his eyes briefly. "I need your promise, Tanginika."

"What promise?"

“Giving you the chance to be with him will cost me dearly. I need your promise that you won’t betray me once you’re with him.”

“How can I—”

“If you want to say good-bye to him, promise.”

“I...promise.”

“Once you’ve said good-bye to him, it will be time to start a new life with me.” He slipped his arms around her, drawing her close again.

She could feel his cock. She shivered. Her body ached for him, much as it had for her first love, but her heart screamed no. If she succumbed to her desire for Aleksander, all her hopes for a new start with the only man she’d ever loved would be dashed forever. Yet there was a part of her that wanted Aleksander almost as desperately as she’d wanted *him*.

“Aleksander, I need time to—”

He shook his head. “I’ve nearly run out of patience. No more talk.”

“We have to talk. I shouldn’t have promised and—”

“You did, and I intend to hold you to your promise. I’m going to allow you to say good-bye to him.”

Her doubts returned. “How is that possible? You said he’s dead. He *is* dead. Isn’t he?”

He caressed her cheek. “You know in your heart he’s dead.”

“Still? Then how can you—”

“It won’t be easy for me, but though corporeal bodies die and decay, where one is loved and remembered, a part of one can always be...summoned for a time. I’ll summon him for you.”

She stared up at him. What was the basis of her certainty he had the will and ability to keep his word? “Thank you,” she whispered.

“Before I allow you to say good-bye to him, I think you need a reminder of what our love and our oneness was like and can be like again.”

She shook her head, pushing against his chest. “Aleksander...” she whispered.

“No more talk. Just let me touch you as only one of my kind can.”

Why did the phrase *one of my kind* not seem like a foreign concept? “Aleksander, I—”

He lifted her chin, drawing her even closer.

She sucked in a breath as she felt his heart beat against her...in sync with hers. The exotic, addictive rhythm captivated her. She closed her eyes and melted into him, sliding her palms over his chest.

He whispered soft, loving words directly into her mind. “*I adore you. My heart and devotion are yours exclusively. My love for you is timeless and will last for eternity.*”

She met his gaze. Lost in the need to submit to him, she parted her lips.

As he bent his head, a flash of lightning lit the room.

She shivered with anticipation and pressed closer.

He swept his tongue over her lips before pressing a long, hungry kiss against her mouth.

The feel and taste of his warm, insistent lips heightened her desire. She linked her arms around his neck, sucking his tongue into her mouth.

He shuddered, his cock pressed tight against her body.

She heard thunder in the distance. Vague memories of being loved and adored during a hot jungle night while the thunder roared and lightning flashed teased her. She had always loved the sounds and spectacular sights of storms.

Now, the storm seemed to fuel her hunger. Greedy for intimacy with him, she ground herself against him.

He slid his hands down her body to cup her ass.

She trembled, rubbing her breasts against his chest.

Without warning, he swept her off her feet and into his arms.

Erin gasped in surprise at how easily he lifted her. She dragged her mouth from his, pressing a hand against his chest. "Put me down, Aleksander. I'm too heavy. You'll sprain something."

He nibbled at her neck. "I'm far stronger than you can imagine."

"I don't want you to hurt yourself."

"I won't." He sighed. "I'll let you say good-bye to him, Erin."

She blinked up at him. "You know about him. Don't you?"

"Isn't that obvious by now?"

A wave of relief washed over her. "Have you lived before too?"

"I'm a lot older than I look, my sheenea. I was there when you loved and lost him. Now I'm going to give you a chance to say good-bye to him so you can let go of all the pain and heartache."

Her heart raced with fear and excitement. "Aleksander...?"

"Do you trust me?"

There was no reason why she should. Yet she did. "Yes."

He smiled. "Then close your eyes and surrender to me."

She closed her eyes and slipped her arms around his neck. She stroked her fingers through his hair.

He gently pressed his warm, insistent mouth against hers in a long, sweet caress.

She arched into him, eagerly returning his kiss.

His lips seemed to sear hers.

A tender flame flared in her belly, quickly spreading throughout her body.

Deepening his kiss, he stoked the flame.

Within seconds, she was on fire with the need to become his one, his sheenea.

As if in tune with her readiness to surrender totally to him, he placed her on her feet and tugged at the towel.

It fell at her feet.

He kicked it aside and stood back to stare at her.

The look of wonder and delight in his gaze negated the instinctive urge to cover herself. She stood before him naked, aroused, and proud of her body.

His gaze rested briefly on her large breasts before sweeping down her body to lock on the dark tangle of hair between her thighs.

He projected his thoughts directly into her mind.

"The memory of your beauty of body and spirit sustained me during my long imprisonment. But you're far more beautiful than I remembered, my sheenea. I am humbled and blessed to have this rare second chance with you."

Her skin warmed with pleasure. Her heart raced with joy and thanksgiving. To be so adored for so long by one as powerful as he made her feel blessed.

He stepped closer, moving his big, warm hands over her breasts in caressing circles.

She moistened her lips and pressed her breasts against his palms. "Take me. Make me yours again, my lord."

Smiling, he bent to kiss her. As his lips covered hers, he pinched her nipples.

She moaned against his lips, aching to feel him take possession of her and love her as only one of his kind could. Still kissing her, he crushed her against the door.

Feeling the unmistakable swelling between his legs, she shivered with anticipation. The time when she would experience the physical bliss of being his one was only moments away.

He slid his warm palms over her body in a long, sensual caress that seemed to adore every inch of her nude body.

She ached with the desire to part her thighs and rub herself shamelessly against his cock.

When he settled his palms against her bare bottom, she licked her lips. Rotating her hips against his, she delighted in the feel of his cock pulsing against her belly. He was sober, and he still wanted her. What a sexy revelation.

“Aleksander? I know we shouldn’t do this, but I want you.”

She sensed a barely suppressed streak of ruthlessness in his response. *“There is no longer any question of my not taking you. I’m only lending you to him to say good-bye.”*

She pulled away from him, sliding her hands down his body, over his chest. She settled her palms over the alluring bulge between his legs.

“Are you ready for me, my beautiful sheenea?”

The nonverbal lovemaking increased the intimacy between them. She nodded. “Yes. I’m ready for you to show me how much you want me.”

“I don’t just want you. I love you and need you.”

“Show me, Alek.”

He turned her to face the door. In a moment of stillness, she heard his zipper slide down.

Oh, yes. Yes. At last he would slide inside her and assuage the centuries-old ache in her. With the soothing sound of the storm outside providing a backdrop, she closed her eyes. She pressed her breasts against the door panels. She parted her legs. “Take me, Aleksander... Slide deep inside me and make me your one.”

He stepped closer so that she could feel his bare, hard cock pressed against her back.

She reached back to clutch at his thighs. “Please...” she whispered. “I need you.”

He nibbled at her neck. *“Once I slide inside you, I might not be able to control my hunger. So I want to make sure you’re totally ready for penetration.”*

“I’m so ready, Aleksander, I’m about to burst.”

Holding her hips, he gently bit the back of her neck.

A jolt of heat and need tingled down her body to her toes. "Aleksander..."

He tightened his hands on her hips. "Don't talk...don't think, my sheenea...just feel how much I want and need you."

Feel. Yes. Oh yes, she wanted to feel his need and desire for her.

He kissed and nibbled a path between her shoulders down the middle of her back. His lips and tongue caressed her bare flesh like a cool, soft breeze, evoking almost ethereal memories of hot, sticky jungle nights spent making love – even as they ignited a coil of heat in the pit of her belly. She'd missed sharing this sweet heat with him.

She released his thigh to rub the fingers of her right hand along her slit. "Yes...yes. Take me."

He knelt, raining moist, biting kisses on her ass cheeks.

She whimpered with pleasure. Lovers had often slapped and caressed her ass, but none had kissed it with this near reverence.

"Your beauty takes my breath away, sheenea."

She moaned and widened her stance.

He tilted her hips and then dragged his tongue over her cheeks.

"Oh...yes...yes...Alek..."

Sliding his mouth against her inner thigh, he slowly licked the bottom of her pussy.

A coil of heat burned in her belly. She thrust her hips backward. "Oh...eat me."

As his tongue slid up into her wet tunnel, warm, seductive thoughts invaded her mind. They mingled with the pleasure his silken tongue and insistent lips brought.

He held her by the hips, sweeping his tongue in and out of her.

She moaned, pressing her cheek against the door.

He seemed to savor making oral love to her as no other lover ever had. He made nonverbal love to her senses even as he physically pleased her.

A helix of desire whirled through her like a sweet, resolute wind, sweeping her off her feet. She lost herself in it, joyfully allowing it to surround and consume her with a heat and passion until she burned with the need to feel him inside her. She belonged to him. Her heart, mind, soul, and body were his to use for his exclusive pleasure.

"Take me, Alek...now...please. Make me your one again."

He slid his hands up her body as he slowly rose.

She bit her lip and pressed her fingers against her clit. "Take me...now...please..."

He thrust his hips forward and then ground his groin against her body.

She shuddered. "Please...don't make me wait any longer."

"Are you ready to show your readiness to be my one by surrendering your body to me without restrictions or reservations?"

Her level of need to feel his cock surging into her aching pussy overshadowed her momentary pause caused by his demand. "Yes...yes. Please just take me."

"As you wish, sheenea." He rubbed the hard, round head of his cock along her slit.

She arched her back, pressing her hips downward.

He nibbled at her neck.

Impatient, she reached blindly back with her other hand. She made a small sound of satisfaction as her fingers closed over his hard flesh.

His breathing quickened, but he made no move to penetrate her.

Chapter Seven

With her pussy flooding, she pressed him against her entrance. “Thrust it in as deep as you can get it,” she begged.

He sucked the side of her neck. Then he gripped her waist and slowly pressed his hips forward.

She tensed, biting her lip.

The head of his shaft pierced her wet, welcoming slit.

A familiar delight assaulted her senses as she savored the sensation of feeling his hard, thick length pushing between her outer lips.

He slid his right hand up her body to cup her breasts.

“I need to feel you inside me. Fuck me,” she pleaded.

He eased his hips forward.

The head of his cock slid past her outer lips and into her pussy.

“Oh...God.” With the first silken slide of his cock into her body, she knew they *had* been physically intimate before. She was going to love it now as much as she had in the past—maybe even more so, as it had been so long.

“Too long! I’d begun to fear we’d never share this enchantment again, my Tanginika.”

Tanginika. While the name felt as familiar and as welcome as his slow possession of her body, a tiny part of her mind rebelled. She was Erin. Erin.

"Mine...mine."

"Yours..." she gasped, reaching back to clutch his hips. "Yes...yes, my Reaper...my one."

He held her still and continued the steady movement until he had buried his shaft deep inside her body.

She ground her ass against his groin. "It's been so long... Love me again."

"I've loved you from the moment I saw you. I'll always love you. You're my sheenea...my one."

She believed him. "I'm yours."

He kissed the side of her neck, running his hands up and around her body to cup her breasts. *"I'll adore and worship you until the end of time."*

Such sweet, sweet words. "Show me," she whispered.

He eased half his length out of her.

"No," she protested.

He rolled her nipples between his fingers before he slid back into her.

She made a small, pleased sound.

He withdrew all but the head of his shaft.

"Put it back in," she insisted.

He obeyed. As he pushed into her, he ground his groin against her ass.

She trembled, waves of pleasure crashing over her. "Fuck me."

He fucked her with all the expertise of an experienced lover who had the patience to expend as much time and energy as necessary to ensure she enjoyed a blissful orgasm.

Kissing and biting the side of her neck, he stroked his long, thick length in and out of her with a slow, delicious hunger.

Her blood on fire for him, she shoved her ass against his groin in time with his strokes. With the storm raging outside, she savored each deep, powerful thrust, feeling her pussy flood with heat.

He whispered to her of love, need, and endless, aching desire in an almost forgotten language that rushed over her trembling body with the seductive force of a gentle but relentless zephyr. It slowly built in intensity until it rivaled the hot, dry Santa Ana winds. She felt weightless, as if she'd been swept off her feet again and consumed by their mutual need.

"Love me, Tanginika...as I love you... Need me...as I need you... Feel the force of a love I can no longer deny or contain... Feel me loving you... Be my one."

His words kept her senses inflamed.

"Oh...my God...Aleksander...your verbal lovemaking is as addictive as your physical lovemaking."

"I live to love, worship, and adore you, my sheenea."

"Show me," she urged. "With your cock."

He sucked her neck hard, pinched her nipples, and slid deep inside her. His cock seemed to swell and harden, so long and thick, she imagined she felt it pulsing in the pit of her belly. Heat flickered there before roaring down her body to her pussy.

Consumed by love and desire, Erin gasped and sobbed softly, wildly grinding her ass against his groin. "Fuck me harder...please... I'm almost there... Fuck me harder and make me come."

He slipped a hand around her body to rub his thumb against her clit.

She shuddered. "Oh...God...Aleksander...I'm almost there...almost..."

He pinched her clit and slid his cock in and out of her pussy with the power of a jackhammer.

The hard head of his shaft hit her erogenous zone.

Her inner thighs shook uncontrollably. She cried out his name and gushed all over his plundering cock.

Consumed by the most blissful climax of her life, her grip on reality slipped. She floated aboveground with the magnificent sound of a raging thunderstorm surrounding her. She imagined she felt his teeth actually sinking into the side of her neck.

Instead of fear or revulsion, the knowledge that he was ingesting her blood heightened her desire and lengthened her orgasm.

He stroked and pinched her breasts through her climax.

Encased in a river of exquisite pleasure, Erin savored the most delicious and liberating release she'd ever enjoyed. It wasn't until her heartbeat resumed its normal rhythm and her grip on reality returned that she realized the source of her belief that she was floating.

Aleksander had literally lifted her off her feet. And his teeth really were buried in her neck. She could feel her blood flowing from her veins and into his mouth.

Both thrilled and frightened by the revelations, and still impaled on his plundering cock, she tightened her vaginal muscles around him.

He shuddered and continued to ingest her blood.

His fingers on her breasts hurt. The tension she felt in his big body and the power with which he drove his cock deep into her pussy assured her he was very close to coming.

She rotated her ass against his groin, continuing to tighten herself around his shaft until he groaned against her neck and came.

He ejaculated into her with such force and for so long, his powerful detonation into her pussy nearly triggered another climax.

Her eyes flew open in panic. She stiffened. She could actually feel his seed shooting deep inside her. She could feel it, which meant he wasn't wearing a condom!

She sucked in a breath, stunned by the implications of unprotected sex with a man who shot jet after jet of semen inside her.

She pushed against his thighs, trying to force him out of her. "Aleksander!"

He slipped an arm around her waist and kept her firmly impaled on his cock as he continued to shoot cum into her pussy. Still feeding on her, he whispered into her mind in a soft, calming voice. *"There's no need to fear, my beautiful sheenea. I can neither get you pregnant nor give you something only a corporeal individual can catch – a sexually transmitted disease."*

Relieved, she relaxed against him. Closing her eyes, she sighed, enjoying the now-tiny eruptions in her.

Her eyes flew open again when he lowered them to the floor.

He hadn't just been holding her off the floor. They'd both been hovering above the floor!

"Aleksander..."

"It's all right, my one." He peppered her neck with soft kisses and eased his cock out of her pussy.

She suppressed a moan of protest at the deprivation of his shaft.

He turned her to face him.

She slumped against the door to stare up at him.

He stepped back and returned her stare.

She allowed her gaze to roam over him. He had a perfect body. His shoulders were wide. A delicious sprinkling of dark blond hair covered his massive chest. His hips were narrow, his legs long, and his thighs muscular. His still-erect cock with a big dark pink head jutted in front of his body.

She moistened her lips, unable to tear her gaze away from his cock. It was big, thick, and glistening with their combined bodily fluids and cum. How had she managed to take all of him inside her without even a trace of discomfort?

He tilted his head. "Does my nude body please you?"

She blushed and then frowned. When had he undressed? "Aleksander?"

He stroked a hand down her body over her breasts and belly to cup her pussy.
"Does this body please you?"

Lord, what a question.

"Does it?"

She nodded and forced herself to look into his eyes instead of at his cock. Recalling that he had bit her, she felt the side of her neck. Her fingers encountered two small puncture marks in her skin.

She pulled her hand away, staring at her fingers. Her fingers bore traces of blood. Surely she should fear him. Yet she didn't. "You bit me."

"I had to. Did I hurt you?"

"No." She dropped her hand. "But...what are you?"

"I am a male who adores you...one who lives for one reason only – to strive and struggle to earn your love and devotion as you have mine."

His words sent a sweet rush of satisfaction through her. She smiled and turned her lips against his palm.

"Did this body please you, sheenea?"

"This body? That's a strange way of speaking about your body, Aleksander."

"Is it?"

"Yes. You make it sound as if it's not a part of you."

"Were you pleased by what we shared, sheenea?" He took her hand and placed it on his cock. "Did you enjoy having my dick in your pussy? Was it big or hard enough to fill your pussy as you liked?"

Her cheeks burned at the memory of sobbing as the luscious orgasm crashed over her. "I...we...yes. Of course you pleased me. But I have a feeling you already know that."

He sighed. "What I think I know and what you tell me are two different things." He slipped two fingers inside her. "You're still very wet...and full of my seed."

Still greedy for him, she fucked herself along his fingers with a complete lack of shame.

He stroked his thumb over her clit. "Do you like my dick?"

"I'm not sure," she told him, her cheeks burning. She tightened her fingers around his shaft, enjoying the knowledge that her juices coated it. "Put it back inside me so I can decide."

He stared at her in silence.

She leaned against the door, parting her legs. "Fuck me again?"

He bent his head to brush his lips against her nipples. "Don't tempt me to take you again, sheenea, or I'll forget my good intentions."

She smiled and licked her lips in a suggestive manner. "At the moment, I have very little interest in good intentions. I'm feeling very uninhibited. Want to join me in a wanton journey to Pleasureville?"

He lifted his head from her breasts and licked the side of her neck.

She trembled. Was he going to bite her again?

He lifted his head to stare down into her eyes. "Would you like me to?"

She slipped her arms around him, resting her hands against his ass. "You can do anything to me that you want...anything."

A slow smile spread across his face, and a clash of thunder sounded in the distance. He rubbed his body against hers.

Her muscles clenched at the feel of his hard cock.

"And what if I tell you I require a show of submission from you before I fuck you again?"

She shuddered with anticipation. "Such as?"

He reached behind her and slapped her ass cheeks so hard, she gasped and pushed against his shoulders.

He stared down at her, baring his incisors. "Are you rejecting me?"

"No!"

"Then don't push me away."

She dropped her hands to her side, confused by his sudden mood change. "Aleksander?"

He pinched her stinging ass cheeks, bent his head, and shot his erect cock up into her pussy with one swift thrust.

She gasped and instinctively wound her arms around his neck as he suddenly propelled them both off their feet. She bit her lip and stared down. They hovered several inches above the carpet.

He slid his palms down her body to cup her ass. "*Wrap your legs around me.*"

She obeyed.

"*Tilt your head.*"

She bit her lip. Should she? What if he got carried away drinking her blood? What if—

He slapped her ass. "*Tilt your head now.*"

"Please talk to me, Aleksander. Tell me I don't need to fear you."

"*Why should I waste any of our precious time together telling you what you should already know? Obey me. Tilt your head.*"

Responding to such masculine arrogance should have been out of the question. But she closed her eyes and tilted her head.

He gently caressed her still-stinging ass cheeks. "*Savor your reward for such sweet obedience, my lovely, adored one. My only one.*"

His only one. She smiled.

He withdrew all but the head of himself from her. *"Give me what's mine. Give me your pussy, sheenea."*

She mindlessly pushed her hips down, which forced his cock back up into her body. Oh...God...yes.

He sank his incisors into the side of her neck and eased his thick cock in and out of her with a slow, sweet heat that set her pussy on fire.

She rested her head against him, enjoying the delicious feeling of having her pussy stretched over his shaft. *"I ache to have you fuck me again."*

"I want more than your delectable body. I won't settle for any less than having complete possession of your heart, mind, and soul. I've waited too long to share you with anyone else."

He fucked her with a slow but relentless passion that not only kept her physically aroused, but also touched her deepest emotions. With each upward movement of his cock, she felt as if he claimed another inch of her heart. Within minutes, her moans filled the room as she wildly ground her groin against his. Her climax was so close. It would only take a few more thrusts to make her explode.

He suddenly parted her ass cheeks with one hand.

She tightened her arms around his neck when his finger rimmed her tight hole.

Her eyelids flew up, and she gasped and blew apart as he drove his cock up into her pussy while he slid his finger up her ass.

Still ingesting her blood, he eased a second finger into her rear and jettisoned stream after stream of cum into her pussy.

She moaned. *"Oh, yes. Yes. Come in me... Fill me with your seed, my handsome, darling Storm."*

"At last you remember." He shuddered against her and shot several more spurts into her.

She cupped her hands over the back of his head, happy and content. *Storm, my love...my one.* She tightened her pussy around his cock.

He groaned and blasted another jet of seed into her.

She smiled. "Oh, Storm, I can feel your cum trickling down my thigh," she told him.

He eased his fingers out of her ass and removed his incisors from her neck. He drifted down to the floor, keeping her impaled on his cock.

She opened her eyes and smiled up at him, still lost in an ecstatic afterglow.

He eased her off his cock and gently set her on his feet.

She leaned against the door, her legs trembling.

He stared down at her, his eyes glowing. "*You remember?*"

She blinked up at him, confused. "Remember what?"

"You called me Storm."

"I did? Are you sure?"

"Yes, Tanginika, I'm sure."

"I wish you'd call me Erin."

He narrowed his gaze but remained silent.

"Why would I call you Storm, Aleksander?"

Several flashes of lightning filled the room.

"So you don't remember?"

She sighed. "What we just shared was very special. Do we have to ruin it by endless discussions?"

"How can it be special when you can't remember why it was special, Erin?"

"Aleksander –"

He shook his head and stepped away from her. "I want you to remember how you feel now with me – when you're with him."

His words conjured up painful memories. She stared at his chest to avoid looking into his eyes or at the erect cock just inches from her fingers...her body...her pussy. "How can I be with him?"

He pressed his cheek against hers. *"Go to the party. Wear your bikini. Entice and enchant him as you've done me."* He straightened and stared at her, his gaze cold.

She blinked at him. "Are you capable of saying anything that doesn't totally confuse me even as it enthralls me?"

He lifted her chin, a smile spreading across his face. "That question gives me enough hope and confidence to allow you to say good-bye. Go to the party."

"You want me to go to the party?"

"Yes."

Then what they had just shared hadn't touched him in the same manner it had her, or he wouldn't encourage her to leave him. "It's a swingers' party."

"So?"

"So there'll probably be nudity and God only knows what else going on."

"And?"

"And you still want me to go?"

"Want? If I had my way, I'd bind you to me and never let you go."

"And yet you keep urging me to go to a party where men will expect the attending women to be...available to swing with them."

"You need to go to the party."

"Why? Will you be there?"

"No."

She sighed. "Speak to me, Aleksander...verbally. If you won't be there, why do you want me to go?"

"He'll be there."

Her heart raced. "He will?"

"Yes." He caressed her cheek. "Go say good-bye and then come back to me."

Suddenly the idea of seeing *him* again after having shared such a physically and emotionally rewarding interlude with Aleksander added to her confusion. What would she feel for *him* after having had Aleksander touch her so deeply? Would her memories of *him* crystallize once they met again? Would her hunger for Aleksander dissolve? Or would she want them both? Could she have them both?

His eyes blazed, and he bared his incisors. "*No. You can't!*"

Under his anger, she sensed a hint of hurt. She shrugged. "Why not?"

"Because for you, he no longer exists outside of your thoughts and memory."

"I don't understand."

"You will." He caressed her cheek. *"When you've seen him again, I'll be waiting for you, my one. Don't forget me when you're with him. Don't doubt what you mean to me or the level and depth of my feelings. My need and devotion for you is unswerving. Don't forget that I have endured more than you can possibly imagine for the opportunity to see you again. Don't forget that you're the reason I exist."*

The reason he existed? "That's...those are strong sentiments, Alek."

"My feelings for you are strong. Do not betray me."

"I...I..."

He shook his head. "Now, you should get ready to go...before I change my mind and..."

How could she long to see another man with Aleksander filling her thoughts and heart with such sweet words? "Wait a minute. I'm not sure I'm ready for this."

"Neither am I, but I don't want to share you with memories of him. Go. Get him out of your system."

She closed her eyes. "I don't know if that's possible, or even if I want to get him out of my system."

"Are you saying you don't want me, sheenea?"

"No, but—"

"You can't have us both. You have to choose."

She sucked in a breath and opened her eyes. "Then I think I choose you."

He caressed her cheek. *"Let's make sure. Go."*

She stroked her fingers over his chest. "Sometimes I almost remember and sometimes...most of the time I'm not sure I'm not nuts thinking I've lived before, Aleksander."

He hugged her. "You need to say good-bye. When you have...you and I can discuss our future together." *"Don't forget me, my sheenea."*

Erin closed her eyes and extended her hand. "Aleksander, I think..." She frowned. She could no longer feel his big, sculpted body pressing against hers. "Aleksander?"

There was no response.

Chapter Eight

She opened her eyes and gasped. Instead of standing naked and shameless in her apartment waiting to be ravished again by Aleksander, she stood in a large backyard in the scandalous string bikini a woman with her curves had no business wearing.

She cast a quick look around. She was at the pool party with no knowledge of how she'd arrived.

There was no sign of Aleksander among the many scantily clad people gathered around her. A number of the women were topless. Some wore only skimpy thongs. A few were completely nude. Although none of the men present were naked, most wore swimming trunks so brief they would have caused a series of traffic accidents on a busy street.

"Glad you came?"

Erin tore her gaze away from a barely covered ebony hunk to look at Erica. The pretty mauve one-piece swimsuit Erica wore complemented her dark skin. Her breasts were completely covered, and a short skirt effectively hid the contours of her nicely rounded bottom.

To cover her confusion, Erin arched a brow. "A little overdressed, aren't you?"

Erica gave her what each sister called the other twin's cheeky grin. She slipped her arm through the arm of the tall, well-built Terrale, who stood at her side. "I've already landed the most gorgeous man alive, so there's no need to advertise my intimate charms. Since you've refused to give Aleksander any encouragement, you need to be barely dressed so all the available males can easily see all the beauty vested in the body of a voluptuous, beautiful black woman."

She'd given Aleksander plenty of encouragement. After all, he'd fucked her twice without protection. She frowned. At least she thought she had. Memories of how deeply he had touched her mind, body, and soul were too "real" to have been a product of her imagination. Besides, she could almost still feel him pulsing and stroking inside her...making her come all over him.

She wasn't sure when she'd given herself to Aleksander, but she definitely had.

"Nika?"

Forcing herself to concentrate on the present, she gave Erica a quick smile before she glanced at Terrale.

He shrugged and gave her one of his I-know-she's-a-little-nuts-but-what-can-I-do?-I-love-her looks.

Erin smiled. After a two-year engagement, Erica and Terrale would be married in less than five months. While happy for Erica, Erin struggled to contain a hint of envy. She feared she might never be able to fully give her heart and love to another man. She was also afraid she was losing her mind. First her uncertain memories of a long-lost love, and now her "certainty" that she and Aleksander had probably had sex.

Erica arched a brow. "So, here's the plan, Erin. Terrale and I will be chaperones while you just run wild among the men, girl."

"Me?" Even as the thought of running wild intrigued her, Erin shook her head. "You're usually the one who runs wild." But she was the one who'd had sex against the door with a handsome, well-hung stud she knew nothing about, and loved every second of it.

Erica grinned. "That was before I met and fell so hard for Terrale. Now, as the still-single twin, it's time for you to run a little wild. Hell girl, go hog wild."

"I don't —"

Erica tilted her head. "Now that you're here, can't we agree that you might as well enjoy yourself, Nika?"

On the point of disagreeing, Erin recalled that Aleksander had insisted she attend the party. She nodded, eager to erase the worried look from Erica's dark eyes. She squeezed Erica's hand. "Don't worry. I have a feeling that after today everything is going to work out just fine for me."

Erica sighed. "That would make me very happy."

"I know. Now." She released a slow breath. "Let's get this party started."

Erica's smile returned. She pumped her hand in the air. "That's what I'm talking about, girl. Go get them."

According to Aleksander, *he* was supposed to be in attendance. Erin allowed her gaze to roam over the people assembled round the pool. None of the attractive men present stirred any of her deeper emotions. Surely she would know him when she saw him again.

She glanced at the pool. The water looked inviting. After a swim, she'd decide how she'd need to go about finding *him*. Moving toward the pool, she was aware of several male heads turning in her direction. Perhaps Erica had been right about the bikini. She climbed into the pool and sank beneath its cool, inviting depths.

She swam underwater for half the length of the pool. As her head broke the surface of the water, a pleasant tingle danced down her back. She looked up.

A tall, well-built man with dark skin and the most incredibly piercing and compelling hazel eyes stared at her from the other side of the Olympic-sized pool. She gave him a quick, furtive look. Unlike most of the other men present, he wore a pair of modest swimming trunks that provided no hint to the size of his cock. But talk about

eye candy. He was big and muscular with broad shoulders, a deep chest, and long, athletic-looking legs. Physically he was as impressive as Aleksander.

Meeting his gaze, she experienced a sensation of tumbling head over heels within their bottomless depth. Strangely enough, the fall felt familiar, as if she'd willingly taken the tumble on previous occasions. Why did staring into his eyes feel like arriving home after a long, dangerous journey?

He smiled, revealing even, white teeth. A powerful swell of heat rushing through her left her feeling almost feverish. Primordial passions assailed her senses. A need to totally surrender herself to him in an intimate and joyful dance of love and desire overwhelmed her. They had shared the mating dance many times in the past. Finally they would do so again.

Moving with the grace of a big predatory cat, he stalked toward her.

Still in the water, she gazed up at him, lost in a wondrous feeling of rediscovery she couldn't explain or deny. They'd never met, yet she'd waited several lifetimes to meet him again.

He extended both hands.

The long wait had ended. The pain and heartache were over. They were together again at last.

"Finally," Erin said with a smile. "Hello." She extended her arms.

"At last, my love...my sheenea...my reason for existing." He leaned down and lifted her out of the pool as easily as Aleksander had picked her up earlier that day. At least she thought that scene with Aleksander had happened earlier that day.

He hugged her close.

She felt the strong beat of his heart against her body. That too felt familiar.

"I've waited such a long time to see you again like this, my lovely one."

He spoke in a deep, warm baritone that touched the endless, aching pain she'd striven to bury deep inside. She felt it loosen and slowly unravel, freeing a part of her emotions and passions she had kept a tight rein on for far too long.

She nodded. "We're together again. I knew we would be one day."

"Yes, my lovely one." He tightened his arms. "But our time together is limited. So we must not waste it."

She reminded herself that they'd never met. She wouldn't have forgotten this handsome, breathtaking male. Like Aleksander, he was the kind of man that, once seen, was never forgotten.

She wasn't sure whom he was mistaking her for, but she planned to take advantage of his mistake.

"There's no mistake."

She looked up at him. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. Share the drink of love and desire with me again." He released her and lifted his left hand.

She blinked, staring at the tall, frosted glass he held. Where had that come from?

"Does it matter? Does anything matter except that we're together again?"

She responded from a well of emotion. "No."

He took a long sip from the glass before he pressed it confidently against her lips. "Share the drink of love and desire with me."

The drink of love and desire? She'd never wanted to be desired or loved more. She parted her lips and shivered with pleasure and anticipation as the cool, sweet nectar kissed her lips and tickled her tongue before sliding down to caress her throat with all the allure of a long-lost lover.

A hot, lusty ache gripped her.

"Dance with me, my lovely one."

He spoke with the assurance of a man with the right to expect her immediate acquiescence.

She eagerly gave it. "Yes. Oh, yes."

When he took her hand in his, she melted against him.

He embraced her.

Yes. Oh, yes. She closed her eyes and leaned closer.

Suddenly, the beat and tempo of the music playing in the background changed from a rather harsh sound that grated on her ears to a soft, sexy rhythm she felt from the top of her head down to her toes.

He slid his hands down to her waist.

She slipped her arms around his neck and moved her lower body against his in time to the music. Feeling the beat of the music in the pit of her belly, she sensuously thrust her hips from side to side, feeling her body come alive as her breasts brushed against his chest.

The last remnants of the inhibitions, which had shielded her most carnal needs and desires from all but her African prince and Aleksander, vanished. She ground herself against his groin, moaning softly in time with the music as she felt his cock awakening.

He slid his big hands down from her waist and back to cup over her nearly bare ass. Staring down into her eyes with flames of longing burning in his deep gaze, he rotated his powerful hips, grinding slowly against her.

She felt the hard contours of his cock taking shape against her body. Liquid need surged through her. The muscles in her stomach tightened. The ultimate dance of love and need was about to begin again.

He slipped a hand between their bodies.

She parted her legs.

He quickly and skillfully bared their genitals.

Erin bit her lip, thrusting her hips forward. She kept her eyes closed, in wanton anticipation of the delights to come.

Moments later, the feel of his long, hard, thick cock pressing against her body awakened long-buried memories of the sweet satisfaction of physical intimacy with him. She had to have him. She wiggled her body in an effort to maneuver his cock between her trembling thighs and into her body.

When she had managed to accomplish her goal, uncaring of the people surrounding them, she widened her stance. Closing her fingers over his tight buns, she thrust her hips forward.

Her wet folds were forced apart as she slowly impaled herself on him. Nice. So damned nice. She sighed softly. Each inch of his hot, slick shaft generated a level of exquisite pleasure she knew would soon consume them both, as it always had.

He allowed her to control his entry into her body.

She kept her slide along him slow so she could prolong the ecstatic joy until his pubic hair brushed against hers. She rotated her hips to force the last inch of him deep inside her pussy. No, not her pussy. His pussy. Every part of her body belonged to him—just as it always had.

She felt a moment of confusion as a picture of Aleksander imposed itself on her closed lids. She dismissed it. This was her time with him. Thoughts of Aleksander were inappropriate.

“Yes, my lovely one. Think only of me and the bliss we are about to enjoy and share.”

“Take me,” she whispered.

When he didn't immediately begin moving inside her, she nibbled at his shoulder and greedily began to fuck herself on his dark, silken flesh. The pleasure that radiated out from her pussy as she rode his big cock was profoundly intense. She suspected her long-held feelings for him were largely responsible for the increased intensity of her physical and emotional response to sex with him.

For a delicious few moments, he allowed her to control the momentum of their dance of love. Then he groaned suddenly and lifted her off her feet. Maintaining the sweet, addictive rhythm of their joined genitals, she wrapped her legs and arms around his body. Waves of pleasure buffeted and then surrounded her.

Cupping her ass in his big palms, he began rapidly walking away from the party toward the surrounding woods. Afraid Erica would object and interrupt them, Erin glanced around his shoulder.

Erica and Terrale danced slow and close together, gazing into each other's eyes. Strangely enough, neither of them or anyone else seemed to think it strange that Erin and the handsome stranger were having sex in public.

Sighing with pleasure, Erin laid her cheek against his shoulder and resumed her greedy assault on his wonderful shaft. Every time she slid her pussy over his hard, thick length so that her pubic hair meshed with his, a feeling of great joy and homecoming washed over her. Somewhere...somehow, they had danced this sensual and erotic dance of love many times before.

It seemed appropriate that no one else at the party should be able to intrude on their blissful reunion.

He carried her into the woods several hundred yards from the pool. The sound of their hearts beating as one intoxicated her senses until she felt lost in a tangle of wondrous emotions.

He knelt, still buried deep inside her aching, bucking body. Settling them on their butts so that they faced each other, with his hard legs between her thighs, he slowly removed her bikini top.

At the sight of her bare breasts, he released a soft sigh. "You are even more lovely than I remembered." He tenderly caressed her breasts, rolling her nipples between his fingers until they pebbled. "So dark...so lush and so lovely. Seeing you like this again makes me very thankful. I'm not sure if this is real...if you're really here."

She wasn't sure it was real either, but it felt real. "I'm yours...only yours."

“Only mine?” He frowned, his hands stilling on her breasts.

She dismissed a guilty thought of the emotions Aleksander had evoked. “Only yours,” she promised.

“Think only of me.”

“Only of you.” She rocked herself on him in time to the inner music burning in her soul. Feeling fire spread through her, she fucked him long and hard, driving his thick cock, glistening with her lustful juices, deep into her hot, quivering pussy again and again. The pleasure built inside her as the crescendo of her soul music soared. She rose with it, fucking harder and deeper with a desperate hunger she could no longer control. She arched into him, gasping as a powerful, blissful orgasm washed over her with the force of a sensual tidal wave. Trembling with delight, she sobbed against his chest.

He held her close, stroking her shoulders and back.

She slumped against him as she savored the last delicious embers of her climax.

Still hard and hot, his cock rested in her drenched channel. He tipped up her chin with a long, caressing finger. “Open your eyes, my love, and watch as I fill you with my healing seed.”

She opened her eyes and looked up into the warm gaze she had long missed.

He smiled down at her. “Hold me in your arms and your pussy as I come.”

“Gladly.” Trailing the tips of her nails over his chest to his shoulders, she held him. She uttered a soft sigh of pleasure when he began to move deep inside her.

He shoved his hips forward forcefully, shooting his burning shaft into the depths of the pussy that welcomed it and him joyfully home. His eyes blazing like twin flames, he pulled his cock out of her, allowing only the big head to linger at the mouth of her vagina, and then he shot his hips forward, impaling her again on his entire length with one delicious thrust.

She shuddered and cried out.

Holding her ass in his palms, he repeated the luscious movement time and time again while staring down into her eyes.

Her passion ignited anew. She ached for him. Her belly tightened; her pussy burned. She cried out and came again. This climax was sweeter, because the emotional connection she felt with him did as much to trigger it as did the physical stimulation he provided.

As her second climax thundered through her, he eased her onto her back, rose above her, and propelled his cock roughly into her.

"Oh...oh. Oh, God!" She shuddered and tightened her vaginal muscles around him.

He called out her name, emptying his seed into her.

Still joined with her, he collapsed on top of her. His big body shook. His dark gaze glistened with tears that streamed down his face onto her body.

Clearly, he was as moved as she was. She held him. He whispered soft words of love and encouragement that she only half understood.

"It is all right, my love. You've found me and reclaimed me. We are together again at long last."

"At long last?" He lifted his head and looked down at her. "Then you remember, my lovely one?"

Since she didn't fully remember him, she hesitated. The words had felt right and had sprung from some wellspring of deep-seated need. She met his gaze. Seeing his need for her to remember, she nodded, unable to deny him anything he wanted.

A look of contentment settled over his handsome features. "Then it was all worth it—even for this short time together, my love." Sighing, he buried his face against her neck.

She slipped her arms around him, feeling as if she'd finally located a beloved part of herself she'd thought lost forever.

Then, with him still inside her, she dozed...

Chapter Nine

Erin lay with her eyes closed, a smile curving her lips upward. A big, warm palm stroked downward from her breasts, over her belly, to cup between her thighs. She squeezed her legs tight, while slowly grinding herself against his hand.

The hand moved until she felt fingers slipping between her wet folds.

"Hmmm. Don't stop. Don't ever stop," she murmured. While she wasn't sure she had the stamina to make love again, she savored the intimacy of his touch.

"Do you still want me, my sheenea?"

She frowned, uncertain why he felt driven to ask such a question. "Yes. Of course I do. I'll always want you."

"Even after you've been with him again?"

Even after you've been with *him* again? She knew Aleksander was the him in question. She couldn't ignore the urgency of the question or the implications. She snapped open her eyes and bolted into a sitting position.

The wooded area had disappeared. She sat on a big bed that appeared to be located within a large white tent. Furnished much like a lush bedroom, the tent included a vanity and cream-colored furniture trimmed in gold with matching gold-shaded lamps on either side of the bed. Through the open bottom corners of the tent

flaps, she could see what appeared to be an afternoon sun shining down on what looked like familiar blue sands.

Elusive memories of long nights spent lying on the cool sands, cradled in her lover's arms teased her. She frowned. Which lover? And how did she know she was once again in the vast, ever-evolving Blue Desert?

"It's been a long time since we were together here. Are you glad to be back?"

She dragged her gaze from the allure of the sands.

A nude Aleksander stood by the bed, staring down at her with a weary look in his silver eyes. "Sheenea?"

She blinked up at him, shaking her head. "What have you done, Aleksander? Why are we in the Blue Desert?"

"Doesn't this place...our place...hold special memories for you as it does for me?"

The energy required to still the impulsive *yes* struggling for release strained her vocal cords. She swallowed and spoke quickly before her courage deserted her. "Send me back to him now. Please."

She jumped as a sudden clap of thunder, accompanied by a flash of lightning, shattered the stillness of the quiet afternoon. Rain poured down in torrents.

He narrowed his gaze, which seemed to mirror the abrupt violence of the storm.

Certain he was the source of the storm, she shivered. "Stop the storm, Aleksander."

"You want to go back to him?"

She hesitated. Part of her definitely wanted to go back to her lover at the pool party. Another part wanted to stay where she was with Aleksander.

He sat on the side of the bed, cupping a hand over her cheek. "Sheenea?"

She lowered her lids, her heart racing as she listened to the rain lashing the tent.

He slipped a hand under her chin and lifted it. "Did our time together mean nothing to you?"

The pain in his voice filled her with guilt. She kept her lids lowered, unable to meet the condemnation she knew she'd see in his gaze. She was certain he was but moments away from accusing her of betraying him. "You don't understand," she whispered.

"Explain it to me."

How could she explain something she didn't fully understand herself? Her conflicted feelings confused her. Her hunger for *him* was older and more enduring than her feelings for Aleksander. "Send me back to him now. Please."

Aleksander sucked in a breath.

The fury of the storm increased. Bolts of lightning flashed; thunderclaps sounded with a deafening roar.

"Quiet the storm and send me back," she pleaded.

He shot to his feet and silently crossed the tent. He ripped the flap back and walked out into the violent storm.

Erin closed her eyes and fell back against the bed. Tears welled in her eyes and rolled down her cheeks. *Aleksander! Don't leave angry with me. Please try to understand how I feel.*

"There's no need for tears, my love."

The deep, comforting voice sounding over the elements didn't belong to Aleksander.

Erin opened her eyes and sat up quickly. Her heart raced with joy and excitement as *he*, gloriously nude and aroused, his skin beaded with rain, strolled into the tent.

She gave a happy scream, scrambled off the bed, and rushed across the tent toward him.

He enclosed her in his embrace, and lifting her off her feet, he swung her around.

She slipped her arms around his body and clung to him tightly. "Don't leave me again," she pleaded.

When he didn't respond, she lifted her head and met his dark gaze.

"Promise?"

He sighed and sat her on her feet.

"What's wrong?"

He cast a quick glance over his shoulder out onto the desert where the storm still raged. "That's not a promise I can keep."

She parted her lips.

He shook his head and lifted her into his arms. "Let's not waste too much time talking."

She swallowed her protest as he carried her across the tent to the bed. He stretched her out on her back and joined her.

She turned to face him, and they lay on their sides holding each other.

He caressed her and whispered to her softly until she drifted to sleep. Her certainty that she had hurt Aleksander resulted in restless slumber.

* * * * *

When Erin woke, even before she opened her eyes, she knew she was no longer in that magical corner of the Blue Desert she had once thought of as *theirs*. Dismissing a jolt of disappointment, she opened her eyes. They were back in the wooded area near the house where the pool party had been hosted. More importantly, she was still in *his* arms. She frowned. So why did thoughts of Aleksander gnaw at the edge of her conscience, clouding her joy with guilt?

He lifted her to her feet. Taking her hand in his, he moved through the woods. "Don't think about him."

"I don't want to, but I think I hurt him."

He stopped near a huge tree and looked down at her. His dark eyes glinted. He spoke in a cool, unsympathetic voice. "He'll survive. He always manages to survive – even if it's at someone else's expense."

The bitterness she heard in his voice disturbed her. She had never thought of Aleksander as thoughtless or selfish.

"You don't know him as I do." He sighed and shook his head. "But we don't have time to talk about him." He caressed her breasts. "I need you again."

She nodded, forcing thoughts of Aleksander from her mind with difficulty. "I need you too."

He drew her to her feet. "Do you remember our first time together?"

She bit her lip, struggling to recall still-hidden memories. Memories of time spent with him conflated with those spent with Aleksander. "I'm not sure," she admitted.

He pressed his right hand against her breasts with his fingers spread. "Remember," he whispered softly.

And she did.

Her thoughts traveled back through time to a West African jungle night long ago. She had sneaked away from her village to meet him. Overcome with pent-up need, he had positioned her against the trunk of a huge tree. She had gasped and shuddered with a pain tinged with sweetness when she became his woman while a sudden storm raged around them. Afterward, he'd covered her tearstained cheeks with tender kisses and whispered of eternal love and devotion. She had basked in the afterglow and wrapped her arms around his neck when he lifted her off her feet and carried her deeper into the jungle to the hut where he took her again.

"Now do you remember our first time together?"

She opened her eyes and nodded. "Yes."

He caressed her cheek. "We often made love standing up."

As had she and Aleksander. Her cheeks burned with guilt at her inability to keep thoughts of Aleksander from invading her precious time with him.

"Let's enjoy each other like that again."

"Yes. Yes."

Leading her over to a tall tree, he pressed her gently against it. He stared down at her. "Is this position uncomfortable?"

His lovemaking would atone for any slight discomfort. "It's bearable."

"You're sure? The tree is rough and —"

"And I'm with you."

He sucked in a breath. "And that matters? It still matters?"

"Yes." She stroked her hands down his abs.

He fondled her mound, his fingers parting her folds. "You're moist and hot."

"I'll always be that way for you," she whispered.

He sighed. "If it could only be so."

She ground herself against his palm. "Why can't it?"

"Because he won't allow it."

She moistened her lips, certain the *he* in question was Aleksander. After all, hadn't he interrupted their time together once already? "Let's not waste our time together thinking about him." She quickly dismissed the sense of betrayal she felt voicing the words.

"No. We have no time to waste." He brushed his mouth over her right breast, allowing his tongue to flick against her nipple.

Erin moaned, cupping her hands over the back of his head. "Hmm."

He took the nipple between his lips. He held her hips as he swirled his tongue along her hardened nipple. He whispered soft, warm sounds, words directly into her mind. "*I love you. I love you, my sheenea. Mine. Only mine.*"

She luxuriated in the words and the power they held over her emotions. He loved her and wanted her to be his alone. And yet Aleksander wanted the same thing.

"There's no time to think of him. Think only of us, my love."

"Only of us," she echoed, while a small rebellious inner voice whispered it wanted only Aleksander. Only him.

He trailed his lips across her body to kiss her breasts.

"Oh...yes...yes."

He slipped his hands down her body to cup over her ass. His caressing fingers sent waves of need pulsating down her body.

"Oh...yes."

He wrapped his arms around her waist and ground his erect shaft against her.

She shuddered, eager to feel him filling every inch of her pussy.
"Oh...yes...please."

"Show me how much you want this and me, my love. Show me the level of your passion and need...it will have to sustain me for a very long time."

She parted her legs and rotated her butt against the rough bark of the tree trunk.

Keeping his lips against her breasts, he slipped a finger inside her.

Tanginika rocked herself against his fingers.

He removed his fingers, easing his hips forward.

She gasped as he slowly sank his cock into her. So nice. She licked her lips and gripped his hips. "I need more." She pulled him closer.

When he removed his mouth and tongue from her breast, she felt a strange but not unpleasant tingling there. She didn't have time to wonder about it, because he finally sank balls deep into her.

She curled her fingers in his tight ass, closing her eyes to more fully savor the sensations coursing through her. "Yes. Oh, yes."

He withdrew most of his hot, hard shaft before quickly thrusting back into her.

Erin shivered with pleasure. "Yes," she whispered. "More...deeper...harder...please."

He pressed his palms against the trunk of the tree.

She ground her hips against his.

He shuddered against her. "*My love...mine.*"

"Yours."

She lifted her chin and parted her lips.

Instead of kissing her, he bent his head to brush his lips against her neck.

Inexplicably, the feel of his lips and teeth there invoked thoughts of Aleksander.

Determined to drive thoughts of him away for good, Tanginika ground her hips against his in a slow, hungry movement.

In response, he sank his teeth into the side of her neck.

A violent clap of thunder and a flash of lightning disturbed the stillness of the late afternoon.

Ignoring it and the implications of Aleksander's wrath, she slipped her hands up his back to cup over his head, shivering with delight as he fucked her.

The storm intensified, lightning striking within inches of them. Chilling rain lashed them and the tree. Branches and leaves rained down on them.

Leave us in peace, Aleksander. Please.

"Ignore him, sheenea."

Channeling her desire and need for the handsome prince she'd wanted for so long, Tanginika forced thoughts of Aleksander from her mind and shut out the raging storm. He was angry, but he would control his anger if only out of fear of hurting Erin.

Tanginika and her lover shared a hot, lustful, yet emotionally satisfying standing fuck. Secure in the knowledge of his love and affection, she even took solace in the thunder and lightning surrounding them.

The physical aspect of their relationship was so primal and powerful that just as she came, the tremors in his body signaled the closeness of his own release. They climaxed within seconds of each other.

After they stopped coming, he removed his teeth from her neck. Both their knees buckled, his cock popped out of her, and they sank weakly to the ground. He drew her into his arms, projecting soft words of love directly into her mind.

Smiling at the sweetness of the endearments, she cuddled close, closing her eyes. She stroked her hand over his chest, taking comfort in the now-softly falling rain. "I never stopped loving you."

He rolled onto his back, lifting her body on top of his. *"It was all worth it for these few hours, which I will always cherish, my sheenea. When we're separated again, remember and cherish this afternoon as I will."*

"I'm going to stay with you forever," she promised.

He stroked her back.

She sighed with pleasure and drifted into the deep sleep of a sated lover.

Chapter Ten

She woke to the feel of warm, tender lips caressing hers, big hands cupping her breasts.

Aleksander. He's forgiven her and returned.

She opened her eyes. The smile forming on her lips froze. It wasn't Aleksander. She was back in the woods with him. Where was Aleksander, and had he forgiven her?

He lifted his head and smiled down at her. "You're awake at last."

She nodded.

"Are you still happy to be with me?"

She bit her lip. "I...yes."

He frowned, his hand stilling on her breasts. "You don't sound certain."

How could she be when her waking thoughts had been of Aleksander? "I could stay here with you forever," she said quickly.

He slid a hand up from her breast to touch her cheek. "If only we had more time together."

"What do you mean?" She linked her arms around his neck. "We can have as much time..." She quickly dismissed a guilty thought of Aleksander. "We can have as much time together as we like."

He shook his head. "If only that were true, but it's not. The time he'll allow us together is going to be very brief."

She frowned. "If you're talking about Alek –"

"Who else would begrudge us time together and try to keep us apart?"

She blinked at the vitriol she heard in his voice. "You sound as if you hate him."

"How could I not when he's responsible for our separation? I'm sure he's had nothing kind to say about me."

She suppressed the urge to push his hand away as she shook her head. "No. He's never said anything unkind about you."

He narrowed his gaze. "Are you defending him?"

"No!" Yes. "I'm just saying he's never said anything unkind about you."

"That's because he's been too busy pursuing pleasure with you when we've both known from the moment we saw you that you were mine. He's done everything in his power to keep us apart."

"No. He hasn't. He insisted I come here to meet you again."

"And you believed he really wanted you to come?"

"Yes."

He compressed his lips. "You shouldn't. He'll say and do anything to keep us apart."

"I don't think that's true." She shook her head. "I know it's not true. I... He insisted I come." When she hadn't wanted to.

"Of course it is!" He smiled suddenly. "Let's not waste our time discussing him. Let's just make the most of the time we have."

She stifled a sense of unease and nodded.

He unlinked her arms and rose, lifting his gaze to the sky.

She sat up, staring at him.

His lips didn't move, but she knew he and Aleksander communicated. He swore suddenly, shaking his head angrily.

She frowned. "What is it? What's wrong?"

"Never mind." He reached down to draw her to her feet. "Walk with me."

She slipped her hand in his. "Anywhere."

She watched his Adam's apple bob. "The time when that would have been possible is long past, but I—"

"Why? What's wrong?" She leaned against him. "How can anything be wrong now that we're together again at last?"

He tilted his head, staring upward.

The storm had finally abated. She glanced up. The trees were tall with branches that nearly touched each other high above in the sky. Through them, the last of daylight filtered down. "Aleksander's back?"

"He never left."

She sucked in a breath, uncertain how she felt about Aleksander having watched them make love. "What does he want? What is he saying?"

He shrugged. "It doesn't matter." He caressed her cheek. "I just want to enjoy your timeless beauty."

"Such talk makes me feel beautiful, desired, cherished, and happy."

"You are all those things." He cradled her hand in his. They walked in silence for a short time before they came upon a small pond.

She stared into the water. A vague memory of a larger body of almost silver water, which was located at the base of a beautiful waterfall, teased her. She frowned. What were the falls called?

He turned her to face him. "Let's swim."

She nodded. "Okay."

They removed their bathing suits and slipped into the cool water.

They swam side by side in silence. After a leisurely few laps together, she swam to the edge of the pond, sprawling on her stomach. Her legs were in the water, her upper body on the ground beyond the pond, her butt exposed, her pussy wet.

She glanced over her shoulder.

He tread water a few feet behind her.

He was so handsome and sexy with his dark skin glistening with water. She smiled, moistening her top lip with the tip of her tongue. "I need you."

"I'm yours, my sheenea. I've always been yours."

"And I've been yours."

He continued to tread water. "Except for the time when you were so happily and contentedly his?"

When had she ever belonged to Aleksander? "I...it only happened once..."

"No, my love. It happened far more than once." He sighed. "But now is not the time to worry about a past that is fast encroaching on our nonexistent future together."

"I don't understand."

"Unfortunately there's no time to explain." He moved behind her and sank below the water.

She lay against the bank, closing her eyes.

He slid his hands along the insides of her thighs.

"Hmmm. That feels so nice. You feel so nice. Being with you again feels so right."

His mouth followed the path made by his hands. He nibbled at her pussy lips.

Oh. So very, very nice. She parted her legs. "Please..."

He slid his tongue along her slit.

She shivered, pushing herself against his mouth. "Oh...yes. Yes...more..."

He lapped at her wet folds with a maddening slowness before he finally started to eat her. The combination of his mouth, tongue, and the water gently lapping at her combined to send her careening out of control to a quick, moaning release. He continued to kiss and lick her through her climax.

While she enjoyed the last blissful moments of her orgasm, he rose.

She felt his cock, hard and wet against her ass. She reached back to grab his hip. "Take me. I'm yours."

He lay over her on the bank, his body stretched against her back.

His cock slid between her legs.

She bit her lip. There was no substitute for the delight of a long, thick shaft wielded by a male she adored about to slide deep inside her.

She ground her rear against his groin, loving the feel of his cock. "Now it's my turn to make you come," she told him.

He pressed warm kisses against her nape. *"I need you, my lovely one. I always need you."*

"Take me...make me yours again."

Holding her by the hips, he entered her.

She caught her breath.

He slowly sank his cock into her still-quaking channel until she felt his groin pressed against her ass.

"Oh...yes. Let me feel every inch of you inside me."

Cupping his hands over her breasts, he bit and licked her neck.

Feeling his teeth pierce the side of her neck, she teetered on the brink of ecstasy and lost a part of herself. He was ingesting her blood again, and she was about to come. "Yes. Yes. Love me. Drink my blood. Consume me."

"I do love you, my sheenea. I always have and I always will. Though he'll never allow us another chance like this, you'll know that I'll always love you. One day you'll know what I gave

up for the opportunity to come love you for just a moment in time. And you'll know he'll never love you as deeply as I do. No matter what he says, I'll always love you more."

She frowned. "No. It can't be just a moment in time. I can't lose you again. Without you there's no reason to go on. There's no one..." She paused, dismissed an urgent thought of Aleksander with difficulty, and went on. "I'm yours for as long as you want me. Take me. Brand me...as you did so long ago."

Even as she told herself the words made no sense, they spoke to a gradually awakening part of her. She wanted and needed him, and yet thoughts and desires of Aleksander continued to plague her. She thrust them away. "I'm yours," she promised. "No matter what he says or does. Take me."

He withdrew from her, removing his teeth from her neck.

She pushed her hips back, moaning softly as he slid deep inside her. She closed her eyes. "Yes...yes..."

He rocked his hips against her ass. "*My love...my beautiful love.*"

She reached back to clutch at him.

He pressed her against the bank of the pond and slipped his cock in and out of her with an exquisite, leisurely expertise that made her stomach muscles ripple.

She ground her ass against his groin, tightening her internal muscles around his thick length.

Along with the pleasure that swelled inside her, she experienced a wonderful sense of being with a man who loved her deeply.

"I do love you deeply."

"I love you too."

With him making mental love to her, they shared one of the longest, tender fucks she'd ever enjoyed. She lost track of the number of times he brought her to the edge of orgasm before his denial of release created a painful need in her.

"No. Please...don't torture me anymore. Let me come...please."

He rained kisses on her neck and shoulders. *"Patience, sheenea. We have to make this last as long as possible."*

"I can't wait any longer. I'm on fire. I need to come. Let me come," she begged.

"Soon," he promised. *"Let's just make this last a little longer."* He pinched her nipples, thrusting deep into her.

She licked her lips. "Hmmm."

He withdrew his cock.

"No," she protested. "Don't stop."

"Just for a little while, my love."

He nibbled at her neck before he licked a path down her back. Gently parting her cheeks, he thrust his cock back into her.

She shuddered, grinding her ass against his groin. "Yes!"

Sliding his hands down to her waist, he withdrew all but the big head of his shaft out of her.

She moaned in protest. "You've tortured me long enough," she protested. "If you love me, let me come."

"You know I love you."

"Prove it."

He slid back inside her. This time, with her wantonly rotating her hips, he fucked her with long, deep satisfying thrusts.

Waves of pleasure crashed over her. Battered by the anticipation of delicious bliss so close, her toes curled. Her thighs quivered. She moaned, digging her nails in his thighs.

He shortened his strokes, powering himself in and out of her pussy with a ruthless precision that dragged her under a giant wave. She surrendered totally. Within minutes, her back arched and she exploded around his plundering cock.

His big body tightened behind hers. Pressing her against the side of the pond with the weight of his body, he thrust deep and hard into her in a series of rapid movements that heightened and prolonged her release until it bordered on a bittersweet pleasure.

Only then did he explode inside her, jetting streams of seed into her.

She felt his cum trickling out of her pussy to stream down one of her thighs. She slumped against the grass, a lecherous smile spreading across her face. Sated and happy, she lay half in, half out of the pond.

He lay against her back, his warm lips pressed against her neck.

With him still buried in her pussy, she experienced a wonderful sense of belonging that warmed her insides.

She felt his breath against her neck. *"I love and adore you, my sheenea."*

She sighed happily, delighted that he continued to make verbal love to her even after they'd both come. Having him retain his erection after they'd climaxed had always made her feel as if he were a part of her.

Finally, a cool breeze blew against the part of her naked flesh not covered by his body. She shivered.

He sighed, kissed her shoulders, and slowly drew out of her. He climbed out of the pond and leaned down to lift her out as if she were a skinny minnie.

Standing there in the dusk, he slipped his arms around her. "I love you still," he whispered.

The words washed over her like a sweet caress. After she linked her arms around his neck, they shared long, wonderful kisses that were devoid of passion, yet that promised a lifetime of love, lust, and devotion. She felt ready to burst with happiness despite the lingering gaps in her memory and his certainty that they had no future together. Her inability to vanquish annoying but persistent thoughts of Aleksander troubled her.

"When will I see you again?" she asked when he finally lifted his lips from hers.

Keeping an arm around her waist, he caressed her cheek. "I'm not sure." He glanced around it. "It's late. I'd better take you back to the party."

She shook her head. "I want to stay with you. There's so much about our past I don't understand."

"You still don't remember?"

"Not fully," she admitted.

He sighed. "You will in time. When you finally do, also remember that I'll always love you."

She squeezed in a breath at the finality in his tone. "But —"

"Our time together has passed. We have to go now." He released her and took her hand in his.

"But —"

"There's no time left for us. We have to go back now."

As they turned to walk toward the party, she sensed discomfort and regret in him.

She shared his conflicted feelings. "Please tell me what's wrong."

"There's no time."

She stopped, forcing him to do the same. "Let's make time."

His dark eyes were troubled. "I had no right to take you without your remembrance, but it's been so long and I've missed you so much, my lovely one."

She pressed her fingers against his lip. "No. There's no question of right. I gave myself freely to you. Don't doubt that, but tell me how we know each other." Even as she spoke, she knew or thought she knew that they had once been lovers who had lost each other. All the passion and love she'd experienced as they made love was not a product of wanton lust. A warm love and a passion long denied had fueled their intense lovemaking.

All her life she'd known something was missing in her intimate relationships with her lovers. Even when she thought she was happy with a lover, there was always a

sense of emptiness and an ache she struggled to overcome. Lovers sometimes thought her cold. She'd even begun to fear she lacked the ability to really fall in love. Now she knew failure to surrender her heart to anyone was firmly rooted in her belief that only one man was capable of igniting the passion buried deep inside her.

Her gaze remembered and caressed his face. His? She frowned. "Why can't I remember your name? Whisper it to me."

He shook his head. "You need to remember on your own. I've already said too much. I'll take you back."

She clutched at his arm, fear forming like a lump in her belly. "Not yet. I can't leave you with so many unanswered questions between us. I have to know when we'll see each other again."

He stroked a finger down her cheek. "If the gods smile on us, we might find a way to be together again. This interlude with you has given me hope. I can go on now, secure in the knowledge that I had one wonderful afternoon with you, my lovely one."

"Well, I can't! Please. Tell me what's going on. Why do I feel like we've known each other for so long when we've never met?"

"You must remember on your own."

"Why?"

He hesitated. "Because I promised I wouldn't coach you or do anything to bind you to me again."

"You promised? Who did you make such a rash promise to? Who had the right to demand such a promise from you?"

He shook his head. "I promised I wouldn't reveal that either. Now, come. I have to take you back."

She sensed she would gain nothing by arguing with him. But a knot formed in her belly as her certainty grew as to who was responsible for tearing them apart again. The

sounds of music reached them. They were near the party. A feeling of desperation settled over her.

She turned to look up at him. "Please tell me when I'll see you again?"

"That's up to the gods, but as long as you remember me, a part of me will always live – even if only in your thoughts."

Oh, God, then he was dead?

"Not as long as you remember me."

But she didn't completely remember him.

"Then maybe he's right. Maybe it is time for you to embrace a new love."

"No!"

He caressed her cheek. *"You deserve to love again, my lovely. You always have. Perhaps it's time I accept that."*

"I love you."

He sighed. *"Our time has passed, but I know you'll be happy."* He turned her toward the party, giving her a gentle push. *"Go, my lovely, while I can still allow it."*

Erin shook her head and turned to look at him. She gasped.

The path stretched on for several hundred yards before it verged into the woods. He couldn't possibly have run that far. Yet there was no sign of him. He was gone again.

No! "Come back. Please come back."

There was no response.

She rushed back along the path where they'd walked together just moments earlier. "Come back. Please...please."

"Don't make this any harder for me, my love."

She stopped, lifting her gaze toward the darkening sky. "Please...oh, please. I can't lose you again."

"The choice is not ours to make. Please return to the party while I still have the ability to see you safely there."

Swallowing a rush of disappointment, she reluctantly retraced her path. Minutes later, she walked out of the woods. As she neared the pool, she saw Erica and Terrale dancing slow and close together.

Erin frowned. She'd been gone hours, and they were calmly slow dancing? She walked up to them and tapped Rica on the arm. "So you two have my back, huh?"

Erica lifted her head from Terrale's shoulder and sighed. "We will if you ever decide to make a move, girl."

She stared at Rica. "What?"

"After the hours you've spent in that blasted pool, you should be feeling waterlogged by now. When are you going to make a move on one of these single men?" She smiled, her eyes lighting up. "Or are you saving it for Aleksander after all?"

Erin blinked. Clearly Erica was unaware of the hours she'd spent in the woods. She wasn't sure how Erica had missed seeing her alight from the pool and accept that drink from her long-lost lover.

Erica frowned, pulling out of Terrale's arms. "Erin? What's wrong? Why are you staring at me like that? Are you all right?"

Erin shivered. She now knew why no one had seemed disturbed when she had impaled herself on her lover's cock in the middle of the party. Apparently no one had seen it happen! If not for her sexual satisfaction, she might have been tempted to believe she'd imagined the bittersweet tryst in the woods.

She understood very little of what had happened to her since Aleksander's return. She needed to be alone to think. "I'm okay, but I'm feeling a little tired," she said. "Can we go?"

Erica gave her a long look. "Are you sure you're all right?"

Erin nodded and smiled. "Don't worry about me, Rica. I'm just very tired."

Erica grimaced. "No doubt from all that swimming. Are you sorry you came?"

Sorry? She recalled those wonderful, uninhibited hours in the woods. "No, I'm glad I came."

Erica reached for her hand. "Nika?"

She squeezed her twin's hand. "I'm tired, but otherwise okay, Rica."

"So you want to go home to Aleksander?"

Erin's feelings about Aleksander were more conflicted than ever. While part of her longed to see him again, another part held him responsible for her present unhappiness. Mindful of Erica's searching gaze, she smiled. "Why not?"

Erica smiled. "Great. Let's get you home to your Norseman."

Seated in the back of Terrale's car, Erin made an effort to keep her mind focused on the conversation during the ninety-minute drive back to Philly. Erin became aware of a stilted silence. She sighed, realizing she'd probably said something that made no sense. "Ah...I—"

Erica turned to smile at her. "It's okay, girl. You don't have to work so hard at trying to make conversation with us."

Erin nodded in gratitude and sank back against her seat. She closed her eyes and made no effort to join in Erica and Terrale's quiet conversation during the remainder of the drive.

Chapter Eleven

When Terrale parked in their second space, Erin leaned between the front seats to kiss Erica's cheek. She squeezed Terrale's shoulder. "Thanks, you two." She pushed the car door open and slipped out.

Erica alighted from the passenger-side door. "Are you sure you're all right?"

Erin nodded. "I'm positive."

She nibbled at her bottom lip. "Maybe I should stay here with you."

While Erin appreciated her concern, she needed to be alone. "That's not necessary, Rica." She kissed her twin's cheek. "Don't worry about me. Go have a great weekend. I'll see you Monday night."

Erica hesitated a moment longer before she finally nodded. She embraced Erin briefly before she got back into Terrale's car and closed the door.

Erin watched Terrale drive away before she entered the apartment complex and rode the elevator up to their apartment. While undressing in her bedroom, her arm brushed across her right nipple. A tingling sensation shot through her.

She glanced down and sucked in a quick breath. Spread across her right nipple was what looked like a tattoo or brand in the shape of an erect cock!

The sight of the brand forced long-suppressed memories up past her subconscious and into her conscious thoughts. Long ago she had loved and adored a handsome African warrior who was promised to a neighboring king's daughter.

A wave of pain accompanied the full memories of their last meeting. She closed her eyes, leaning her forehead against the wall near her dresser. She took a measure of comfort in the knowledge that he had been happy and pleased just moments before his untimely death.

Recalling her own close escape, she opened her eyes. Back in the West African jungle, she had thought she owed her salvation to the spirits. She frowned, turning her thoughts to what she now knew about the so-called spirits, Aleksander, and *him*.

As he died, her hopes and plans for the future, as well as a large part of her, had died with him. She had gone on living. She had endured several lifetimes since without ever knowing true love again.

And yet... Erin struggled to grasp the remnants of an elusive memory. Once she *had* been adored by another male. At least she thought she had. Why couldn't she remember?

Clear your mind. Become one with the past. Allow it to live again.

Although uncertain of the origins of the admonition, it felt right.

She took a series of deep breaths before she closed her eyes.

After moments of blackness, she tilted her head. A faint roar she recognized as generated by a powerful waterfall reached her ears. A smile curved her lips. The Falls. She drew in a deep breath. As she slowly released it, a vision crystallized on her closed lids.

She stood naked at the base of a crystal clear, majestic waterfall with the morning sun warming her wet skin. Her eyes were closed. Her head tilted. An ecstatic smile curved her lips upward as she reached behind her to clutch at her lover's thighs.

A nude, well-built male with tanned skin and dark blond hair stood behind her. His big hands cupped her breasts. He slid a thick, hard cock in and out of her stretched pussy as he ingested her blood.

Across the ages, Erin shook with the memory of ecstatic delight her unknown lover had given her. Unknown? She opened her eyes. Surely she'd just seen herself with Aleksander. She frowned. He'd behaved like a vampire, ingesting her blood. She'd loved it until a moment of sudden fear and inexplicable anguish gave her pause.

Erin lifted a hand to her neck. Her fingers encountered two small puncture marks. Oh, God. What was happening to her? Why did she feel excitement instead of fear now?

Her breasts tingled. She looked down at them. The tips of both nipples bore impressions of his erect cock. She trembled at the signs of his endless love and passion for her.

"Malikinder," she whispered, embracing and welcoming the painful memories. "Malikinder, my love, I finally remember. I remember. Where are you?" *I remember. Where are you? Return to me.*

She heard a low, almost musical, whisper-soft sound. A warm breeze swept over her, filling her with a sense of well-being. The spirit, which had saved her so long ago, was present.

"Will I do?"

Erin opened her eyes and stared around her bedroom. She saw no one. Yet she knew she was no longer alone. She could feel the spirit...feel him... She frowned. The presence felt familiar, yet it wasn't Malikinder. "Where are you? Show yourself."

"I can't."

"Why not? I need to see you."

"I'm too weak to assume a corporeal form again so soon, but I'm here."

She sighed, struggling with conflicting emotions. "You're not Malikinder."

"No."

"Who are you?"

A warm breeze caressed her naked body.

She crossed her arms over her breasts. "Who are you?"

"You've forgotten me so quickly?"

"Who are you? What's your name?"

"I am known as the spirit who quiets or summons the wind and the lightning. Some call me Stormreaper."

"Stormreap...storm? Aleksander? Aleksander?" She bit her lip. "It's you...isn't it?"

"Yes, my sheenea. It is."

She closed her eyes. "Why can't I see you?"

"I'm unable to assume a physical form at the moment."

Which meant he wasn't human. She'd apparently slept with a being who wasn't human. She'd also slept with a man who'd died hundreds of years earlier. But then if any of this were true, she had also died hundreds of years earlier. She had probably died more than once. What did that make her?

She opened her eyes. "You were the spirit who saved me in the West African jungle. Didn't you?"

"Yes. I couldn't allow you to die while it was in my power to protect you."

She sucked in a breath, sinking down onto the side of her bed. "If you saved me, you could also have saved Malikinder as well."

He didn't respond.

"Why did you allow him to die, Aleksander?"

Continued silence greeted her question. She closed her eyes. She could still feel his presence. "Aleksander? Why did you allow him to die?"

"We are forbidden to interfere in the affairs of humans."

His answer angered her. "Then why did you save me?"

"I had to, but it was viewed as a grave lapse in judgment, for which I paid dearly...for which I am still paying...but I'd gladly do it again."

Recalling the depth of his passion when he'd made love to her in the Blue Desert and at the base of the Crystal Falls on another planet, she knew why he'd saved her but not Malikinder. "You allowed him to die because you were jealous," she whispered, angry tears filling her eyes. "You're still jealous."

"I love you. I worship you. I live only to please you and attempt to earn your affection."

She believed him, but it didn't lessen her anger and pain at her certainty that he had allowed the man she loved to die for selfish reasons. "He loved me too, and we wanted to be together. You could have saved him, but you selfishly allowed him to die."

"You don't understand. I was too weak. I couldn't save you both..."

"Please don't lie to me, Aleksander. Even now I can feel your malice for him. You didn't want to save him!"

A sense of confusion and pain surrounded her. "No. I didn't want to."

Rage filled her at the admission.

"Please let me explain."

"No."

"Please. Even if I'd wanted to save you both, I was much younger then and lacked the power or ability to save you both. He knew that –"

"What he knew is what I know now. You're the one who's keeping us apart for your own selfish reasons."

"That's not true."

"Go away. Please."

"Don't ask me to do that. I can't...not after all the time...all the anguish I've endured for the opportunity to be with you again."

"It was wasted effort. I don't want to see you again, Stormreaper or Aleksander or whoever the hell you are."

"Please –"

She lay on the bed on her side with her knees bent, her eyes filling with tears. "If you have any real feelings for me, please just go away and leave me alone."

"Tangi –"

"Don't call me that! If you feel half of what you say you do for me, leave me in peace to try and deal with the mess you've again made of my life. I need to think without your self-serving presence."

"My feelings for you have dominated everything I've ever done since I first saw you. If you give me a chance to explain –"

"Leave me in peace! Please!"

A sudden, brutal chill washed over her. She shivered. It lasted several seconds before it and he were no longer there.

He'd left her as she insisted he do. So why did she feel conflicted? She closed her eyes, swallowing the urge to call out and beg him to return to her. She lay for a long time with tears streaming down her cheeks before she drifted into an exhausted sleep.

Struggling with feelings of rage and despair, Aleksander reluctantly left Erin alone. Still too weak to resume human form, from which he suspected he might have stood a better chance of having her listen to his side of the story, he returned to the haven of rogue spirits, the Blue Desert.

A large white tent sat like a beacon of hope in the middle of an expanse of blue sands in the desert night. In his spirit form, Aleksander hovered several feet above the ground.

The closed flap of the tent and the lack of light from within indicated he'd arrived at an inopportune time. Interrupting the powerful spirit who the senior members of The

Council contemptuously called Lord Rogue would not be wise. Yet the thought of returning alone to the dwelling he'd prepared with the hope of once again sharing it with Erin increased his rage. He had no mechanism for dispersing it, unless he found someone to expend it on.

No one with a corporeal form dwelled in this area of the Blue Desert. Anyone he encountered should be able to defend himself or have a protector capable of doing the job.

He moved away from the tent.

"Reaper."

He turned.

A tall blond male dressed in white pants emerged from the tent.

Noting the annoyed look on the other's face, Stormreaper spoke quickly. *"I know it's unforgivable to intrude on your time with your sheenea, Lord."*

"And yet you're here anyway – intruding."

"Your outspoken defense of my right to make my own choice was instrumental in The Council lifting its ban on my return to Earth."

"It was also instrumental in branding you a rogue spirit banned from home until you renounce your perverted ways."

"That's not something I plan to do."

"The ban is lifted, and you're free to go wherever you like and to do whatever you like. Why are you here instead of with your sheenea?"

Stormreaper had to take several moments before he could respond in a calm manner. *"She's started to remember, and she's chosen him."*

"Are you surprised? If you've learned anything from your previous time spent on Earth, it should have been that nice guys finish last. Instead of channeling all your energies into winning her, you were foolish enough to help your competition. Why did you provide the energy necessary for him to assume a human form again?"

"He begged me to, and she needed a chance to say good-bye."

Flame shook his head. "You have to stop thinking of him as part of The One and start thinking of him as a rival who will use every opportunity you're foolish enough to provide against you."

"We were once very close, and he's so lost without her."

"As you will be if you don't stop allowing him to use you! My patience with your inability to do what's necessary to win her is limited, Reaper. Make a decisive move, and I'll ensure none of the others interfere. But do it soon, or you'll be on your own."

"She's made her choice."

"Then change her mind!" Flame glared up at him. "She's human. She can't possibly prefer one who can only assume a corporeal body with your help. Woo her. Win her."

"How?"

Flame's nostrils flared. "Kidnap her if you have to. Ravish her until she surrenders to you. How the hell should I know? She's your sheenea. Find a way to make her understand and appreciate the magnitude of your feelings for her. Once she knows that, there's no way she'll choose him."

"I want her to want me."

Flame sighed. When he spoke again, his voice held no trace of annoyance. "Sometimes you have to help a human woman understand what she really wants. If you want her, then start acting like it. Do whatever you have to do, regardless of the consequences."

"The Council will –"

Flame's eyes blazed, and he suddenly thrust his right hand skyward. When he opened his hand, flames shot from his palm, lighting up the night sky. "The Council will stay the hell out of this. Any Council member who dares to interfere will learn just why the hell they so rightly dubbed me Lord Rogue."

Flame lowered his arm and turned his attention back to him. He parted his lips. "She's yours for the taking, Reaper. So take her."

Noting the traces of blood on Flame's incisors, Stormreaper hesitated. "It's true what the elders say. Isn't it?"

"The elders say many things, Reaper. To which one of their so-called truisms do you refer?"

"That it's degrading for us to assume a corporeal form for the purposes of mating with a human. That's why the longer we retain the form, the more we revert to the parasitic vampires we once were."

"We weren't always parasitic vampires. Don't forget the time when we were vampires with a noble calling. Don't forget when we risked our lives and eternal souls to help others."

"Those days are long gone, Lord. Now we require the blood of our human lovers to sustain us without any benefit to them."

Flame's eyes glowed. "Maybe so, but despite the elders' views, there are few things that can compare to the innate beauty and sensuality of one who accepts you as you are and willingly and gladly offers the sweet, sustaining power of her blood.

"Are there trade-offs? For some of us, there will be. Some are not as powerful while in human form. The younger and less skillful among us are more vulnerable to attack the longer they retain their human form. You know that from what happened to Malikinder. Some run the risk of losing their ability to shed the human form at will. Some run the even greater risk of full reversion to the ravenous, soulless vampires we once were.

"There are many risks involved in choosing the love of a human female over the spiritual companionship and oneness with which the elders are content. Are you willing to face those risks to be with your sheenea, Reaper?"

The prospect of losing the unique ability to experience the oneness with those of his own kind, while daunting, paled in comparison to the thought of never knowing the absolute joy and bliss of mating with Erin. "Yes."

"Then go win her. I and the rogues who have chosen to align themselves with me will ensure the elders leave you in peace."

Chapter Twelve

Erin woke with a start, bolting into a sitting position in her darkened bedroom. Heart racing, she turned on her bedside lamps. She glanced around. Despite appearances, she knew she was not alone in the room. She could feel someone else there. Worse, it wasn't Malikinder or Aleksander.

She pulled the sheet tangled at her feet up to cover her breasts. "Who's there?"

A tall, well-built blond with silver-gray eyes dressed in white jeans and a white pullover suddenly appeared at the foot of her bed.

She sucked in a breath, pressing back against her headboard.

The man held up a large hand, palm outward. He shook his head slowly. "You have no need to be afraid of me, Tanginika."

"No one calls me that anymore."

He tilted his head. "But you are the same one who was called Tanginika?"

She sighed. "I'm not so sure of that, and anyway it was a long time ago. My name is Erin. Who are you?"

"I'm Flame."

"Voni's Flame?"

He nodded. "Yes."

Her shoulders slumped in relief. That explained who he was, but not how he had gained entry into her apartment. Of course she knew he was no more human than Malikinder or Aleksander. "Why are you here?"

"I'm here to talk to you about Storm – Aleksander."

She shook her head. "There's nothing to say. In fact –"

He advanced slowly around the bed until he stood staring down at her. "In fact, there is far more to say than you can imagine. You have no idea what he's endured because of his feelings for you."

"I know what he's allowed to happen to Malikinder, who I love."

"Malikinder? The one you call Malikinder might more aptly be called Malice. He's done nothing but repay Aleksander's kindness with maliciousness."

She stiffened. "Aleksander's kindness to Malikinder? All he's done for Malikinder is –"

He shook his head and held up his hand. "Don't presume to speak about things of which you know very little."

Despite herself, she swallowed the retort trembling on her lips.

"What do you know about us?"

"Almost nothing," she admitted.

"Then allow me to school you about us. Malikinder, Aleksander, and I are living spirits who have long since evolved to a point where we no longer have corporeal bodies. The eldest among us believe assuming a physical body for what they'd call lustful and corrupt purposes is an evolutionary step backward.

"Assuming a physical form for a protracted length of time requires an incredible amount of energy. The very young among us, as both Malikinder and Aleksander were when they fell for you, risk the most when they retrogress. They are more vulnerable to harm than they would ever be in our natural form. When Malikinder romanced you in

the West African jungle, he was very weak by our standards. As powerful as we are, we have equally powerful enemies who seek our destruction. Once one of our kind commits the sin of retrogression, The Council of Elders withdraws its considerable protection. Who do you think protected Malikinder from our enemies while he was with you in human form?"

She tightened her lips. "If Aleksander was so protective, why did he allow Malikinder to die?"

"He wasn't strong enough to protect you both. A *Creatoff* who dies while human is condemned to an eternity of never belonging to our collective or one again. He can never return to exist among the others. If he's very young and inexperienced, he probably won't be able to assume human form again. For a living spirit, such an eventuality is..."

She watched his Adam's apple bob several times before he went on.

"Without a corporeal body, all a living spirit has is the belonging to the collective and the sense of oneness we all crave. If that's taken from us without any replacement, there's no one to share the rest of eternity with. By our very nature, we crave intimacy." He sucked in a breath. "To spend the rest of eternity alone...such an eventuality is purgatory to us."

The thought of Malikinder relegated to such a long, cold existence sent a chill through her. She blinked rapidly to keep tears at bay. How could Aleksander have allowed such a thing to happen to him?

"In saving you, Aleksander broke one of the *Creatoff's* cardinal directives, which mandate we protect one of our own first. The Council has the power and authority to impose harsh penalties on any who dare transgress our most sacredly held beliefs. The Council decreed both Aleksander and Malikinder guilty of such sins when they fell for you. Both paid a price for their defiance of The Council of Elders."

"Maybe so, but because of Aleksander's jealousy, Malikinder paid with his life and his eternal peace of mind."

“You have your facts wrong, Tanginika. Despite his feelings for you and The Council’s decree, Aleksander protected Malikinder from our enemies for as long as he could. The Creatoff believe retrogression corrupts the sanctity of our spirit. In this, I have to believe The Council. What other explanation explains how Malikinder repaid Aleksander with such a shocking lack of gratitude?”

The disgust in his voice left her in no doubt as to the truthfulness of his words. “What...what do you mean? What...did he do?”

“Despite his grief at losing Malikinder, Aleksander was able to conceal his actions from The Council. Malikinder returned home to rectify that.”

She recoiled. “No.”

“Yes.”

“No. He must have returned home because he wanted to belong again.”

“No. He knew that was improbable at best. He returned to the collective for the sole purpose of betraying Aleksander.”

“If Aleksander was so generous, why would Malikinder possibly do such a thing?”

“Why do you think Malikinder betrayed him?”

“I don’t know that he did.”

He nodded. “Yes, you do.”

She recalled Malikinder’s many condemnations of Aleksander. She knew Flame spoke the truth, but she wasn’t about to admit it to him.

“Malikinder did it because he was determined not to allow Aleksander to be happy with you.”

“You make him sound selfish.”

“He is selfish. He went out of his way to ensure Aleksander was punished. What was Aleksander’s sole transgression? Protecting Malikinder while he romanced you – a female Aleksander hungered for himself. When some on The Council were inclined to

overlook Aleksander's transgression because of his youth and prior obedience, Malikinder protested until The Council summoned Aleksander home and punished him, and inadvertently you as well."

"Me? How?"

"Have you no memory of the Crystal Falls and the happy times you knew there with Aleksander? Has time eroded all memory of your renewed grief when they ripped you two apart and returned you to Earth to live the remainder of your life without the adoration of either of the two who loved you more than they did their own sanity and freedom?"

"You're only saying these things because Malikinder is black and Aleksander isn't."

He shook his head.

"Aleksander told me everyone at home was white. You're taking his side out of prejudice."

He stared at her in silence before responding in a cold voice. "The reason we generally assume white corporeal bodies is because they don't require us to expend the massive amount of energy darker ones do. Even those of us who are capable of assuming a darker skin tone can only do it for a limited period of time.

"While we have prejudices, they are *not* based on skin color." He softened his expression. "In fact, those of us who have retrogressed nearly always prefer women with dark skin. So you see, Tanginika, being black has no negative connotations with us. What I despise about Malikinder is his betrayal of Aleksander."

His words evoked a faint remembrance of an overwhelming grief that even now sent a shiver of pain through her. "I...it really happened?"

"Yes." He touched her cheek. "But it's in the past. Aleksander's punishment has ended, and you now have another chance for happiness together."

She pushed his hand away. "He's not the one I want."

He swore. "Just as I suspected; you have no idea what you really want or even what's in your best interests."

His arrogance annoyed her. "What?"

"I'm sure you heard me. If you reject him after all he suffered for an opportunity to spend what is to us but a brief moment in time with you, then you are not worthy of him!"

She sucked in an angry breath. What could Voni possibly see in this creature who thought he knew what she wanted and needed better than she did? "Get out."

He frowned. "As you wish, but it's time you had a reality check."

She stiffened. "Is that a threat?"

He narrowed his gaze. "You're one of the people Devoni cherishes most. There is no question of a threat from me to you. It was merely a statement of fact."

"What fact?"

He stared at her. "That it's time you realize he doesn't have to settle for you."

"Settle for me? Are you implying I'm not good enough for him?"

He arched a brow. "Do you really think you are?"

"Why you...you... Yes I do!"

"Then you're more deluded than I thought."

"What?"

"Why should he subject himself to your ungrateful shit when he can have his pick of women? This city is filled with women who possess far greater beauty and charm than you can lay claim to. In fact, there are several women in this building who would jump at the chance to be his one. With them, he wouldn't need to worry that they'd quickly spread their legs for any male who waved a big dick in their general direction the moment his back was turned."

"What...are you implying I'm...easy?"

"Implying it? No."

“Good, because I’m –”

“I’m not implying anything. I’m coming right out and saying it. And while I’m at it, I might as well point out you could stand to lose a little weight.”

She stared at him, speechless for several moments before she found her voice. “You arrogant bastard! How dare you!”

He leaned over her, his eyes glowing, his incisors bared. “How dare you think I’m going to waste another moment of my time in your company?”

“Wait a...” She blinked, and he was no longer there.

Erin allowed the sheet to fall away from her body and lay back in her bed, her heart racing. She glanced at her bedside clock. Two ten a.m. It was too late to call Voni and ask her to tell Flame to stay away from her.

Who the hell did he think he was to imply she was overweight and easy? And why the hell did he think he had the right to tell her who she should love? While Aleksander had managed to stir her emotionally, her heart had always belonged to Malikinder. It always would.

Once her anger had subsided, Flame’s revelations haunted her. When she closed her eyes, she found sleep elusive. Had she been unfair to Aleksander out of a misguided sense of loyalty to Malikinder? Had Malikinder betrayed Aleksander? If so, he must have had a good reason for doing so. She wouldn’t believe selfishness had motivated him. Nor would she believe any of the women in the building had a hope in hell of turning Aleksander’s head.

She needed answers from a source she could trust. She closed her eyes. “Malikinder? Where are you? I know you can’t appear to me without his help, but surely you can hear me. I need to talk to you. Please answer.”

There was no verbal response. Nor did she feel his presence. Had he heard her? Or was Aleksander doing something to separate them?

A sudden bolt of lightning lit the night sky.

She sat up in bed, staring out her bedroom window into the night. Rain fell in torrents, and thunder sounded in the distance. She sucked in a breath as she felt a cold breeze fill the room. The air seemed heavy with anger and tension. She was no longer alone in her bedroom.

She couldn't see him, but she knew he was there. "Aleksander?"

"You think that of me? After I've expended a massive amount of energy to allow him to rut in you all afternoon, you have the nerve to accuse me of keeping you apart? Who the hell do you think made it possible for him to be with you at all? Who do you think watched over him and shielded him from our enemies in the West African jungle?"

"Nothing I've ever done or suffered for you has been enough. Has it? You want me out of the way? Fine. Consider me out your life!"

She stared around the room, her heart racing. "Aleksander? I can't see you."

"I can't assume a physical body because I expended too much energy fueling his romp with you! But even if I hadn't, I don't know if I'd waste any more energy trying to please you when you are so clearly beyond being pleased."

"That's not true."

"It is, and it's time I accepted the truth about you."

"What does that mean?"

"It means it's clearly time for me to move on."

His words held a note of finality that sent a shiver of panic through her. "Time for you to move on? But...but what about all the things you said? You implied I was special to you? You said that—"

"I'm not wasting any more time or energy trying to please you. If you want another male, have him. Just don't expect me to help, and don't expect me to ever be at your beck and call again."

"I've been a fool for thinking you were worth all the anguish I suffered in my pursuit of you. Well, enough is enough. Nothing I've ever done has pleased you, and I'm not wasting any more time on you."

She shook her head. "What are you saying?"

"I'm tired of trying to win you. It's time for me to find a woman who doesn't expect me to help another man romance her. I need someone who wants me."

She knew what he was threatening, and though it pissed her off, she wasn't about to let him see that. If he wanted Aja, then they were welcome to each other. "Where is Malikinder?"

"I don't know and I don't care. As of now, you can consider yourself free to pursue him without any so-called interference from me, Erin. Despite your betrayal, I wish you joy."

"I didn't betray —"

"You did, and I have no desire to forgive you."

"Forgive me for what?"

"You want him? You can have him. Consider me out of your life."

She struggled to control a surge of panic as she stretched out a hand. "I didn't betray you, Aleksander —"

"You betrayed my trust with him. You listened and agreed as he belittled me and portrayed me as selfish and conniving. I've never been either."

"You're not being fair. You're overreacting. If you'll just take a moment to consider things from my point of —"

"No! You no longer have anything to say I want to hear. I'm going to go see Aja."

"No! Not her!"

"Yes. Her. She won't compare me unfavorably to anyone else. Malikinder, as you call him, would have done better to pursue her instead of you in the West African jungle."

"Aleksander —"

"Good-bye."

And as abruptly as Flame had done, he left.

She fell back against the bed, gasping for breath. Tears welled in her eyes and spilled down her cheeks. Her heart ached. Despair filled her. Malikinder could no longer come to her, and Aleksander had left her for Aja. She'd managed to lose them both—again.

For the first time, she understood the nature of her and Aja's mutual dislike. They had both competed for Malikinder in their past life. Although Tanginika had won his heart, Aja had succeeded in tearing them apart when she'd killed Malikinder. Now, she'd driven Aleksander straight into her arms as well.

Erin tossed in bed for a long time before she finally drifted into a fretful sleep.

Chapter Thirteen

When Erin woke again, even with her eyes closed, she knew she was no longer in her apartment. She felt a cool breeze on her nude body. The sound of a powerful waterfall filled her ears. The smell of exotic flora teased her senses. The way the surface she lay on contoured, cradled, and caressed her body stirred memories.

She rolled onto her back and slowly opened her eyes. She blinked and quickly sat up.

A beautiful desert with sparkling blue sands that flowed into a series of gently sloping hills dotted the far horizon. The desert spread as far as she could see. The morning sun shone down on her, warming her skin. Yet she could hear the distant but distinct roar of a waterfall. She inhaled, filling her nostrils with the pleasing scent of flowers she couldn't see. Nevertheless, her senses told her both the flowers and the waterfall were close.

She appeared to be alone. Yet surely Aleksander must be near. He must be responsible for spiriting her away to the Blue Desert. He'd brought her there and then abandoned her. How could he leave her alone knowing the region was inhabited by lawless individuals of various species?

She glanced down. She lay naked on warm sands, which had cradled her body with all the comfort of an extravagantly priced custom-made bed. Still seated, she glanced around.

Several hundred yards behind her stood a huge white tent with the flaps closed. She recognized the Tent of Refuge. She sighed in relief. The tent was a known refuge for those pursued by the authorities, wronged lovers, and lost or weary travelers.

She glanced skyward. "Why did you bring me here only to abandon me, Aleksander?"

There was no response.

"Damn you, Aleksander! Answer me!"

Her demand elicited no response. She couldn't feel him and wasn't sure if he was blocking her ability to feel him or if he really had abandoned her. Surely he hadn't. Yet he'd been very angry when he left her, promising never to see her again. Until he came to his senses and realized the danger he'd placed her in, she'd better seek refuge in the Tent of Refuge.

She rose and slowly walked over the warm sands toward the Tent of Refuge. As she neared it, she heard soft, almost hypnotic music and the sounds of laughter. Several yards from the entrance of the tent, she caught a glimpse of something white lying on the sands out of the corner of her eye.

She turned and moved toward it. She bent to pick up a white, one-piece bodysuit. Thank God. She picked it up, shook it free of sand, and quickly slipped it on. She then pushed her feet into the matching white flat shoes that lay under the suit.

At least he cared enough not to make her enter the refuge naked. She turned and walked toward the entrance. As she neared it, the flaps folded back, revealing a dimly lit interior. She could see several couples slow dancing in front of a bar. There appeared to be a party within. Would she be welcomed at the party and hopefully encounter someone who would be willing to direct her to a portal that would take her home? Or

had Aleksander planned something else for her within? Or had he planned anything for her?

There was only one way to discover what lay ahead of her. She took a deep breath. When she stepped inside, she found herself standing in the clearing of a lush green forest at the edge of a beautiful, almost crystal clear lake. The sound of thundering water filled the air.

She looked up. On the far horizon, beyond the lake, the almost silver waters of the majestic Crystal Falls crashed over the edge of Mount Toren into Lake Venus. She frowned. Why did she expect to see a beautiful mare and a majestic stallion at the edge of the lake?

Erin turned and rushed along the bank of the lake away from the falls. At a curve in the path, she hurried along the left fork until the path widened.

She stopped abruptly, atop a small summit. Below her in the clearing stood a sight she had feared she'd never see again. She sucked in a deep, calming breath. Her private hover jet sat at the side of a large cabin surrounded on three sides by verdant foliage and beautifully colored exotic flora. She turned her gaze back to the cabin. They had spent several months building it and then several more finding the perfect furniture for each of its five rooms.

She thought she heard a horse whinny. She was disappointed to find herself still alone when she glanced around. *Of course you're alone. How could you possibly expect either of those beautiful horses to still be alive?*

The thought of a *Denhari* that didn't include them sent a wave of sadness through her. The two sentient creatures had safeguarded her even as they had served as companions. She had a clear picture of both in her mind, yet she couldn't recall their names.

She sighed, turning her attention back to the cabin. The entrance door stood open. Light shone from within. The soft, alluring music he had composed just for her filled

the air. She inhaled. The air was fragrant with the aroma of her favorite baked grains and vegetables dish, *cabali*.

Her lips curved up into a smile. In the living room, she'd find the table set for two with a chilled bottle of her favorite wine. If she looked out the back door, she'd surely find one of the two horses grazing.

Countless happy memories spent here flooded her senses. She was home. While *cabali* slowly simmered to perfection, she'd shed her clothes and sink into a bath filled with her favorite bath salts and oil. He'd massage her shoulders and feet before climbing into the bath with her. She'd part her legs and open her arms to welcome his hard, thick cock into her body.

As if she had conjured him up, he appeared in the doorway. Naked and gloriously aroused with a warm smile curving his lips and lighting his eyes. He extended a hand. "Welcome back, my reason for living. My cherished sheenea."

His cherished sheenea. She was finally home again. Her heart racing with joy and delight, she rushed across the clearing. Several yards from the entrance, her foot hit a rock. She stumbled, falling toward desert sands instead of grass. She closed her eyes and thrust her hands out to break her fall.

"Sheenea!" Gentle hands touched her, easing her onto her back. "Are you all right?"

"Yes. Of course, I..." She opened her eyes, gasped, and then bolted into a sitting position. "No!"

Erica, seated on the side of the bed, squeezed her arms. "It's all right, Nika. It was only a bad dream, but you're awake now."

Erin stared around her at the familiar blue walls of her bedroom. It had been a dream. She closed her eyes and fell back against her bed, struggling to keep her eyes tear free.

"Nika? Are you all right?"

She took a deep breath and slowly opened her eyes.

Erica stared down at her, her dark eyes worried.

She sat up and nodded. "I'm fine. I was just having a nightmare."

"If you're all right, why are you crying?"

She blinked and wiped at her damp cheeks. "I... Oh, Rica." She pressed her cheek against Erin's shoulder as sobs shook her body.

Erica made a small distressed sound and wrapped her arms around Erin. "What's wrong? Tell me what's wrong, and we'll work it out. Just let me share your pain."

Hearing the fear and pain in her twin's voice, Erin sucked in a breath and swallowed hard in an effort to control herself. She pulled away from Erica and wiped at her cheeks. "I'm sorry. I'm all right now. I just —"

"No, you're not all right, Erin! You're not. I want to know what's wrong, and I want to know now."

"I... Rica, I—"

"Tell me what's wrong."

She watched Erica's lips quiver and tears glisten in her eyes.

She touched Erica's cheek. "Okay, but you have to promise to listen with an open mind and not interrupt."

Erica nodded silently.

Erin scooted over on the bed, resting her back against her padded headboard.

Erica swung her legs off the floor and sat beside her. "I'm here for you, Nika, and I'm ready to listen."

"What day is it?"

"What?"

She glanced at Erica. "What day is it, and what are you doing here?"

Erica frowned. "It's Sunday afternoon, and I'm here because I was worried about you. When I came in, I heard you crying out. I came in here to wake you up. Now tell me why you were crying."

Erin nodded and told Erica of her belief that she'd lived, loved, and lost the man she loved during a previous life. She told Erica about Malikinder and Aleksander. She hesitated before she included the events that had transpired at the pool party.

"So you're this Tanginika?"

Erin hesitated. "I don't think I'm actually her. I think I just carry her memories."

Erica listened in silence, but as Erin shared her fear that she'd not only lost Malikinder to Aleksander's jealousy but had also lost Aleksander to Aja, she squeezed her hand.

Erin sighed and turned to stare at Erica's profile. "So go ahead and call me crazy."

Erica shook her head. "I'm not saying I believe any of what you've told me."

Erin sighed and shrugged. "Who could blame you?"

Erica turned to face her. "I'm not saying I disbelieve it either. I don't know what to believe, Nika, but one thing is damned certain."

"What's that?"

"It will be a cold day in hell before you lose your Norseman to that assless and breastless Aja."

She shook her head. "It's too late. I've already lost him to her."

"Oh, Nika, wake up and smell the coffee. If he were attracted to a bony-assed bitch like her, you wouldn't have caught his eye in the first place. And if he did all you say he did in the past, he won't be able to just turn his feelings for you off."

"He was very angry and —"

"He was hurt, Nika. Men say things they don't mean when you injure their pride." She glanced at her watch and scrambled off the bed. "I have a plan. Jump in the shower, and we'll discuss my plan over dinner."

"Why do I need to shower?"

"We're having dinner out."

"Out where?"

"In the clubhouse." She walked over to Erin's closet. She opened the door and frowned at Erin over her shoulder. "Get the lead out, girl, and get in the shower while I try to find something scandalous for you to wear."

Erin wasn't in the mood for food or eating out, but she knew that look in Erica's eyes. She was on a mission. She slipped off the bed and walked into the bathroom.

* * * * *

Aleksander sat across the clubhouse table watching his date for the evening. His pretty dinnermate picked at a salad bowl of dry lettuce, tomatoes, cucumbers, and broccoli. She nibbled at a small mouthful, which she washed down with bottled water.

Small wonder her thin body lacked curves.

She glanced up and gave him an intimate smile. She lay her utensils down and sat back in her chair. "Would you like to have coffee on my balcony?"

"Coffee?" He shook his head. "I have no interest in coffee."

"What are you interested in?"

He hesitated. How far should he go with her? Although she was a mirror image of the rogue spirit who had killed Malikinder, she had no direct culpability in his death and probably didn't deserve to be used and possibly hurt. But then, if she were the delicate kind, she shouldn't toss herself at a living spirit whose motivation she knew nothing about.

"Sex," he replied.

"Sex." She made a fanning motion with her hand. "Now? Tonight?"

A familiar warmth spread through him. He glanced over his shoulder. Erin and her twin stood several feet away.

He stared at her.

She cast a quick look at Aja before turning her gaze back to him.

He could feel her hurt and anger across the distance separating them. *"How could you?"*

He gave her a long, cool look before turning his attention back to Aja. "Yes," he told her. "Tonight. Now."

She moistened her lips. "What about her?" She jerked her head in Erin's direction. "Rumor has it you like her."

He kept his gaze trained on Aja's face. "And yet you've been flirting with me since I returned."

She shrugged. "Rumors aren't always accurate. Are they? Are you interested in her?"

"Yes."

She blinked, shaking her head. "If that's true —"

"It is."

"How interested in her are you?"

"Very."

"Then...I don't understand."

"Don't you? It's simple. She's not prepared to give me what I want. Are you?"

She nodded quickly. "Yes."

He arched a brow. "Aren't you going to ask what I want first?"

She shook her head. "I want you, and I'm prepared to do whatever I need to get you. If Erin's not, I'm going to make her loss my gain."

"And what if I want unprotected anal sex? What if I want to blindfold you, bind you with handcuffs, and spank your ass until it stings? What if I want to spirit you away to a strange place far from your family and friends? What if I want you all to myself?"

She leaned across the table and gripped his hand. "You're into domination?"

He shrugged.

"Oh...God...you're making me hot. I've been dying to meet an alpha male sexy enough to entice me to do all kinds of nasty sex acts, Alek."

Why hadn't he been able to elicit a similar response from Erin? Why did she persist in comparing him unfavorably to Malikinder? Why couldn't she understand and appreciate the level of his need and hunger for her? Why couldn't she comprehend that the choices he'd made in the jungle had been dictated by his desire to protect and cherish her?

"Alek? Did you hear me?"

He nodded slowly. "Yes, but my name is Aleksander." He didn't want anyone but Erin calling him Alek.

"Fine. Aleksander. I like the name." She lowered her voice. "I like you."

A pity the feeling wasn't mutual. He gave her a cool smile.

"So? Is it over between you and Erin?"

He frowned. "Do you want to spend the night at your place or mine? And do you want to waste valuable time discussing Erin?"

"I want to spend the night with you completely dominating me. Will you spank my ass before you fuck it? Will you handcuff me and make me beg to have you drive your cock up my ass?"

Why didn't such licentious questions ignite his sexual hunger? Perhaps if her breasts were fuller, her body more curvaceous, and her skin darker, she'd be able to arouse him. He considered her in silence. A living spirit wouldn't readily submit to such domination. But perhaps human women craved a show of control. Did Erin share such desires? Is that where he had gone wrong with Erin? Did she want him to be more dominant? "Is that what you want?"

“Oh, yes. I want you to make me beg for it and then fuck my ass so hard it almost hurts. And then, when I beg you to stop, I want you to fuck me harder and deeper until you make my ass your personal property.”

“I take it you enjoy being fucked by white males?”

She shrugged. “I’ve always preferred my men tall, handsome, well-hung, and white. Is that a problem for you?”

Why the hell couldn’t Erin share that preference? Why did she have to go on and on about preferring men with dark skin?

“Aleksander?”

He flashed her a quick smile.

“That’s better.”

He glanced at the check on the table next to his plate before reaching for his wallet. He placed several bills on the tray and looked at Aja. “Then let’s go.”

“Well, damn, Aleksander. Aren’t you the fickle one?”

He glanced up as Erica paused at the table he and Aja shared. Erin walked past without looking at him.

He turned his attention back to Erica. “I’m the one who doesn’t need your permission to see whoever I like.”

Her nostrils flared, and she cast a look of dislike at Aja. “If I were you, I’d think twice about trying to steal what belongs to my sister.”

Aja lifted her chin and rose to face Erica. “And if I were you or your sister, I’d start ordering more salads. Maybe then neither of you would have to worry about losing your men to those of us who know how to control our appetites and our weight. Not all men like their women fat, sweetie!”

“Why you skinny, titless, flat-assed bitch!”

Aleksander rose and quickly stepped between the two women, facing Erica. “Erin has made her choice, and I’ve made mine.” He turned away.

She clutched his arm.

He turned back to face her, his gaze narrowed. "Yes?"

"Erin told me things about your shared past."

"Do we have a shared past?"

"You'd know that better than me, Aleksander. You should also know she's afraid and confused. If any of the things you told her were true, please don't do this to her."

He glanced across the room to find Erin staring at him. He felt her anger, but nothing in her dark gaze or thoughts gave him reason to change his plans for the evening.

"I'm going to spend the night with Aja – just as you spent the afternoon with Malikinder. I know Erica's passionate in your defense out of love and loyalty to you. I don't have any particular need to be unpleasant or unkind to your sister. Call her off before that changes."

Erin rose and quickly crossed the room to them. She touched Erica's arm. "It's okay, Rica. He's not the...man I thought he was." She stared at him. "The two of you deserve each other, Aleksander."

Had she shown even a trace of remorse, he would have relented. He narrowed his gaze. "Then you should be happy to know we plan to spend the night together."

She clenched her right hand. "If you think I'll forget or forgive this, Alek, you're wrong."

"I haven't forgotten how you spent your time at the pool party, Erin. Nor do I intend to forget it or to forgive you."

Her eyes flashed, and for a moment, he half expected her to slap him or Aja. Instead, she tugged at Erica's arm and pulled her away.

Despite himself, he turned to watch her walk back to her table.

Aja stroked a hand down his arm and leaned against him. "Let's get the night started, lover."

He tore his gaze from Erin to stare down into Aja's eyes, probing her thoughts. The level of lust she projected at him did nothing to stir his emotions or desires. He nodded curtly and followed her from the restaurant.

Chapter Fourteen

“What are you going to do?”

Erin tightened her fingers around her coffee cup and slowly shook her head. “I don’t know that I’m going to do anything.”

Erica frowned and leaned across the table to grip her hand. “Nika! You can’t just let that bitch sink her claws into him.”

She pulled her hand from Erica’s, sitting back against her chair. “What else can I do? You saw him. There was nothing in his gaze, voice, or manner that gave me any reason to hope he was just trying to make me jealous with her. He’s going to sleep with her, and there’s nothing I can do about it.”

Erica tilted her head. “You can go tell him you were wrong and you’re sorry.”

Erin frowned. “About what?”

Erica shrugged. “Malikin...Malik.”

Erin put down her coffee cup. “What am I supposed to be sorry for?”

“For believing that anyone who would facilitate your sleeping with a rival isn’t a far better person – spirit – than you’ve given him credit for being.”

“You don’t understand, Rica. He –”

Erica narrowed her gaze, holding up a hand. "I understand the man you want...love...care deeply for is about to bed another woman unless you do something to stop it. What's more important than that? You expect him to overlook your sleeping with this...Malik...but don't want to make any allowances for him?"

Erin sucked in a breath. "That's below the belt, Rica."

"Is it? Not from where I'm sitting. You know I love you, but things seem a little lopsided from where I'm sitting, girl. That's just the way it is."

"You think I'm being unfair?"

"What do you think, Erin?"

"I think you clearly think I've treated Alek badly."

"In a word? Yes. Erin. You slept with another man. He knows it and —"

"With his blessing!"

"Regardless! The bottom line is that you slept with someone else."

Erin sighed. Although she and Erica disagreed on many things, they didn't lie to each other. And she valued her twin's opinion. "It's not like that. You don't understand —"

"You're right there, girl. I don't understand much about this situation. But I do know that it's time to get your big ass in gear, Nika, and go stop him before he does something you'll both regret."

She shook her head. "If you think I'm going to humiliate myself by chasing after him, you —"

"Your pride is going to be cold comfort once he's slept with that flat-assed hussy."

"Once he has —"

"What? It'll be over between you two?"

"Yes!"

"Even though you've slept with this Malik of yours and expected him to welcome you back afterward?"

"That's not... Why do you speak so...? You're making me sound unreasonable."

"That's the way you're behaving."

Erica's assessment of her behavior stung. "Why are you using that tone when talking about Malikinder?"

"I've never met or even seen this Malik you talk about. I'll accept your word that he's everything you say he is. But I've seen the effect Aleksander has on you, and I've seen the way he looks at you.

"No one is going to convince me Aja is serious competition for you as long as you treat him properly."

"Treat him properly? Are you implying...?"

"There's no need to create a crisis where none need exist, Nika."

Erin narrowed her gaze. "You heard what he said. He's angry and vengeful because of my afternoon with Malikinder."

"How can you blame him? You're angry that he's about to spend the night with Aja."

"It's not the same thing!"

"It is from where I sit, but that doesn't matter. What does matter is that you make the right choice now."

"I...I... You're making me feel unworthy of him, Rica."

"No!" Erica shook her head. "You know that's not my intention. I just want to make sure you don't make another mistake."

"Another mistake?"

"Yes. From what you've told me, Alek seems the more worthy of the two of them, Nika." Erica placed a hand over her heart. "I think you know that. So forget your pride and follow your heart."

Erin hesitated, then abruptly bolted to her feet.

Erica arched a brow, a slow smile curving her lips. "Going somewhere?"

“Don’t wait up for me, Rica, and don’t worry if I’m gone for a while.”

“Why should I worry? Despite his behaving like a dumbass with Aja, I know you’ll be in good hands with Alek. Just don’t stay away too long.”

Erin nodded and turned to rush from the restaurant. *Aleksander!*

There was no response. He was ignoring her as he’d done after stranding her in the Blue Desert. Damn him. *Aleksander! We need to talk. Don’t touch her. Please!*

Her plea elicited no response.

She hurried along the terrace outside the clubhouse and into the building that housed their apartments. An elevator stood open in the lobby. She quickly entered and pushed the number twelve button. Only then did she realize she had no idea if they were in Aja’s apartment or Aleksander’s. She quickly decided he’d know better than to take Erin’s rival to his apartment. He’d surely know she’d find that unforgivable if they reconciled. She pushed the fifth-floor button.

The elevator stopped at each floor between one and five to allow tenants on and off. The doors swished open on the fifth floor. Heart racing, Erin stepped out of the elevator and started down the hall to Aja’s apartment.

“Erin!”

At the sound of the warm, deep voice, she stopped and turned. A tall, handsome male with smooth dark skin dressed in black sweats stood at the other end of the corridor, smiling at her.

She caught her breath. “Malikinder?”

His smile widened.

She blinked. It was him. “I...I don’t understand. How are you here?”

“You called. I came.” He extended a hand.

Too late! He’d come too late.

He frowned and quickly walked down the hall toward her. He stopped within a few inches of her. He stroked her cheek. “It can’t be too late.”

She swallowed hard, torn. Part of her wanted to yield to him. Another part of her wanted to continue rushing down the hall to stop Aleksander from sleeping with Aja. "I'm sorry, but...it is..." She took a step backward.

He stepped closer, slipping an arm around her waist. He drew her close until she could feel his hard cock pressed against her body. "I'm not going to let you go to him."

She pushed against his chest. "I have to."

"Why? What lies has he told you about me? What lies has he made you believe?"

She sighed. "He's never really said anything bad about you."

"Someone clearly has. Tell me who."

"Flame said –"

He stiffened against her. "Flame? You've talked to Flame about me?"

"He talked to me about you and Aleksander."

"And you believed whatever he told you?"

"Yes."

He narrowed his gaze. "Why?"

She shrugged. "I didn't want to, but it had the ring of truth. He said you were...ungracious to Aleksander."

"That's not true. He...he's always preferred Aleksander. Look at my skin color, and you'll know why."

She stared up into his angry eyes, and any remaining doubt about Flame's veracity vanished. She pulled out of his arms. "I have to go." She took several steps away from him before she turned and ran down the corridor.

"Erin! Come back here!"

"I've made my choice, Malikinder!"

"It's not over between us."

“Yes it is!” She stopped in front of Aja’s apartment door, her heart racing. *Aleksander?*

He didn’t respond.

Damn him. She lifted her fist to pound on the door. It abruptly swung inward, revealing a dimly lit living room. A clearly naked Aja sprawled on the sofa.

Erin felt a wave of anger-filled heat rush up her neck to her cheeks. She stormed into the room, slamming the door.

Aja lay unmoving on the sofa, her breathing deep and even. She was asleep. A half-empty wine bottle and two glasses sat on the coffee table in front of the sofa.

Erin frowned, looking around the room. Aja’s clothes lay in a tangled trail leading up to the sofa. There was no sign of Aleksander or his clothes. Where was he? Had he already fucked her and left?

She heard a door closing somewhere in the apartment. He must be in the bedroom. Casting a last look at Aja still asleep on the sofa, she ran down the hall. She pushed open the door.

Aleksander, naked and fully aroused, stood with his back toward the window, facing her. She centered her gaze on his groin. The bedroom was well lit. She noted clear traces of vaginal fluids coating his shaft and balls.

Erin sucked in an aching breath, her eyes filling with tears. “Alek! How could you sleep with her?”

He extended a hand. “Come to me of your own free will, Erin, knowing as you do that I’ve just fucked your oldest rival – as you did mine when you fucked Malikinder.”

The tears spilled down her cheeks. She shook her head. “No! No. It wasn’t the same, Alek. You cheated with her. I had your permission and cooperation to sleep with him. I couldn’t have slept with him without it. You only slept with her to hurt me.”

“As you’ve gone out of your way to hurt me with Malikinder.”

"No! Oh, I know now that I did hurt you, but I didn't mean to. I didn't understand. I'd forgotten our little enclave near the Crystal Falls. I'd forgotten how much you and I meant to each other after I...after *she* lost Malik."

"And now you remember?"

She nodded. "Yes. Yes. I remembered when I saw our cabin."

"You remember now?"

"Yes. We were happy there together." Or at least he and Tanginika had been happy there. "I remember."

His eyes glowed. "You remember now? Now when it's too late?"

She bit her lip. "Why does it need to be too late?"

"Because I can't forgive you."

Her heart raced with fear. "You have to."

"No. I don't." He spoke in a cool voice and disappeared.

"No! Aleksander! Come back!" She rushed across the room and abruptly found herself running naked over the sands of the Blue Desert at night. Her heart raced with fear at the sounds of pursuit.

She glanced over her shoulder. On the far horizon she saw three males astride dark horses charging down the dunes toward her. Although she didn't recall who they were, she decided it would be better if she didn't fall into their clutches.

She glanced around. She appeared to be alone. "Alek? This is not a good time or place to leave me stranded."

He didn't respond.

She took a deep breath. Clearly she'd hurt him more than she'd realized and would have to work hard to earn his forgiveness. In the meantime, it appeared she was on her own. She turned and ran toward the Tent of Refuge, where she could hear music interlaced with laughing voices. Several feet from the entrance, with the horses bearing down on her, the flaps of the tent folded back.

As before, she noted evidence of a party via the dim lights, upbeat music, and nude couples dancing close together. She sprinted toward the entrance and hurried inside. She came to an abrupt halt as she found herself in a large bedroom with a mirrored ceiling and wall. A pair of handcuffs dangled from the frame of the big four-poster bed that stood in the middle of the room.

A black leather bondage swing hung several feet above the lush, almost ankle-deep carpet. Once seated, the submissive would find her legs held open, leaving her pussy and her ass in prime position to be ravished, her arms strapped above her head. Once the blindfold was applied, she'd have no way of knowing whose cock entered her body.

She swung around as the door slid closed behind her. The lights dimmed. A sudden soft breeze whiffed along her nude flesh with all the sensuous allure of an appreciative lover.

The puff of air brushed against her breasts like a soft, sweet, sensual caress. Her nipples pebbled. She tingled as the breeze danced over her belly to pulse and emit intermittent tiny blasts on her clit.

Erin gasped, parted her legs, and closed her eyes. Liquid heat spread out from her clit and pussy to encompass her entire body. The air around her seemed to hum with sweet, unspoken words that spurred memories of long nights of love and adoration spent in a secluded enclave not far from the Blue Desert.

Her knees buckled. Instead of feeling the carpet against her body, she felt the supple restraints of the bondage seat fastening around her body. Her thighs were held open, exposing her wet core. Resisting the urge to open her eyes, she inhaled slowly. "I'm so sorry," she whispered. "I was wrong. Forgive me. Show me you forgive me."

Although she received no audible response, she felt certain he would forgive her. He loved her. He'd always loved her. She'd been a fool to ever forget or doubt it. He would forgive her. He would express his forgiveness by making love to her.

How would he take her? Would he do it in spirit form? She shivered in anticipation as gentle hands applied the blindfold. She relished the sweet delight of an almost out-of-body experience while he aroused and satisfied her without any corporeal physical contact from him. Or would he materialize? Her stomach muscles clenched at the thought of the tantalizing prospect of the warm, flesh-to-flesh contact as he stood between her thighs and slowly pushed his slick, rigid cock into her pussy.

Cool lips slid over the soles of her feet before nibbling at her toes.

She licked her lips and smiled. "Yes...yes..." she whispered. "Touch me...love me."

Big, warm hands slid along her inner thighs, leaving heat in their wake.

"Yes...yes," she encouraged in a soft voice.

She caught her breath as she felt his cock touching her slit. She was moments away from receiving what she wanted most. The second she felt him sliding inside her body, she'd know he had forgiven her for hurting him.

He slid the big head of his shaft up and down the length of her slit.

She bit her lip, her heart racing, her pussy filling with moisture. "Give it to me...please...now. I need you inside me now."

He rubbed the head of his length against her clit.

"Oh...my God," she moaned, her thighs trembling.

He bent.

Moments later, she felt a cool mouth moving along her outer lips. That delight was quickly followed by the skillful insertion of his tongue into her pussy.

"Oh...yes...yes!" She arched her back.

He rose, settling between her thighs again. Then he eased his hips forward. The warm head of his cock nudged her slit.

She trembled and attempted to spread her thighs wider. "Yes..."

The helmeted head slid between her wet outer lips and several inches into her pussy.

After an initial thrill of pleasure, she stiffened and then shook her head. This wasn't Aleksander's cock. "Wait."

He continued to push slowly into her.

"No!" She compressed her vaginal muscles in an effort to expel the thick length tunneling into her.

"Shh," he whispered, speaking for the first time. He cupped his hands over her breasts while he thrust his hips forward. He settled his lips against hers, sweeping his tongue into her mouth.

An involuntary shudder shook her body. She drew her head back until she could no longer feel his lips on hers. "Please stop," she pleaded.

Ignoring her pleas, he slid his hands around her body to cup her bare ass cheeks.

"Crystal!" She shouted the word.

A shock shook her when he ignored the control word and continued pushing inside her.

Furious that he would attempt to continue without her permission, she balled her hands into fists. Taking a deep breath, she channeled all her anger into her internal muscles. Then, as Aleksander had taught her long ago, she compressed her vaginal muscles in a series of rapid movements.

He gasped in pain and quickly withdrew from her.

"Crystal cease!" The bondage equipment responded to her command. Her bonds loosened. She tore the blindfold off and climbed out of the seat.

A naked Malikinder, his eyes blazing, stood staring at her. "How dare you cause me physical pain? You know how fragile these bodies are!"

She stared at him. She sensed very little of the spirit she had fallen in love with so long ago. His behavior had removed all her remaining doubt about her feelings for him

and Aleksander. She no longer loved him. "How dare you attempt to use force with me?" she demanded.

He narrowed his gaze. "I made it clear to you that once you surrendered your heart and allegiance, they would be mine forever. You belong to me. I don't require —"

She raised her chin. "Tanginika was once a daughter of a king. No one forced her to do anything! Not even you."

"She loved me for all eternity!"

"Yes, she did, but I'm not her! I'm Erin, and no one uses force with me. I've made my choice. Please respect it."

His nostrils flared. "What lies has Stormreaper told to turn you against me?"

"He's never said anything bad about you, which is more than can be said about you," she pointed out.

"I lost my physical body because of my devotion to you. I'm not going to lose you to him or anyone else."

Recalling the events of that night in the West African jungle, she sighed, some of her anger dissipating. "I remember that awful night, and it still hurts, but it's time to move on. I want to move on with Aleksander."

"Even after he's been with Aja for no other reason than that he wanted to hurt you?"

She moistened her lips and took a slow, deep breath before she responded. Aleksander's deliberate attempt to hurt her had been successful, but she wouldn't reveal her anguish to Malikinder. "Even after that."

"He only slept with her to humiliate and hurt you. How can you overlook that? Where is the pride the daughter of a king should possess and demand?"

"That's between me and Aleksander."

He stepped close and stared down into her eyes. "I won't allow you to go to him." He gripped her arm.

She jerked away from him. "I've made my choice." She walked toward the door.

He stepped in her path. "You belong to me. I'm not going to let him have you."

Erin met his gaze, noted the determination, and realized she was in trouble.

Aleksander! Is this what you want? Is this why you brought me here? So he could impose his will on me? Is this what you want for me?

She felt a sudden breeze in the room.

Malikinder stiffened. Moments later, Aleksander stood next to her.

Chapter Fifteen

Like Malikinder, he was naked, but unaroused. The rush of joy that suffused her was quickly followed by confusion. How could they both be there at the same time?

Aleksander urged her aside and faced Malikinder. "She's made her choice. Accept it with the graciousness I know you're still capable of."

Malikinder shook his head. "I've endured too much agony to allow you or anyone else to take her from me. Don't make the mistake of challenging me, Stormreaper. You know I've always been stronger than you."

The clear threat in his tone sent a shiver of fear through Erin. She turned to look at Malikinder. Physically, the two seemed evenly matched – both well over six feet, broad shouldered with exquisite muscular frames. The clear difference between them was in the toxic level of vitriol emanating from Malikinder.

Erin turned her attention back to Aleksander.

He kept his gaze trained on Malikinder. He spoke in a low, controlled voice. "For the sake of our past close oneness, I beg you not to make me prove that's no longer true, Malikinder."

Malikinder's right fist shot out with lightning speed.

Erin gasped, her heart racing with fear.

Aleksander tilted his head to the side and danced back several feet. He kept his gaze on Malikinder. "Leave us alone, Erin."

"No!" She turned to face Malikinder, placing a hand on his chest. "I've made my choice. If he'll forgive me and will still have me, I've chosen Aleksander."

He shook his head, a look of despair in his eyes. "Tanginika...you can't do this to me. You're mine."

"I carry her memories, but I'm not Tanginika. I'm Erin. You and she had your time together. Now I..." She glanced over her shoulder at Aleksander. "My feelings for him overwhelm me. I'll always have fond memories of the time you and Tanginika spent loving each other, but that time is past. Tanginika loved and adored you. I...love and adore Aleksander."

Malikinder gripped her arms. "You're still Tanginika."

She shook her head. "No. A small part of her lives inside of me still, and that part will always have warm feelings for you. But Erin loves Aleksander." She touched his cheek. "I know how much you loved her and how much she loved you. For the sake of that love, please let me go. Let me keep and share her wonderful memories of you. When I think of you in years to come, that's what I want to recall. I don't want to remember today. Please let me go, Malikinder."

"Without you —"

She pressed a finger against his lips, tears welling in her eyes. "I carry her memories, hopes, and fears, but I'm not her. I'm Erin, and I have different needs and desires. Take comfort in the fact that she will always want and love you. I love Aleksander. Please, let me go."

He sucked in a breath. "I can't...I can't."

She placed her hands on his shoulders. "You have to."

He wrapped his arms around her, dragging her close to him.

The fact that his erect cock pressing against her body elicited no emotional response in her was a sure indicator that her heart now firmly belonged to Aleksander.

She returned his embrace, closing her eyes. "I will always remember you and have fond memories of you, Malikinder. My being with Aleksander won't change that."

He shuddered against her, tightening his arms.

She pressed her cheek against his shoulder. "I won't forget you."

"Promise."

"I do, Malikinder. I promise."

He released her and cupped his palms against her cheeks. *"How can I let you go and say good-bye?"*

She experienced a brief but powerful sense of sadness and loss. "The part of her that lives on in me will always love you and cherish the memories of the times and the love you shared."

"And I'm supposed to be satisfied to spend an endless existence without you?"

"If you love and honor her memory, let me go. I'm not her. She would never be able to choose anyone else but you. I'm not her. I want to be with Aleksander. Please let me go to him without making me feel as if I'm deserting you."

He shuddered and then bent his head.

Oh, God, please make sure Aleksander doesn't hold a last kiss against me. She hesitated, closed her eyes, and then lifted her face.

Malikinder's lips moved over hers with a featherlight warmth before he released her.

Erin kept her eyes closed for several moments until she realized she could no longer feel either of them. She opened her eyes, glancing around the room. Neither Aleksander nor Malikinder remained in the room.

Great. Just how the hell was she supposed to get back home? And where the hell was Aleksander? "Aleksander? Where are you?"

He didn't respond.

Damn him.

She crossed the room to the door, which slid open. She stepped over the threshold and found herself back in the Blue Desert. The familiar sands spread before her in a seemingly endless expanse. The Tent of Refuge was her only option until Aleksander came back for her. She swung back around and found herself facing another expanse of sand.

The Tent of Refuge had vanished.

She compressed her lips. Damn Aleksander. When she saw him again, he'd have a lot to answer for. She looked up. It would be dark soon. "Do you plan to leave me alone and naked here, Aleksander?"

He didn't respond. She couldn't feel him. She sucked in an angry breath. Vague memories of being told to walk toward the horizon away from the setting sun if she were ever lost in the desert filled her mind. She started walking across the desert. With each step of her feet sinking into the soft sands, her indignation grew.

She judged she'd been walking for about fifteen minutes when she heard a horse whinny. Her heartbeat quickened. A beautiful mare with a dark brown coat cantered across the sands toward her. Memories of riding side by side with Aleksander across the Blue Desert under the stars teased her memories.

A smile spread across Erin's face. She waited until the mare came to a stop beside her. She stroked the horse's side. "Cala! It can't be you...not after all this time."

The horse whinnied against her cheek.

Common sense told her that this beautiful mare couldn't be the one she, or rather Tanginika, had ridden so long ago. Yet the warmth emanating from the animal felt familiar and right.

She put her foot in the stirrup and pulled herself up on the horse. She picked up the reins and then leaned forward to rub her cheeks against the mare's neck. "Are you Cala?"

"I am Baka. Cala was a foreparent. I carry her many fond memories of her friendship with you, Tanginika."

"Although I carry her memories, I'm not Tanginika." She frowned. Was that really true? She was no longer sure.

"You feel like her. As Cala befriended her, I befriend you. As Cala pledged her allegiance to her, I pledge mine to you."

The sentient mounts gave their allegiance for life. Erin's eyes welled with tears of gratitude. "I haven't done anything to deserve your loyalty."

"You carry Tanginika's memories. I carry Cala's. She remembered Tanginika fondly until she joined our One."

"I know Tanginika would have loved to know that."

"What shall I call you?"

"Erin."

"I suppose Storm has joined his One?" she asked of Aleksander's mount.

"He has, but he had many mountlings with Cala. Reaper has pledged his allegiance to Stormreaper."

Erin felt a sense of shyness from Baka. "And?"

"And he and I...we have formed our own One."

Erin smiled. "Is Reaper as majestic as Storm?"

"I think he is, but Reaper has a great regard for his foreparent and says it's not so. Where shall I take you, Erin?"

She thought of the home in the hidden enclave she and Aleksander had shared. Or had Tanginika shared the home with Aleksander? "Take me home. Do you know where that is?"

"Yes. There is a glade in back where Cala loved to graze. Relax. I will take you safely home."

Hopeful that Aleksander awaited her there and certain she was safe with Baka, Erin rubbed her cheek against Baka's neck and closed her eyes. The motion of Baka's steady trot lulled her to sleep.

"We have arrived, Erin."

Erin opened her eyes and sat up. In the moonlight, she saw the large cabin where she and Aleksander had spent their all-too-brief time together. Soft lighting spilled out into the warm night from within. Although there was no welcoming aroma of cabali filling the air, she experienced a sense of hope.

"Thank you," she whispered to Baka, then pressed a kiss against the mount's neck and dismounted.

"I will be near, Erin. If you want me, call and I will come."

"Thank you." She turned and rushed into the cabin. She stepped over the threshold and found herself back in Aja's bedroom, fully dressed. A quick glance around showed she was alone. "Oh...no...not now, Alek. Aleksander."

Without waiting for a response she suspected wouldn't come, she hurried from the bedroom down the hall.

Aja still slept on the sofa.

Erin sighed. Thank God. She let herself out of the apartment, closing the door behind herself. She ran down the corridor to the elevators and pushed the Up button. She waited impatiently until the elevator arrived. She stepped on and pushed the twelfth-floor button.

Stepping out of the elevator on the top floor, she took a slow, deep breath before she walked down the corridor to Aleksander's apartment. The door opened as she raised her hand to knock. She moistened her lips before she stepped inside.

The door closed after her. She stared around the living room. There was no sign of Aleksander, but she could feel him. Her heartbeat quickened. "Aleksander? I know you're here. I can feel you. We need to talk."

"What makes you think you have anything to say I want to hear?"

The fact that he'd bothered to answer her. But she'd clearly need to stroke his ego. She suppressed a smile. Who knew living spirits could be as insecure as human males?

"I don't know, but I'm hoping...I'm begging you to appear and talk to me, Aleksander."

"Even after what happened with Aja?"

She compressed her lips. "Yes. I know why you felt the need to sleep with her, and...and I can deal with that."

"And if I can't deal with your behavior with Malikinder?"

Damn him. He wasn't going to be satisfied until he'd made her eat crow. "You know my reactions were driven in large part by Tanginika's feelings and memories of loving and being loved by him. It's not fair to hold me responsible for actions I didn't have complete control over."

"Are you implying that you don't love him?"

"She loved him, and I have her memories of him."

"Which doesn't answer my question. Do you love him?"

She hesitated only briefly before she shook her head.

Her response was greeted with silence. She frowned. "Aleksander?"

"Are you sure, or are you just saying what you think I want to hear?"

"You can read my mind. You know I'm sure."

He didn't respond.

She waited in silence for several moments before she realized she could no longer feel his presence. "Aleksander! Don't leave! Please. Aleksander!"

"I am here, my lovely one."

Erin swung around, and there he stood, tall, strong, and handsome. His eyes shone with love. His cock was fully erect. She resisted the urge to immediately rush at him. She touched her chest. "You do know that I'm not really Tanginika? I have her memories, but I'm a different person."

"I loved her. I love you."

"I need you to want me because I'm me, not because I'm her. She would have chosen Malikinder."

He sighed and nodded. "I know."

"I choose you."

"Prove it, Erin."

With eyes full of tears and her heart full of joy, she walked to him.

He engulfed her in a close embrace, rubbing his cheek against her forehead. "I love you," he whispered.

She could feel his emotion in the tense body pressed against hers. She clung to him. "I love you too, Alek. Together we'll make new memories of our own."

"Before we do, I want you to know what happened with Aja."

She shook her head and stiffened. "I don't want to talk about her."

He stepped back and tipped up her chin so he could look down into her eyes. "I didn't sleep with her."

"She was naked, and I saw...fluids on your cock and —"

He shook his head. "I made you *think* you saw traces of cum on my cock. I didn't touch her. I'm a living spirit, Erin. Taking on a physical body requires an immense amount of energy. Making love in that body feels extremely good, but it requires even more energy." He touched her cheek. "I've only made physical love to one other woman besides you."

"Tanginika?"

He nodded. "I'm not a human male. I only feel this need for physical intimacy when my emotions are fully engaged. Aja doesn't engage those. You're the only woman who has since Tanginika. I wanted you to think I'd slept with her, because I felt betrayed by you, but I didn't touch her."

She drew in a slow deep breath. "I'm sorry, Aleksander."

He sighed. "It's partly my fault for allowing you to sleep with him again, but I thought you needed closure."

"I...she did, and she got it. Now I just want to be with you."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm very sure."

"Have all your doubts been resolved?"

"The doubts I have about us were because of Tanginika's love for Malikinder."

"You liked him too."

She nodded. "Yes, but I love you. Wasn't that clear when I rejected him in the hallway and in the Blue Desert? I feel a measure of sorrow for her having to say good-bye to him, but when I thought I'd lost you to Aja..." She took a deep breath. "I knew we weren't the same person. She'd choose him every time. I'd choose you."

Apparently she'd finally convinced him of her sincerity, because he drew her into his arms.

She closed her eyes, burrowing against him. "Love me, Alek."

He tipped up her chin. "Look at me."

She opened her eyes. The adoration she saw in his gaze filled her with delight and hope for their future.

"You know that I'm not human and that I can't maintain this body indefinitely?"

She nodded. "I know."

He stroked her neck. "I require your blood to help sustain this body, Erin."

She placed her hands against his shoulders. "I'll gladly surrender it freely as often as possible."

"I expect complete devotion from you. I won't ever share you with anyone else again," he warned. "I expect you to be mine, heart, mind, body, and soul for eternity."

"I am yours, Aleksander. You know that." She slid her hand over his shoulders to stroke her fingers through his hair. "Let me show you the level of my need and love for you. Let me be your one."

He tightened his arm around her waist.

Feeling his chest against her breasts and his thick, long cock pulsing along her belly, she trembled. She parted her lips, extending the tip of her tongue.

He quickly undressed her before he bent his head. As his lips covered hers, he bent his knees and slid a hand between their bodies to position his cock at her entrance.

She moaned softly, pushing her hips forward. The big head of his shaft slipped between the lips of her slit.

Her stomach muscles rippled; her heart raced. "Do it," she urged. "Fuck me, Aleksander, and brand me as yours alone...your one."

"Mine alone...my one...for eternity."

Instead of the hard, wild thrust she wanted and expected, he surprised her by gently easing his cock into her wet pussy.

The slow tunneling sent chills of delight through her. She moaned against his lips, arching her body into his.

Devouring her lips, he slid his hands down her back. Cupping his warm palms over her ass, he slid the last few inches of his cock into her.

He fucked her with a leisurely hunger that branded her body and heart as his with each deep foray into her tight depths. He made each kiss and every stroke a demand for her surrender.

Clinging to him, she gladly offered it. With her surrender came a wealth of feeling. Her stomach muscles tightened. Her passions heightened. She was so close to an emotionally and physically explosive climax, her entire body felt like a bundle of sensitive nerve endings.

He lifted his lips from hers.

She made a small protesting sound.

"Look at me."

So close to coming, she had to struggle to obey and lift her eyelids.

His eyes glowed. His incisors were exposed.

Her heart raced with excited anticipation.

He continued to slide in and out of her drenched channel. Soon he would need more than her pussy.

"The need is now. Give me the substance I require, my one."

"Gladly, Aleksander." She tilted her head, exposing her neck.

He bent his head.

She closed her eyes, savoring the feel of his incisors gently raking against her flesh before she felt them pierce and sink into her neck.

Feeling her blood flowing from the small wounds into his mouth, along with a sudden fierce and deep thrusting of his cock into her pussy, provided the emotional and physical rush she needed to send her over the edge. She gasped, shuddered, and shook as she experienced an intense orgasm. A sense of euphoria quickly spread out from her pussy to encompass her entire body.

She felt the bliss of being one with him and knowing that her blood helped sustain him. When she finally felt the detonations in her pussy, they enhanced and lengthened her pleasure.

Even after he'd come, he kept his cock in her while he continued to ingest her blood.

When she recovered from her extended climax, she was surprised to find herself sprawled on her back on her bed with him lying between her legs. His cock was still rigid inside her. His mouth was open, his canines touching, but no longer piercing, her neck.

He felt much lighter than a male of his size should. He was losing his ability to maintain his physical form. She stroked her hands down his back. "Don't leave me."

He kissed her neck and lifted his head to look down at her. "I won't leave, but I can't maintain this body much longer."

"I know."

He kissed her lips. "I'll come back as soon as I can."

She cupped her hands over his ass. "I like this body, but I love the spirit who inhabits it more. I like when I can feel you with me – even when I can't see you." She yawned and closed her eyes. As she drifted to sleep, she was aware that his weight no longer rested on her. But she felt him all around her.

Chapter Sixteen

When she woke again, it was morning. She was alone in her bedroom. A beautiful bouquet of flowers sat on each of her nightstands. She smiled and stretched before she slipped out of bed. Erin stumbled into the bathroom to shower. The aroma of brewing coffee greeted her when she emerged from the bathroom wearing only an oversize nightshirt.

Erica must have returned home, she thought, making her way to the kitchen. Erin was surprised to find it empty. She crossed the floor to pour herself a cup of coffee. She added cream and sugar. She sipped it as she microwaved bacon and scrambled eggs.

When would she see Aleksander again? She sat down at the kitchen counter to eat her breakfast. She felt restless but hopeful. Although she wasn't sure how much time he'd need before he could assume a physical body again. She sighed, uncertain why he'd left after she'd asked him not to.

"Where are you, Aleksander?"

"I'm here."

She swung around on the stool.

Aleksander, dressed in jeans and a pullover, stood in the doorway.

She slipped off the stool and rushed across the room to toss her arms around his neck.

He embraced her, brushing his lips against the side of her neck.

She trembled when she felt his tongue and teeth probing the two small puncture wounds there.

He kissed her neck before he lifted his head to look down at her. "No regrets choosing me?"

She stroked her fingers through his hair. "Not a single one." She hesitated. "He... Will he...be all right? Is he really dead this time?"

"It's nearly impossible to kill all traces of a living spirit, so he's not dead as you mean the word."

"How were you both in the Blue Desert at the same time? Flame told me you'd provided the energy to produce Malikinder's physical body. How were you able to produce two bodies at the same time?"

"I couldn't. Flame supplied the necessary energy to generate Malikinder's physical body."

Recalling her first and only encounter with Flame, Erin compressed her lips. "Why would he do that when I know he doesn't like me?"

"He did it because I asked him to. What makes you think he dislikes you?"

"He implied I'm fat and need to lose weight!"

His lips twitched.

Erin inhaled an angry breath. "Don't you dare laugh."

"You've misunderstood him, Erin. He has no love for thin women. Remember that his Voni is a full-bodied woman as well."

"Well, he clearly thinks you're too good for me."

He caressed her cheek. "No, he doesn't. He's been a mentor of mine for a long time and he might have allowed the special closeness we share to color his feelings when he spoke to you."

She felt her cheeks heat up. "He told you what he said to me?"

He nodded. "He asked me to convey his apologies."

Hell would freeze over before she forgot or forgave Flame's unkind words. She pitied Voni being in love with him.

Aleksander laughed.

She frowned, knowing he'd read her thoughts. "You're twice the spirit he is," she said.

His smile immediately vanished. "No, I'm not. He's older, much more powerful, and has much more finesse than I'll ever possess. You'll like him once you get to know him."

"No, I won't," she assured him.

He laughed again.

"I do have one concern."

"And that is?"

She hesitated. "Your daughter. First, how is she?"

"I'd like to think she'd be fine – if I actually had one."

"What?"

"I don't have a daughter, Erin. The myth of a daughter living out of state was a convenient excuse when I needed to discard this body to be myself or when I was summoned before The Council of Elders."

"So there's no...female other than me you care about?"

"Well...there is a spirit who always takes a female form when she assumes a corporeal body who is younger than me who I have fond...feelings for."

"Oh?"

He shook his head. "I have no intimate sexual feelings for her. I feel like a mentor of sorts to her...much as Flame has been and is for me. Although I haven't been a very good role model for her."

"So this female spirit... You don't want to...sleep with her?"

"No! The only one I want physical and sexually intimate contact with is you."

"Good." She smiled. "Let's keep it that way."

"I've spent hundreds of your years keeping it that way, Erin. I don't foresee that ever changing."

"That's sweet, Alek." She tilted her head to one side, frowning.

"What's wrong, Erin?"

"She's gone."

"Who's gone?"

She frowned. "Tanginika. I still have her memories, but they're no longer a burden weighing me down. I don't feel her need for Malikinder. Where is she?"

He shrugged. "Hopefully with Malikinder."

She stared at him. "They're together?"

He nodded. "Flame intervened with The Council and prevailed upon them to ease their restrictions on Malikinder. The Council will oppose either of them ever assuming physical bodies again, but they are together again. They are one."

He smiled at her. "As you might remember, while making love with a physical body is very satisfying, there is a special delight in experiencing a spiritual intimacy with your special one."

She nodded. "Yes. Yes, I do." She sucked in a breath but couldn't stop her eyes welling with tears, which quickly spilled down her cheeks.

He brushed her tears away. "Why are you crying?"

"Finally, I have the best of both worlds. I'm your one and have the excitement of rediscovering the Blue Desert with you. While we make wonderful new memories, I

have the satisfaction of knowing that Tanginika and Malikinder have not only had a chance to make peace with each other but are finally together.”

“And you are in my arms, my sheenea, where you’ll always belong and will be forever welcome.”

She smiled up at him. “Really? Care to prove that?”

He swept her off her feet and into his arms.

She linked her arms around his neck. She brushed her lips against his chest.

He carried her from the kitchen down the hall to her bedroom. There, he undressed quickly before pulling her nightshirt over her head and tossing it aside.

She stood in front of him, confident that he found her nude body a thing of beauty.

He took her hand and engulfed her in a warm embrace.

She lifted her head.

He bent his head.

As he rained warm, hungry kisses against her mouth, she knew she was with the being she’d been born to love and adore. The delight of knowing how much he’d endured to win her ensured that their future would be both exciting and full of wonderful discoveries.

 THE END 

Marilyn Lee

Marilyn lives, works, and writes on the East Coast of the US. In addition to thoroughly enjoying writing erotic romances in various genres, she enjoys roller-skating, spending time with her large, extended family, and rooting for all her favorite hometown sports teams. Her other interests include collecting *Doc Savage* pulp novels from the thirties and forties and collecting Marvel comics from the seventies and eighties (particularly *Thor* and *The Avengers*.) Her favorite TV shows are forensic shows, westerns (*Gunsmoke* and *Have Gun, Will Travel* are particular favorites), and mysteries (Charlie Chan movies in particular). Her all time favorite mystery movie is probably *Dead, Again*. She's seen nearly every vampire movie or television show ever made (*Forever Knight* and *Count Yorga, Vampires*) are favorites. She thoroughly enjoys interacting with readers either through email or via her Yahoo web group, marilynlee-subscribe@yahoogroups.com.