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MAGICAL RIFFS

Rock Hard Seduction

Tonya Ramagos

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Rock Hard Seduction 4

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EROTIC ROMANCE



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A SIREN PUBLISHING BOOK

IMPRINT: Erotic Romance

MAGICAL RIFFS

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DEDICATION

To Wendy. Keep rockin' girl!

To Diana's fans, past and present, who wondered when she would find her happiness. This one is for you. I hope it was worth the wait.

MAGICAL RIFFS

Rock Hard Seduction 4

TONYA RAMAGOS

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Chapter 1

Diana Thompson walked the empty rooms of the little house in which she'd grown up, softly chanting the cleansing spell she'd devised. It was difficult to keep her mind free of all thought not pertaining to the task at hand knowing what she would be leaving behind, what she would soon face.

She reached the front door just as the last of the candle she held in one hand and the incense she held in the other burned out, as she spoke the words of the chant for the final time. "Blessed be," she whispered aloud and felt the single tear slide down her cheek.

Turning, she paused on the front porch and closed her eyes as a gentle breeze blew in from the beach. She'd miss this place, the beach, the house. She'd miss the friends she'd made, the life she'd built. But the time had come to move on. The path meant for her to follow was leading her away from here. She would build another life, a better one and, if the Gods were willing, she'd do it all with the man she'd loved so long ago.

I love you, Diana. We'll never be apart. This is it for us. You're it for me.

The words echoed in her memory. She heard them as clearly as she saw the rocky path through the trees at the edge of the beach

where they'd been that long ago afternoon when he'd said them to her. Would he still feel that way after all these years, after what she'd done?

"There's only one way to find out," she told herself and, without another look back, walked off the porch and slid behind the wheel of her sleek black convertible.

The drive from central Florida to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania offered up plenty of time for reflection, plans, and prayers. She used it wisely and did exactly that. She believed in fate. She'd seen it at work in recent years in her own life and in that of her friends. Hadn't it been fate that brought Derek Kadin to Addison House the precise week her best friend, Alicia Addison, had been filling in for her sister, Star? And hadn't it been fate that pulled Suzanne Cassidy, another of Diana's long time acquaintances, all the way from Florida to Pennsylvania for an art show only to find the love of her life, Garrett Henry, in a neighborhood bar? And what about Reese Torrin and Melody Forbes? Diana personally watched the fate of their coupling unfold right before her very eyes.

It was another twist of fate, she decided as she stopped just outside Philly to put the top down on her car, that all the couples had been connected in some way, how they all connected to her. She chewed on that as she cruised through the busy streets of downtown Philly, the cool spring northern breeze fluttering through her hair. She and Alicia had been off and on friends for decades. They'd known Suzanne, even though they'd never exactly been close friends. Of the four women, Melody was the only one of them who hadn't come from Florida, who hadn't come from the same town. Yet, even Melody was connected to the guys involved by being the sister of Reese's close friend.

Reese. The thought of the too sexy drummer always brought a smile to Diana's face. She'd crushed on him for so long. But, alas, more than friends they were not meant to be. She'd always known that, even before she'd actually met the man. She firmly believed only

one true love existed for everyone in life and she already knew who that one someone was for her. It wasn't Reese Torrin.

Even so, the man had turned out to be one of the best male friends she'd ever had. And that led her to thinking of the men involved, of the members of the heavy metal rock band Façade. Derek Kadin who'd found his one true love in Alicia; Garrett Henry who found his in Suzanne Cassidy; Reese and Melody Forbes; James Fisher and...

Diana slowed as her destination came into view. She caught the left hand signal of a car attempting to merge into traffic from a parallel parking space exactly where she needed to be and motioned with a quick flick of her arm, switching on her blinker, too. The tired looking Caddy pulled out and she slid her lovely little gem in its place. Hmm, thinking about fate, she mused as she gathered her handbag and slid from the car. It was definitely fate that had pulled her away from her home, possessed her to go into business for herself, and brought her here to do it where she would find him again.

The bellhop greeted her as she stepped inside the apartment building. Diana paused, secretly pleased to be remembered by the older gentleman after such an extended time away. Butterflies started a mosh pit in her stomach as she rode the elevator up and stepped onto the fourth floor. The hall was simple in its elegance. Rich golden carpet sponged around her heels with each step. Mauve painted walls complemented decorative art that had been strategically hung to accent the antique tables and vases.

She stopped to study a particular painting just outside the door to apartment 402—a seascape of waves crashing against a sandy shore, gloriously full green trees at the water's edge, and birds flying high and free in a sky of brilliant blue. It was so much like the scene she'd left only hours before. The resemblance was uncanny down to the little path leading through the trees.

Diana gaped as the surprised shock moved through her. It couldn't be. Could it? Of course not, she shook her head and afforded herself a half-laugh at the silliness. It was pure coincidence. Before she moved

away, she stole a glance at the lower right hand corner of the painting. Suzanne Cassidy Henry was elegantly scrawled there.

"Maybe not such a coincidence after all." She took the last few steps to the apartment door, her mind whirling with the possibilities. It wasn't a surprise to see Suzanne was the artist of the painting. She'd known it even before she looked. She'd recognized the style, the colors, and the scheme. Just as she recognized the place. No, not a coincidence. Another dollop of fate? Perhaps.

Sighing, she wiped her palms on her skirt, squared her shoulders and, ignoring the super charged pounding of her heart, knocked on the apartment door. She heard a bark, some rustling, a crash, a few giggles, and the door swung open.

The bright smile on Reese Torrin's face was huge and instantaneous. "Diana!" He all but yanked her inside, tossing his free arm around her waist while holding fast to the beer bottle in his other hand. He laid a kiss on her lips that was long, playful and ended with a loud pop. "Geez. I missed you."

"It's good to be missed." Diana pulled back laughing to look at Reese. She felt only a second of remorse that he hadn't been meant for her. Handsome despite the lopsided cut to his scraggly dark hair with a long lean build and fun eyes, he brought both boyish charm and innate drumming talent to the stage with Façade and to the lady's hearts.

"For Pete's sake, Reese, you could let the woman get in the apartment before you tackle her." Melody Forbes Torrin slapped at her husband's shoulder, pushed him back and snagged Diana's hand all in a series of moves that were flowing and almost quicker than the eye. Where her husband had the shaggy hunk meter pinned to an unequivocal nine point five, Melody was, as Reese so often called her, a picture-perfect tomboy version of Kate Beckinsale with flawless skin, and a tumble of gorgeous wavy brown locks. "Diana, it's great to see you. Come in."

“Thanks, I believe I will.” Diana slid an arm around Melody’s waist as they moved through the doorway. The other woman stood a couple of inches taller and Diana tipped her chin up to meet her gaze. “Any news yet?”

Melody slapped Reese’s shoulder as the man pushed by them. “You told her! You weren’t supposed to tell. We were supposed to tell her together!”

Reese skipped away, chuckling. “I had to, honey. It couldn’t wait. She threatened to put a spell on me.”

“I would never!” Diana struggled to sound horrified despite the amusement making her lips twitch.

“Yeah, right.” Melody rolled her stunning green eyes. Eyes that positively dazzled, Diana noted. Eyes that danced as they looked down at Diana. “Did you threaten to turn him into a toad?”

Diana coughed to cover a laugh. “I was thinking a hamster. You know, small, furry, and cute? I thought he’d make a great pet for the new baby.”

“Everyone else knew.” Reese squirmed when Melody pegged him with another penetrating gaze. “Come on, Mel. You really didn’t expect me not to tell her.”

Melody leaned closer to Diana and lowered her voice. “Actually, I was surprised he wasn’t calling you from the hallway of the adoption agency as we left the building. I just wanted to be there to tell you, too. So I’ll do the updates instead. We’ve passed the first hurdles. It’s a long process and it could take a lot longer than we’d like to make it all the way through.”

“But we’re hopeful,” Reese interjected with a smile that lit his face from ear to ear. “And we’ve got nothing but time.”

“For a love-struck couple who never figured to have kids, you sure appear ready for parenthood.” Diana gave Melody’s waist a squeeze.

“I never thought I’d be a mom, but I sure am finding myself looking forward to hearing a sweet little voice call me that.” Injured

in an accident that had taken her ability to bear children when she was barely older than a child herself, Diana knew Melody had come to terms with the fact that she would never have children of her own long before she met Reese.

"You'll be fantastic at it, too." Diana kissed the other woman's cheek and let her arm fall to her side.

"Thanks." Melody beamed as if Diana had given her a truly special gift. "Everyone was just getting ready to settle in front of the big screen. Game starts in less than an hour and there's some pre-game stuff going on."

A sports fan to the last, Diana mused. Could the woman be any more perfect for Reese? She followed Melody to the living room where Garrett sat with his long legs stretched between the sofa and coffee table, a bottle of beer resting on one thigh and a beautiful blond baby girl on the other. They made such a happy picture it drew a quiet, wistful sigh from her throat.

"Better watch out," Melody leaned in again to whisper. "This mommy thing can be contagious."

Diana made a quiet, "Hmm," of agreement even as she felt the infection move through her bloodstream. It wasn't new. She'd had the longing mommy disease for a long time, but seeing so many happy couples around her, so many happy parents or soon-to-be parents caused it to spread like a vicious cancer.

"Here you go, sweetheart." Suzanne Cassidy Henry sailed into the living room looking every bit the sweet, innocent, blond kindergarten teacher she'd always been complete with a sippy cup and a teething biscuit. She spotted Diana and her face lit with welcome as she handed her daughter the cup and put the biscuit on the nearby table. "You made it."

"Seems I did. She isn't cutting teeth already, is she?" Diana stepped to the back of the sofa, reaching over Garrett's shoulder to fondle one of Lilly's blond ringlets. "How old is she now? Not even a year?"

"She was born cutting teeth." Garrett tipped his head back, a wide, proud smile splitting his lips.

"I have something for you." Suzanne rushed around the sofa to Diana's side, pointing to a painting braced against a nearby wall. "For your store."

"Oh." Diana covered her mouth as the soft gasp escaped. It was exactly as they'd discussed. A painting of the home she'd left behind so comfortable and cozy. It came to life on the canvas. She felt her throat tighten, her eyes growing warm as the first pang of homesickness squeezed at her heart. She'd expected to miss it, her home, and the town she'd grown up in, the life she'd made there. She'd wanted something to bring with her from that place, from those years, something more than the memories in her head. Suzanne had given her that in this painting.

"Amazing, isn't it?"

Diana shot a look over her shoulder at the new voice coming up behind her. "It's perfect," she told Alicia Addison even as she returned her attention to the painting, to the artist. "You have a real talent, Suzanne. Magic on canvas. Thank you. I'll treasure it always."

"It will look great in the store," Alicia commented, moving to stand on Diana's other side. "A bit of old with the new. Did you stop by the building first or come straight here?"

Diana shook her head. "Straight here. I suspect once I make it to the building, I won't be eager to leave so quickly." She covered her belly with a palm and let out a short laugh. "I'm nervous. I keep trying to convince myself coming here first isn't procrastination, but maybe I'm simply playing games."

"You've taken a big step." Another new voice stepped into the room. A voice she'd know anywhere, male, melodic and absolutely mesmerizing.

"And it's all thanks to you." She let the smile come as she turned to meet Derek Kadin's milk chocolate gaze. The man was utterly spectacular. Dangerous and viral while smooth and charming, all at

the same time. Though short for a man, his body was all muscle, his features angular and handsome, his head shaved and adding that last little touch of the rugged warrior that made so many female hearts in the music community swoon.

It sure worked on Alicia, Diana mused. And if it hadn't it was likely that all of their lives might be far different than they were now. If Derek hadn't showed up at Addison House on the exact weekend Alicia's sister went away, leaving Alicia in charge of the bed and breakfast, the entire chain of events that had occurred since might never have been.

Yes, it was definitely fate, Diana thought yet again. The will of the Gods. Each link in that chain leading them, leading *her* to the here and now. To the final clasp that would draw all those links together for her. A clasp that caught her eye as it walked into the room and stopped short.

She saw in his eyes when recognition took hold, watched as the play of confusion, surprise, hurt and uncertainty washed over his face. They hadn't told him about her, she realized. Or if they had, he hadn't made the connection. And why would he? Philadelphia was a long way from St. Petersburg, the years since they'd last seen one another separating the time as though it were a mere memory. Her memory had changed immensely, she saw now as she took the briefest of moments to study James Fisher.

He stood taller, broader, and more handsome than she remembered. As he should be given the boy had grown into a man. Dark hair, long and braided, cascaded past a set of wide shoulders that seemed to scream for a female's hand. Even beneath the solid black shirt she could make out sculpted muscles and hard ridges, six pack abs and a flat stomach. He wore jeans, tight and forming to a pair of narrow hips and long legs. His face, too, was long and lean with laughter lines around a mouth so utterly kissable it made her own mouth water in anticipation. His eyes were a mesmerizing shade of blue. Eyes she'd stared into so few nights beneath a starlit sky. Seeing

them again, seeing *him* again brought the memories slamming back with such a ferocious force they nearly knocked her off her heels.

She'd known he'd be here. She thought she'd prepared herself to face him. She'd been wrong. No amount of preparation could have steadied her for the way her world dammed near tilted off its axis. Sensations swamped her, in her heart, in her belly, lower. Sharp slivers of desire and need brought a low sound from her throat she hadn't meant to make.

"I thought you could use a glass of this. Long drive and all that," Reese was saying. Only when he blocked her vision of James did she manage to look at him. "Of course, if you'd rather a bottle..."

He held out a glass of blush wine for her. Diana took it, willing her hand not to shake, forcing herself to take a small sip. A bottle? Reese might have meant it as a joke, but a bottle would have been good right about now.

"Wait! You haven't met, have you?" Reese turned slightly, affording her a view of James once more. "Duh. I forgot you were on your way back to Florida when he officially joined the band. Diana, this is James Fisher, our new bassist. James, Diana Thompson, all around best friend, witch, beauty and soon to be entrepreneur."

"Actually," Diana said with a surprising calm. She paused and took another sip of her wine, gazing at James over the rim. "We've already met."

* * * *

Her voice sounded like a siren's song and stayed with him long after he left Derek's apartment. Her beauty followed him, too, as did her power and the pain. As James let himself inside the house he rented from Reese and Melody, Melody's old house, he wished for an instant he could put his life in a re-winder, go back to morning and start the whole day again. Not that it would do him much good, he decided and headed straight for the kitchen in search of another beer.

No matter how many times he repeated this day, he figured it would still reach the same outcome in the end. Him standing by the fridge with a cold bottle of brew at his lips, a mind muddled in shock and confusion, and a heart bleeding from the inside out.

She'd looked amazing, incredible, beautiful, *out-fucking-standing*. Not that she'd ever looked less, he conceded and tipped back the bottle, draining half the contents in one gulp. A blanket of fiery red hair against skin of alabaster and eyes such an odd shade of green with tiny blue flakes that sparkled. Flakes, he knew, that deepened, darkening when she became aroused. The body he remembered, the one he'd dreamt of all these years, had changed from the girl to that of a woman. She had curves now. Perfect, well-toned curves and sweetly built muscles as delicate looking as they were strong. Her breasts, *God*, he remembered those breasts. Yet he found those on the woman's body to be far more wicked temptation than they'd ever been on the girl.

She'd worn purple, he reflected as he moved to the cabinet, pulled out a bag of potato chips. She'd always loved purple. It was the color of divination, of health and spirit. It looked great on her as it always had. Sexier, he mused and opened the chips to crunch on a few. Yeah, the purple that clung to those amazing breasts, fit snugly to her smooth flat stomach and stopped barely an inch below the waistband of the black and purple skirt had been sexy as hell. As was the broom skirt and the black strappy pumps she'd worn on her feet. Power. Her beauty was simply another form of the power she possessed. She knew how to use it too. Always had.

James never discounted power of any sort. He'd felt it way too often, experienced its reality too many times not to believe. He didn't have any himself, at least not in the metaphysical sense, but he knew those who did and he believed. Diana was one of those who did. Power radiated from her even stronger than her beauty. She'd been his first brush with true power, given him his first real taste of it, and showed him the joys and later even the pain.

That, too, had been another first for him. Oh, she hadn't hurt him in any physical sense. She never turned him into a toad like a witch in a storybook. She never lashed out at him, never caused him to see things that weren't there or feel imaginary things crawl over his skin like something out of *The Craft*. She never formed tangible balls of energy and threw them at him, or put a curse on him that put him in the hospital from thousands of spider bites like in *The Covenant*. No. All that stuff was for Hollywood witches. Not for the true, for the reality of a witch like Diana.

But she could see, she could know. *You're meant for me, James. The only man meant for me.* She'd told him that, all those years ago in their special place at the edge of the beach in the wood. She'd told him that just before he took her virginity, just before he gave her his heart. A heart she'd ruthlessly broken, he reflected now, with more words mere weeks later.

James tipped back his beer, drained the last drop, and tossed it at the trashcan a good three feet away. It hit the back of the rim, bounced off and tumbled into the can, shattering with a resounding sound of glass on breaking glass. Just like his heart that day in early fall. Leaving the bag of chips open on the counter, he stomped out of the kitchen. Just like his heart today.

Dammit, seeing her again had been a knife in the gut. She'd known he'd be there. She'd expected to see him.

"Could've given me some fucking warning," he mumbled irritably. Instead, he'd been struck dumb, shocked and speechless. He shouldn't have left the way he had, so abruptly, making up such a lame excuse. Had anyone really bought his claim of not feeling well? They might have, he figured since he'd had a cold for the better part of two weeks now. The change in climate from his home in southern Texas to Philadelphia seemed to be taking a toll on his immune system. Because of such, they might have bought it had it not been for Diana's admission of knowing him, the cold shoulder he'd given her, and his brisk departure thereafter.

She'd been so cool, so calm, and the look in her eyes...apology, grief, desire. By the Gods, he'd noticed that intense level of desire simmering in the flickering depths of her amazing eyes! He'd known if he'd gotten any closer to her, given her any encouragement at all he would've seen those blue sparkles go dark with that desire as they used to.

"Why?" The word came out on an exasperated burst as he flung himself on the sofa and snatched up the television remote. She'd pushed him away, ended what they'd started without so much as a backward glance. It took him months, hell, *years*, to recover from losing her. Why would she look at him that way again now? More to the point, why had his path aligned with hers again and what did he do about it?

He'd finally gotten everything he wanted. He was well on his way to having more than he ever dreamed. Would he risk it all now for her? Could he prevent himself from risking it even if he wanted to?

"You're a pathetic soul, James Fisher," he told himself as he found the tail end of the sports game, tossed the remote aside, and settled in for the final ten minutes. "She steals your heart, gives it back in pieces and one look has you wanting to go back for round two. Pathetic. Truly, truly pathetic."

Chapter 2

Diana heard the door open behind her, heard it softly close again. She smelled the gentle drift of neroli, lavender, and a touch of rose on the air and knew it was Alicia without even turning to see. Diana had special made the oil based fragrance for her birthday last year.

"You were right about this place." Diana spun, only marginally feeling like an idiot for the ear-to-ear grin splitting her face. "It's absolutely perfect."

"I knew it would be." Alicia stopped just inside the door and shoved her hands in the pockets of her jeans. "It seemed to have you stamped everywhere in here. Everything you said you wanted, everything you described to me so many times. I could see all of that when I first saw this place."

"It worried me," Diana admitted. Still did, she thought and, because she couldn't define the needling voice in the back of her mind, she pushed it away for now. She walked to a wall of built-in shelving, grazed the tip of one finger over the wood, and winced when the finger came back covered in dust. "It all seemed so sudden. It *was* sudden. And I wasn't even sure if this was the path I'm meant to take. Then you called to tell me about this space. There was no time for me to make a trip here, no time for me to think."

"The owner needed an immediate answer."

"Yes, I understand that. It's not like me to make rash decisions though, especially without truly seeing what I'm getting into." She'd tried to see. She'd used every divination tool she had—tarot cards, crystal ball, runes, even tea leaves. None of them gave her the clear answer she sought. Owning her own New Age shop had been a

dream...no, a goal since she was a young girl. She'd studied like a demon, in high school, in college. She'd busted her buns for others who owned similar businesses all for the degrees and the experience. She worked her way to management of the last New Age store she worked in back home. Thought she may have found the happiness she sought in merely managing what belonged to someone else. She discovered all too quickly, however, she needed what was hers.

Having her own shop should have been some time down the road yet. She'd begun to work harder toward it, to save more, even to scope out products and locations. But Alicia made it happen. Her friend loaned her the money to get started, encouraged her to leave the familiar and safe home of St. Pete, found the space for her here, and even talked her into turning her idea into a combination store of sorts. New Age supplies and books. Given that Alicia was the bestselling author, she knew a lot about books.

She also knew about space, Diana mused, happiness and thrill alive in her heart. This space. It was so right! "You knew," she said and turned back to Alicia. "You knew it was the right time, the right place. Because you know me."

"I used to think I did, anyway."

Diana's smile faded as she studied Alicia, heard her friend's words spoken so coolly with just a twinge of anger and...hurt? "Alicia?" Heart pounding faster now more from confusion and fear than excitement, she took a step toward the other woman and stopped when she felt the chill in the air that mirrored the coolness of Alicia's voice.

"I suppose you simply never planned to tell me about James." Alicia tone turned casual but a bite remained, turning the words to sharp little darts. She rocked back on the heels of her black leather combat boots and bit her lower lip. "I wonder, though, how you figured you would keep the secret after the eight of us got together."

Diana studied her friend for a long moment. There was anger, yes, and pain. Pain far beyond the physical. She sensed it. She felt it.

She'd caused it, she realized. She'd only caused such pain in another she loved once in her life. That time, that heartache had been intentional. This, well, this surprised her as much as it touched her.

"How long have you known James, Diana?"

"A few years." Diana took a deep breath. "Ten. We met ten years ago, the summer between high school and college."

"Ten years," Alicia whispered, her gaze unwavering, unchanging. "Yet you never once mentioned him to me. You loved him."

It was more a statement, an accusation than a question. Still, Diana nodded. "I did." With all she'd had, all she'd been at the young age of eighteen, she'd loved James Fisher. A part of her, a very large part she'd never been able to bury or ignore still loved him.

"You were in love with him and yet you never told me. I never knew about him or anyone, never knew you'd ever fallen for a man like that. We were friends. At least I thought we were. I thought we *are*, and yet you hide something so personal, so sacred like that from me."

Diana felt her temper spark. Maybe she would find some sympathy later for the tears she saw sparkling in her friend's eyes. Maybe she'd even find an apology. Alicia was half right, after all. Maybe Diana should have told her about James. But just now, she couldn't accept all the blame tossed her way.

"It seems to me," she started and had to fight to keep her voice level and even, "ten years ago I thought we were friends, too. Right up until you gave up what we had, what we shared to become the spoiled little rich girl your mother wanted you to be."

Alicia's jaw dropped. "Oh, no, you don't. How could you—?"

"I wondered that myself about you at the time. How could you? I never quite figured out the answer. Fact is, Alicia, you would've known everything if you'd been there, but you weren't. You chose to go a different way, to do different things for a few years."

"I left you." The admission came far quieter, more subdued than any Alicia had said since entering the shop. She pulled her hands from

her pockets and shoved one of them through her long mane of dark hair. "I dropped our friendship, dropped you in favor of trying to become someone I wasn't. We never talked about that. One minute we were the best of friends. Then we weren't."

"We had to go our separate ways for a while, I guess." It was how Diana had come to think about those years without Alicia as a friend. They needed time to grow, to explore, to become the women they were today without the other. "Still, we found our way back."

"He hurt you." Alicia walked to her, her steps hesitant at first, as if unsure or frightened. "James," she qualified. "I can see that. I could see it last night."

Diana shook her head. "I hurt myself. I hurt him." She sighed and fought the urge to wring her hands. She settled for turning to face the wall of shelves again, curled her fingers lightly around the edge of one. "I'm the one who ended it, Alicia, and he's angry. That's why he left so quickly last night. He has every right to be."

"Something happened then. You saw something that made you end it."

"Yes." Despite the years apart, the time they spent growing on their own, Alicia still knew her better than anyone ever had. She understood her better.

"But you still love him." Alicia's hand was a gentle, caring touch to Diana's shoulder.

Diana angled her head into that touch, brushing her cheek over the back of Alicia's hand. "I never stopped loving him. Not then. Not now. Not at any point in the years between."

"You're destined for each other. Is that what you're telling me? That's why you're together again."

"I believe so. I can't see it." She'd tried and it frustrated her that she couldn't see this time. Why show her the end when she wouldn't be blessed with the beginning? "He's so angry with me, so hurt." That much she'd easily seen last night. The razor sharp edges of that pain

still continued to slice at her now by the light of the day. "I don't know if I'll be able to get through that."

"But you have to try."

"Yes," Diana agreed. "I have to try."

* * * *

His rhythm was off, his fingers more suitable for a game of fumble the strings than real bass guitar playing and his mind was nowhere close to the recording studio where he'd spent the better part of the last two hours.

"How about a break?" Garrett suggested and unhooked his guitar strap, carefully setting the instrument on its stand before anyone could answer.

"Sure. One second though." Reese smacked his drumstick smartly on the center snare drum in the set and waited for the sound to fade. "Did that sound funny to you guys? Off key maybe?"

"Do it again."

At Derek's request, he hit the drum again, and then grinned at the reverberation through the tiny sound room.

"Sounds on to me." Derek shrugged. "Maybe it's your ears that are off today. I'm going for a bottle of water. You guys want something?"

"Yeah, buy us a round." Reese waited until Garrett followed Derek out the door before he spoke. "Wanna talk about it?"

James shot him a look then shoved an aggravated hand through his hair. As the long strands were still paired into dozens of tiny braids, the act served little purpose. Maybe it was time to take them out, he thought idly. He'd adopted the style one night in a drunken haze with the vocalist of his former band back in Texas. Not that it didn't fit, he supposed, with the metal image of Façade as well. Derek, Garrett and Reese each had their own thing going on when it came to

style, everything from their hair—or lack thereof in Derek's case—down to their choice of shoes.

"Can't seem to get my fingers to cooperate today," James answered after a moment. He moved to the stand against the wall, set his bass securely inside it, and perched on a nearby stool. His fingers, his brain, neither wanted to listen worth a shit to reason or command.

"Happens to the best of us."

Yeah, but not when one was working his ass off to fit in, to prove himself worthy, James thought. He'd been with Façade for over six months now. He'd beat out close to one hundred hopeful bass players who auditioned for the open spot to be the fourth in an already established, already platinum-selling band in the heavy metal industry. But, securing the spot didn't mean he was home free. It didn't make him part of the family, yet. Now that he had it, he had to earn it. He had to prove himself good enough to hold onto it. And he *was* good enough, dammit. He'd worked his ass off to get here. He'd earned his place here. And he was already screwing it up because he couldn't unwrap his mind from a dammed woman.

"It's not the songs, the riffs," Reese went on. "You've got them down solid. We know that. I've heard you play them. It's kind of hard to remember them, to think about them, though, when a certain amazingly beautiful redhead wants to monopolize your thoughts instead."

James winced and let out a long suffering sigh. "It's that obvious, huh?"

Reese chuckled, shrugged, and spun a drumstick in his fingers. "It's Diana. She has that effect on men. Like I said, she's amazingly beautiful, and that's just a small part of her power."

"Don't I know it," James muttered. "She's gotten stronger over the years, harder to pull away from." Harder to walk away from, he added silently. He might have left Derek's apartment in a flash last night, but that didn't mean it hadn't taken a lot out of him to do so. It would've

been easier to simply yank her into his arms and pretend those years apart never happened.

"Don't I know it?"

At Reese's echo of his own words, James slanted the other man a look. "You and Diana?" Geezus! That's all he needed, to be at odds with a band mate over a woman. But Reese had Melody. He was shaggy hair over leather boots in love with his wife.

"I thought about it," Reese admitted. "Boy, did I ever. Thought way too much about that woman in the first few weeks after we met."

"But you didn't—" James cut himself off, shook his head, and held up a hand. "Never mind. Don't answer that. Not my business."

"We didn't click. Not in that way. She's a phenomenal kisser. I'll give you that."

James wished he hadn't given him shit as twin streams of jealousy and longing curled in his gut. Because it was far too easy to picture Reese's mouth fused to Diana's, even easier to remember his own pasted there, he pushed himself up. He paced to the wall where a plaque hung celebrating Façade's first multi platinum selling CD and stopped.

"She's an even better friend," Reese continued, his voice quieter, more reflective, more considering. "I suppose she would say she wasn't for me. Or I wasn't for her, depending on the viewpoint."

Yeah, that sounded like something she would say. She would've known, too. Almost instantly, she would've known if Reese was meant for her. She'd believed James to be meant for her once. Could it be that she believed it again?

"I wonder if she's for you though."

The mirror of Reese's thoughts to his own had James bristling. "She had me once. She threw it away. She threw me away."

"Thought so. She broke your heart." Reese nodded. "Okay, that explains it."

"Explains what?" James whirled on the man. "And that sounds so high school."

"I haven't known her long in comparison but, from the time line I've been able to construct, you couldn't have been long out of high school."

"I was twenty-two. And that has nothing to do with now."

"Doesn't it?" Reese arched a brow.

"Geez, you must spend a lot of time around her. You're even starting to sound like her!"

Amusement danced in Reese's eyes, but he said nothing.

"How is it anyway that you're good friends with her and I never knew it before last night? I've been in this band for months, stuck to you guys like glue, breathing the same dammed air, for crying out loud. I never heard you talk about her."

"Didn't you? We talked about her a lot. Derek and Alicia especially as they were setting things up, talking her into moving here, opening her store here."

"I guess I never put two and two together."

"Maybe you weren't meant to before last night." At the sideways look James shot him, Reese laughed. "Yeah, that sounded like something she would say. I know. And because it did, maybe you should go see her."

Maybe he should, James thought. He couldn't avoid her. Like it or not, they were too closely entwined. Their worlds collided on a vicious track last night. "After practice," he decided.

"You could go now if you want. There's time for practice later. Garrett and I can run through our solos. Start the prerecording for them. You don't have to be here for that."

No, he didn't. Still, he wanted to be. There had been a time when he'd willingly put Diana first in his life, above everything else, even the music career he'd been attempting to pursue. Not this time, he thought defiantly. This time he would put himself first. "After practice," he said again and moved to pick up his bass guitar.

* * * *

"Champagne. How could I have forgotten to bring champagne? And orange juice. We could have had mimosas to celebrate."

They were alright again, Diana thought as she pulled back from Alicia's fierce hug and grinned into her best friend's eyes. All was forgotten if not forgiven. She found comfort in that, in knowing their friendship had grown strong enough over the years to survive bruised feelings, separations, and secrets. "So you'll bring them tonight." She stepped back and let her arms fall from Alicia's trim waist to her own sides. "I'll supply the chocolate. We can have a slumber party. Invite Suzanne and Melody. Unless, of course, you want it to just be the two of us. You know, like old times, sister."

"That's a great idea!" Alicia's excitement was almost palpable. She'd always loved female get-togethers. "And you know how much fun the old times were, but we should invite them too. We've all become a bit of a quartet recently, haven't we?"

"So it seems," Diana agreed. She moved away, turning to gaze around the room that, someday soon, she would have stocked with herbs, incense, candles, stones and books. Something missing in that, she thought. Something causing that needling feeling she still couldn't quite identify. She'd seen it differently, seen another addition she couldn't quite place.

"The Façade women," Alicia mused, a chuckle in her tone. When Diana cast her a quick glance over her shoulder, she instantly sobered and winced. "Sorry."

"It's okay. You're more than half right."

"If you have your way, I'll be all the way right soon."

Before Diana could comment, the door to the shop opened and James stepped inside. He let the door close behind him, paused just inside as his eyes adjusted to the dimmer light, and then his gaze landed on Diana.

"Real soon," Alicia muttered, amusement back in her voice. "That's my cue." She brushed an airy kiss to Diana's cheek. "I'll talk to Suzanne and Melody. We'll see you, oh, say, around six-thirty."

"Six-thirty is fine. Let me know if it's not okay with the men."

"Will do. Hey there, handsome." Alicia greeted James with a smile and a quick hug. "Since you're here, I'd say it's safe to assume you guys are through with practice for the day."

"You'd be correct." James slid an easy arm around Alicia's waist and Diana felt a quick tug of jealousy.

Stupid, she knew, to feel that. Alicia was madly in love with Derek. And James, well, she guessed she didn't really know him anymore, she was forced to admit. Still, the young man he'd been would never poach on another man's territory. She had no reason to believe the man would be any different.

"If what's not okay with the men?" His gaze flicked to Diana, just a quick glance before he looked back at Alicia.

"Girl's night out, of a sort. Slumber party in Diana's new apartment upstairs. You guys haven't made plans, have you? Maybe Garrett will be okay with watching the little one for the night."

"If they've made plans, they didn't clue me in. I bet between the four of us, we can give little Lily the night of her life."

"Oh, I just bet you can. Four big, strong, handsome men... What's a precious angel like Lily to do?"

"Wrap us all around her sweet tiny finger." James grinned then lifted a brow. "And what will the bigger angels be doing while the little one keeps us occupied? What exactly does your species do when four get together for a time honored slumber party tradition?"

"That, my handsome friend, is a secret. As it goes, if I told you, well, I would simply have to kill you." She planted a quick, playful kiss on his cheek and dropped her voice conspiratorially. "But to give you and the other boys something to consider tonight, I will tell you sleek teddies, pillow fights in our underwear and painting each other's toe nails are all on the menu."

"Yum, yum." James growled.

Alicia laughed. "Later, gorgeous. See you tonight, Di."

"Derek has his hands full with that one," James commented with a chuckle as Alicia sailed out the door.

"Between the two of them, they manage to balance out nicely. I'm surprised to see you." The admission cost her and she didn't like it. She wasn't a woman often taken by surprise. Still, she'd expected him to go into avoid mode, at least for a time. As their worlds were so tightly connected now, it couldn't last forever. But, for a time.

"You're happy with the space?" He hooked his thumbs in the pockets of his worn jeans and kicked toe to heel as he ambled around the room. "It's what you had in mind?"

There were other things, other ways to avoid, Diana supposed and decided for now to roll with the flow. "It's better. It's bigger and not just in size. A place can have the square feet and still be small in usable area."

"Looks like whoever built this place knew that too."

"Maybe that's it."

"Maybe what's it?"

Diana blinked at him. She hadn't realized she'd spoken aloud. "I've been thinking something is off, but couldn't quite pin it down. Maybe it's the size. Bigger is better, yes, but maybe it's too big for what I need."

"So you'll just fill it with more stuff." He lifted a chin at the double open doorway across from the main wall. "Is that another room?"

"Yeah." Diana walked to it, leading him inside. A serving bar stretched along one wall with display cabinets and shelves behind and beside it. More shelves lined the other two walls and windows monopolizing the front. "It would be a great room for a café. Don't you think? I hadn't planned on putting one in but..." She let the thought trail off.

"Perfect! Put in a few tables topped with discreet candles, some comfortable chairs, maybe even put some kind of make-shift stage in the corner there. You could have poetry night once a month, open readings while dining on coffee or herbal teas the rest of the time."

It was her idea exactly, or what had become her idea since first seeing this part of the space. The fact that he had it too, that he could see it too only added weight to the whole destiny deal. "I figured I would scatter the stock," she told him and slowly moved back to the main room. "A row of books here, opposite another of candles there. Statues and dragons, stones scattered about for color and form."

"The customer comes in for a book and finds a Fairy figurine or a moon and stars incense burner."

"Or needs to stock up on candles and herbs and discovers the latest Laurel K. Hamilton or Alicia Addison bestseller." Diana nodded. "Sidelines to attract and divert attention."

"They'll work and work well."

"I hope so," Diana admitted. "I think so." Small talk. It amused her, surprised her. She'd expected their next face-to-face after last night to be, well, she wasn't exactly sure what she'd expected. She'd figured it to certainly be far different from this, anyway.

She watched him, twin fists of intrigue and desire punching in her belly as he moved about her empty store. He seemed to picture all they spoke of, seemed to see just as she could how everything would look when all was said and done.

What was it about him she'd always found so alluring? There was physical attraction, yes, and lots of it. He wasn't traditionally handsome, not one most would picture her with. For a time, she'd even found their coupling a surprise. As a young girl, she'd fancied herself with a suit and tie guy, a businessman of complete polish and sophistication. Only in her dreams and sometimes her visions did she see someone different, someone like James.

Rugged, sloppy even, while at the same time appearing clean and well kempt. About as far from the tailored suits as a guy could get,

she mused as her gaze slowly raked over his worn jeans, combat boots and snug fitting Mudvayne T-shirt. And his hair... Those long strands intricately braided in thin, tight sections. It had to take hours to get all his hair that way. Yet, even as girly as the style should've appeared, on him it was oddly masculine.

He'd always worn his hair long, she remembered, and could almost feel the way the silky soft strands had slid through her fingers. She'd loved to play with it, always took it down herself when he'd dared to pull it back. What would he do now, she wondered, if she undid those fascinating braids?

"I came by to apologize." He turned to her and shrugged. "You know, for walking out the way I did last night. It was pretty rude of me, huh?"

And here was another surprise. First the small talk, then an apology. Obviously the one had simply been a segue to the second. Except, if she thought further on that, maybe not. More like laying the foundation, getting himself in the groove, making himself comfortable, even knocking a hole in the wall the last ten years put between them so that he *could* apologize.

But wasn't it she who owed him the apology? Though only a part of her believed so, maybe for the way she ended it so abruptly, she'd expected him to all but demand it. To look at her with contempt, even hatred, not utter any form of apology.

"I suppose you had the right," she told him now. "You were, shall we say, surprised by my arrival last night."

"That's putting it mildly," he scoffed.

Diana bit back a grin. Ah yes, apology or not, there was still anger here, and contempt. Hatred? No, she didn't think the pain delved that deep. She thanked the Goddess for that. "I didn't know if any of the others told you I was coming."

"You could've told them to."

"Yes," Diana said slowly. In truth, she couldn't say why she hadn't, except simply because it hadn't felt right. It never seemed the time to bring it up with any of the other six.

"You're still as self-serving as always." He turned and disappeared through another door in the back corner of the main space. It would be the storeroom most likely, though she hadn't yet decided for certain.

Self-serving? Her? Stunned, Diana let a full five seconds lapse before she followed him. "That was a bit rude, don't you think? For your information, I thought it best to greet you face-to-face rather than letting the others—"

"Do your dirty work," he interrupted her. His voice was so calm, so low she ended up stopping in mid-sentence to hear him. "Well, I guess you did that."

Diana felt her temper spark. It ignited before she could stop it. "My, didn't we grow into an asshole in the last decade?" She thought she saw the corner of his lips twitch at that and it only added more fuel to her temper flame.

"I've been called such a time or two. At any rate, we're both here. We have mutual friends. Our lives are going to intersect quite often from now on it seems. So, I felt it best to apologize, put any ill feelings of the past behind us and, oh, I don't know, start on a new slate, perhaps."

"You felt it best?" Diana repeated, seeing red. It was his calmness that did it, his arrogance and yes, his assholeishness. When he turned his back on her, she very nearly let it all go. All her fury, all her power. She found it hard to restrain herself when it came over her so strongly. "You felt it best and *I'm* self-serving." She reached out, grabbed his shoulder, and pulled. Heat seeped through her hand as he turned once more, but she ignored it, pushed away the magic of feeling him again. "You say all of this, you accuse me, and don't even take a moment to talk."

"Talking was always your way, never mine. This is how I always preferred to handle things." He yanked her to him, one arm closing around her waist, the other hand burying in her hair. That hand fisted and pulled her head back even as his mouth came down on hers.

Chapter 3

It was like coming home. James hated it felt that way. He'd left this home, as it were, shortly after he reached twenty-two, never intending to go back. Yet, he'd had to go back. He'd realized that while talking to Reese, realized how it had to be done on the way over, and he'd baited her. He played her, pissed her off so he could lead them straight to this. Everything he'd said, all the hurtful words were ones he'd thought about her once, ones he'd meant then. Maybe a part of him meant them now, still thought them. Either way, they were out and had gotten him right where he'd wanted to be, with his arms around Diana Thompson, his mouth fused to hers.

God, she tasted amazing! She felt equally incredible against him. She was fire in his arms. A rain of temper flames that morphed to a fiery lust, a blazing desire as he forced his way inside her mouth, as he felt her surrender. Her arms moved around his neck, her body grinding against his as she changed the angle of the kiss. She took it deeper, giving him more. Then she moaned, a low guttural sound that did wicked things to his hardening cock and sent his blood boiling to a point off the temperature scale.

He felt her power, intense and seductive, move through him. It was another sense of the coming home, more familiarity but with a new, far more gripping twist. The girl had become a woman, the girl's powers maturing just as the body that possessed them, and James knew, if he allowed it, woman and powers would possess him. It was what he'd wanted to know. If not wanted, then needed. It was why he'd needled her into this kiss. Hadn't he already guessed it would be easier to forget, to forgive and to take rather than walk away?

Easier maybe, but not better. Not for him. He let the storm of emotions he'd felt since walking out of Derek's kitchen the night before, since setting eyes on her again break over them. It was a surge of electricity that struck them like a bolt of lightning, a downpour of power all consuming and drenching. He might damn himself for it later but he'd had to know. He remembered the unique flavor of her, recognized her dark scent. Both slithered into him, addicted him, and tied him in knots. The feel of her curves hard and fast against him was a wicked temptation he'd only evoked in his dreams. Her tongue felt like a ribbon of silk. Her mouth demanded, took, feasted. Sensations rippled through him, twin daggers of lust and need shooting a direct line to his cock.

He pulled back, breathless and confused, shaken and sure. He had to pull back before he nailed her to the wall, before he let himself indulge in the overwhelming need to drive his cock in her sweet heat, before he gave into the need to make her scream and beg to come. Those needs and that kiss left him breathless. The questions that formed inside him, the wonder he read in the depths of her incredible eyes confused him. The close proximity to her, the feel of her body, the intoxication of her scent shook him. But beneath it all, he was sure of one vital point, she was still the only one for him. She remained the only woman who could match him passion for passion, magic for magic, soul for soul.

"Did that tell you what you wanted to know?" Her voice was hoarse, her question far from steady.

It helped knowing she was as shaken by the kiss as he. He'd wanted to prove to her, to himself that what she'd tossed away ten years ago had been the end of it all, the end of them. Was it possible somehow that it had been a beginning instead?

Unable to answer either her question or his own, James stepped back, turned and, for the second time in less than twenty-four hours proved to them both he could still walk away. At least for now.

* * * *

All things considered, she'd wanted a slumber party and she was destined to have exactly that. Diana grinned at the soft rap on the door and even let out a chuckle as she pulled it open.

"I've got champagne, Ben & Jerry's cookie dough ice cream, and orange juice," Alicia announced and breezed inside.

"Mimosa cookie dough floats. Why is it I find the combination more intriguing than revolting?"

"Because you've always had eclectic tastes."

"So true." Diana gripped the doorknob and started to shut the door. "Alicia, I didn't think. When I suggested this slumber party I—"

"Oh, no, you don't," Alicia cut her off quickly. "You are not backing out on this sleepover."

"No, of course not, but—"

"But nothing," Alicia cut her off. "When I left you and James were staring one another down like two dogs in heat. I don't know what happened between you and it's killing me! You have to tell me everything. You *will* tell me everything. We'll binge and rag on men or swoon over them, whichever reaction is warranted by the conversation, and then fall asleep full of calories and delicious dreams."

"As always, your descriptions are full of intriguing imagery," Diana chuckled. However, the dreams may not be so delicious considering there's nowhere to actually *sleep*."

"Oh, that." Alicia stopped in the center of the nearly empty living room, turned back to Diana, and grinned. "Sure there is. You've got plenty of floor space, don't you?" She spun again and proceeded to the tiny kitchen. "Don't close that. Suzanne and Melody are right behind me. Lucky for you, they did think."

Diana stepped onto the platform outside the door. She peered through the safety bars to the narrow alley below where Alicia had parked her BMW behind Diana's convertible and Suzanne parked her

cute little Mazda behind them both. Suzanne and Melody were just closing the trunk on the Mazda, Mel rolling her eyes behind Suzanne's back as the women moved around the back of the car and headed for the stairs.

"Geez, Suzanne, you could've waited," Diana heard Melody grumble. "I was headed back there to help."

"Please. A few blankets, pillows and a deflated air mattress weigh about as much as a bag of cotton balls," Suzanne shot over her shoulder. "I carry more than this just lugging Lilly's stuff around."

"Maybe so, but the pump for the mattress is in there, too. And then there's the extra bottle of wine, the glasses, some silverware, and a few plates. It all weighs considerably more than any bag of cotton balls I've ever picked up."

"Need some help?" Diana called down as Suzanne made it to the first step.

Suzanne looked up, beamed and reminded Diana of Barbie's little sister, Skipper. Hard to believe she and the perky little blond headed her way were nearly the same age.

"No thanks. We've got it."

"She means *she's* got it. She wouldn't even let me help." Melody dropped her voice to a conspiratorial whisper as they moved past Diana. "I think she's planning to audition for the title of Ms. Bodybuilding America or something."

"Hardy har har," Suzanne quipped as she set the load on the floor. "Get inside and put that stuff in the fridge before it melts."

"And now she's getting bossy," Melody grumbled, but she grinned as she headed for the kitchen.

"What's in the bag?" Diana called after her.

"Finger sandwiches, cheese and celery, and donuts."

"Chocolate covered?"

Melody peeked her head around the kitchen doorway. "Is there any other kind?"

"Not in my house."

“I wasn’t sure what you would have yet,” Suzanne added.

“Not much.” Diana closed the door and joined the women in the kitchen. “I drove to the market a block over, picked up milk, eggs, condiments, dark chocolate Dove bars.”

“Yum.” Alicia licked her lips. “The woman always does chocolate in style.”

“If you’re going to splurge...” Diana shrugged. She moved to one of the bags on the counter and started to unload.

The women bumped elbows, danced around one another, and did a grind and slide a time or two as they set about making a smorgasbord out of the kitchen counter. As the space was small, they had to stagger some items, stack or eliminate others. When they finished, they settled in the middle of the living room floor, each with a plate of sandwiches, chips, celery and dip, cookies Diana had picked up for their chocolate fest, and glasses of chilled champagne.

“I’m allowing myself only this one glass.” Suzanne slid a finger around the rim of her glass. “You know, given that this is a celebration and all. And since it is such, I have some other news to share.”

“And that would be?” Melody prodded.

“I think I’m pregnant again.”

“Oh, my God!” Alicia shrieked. “You’re serious. Holy cow! Again?”

“Go Garrett. You da man.” Melody toasted the air with her glass. Then she pinned Suzanne with a narrowed glare. “You think you’re pregnant and you just toted all that stuff up those stairs and wouldn’t let me carry any of it!”

Suzanne rolled her eyes and laughed. “Oh, stop it. I haven’t even taken the test yet.”

“You don’t need to,” Diana said quietly. She could feel it, the life growing in Suzanne. She placed a hand on the woman’s flat belly and felt the life starting inside it. “It’ll be a boy.”

Suzanne gulped. “Y-you can tell that just from touching me.”

Diana nodded. "Yes, little sister, I can."

"That's so freaking cool." Melody snapped a bite off a celery stick. "I wish I could do that. I don't suppose you can see what my child will be. I mean, when the adoption agency finds us one."

Diana shook her head. "No, sorry. I wish I could."

"That's okay. It'll happen. Maybe we'll get a newborn boy, too."

"What would you name it?" Suzanne asked and crunched on a potato chip.

"I don't know. James, Reese and I were kidding around about that the other day. James thinks if that were to ever happen we should name him after Bryce. He is responsible, even if a bit indirectly, for my meeting Reese after all. You know, if Bryce didn't play hockey and Reese and I weren't fans of the sport that happened to be at the game in seats next to one another and all that. Plus, Reese and Bryce have been friends for a long time."

Diana had been there, she thought now, at the hockey game in question when Reese and Melody met. "I'm surprised Reese doesn't want to name the child hockey puck."

Melody groaned. "Please don't give the man any ideas. If we do get to pick out our child's name, I would like it to be a normal one if at all humanly possible."

"Hooked up with the wrong guy for that one," Suzanne pointed out.

"Speaking of hooking up with a guy." Alicia set her plate aside, spun around until she lay on her stomach and clasped her champagne glass with both hands in front of her. "I believe it's later. So tell me what happened. James was here when I left earlier," she told Suzanne and Melody. "Down in the store." Her attention returned to Diana. "I haven't told them anything, but I think they've pretty much figured out you and James have some sort of history."

"He kissed me." She hadn't meant to say it, especially not with such evident longing in her voice. "He called me names, pissed me off, and then kissed me breathless. He was always good at that."

“Baiting you, keeping you on your toes or kissing you stupid?” Melody asked and bit off the tip of a celery stick.

Diana pulled her knees to her chest, closed her arms around her legs and chuckled. “All of the above, I suppose. He always had such a smooth way about him, sure, confident.”

“Still does from what I can tell,” Suzanne commented.

“Except when it comes to you,” Alicia added. “So, do you want to put the kiss on a scale or give a super detailed description?”

For just a second, Diana let herself fall back into the moment, into the kiss. She let herself remember, experience again the feel of his mouth, his arms, his body. Hard, demanding, vicious. She’d met him in kind, gave him equal passion, equal intensity. She could still feel it now, the electric shock to her system, a cataclysm of sensations she’d never felt before him, hadn’t felt since him. The desire still churned low in her belly hours later, a persistent heat between her legs. She’d wanted more, so much more. In that single moment she’d thought she’d give up anything, *do* anything simply to have his marvelous cock inside her once more.

When she came back to reality it was to find Suzanne studying her with a quiet scrutiny, Melody gazing at her while she continued to munch on the celery stick, and Alicia peering at her with a small knowing smile tilting her lips. Diana felt her face warm with a hint of embarrassment for where her thoughts had traveled. She stretched out her legs, tugging at her skirt, and picked up her wine glass. Stalling? Yes, she decided and the realization amused her. She let the moment drag on a bit longer as she collected her thoughts.

“I would like to keep the specific description private, if it’s all the same to you.”

Alicia’s smile morphed into a pout. “Figures. You sure know how to burst a romance writer’s bubble,” she grumbled and drained her champagne glass.

“But, in the interest of said romance writer’s bubble,” Diana continued. “I will say it broke all possible scales.”

“Whoo hoo,” Melody cheered and toasted Diana with a stick of Monterey Jack cheese.

“Well now, I suppose that’s a start.” Alicia snagged the bag of cookies sitting on the floor between them in the circle they’d made.

“It’s a start.” Diana agreed.

“How did you meet?” Suzanne got up and retrieved a sketchbook from a canvas bag leaning against the wall. She settled back in the circle, legs crisscrossed, and started to draw.

Diana knew she could easily fall into the moment, into the transport shuttle that would take her right back to where she’d been ten years before. Needing to stay in the here and now for a while, she stood and paced the room as she spoke. In her mind’s eye, she let herself picture the way the room would look when her things arrived on Friday. The way everything would be when she completed the daunting task of unpacking and arranging.

There was a corner nook near the coat closet between the front door and kitchen. Wasted space, she’d thought at first until she realized for her it would be anything but. It was the perfect size, just large enough to hold a permanent altar, her tools, and divination aides. Not big enough to cast a circle or hold a complete ritual, but she preferred the outdoors for that sort of ceremony anyway.

Her comfortable sofa would take up much of the main wall in the living space. Her marble and stone end tables would monopolize the rest. She had throw rugs of beautiful patterns and colors to jazz up the beige carpet.

A small wood-burning fireplace sat in the far corner. She would love that come winter and could already see herself curled in front of a flickering fire, a cup of warm chamomile tea and James. Yes, James, she realized when the image gave her a slight jolt, its clarity brilliantly bright and amazing.

“I suppose one could say it was a meeting fit for a romance writer’s soul.” She tossed a smile over her shoulder at Alicia and saw that all three of the other women sat watching her with unabashed

interest. “He was in town for the summer with some friends, his band mates at the time. I was working at All Things Magical.”

“The New Age shop you managed before coming here.” Melody made it part statement, part question.

“I wasn’t manager then. The store hadn’t been open long. I’d just graduated and was in limbo, I guess you could say. You know how some people get in that time between high school and college.”

“That’s the time you’re supposed to spend living it up on the beach with friends.”

At Alicia’s quiet words, Diana turned all the way around and met her gaze. She was thinking, Diana knew, of how she’d deserted Diana that summer. Remembering how she’d chosen the ritzy, more snobby society friends her mother had selected for her over the company of a middle class town witch like Diana.

“It was more to my liking anyway,” Diana said with an easy shrug. She sent Alicia a smile and hoped her friend would find some comfort in the gesture. “I’ve never been much for sand games or baking in the sun.”

Alicia nodded, an almost imperceptible movement of her head, and returned her smile though it didn’t come as easily to her as it had to Diana. As she did now, Diana had understood then the decisions Alicia had made. She’d understood a daughter’s need to be closer to her mother, to attempt to forge a bond that never managed to build through her childhood. Diana had also understood Alicia’s need to keep a deathbed promise to her beloved grandmother, a promise to do what it took to construct that bond.

Alicia had tried in every way, becoming someone she wasn’t, letting go of all she loved, all she was to gain that closeness with her mother. Despite her best efforts, the bond never formed. Not through any fault of Alicia’s. Diana could only be grateful her friend had realized her exhausted efforts and started to find her true self again rather than continue to drown in the pretend life she’d made for herself.

“James came in the store one afternoon.” She couldn’t do it. Pacing, fighting to stay in the here and now rather than to let herself drift back to the past did no good. The memory came in crystal clarity. She saw him that sunny summer day the way she’d replayed that very moment so often over the years. Wasn’t it a hoot, she thought as realization struck, that it all began with a store—*her* store, as it were—then just as it was all beginning again with a store—*her* store—now?

“Let me guess, you took one look at him and you knew.” As much of a romantic as Alicia, Suzanne sighed wistfully, her face growing dreamy even as she continued to sketch. “I know how that feels. It was like that when I met Garrett. Or almost anyway. I didn’t really *know*, not at first, at least not consciously. But when he sat down across from me and offered to buy me a drink, I think that’s when I knew.”

“Geezus! Am I the only one here who didn’t get all googly eyed and start thinking about the white picket fence, two point five kids and the dog the instant I spotted my man?” Melody rolled her eyes, popped a handful of chips, and crunched.

“Actually, the fence, kids and dog were the last things I wanted from Derek that first moment.” Alicia took a delicate sip of her champagne and grinned.

“Yeah, more like jumping his bones and sinking your teeth into him.” Diana chuckled and joined the fun. And it had been fun, she remembered, watching her best friend fall for Derek Kadin, listening to her ramble as her feelings morphed from a besotted fan, to a frightened woman desperately trying to hold onto her heart, and finally to a woman so in love she glowed with it.

“What else is a woman to think about when her fantasy fuck shows up on her doorstep?” Alicia shrugged and indulged in another sip while the other three women laughed.

“I thought about all of the above,” Diana admitted after their giggles died. “Yes,” she added with a pointed look at Suzanne. “I

knew he was the one. He had long hair. Like it is now but unbraided. It was so silky looking my fingers itched to touch. He was slimmer then, bonier, less muscled but still sculpted in a way that made my eighteen year old hormones go pity-pat. I spent about thirty seconds lusting after that body before he noticed me. He looked at me and...that was it. I knew and I was toast. I looked into his eyes and I could see everything, knew I would give him everything.”

“You were still a virgin,” Alicia said on a gasp as if just now remembering.

Diana walked back to the circle and lowered herself to her knees beside her friend. “I was until I met him.”

“There’s more history there then we realized,” Suzanne commented and set down her pencil. When she looked at Diana it was with eyes gone sympathetic and compassionate.

“More than I can tell you about.” She saw Alicia frown and look away. “I’m sorry if that offends either of you.” She reached out, put an arm around Alicia’s shoulders, and felt both the tension and the comfort there. “What was between James and me then, what will be between us now, is for us.”

“You have to find your way,” Alicia whispered. “You both do.”

“But if you need any help in that journey, you know where to find us.”

Touched beyond words, Diana’s eyes brimmed with tears as she looked to Melody and nodded. “Thank you. All of you.” She dabbed at the corner of her eye and blinked. “Wow! That got me misty. Quick, Suzanne, show it off before I start to blubber and embarrass us all. What masterpiece did you sketch out this time?”

Flushing slightly, Suzanne gave a small shrug, turned the sketch pad in her lap, and held it up. “You.”

Diana’s breath caught as her gaze met with that of her own on paper. Suzanne had indeed sketched her, managing somehow to not only create a portrait of her, but to show color and light though she’d had only the gray of charcoal and white of paper to work with. “It’s

like..." She searched for the right words and settled on the most obvious. "It's like looking into a mirror."

Suzanne beamed. "That's exactly what Garrett said the night I sketched him from across the bar. The night we met. He kept it. He wouldn't even let me touch it up, to smooth out the rough spots. He's got it framed in the practice room. His office, as he likes to call it."

"It's amazing!" Alicia commented. "And you can't change a thing about that one either. No touch up. Tear it out and hand it over."

"I wish I had talent like this," Melody gave a sigh of awe as she intercepted the sketch. "Look at the detail, the lines, the angles, they're all Diana."

"You have a talent for detail, too," Suzanne argued. "Yours simply lies behind the camera lens. The pictures you take, the way you capture the heart and soul of a person or object, a scene or landscape. They're every bit as artistic as my sketches and paintings. I could never take photos like you do, Melody. Mine would end up all out of focus and red eyed."

"Demon products," Alicia chimed in. "That's how all my pictures turn out. As if all the people are prodigies of Satan with their glowing red eyes and shaky figures. You both make me sick." She flicked a playfully disgusted hand at Suzanne and Melody and reached for a cookie.

"I don't see why." Diana took the sketch Melody held out for her and gave it a studied glance. It really was magnificent, even more so now that she held it in her hand and could look at it more closely. "You make pictures, too. Only you use words rather than a camera or brush. It's me who should be envious. The only thing I can write is rituals and chants, I'm a mediocre photographer at best, and I can't even sketch a stick figure."

Alicia barked a laugh. "You can't make a picture because you *are* a picture. Look at yourself. You're beautiful, educated, powerful..." She trailed off, her head tilting, and eyes narrowing.

“Well, don’t stop there.” Diana tossed her hair over her shoulder in an exaggerated move. “I was starting to enjoy the praise.”

“Yeah, can’t you tell? Her head is swelling.” Melody pushed her plate away, lay back on the floor, and expelled a low groan.

“Can it, you two. I’m serious.” Alicia jumped up and began to pace. Each carefully measured step was contemplative with a small amount of agitation in the mix. She fell silent for several seconds before she rounded on Diana. “You’re the center. The four of us,” she made a circling gesture with her finger, “we’ve become a sort of circle and you’re the center.

“Should’ve limited her to a half a glass, too.” Melody stared up at Alicia, eyebrows raised and lips twitching. “Champagne seems to be impairing her ability to make sense.”

“I haven’t had too much to drink.” Alicia scowled, planted her balled fists on her trim hips, and for a half a second Diana thought she might even stomp her foot.

“Circles, centers...” Suzanne shook her head, her expression solemn and serious. “I’m sorry, Alicia, but I was never very good at geometry so if you’re thinking of starting a class tonight I may need to indulge in a bottle of champagne.”

Diana bit the inside of her cheek to hold back a smile as Melody barked a laugh and Alicia rolled her eyes. “Ladies, I don’t believe it’s a sign of the bubbly or our friend’s sudden desire to become a math teacher. I think what Alicia is doing is trying to explain herself in terms I will understand.”

“Do you understand?” Melody lifted her head off the carpet enough to slant Diana a look.

Amusement winning out, Diana chuckled. “No.” At Alicia’s narrow-eyed stare, she added, “But, if you will continue with what you were saying, I’m sure I’ll catch up.”

“Suzanne paints or sketches, Melody takes photos, I write books, you’re opening a store.”

“And now that we all have, or will have a successful career, let’s do each other’s toe nails.”

“Wait, Melody.” Diana struggled to keep a straight face. “I think she does have a point.”

“Of course I have a point.” Alicia sighed in exasperation.

“Then maybe you’ll want to share it before Suzanne’s might-be-pregnant-again baby is born.”

Alicia crossed her arms, patted the toes of one foot on the carpet and pinned Melody with a stony glare. “If you don’t hush I’m going to make you eat my toe nails.”

“Oh, Alicia, don’t do that. You have such wonderful toe nails and they’re already painted a great shade of pink.” Suzanne leaned forward to admire Alicia’s feet.

This time Alicia’s lips twitched as Melody slapped her forehead and groaned a laugh.

Unable to help herself, Diana grinned, too. “Please, Alicia, continue.”

“Have you ever thought about selling art?” Before Diana could answer, Alicia plowed on. “You’re already planning to sell books. They’re a form of art. As are the goddess and god statues you intend to carry, the fairies, dragons, and so forth. But what about paintings, photos?” She turned to Suzanne, excitement all but bubbling on her face. “Your paintings and sketches, what if Diana were to display some for sale in the shop? And your photos,” she whirled on Melody. “I know you usually freelance to magazines and newspapers, but you could sell some outright too.”

Obviously intrigued now, Melody sat up and pursed her lips. “I’ve never thought about it. I mean, I just always worked in freelance photography.”

“No one says that has to change. But you could take some of your best, say a dozen or so, frame them and let Diana put them downstairs. You could draw up a consignment contract.” When Melody’s look turned speculative, Alicia laughed and corrected

herself. “Garrett can make up a contract. He’s good with all the legal stuff. Suzanne, I know Georgiana handles your stuff at the gallery...”

“But I could put some pieces here, too,” Suzanne nodded. “Maybe we could hang a discrete sign somewhere pointing interested customers to the gallery for larger pieces?”

“That’s a great idea! And I can almost bet you Georgiana would be willing to drive business to your store, Diana. Maybe some tasteful brochures or business cards, an artsy advertisement of your store’s offerings.” Alicia stopped and angled her head. “Diana, you haven’t said anything.”

“How can she? You haven’t shut up long enough to give her a chance,” Melody grumbled.

“I...” Diana lifted her glass, realized it was empty—when had she drunk all the champagne?—and reached for the bottle.

“She needs another drink.” Suzanne giggled. “I think you overwhelmed her, Ali.”

Diana smiled and sipped from her now full glass. “A little, perhaps,” she admitted. “It’s a good idea.” She turned her attention to Alicia and nodded. “A very good idea. I’ve been thinking something was missing. My vision for what I wanted downstairs seemed incomplete somehow. This could be it.”

“You could call it Picture the Magic,” Alicia suggested, really getting in to the whole idea. “Unless you already had a name for the store picked out,” she added with a hint of embarrassment.

“I did,” Diana said slowly. “But I like that better. I mean, if we’re all going to do this. It’s a big idea but I think it would be great.” She looked to Suzanne and to Melody. “If you ladies are in agreement, too.”

“We are!” Suzanne said quickly, then shot a quick glance at Melody and blushed. “I mean, I am,” she corrected more quietly.

“So am I,” Melody laughed.

“Great! We’ll get to the specific details later.” Alicia moved to a sack leaning against the far wall and started to dig. “Right now,” she

paused, her words muffled as she continued to dig. She came up seconds later with a handful of small glass bottles in various colors. “What shade do you want your toe nails?”

* * * *

Waves slapped against the distant shore. Birds sang merrily as they flew overhead. The faint rustle of leaves as a light wind blue through the trees made him smile. This was his place, their place, her place. He settled on a large stump to wait for her, wondering for a moment what she felt when she sat here, when she allowed this area, this stump to touch her deepest soul. Did she feel the pain of the once thriving tree, now a fraction of its original height, cut by a manmade tool so sharp and vicious it had no defenses against it? Who had cut into this tree so deeply in the woods at the water’s edge? Why?

Silly questions, he thought. Yet, not so silly when one knew Diana Thompson. They were the kinds of things she would wonder because she cared and she felt. And she *did* feel something for this place, for this stump, for all that surrounded him. He could sense her here, her essence, her powers, and his throat tightened with it. She’d shared this place with him, *her* place, and by bringing him here, she’d made it his too. Then she’d made it theirs by giving him her most precious of gifts.

There, in that shallow patch of grass, he recollected, beneath the canopy of two large oak trees, by the silvery light of the moon. Diana Thompson had given him her virginity. She’d trusted him to bring her to womanhood. He hadn’t expected it to touch him so. Though it had been her first time, it hadn’t been his. Except in an odd way he could never explain, it had been.

Energy drifted through the wood. Power. One he recognized, one that made his heart swell. James turned his head and found her standing at the start of the path. The smile that curved his lips came

from so far deep within him he figured he looked like a lunatic. God, he loved her! With all he had, all he was. He loved her.

James stood, held a hand out for her, and wondered at the almost overwhelming sense of dread that started to tighten in his gut as she took her time coming to his side. Her hair floated around her shoulders in the gentle breeze, the long fiery red strands like a siren's mane of brilliance. Her skin seemed to glow in the afternoon sunlight.

Was it truly the sun that made her flesh shine so or the power beneath? he wondered. Her body was long and slim with curves that tempted his cock to harden, throb, and hope. She'd covered it with a wrap around skirt and halter top, her feet encased in a delicate pair of tie-around sandals. She reminded him in that moment of a redheaded, vixen version of Cinderella. When she stepped close enough that he could peer into her incredible eyes, he feared he might turn into a pumpkin.

Something was wrong. He saw it, sensed it, and believed it in that instant. Before he could speak it, she moved into his arms and he lost all words. She gazed up at him, a myriad of emotions swirling in her eyes. He closed his own eyes as he bent his head and kissed her. She tasted of sweetness, innocence, seduction and power. Always power. It clinched at him, gripped him, had him devouring her mouth with a fervor he knew was dangerously rough and demanding. As if he couldn't get enough, yet he somehow knew he should get all he could now for it would be his last chance.

His last chance.

"James." She whispered his name as she drew back. She cupped the side of his face as she pulled farther away. Her smile held none of the warmth and sheer thrill he was used to. Instead it seemed forced and oddly cold. "Shouldn't you be with the band?"

"I wanted to be with you." She took several steps back and he had no choice but to let his arms fall to his sides. Empty. They suddenly felt so empty without her in them. "The guys are practicing, getting ready for the show tomorrow night."

“Yes, and you should be as well. Tomorrow night will be a big night for the band, for you.”

James shrugged though suspicion had him eyeing her. The hairs on his nape stood up in a fear he couldn’t name and wasn’t sure he wanted to. “Maybe. I suppose it could be. It’s just a talent gig.”

“With recording scouts and agents present, people who could make it all come true for you.”

“Maybe.” He shrugged again. He wasn’t so sure he wanted it anymore. The fame, the fortune, the whole sex, drugs and rock and roll deal. Was that really what he wanted out of life?

“Why did you come here?”

Her question surprised him, but he was careful to keep his expression blank. “I knew you would come eventually and find me here. I thought we could spend the rest of the afternoon together and all of the evening.”

“I came to...” Her words trailed off as she gazed at him for the span of several long heartbeats. She finally broke the stare to look to the sky, to the trees, then down to the earth beneath her feet. Her lips moved in a silent chant. A prayer for guidance? Then she continued. “I came to tell you to go. You should be with your friends now.”

“Diana.” He took a small step toward her as the fear grew in his gut. His pulse kicked up from more than the surge of hormones the amazing kiss had given him. “What’s going on?”

“It’s over, James.” She crossed her arms almost as if she were hugging herself for comfort and turned her back on him, bowing her head.

Stunned, he stood rooted to his spot, staring at her back. Over? What did she mean, over? What was over? Needing an answer, feeling he deserved one, he reached out, caught her shoulder, and spun her to face him. “What are you—?” He broke off at the fire that blazed in her eyes, turning them red. Demon eyes. Her lips curved in a psychotic, evil grin that had his mouth growing dry and his breath coming too fast.

James awoke to that sensation. Feeling as though he couldn't catch his breath, sweating and panting as though he'd just run a ten mile marathon. He sat up straight in the center of the bed, let out a stream of curses, and caught his head in his hands when the sudden movement had him seeing stars. Gods it had been a long time since he'd had so much whisky. Or the dream. As he slowly swung his legs over the edge of the bed, narrowing his eyes at the throbbing pain that only intensified when he met the sunlight that streamed in through the window, he wished he'd had neither last night.

Nausea washed over as he attempted to stand and he immediately sat back down. Beneath the urge to wretch and the head dividing pain, an ache of a different sort remained. One that gripped his chest like a vise. One he remembered all too well from the dream.

The nightmare, he corrected himself. He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, his face in his hands. It hadn't ended that way of course. Not in reality. Not with Diana turning all evil witch of the south on him. But his mind had played it like that often enough. When the hurt and betrayal finally started to ebb, anger had taken their place. That anger simmered, stewed and morphed, both in his reality and more in his dreams, until his memory of what she'd done had made him see her as that evil red eyed witch.

Even now in the waking of the dream, he felt that anger. Dammit! Barely twenty-four hours had passed since the woman returned to his life and she had him so churned up he'd punished himself with a bottle of his favorite Uncle Jack, spent a restless night tossing from nightmares, and woke with the mother of all hangovers.

As the anger bubbled hotter he started to push himself up only to check his movements, taking the task of standing a lot more carefully this time. When he managed to get to his feet without upending whatever contents remained in his stomach, he thought he might just make it through the morning. It was the loud rap at the door that had his head splitting, his mouth cursing and the anger boiling over with a vengeance.

Chapter 4

Diana had awoken to an empty apartment—of woman as well as furniture—her mind full of new ideas and her heart consumed with a new determination. Since she could do little about the state of her apartment until the moving company arrived with her belongings from Florida at four that afternoon, she was left with her thoughts and needs that had begun to bubble in the night. The thoughts would require lengthy planning, considering, inspecting and more conversation with her new business partners. So she'd centered her energies on the needs and felt them grow.

Over a cup of coffee brewed by Suzanne in the second hand coffee maker she'd brought, Diana had sat on the cool tiled floor of her matchbox kitchen and contemplated her next move. When her thoughts of James drove her to a need for immediate gratification, she'd dove for what remained of the chocolate chip cookies from the night before. A pitiful excuse for breakfast, she'd decided, but desperate times called.

She'd dreamed of him in the night. She often dreamed of James. Sometimes her dreams played out a scene from a book or movie she'd recently read or watched, casting herself and James as the heroine and hero. Other times she remembered the past, how they'd been together, how she'd thought at first they would always be. Still other times, like last night, what she dreamt seemed to be so much a foretelling that she would awake once again certain he was her destiny.

With last night's dream so fresh in her mind, she'd battled the desire to go to him. She'd forced herself to carefully plot only to give up and throw caution to the wind. She caved when the desires, the

needs grew so strong she could fight no longer. This time, she vowed, she would corner him and by the Gods, she wouldn't give him the chance to walk away.

A cool breeze fluttered the mid-day air as she stood on the front walk of Melody's family house, a house James now rented, and waited for him to acknowledge her knock. She knew he was inside. The black motorcycle with the bluish-purple flames in the drive was a dead giveaway. He'd always loved motorcycles, she remembered. Always spoke so reverently of the freedom he felt when riding one. And he'd often kidded about having so much power between his legs to control.

The memory made her smile as she knocked a second time. She gave the tiny charm clock on her bracelet a quick glance. It was nearly eleven o'clock. Surely he'd be up by now. Her gaze scanned the front of the house as she continued to wait. When her vision settled on a narrow flower bed wrapping around the far corner to the side, struggling bushes of violets and mums peeking their way around and through a mountain of weeds, she frowned and let out an agitated sigh. She should've been the one to rent the house from Melody and Brock. What did a man like James need with such a lovely house and fantastic yard? Obviously, he wasn't taking care of the precious gardens someone had planted.

It was her only regret about the apartment over the store, the building's location. It may have been prime real estate for a business, but its lack of yard made it fall way short of prime home accommodations. At least for Diana. She needed grass, trees, a place to plant and grow. She needed a space to call her own where she could connect with the nature she so loved and respected. She turned and started to walk down the short case of steps, intending to take a tour of the yard when the door finally opened.

He looked like hell. It was her first thought as she twisted to face him. He'd removed the braids from his hair. Or tried to at least, she mused when she saw a few remained, peeking from beneath a mass of

dark tangled strands. He wore only a pair of ratty jeans. No doubt he'd thrown them on as he'd crawled out of bed to answer the door. His chest was bare, every ridged line, every toned muscle on perfect enticing display.

It made her mother water as she let her gaze slide over him. She drank in the sight of him in a slow, thirst-quenching sip. He watched her through narrowed eyes both bloodshot from obvious lack of sleep and heated with desires of his own.

Diana lifted a brow and allowed herself to continue to study him, allowed him to see her inspection in her expression, in her eyes. To add fuel to the growing fire, she gave her bottom lip a purposely slow, purposely seductive swipe with her tongue. "Rough night?"

He merely shrugged, grunted and walked away, leaving the door open and leaving her to stare at his retreating back.

By the Goddess, she'd seen more of that man's back in the last twenty-four hours than she cared to see in her life! Was he trying to piss her off again? she wondered as she stepped inside. She took her time following him, gently closing the door behind her and moving slowly as to take in the interior of the house. The living room was average size for a two story family home, furnished in an array of brown leather furniture, solid wooden tables and beige carpet. A big screen TV occupied nearly the entire far wall, the remainder of the space taken up by shelves containing other entertainment necessities—VCR/DVD combo, cable and TIVO boxes, stereo system, Playstation and Xbox. Everything about the room screamed, "A man decorated me." Despite her initial spark of temper toward James's less than pleasant greeting, she smiled.

She found him in the kitchen. A nice, homey kitchen, she decided with a quick glance. She didn't allow herself the time to inspect it as she had the living room. Instead, she continued her scrutiny of James. He stood hunched over the counter, head in his hands, and one bare foot resting atop the other. An open container of Folgers sat at his

elbows, the coffee pot in the nearby sink overflowing with the continuous tap water spewing from the faucet above it.

Diana pursed her lips. Goddess help her, the man's side profile was as hormone scorching as his front or even back. She wondered briefly how many hours he spent in the gym each week to develop those wide biceps, to keep that slim toned rib cage that showed only a hint of bone and beautifully rippled muscles. She wanted to go to him, to slide her arms around his narrow waist, kiss her way over his bare shoulders, up his neck, and trace the line of his jaw with her tongue.

Because the idea sparked a deeper burn inside her that had her nipples hardening beneath the lace of her bra and her panties growing wet with anticipatory juices, she tabled it for now and let loose with an ounce of her simmering temper instead. "You look like shit."

"At least I'm consistent." His words were muffled by his hands over his face. "I feel like shit."

Lips twitching, she walked to the sink and twisted off the faucet. Compassion tugged at her as she turned back and stepped to him. "What did you do to yourself?"

"Uncle Jack stopped by."

"Ah. I should let you suffer." But because she couldn't stand to see someone in pain, she sighed and reached for him. "Here, let me." When he lifted his head to glare at her, she put her palms on his temples. "Close your eyes." Closing her own eyes, she shut out everything around her, reached down deep, and drew up her energies. She let it flow through her, center her, fill her, marveling at the warm tingling sensation that accompanied her raise of power. As the words came to mind, she moved her lips in a silent chant to heal and soothe and let the warmth flow from her palms and into him.

The low rumbling sigh of relief he made had her smiling. The look in his eyes when he opened them moments later had her breath catching.

"I'm not in the mood to talk, Diana." His words sounded as much of warning as statement of fact.

“Lucky for you, I didn’t come for conversation.”

“What did you come for?”

Heart pounding, Diana stared at him. She knew why she’d come, knew what she’d wanted, what she still wanted. Once she took that step there would be no going back for either of them. Truth be told, she realized, she’d already taken that step, already passed the point of no return for both of them.

“This.” She let her hands slide from his temples to cup his cheeks and, rising to her tiptoes, covered his mouth with hers. For a moment, she feared he might pull back or push her away. His body went so ridged against the counter, against her, the muscles in his face tightening in her hands.

His resistance lasted all of two seconds before his fingers curled around her wrists and he took control. The kiss was scalding, animalistic and demanding. Anger seared the edges, sucking at her breath, leaving her body dry even as every part of her became wet with need. He turned, yanked her into his arms, and backed her into the round table in the center of the kitchen floor. Before she could register what was happening, he’d shoved her hands behind her back, cuffed them in one of his, and his mouth greedily nipped along her chin, her neck, her collarbone, lower.

Diana let her head fall back as his free hand came up, snaked inside the steep V-neck of her blouse, and pulled the stretchy material down. In the next heated exotic flash, he had her bra pulled down too. Her left breast spilled over the material and his tongue drew lazy circles over the beaded surface. She heard herself moan, her hands tugging at the small of her back to free themselves from his grip. He held tight. She cried out louder, more surprised passion this time when his teeth closed around her taut nipple and gave it a gentle but slightly pressured bite. Flames licked her insides, igniting a straight line of fuel on a direct course with her pussy.

“This is what I’m in the mood for, Diana.” His breath was an intoxicating potion to her flesh. His mouth moved to her other breast,

licked, bit, devoured it as he had the first, and she squirmed in his grasp.

Yes! Her sanity began to waver beneath the weight of sexual needs. She was in the mood for this, too. It was why she'd come to him this morning. Not to talk but to take, to give. She'd known they would end up in bed. What she hadn't known, hadn't expected was to be accosted against his kitchen table. It was, she decided as another cry escaped her lips, as another ounce of her sanity crumpled away, invigorating, beyond arousing! She remembered him being a skilled lover even at the tender age of twenty-two, but he'd been compassionate and gentle. There was none of that boy in the man who now held her captive with his hands and his mouth.

Her flesh burned with his touch, burned to *be* touched and when his free hand tangled in her hair and yanked her head back, the sound she made was beyond comprehension. She wanted to touch, to feel, to explore with her mouth and hands as he explored, but he held her in a way that denied her all options. He was in control, complete and unyielding. His lower body pressed against hers, penning her to the table, his hands—one in her hair, the other clasped around her wrists—holding her where he wanted her. He'd put her body in a position of only submission. By the Gods, it drove her mad!

"Let go, James," she managed, her voice raspy and pleading. "I want to touch you."

"No." The single word was his only response as he continued to hold her as he wanted, continued his assault on her body with his lips, his tongue, his teeth.

Pulse points of pleasure she hadn't known existed began to sizzle, throb and explode as he fed some growing needs and denied others. The feeling of being helpless, of being controlled warred with her usual senses of independence, of being the one *in* control until her mind could no longer sort one sensation from the other.

When he finally let go of her hair it was only to reach his hand up her skirt. Without hesitation or design, he pushed the thin strip of

satin covering her pussy to the side and swiped a finger between her sopping folds. He delved that finger inside her fiery opening as deeply as he could reach.

“James!” Diana gasped his name. Her hands fisted behind her back, nails digging into palms as her knees grew weak. She began to sink, melting against the table, into his hand.

He pumped the finger into her heat, driving her higher, sending spasms of electricity through her very core. As quickly as he’d invaded her body, he withdrew, pulling his finger free of her folds, of her panties, of her skirt. “Take it off.” He ground the order through clenched teeth as he released her hands at last, only to fill his own hands with her breasts.

Diana didn’t think to argue or object. Instead, her hands went straight for the elastic waistband of her skirt. She shimmied the material over her hips and let it fall in a black pool around her feet. Fingers shaking, head spinning, she fumbled with the thin straps of her panties as James squeezed and fondled her breasts. He caught her already overly sensitive nipples between his thumbs and forefingers and twisted.

When she finally managed to pull her underwear down, she left them to circle around her ankles in favor of getting her hands on him. Yes. Yes! His skin felt warm to the touch, damp with a light sheen of sweat. She let her palms roam over his back, absorbing the feel of his bare flesh to hers. Her hands moved over broad shoulders that exuded strength and power, down his chest where she paused to marvel at the light patch of curls covering the beautiful contours of his pecs. She would’ve gone for places much lower had he not caught her hands again and raised them over her head. She wanted to scream. The protest was on the tip of her tongue, but his words stopped her.

“Keep them there.” His hands grazed down her stretched arms and moved lightly over her neck, her breasts to the hem of her blouse. He gripped it, pulling it up and over her head. He tossed it aside and making quick work of her bra next.

Naked now, Diana let her arms fall to his shoulders. She felt a sliver of anticipation when his hands closed around her waist as he lifted her to sit on the table. “James?” His name was both question and a cry for more as he moved his hands to her shoulders and pushed her back.

His gaze locked with hers, held, and she saw something almost viral in the depths of his eyes. Something commanding, demanding, and wild. So wild. It excited her even as she felt a prickle of fear race down her spine. She didn’t look away. She couldn’t. The spell he cast over her was too great as she lay back on the table. Her hands stayed on him, sliding down his front until she could no longer reach, then she simply curled her fingers around the edge of the table and waited with bated breath for what he’d do next, what he’d order of her next.

His hands raked down her body, making her arch into that touch as he palmed his way over her breasts, her abs, her stomach. When he reached her thighs, he slipped between them, pushing them open to expose her naked pussy. Cool air of the kitchen met with the super heated sensitive flesh of her feminine lips and she shivered.

“James, I—”

“Talk too much,” he finished quietly. “I told you I don’t want to talk. But if you insist, I suppose you can while I have breakfast.” A devious twinkle sparked in the evil darkness of his eyes as he skimmed a finger down the outsides of her pussy lips.

Breakfast? The word dimly registered through the fog in her mind. He would stop to eat breakfast now! She felt his fingers spread her intimate lips, felt more cool air meet with even hotter places, and wondered that steam didn’t form to fill the room with a foggy hazy as thick as that which clouded her mind. Then he sank between her legs, buried his face against her, and licked from the tender strip of skin just before her anus all the way to her clit.

Diana felt her body rise off the table in a shocked rapture of combustible flames. He paused at her clit, sucked the swollen nub between his lips, and she heard herself cry out unintelligibly, insanely.

Only one rational thought managed to snake its way through. *So this is breakfast.*

* * * *

James watched her as he feasted on her, as he lapped at her sticky sweet juices and reveled in her feminine scent. He lost himself in her satiny feel. She looked like an offering to the Gods, sprawled as she was on the round table. She'd spread her arms to grip the sides of the wood, her legs parted around his biceps, her head flailed back as she gave herself over to the sensations he sent through her body.

She gave herself to him. He felt the give, the possession, and knew she was his again. He knew, too, that he was hers again. It was different than it had been before. Everything about their union was different this time. Would it end differently too?

He couldn't think about that now. He *wouldn't* think about that now. In this moment, he would take and damn the consequences. He'd let the anger that had been alive inside him after waking from the dream rule him. It still controlled a part of him, causing him to be harsher and more demanding than he might have been. But she seemed to be enjoying it, he mused as he sank his tongue inside her. He tasted ambrosia, the sweet nectar of her offering to him and, ah God, it felt beyond delicious! He plunged, licking so deeply he thought he might find her soul. It would only be fair. After all, she'd already possessed his.

She writhed on the table, drew her legs up, and braced her feet on his shoulders. Almost absently, he noted she'd failed to slip those feet out of her glossy black and maroon heels. The fact that she lay completely naked save for a pair of incredibly sexy shoes had his dick groaning in his jeans from sheer torture. With her feet braced, she lifted her hips, pushing her sex more firmly against his face and drawing his tongue deeper inside her. He thought for a fleeting instant

he might suffocate and found he wouldn't be so disappointed if he did. It would be a hell of a way to go.

Still, suffocation-induced pleasure or not, he wasn't ready for anything to end. He caught her inner thighs with his palms and pulled back just enough to allow himself room to work once more. And work her, he did. He drew her folds between his lips and sucked. He fed off the sounds she made as much as the taste of her sweet pussy. He drank from her, slurping up the sugary syrup as if it were the last liquid he would ever receive. He found her clit again, circled the swollen bud with his tongue then closed his teeth around it and gave it a light but pressured bite.

"James!" She gasped his name. He watched over the smooth planes and generous curves of her body as she went wild on the table. She was shaking, shuddering in his hands. Her arms came up only to fall again. Her hips squirmed, her thighs pressing against his palms in an attempt to close. Her head lolled from side to side as the pleasure gripped her, and took control.

He lifted his head and only then did she seem to find a marginal amount of calm. "What is it, Diana? Do you want me to stop?"

"Goddess no! Please, don't stop."

That made him smile. More, her begging very nearly made him come. Gods! His cock was so hard inside his jeans. His balls throbbed with the force of a bass drum. It was a turn-on of a different dimension, hearing Diana Thompson beg and knowing he was the one to bring this prim, sexy, elegant witch to a point of lost control. He couldn't help himself. The needs to dominate twisted with the sheer ecstasy of what he did to her, what he could do to her, and he wanted more.

"Don't stop what, Diana? What is it you want?" As he asked, he began to stroke her again. Her inner thigh, the smooth patch of skin at the fold of her leg, the outer edge of her pussy lips...

"More," she breathed and writhed against his finger as though attempting to draw it inside. "I want more."

Inspiration struck, a devious, dangerous idea that had him wondering how far he could stretch this string of dominance. How far would she let him go? “Touch yourself for me.”

Panting, vibrating from unreleased needs, she looked down her body at him. Her gaze was glassy, dark and...ho, now, wicked. Yes, that was definitely a wicked twinkle in her eyes. “Where?”

Geezus! James felt his breath lodge in his throat as his cock began a happy twitch in his jeans. He wanted to ask, “Who are you and what happened to the Diana Thompson I used to know?” but now certainly didn't seemed the time to bring up the past. Instead, he swallowed and said, “Your breasts. Touch your breasts for me.”

Gaze still locked with his, eyes still glimmering with a wickedness that made him wonder if the wicked witch hadn't possessed her after all, she lifted her hands off the table. “I would rather touch you.” Her voice was barely above a breathless whisper. Still, she did as he told her, tracing circles around her breasts with only the tip of the fingernails on her first fingers. The look that swam into her eyes was both teasing and tempting, tormented and pleased. When her circles closed in on her taut nipples, she put her thumbs together with her fingers and gave the tight buds a light twist. She held his gaze, licking her bottom lip so suggestively he could almost feel her tongue gliding along the shaft of his cock.

Whether by reflex or design he wasn't sure, but his finger between her slick folds jerked and plunged inside her. She gasped, her hands falling to cover her breasts, to caress and squeeze as she began to rock against his finger.

“James, please,” she whimpered, begged, panted. “Please, James. I can't take much more.”

He pushed two fingers inside her and felt her legs go ridged on his shoulders. Her whole body tensed as he pumped his fingers in and out of her, her juices making a slurping sound with each dive in, each pull out. His mouth went dry with the need to consume, to taste, and he

buried his face in her pussy, immediately finding her clit with his tongue.

She exploded. He knew no other word to describe the rapturous shivers and shakes that overtook her body as juices even sweeter than the Gods spewed from her channel, coated his fingers, and tempted his tongue. He pulled his fingers from her, replacing them with his tongue. Feeling wasn't enough. He needed to taste it as she came undone for him. He had to consume her. He licked, slurped, drank and nearly drowned as her desires spilled into his mouth and onto his face. His balls screamed in agony, demanding to follow suit, desperately needing a release of their own. But not yet. Not yet, he told himself as he forced himself to think past the throbbing in his cock to the sheer enjoyment of devouring the wave he'd pulled from Diana.

* * * *

It wasn't how she'd wanted it. Even as she laid spread on the kitchen table with James's face between her thighs and her body shuttering from the aftermath of her release, Diana felt the regrets settling in the pit of her stomach. She hadn't wanted to take. She'd intended to give. She'd taken enough from him in the past and, though she'd given him far more even then, she knew he couldn't see that. So she'd wanted to begin anew and begin as being the one to give. Instead, she'd gave nothing and taken everything.

But she could change that now, she decided as a fresh bolt of energy curled around the regret to smother it. Breaths still coming in short, uneven burst, she struggled to smooth them and concentrated on regaining her head, on centering her power. She felt it move through her like a sensual wave of silky tingles just under the surface of her skin. A low, satisfying moan escaped her lips at the sensation. When James gave her opened pussy one final lick before he began kissing his way up her body, she heard herself purr like a kitten.

She caught his shoulders—hard, warm, slick with a sheen of sweat—and used them to pull herself up, to sit on the edge of the table with her legs spread wide around his hips. This time, she didn't give him the opportunity to move, think or object. She simply caught his face in her hands and kissed him.

He tasted of unreleased desires, near frantic and purely masculine needs, and her. She was all over him, her scent and her taste. It surprised her that she would find that such a turn-on though she supposed the female juice's ability to act as a pheromone didn't have to work only on the man. Needing to show him as much fervor and battle for dominance as he'd showed her, she nipped his bottom lip, licked it, moved to the corner crease of his mouth, nipped and licked there too. She continued her little escapade of alternating nips and licks as she let her hands roam free. They glided from his face to his shoulders, grazed his pecs, and lingered to play in the shallow dark curls that spanned his chest.

As the needs rose inside her once more, so did her power. His hands, now around her, skimmed up and down the bare flesh of her back, sending a little tickle through her when they grazed down her spine. She felt tenderness in that touch now. Oh, the dangerous glint of domination remained. She sensed that in the hard planes of his muscles beneath her hands. He was holding it back, keeping it captive within. He'd tempered that reckless streak if only for now in favor of the gentle, of the sweet. Once, she would've even said of love, but she knew it was far too soon to attempt to foresee that prediction. She would have to rely on her own heart for now, on her love for him, and her powers.

She let the magic build until it sizzled through her, the feel more potent than any physical electricity. Then she gathered it, directed it to her hands, and let it flow from her fingertips into him. She felt his quick intake of breath, heard his low guttural moan and knew he felt her power. He would ingest it and ride on it as he was meant to. As her hands continued their slow perusal down his body, releasing a

steady stream of her energies along the way, she wondered at the feel of sharing her power this way. It was as new for her as it would be for him, and the fact that she was once again losing a form her virginity with this man was truly a marvel.

“I must have done something wrong just now.” He spoke gruffly, absently, as though he were drowning and all his attention was focused on that one single task.

“Oh?” Amused, Diana dipped her head, found his small beaded nipple, flicked her tongue over it, and gave it a little nip. “What makes you say that?”

“Power, energy,” he exhaled then sucked air through his teeth when she slipped her fingers between his lower stomach and the waistband of his jeans. “You have too much of it left for me to have done it right.”

Diana grinned at that even as her other hand joined the first at his pants, freed the button with a mere pass of a finger, and urged the zipper down. “I’ve learned how to put some of that power and energy in reserve. To bottle it, so to speak, for a time when my normal supplies are running low or, in the case of a few minutes ago, all but depleted.”

“Geezus, Diana!” This time the words came on a hard push of air from his lungs as she found his cock and curled his fingers around his shaft. He reached between their bodies and curled his own fingers around her wrist. “Stop.”

Surprised, Diana lifted her head and pulled away from him enough to meet his gaze. The eyes she found so beautiful, eyes she’d never quite managed to forget, stared back at her with such torment, such indecision and pain it made her chest ache. Still holding his cock with the hand he held in his own, she reached for him with her free hand and slid her fingers along the side of his throat to the back of his neck. “My turn,” she whispered.

“No.” But even as he said the word he kissed her, a tender brush of his lips to hers, a scrape of those lips across her cheek. “Not this time,” he whispered in her ear then pulled back.

She could feel the heavy weight of his resistance coming between them and countered it with a sharp edge sword of determination that sliced through it. Her hands moved to either side of his hips, tugged at his jeans and, even as he continued to resist, shaking his head and whispering no, he helped her. He moved his hips slightly, swaying with the pull of the tight denim until the pants fell from him to the floor. He wore no briefs and Diana was delighted by the discovery. Her hand immediately returned to his cock, her fingers wrapping around the shaft. He was wide, long, and impossibly hard. Her pussy convulsed in anticipation and longing.

“I want you, James.” The underlying plea returned to her voice but she ignored it. No way would she allow herself to feel embarrassed by it. “I need you. I want to feel you inside me. I need to be one with you again.”

“No.” He squeezed his eyes shut and let his head fall back, but he didn’t attempt to step away as she shifted on the table. She started to guide the head of his cock toward her slick channel.

“Take me, James,” she urged and felt him enter her, just the tip, only the head. Still, the sensation of having even that much of him inside her after ten years of longing hit with a force of erotic joy so strong and powerful it felt like a physical blow. She released him and reached around to cup his buttocks, but she didn’t pull him, she didn’t attempt to draw him more deeply inside her. That was for him to do now. She’d taken all she would against his resistance. The rest he would give freely or not at all.

His head came up, eyes opening, gaze locking with hers. She watched his eyes change, watched as emotions raced through them like an old fashioned slide show. There was surprise there in the stormy depths, amazement that she’d stopped. Then the astonishment fled, giving way to acceptance, surrender, and capture. The dangerous

glint returned and she knew in this, for this moment, she'd won. His hands moved to her hips, his fingers digging into flesh. "It won't be slow," he warned her. "And it won't be gentle."

"I don't want slow," she countered. "And I don't want gentle."

He plunged. In one vicious thrust, he drove his cock so deeply inside her the pleasure brought stars to her eyes. Hands still gripping her hips, he pulled her hard against him on the inward thrust then shoved her back as his dick slid out until only the head remained before he yanked her back. He sank in again and made her cry out almost on the verge of a scream. He took her, controlled her, *fucked* her and proved he was still a man true to his word. Fast replaced slow, roughness replaced gentle, and in mere seconds he had her teetering on the edge. Fireworks wrought with colors she hadn't known existed built to burst inside her. She could do nothing more than hold on for the ride. It was a rollercoaster of speed and defiance, of mountainous climbs and rapid falls that had her mind seeping out her ears, her body flaming, and her heart filling.

He didn't touch her, didn't kiss her, and offered her no niceties or soft caresses. It made her feel both exhilarated and more turned-on than she'd ever been in her life. It made her feel as though she were merely a Friday night fuck who deserved none of the personal or the intimate. He didn't have to touch her to bring her to that cataclysmic crest. Her insides seized, her legs locking around his waist, her ears zoning in on the sounds of their rapid breathing and the beating of their bodies slapping together. There was no holding back, no possibility of delay so she didn't even try.

"James, go with me." She panted the word, her nails digging into the flesh of his shoulders so fiercely she couldn't be sure if it were sweat or blood she felt in a wet trickle against her palms. "Come with me, James. Come inside me."

His answer came in a low grunt that sounded almost animalistic as he pounded harder, deeper, consuming, possessing until, with one final thrust, he spilled his hot sticky seed inside her. His whole body

seemed to melt with his release. He let go of her hips, placing his hands on the table on either side of her to steady himself. His head fell forward to rest on her shoulder, his face buried in her hair.

Diana's body felt like an uncontained glob of jelly. Her ankles unlocked from behind his back and her feet fell to dangle an inch above the floor. As she rested her cheek on the top of his head, her mind dimly registered the fact that at some point her feet had slipped from the confines of her heels. She hadn't heard the plop as they hit the floor, hadn't even noticed their absence.

Breaths ragged, hearts hammering, neither moved beyond the moment of their first collapse. Neither could. It felt like decades passed before Diana began to sense her soul return to her body for that was how she felt in the aftermath of the incredible orgasm. She remembered it now, felt now as though she were returning from an out-of-body experience. It felt wonderful, a truly exhilarating experience, and she hoped to the Gods it was a product of many more to come.

Able to finally move, she lifted a hand and grazed it over the back of James's hair. Her fingers caught in one of the many tangles she'd seen and she smiled, spoke a little glamour charm in her mind that had the knot smoothing out and continued to comb her nails through the strands.

"How's your headache?" She felt his lips move into a smile against her neck and marveled at the stirrings of arousal it kicked up between her legs. By the Gods, she never had been able to get enough of the boy. It seemed she wouldn't be able to overdose on the man either.

"What headache?" He brushed a kiss on her neck and slowly lifted his head. "You're stronger than you used to be, learned some new tricks."

"A few."

"I've never met anyone with magic quite like yours, Diana."

"I should hope not. I like to think I'm an original."

He chuckled at that and shook his head. "That you are." He shot a glance over his shoulder and frowned. "Coffee. I guess I got a bit sidetracked. Never did get around to making it, did I?"

"I'll do it. Why don't you go shower. I'll bring you up a cup when it's done."

"Join me?" He waggled his eyebrows suggestively. "After the coffee is made of course."

Diana chuckled. "Of course." She studied him and saw that a playfulness had replaced the dangerous gleam in his eyes. He'd always been a moody creature, she remembered. In that, it seemed he hadn't changed. In less than forty-eight hours she'd seen him shocked, pissed, furiously aroused, hung-over and grouchy, dangerously aroused, and playful. Was it any wonder she was already having trouble keeping up. "I might," she said finally as he slowly stepped back from her, slowly slid his softening cock out of her.

"You know your way around the house then?"

"No, but I can manage." She eased off the table, her body brushing down the front of his as he hadn't stepped back far enough to avoid the contact. Hunger rose in an instant, in her breasts, in her pussy, in his eyes.

He slid a hand under her hair, caught the back of her neck, and kissed her. "You're so amazingly beautiful. You always were but now," his gaze dropped between their bodies and heated. "Now you're even more beautiful than before." His hand released her neck and slipped down her back. "You've put on weight."

Diana narrowed her eyes and chilled her gaze. "Now you've done something wrong."

He laughed, a free and lighthearted sound to match his new mood. "It looks great on you and it really works for me."

"Nice cover." Her lips twitched but she held back the smile. She felt it die as the fun in his eyes turned serious.

"I hadn't meant to take you that way, on the kitchen table. You deserve better. You should've had better."

Her stomach twisted even as her heart clenched. “If that’s supposed to be an apology for what just happened, it’s unaccepted, unwanted and unnecessary.”

“I don’t think so. I’ve always thought you more suited to lie on a bed of roses than a kitchen table shagging. I should’ve treated you that way.” His hand settled on the small of her back, spayed there, and pulled her body to his, closing the minute distance between them. “I let my anger get the best of me, let memories of the past...” He trailed off and shook his head. “I’m sorry.”

The look that came to his eyes, the pain, the regret, the remorse made her heart bleed even as her eyes misted with tears. She blinked, refusing to give in to the sorrow or the pain of the past. She hadn’t come here to dredge up old memories, though deep down she’d known that to be unavoidable. She hadn’t come here to talk and he’d made it clear, harshly with his voice and initial cold-shoulder treatment then with his feverishly, dominantly fabulous hands and body that he was in no mood for conversation either.

“If it will make you feel better I will accept your apology.” She lifted a hand between them and hooked a finger under his chin. “And I will admit that making love on a bed of roses does have one hell of a romantic appeal no matter how cliché the idea. However, I’m not as delicate as I once was, James, nor do I always want the tenderness, the sweet. Lastly, I will clue you in on a time honored female secret. Sex on the kitchen table ranks near the top of a woman’s hot spot fantasy chart. Simply put, that rocked!” She rose to her tiptoes, planted a kiss on his nose, and felt her insides ease when he smiled.

“I’ll keep that in mind.” He stepped back, letting her slowly out of his arms before he turned and bent to pick up his jeans where he’d managed to kick out of them at some point.

“James.”

At the sound of his name, he stopped at the kitchen doorway and gave her a look over one shoulder that had her in mind of a very sexy, very sensual cover for a romance novel. His hair, now untangled and

silky smooth from her magic, fell around his face and down his back, stopping just below his shoulder blades. His back rippled with muscles and the sight of the two small dimples just above his firm, shapely buttocks made her mouth water. Gods, but the man was sex personified.

“How do you take your coffee?”

“Black,” he answered and strolled out of the kitchen.

Diana stood for a long moment staring at the empty doorway. That simple question coupled with their short conversation mere moments before had offered up proof that they really didn’t know one another anymore at all. Because the realization of that left a hole in her heart, she bent, scooped up her clothes, and draped them over her shoulder as she set about making the coffee.

Chapter 5

James followed her back to the apartment figuring it best to have his bike on hand so he could leave whenever the mood struck. It wasn't exactly how he'd planned to spend his day. A bout of extremely hot rough sex on top his kitchen table followed by another slightly less vicious but certainly no less steamy jumping in the shower, and finally an afternoon unloading and unpacking boxes and furniture and who knew what else. He had intended, after nursing the mother of all hangovers, to spend much of the afternoon at Garrett's place, making use of the soundproof practice room in the guitarist's home. The fact that he'd fumbled so much during practice the other day still irked and embarrassed him even if the other guys had thought nothing of it.

Instead, he'd tossed out all plans in favor of a day with Diana. What did that say about him, he wondered as he whipped his bike into the alley beside the building that housed her apartment and future store. That he could so easily give in to temptation where she was concerned, so easily let anger and desire override all rational thought even after a decade apart. He switched off the bike's engine and just sat there, watching as she unfolded those incredible legs, curvy body, and windblown hair from her spiffy little convertible. Not so easy, he thought as his gut twisted and his heart both flipped and ached. Nothing about Diana Thompson had ever been easy.

"We're early yet," she told him, walking around the back of her car to join him at his bike. She caught the dangling charm watch on her wrist with the fingers of her other hand and pursed her lips. "Delivery truck won't be here for another half hour or so."

Even as she said it, the sunlight in the alleyway dimmed. It was blocked, James realized with a cursory glance over his shoulder, by the tall bed of a delivery truck. He looked back at Diana and lifted a brow. “Are you sure about that?”

Though obviously puzzled, she answered, “Positive.” Still, she moved around the bike and walked to the start to the alley.

“Hey. Hold up.” James scrambled off the bike, hooking his helmet on one of the handlebars, and followed her. The driver hopped out of the cab of the truck, electronic clipboard in hand, as James stepped around the corner. Since Diana already stood mere feet from him and it was, after all, her store, her apartment, her business, James stopped, crossed his arms and listened.

“May I help you?”

All business, James thought and felt his lips curve in a glint of a smile. He remembered the joy and arousal of watching the girl handle business matters. Then, she’d merely been clerk in someone else’s store. Now, the store would belong to her.

“I have a package for Diana Thompson,” the driver informed in a bland tone that clearly exhibited how bored with his job he’d become as he closed the distance between them, his gaze transfixed on the clipboard. Then he looked up, met Diana’s quizzical stare, and his eyes widened, all hint of boredom making way for sheer adoration. The clipboard jostled in his hand and he nearly dropped it on his toes.

James stifled a laugh. He understood the reaction. His own upon meeting her the first time had been nearly the same. It was refreshing to know he wasn’t the only male on the planet to go fumble fingers and tongue-tied at the sight of her, even if a wave of icy jealousy washed through his veins at the scene.

“I’m Diana Thompson.” Her voice was brisk, smooth, and professional as if though completely unfazed by the delivery guy’s sudden fumbling abilities. “What sort of package?” Her brows wrinkled as she shot a look to the back of the truck. Another man,

slightly shorter and wider than the driver was raising the back door and lowering a flat lift to the street.

“I’m not, um, I don’t know, ma’am,” the delivery guy stammered. He flushed as he held out the clipboard. “If you would just sign your name in the box. First initial and last will do. We’ll get it out of the truck for you. It’s a beautiful—” He broke off, his face going redder than a fresh apple and cleared his throat. “I mean, it’s a big package.”

The corners of Diana’s lips twitched as she scrawled her name on the clipboard and then handed it back.

No, not completely unfazed, James mused as he watched the byplay. Jealously morphed to pure amusement at the way she nonchalantly handled the guy. She knew the power of her beauty, recognized the effect she had on men and was, if nothing else, amused by it. A lot of women with Diana’s looks would have toyed with the guy, flirted, maybe even thrown out a few sexual innuendos to have him melting at her high heeled shoes. Diana, however, didn’t have to do any of those things, he realized. All she had to do was stand there and let the guy look at her for him to melt to a bowl of jiggling Jell-O.

Somehow the delivery guy managed to congeal himself enough to turn and toss the clipboard through the open door of the cab onto the front seat. He jogged the few steps to the back of the truck where his partner waited. The two men disappeared inside the enclosed truck bed, shuffled, rearranged, and reappeared several minutes later with a large box that put James in mind of a small washing machine or refrigerator.

A package, the guy had said. That looked to be more than a mere package.

“Where do you want it, ma’am?” the second delivery guy asked more smoothly and unaffected by Diana’s beauty than his partner had been. Was he gay, blind or just plain smart enough to realize he would never stand a chance with a woman like Diana?

James went with the latter considering.

“Please, call me Diana. You say ma’am and I want to rush upstairs and look for my support hose.” She studied the box the guys had pulled from the truck and pursed her lips. “Well, wow, hmm... It would help, I suppose, to know what’s inside or, at the very least, where it came from as I don’t recall ordering anything to be delivered today. Not of this nature at any rate.”

The first guy stepped off the lowering lifter, yanking at an envelope taped to the outside of the box, and made his way back to Diana.

Intrigued, James took a step toward them, meaning to check out the delivery slip for himself, but stopped when he caught sight of a trio of females pointing, whispering, and giggling just in front of the truck. One of them—a leggy brunette with big round eyes, lips painted a murderous red and clothes so tightly molded to her curvy body he felt fairly certain she’d had to be poured inside them—gave him a smile that was somehow shyly seductive and a questioning look as though asking for permission to approach him. He spotted the Façade logo on the t-shirt of her ebony-haired friend and immediately gauged them to be fans.

Rather than motioning them over to him, since to do so would’ve meant moving around Diana and the delivery men, James walked to the trio. He felt Diana’s gaze on him as he moved by her, felt it when she returned her attention to the business at hand. Was the jolly green jealously giant visiting her right about now the way it had punched him in the gut moments ago? Did it bother her in the least that he’d attracted the attention of three sharp looking females? A part of him couldn’t wait to find out.

Their names were Brandy, Mandy and Candy. As their physical resemblance mirrored true triplets about as much as Larry, Moe and Curly, he puzzled at how three women with rhyming names had become friends. He signed autographs, talked about Façade’s extended break and was discussing their upcoming CD release and touring schedule when Brandy, the leggy brunette, closed the distance

between them. She draped a not-so-casual arm on his shoulder and leaned in.

“Is that your girlfriend?” she inquired in a pouty, sex kitten voice. “I thought you were the one member of the band who was still available.”

James shot a glance over his shoulder—the wrong shoulder, he realized too late as the movement had his nose brushing Brandy’s cheek—and locked eyes with Diana. She smiled, a completely friendly, totally unconcerned and easy smile that made his heart flip inside his chest even as his dick flexed in hopeful jubilation. Her gaze flicked for a fraction of an instant to Brandy and he thought he caught an almost imperceptible shake of her head before she angled said head toward the door of the shop. She returned her attention to the delivery guys and let them inside with the enormous box.

Sneaky witch, he thought with equal parts disappointment and admiration. If she was jealous by the scene she certainly hid it well. Then again, he mused, she’d always been good at putting on a poker face. Not that he’d been trying to make her jealous with Brandy but, dammit, a little show of that’s-my-man girl power would have been refreshing. Not that he *was* her man, he reminded himself.

Oh, to hell with it.

Left on the sidewalk with the female sexpot version of the *Three Stooges*, James looked back at Brandy, careful this time not to brush his face against any part of hers as he turned. How to answer her? The obvious response was a simple no. Diana wasn’t his girlfriend. He wasn’t her man, as he’d just succinctly recapitulated for himself. Yet that simple no would lead to more questions, possibly more direct ones. Diana was, he supposed after this morning, his lover. Though, did one shagging on the kitchen table qualify a woman as his lover? He wasn’t sure. Oh yeah, and he couldn’t forget the second round in the shower.

“Diana is a friend,” he finally said, going for lame answer number one instead. Let Brandy, Mandy and Candy infer what they would

from that description. They would anyway. Fans were often the worst of the paparazzi, the first to draw their own conclusions, the first to blab the rumors. God, he loved having fans! “She’s opening a store here. A New Age and bookstore with a cafe. Be sure to keep your eyes open, stop by in a few months when she has everything settled and is open for business.”

“Will we see you here?” Brandy purred and dared to trail a fingernail painted the same murderous red as her lips down the front of his shirt.

Twin arrows of heat and ice speared his core. *Careful*, he told himself. He was finding himself suspended on a tightrope high above a crowd of three women with wagging tongues and he was still learning to be a skilled acrobat. A delicate situation, this. Though he probably would’ve been more than half eager to flirt back with Brandy less than seventy-two hours before, he had no inclination to do it now—despite what his rapidly hardening dick thought. Fact was, sensual or not, beautiful or not, he didn’t want her touching him. Especially not after having Diana’s hands on him such a short time ago.

Still, he had an obligation to the band, to their fans, to his career. Let the women down gently, without even clueing them in that they’ve been let down. Be charming, friendly and haul ass as quickly as possible. He nearly laughed aloud as he remembered advice Derek gave him once. Well, it hadn’t been advice exactly because James was the only single member of the band. In truth, Derek’s advice to him had been to play the field with as many women as he could until one sunk her fangs in him so deeply he couldn’t pry them out...then play the charm, befriend and run game.

When the image of Diana with red eyes, fiery blowing hair and fangs filled his vision he quickly blinked it away. No. Uh ah, he refused to think her fangs could already be in him that deeply again. He wouldn’t let them be. So what if he would rather be inside with her right now instead of taking Brandy up on the offer shining in her

glistening eyes to nail her to the wall right here in public view on the sidewalk. It didn't mean anything. He wouldn't let it mean anything.

"I'm sure you'll see me around if you stop by." He smiled into her eyes, carefully blocking all thoughts from his own as he closed his hand around her finger. He held it just long enough to be friendly but not suggestive and then released it and took a small step back. "It was good to meet you Candy, Mandy, Brandy." He met each woman's gaze with a smile and a slight nod and felt only the tiniest stirring of regretful arousal as Brandy licked her lips suggestively, her own gaze dropping to his cock. Hey, he was a man, wasn't he? If his dick didn't break into a bit of a happy dance inside his jeans when a woman who looked like Brandy looked at him that way there would be something seriously wrong.

Even so, he said goodbye and backed away from the trio, turning his back on them only when he reached the door to Diana's shop. A bead of sweat trickled down his spine as he stepped inside. As the temperature today peeked in the low seventies, he could only figure that sweat derived from either his hard work at keeping himself contained in the presence of three striking women or concern at how well one striking woman in particular would continue to hide her reaction.

* * * *

The package, as it were, was from Alicia. The accompanying card read simply, for the circle within the store. Diana didn't take the time to puzzle over exactly what Alicia meant by that, nor did she bother to question why she wanted so strongly to wait to open the box until James was inside with her. Years of listening to the little voices in her mind, of trusting her instincts had her leaning against the box facing the door to simply wait.

He expected her to be jealous, she mused as the scene just before she led the delivery guys inside replayed in her mind. A bit

disappointed too, she thought, that she hadn't reacted to his little circle among the three other women.

She was jealous, of course. She wouldn't be human, certainly wouldn't be female, if she hadn't felt some little twist of envy. But with that twist had come satisfaction, even a motherly sense of pride. All hints of motherly love turned to dust, however, the second he opened the shop door.

One look at him and her body felt electrified. Her blood sizzled and hummed from the roots of her hair all the way to the tips of her toes. There had been others. None before him of course, but plenty of them since. Sex in Diana's mind was a celebration, after all. It wasn't something to shy away from, certainly not something by which to be embarrassed or hesitant about. If two consenting adults felt such attraction and were so compelled to act on it, then by all means they should be allowed to do so. She had and never once regretted her decision.

Still, none had been James. None had touched her, consumed her, and taken her the way James had. Over time she'd begun to see sex as more of a casual affair. No less a celebration, a discovery and delight of what it meant to be alive, but a relaxed and fulfilling event, nevertheless. What she'd shared with James today, what they shared then, what she felt even now as she looked at him, well, there was nothing casual about it.

"Fans?" She lifted a brow when he let the door swing closed behind him but simply stood looking at her as if unsure what to say or do. His uncertainty was so damned adorable it nearly made her laugh. "You've apparently yet to grow accustomed to being recognized on the street."

"I'm not sure I'll ever get used to it." He moved toward her a bit cautiously, his gaze locked with hers.

"What's it feel like? To walk down the street and have people know who you are?" She pushed away from the box and stepped to him, her arms lifting to wind around his neck when he met her more

than halfway. His arms circled her waist and held her tight. “To sign autographs, take pictures, give hugs.” She let her voice drop to a seductive purr on the last and leaned into him, rising on her tiptoes to brush her lips lightly over his cheek, his ear. She whispered, “To dodge the kisses and advances of an all too eager female.”

He pushed a hard breath from his lungs only to shudder in her arms when she nipped his earlobe before pulling back. “You’re playing with me.” His tone was tortured, raspy, heated.

Diana gave him her best coy look. “No, handsome. Not yet anyway.” She sighed and toyed with his hair. “And sadly I doubt there is enough time for me to begin before the moving company arrives.”

That brought a grin to his lips, wide and devilish. “It doesn’t have to take long.”

“Are you offering me a quickie in my empty shop?” She laughed. “As appealing as it sounds, we’ll wait.” She stepped back, slowly edging out of his embrace.

“What’s in the box?”

“There’s a question.” She turned and gave the box a fixated glare. “Alicia sent it. Funny but she didn’t mention buying me anything. Not that she hasn’t bought me gifts out of the blue in the past but...”

“How come—?”

Diana glanced over her shoulder at him and lifted a questioning brow when he broke off. “How come she buys me things on a whim?” She shrugged and ran a hand over the top of the box. “She’s a good friend. Great, actually. And I suppose it’s what friends do. We see something that reminds us of one another and we buy it. I’ve done it myself for her many times.”

“No. I meant, well, I wondered why I never met her.” James moved to stand with her opposite the box. “When we were together, why didn’t I meet Alicia? You were friends then too, weren’t you?”

Diana sighed. It hurt as it so often did to remember the emptiness of those years without Alicia’s friendship. “She needed some time on

her own, needed to grow, I guess you could say, to experiment and learn.”

“Without you,” he muttered, his eyes darkening with compassion.

“Without me.” She nodded, her gaze searching his. Compassion, yes, but it was comprehension she looked for, a connection between the situations of that time. If he fit the pieces of the puzzle together, it didn’t show in his eyes.

“She’s an amazing woman. Derek is one luck man.”

Diana angled her head. “Trying to make me play with you again, talking about my best friend that way?”

“As appealing as it sounds, we’ll wait.” He winked at her and chuckled. “For now, why don’t we see what she bought you?”

It took the strength of both of them to bust the seal of the tape on the box seeing that neither of them had a knife handy. Then, rather than strain every muscle in their bodies lifting out the contents, they ripped away the cardboard instead. As the first side gave and fell to the floor, Diana let out a gasp of surprise. It was a cabinet, antique with moons and stars scattered around a pentacle carved in the sides. A single drawer sat closed above a door carved by a Celtic cross with brass handles fashioned of intricate knots for openers.

“It’s stunning,” Diana breathed, her hands moving caressingly, lightly over the wood, the carvings. “It’s perfect.”

“It suits you, suits the shop,” James commented.

“Yes. Yes, it does.” Diana shot him a smile, unable to hide her joy, unwilling to try. She figured she must look like a toddler who’d just been give her first and very favorite doll right about now and so didn’t care how silly it made her.

“For the circle within the store.” He read the note she’d let fall to the floor in her excitement of opening the box. “What does that mean?”

“I’m not entirely sure,” she admitted on a half laugh. “Sometimes you never know with Alicia until...” Her words trailed off as it came to her, the meaning of Alicia’s message, her friend’s intent, and the

right of it all. "Of course," she whispered. "Of course. The circle within the store. It's a counter for the cash register and the likes."

"Looks more like some kind of cabinet to me. Sturdy," he added and gave the wood a steady shake. "Would make a good TV stand." At Diana's withering look he grinned. "A snazzy one, too."

"Be that as it may, it will make an even better checkout station for this main area. Can't you see it?" She could. So easily, she thought as she spun around, a clear vision of the setup, the stock, the organization of the room forming in her mind. "It will go there." She pointed to the wall at the right of the door. "Just inside on the customer's left. It will be the first thing to see when you walk in and the last to see when you leave."

"The circle," James repeated and nodded, understanding now. "The beginning and end, or continuation, or whatever you call it since a circle really doesn't have an end."

"And neither will this one because they will keep coming back. The customers will keep coming back."

"A necessary occurrence for any business."

Diana turned and cocked her head at him. "Well, duh!"

It made him laugh, a rich, throaty sound deeper than it once had been, but no less musical or magical to her ears.

"I always enjoyed getting that sort of response out of you. It's so normal, so witty, so unlike you."

"Are you implying I'm not witty, not normal?" Her brow furrowed as she tried to decide if she should be insulted or not.

"Oh, you can definitely be witty when you want to be but normal?" He shook his head as he walked toward her. He pulled her into his arms and kissed her softly on the lips. "There is far too much magic inside you for you to ever be normal. The Goddess's daughter and the magic of light," he whispered and froze.

Diana's breath caught and she stared into his eyes, losing herself there, remembering as he remembered. It was an old saying of his, an old gesture to hold her this way as he whispered the words. She found

it more meaningful still that he'd said them now, done this now without thought or question. It shocked her, shook her as she could see it did him. But with that shock in him swirled a fear that stabbed at her heart.

He closed his eyes, breathed deep, and released her. Stepping away, he pushed a hand through his hair.

She watched him, silent and waiting. He would speak again, she knew, when he'd gathered his thoughts, collected his feelings, settled his mood. They really did need to talk. Was now the time for that? Should she force him as she'd yet to do since their paths crossed again?

His shoulders rose and fell in a heavy sigh. He took a step forward and then another and she would've worried he might get the urge to walk out on her yet again if he hadn't been moving farther from the door rather than toward it.

"You always talked about having your own place, opening your own store." He didn't turn, but there was no need. She could sense his vision as well as she could see her own. She knew he saw as she did how the space could look, how it *would* look in just a few months time.

"It was my dream," she said simply. Her destiny, she believed as she had since she was a young girl. Just as *he* was her destiny.

"But not here. You never spoke of it being here. I always figured it would be Florida. If not St. Petersburg then somewhere near the beach, the ocean." He did turn then and all the fear and sadness that had clouded his face was gone. "Why here, Diana? What brought you here?"

So they would talk after all, she thought as she studied him for a silent moment. Not of feelings, past or present, not of reasons. But this too was a needed conversation, she realized, a place to begin. They would get to know the woman and the man the girl and boy had become.

“The simple answer would be friends. Friends brought me here. Alicia, Reese, Suzanne, the rest of Facade.”

“Simple answer maybe, but not the whole truth.”

Diana smiled at that. She may not have known how he drank his coffee or him equally trivial things about her, but he remembered a lot, sensed a lot. He realized possibly even more than she did that they hadn’t changed so much after all. “No, not complete truth.” But because he did know her enough, she could give him the whole honesty where she might not have been able to give another. “It did begin with friends. Alicia came here first, to Philadelphia.”

“Following Derek.”

“Yes, following Derek. Since his place is here and hers, well as a full-time author with a sizeable trust fund to boot, her place is just about anywhere, it was the likely solution to the miles between them. At first, I was happy. Not with the distance her move put between us, especially not so soon after we found each other again. But with my life, my career, and her happiness. I was definitely happy for her. She had her fantasy fuck.”

James laughed. “She calls him that all the time.”

“Yeah, it’s been a bit of a joke between them for a while now. He’s good for her. She’s good for him. Oh hell, they’re perfect for each other.”

“What changed? For you, I mean.” He moved to lean against a far wall, propped one foot on the wood behind him, and crossed his arms as he studied her.

For a moment, she let herself study him back. He’d put the ratty jeans back on, added a solid black T-shirt with the sleeves rolled into cuffs and a pair of black combat boots. Now that he’d taken the braids out of his hair, it hung loose and free around his face. He looked so damned sexy, she thought and wished she had Suzanne’s talent with a pencil for sketching or Melody’s with a camera to capture that moment, that pose. Instead, she had only the camera in her mind so she used it to snap a quick shot and filed it away in her memory as she

too moved. She walked to the front display window, stared out at the passing cars, the people walking by, and how the bright sun illuminated it all.

"I hit a wall," she finally said. "A very hard, very solid wall. Or rather that wall hit me. Either way you look at it, I realized my happiness had reached its limit and I had started to pretend rather than truly feel. I've never neglected the craft," she told him and turned from the window, began to pace. "Never ignored what I am, what I have or the weight, the responsibilities of it. I did, however, well, let's say that I slacked away for a time."

Because the admission shamed her, she felt an uncharacteristic heat in her cheeks and was grateful for the dim lighting in the store. Her visions had blinded her, left her longing, wishing she could speed up time, turn it back, anything but continue to live in the present. She had seen James. She'd known he was for her, known what she had done had been the right move at the right time, and yet she'd started to doubt her own powers, her own strengths. Every time she had attempted to use her scrying powers, bided for a glimpse of her future, of her path, she'd seen him and nothing else. So she had cut it off. Cut herself off from that part of her. But only that part. She'd told herself, *convinced* herself it was okay to do so. She had continued to practice, to hone her gifts in every other way, to observe the Sabbats, the Esabbs, the Lord and Lady as she had done almost since birth. And in the end she paid the price of true happiness.

"I was managing All Things Magical when I left. I had been for nearly a year."

"Took them long enough to give you the promotion," James muttered.

Diana smiled. "That's true enough. I had to wait for the battle-axe to reach the end of the tether."

"Battle-axe?"

Because she heard the amusement in his question, she turned and found him gazing at her with lifted brows and a tilt to his lips. It made her chuckle. “It’s wrong of me to call her that.”

“If the shoe fits.” He shrugged.

“Yes. Yes, I suppose so. I thought it was what I wanted. And it was, for the short term. I worked my tail off for that position.”

“Lucky for me it didn’t stay off.” His eyes sparkled with a mischief gleam that made her laugh.

“Somewhere along the way I started thinking of it as long term and that’s where I went wrong. I began to think maybe I had been wrong and I would be happy as manager rather than owner.”

“But you weren’t.”

“No. No, I definitely wasn’t. Deep down I always knew I wouldn’t be. I wanted my own. Always had. Still, for a time I couldn’t quite figure out where I made the wrong turn, or rather how to get back on track and be happy once more. What I wanted was still there, of course. Once I let it swim to the surface again, I realized I hadn’t lost that. But I had lost my vision, my sight of how to obtain my goals. Then Alicia stepped in. Funny but sometimes I think she’s more my fairy godmother than my best friend.”

“A messenger of sorts perhaps. Someone to keep you grounded, centered.”

“She does that,” Diana agreed. She turned to him, her heart swelling even as everything inside her tingled. “You understand me so well. How is it that—?”

“So Alicia put it in your head to come here, open the shop here instead of Florida,” he cut her off so briskly she all but felt the slice. “And she loaned you the money, the startup costs for this.” He gestured with a flourish of his arm at the space around them. “Or what this will eventually be.”

“She’s calling it an investment, not a loan.” *Well now*, she thought as much intrigued as irritated at being interrupted so rudely, at having the subject changed on her so ruthlessly. *My moody creature strikes*

again and apparently he didn't care for the path the conversation was taking. Rather than call him on it, possibly start an argument or, Goddess save her, watch him walk out on her again, she rolled with it and let it go. It wasn't yet time to press, not yet time to force the issue. "The bookstore half is both our ideas and she wanted a part in it. It will still be my store at the front of it. She will be more my silent partner, I suppose. All in all, it's a good arrangement."

"She had the money sitting in the bank. You needed money." James nodded. "I can see how it will benefit you both. Wow! I knew she had money but..." He finished the sentence with a low whistle.

"She's loaded. With money and ideas, it seems." She told him of Alicia's latest brainstorm, of Suzanne's paintings and sketches, of Melody's photography.

"The missing link," he said when she'd finished. He spun, walked to the doorway of the adjoining rooms and nodded. "It's a good idea."

"It's a great idea! And you're right, too. It is the missing link. I could see that, feel that I hadn't quite lined all my ducks in a row, so to speak, but I couldn't figure out what was absent or needed."

"Alicia did." He walked back to her and pulled her into his arms so quickly it had her breath catching.

"Alicia did," she agreed. "It's going to be wonderful, the shop, having my friends involved." *Having you here.* She didn't say the last but she knew it was there in her eyes. He only had to look to see it. And he did, she could tell as she gazed up at him. Just as she saw something pass through his eyes, something she couldn't quite define, something she wouldn't even try.

"Diana, I—" he began but cut himself off when the light in the shop quickly dimmed coupled with the sound of another truck pulling to a stop out front.

"The moving company," she said on a slightly breathless, slightly irritated sigh as he released her and stepped away. Of all the lousy timing! She knew, positively *felt* he'd been about to say something

important, something that needed to be said, something that could've been the next step in closing the gap between them. "James?"

He stopped, seemed to consider and then shook his head. "Some other time. The movers," he pointed to the door. "They will need to get inside the apartment upstairs."

Some other time, Diana thought and led the way out of the shop. It seemed what needed to be said, what needed to be done was always meant for some other time.

Chapter 6

They worked like demons through what little remained of the afternoon and into the night. James bypassed practice with the band, even the solo practice of his own he'd planned in Garrett's sound room, in favor of helping Diana, of staying with Diana. He broke at one point to phone Derek, touching base as the four often did at least once a day, and thought nothing of the need to be with the band or the itch he'd scratched instead to stay with Diana.

He was lost in a world not entirely all his own, but definitely one of his own imagination when he felt slender arms move to encircle his waist. He felt the heat of the curvaceous body press against his back. It made him want to groan with the pleasure of it, made him want to smile from the happiness he hadn't felt in so long. He went for the smile because it seemed manlier than the groan and she wouldn't see it unless he let her. He felt her rise on her tiptoes, rest her chin on his shoulder, and nuzzle her lips against his ear. It gave him a jolt, the sheer rush of sudden longing that traveled through his blood to collect in his cock and harden there. No doubt about it, the woman still had the magical touch to make all the circuits in his body snap and fizzle to uselessness.

"How about a break, handsome? It's getting late and I'm starved."

So was he but not for food. He sat a small faerie trinket on the shelf he'd recently secured to the bedroom wall and let his fingers brush over its delicate chartreuse wings. "How is it that a single woman manages to have so much stuff?" He'd wondered over the very question as he'd watched the movers unload, as the empty rooms of the apartment quickly filled nearly fit to bursting with stuff.

Furniture, boxes, crates... He couldn't remember when he'd seen so many items crammed into such a small area.

"A single woman has to find some way to pass the time." Her hands began to move, one idly caressing his stomach through his T-shirt just above the waist band of his jeans while the other started to climb, to roam, and explore his abs and chest. "Some women knit or paint, read a book or simply watch TV. While I've been known to lose myself quite often in a book, I prefer instead to shop."

"Cheaper to watch TV," he commented and a part of him thought he felt the wallet in his back pocket jump in agreement. She laughed and it was more than his wallet that jumped at the sound. It moved over him, bringing goose pimples to the surface of his skin even as it heated him inside to near boiling temperatures.

"But not near as much fun or rewarding."

"How would you know?" He turned, staying within the circle of her arms, closing his own around her as he smiled into her eyes. "Unless you shoved it in one of the hundred or so boxes we haven't gotten to yet, you don't even own a TV."

"So I don't." She smiled back at him and it lit her face with more beauty than any light, any power ever could. Her face seemed to glow with it as if one of her many faerie trinkets had waved a wand or sprinkled magic dust over her and made it so.

"You're happy," he whispered before he could stop himself.

"I am. Even more than I anticipated, more than I knew I could be. Everything is coming together so well."

"I missed that smile, missed you." The words were out of his mouth before he even realized he'd said them aloud. The smile that doomed him slowly faded from her lips as surprise swirled with heat in her expression. When her lips parted to speak he could think of nothing he wanted her to say at that moment, nothing *he* wanted to say. Dammit, he'd said too much already! Rather than allow either of them the time to speak, he crushed his mouth to hers.

Gods, he couldn't get enough of her! Even as he ravaged her mouth with much of the same intensity as he had when he'd been so rough with her in his own kitchen, he felt starved for more. He held her hard against him, drank in the heat of her body from every curve, every opening, every pore. His blood felt on fire for her, his cock throbbing to be inside her once more. Her arms moved, her hands burying themselves in his hair, tugging his head farther down to deepen the kiss. She took it from the rough demand he started to a headier command of her own and he fell into it, allowed her to do as she would.

His hands roamed, moving over her back, her ass, gathering her shirt in his fists as she ravaged his mouth. She nipped, licked, bit, soothed, tasted and devoured his mouth until he saw stars, moons and even tiny pentagrams dancing in the darkness of his eyelids. And still, he let her take more. Her hands moved between them, found the button of his pants, and made fast work of it and the zipper. But when he expected her to reach inside, to find his aching cock, she caught his wrists where they held her skirt on either side of her hips instead.

"No," she said against his mouth, the word almost unintelligible through the heavy sounds of their kisses. "No. Not this time." She wrenched her mouth from his. "It's my turn." She pulled at his wrists, urged him to release her skirt then guided his hands to his own sides. "Right there." She nipped his bottom lip, kept her gaze fixed with his as her hands returned his the opening of his pants, slipped inside, and dove under his briefs. "Keep them there."

It was her version of binding, he supposed, much as he'd done to her on his kitchen table. It would have been easier for him if she'd gone for rope or handcuffs, if she'd left him unable to move rather than to rely on his own self-control to obey. Gods! He would go out of his mind having her hands on him and not being allowed to touch!

She found his cock, her delicate fingers curling around his shaft as if testing its girth, and pulled it free of the confines of his pant and briefs. "Oh my," she cooed. "I would say you've put on some weight

in the last decade too and every pound is in all the right spots." When she gave his shaft a quick, slightly pressured squeeze, his eyes rolled back in his head and a low animalistic groan rumbled from his throat. When he opened his eyes he saw a satisfying wicked smile unfurl on her siren red lips.

"Ooo, I do like the sound of that." She purred the words barely above a whisper and they were more seductive, more devious because of it. "Let's do that again, shall we?" Her hand squeezed, his eyes closed, his throat groaned, and she gave a breathless laugh as she began to stroke the length of his dick in pressured, slow squeezes.

"Diana." Her name burst from his lips on a cry of pleasure, a plea for more. His hands ached to touch her, to feel the smoothness of her flesh beneath his palms. He wanted to delve his fingers inside her sweet juicy heat, prepare her for his cock and then piston himself inside her until they both lay breathless and spent on her bedroom floor. But he denied himself that want and forced himself to remain still, to stay at her mercy. When she dropped to her knees in front of him, he thought he might whimper but it was nothing of the sound he made when she trailed her satiny warm tongue over the tip of his cock.

His body jerked at the contact, every muscle going rigid, waiting, wanting. It made her laugh, a low seductive purr that nearly did him in. His balls tightened and became heavy rocks between his legs. His cock throbbed with a fire that felt as though a whip had been laid across his shaft. "Are you—?" He broke off, sucked in a breath when she repeated the lick, slower, more calculating all the while watching him. Her hand squeezed, a little more pressure, a little closer to walking the thin line between pleasure and pain. "Are you enjoying yourself?"

"Yes." She nodded and paused as if to think it over. "Yes, as a matter of fact, I am." She beamed up at him, eyes shining, mouth curved, lips glistening. "Aren't you?"

Devilish lips, he decided a fraction of a second later when, rather than await his response, she leaned in again, this time wrapping those lips around the head of his cock. She held it there, creating a light suction that caused tiny spasms of sparks and need to ricochet through his shaft as her tongue circled the sensitized flesh. She flicked the tip of that demon tongue over the tiny slit and delved inside it to draw out the pre-cum. "Geezus, Diana!" he seethed through clenched teeth. "You're driving me mad."

"I am?" She pulled back enough to ask, her warm breath a different kind of torment to the wet head of his cock. She shot him a quick look of pure innocence, *yeah, right, like any part of this woman is innocent*, and batted her eyelashes. "So soon? But I'm just getting started."

Goddess, help him. He managed a short, shaky laugh. "Yeah, I just bet you are but, Diana, honey, I really need..." But whatever he thought he really needed fizzled out in a sizzling spark as she drew his cock between her lips, sucked him down, and swallowed the length of him without warning or finesse.

"Oh God!" Yes, that was his voice crying out and, yes, that was definitely his knees going weak. Sit down. That's what he'd been about to tell her before she short-circuited every cell in his body. He needed to sit down before he fell down.

"Diana." He thought he said her name again, knew he tried at least, but he couldn't be sure. His body had plunged into a world of rapturous sensations too intense to define, too overwhelming to push through. The sweet warmth of her mouth captured him, controlled him. Her lips felt like a vise around his shaft, tightening, squeezing as she sucked him deeper, eased away almost to the point of letting his cock fall free before drawing him in again, claiming his length all the way to his balls. Gods, he couldn't take this standing up!

"Diana, please!" He knew he said it this time, figured half the city had heard the growl that made his words sound beastly, agonized, and treacherous. He *was* in agony. Even as the sheer pleasure rocked him,

the act of forcing himself to allow her to continue without interference or touch from him was more torture than he'd ever known. Yet, it was a deviously sweet torture wrought with such magnificence it left his body quivering.

When she reached between his legs, found his sack, and rolled his balls in her gently fisted hand, he knew more of that devious sweet torture. His knees shook and nearly buckled on him again. He locked them tighter, determined to give her this, to let her have her way even if it killed him. She drew back, swiped her satiny tongue over the head of his cock, licked down the shaft until she found his balls with her heated lips, and he all but died on the spot.

"Geezus, Diana! Baby, you're going to make me—" She sucked his left nut into her mouth and he ended the sentence on a cry that would've been embarrassing if he had an ounce of pride left. Good thing he didn't. She gave his head another lick before sucking his cock so deep down her throat he thought he felt her tonsils and he lost all ideas of warning.

"Yes. God, yes! Suck it, baby." He began to coach, soft whispers at first and then breathless moans as she fucked him with her mouth. She let her teeth graze the sensitive underside of his shaft along the vein that pulsed there, and his hips bucked in reflex. It was a hint of pain that exploded in pleasure and because of it, he forgot himself. As with his thoughts of warning, his control fled the scene. He caught the back of her hair in his hand, fisted, and held.

She moaned, slowed to savor his cock, her tongue circling, licking, and slurping at the flesh. Her teeth grazed again, a light caress of sandpaper from the fold of the skin behind the head all the way to the meeting of his lower stomach as she took his shaft deeply once more.

It made his hand convulse, made his breath lodge in his throat, and he swallowed it along with any semblance of niceties that remained. "Not slow." The words ground from his throat as he used his hold on her hair to control her movements, pulling her head back

only to drive his cock inside her mouth again. "I don't want it slow. I want to come in your mouth, Diana. Is that what you want?"

Her hands moved to grip his thighs, fingers digging into flesh, but her only answer was a low, throaty moan.

"If it's not what you want, stop now." He forced himself to loosen his grip on her hair, allowing her the measure of control she would need to stop.

She didn't stop, but rather kept up the brisk ramming pace he'd set on her own. As if by way of giving him more of a wordless answer, she skimmed one hand around him, over his buttocks and slipped a finger between his butt cheeks.

"Diana." This time he couldn't swear if he intended her name as a warning, a question or merely a gasp of surprise. Whatever way it didn't matter because the moment her finger grazed over his anus, her other hand slipped between his legs to cup his sack, and her mouth fucked his cock with a feverish hunger he'd never before felt. He came. "*God!*" The cry was wrenched from him in a blur of explosions and body convulsing release as he spilled his seed into her mouth, down her throat.

Ears ringing, vision nonexistent, muscles pulsing and straining to hold his weight, he nearly slipped into dreams where he stood. He scarcely felt it as she let his now limp cock fall from her sultry lips. She skimmed her hands up his body, pulling his shirt up and off in her climb as she stood in front of him.

* * * *

He looked like an archangel awaiting the ray of brilliant white light, standing as he was so straight, eyes closed, head slightly back, and body still trembling from the force of his orgasm. She'd done that to him, Diana thought and slowly licked the remnants of his salty sweet cum from her lips. And Goddess save her, she couldn't wait to do it again!

Why wait? She lifted a finger to skim the nail down his front from throat to belly button. *Now there's a question.* She'd spent a decade waiting to be with him again, waiting to feel the things only he could make her feel. By the Gods, she was tired of waiting.

She'd considered the situation while they unpacked through the afternoon and evening, weighed her options, and played out different scenarios. As she figured it she could handle him in one of two ways. She could make him talk—they really had to discuss what happened between them in order to completely put it in the past—or she could fuck his brains out. As he'd resisted every opportunity to talk about the past thus far, she aimed to go for the second. To her way of thinking, if she fucked him to just short of unconscious he wouldn't have the energy to evade the needed conversation.

"Well now." She smacked her lips and the loud pop of it had his eyes fluttering open, his gaze fixing on hers. "How about that dinner?" She watched in amused fascination as exhaustion turned to confusion then to comprehension in his eyes.

"Dinner? You. Want. Dinner. Now?" He spoke slowly, breathlessly, making a sentence out of each word.

"Not in the way you're thinking. As I was referring to real food the last time I spoke of hunger, but you took a different approach. Now it's my turn to misinterpret."

He laughed and, though it sounded with amusement, it rang with the raspy gruffness of a done in and spent man. "Better stick with the Webster's definition of dinner for a while. Give me time to recover. I couldn't get him up again right now if both our lives depended on it."

"Well, lucky for you, you don't have to wake him." She tugged at his jeans and briefs until both fell around his ankles. "That's my job. Step out."

"Step out? How about pull them back up? I would rather eat with my pants on if it's all the same to you."

"Not going all modest on me, are you?"

"Modest? Now that's a word and I suppose it depends on your definition. Would that be Webster's or do you have a different one for that too?"

"Webster will do for now." Diana noted even though he argued he was stepping out of his jeans as she'd asked.

"As it happens, it isn't modesty but simply the fact that I generally prefer to wear some clothing while I have dinner. It's probably more of an engrained manner than anything else. My family has never been rich but my mother was always adamant about table manners, including proper—"

Diana caught his soft cock in her hand and bit the inside of her cheek when the act had him shutting up in mid-sentence. "Would that be proper dressing?" she asked coyly. She gave his dick a light tug. He stumbled a step, somehow managing to shed his briefs from his ankles in the action.

"Yeah. Diana, what are you doing?" Though he questioned, he didn't resist as she used her grip on his cock to turn him around and back him against her newly assembled four-poster bed.

"I'm reporting to work." She released his dick, splayed her palms on the front of his shoulders, and pushed.

He fell back on her bed with a grunt and a chuckle. "And exactly what might your job be?"

She hiked up her skirt as she climbed onto the bed with him, straddling his legs. "I already told you. It's my job to wake him up again."

"That may not be as easy as it sounds. I need a bit of time to recover."

"I'll give you time." She caught his cock in her fist and started to stroke in gentle, measured slides. "I'll wake him slowly. I like it when he's soft. I love to feel him limp in my hand. And it's fascinating to watch him grow from my touch." And grow it did, rather rapidly as she continued to fondle, to touch, to squeeze and stroke. She shot him a look and lifted a brow. "Guess you won't need that time after all."

"Guess not." He held her gaze, a light smile tilting his lips. "You always had the magical touch."

"No magic here, big boy." She glanced down, looked back at him, and let the grin come. "What an apt nickname. Anyway, good thing for me, at least this time that I have, how about we say, the right touch?" She scooted on her knees, up his body until she straddled his waist, and positioned her sopping pussy above his now fully erect cock. "Referring once more to that alternate definition of dinner, I'm still starving." She lowered herself onto his dick, taking him inside her eager opening in one smooth, slow, fluid motion that had her blood singing from the thrill of it.

His eyes closed, his breath catching, his head bending back as his hands found her hips and gripped them. He tried to lift her, tried to raise his hips both in an attempt to gain the first moment of control. She dug her knees into the mattress and splayed her hands flat on his chest, refusing to give. Several long moments passed with only their breathing and hearts to make quiet sounds as she held herself to him, held him inside her. She could feel him so deep, so hard. Her inner muscles strained to accommodate his width, his length. He filled her so perfectly, so completely that she sat there, reveling in that knowledge, that feel for as long as he allowed.

It wasn't long. He moved a hand around her front, found her clit with the pad of his thumb, and this time it was her breath catching, her eyes closing. "No fair. This is supposed to be my time, my way."

"Your time is too slow, your way too gentle." But even as he complained, his thumb moved with equal slowness, caressing her clit until it felt like a swollen nub of fire between her feminine lips.

"But I want slow. I want gentle." To prove it, she eased her hips up a mere fraction of an inch and floated down again.

"And I'll tell you what isn't fair," he said on an agonized breath. "You're still dressed."

"I assure you it is completely fair." She curled her fingers around his wrist and pulled his hand from between her legs. It cost her giving

up that gyrating heated pleasure his thumb was giving her. But she meant to have it her way this time, slow and easy, torturous and pleasing. "I like it this way. Sort of a backward game of master and slave, don't you think?"

James laughed. "Master and slave, huh? I gather I'm the slave." His brows lifted as he studied her. "I don't remember you being so fond of sex games."

"I was young, still learning."

"And now? Have you learned all there is to know?"

"Absolutely not! And I pray to the Goddess that I never do. That's the game of it. Each time you play you learn something new, make a different move, and try a different act. Experimentation is half the education and all the fun. What feels good and what doesn't. Like this." She dug her knees deeper, lifting her body until only the head of his cock remained inside her. Slowly, she lowered herself once more, taking him back in inch by glorious inch. It felt so incredibly good she had to catch her breath, to wait until the sharpest edge of the intense spasms within her ebbed before she could speak. "Ah yes, that felt beyond good. Don't you agree?"

His eyes had gone glassy, darkened by the pleasure until they resembled her scrying mirror, black and shimmering, bottomless pits of desire and longing, of satisfaction and even more emotions she couldn't define, wouldn't try. "You're doing that on purpose. Are you trying to make me lose it again, make me beg?"

There's an idea, she thought. Exactly what would it take? What would she have to do to make him beg? She figured she'd come close minutes before. She'd definitely caused him to lose a bit of that iron will control at the end. Because she could still taste the evidence of his loss in the back of her throat and found it turned her on nearly as much as having his cock so deeply inside her, she decided to save the begging experiments for later. In truth, her pussy flamed with the need to have him driving inside her so badly she was on the edge of begging herself. She'd wanted slow and easy, but Goddess she wasn't

sure she could take it slow and easy herself. She'd wanted to show him a bit of torture, but the person she was torturing was herself.

"Would I do that?" She tried a look of innocence, a bat of her lashes. He didn't fall for it.

"Yes," he said on a bark of laughter.

"I'm just trying to make you feel good." She repeated the slow climb and the equally slow impalement that had them both catching breaths on moans of pleasure.

"By the Gods, Diana, you sure do that." He reached up and cupped her cheek in his hand. "What I said before, about your magic, you don't have to use it for it to be. Everything about you is magic."

His words brought tears to her eyes that she didn't bother to blink away. Better, she decided, to let him see what his words did to her. To let him see what she still felt for him after all these years. But when he dropped his hand from her face and looked away, she wondered if she'd made a mistake. Because she felt a sudden tension growing between them, she wiggled her hips and rotated them in a circle as she spread her legs further apart to take him deeper still. The rush of air that burst from his lungs was a satisfactory enough response for now.

She gathered herself, convinced herself now was not the time, and blinked away the tears after all. Teasing, she decided, would be better for now even if she drove herself mad in the process. Keep it light even if they were sharing some of the heaviest emotions a heart could feel with the act of making love. "And does that make you feel good, too?"

He chuckled, returned his gaze to hers, and whatever he'd felt at the sight of her tears was gone from his eyes. "Still experimenting, are you? You learned well." He sucked in a breath as she gave her hips another grinding rotation. "I don't think I want to know where you got such education."

Another avoidance of discussing the past. This time she agreed. She would rather not talk about his past lovers either. "Then why not simply enjoy my education instead?" She needed his touch, needed

the magic the contact would give her. She stripped off her blouse and bra and reached for his hands, guiding them to her breasts.

She rode him, slow and steady at first until both of their eyes nearly bulged from their heads in the restraint of the tempered tempo. Then she increased that tempo and her body soared. Everything inside her sang with the glory of the rapturous bolts of sensations searing through her. Neither of them spoke. She couldn't have collected her thoughts enough to mutter anything beyond an "Oh yeah," or "Yes, yes, yes!" anyway. The only sounds were that of heavy breathing, hearts pounding and sweaty flesh slapping sweaty flesh as they brought each other to a climax that ended in an almost audible explosion.

Spent, lost in a world beyond exhaustion, Diana let herself fall on top of him. She laid there, the sweat of her body mixing with his, forming a sticky wetness between them that felt like glue, the smell of sex coating the air, and breathed. Simply breathed.

"Promise me something." It was more order than question, yet it held a quiet hint of uncertainty. He'd circled his arms around her when she'd fallen and his hands now moved in lazy caresses up and down her naked back.

It felt so amazing to lie with him this way, Diana thought she might never move. "If I can."

He was silent for so long she thought he might have changed his mind. Then he took a deep breath that seemed to steady him and said, "Your experiments, as you call them. When you get ready for more, would you make sure I'm your only test subject?"

It bothered him more then he would ever want to admit knowing she'd been with other men. She wanted to think it crazy, but she couldn't, not when deep down the thought of him with other women cut in her belly like a double-edged sword. It would be best for them to accept the fact that there had been others and move on. Still, he was the one with women all but falling at his feet. While she could respect

that, even expected it given his fame with the band, she deserved reassurance of exclusivity too, didn't she?

"I suppose so." She lifted her head and gazed down at him. "I should tell you that I make an excellent student, too. Want to be my personal, exclusive tutor?"

He smiled, just the slightest curve of one corner of his lips that was so sexy it made her heart flip in her chest. "I would love to."

"Great." She pushed herself up with her arms on either side of his shoulders. "Now I'm really *starving*."

His eyes widened and she would have sworn his face went pale. "Again?" he croaked. "Already?"

Diana laughed so hard her sides hurt. She rolled off of him to lie beside him on the bed, still laughing.

"Webster's...definition...this...time." She managed between strangled breaths. "Food. Real food."

"Oh. Whew!"

"Then we'll have our next lesson."

"Our next lesson? Woman, you're insatiable!"

"Yes. Yes, I am. Come on. Let's go raid the kitchen, handsome. Surely there's something left from our girl party last night." Still chuckling, she patted his thigh, pushed herself up, and scooted off the bed. She found his briefs on the floor where he'd shed them and picked them up. "You want the jeans, too?"

He lifted a lazy head and blinked at the underwear she tossed on the bed beside him. "Unless you plan to walk around naked."

"Not naked exactly." She slid her skirt down. It was the only article of clothing she'd managed to keep on. *So much for her game of master and love slave*. She folded it and placed it on the dresser. A satin robe of deep pink hung from the knob on the bedroom door and she slipped it on.

"You weren't wearing any of these."

She turned to see him gesturing quickly with his briefs before pulling them on. "They aren't really my style or color." At his

withering look, she laughed. "My panties were too wet to put them back on at your place this afternoon and well," she shrugged. "I never got around to finding a replacement pair when we got here."

"Be glad I didn't know that." He pulled on his jeans too but left the button and fly undone.

Sex personified, she thought as she watched him. His hair was mussed, his eyes heavy lidded with a satisfied exhaustion that told her he would need sleep soon. His chest still glistened with a light sheen of sweat and the way he looked in those jeans... Goddess, how was it possible that she could actually feel herself becoming aroused already again? "Because you would've been unable to resist bending me over in front of the moving guys?"

"Don't put it past me."

Her stomach gave an excited flutter at the warning underlying his tone. "I'll have to remember to enlighten you to my lack of undress next time then, see exactly what it is you will do."

James cocked a brow. "Is that a challenge?"

Diana pursed her lips and pretended to think. "It just might be. You know, Alicia never wears underwear of any fashion."

"That's something I really didn't need to know about my friend's woman," he muttered. "What a thing to think about the next time I see her."

"Don't sweat it, handsome. It's likely she would enjoy it." Laughing again, Diana left the room.

Chapter 7

Opening a business required more than simple desire and plans, more even than prime location and funds. There was the business license to acquire, permits to apply for, health regulation and inspections to set up, and the creation and legalization of the partnership contracts to see to. Then there were the more practical concerns of ordering stock, purchasing advertising space, having the phones connected.

Diana might have wished for a spell to make it all easier, but if she had, she would've missed the fun, the thrill of accomplishment, the satisfaction she felt when each small but essential piece of the puzzle fell into place.

She had Derek to thank for the rush on the license, Diana reminded herself. And who would've thought a man like Derek Kadin would have such a pull with the powers that be downtown? It simply proved that fame and fortune could speak the right language in nearly every arena. Then there were Alicia's connections in the book world, with distributors, publishers, authors and the likes. There were her own contacts with Wiccan suppliers and artists. That left nothing to say of the quick work Melody and Suzanne managed to pull together with their various artworks. In a matter of weeks rather than the months she'd expected, Diana found herself unpacking boxes of books, organizing jars of herbs on the shelves and scattering candles of various sizes and colors throughout the main area.

It was all coming together so much faster and better than she could've imagined, all exactly as she'd envisioned but for a few minor changes that added to the whole in ways she'd yet to dream. And yet,

with all her accomplishments, all her excitement and all her eagerness to tackle the work left to be done, she found her spirits waning. She wasn't the only one noticing the dive in her mood, she realized when she caught Alicia studying her as she popped the seal on another box of books.

"You're feeling bitchy," Alicia commented. She carefully loaded one arm with the contents of the box, began to stack them on the appropriate shelf.

Diana had decided to go with a motley collection of shelves scattered about, some back to back and others against the walls rather than basic metal or even common wooden ones. It added more character, she thought now, complimented the colorful book covers, candles, stones and rocks and all the other pretties their shelves would contain. A real mood brightener, and boy, couldn't she use that right about now.

"And aren't you observant?" She frowned and decided maybe she needed more than color and variety to perk her up today.

"One of the many perks of being a writer." Alicia shrugged then tossed Diana a smirk over her shoulder.

She'd gone for comfortable, slouchy, and relaxed today, Diana noted. Auburn strands pulled into a high ponytail, Slipknot T-shirt at least two sizes too large with a pair of black skintight jeans and black platform shoes. Tiny silver skulls with tiny blood red roses dangled from her ears and a necklace fashioned with a Celtic cross hung from a silver chain around her neck. The look suited her friend best. The laid-back, heavy-metal queen, as opposed to the elegant, rich bitch of her alter ego.

"Or a curse," Alicia added. "It all depends on your viewpoint."

"I think today we'll go with a curse."

"Okay, so curse it is. Want to tell me why we drank the bitch potion this morning?"

"Someone spiked my coffee," Diana muttered and, at the sound of Alicia's chuckle, her own lips twitched. "He won't talk to me."

"He? That would be James?" Alicia went back to shelving the books from her box.

"Of course he would be James. Who else would I be talking about?" Because she heard the bite in her voice even before she registered Alicia's slow turn, the gradual lifting of her eyebrow, Diana sighed. She shoved a book on a shelf and massaged her temples with the middle finger of each hand. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to snap at you."

"He has you on edge. I don't think I've ever seen you on edge because of a man and I've known you over half our lives."

"No one but him ever managed to affect me like this."

"And that really pisses you off, too," Alicia observed with a hint of amusement in both her eyes and her tone.

"It does," Diana admitted. "And the fact that it does piss me off only pisses me off further! I can't figure out if he's doing it on purpose or if he's really simply let go of the past. How could he let go so easily? He's acting like... Well, like..."

"Like nothing ever happened between you?" Alicia suggested.

"Yes! How can he let a decade go so easily?" She voiced the question that nagged at her almost constantly these days. "He shouldn't let it go. He doesn't *need* to let it go."

"How did you let him go so easily a decade ago?"

"It wasn't easy." Diana's words dropped to a whisper as the memory swamped her along with the pain, the instant loneliness. "Goddess, it was anything but easy."

"Okay." Alicia walked to her and pulled her in for a tight hug. "Okay, I'm sorry. You're right. I can see that. I didn't know."

"You couldn't know." Diana rested her cheek on Alicia's shoulder and allowed herself the moment to lean on someone. It was something she rarely did even with her best friend but just now it felt good, right. "Letting him go was the hardest thing I've ever done."

"Why did you do it? You broke it off, right?" Alicia pulled back slightly, waiting for Diana to look at her, for her answer. "If you loved him this much even then, why push him away?"

Diana shook her head, blinked away the tears that blurred her vision, and stepped back. "That's for him. I'm sorry," she added quickly when Alicia's gaze dropped to the floor. "I know you're only asking because you care, because you're a friend, my very best friend, but the answer..." She shook her head again and let the rest trail to nothing. After a long silence followed by a heavy sigh, she finally said, "Let's just say that I couldn't keep him. Okay?"

"Okay." Alicia's nod was slight and brisk. "Okay. Okay. I'll understand. You've tried to get him to talk, I take it?"

"Of course I've tried." This time frustration rang in Diana's voice. "And he finds a way to change the subject or simply walks away."

"Hmm." Alicia tapped a thoughtful finger on her chin. "So we tie him down and cover his mouth with Duct tape."

Diana laughed. "The idea has crossed my mind but..."

"Yeah. A bit too crass I suppose. You could put some kind of potion in his coffee—does he even drink coffee?—anyway, something to cause temporary paralysis and muteness. Although, I suppose that is just as crass as the Duct tape."

"But far less painful. And he does drink coffee. Still, whether tape or potion, to commit such an act would be a violation of everything I believe in, everything the power stands for. Harm none, remember?"

"Even if it's for his own good? No, never mind." Alicia waved a hand in the air dismissing the question. "It doesn't matter anyway. You would never do it in any case. Besides, I was only joking. Well, only half joking," she amended with a quirk of her lips before it quickly faded. "Seriously though, have you considered he may just need time? You had, what, a few months together at most when you were barely adults, then ten years or more apart. A parting that apparently was far from amicable from what I can gather."

"You gather correctly." Diana sighed. Not amicable was putting it mildly, she thought, remembering his thinly veiled pain, the chill of his fury as she'd walked away.

"Now you've had mere weeks since you found one another again," Alicia continued. "You've had sex." When Diana cocked her head and arched a brow, she laughed. "A blind man could see the two of you have been intimate on way more than one occasion."

"It's that obvious, huh?" Diana returned to her box of books and started shelving the remaining few that covered the bottom.

"It's beyond obvious, darling. And I'll tell you what else is obvious. He cares for you. Whatever you had or didn't have, whatever ill feelings or memories stewed in the last years, he never got over you. That isn't new attraction or new feelings. Hell, Diana, it isn't new love I see in his eyes when he looks at you. It might be rekindled but it's certainly not new."

"He *does* love me still." Whatever indecision, confusion or avoidance she'd felt from him these last weeks, she'd felt that too. She knew it despite his reluctance to admit it. Not that she'd clued him into her own heart. It was too soon for that yet.

"Of course he does. Men are such silly creatures. You know this. Give the man some time." Alicia closed the distance between them again in three long strides and thumbed away a tear Diana hadn't realized had fallen down her cheek. "Sometimes it takes a lot of time, but eventually you'll steer him down the right path. He's in a new place right now and I don't mean the city. I mean his life in general. New band, on the edge of all that fame, fortune, women. You know how hard it is for a guy in his place to commit. Look at how long it's taken me to get a ring on Derek's finger."

At the shimmer of stone and silver on the ring finger Alicia held up, Diana squealed and grabbed the hand so she could get a better view. "A sapphire." She couldn't disguise the wistfulness in her voice no more than she could squash the clutch of envy in her belly. "It's gorgeous! Simple, casual elegance, not gaudy or overbearing like

many engagement rings. He made a fabulous choice." She released Alicia's hand. "It suits you. It suits both of you."

"You mean the rich bitch me and the metal head me." Alicia nodded and grinned. Her alter egos were a running joke between them these days. "It does and Derek does have fabulous taste. Though..." She hesitated, rocked back on her heels as she wiggled her finger, and stared at the way the stone caught the light. "He didn't intend for it to be an engagement ring. I put the moves on that one."

Intrigued, Diana cocked her head. "Do tell, sister."

"I told you I would convince him to marry me by the end of the year." Alicia propped a foot on a low lying shelf and rested the elbow of her left arm on a higher one as if settling in for the story. "Well, he took me to dinner last night. That quaint little restaurant about two hours out of town on the corner of..." She trailed off at the blank look Diana knew was on her face and waved a dismissive hand in the air. "Never mind. I forgot we haven't taken you there yet. It's not important. You should get James to take you. It's a bit of a drive but well worth it for a romantic evening, especially for a nature lover like you. It's set on the ridge of the mountain with a trail that leads behind it into the woods. There are these shops scattered about, too. That's where we found the ring. Derek spotted it, actually. He insisted on buying it for me."

"And of course you didn't argue." Diana smiled, knowing her friend all too well. Conservative and casual as she was, Alicia's wealth and need for the occasional glamour ran deep in the Addison blood.

"Didn't even think of it," Alicia confirmed with a coy grin. "But I did make him promise to marry me before he put it on my finger."

"Bet that gave him pause." They'd been in love and together for the better part of two years but getting a commitment out of Derek Kadin beyond that of exclusivity proved to be quite a chore for Alicia. Diana had watched with some amusement as Alicia patiently waited for Derek to pop the question. Waited until said patience wore out

then set on a path to make him propose. It appeared the path finally ran to an end.

Alicia laughed. "You should've seen the way the color drained from his face. The palest vampire had nothing on Derek's pallor when I mentioned the words engagement and marriage."

"I bet." The image Alicia's description brought to mind had Diana laughing, too. "Still, he agreed."

"More. He did the asking! Not with all the down-on-one-knee finesse I might have gone for, but I figured I would stop while I had the upper hand."

"Did you set a date?" Diana picked up the now empty box and walked it to the growing stack of others near the back door.

"Not yet." Alicia stayed put and raised her voice to be heard over the distance. "We'll probably wait until the first leg of the tour is over. I need time to plan anyway. That will give me a good two months or so."

Two months, Diana thought and felt the stirrings of aloneness in her very soul. Two months without James. It was funny how she could miss him so greatly already after only weeks together again when before she'd gone years without him. Yet, wasn't this why she had ended it so long ago? Hadn't she hurt them both so he could have this? Give him time, Alicia had said. Maybe Diana had been wrong all along, she thought now. Perhaps it wasn't fate that ruled her, that ruled them, but rather time instead.

* * * *

James wanted to do something with her this last night before leaving town. More, he needed something to take his mind off the coming months without her. At Alicia's suggestion, he decided on reservations at El Romanios. He remembered Diana always loved Mexican food and the posh restaurant on the ridge side, while a bit steep for his still growing wallet, offered the best in the city for

authentic Mexican cuisine coupled with an outdoor atmosphere sure to delight Diana straight to her Wiccan soul.

He drove her car. It gave him both the opportunity to be close to her and the option of conversation. They left the top down, both enjoying the whip of the early evening breeze as he wound her sweet convertible through the city streets to the more secluded mountain edge outside of town.

"It handles well," he said of the car as he maneuvered a particularly sharp curve at double the speed posted. It both amused and pleased him to note she didn't grab for the handle to brace herself. She didn't have an ounce of fear etched in her expression. Instead, she leaned into the turn as he would have done on his bike, her face calm and easy. "I would've expected you to go for a more practical car though. Something more sensible and economical."

Diana sighed. "Oh, I'll admit a more practical car would be easier on the bank account." She looked at him, her luscious lips unfolding in a wide, heart-stopping grin. "But it wouldn't be near as much fun to cruise."

"No. I suppose not. It wouldn't attract as much attention either." Even with the wind of the open night, her scent drove him mad. He got a whiff of it now as he pulled into the valet of the restaurant and felt his mind slip a gear because of it. Was it geranium? Lavender? Neroli? A combination of each?

"And you know how I love to attract attention."

He looked at her and let his gaze do a slow slide down her front. She'd chosen a black dress, straight, low cut and jaw dropping. A thin strand of silver beads decorated her slim neck, with a single silver heart pendant dangling to a stop a mere inch above her incredible cleavage. "You certainly do that."

A man in a valet uniform opened his door as he pulled to a stop and put the car in park. He left the keys in the ignition, engine running as he got out and walked around to open Diana's door. She took his offered hand as she stepped out of the car, laughter dancing in her

stunning eyes. He pulled her hard against him even as he closed the passenger door, as the valet attendant drove off with the car. It pleased him to hear her quick, startled intake of breath as her body slammed into his, to see the laughter in her eyes morph to hunger he knew full well no food inside the restaurant would abate.

Because the feel of her body made his own hunger rise, he lowered his mouth to hers for a taste that merely succeeded in tormenting his already screaming soul. "One question," he whispered against her lips then gave the lower one a rough bite before licking the sting away. "Are you trying to kill me tonight?" When her gaze turned puzzled, he explained, "The dress, your scent..."

Diana's smile was wicked and sensual. "Not kill but kick your ass perhaps."

"Oh, you have definitely done that. Consider my ass adequately kicked." He grinned and brushed his lips to hers once more. "Left me barely able to think in any case." He stepped back, turned and motioned with his free hand toward the door. "Shall we?"

* * * *

Dinner was a decadent and delicious mix of the best foods Mexican cuisine had to offer coupled with margaritas large enough to make Jimmy Buffet sing. The table James reserved was both perfect and private, lit by only the dim glow of candlelight and the silvery ray of the three-quarter moon. It sat before a large picture window overlooking a more dimly lit path leading behind the restaurant and up the mountain ridge. The path they walked along now as dinner ended, both choosing the quiet walk in lieu of dessert.

They were but a few feet onto the path when Diana stopped, placed a hand on James's shoulder to rest her weight, and slipped out of her shoes.

"You'll hurt your feet," he commented, curving a steadying arm around her waist. "It's too dark to see clearly, and this doesn't appear to be a paved trail."

"It isn't and I'm glad for it. I love to feel the earth beneath my feet." Diana bent and picked up her shoes. "My feet are used to walking bare in the woods. I'm surprised you forgot that about me."

"Not forgot. I just wasn't thinking. Here, I'll carry them then." He took her heels from her hand, hooked them on the fingers of his free hand at his side, and began to walk again. "It's a beautiful night for this. I can't remember the last time I went for a walk at night through the woods. At night, or even in the day for that matter."

"It's been a while for me too," she admitted and felt a pang of guilt that only magnified when he shot her a surprised glance.

"You always loved the outside, practically lived there! On the beach, in the woods, if it was open and full of nature you were there."

"And still prefer to be." She sighed. "We fall into the world of business, of work, of plans that leave no room for free time or relaxation. I've been through a lot of that lately and it's left me feeling empty, missing the outside and my natural connection to nature."

"This is a different nature than what you're accustomed to. Mountains and streams, season changes from snow in the winter to a lighter heat come summer. No beaches or ocean and a lot less humidity."

"It's an even exchange, I think. You trade one for the other, flatlands for the mountains, oceans for the rivers and streams. Different but equal beauty in its way." She stopped, splayed a hand on the trunk of a nearby tree, and felt. Her mind cleared so she felt the energy of that tree seep into her palm, travel up her arm, and flow through her like her blood. It steadied her, centered her. She hadn't realized until that moment how much she needed that. "There are far more of these here," she said of the tree as she dropped her hand and moved back onto the path. "Everywhere you look, people are cutting

down trees. Yet, even with the size of the city, the country remains on the edges here. That's something I know I will enjoy."

"Something else that always amazed me about you," he said as they began walking again. "You lived on the beach, surrounded by water and sand, but it's the woods that call to you. Not the water. Did you ever go back? To our place, after... Did you still go there before you moved here?"

His question startled her and she stumbled, stumped her toe on an exposed tree root, and sucked a breath through her teeth even as she swallowed a curse.

"Are you all right?" James knelt and skimmed his hands down her leg to her foot. He rested her foot on the thigh of his bent leg to examine her pained toe by the glow of the moonlight. The stance put her in mind of prince charming on one knee before Cinderella about to fit the glass slipper on her dainty foot.

He *was* her prince charming, she mused as the pain in her toe ebbed. Lucky for her, she didn't have to concern herself with turning into a pumpkin come midnight. "I'm fine," she finally answered and gave her toe a wiggle for good measure. "Just mis-stepped. I'm fine."

"Do you want to turn back?" He straightened, looking over her shoulder at the part of the path they already covered.

"No, no. We'll go on."

He nodded and let his hand glide down her arm to lace his fingers with hers.

She took the first step gingerly. The ground was just soft enough to give under her weight and it seemed to close around her foot, brushing over the abrasion of her toe. The next step was easier and then the next until she forgot about the injury and remembered its cause. He'd asked about their place. She threw her head back, stared into the night sky through the canopy of trees, and focused on the twinkle of starlight shining down.

For a moment, she simply breathed and let the wonder of his question swirl in her mind. So often since being reunited, she'd

wondered if he ever thought about what they had shared or if the pain she'd caused in him had been too great. Was it a sign he would ask about something out of their past now? Was he ready to talk at last?

"It hasn't changed much." She spoke softly, head still back, eyes still transfixed on the stars. "There's some new growth of course. Nature always has a way of providing that. The clearing is still there though a bit smaller now, more overgrown than it once was."

"I'm surprised no one has disturbed it, cut down the trees, developed the land," James commented just as softly as if by unspoken agreement to talk barely above a whisper might disturb the ease, the conversation, the atmosphere of the night.

"It's too far out, too far away from any real civilization. Close to the beach, the water, but not enough prime land to make it a treasured spot."

"To anyone but us."

Diana did look at him now and caught the seriousness, the memories, the emotions past and present in the glimmer of his eyes. "Yes, to anyone but us," she agreed and heard the catch in her voice. She knew he heard it too when he gently squeezed her hand. "I didn't go there as much. Not after..." She shook her head, not yet ready to speak of the one thing she'd been longing to talk with him about since finding him again. Because the words seemed to get caught somewhere in her chest, she said instead, "I went back, of course, now and then. To see what changed, what remained the same, to remember."

Still holding her hand, he stepped in front of her on the path, and turned to face her. "I remember. Each and every second of every moment we spent there. I remember." He cupped her cheek with his free hand, his thumb grazing over her lips in a featherlike caress. "Every smile, every laugh, ever kiss we shared." His head lowered to hers, lips brushing.

Diana didn't think to pull back. She wouldn't have in any case. The quick jolt in her blood at the touch of his lips was as much a memory of then as reality now.

"You gave yourself to me there as you had never given yourself to any other man." His lips moved to nip her jaw, to graze over the bone, and slide down her neck.

Paralyzed, she could do nothing but tilt her head farther back, expose more skin for him to nip, to taste.

"I've dreamt of it so often," he whispered against her flesh. "Of that sunny afternoon when you let me have you. Your first time. Our first time." His hands started to travel, down her back, over her sides, to her breasts, her hips.

She felt him everywhere in an instant, but not where she wanted to feel him most. Flames licked between her legs, her body shuddering in its need to feel his cock plunging inside her. "James." She whispered his name, her hands groping his back, the back of his neck, settling on his shoulders in a tight grip. She wanted to touch flesh but found only cloth heated by the warmth of his body. "I've dreamt of it, too, nearly every night since that night."

He backed her carefully against a nearby tree along the edge of the path and pinned her there with his hands on either side of her as he ravaged her mouth, her neck, her throat. "You weren't my first. I've always regretted that," he told her, his breath coming ragged now as the hunger built inside him as it did inside her. "I would have wanted you to be my first."

"One of us needed to be skilled." Her words came in pants now, breathless and heady. "It was better that way, easier, less fumbling, and less nerves. I had enough of that for both of us." Her fingers dug into his shoulders, clawing at the crisp white shirt he wore with dark trousers as she rested her head against the tree. She damned herself for wearing a skirt when the material stopped her from parting her legs, to wrap around him so she could draw him closer to the heat

raging between her legs. "You taught me, James. You showed me the pleasure of making love, how amazing it could be."

"You never knew how much that meant to me, that I was your first, that I was the one to teach you. I never told you." His tongue traced the deep V of her dress, grazing the outer edge of her breasts that spilled over her demi bra beneath. It was worse than liquid electricity, that lick of his tongue, and she all but heard her flesh start to fry.

"I knew in any case." She gasped when he brought a finger to that V and pulled the material as much as it would stretch to expose more of her chest, to sample, to lick, to taste. "You told me with your hands, your body."

"Then let me tell you again. Let me tell you now." He turned her around, pressed his front to her back and caught her wrists. He braced her hands on the tree as his hands danced down her arms, over her shoulders, down her sides, her hips. "Are you wearing underwear tonight?" he asked as he fisted the hem of her dress in his hands, and started inching the material up.

"After a fashion." She felt the slight chill of the night on her bare cheeks as he pushed her dress to her waist, and exposed her g-string. When his hand moved around her body and delved between her legs to swipe over the narrow strip of satin covering her mons, she breathed a moan and let her head fall back onto his chest.

"God, that's an incredible turn-on. The way your body responds to my touch drives me wild!" He slid a finger beneath the satin of her panties and found her hot and wet and ready for him. "So eager." Her head rolled to one side and he nipped the sensitive skin just below her ear. "So ready and wanting."

"I want you now." Diana rotated her hips, grinding her bare buttocks against his front. She could feel his stiff erection beneath the material of his trousers. She wanted to rip that material away and expose the wand that would give her more magic than her own powers ever could. When she tried to move, attempted to reach back

to find his pants, his cock, he held her fast, his body holding her prisoner between himself and tree. "I need you now. Please, James."

"I know and you will have me." He thrust fingers inside her throbbing opening, two side by side. They stretched, made her cry out with the surprised thrill that shot through her limbs. "When I'm ready to give it to you."

So demanding, she thought as her body surrendered beyond will to the brisk pounding of his fingers inside her. Her back arched involuntarily, pushing her hips farther back, thrusting her breasts forward into the hand he'd brought between her chest and the tree. Fingers slipped inside the bodice of her dress and caught her nipple in a rough, possessive capture that stung all the way to her toes while at the same time fueling the fire between her legs to blazing temperatures. *So controlling*. Not the same as the boy she'd first given her body, her virginity. No. This was the James who had taken her so roughly, so viciously on his kitchen table. It surprised her now as it had then that she found his dominance so arousing, so invigorating. Juices spilled from her, coating his fingers, his hand, her inner thighs, and still the fire inside her continued to grow.

"I want you begging, Diana. I like it when you beg." He flicked a thumbnail over her nipple, somehow caught her swollen clit between his other thumb and finger while holding still two more fingers deeply inside her and squeezed, tugged.

The pain of it, the sheer pleasure had her quietly screaming, gasping for breath and begging for more. "James! Please. I want you, *need* you."

"That's a start. You're so wet." As if to prove his words, he slipped his hand free of her pussy and held it up near her face to let the moonlight glisten off the wet juices that covered it. "So incredibly wet. Taste yourself for me." He dragged one finger over her mouth, urging her lips to part.

She did as he told her to, as he made her to, her lips opening, tongue protruding to taste the sticky sweet mixture coating his finger.

Her juices. Her cum. She angled her head, using the new position to draw into her mouth the second finger he'd had inside as well. She sucked them, licked them, and devoured them as she would his cock until no trace of her juices remained.

"Dear Gods," he breathed as he slowly pulled his fingers free of her mouth. "Dear Gods, that drives me crazy." His hand returned to the heat between her legs, yanking the thin strip of saturated satin to one side even as he pushed her thighs apart and rammed his cock inside her to the hilt.

The pleasure was instant and maddening. Her every conscious thought drove into insanity with such force it rivaled a train wreck. How had he gotten his pants unfastened when both his hands had been busy on her body? When had he undone them? The answers were moot, the questions fading in surrender to the spasms of hunger feeding on his cock now lodged so deeply inside her it was a wonder she didn't split in half.

"Thank you." She heard herself whisper the words as though more grateful for his intrusion of her body than she was for the next breath she took. Only then, as the intense pleasure of that first thrust began to subside, did it register that he'd stopped. Inside her until their bodies touched, bent over her with one hand cupping her mound where they joined, the other covering one breast, he stood unmoving. She couldn't move either, she realized when she tried. He'd effectively pinned her once more, sandwiched her, and positioned himself behind and around her as to leave her no room for even a wiggle.

"James." She said his name now as more question than statement and still there was the hint of the begging he wanted underlying her tone.

"We're out in the open here, Diana. I wonder what would you do if someone happened upon us right now."

She turned her head, the only part of her she could move, and stared down the path in the direction they had come. Even with the silvery streams of moonlight, she could see nothing but a thick, black

darkness. They were alone. She'd already known that before she looked, and yet, what if someone did come down the path? It wasn't an impossible thought. This path was behind a very busy restaurant, a well known path by the patrons of that restaurant and traveled often.

"How would it look to someone who came up on us with you braced against that tree, your dress up around your waist, my dick buried in that sweet, hot pussy of yours from behind." He started to move, just the smallest, slowest inching pull out, easing push back in.

"Yes." Diana hissed the word, closed her eyes and reveled in the feel of the slowly aching torture he gave her. It was pleasure. It was agony. She wanted it faster, harder. She needed more. "Please, more."

"That turns you on too, doesn't it?" He didn't move faster but instead kept up that maddeningly slow rhythm as he tormented her with his cock, his words. "You like the idea of someone catching us, of someone watching as I fuck you."

Goddess, who was this man? He'd never spoken to her so bluntly, so crudely, never treated her with such callousness even if there was an underlying tenderness to it all. Even when he'd taken her so forcefully on his kitchen table it hadn't been like this, *he* hadn't been like this.

"Admit it, Diana." He pulled back slowly, nearly slipped out of her and she whimpered in fear he would stop altogether. He laughed, a low and satisfied chuckle. "Yes, you are on the edge, aren't you, my Goddess? Will you admit it for me? Will you tell me how you would enjoy having an audience as I take you, as I fuck you until you scream?"

By the Gods, she *would* enjoy it. The realization had her cheeks flaming in the darkness. Diana had never considered herself an exhibitionist, never dreamed the event he spoke of would be anything more than sheer embarrassment and yet... "Yes," she whispered.

"What was that? I can't hear you, sweetheart."

"Yes!" She said it again, but when she did this time he slammed his cock all the way inside her. Goddess in Summerland, it did turn

her on! Everything he was saying, the idea of it actually happening made every nerve ending in her body spring to life with aroused excitement. So much so she felt as though she might die from the inside out, the need for him to do as his words promised with or without an audience killing her like a slow-acting poison. To make matters worse, just when she thought he might follow through with his promise, he stopped. He'd taken her to the moon with that one single vicious thrust and now she was falling with the velocity of a jumper out of an airplane at fifty thousand feet without a parachute.

"Dammit, James!" Frustration mixed with need and had the words seeping out of her on a growl of warning and razor edge fury. "If you don't fuck me right now I'm going to put a spell on you."

That made him laugh, a low chuckle that sounded as much amused as it did breathless. "Isn't that a no-no for you? Casting a spell on another could be harmful."

"I'll risk the karma. Surely under the circumstances the Gods would understand."

He leaned in and brushed a kiss over the exposed flesh of her neck as his hands moved to her wrists as if to check their position on the tree. "No need for that, baby. Hold on." His hands moved again, this time a fast glide down her arms, her sides. They found purchase on her hips and he plunged.

Diana cried out, so loudly and without restraint that she wouldn't have been surprised to learn people in the restaurant heard her. He fucked her, *finally* fucked her as she'd wanted him to do all along. He ruled her, commanded, demanded and dominated her mind, her body, her soul with long, brisk, measured thrust that drove her back to the moon in an instant. But instead of falling this time, she soared. She rode the crest as he rode her, screamed her pleasure as she toppled over, her body convulsing so violently with the force of her orgasm that she clung to the tree, the only support she had to keep her upright. Furious spasms took over her muscles, her breaths rigid and on near verge of hyperventilation. Her heart pounded in rhythm with the

pounding of his cock until he, too, found release and spewed his seed into her.

Sated, exhausted, completely used and wonderfully abused, Diana went lax against the tree. She was grateful for its sturdiness when James folded himself over her back and went lax against her. His breaths came fast and warm in her ear, his heart a steady rhythm on her back.

"Goddess," she on a half laugh. "I think I'm getting too old for this." She used her hands still splayed on the tree to push herself back and found she couldn't straighten much as his weight on her back was more dead than movable yet.

"Naw." His lips moved over her neck, the back of her shoulder, her neck again. "Just out of practice."

She couldn't argue with that. Not only had it been... Well, she really didn't want to think how long she'd gone without sex prior to hooking up with James again, but even when she'd had a companion he'd never worked her over like this. "Then I would say we should continue this workout on a more regular schedule. What do you think, four, five times a week?"

"I was thinking at least six. Being unfit and obese does tend to be a curse on America these days. We wouldn't want to unsuspectingly fall into that category."

The laughter rolled out of her, free and fun. She let her head fall back and to the side and was pleased when he angled his body enough to meet her gaze, to meet her lips. "No. I suppose we wouldn't. And why be greedy, right?"

"Oh, we could go for seven but I figured we would need a small break. Absence makes the heart grow and all that." He kissed her, his lips capturing hers so gently, so tenderly it made her tingle all the way to the soles of her feet. It was such a contrast to the rough, demanding way he'd taken her only moments before that it shook her, filled her with emotion, and awoke her hungers once more.

"I love you, Diana."

He said it so softly, barely above an audible breath, that at first she thought she imagined it. One look into his eyes told her she hadn't. It was there, glistening at her in the amazing depths of his eyes. His whole heart was suddenly there and it made her own heart catch even as it began to beat wildly in her chest.

"James?" She let go of the tree to reach up and around, to cup the side of his face.

"It never went away. It never spotted. I tried to forget you, to forget us, but I couldn't. No matter what I did, Diana, I couldn't make it go away."

Diana's eyes filled. "I know. It never went away for me either. It wasn't supposed to."

"I don't want to go." He turned her in his arms, lowering her skirt as he pulled her against him again, this time front to front. He rested his forehead on hers and gazed into her eyes. "We leave day after tomorrow to start the tour. My first real tour since I joined Façade and I wish it wasn't happening yet. I don't want to leave. Now that I have you again, I don't want to leave you."

"You have to." Her throat felt tight. So much so that it hurt to speak, but she had to. She let the tears spill over, knowing she couldn't stop them any more then she could prevent the words she had to say. "I'll miss you. Goddess knows I will miss you. But you have to go, James. If you don't then the last ten years were for nothing."

Chapter 8

He went still. The only movement Diana could sense, could feel was that of his heart. It started to beat faster as his eyes narrowed, his gaze seeming to search hers. She watched as emotions flashed through his expression, so many and so rapidly she couldn't keep up. It was shock, complete and all consuming that managed to settle over his features above all else.

"I've thought of nothing but my career the last ten years," he said slowly. "It's been my complete focus, my concentration."

"Yes. As it should have been, as mine has been for me, as it was meant to be for both of us."

"We wouldn't be where we are today in our careers if we had stayed together then. That's what you're saying isn't it. We wouldn't have what we do now if we hadn't had the last decade to build it."

"I wonder if we would." She spoke slowly, quietly because she could see the dregs of temper starting to move in beneath the shock. It could blow at any moment and she would be its direct target.

"No." He shook his head and released her as he took a step back. "You don't wonder. You know. Or believe you do at least. You believed it then."

Calm, she told herself. She had to remain calm, collected. This was what she'd wanted, wasn't it? This was what she'd been after almost since the moment she'd come face to face with him at Derek's her first night in town. To talk about the past, to explain, to put it all behind them so they could move on, this time together. "I did." She nodded. "I do."

"You might have clued me in on it." Yes, there was temper. It overtook his shock. It swirled in his eyes, rang in his tone, and tightened the muscles in his jaw. "You could have told me."

"What would you have said, James? What would you have done? Would you have believed me? Or would you have argued, fought?"

"I don't know," he snapped and turned his back on her. He took a few steps, pushed a frustrated hand through his hair, and turned back. "I don't know what I would have done. Maybe I would have understood. Maybe I wouldn't have. I doubt I would have agreed. But I do know I wouldn't have walked away bleeding, Diana. I wouldn't have spent the last ten years bleeding because of the way you tossed me aside!"

Oh dear Goddess, Diana thought as her eyes filled, as she felt the memory of her own bleeding in her chest. "You wanted to stay." Her voice cracked and she swallowed, blinked, and then waited until she was certain she could speak calmly again before she continued. She needed to make him understand. *How* could she make him understand? "You wanted to stay with me. You were willing to give up everything just to be with me, James. I couldn't stand knowing that. I couldn't let you do that."

"I loved you." He said it so simply, so quietly the words felt like knives to her heart, the pained expression on his face now a dagger slicing into her soul.

"I know you did. I knew it then. And I loved you." She stepped to him, reaching out and let her arm fall to her side when he angled his body away to avoid her touch. "I loved you enough not to want to see you give up everything, give up a chance to have everything."

"And you were so sure that's what I would do. That's pretty conceited of you, don't you think?" he snarled, cocked a brow, and made her feel about as stupid as a mule.

It sparked her own temper, that look, his accusation and she let the bite of it tinge her voice. "Not in the least. You were already doing it. You were skipping out on practices, meetings. You had a

performance that night and you knew a scout was supposed to be in the crowd."

"Which got me nowhere," he murmured.

"Maybe not, but what you did after got you somewhere. Dammit, James, I couldn't stand to see you throwing away possibilities, tossing away the future you wanted to be with me!"

"So that's your excuse. You did it for me."

"I did it for us. I wish..." She broke off and caught the sides of her head in her hands. "Neither of us was ready for the level of relationship we found that summer. We needed time to grow, to explore, to experience. What would have happened to us if we had stayed together? If we had let our love take over everything as it was?"

"I guess we will never know because you didn't give us a chance to find out, did you? And what if we never saw each other again?" he demanded. "What then, Diana? You say you loved me but you gave me up easily enough."

"Not so easy. It was never easy. Letting you go, pushing you away," she corrected with a sigh when he shot her a narrow eyed gaze, "was probably the hardest thing I've ever had to do."

"Yet you did it. You made me think what we had wasn't what you wanted. You told me it wasn't what you wanted."

"I didn't know any other way to make you go," Diana admitted softly.

"It was all a lie. Deep down, I knew that. I felt it. Still, it worked. I left and you let me. Because you believed it wasn't the end. You knew it wasn't the end," he realized. "Not really. What you are, what you can see, told you we would meet again, didn't it?"

"It was shown to me in part, yes. I could envision how it would be, how it was, what might be. The rest I had to leave to fate. I believed more than anything that I was doing what was best for the both of us, James, and I knew if I told you that you would argue, you would stay. You wouldn't be where you are now if you had stayed.

Your place with Facade, you wouldn't have that. You have it now, all the fame, the fortune, the great band you spoke of so much that summer. You have it now. If you had stayed, if you had given up your chance for all that you wanted, you would have resented me in the end. We might have resented each other."

"Well, I suppose you achieved your goal." He pushed past her and turned to face her again. "I don't resent you, Diana. I got what I wanted. You're right about that. And now that I've got it, I don't need you." He turned and strode down the path in the direction they came in brisk, angry steps.

She didn't go after him, couldn't. It would do her no good in any case. He was too hurt, too angry to listen to reason now. And he was wrong, she told herself as she crossed her arms, cupping her elbows in her hands. Suddenly cold though the night was still and warm, she hugged herself and tried to believe he was wrong. He *did* need her. Dammit, he did! He just needed time. That was all. Once again time stepped in to rule her path. She refused to believe that time had run out tonight.

Still, even as she bent to pick up her shoes from where he'd dropped them near the tree, she thought perhaps she'd turned into the pumpkin after all.

* * * *

Her beauty struck him stupid. James actually felt his IQ drop into the single digits—a phenomenon he'd only experienced one other time with one other woman ten years ago. Sleek, shapely legs that seemed to go on for miles met with trim hips, a narrow waist, flat abs and breasts designed to make the mouth water. His did water as he slid an arm around that slender waist, careful not to snag the sheik mane of straight blood hair that reached to her delectable tight rear end. Her lips were an unpainted pale shade of pink and all the more

alluring for their lack of cosmetic gloss. Her eyes were a dazzling tint of hazel and full of temptation, confidence, and knowing.

She leaned into him, her mile-long legs making her height equal his even in flat soled tennis shoes. He caught a whiff of *Chanel No. 5* mixed with a natural female scent that nearly made him whimper. "What do you say we hook up after the show, handsome?"

The sultry spoken invitation had his cock doing a throbbing leap of excitement inside his jeans. Before James could answer she closed the distance between his mouth and hers. Her tongue snaked between his lips, seizing his in a quick and vibrant dance. Arousal surged through him but even as he registered her breasts pressed against his body, the stiffness of his cock as her thigh moved to grind and tease, he felt an empty weight in his chest. She had captured his attraction—hell, he was human and a man after all—but despite her sleek, sultry body and incredible taste, she wasn't Diana.

He was careful when he pulled free of her embrace. Insulting her, being rude, making a scene in front of the dozen or so other fans gathered around would do neither of them any good. Besides, he figured he might have been eager to take her up on her offer for some after show fun—geezus, his body was certainly eager enough now—if it weren't for Diana. The fact that he was going to pass on the sweet temptation currently in his arms for the maddening witch he'd walked away from less than a week ago rankled enough to have him consciously covering a snarl with a smile.

James glanced up, caught Reese's observant gaze and knew the drummer had watched that kissing exchange. Still, it wasn't condescending or even condemnation he read in the other man's gaze, but a keen understanding mixed with a bit of amusement. The corners of Reese's lips even twitched a bit before he returned his attention to the fan in front of him and held out a hand for a shake.

"I could wait for you." The blond trailed a finger down the front of his shirt and stopped just short of reaching the waistband of his jeans.

He let his gaze roam her face, smooth and flawlessly tanned skin, eyes that were both mature and experienced. The heat radiating from her body offered as much promise as her words. Yes, if not for Diana, he would likely take this woman up on everything she offered and more. Instead, he would turn her down gently and more than likely spend the after show party time alone.

"Tempting." He let his hand around her waist drop an inch or so, just enough to give her the illusion that he might cup her shapely ass without actually doing it. "And I thank you for both that amazing kiss and the offer, but we will be pulling out as soon as the show is over tonight. Not much time to make the trip between here and tomorrow night's show."

Exactly where would they be tomorrow night? he wondered even as the half-lie tumbled from his lips. A half-lie because the road crew told them there wouldn't be a lot of time between the end of show and when they needed to board the bus to head out for the next city. They would be crashing on the bus tonight rather than a motel to keep with the rigorous schedule they had booked for this first tour back on the road after the band's extensive two year break.

"That's too bad," she purred and let her fingers skate along the waistband of his jeans as she leaned in once more then brushed her lips over his in a chaste kiss. "We could have had so much fun together."

Yes, they definitely could have, James thought as he let her go. Still, he felt only the slightest inkling of regret as she stepped aside, allowed another of the waiting fans to move in for an autograph and a picture. A half an hour later, he followed Derek, Garrett and Reese inside the backstage door to the venue where they would perform later tonight.

"Did something happen with you and Diana?"

Because he'd settled into thoughts of the upcoming show, his cues, his riffs, the question startled James. He blinked, his eyes having a bit of trouble adjusting to the difference in light from outside to in. He

was startled again when his vision cleared and he discovered Derek had hung back to talk rather than Reese as he'd expected.

"There is no me and Diana." Derek's expression changed from questioning to mildly amused and James sighed. "Yeah, you know that's a lie as much as I do. Shit, I don't know what the fuck happened with us." And it felt weird talking about it with Derek. Not that he didn't see the vocalist as a friend. He'd clicked with Derek and even Garrett and Reese almost on the spot when he auditioned for the open bass player slot. He figured that click was a large part as to why he'd been chosen over the countless others who'd tried for the slot.

Still, click or not, talking about personal shit like this just didn't come naturally to him. Especially not with another guy. Guys, as a rule, didn't discuss matters of the heart. Unless you were a guy in *Façade*, he thought, remembering how he and Reese had discussed Diana not so long ago. He recalled, too, conversations between Derek and Garrett and Garrett and Reese, the three of them about their women, the advice they had given him as the new and fourth addition to the band.

"We aren't pulling out the moment the show is over tonight." When James shot Derek a blank look, Derek shrugged. "I heard you talking to the blond after she completed her examination of your tonsils out there. It sounded to me like she wasn't quite through with the physical assessment she had in mind."

James didn't comment. He didn't have the foggiest clue what to say to that.

Derek laughed. "There was a time, not so long ago in fact, that I would've had a woman like that at my side right now. Especially after an offer like that. If you're looking to play, you won't find any of us shooting you down for it."

Reese would, James nearly said but bit back the words. Still, he figured he must be an open book right about now because Derek laughed again and shot a quick glance down the hall at Reese and Garrett's retreating backs.

"Not even Reese. He's close to Diana. They're good friends. We all are. But the fact is he was dammed near as big a playboy as I was before Melody, before Alicia. It's not like we don't understand the need, the desire. Now that Garrett and Reese are married and I'm," Derek glanced down, raked his thumb over his bare ring finger of his left hand, "well, I will be soon."

"That's still got your stomach doing crazy dances, doesn't it?" James chuckled.

"Buddy, you have no idea," Derek mumbled. "It feels good though," he admitted after a moment. "And because it does, because I know the other two feel the same about their women, you have the pick of the lot at any show. Live it up if you choose. Like I said, no one is going to think less of you."

"Do you ever miss it? Being the lead playboy, as it were?"

They took several steps down the hall outside the dressing rooms before Derek answered. "Sometimes," he finally said then barked a chuckle. "Shit, when I'm out there with beautiful blonds or brunettes or hell, even redheads making me offers like that blond did you, dammed right I miss it. I'm a hot blooded male, aren't I?"

"Then why give it up? Why settle down?"

"I never thought I would, at least not for a very long time. But then I met Alicia and..." He trailed off, shrugged, and smiled. "She's everything. That's the key. I may miss the freedom of having a different woman every night if I chose, but in the end I know none of them would satisfy me. They wouldn't make me as eternally happy as Alicia."

* * * *

He opened the hotel room door wearing a puzzled expression, a bass guitar strapped over bare shoulders and chest, and a towel wrapped around his waist. Diana's heart did a quick pity-pat, her stomach fluttering in time as arousal awoke hot, juicy and instant

between her legs. By the Gods, did the man have to be such temptation when she really needed a fully functional brain to talk to him?

Surprise flickered behind the puzzlement as James met her gaze. He let his own slide down her body in such a way that only managed to supercharge that heat in her middle. One brow rose slightly as he took in the Facade T-shirt she wore tucked into a pair of tight-fitting black jeans and black combat boots. But rather than say hello or comment on her attire, he simply turned, leaving the door open and walked back into the bedroom of the suite.

Okay, Diana thought as she stepped inside, closed the door, and locked it. It was pretty much the reception she'd expected. When she turned, she noted he'd watched her lock the door, both the knob and the night lock for good measure. His lips twitched just slightly as he turned again and moved to the far side of the room.

"Afraid I'm going to walk out?" he asked when she followed him, stopping just inside the doorway.

"It's become an obvious trademark of yours." She put one hand high on the doorframe and rested the other on her hip. She had to make a conscious effort not to let either hand shake. She was nervous. Much more than she'd expected to be, more than she should be. "I decided I wouldn't take my chances this time. I didn't know the four of you had decided on a new stage wardrobe. Sexy." She let her gaze travel down the length of him as he'd done to her only moments before. "Very sexy."

"I just got out of the shower." He frowned at her, slipped the guitar strap over his head, and gingerly placed the instrument on a nearby stand. "I've been working on a new song, something for the next CD. A riff came to me while I was bathing and I wanted to try it out with the rest before it slipped my mind. I didn't expect you to show."

It hurt, a small prick to her ego and her heart that he hadn't thought she'd be here. "Alicia, Melody and Suzanne all came too. You thought I would stay behind?"

"I thought you would after the way we left things," he said with a nod. "Added to that, you have the store, all the work there still to be done."

"The work is done." She let her hand fall from the doorframe and took a step farther inside to lean her back against the corner instead. "The store is ready to open as soon as the four of us get back."

"It's amazing the things we can accomplish in our time apart, isn't it?"

Her heart tripped, kicked, and nearly stopped before settling back into an even tempo. He was right of course. Wasn't that the core of it all along? But not anymore. She'd let time rule them long enough. Now she would do what she had to in order to beat that time and have what was hers. "I bet," she said slowly as she pushed away from the wall and took three careful steps toward him, "we can accomplish a whole lot more together if we give it a chance. If you're willing to give it a chance."

"Is that what you see now?"

"Not what I see but what I hope, what I believe, and what I..." Her words faltered as did her step at the expression that passed over his face. Unreadable, not cold but certainly not warm. "It's what I want, James."

* * * *

It was what he wanted too. He wanted anything and everything that had to do with Diana. He'd loved her for years. Even in their time apart, he hadn't been able to stop loving her. She was his soul mate. He'd never believed in the term. He'd always thought there was more than one person out there for everyone. Everyone got a second chance for happiness, even a third or fourth if needed. Then he met Diana and

realized he'd been wrong. All other women paled in comparison to her. There was no other woman like her, no other woman for him except her.

"I didn't give you a chance to explain that night behind the restaurant in the woods. I'm not sure I wanted you to." It had scared him. He could admit that now but only to himself. Her vision had terrified him. How clearly she'd seen him, seen them even back then frightened him to the bone. Ten years ago, he'd barely been able to see the next day yet she'd obviously seen so far into their futures that she could've drawn a map of their destinations.

"And now? Will you let me explain now?"

"I think I have to. I think I need you to." James watched surprise and relief flicker over her expression. She'd dropped her hands to her sides and rubbed her palms on her jeans. He wondered if they were sweaty and tried to remember a time when he knew of anything making this woman's hands sweat. He doubted there had been many. The calm, cool demeanor he'd felt from her when she came into the room seemed to be gone now, replaced by... Well, if he didn't know better he would swear she was nervous, uncertain. More firsts for her, he bet. He moved to the bed and perched on the edge but when he patted the mattress beside him, she shook her head. "Sit with me, Diana."

"No. Not yet. I need to stand, to walk." Pace was more like it, she proved as she began to do exactly that. She took a deep breath, to calm her nerves perhaps, and began. "My parents. I never told you much about them. You met my mother."

When she shot him a glance, he nodded. Yes, he'd met her mother, once in that short summer and only once. Still, it had been enough for him to see where Diana got her beauty, her power. It had also been enough for him to sense the emptiness, the longing in the older Mrs. Thompson.

"My father died—" She broke off abruptly and took another deep steadying breath even as her eyes glistened with a hint of tears. "My father died two years before you and I met."

"I'm sorry." He meant it. He could all but feel the pain of her loss still so fresh even after, what, twelve years now? It hurt, more than he could've thought and yet exactly as he expected it would, expected it *should*, to know she hurt.

"Me, too." Her voice cracked on the whispered words. Ruthlessly, she blinked back the tears and turned on him fully this time. "He would've liked you. You're nothing alike. I marvel over that sometimes. They say daughters often fall for men who resemble their fathers and sons their mothers, but you and my father..." She smiled though it held little of the electricity her smiles usually possessed. "You are as different as the moon and the sun."

"Maybe not so different as we both love you." It was all he could do to remain sitting on the bed as her eyes filled with more tears, as a single tear toppled over to slide down her cheek. He wanted to hold her so badly his arms ached with the need but, even as he longed to do so, he knew she still needed this bit of distance she'd put between them. At least for now.

"I'm not sure how much weight that holds anyway," he went on as she made a soft sound that might have been surprise, might have been something more at his declaration of love. "Fact is you and my mom don't resemble one another much either." And that was putting it mildly, he thought. June Cleaver had nothing on his mother and Diana was as far from the *Leave it to Beaver* type as a woman could get.

"He did love her. My mother," Diana qualified and began pacing again. "He loved her without bounds or restraints, without thought or reason. He had a scholarship to Harvard Law School and the promise of an internship in a lucrative law firm after his first two years. But going to Harvard, taking the job opportunity would have taken him away from Mom."

"She could've gone with him."

"No, she couldn't. My grandparents needed her. My grandfather was sick and my grandmother couldn't handle him alone. So Mother stayed and, in the end, so did my father. He loved her so much that he gave up everything to be with her, all his dreams, his goals and plans. Everything." She whispered the last as her face clouded with memory.

"I know the feeling," James muttered before he could stop himself but she continued as if she hadn't heard him. Maybe she didn't. She seemed lost in the past now. Talking to him but seeing it all inside her head.

"He said he never regretted it. I actually asked him that once and he swore he had all he ever wanted in my mother and then in me. But there was this dimness to his light." She shook her head. "I always believed deep inside a small part of him regretted staying, that he resented her for making him want to stay. Mother felt it, too. I never knew that, not for certain anyway, until he was gone. After he died we talked about it and she agreed with me. She even said she'd tried to talk with him about it many times, but he would never admit he'd taken the wrong path at any point in his life."

"Maybe he never felt as though he had," James suggested even as an understanding so alien in the last decade started to settle inside him to break down walls he'd thought could never be demolished again.

"Maybe not." She shrugged. "Mom admitted to me that she had felt his resentment though, just a small darkness shadowing all of the light. That was just before I met you." She turned to him again, wrapped her arms around her as though she were cold, and met his gaze. "She told me mere days before you walked into the store that summer."

"And you saw us repeating your parent's mistakes, repeating their lives." Would they have? he wondered as he let his mind travel back. Perhaps. He'd been well on his way to doing exactly as her father had done. He could admit that now. He could see that now. "Come here." He patted the mattress at his side once more and when she still didn't come to sit by him, he held out his arms. "Diana, come here."

She hesitated only a heartbeat longer before she finally gave in. She moved to him, stopping to stand between his legs, her arms finding their way to his shoulders. "I never wanted any resentment between us, James," she told him softly as she gazed down into his eyes. Her tumble of red hair fell around her face and brushed his cheeks. "I never meant to hurt you, never wanted to lose you but I saw no other way."

"If you had told me your fears, talked with me rather than push me away, we might have found a different answer together." When her expression turned skeptical, he added, "I like to think we would have anyway." He caught her hands in his and pulled her down to sit in his lap. "Promise me this at least. Promise me that you will talk to me in the future. Whatever you feel, whatever you fear, whatever is shown to you in vision or dreams, we talk about it. Okay?"

She gave him her answer in a kiss. With tears still glistening in her eyes and glittering on her cheeks, she leaned into him and brushed her lips over his in a kiss so light it was like a gentle summer breeze. It warmed him in a tingling flow from lips to heart to cock. Rather than devour or take control as he'd done each time they had kissed since being reunited, he let her make the moves. Though he wanted to touch, to explore, though he ached to feel, he kept his hands still, one locked around her waist and the other beside his thigh on the bed.

When she swiped her satiny tongue over his lips and requested invitation, he opened for her and actually heard himself make a low growl of pleasure as her tongue swept inside. She tasted of mint toothpaste and a pure, electric desire he only ever associated with one woman. His Diana. And she *was* his, always had been. Despite the mistakes, the fears, the decisions and the years, she was his and he hers. He'd lost her once, or believed he had at least. He was bound and determined he would never lose her again.

"Diana," he whispered against her lips. His hands fisted, one on the sheets, the other in her shirt. By the Gods, how much longer could he hold off touching her? Her lips skirted over his face, her teeth

nipping lightly at his jaw before she licked her way to his ear, caught his lobe between her lips, and tugged playfully.

"How long do we have?" Her words were a seductive purr in his ear and for a moment they didn't make sense. How long? Forever, he started to say before realization dawned. The show.

He growled, both in frustration and heated pleasure at the delicious things she was doing to his ear, and pulled back enough to cast a glance behind him at the clock on the bedside table. "About twenty-five minutes. I have to meet up with the guys in forty minutes."

"Not much then," she sounded only marginally disappointed as she folded herself in his lap. Her tongue glided down the side of his neck to his collarbone, over his shoulder, down his chest.

His arm around her waist tightened in effort to prevent her from sliding off his lap as she devoured him as though he were a melting ice cream cone. It seemed an apt analogy, he mused as his other hand fisted at the sheet so tightly he felt his nails digging into his palm. He was melting with each glide of her tongue, each gentle nip of her teeth, each suck from those voluptuous lips.

"I want you, James." Her breath was like liquid fire to the flesh of his chest, charring the sensitized nerves beneath until they sent a racing flame straight to his groin. "Put your hands on me."

He couldn't deny her, couldn't resist. His need to touch her was already too great to even begin to think of not doing as she asked. Still, it was she who put his hands on her. With smooth calculation, she reached for his hand and guided it between her jean clad thighs to cup her heated mound. The sounds they both made were echoing groans of surrender and pleasure.

"You should know," she rose to whisper in his ear, "that I'm not wearing any underwear." When he slowly closed his eyes on a sighed curse for divine intervention, she laughed. "You said I should tell you the next time."

James laughed, too, but his sounded more pained than amused even to his own ears. "You do stuff like this to kill me, don't you?" Even as he asked the question his fingers began to move of their own accord. He massaged her pussy through her jeans, marveling at the sheer heat that warmed his palm bit by increasing bit as she began to grind against his hand.

"No, just kick your ass." Already her voice was going breathless. She gripped his bare shoulder, nails cutting into flesh as she moved her hips in a slow grinding circle that both seemed to pleasure her and drive him mad.

"We should wait until after the show." He nuzzled his face in her neck, nipped and sucked at her tender flesh, his hand massaging faster, her hips gyrating faster. "I want to take my time with you, Diana. I want to make love to you."

"Then make love to me later." She caught his earlobe between her teeth once more and tugged at it in a playful tease that drew another groan from low in his throat. "Fuck me now. I want your hands on me." She blew a stream of warm air in his ear. "I want your mouth on me." She traced the outer rim of his ear with the tip of her tongue. "I want your hard cock inside me."

Geezus! How was he ever expected to hold on to even an ounce of control when stuff like that spilled from those incredible lips? "We'll have to hurry." He caught her waist and lifted her to stand with him as he got to his feet. "I can't be late."

She stilled in front of him, her eyes going soft, her lips slightly parted in a way that could have been surprise, could have been wonder, but was definitely breathtaking. Then those lips curled in a smile that caused his already hard cock to pulse with an anticipatory pain and mixed delight and lifted a hand to cup the side of his face.

"We're going to be okay this time." Her words were barely a whisper but her eyes gleamed with more happiness than he thought he'd ever seen in their amazing swirling depths.

And James understood. He hadn't put her before the band. More, he hadn't pushed his dream aside for her and, despite his secure place with the band, each show he performed, each song he played was still a part of living his dream. She knew it, too, and flew on that knowledge even as she quickly shucked her pants down around her knees, grabbed the towel that covered him, and jerked it away with a quick flick of her wrist. When she returned her attention to her own clothes and started to reach for the laces of her boots, he stopped her. There wasn't time to get her fully undressed, wasn't time to prepare her for his cock, but he suspected she wouldn't need any preparations and the need in his heart, in his cock to be inside her couldn't wait a second longer. He caught her hips, turned her, and then carefully guided her to lie on her stomach across the bed. With steady hands that seemed to sigh in relief as they touched her heated flesh, he spread her thighs as much as the binding of the jeans now around her ankles would allow and climbed on top of her from behind.

Even in his position, his aching cock needed no guidance. He pushed himself inside her and lunged into paradise. "Yes!" He couldn't say for certain if the word came from his own lips or hers. Either way, his body echoed the elation. How had he thought he could walk away from this again? The question brought a different realization to mind. She hadn't promised as he'd asked. Oh, she as good as promised with her words, her touch, her gazes, but she hadn't said *the* word. Maybe it was stupid of him to harp on that now, especially when the warmth of her channel was closed around his shaft, her inner muscles milking him with each inward thrust, each outward pull, but he wanted to hear the word. He needed to hear it.

James thrust, one long and vicious move that had him seeing magical stars and hearing the delicious musical sound of her cries of pleasure. "Promise me." He ground the words through clenched teeth as his cock retreated and then thrust again. "Promise me we will talk about things. Promise to never keep your fears or visions a secret from me again. Promise me—" *that you will be my wife*. He finished

the sentence in his head though the words were on the tip of his tongue. It wasn't fear that kept him silent. No. Having Diana for his wife would be the last of his dreams to come true. Well, that and the children they would have together. But this wasn't the way to ask. Despite the fact that they were sharing in the most magical of acts a couple could share, now was not the right time.

"I promise." She all but screamed the words as he pounded into her, driving them both closer and closer to the edge with each hard, unrelenting plunge. "James!"

He heard the need in her voice and understood it. His own body echoed it as he kept up the vicious pace unsure if he could slow it now even if he wanted to. She'd told him to fuck her. But the Gods, that's exactly what he was doing. He lifted her hips off the bed, folded himself over her enough that he could reach around her and find her clit. He flicked a thumb over it and smiled wickedly at the sound she made. He did it again, knowing his nail would cause just a modicum of abrasive pain to her sensitive nub. Pain he then soothed away with brisk, pressured circular massages to her clit and pussy lips.

He felt it when she came. The force of her orgasm was so ferocious he wondered it didn't push his cock out of her fiery channel. Her body trembled in his hands, her pussy convulsing around his shaft as hot juices washed from inside her to coat his cock. His own release followed almost immediately and his body jerked, tightened and shook as he spilled his seed inside her. A quick flash of alarm skittered through his mind. Protection. They hadn't used protection. But, now that he thought about it, they hadn't used protection any of the times they had made love. It was unlike him. He'd never had sex with a woman without a condom. Yet, he hadn't even thought to use one once with Diana. He waited for the fear to accompany the realization and was only half surprised when he felt nary a trace.

Still joined, now sated and pleased to be so, he rolled them until they lay on their sides, her back to his front and breathed in the scent of her, sweet and herbal and more intoxicating than any drug. She

gave a soft, contented sigh and he knew he would happily stay high on his Diana drug forever.

"I suppose we should get cleaned up," she said after a long moment of satisfied silence.

James lifted his head and looked at the clock. "You're right. I've got to get going." He leaned in and brushed a chaste kiss over her cheek before untangling herself from her luscious body. He needed to do something before meeting up with the guys. That something would no doubt cause him to be late, but he was certain the guys would understand.

As he pulled on the leather pants he would wear for the night's show, he ignored the nagging voice in his head, the one that told him he'd lied to Diana. He was putting her first before his dreams, his career, but just this one last time. Surely for this time it couldn't hurt.

* * * *

Diana figured she looked like a drowned river rat soaked to the bone as she was. She guessed she probably didn't smell much better after being sandwiched, pushed, squished, and jostled between other equally sweaty and smelly bodies for the better part of two hours. Still, she could think of no place she would rather be or no greater magic she would rather experience than watching her man play on stage. Lose himself was more like it, she amended as the tempo of the song picked up to mind jarring. James and Garrett jumped in time with the music, all the while playing their guitars on either end of the stage. A blur of white sailed over her head, landing at James's feet and he kicked at it, shot Derek a smile and shook his head as the sacrificial bra scooted to the edge of the stage out of tripping danger.

As the song drew to an end, their eyes met. It amazed Diana that he could see her in the crowd blinded by the stage lights as he must have been. She was bathed in darkness and smoke resulting from the pyros that fired at intricately set cues throughout the concert. Still, she

knew without a doubt he saw her and marveled at the twinge of pink that almost certainly rose to brighten his cheeks. She laughed, pleased by his slight embarrassment by the overzealous fan with the bra—or rather without a bra somewhere in the crowd now that she'd donated said bra to the band, to him.

In that moment, any and all doubts erased from her mind, her body, and her heart. As the stage lights slowly dimmed, the crowd around her erupting in cheers that resounded through the auditorium, she knew everything she'd been through, everything he'd been through, all they had been through together or apart had been worth it, if for no other moment than this one.

Lights over the crowd flittered to life and a new mantra started. *Facade, Facade, Facade*. Cheers and screams urged by the band's name requesting an encore. Surely the show wasn't over yet. It wasn't of course. The time lag was merely a diversion for the fans, a breather for the band as excitement grew and the pleas for more became deafening in the confined space. Still, even the deaf could've heard the wails and applause as Derek reappeared on stage several minutes later, a towel draped around his shoulders, water bottle in one hand and his microphone in the other.

"Do you want more?" The grin on his face turned wide and seductive as the crowd answered with a collective yes.

Diana actually felt Alicia swoon beside her. *Once a fan, always a fan*, she thought with a chuckle. Front stage and center, it was Alicia's favorite way to witness a Facade concert as she'd done for years before she became more to Derek than just another fan. Diana easily saw why. Though they could have watched the show from the sidelines on the stage, they wouldn't have gotten the full effect, wouldn't have absorbed the full energy of the crowd, of the band. Energy that was no doubt giving Derek one hell of a hard-on right about now, she mused, thinking of Derek's confirmation in countless interviews.

Did the adrenaline rush and fans' energies have the same effect on James? Even as her own adrenaline swirled in her veins, stirring to life a heated arousal between her thighs, she made a mental note to ask him after the show. She chuckled again, this time at herself, when her gaze dropped straight to his crotch as he joined Derek on stage.

Puzzlement flittered through her when James stepped beside Derek holding a microphone of his own. Was she about to be treated to something unsuspecting? Did James know how to sing? She thought back quickly through every second they'd spent together, her memory settling on one time in the first weeks of their relationship when he'd sang to her. A low, soft melody that had come completely unexpected both because of the beautifully melodic way he delivered it and because it bordered more on the soft rock variety than the heavy metal he'd always preferred.

"We have a few more songs for you tonight," Derek continued over the roar of the crowd and drew Diana's attention away from the past to the here and now. "But first, I'd like to welcome our new bassist to the stage."

More cheers, this time accompanied with a collective, "We love you, James," from several groups of females and even a few, "I want your body," comments that made Diana smile. His body, she thought with great satisfaction as she let her gaze roam over him on the stage, belonged to her.

The crowd grew quiet when he brought the microphone to his lips but Diana's attention was drawn to a big, burly security guard leaning over the guard rail to shout over the remaining noise.

"He wants you on stage." As he spoke, he thrust a large arm toward the stage at his back toward James who'd stepped to the edge.

Diana shot a look at Alicia who leaned over. "I'm going with you. Crawl over the rail. The guard will help us."

There wasn't any crawling over or even climbing to it, but rather a surrender of self, Diana realized as she allowed herself to be lifted right off her feet by this Hercules of a man. He swung her over the

guard rail and placed her gently on her bottom on the edge of the stage. James's outstretched hand was there to help her up when she glanced up and met his gaze. He shook his head, the smallest of movements, at the puzzled look she knew was on her face as he pulled her to her feet.

Decidedly male whistles and whoops resounded from the crowd and James grinned. "Already called it," he said into the mic. Then he lowered the mic and spoke directly to Diana. "Bear with me for a few minutes."

It was more question than statement and she nodded easily. "Of course, James, but—"

"I've thought of a dozen ways to do this," he said to her, said into the mic as he stepped them a couple of paces from the edge of the stage and stopped them so they faced each other. "A fancy dinner with roses and candlelight, a walk in the woods on a full moon night, a ride on the back of my bike to a secluded spot in the middle of nowhere, but this is the place for us. It's because of you that I have this." He turned slightly to address the crowd. "It's because of you, all Facade fans, that this was here for me to have."

The crowd roared and he waited for the noise to settle once more before he continued. He turned back to Diana. "They are the stars." He pointed to the crowd but his gaze was now transfixed on hers. "You gave me the stars and I want to share them with you. Always and forever with you." He slowly lowered to one knee in front of her, his gaze never wavering and the roar of the crowd reached its loudest volume yet.

It didn't matter. Diana couldn't have heard anything over the pounding of her own heart. A heart that nearly stopped when he held up a black jeweler's box and flipped open the hinged top. The silver ring with the pale blue stone inside caught the spotlight, sending dazzling streams of light to dance through the tears blurring Diana's vision. Her gaze flew back to his and she felt herself fall again, always and forever.

"Marry me, Diana."

Throat tight, chest aching with so much joy and love she could scarcely breath let alone speak, she nodded her answer and felt the magic of their impending joining travel through her as he slid the ring on her finger. Swirling bubbles of silver and gold appeared in the air around them, drawing gasps and cheers from the crowd.

James arched a brow, maybe in question, maybe in surprise as he straightened, and pulled her into his arms. "Your doing, I suppose?" he whispered as the bubbles began to dance around them. Diana simply gave him an elegant shrug, a seductive little wink and kissed him breathless.

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bestselling author Tonya Ramagos spends much of her time daydreaming about one plot or another. Give her a cup of French vanilla flavored coffee and a keyboard and she is at her happiest. When she isn't writing, thinking about writing, or plotting what to write, she can be found taking on the mother role with her two boys and the husband, too. She enjoys taking long walks on the nature trails near her home in Chattanooga, TN, playing computer games, swinging on the playground, dancing, and curling up with a good book.



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