



WINDS THROUGH TIME

By

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Chapter One

Wynter McGregor grimaced with every step she took. Leave it to her to get the shopping cart from hell. Squeaking like a cat with its tail in a wine press, the hateful thing not only screamed its obnoxious presence to everyone in the grocery store, one wheel wobbled worse than her Uncle Nate after one too many shots of Christmas bourbon. Just pushing it down the aisles was a chore.

"Salsa, chips, cherry Pepsi, jar of blue-cheese stuffed olives and a stick of pepperoni," she repeated to drown out the sound.

Salsa, chips, cherry Pepsi, jar of olives and a stick of pepperoni: the five basic food groups for a woman who lived alone with her cat and who spent her days hunched over a computer keyboard. Nutritional? No way, José, but comforting nevertheless. Who needed nutrition when you had the food of the gods at your fingertips?

Mind on what she wanted, what she needed to exist, what she craved, grinding her teeth to the sound the cart was making, she turned her head for just a fraction of a second but that was all it took.

"Ah, nice running into you, too."

Wynni snapped her head around as the cart hit a solid roadblock she swore had not been there that fraction of a second earlier. There had been *nobody* in the aisle yet there he stood—looking like something that should be part of a sixth food group for women who live alone with their cats.

Tall—at least six feet, three inches—he had thick dark brown wavy hair that curled at the nape of his neck. Broad shoulders, chest solid with muscle, hard little nipples poking through the front of his t-shirt, nicely sculpted biceps, a lean waist and legs that went all the way to a world class ass clad in tight black jeans. Dark brows peaked gorgeously over the most beautiful eyes she'd ever seen on a man. With long, thick eyelashes and a dusky smudge along the lower lids, those eyes were hypnotic. It was hard to tear her gaze from them but she did and found herself looking at chiseled lips holding a smile that made her womb clench. A few days growth of beard shadowed his jaw. He had spoken in an Australian accent that sent shivers through her. Along with a cocky grin, merry eyes and the accent, the man was unadulterated sex in a pair of sneakers that had seen better days.

"Oh, my god, I am so sorry!" she said, jerking the cart away from his jean-clad leg. "I didn't see you."

"No harm done," he said and his smile was 1000 watts of pure heat.

Cheeks tingling, Wynter took another step back. "I do apologize. I'm not usually so careless."

He cocked a shoulder. As he did the black t-shirt he was wearing pulled taut across that wide chest and the muscles in his arm bunched. "I think I'll live although" He looked down at his leg. "I will need your name and phone number just in case."

Wynni blinked. "Excuse me?" she asked, brows drawing together.

"In case I'm hurt worse than I look," he said, eyes twinkling. "There could be internal injuries."

She found herself staring into those gleaming orbs, surprised at the unusual color. They were golden—amber, actually—with just a hint of brown flecks swirling in the depths. Riveting eyes. Sensuous eyes. Eyes that drew you in, pulled you down into a maelstrom of passion and kept you there. She shook her head to free herself of the mesmerizing quality of the gaze.

"I don't give my name and number to strangers," she said, feeling like an idiot under his steady regard, putting a hand to her throat where her pulse was racing. "I mean"

He put out his hand. "Kaegan," he said. "Kaegan Cree."

She slipped her hand into his and felt the strength of long, tapered fingers closing over hers and a hint of callus along the broad palm. "Wynter McGregor."

"Wynter," he repeated and that fiery smile returned. His eyes roamed over her face. "Suits you."

Once more her eyebrows clashed and she jerked her hand from his grip. "Why, because I've got snow on the roof?" she snapped, sniffing with pique.

Self-conscious of the steadily creeping gray that was leaching her once brown hair of its coloring she wrapped her hands around the shopping cart's handle and prepared to go around him.

"No," he said, twin furrows appearing over his aquiline nose. "I just thought the name fit. If I offended you, I'm sorry. That wasn't my intention."

"As you said, no harm done," she said and angled the cart only to have him step in front of it to block her path.

"Let me make it up to you," he said. "Let me buy you a mansion in Beverly Hills."

Wynter had opened her mouth to tell him there was no need for him to make anything up to her but his words stopped her. She gaped at him.

"A Lear jet?" he asked and when she didn't respond he flung out a hand. "No jet? Okay, what about a yacht? A Porsche? A villa on the French Riviera? A chalet in Switzerland?"

Her lips twitched. "You are something else, young man," she told him.

"I'm filthy rich," he said. "I can afford it. Name your price."

Once more her eyes flicked down to his worn sneakers and then back to his face. One brow badly in need of tweezing arched upward over a green eye.

"I'm incognito," he defended his attire.

"Of course you are," she said.

"All right if you don't want a jet or a yacht or a villa, how 'bout a Pepsi over in the deli?" he questioned. "I'll spring for a large cup and a wedge of lemon."

She laughed. "Are you for real, Mr. Cree?"

"Kaegan," he corrected then dug a hand into the pocket of his jeans. She heard the tinkle of coins. He pulled his hand out, used the index finger of his free hand to push the coins around on his palm. He looked up. "Yeah. I can manage a large Pepsi but we'll have to share." His amber eyes danced. "We'll need two straws."

Wynter snorted. "Only the filthy rich would need two straws."

"But that way we can bump noses if we have two straws," he stated. He lowered his voice. "I might even steal a kiss. Who knows?"

That took her aback. He was at least half her age and there he stood flirting with her as though they were college students on the quad.

"Okay, where is it?" she said, looking around. She looked past him then craned her head back to look up at the top of the shelving, the ceiling above her.

"Where's what?"

"The hidden camera," she said with a sigh. "I'm being punked, right?"

"No, I'd just like to spend some time with you."

His tone was earnest and his eyes were looking directly into hers. There wasn't a flicker of humor in his gaze or a hint of condescension along the full lips. If she didn't know any better, she could believe he didn't have a duplicitous bone in his tall, muscled body but she did know better. Young men who looked as though they'd just done a cover shoot for a men's health magazine didn't show interest in women sixty pounds overweight and twice his age. They barely glanced at such women and when they did it was to shower her with disdain.

"I'm not looking at you with disdain," he said as though reading her mind. "I'm looking at you with interest." He curled his fingers over the wire grid of the cart's edge, leaning toward her. "Why do you think I put myself directly in your path, Wynter?"

Hurt drove deep in Wynter and it was all she could do not to let loose the tears that were prickling behind her eyes. Normally she wouldn't let someone's idea of a cruel joke affect her so brutally but she hadn't been feeling all that good about herself lately and this was more than she could take.

"Look, I don't know who put you up to this or why, but I really don't appreciate it," she said, striving to keep her bottom lip from trembling. She lifted her chin. "It isn't funny and it isn't nice, Mr. Cree."

He cocked his head to one side. "Is it so hard to believe a man would find you attractive?" he asked.

"Yes!" she snapped. "It sure as hell is!"

With that she jerked the cart from his light grip and barged past him, keeping her eyes straight ahead as she marched down the aisle. She could feel his gaze on her back and desperately wanted to turn to catch him laughing at her but she didn't think she could bear the hurt. Shoving the empty cart carelessly aside, she increased her speed until she was all but running. The tears erupted as she headed for the exit—barely breaking her momentum as the automatic doors shushed open for her departure.

Kaegan Cree stood at the wide expanse of windows, watching her as she fled. His hands were thrust into the pockets of his jeans, his shoulders hunched, and the look on his face didn't bode well for anyone who might accost him at that moment. He was angry, enraged, but not at the female who ran from him. He was furious at himself for having given her reason to do so.

"Idjut," he labeled himself and a muscle flexed in his cheek. "Gods-be-damned stupid idjut."

Well, he'd just follow her. It wasn't as though he didn't know where she lived. He did. For the last five nights he had been outside her house from dusk 'til dawn, watching over her. That was part of his job and he took it seriously.

"Losing your touch there, sweet cheeks?"

Kaegan didn't look around. He knew all too well who had spoken. The Companion was the last person he wanted to see at that moment. "I miscalculated," he admitted, gritting his teeth.

"Uh huh," was the dry retort.

"She thought I was making fun of her," he said.

"Women like our Miss McGregor aren't used to men coming on to them," his Companion reminded him. "There's a reason she's an old maid at fifty-nine."

"Aye, well, I'll handle it better next time." He glanced around, his gaze settling on the flower department facing the deli counter. "You think roses?"

"She doesn't like live flowers," the Companion replied. "Doesn't like to see them die. Remember?" A high heel nudged the side of Kaegan's foot. "Or didn't you read her file this time?"

"I read it," Kaegan grated. "Every word of it. I was talking about silk roses."

"Salsa, chips, cherry Pepsi, jar of olives, a stick of pepperoni and a bottle of sharp cheddar spray cheese would work better than flowers."

"She wasn't thinking about spray cheese," Kaegan grouched.

"So surprise her. Throw in a box of chicken-flavored crackers and you'll have her eating out of your hand in no time. I'll procure the delights for you if you like."

"Fine." Kaegan risked a glance at the Companion and winced. The sight that greeted him was enough to give him acid reflux. "Where the hell did you get that outfit, Thyme?" he asked. "Freaks R Us?"

The head of the young woman—well, you could call her a woman although he had his doubts about making such an assumption—came only to the mid-point of his chest but her wacky hairdo rose a good two feet from her mostly bare scalp. The Mohawk that ran down the middle of her skull had enough gel slathered on it to keep the eight radiating spikes aloft. Each spike was a different color and ran the red spectrum from pale pink in the front to burgundy at the nape of her neck. The garment she wore was just as bizarre and consisted of a scarlet red leather bustier worn over 44-D bosoms and tapering down to a tightly cinched waist he knew he could span with his two hands and have room to spare. A leopard-skin patterned micro mini topped black fishnet hose that ran down her short little legs and disappeared into pink acrylic six-inch spike heels with broad metal tips at the toe.

"I'm the bomb, huh?" Thyme inquired, popping the gum in her mouth.

"You're a blast, that's for sure," he mumbled, shaking his head. Sometimes the Companion scared him.

"Better get to work. I'll get the goodies and take them over to Miss McGregor's," she ordered. "The boss will be expecting a progress report from you in the morning."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Kaegan grumbled.

Leaving the Companion going through a rack of discount DVDs, Kaegan walked out of the store and headed for the black motorcycle that was his pride and joy. Disdaining the helmet perched atop the back rest he swung a long leg over the powerful machine. A couple of teenage girls gave him the once over and he grinned at them. They giggled; he switched on the bike. They waved. He winked then used his heel to raise the kickstand. As he peeled out of the parking lot, he passed a trio of teenage boys sauntering down the sidewalk. One flipped him the bird.

For a moment he thought about swinging the bike around and pulling up beside the pimply-faced little brat but he had bigger fish to fry than the pint-size minnow in the baggy shorts.

Weaving expertly through the traffic—sneaking under yellow lights a second before they turned red—he was tooling along on autopilot, the wind tousling his hair. His steel trap of a mind was on his assignment and not the slower moving vehicles he passed. He went over all the information they had on Wynter Skye McGregor.

Only child of a pair of long-dead hippies, the sixty year old Georgia native lived alone on a cul-de-sac in the Pebble Lake subdivision, a gated community of mostly retired homeowners. Never having married, her only Companion was a pale yellow Maine Coon cat named

Butterbean. She had moved to Iowa from Florida in the middle of 1988 and apparently had no desire to return to her southern roots.

Staying mostly to herself, she spent her days writing dark fantasy romance novels in a little office off the back deck of her house and her nights watching TV in her recliner with the cat stretched out on her lap.

"We've got to liven up your life, sweeting," he said as he raced around a stopped pickup truck. He grinned. "Again."

Aye, he thought as he hit a stretch of road where there were no cars to hinder his speed, he'd known her before. Many times before and every time had been about the same. Stroll back into her humdrum, boring life and fan the flames smoldering within her to a roaring inferno. Turn her into the woman she was meant to be.

He was good at his job. Gods-be-damned *good* at his job. Too bad he'd spent the last thirty years locked in a cage unable to do it or Wynter wouldn't have such a lackluster life today.

Kaegan tweaked Black Beauty—he believed the name fit the machine perfectly—up to seventy miles an hour as he shot past the sign that cautioned 55 m.p.h. It was, in his opinion, a suggested speed limit anyway and didn't apply to him. The speedometer needle had just pegged at ninety when he blew past the Iowa State Patrol car sitting off the side of the road.

He grinned as he glanced down at the rearview mirror on his left handlebar. The trooper's red and blue lightbar came on and the beige/bronze car shot exhaust smoke as it came speeding after the motorcycle, siren blaring.

"Sorry. No green stamps today, Smoky," Kaegan laughed. He drew in a deep breath, concentrated his full attention on the bike he was straddling. Within the space of a heartbeat, he was in The Zone.

Trooper Mike VanLandingham sat hunched over the steering wheel of his Crown Vic. His blue eyes were glued to the taillight of the crotch rocket that had blown past him.

"I'm gonna get you, you little ...," the trooper said and then his mouth dropped open as the bike disappeared.

One minute it was there and the next it wasn't. It simply disappeared in broad daylight on a bare stretch of highway 6.

Taking his foot off the accelerator, VanLandingham swept his shocked gaze from one side of the road to the other but there wasn't a gravel road, a dirt path or even a bare spot on the shoulder where the bike could have left the pavement. Farm fencing ran along a shallow ditch to either side of the two-lane without so much as a break in the barbed wire stretch.

The motorcycle was gone.

Vanished in plain sight.

"What the hell?" the trooper mouthed as he tapped the brake until his vehicle came to a stop. He put it in park, shoved open the door and got out—bracing his hand on the top of the car as he did a 360° inspection of the Iowa countryside.

Nothing.

Nada.

No bike, nowhere.

Reaching up to scratch his head, VanLandingham stood there until he decided he really hadn't seen that black motorcycle go barreling past him. He decided he hadn't seen anything at all.

"Too much coffee and too many freaking doughnuts," he mumbled.

The state trooper had no idea that sitting twenty feet away on the other side of the road, using only a fraction of the immense psychic powers in his arsenal, Prime Reaper Kaegan Cree was watching him. When after one final look at his surroundings the law officer got back in his car and did a u-ey, driving slowly back the way he'd come, the shapeshifter allowed the invisibility cloaking to fade, revved the engine of his bike and continued on his way.

Chapter Two

Fingers flying, mind in overdrive, Wynter was taking her frustration out on the keyboard. From the time she'd been able to put pencil to paper, it was how she always handled disappointments, aggravations, slights, and snobbery. She'd honed her skills by using her imagination instead of her anger. She let her fertile mind attack the problem.

The bratty boys down the street hit her with rocks? Have them fall into a quarry and get buried up to their chins.

One of the popular girls started a rumor about her? Have that girl develop a debilitating case of suppurating acne.

A teacher gave her a grade she didn't deserve? Have the IRS audit him.

As time passed, she became more creative with her paybacks. She could write the ending that helped her to cope with what was handed her. It was easier to find justice, settle scores, and relieve heartache that way than in real life.

"Bastard," she typed then leaned back in the chair, fingers touching the keyboard. She thought about it then slid the middle finger of right hand up to the backspace and deleted bastard. She typed in lying bastard instead.

Taking a deep breath, she used her mouse to scroll up to the beginning of the scene and began to read

He dropped to his knees to beg for her forgiveness. There was devastating pain in his wounded eyes, a tremor to the hand he lifted toward her in pleading.

"Please, Summer," he entreated her. "Give me just one more chance." He clutched her hand, bringing it to his lips. He kissed the knuckles. "I ache for you, baby."

Summer Collins coolly stared into his hot eyes, the expression on her face as frosty as a mug of chilled ale. She pulled her hand from his fevered grip.

"I don't trust you, Pax. I may never trust you again," she told him.

He flinched. "I swear I'll do whatever you ask to make it up to you. Just take me back. I can't live without you."

She turned and walked to the window, pushed aside the silken drapery. "You'll have to because we're through."

"No, don't say that!" he protested, coming to his feet. He rushed to her, took her by the shoulders and spun her around, shaking her gently. "Please don't shut me out. We belong together!"

Placing her hands on his hard chest, she pushed him back, keeping him at arm's distance. "It's over, Pax. You're a lying bastard."

Wynter grinned nastily and hit the enter button, eager to make the handsome pirate grovel even more before she allowed him back into her good graces. Before she could depress the quote key the doorbell rang.

"Meow?" Butterbean questioned, his triangular ears twisting like miniature radar antennas. The Maine coon was perched on the corner of her computer desk.

"It's probably Mr. Finch," Wynter told her cat. She reached out to scratch his silky back. "Be thinking of something really mean to do to that cheating Pax while I'm gone."

Butterbean yawned daintily then laid his head down again though his golden eyes tracked his human Companion as she got up and padded over to the door.

Expecting the elderly neighbor from across the street, Wynter was surprised to find a young woman with the strangest looking hairdo she'd ever seen standing on the porch. A quiver of unease rippled through her as she opened the full-length glass door, keeping the screen door locked. It wasn't just the odd hair that disturbed Wynter. The ensemble the woman was wearing was odder than her multi-colored Mohawk.

"May I help you?" Wynter asked, dubiousness rife in her voice.

"Delivery," the young, gum-popping woman announced. She held up the cardboard box she was carrying. "From SquareAway."

Wynter frowned. "I didn't order anything from SquareAway," she said.

The young woman looked down into the box. "Six pack of cherry Pepsi, bottle of hot chunky salsa, a bag of chips, a jar of stuffed olives, a stick of pepperoni, box of Chicken in a Bisket, bottle of spray cheese, and a bag of Nestle Crunch mini bars," she said in way of inventory then looked up. "Oh, and a single red silk rose."

"What?" Wynter asked, dumbfounded. "Are you sure you have the right address?"

"962 Evergreen Avenue," was the reply. "Delivery for Miss Wynter McGregor."

Wondering how the woman had gotten into the gated community—especially looking as she did—Wynter shook her head.

"That's not you?" the woman asked.

"Yes, that's me but"

"And this is 962 Evergreen, ain't it?"

"Isn't it," the writer in Wynter corrected.

"I don't know. You tell me," the woman said then stepped back to look at the brass numbers beside the door. "Says 962 on the plaque."

"Yes, but"

"Are you this Miss McGregor?"

"Yes, I am but"

"Then this is the right place and you are the right person. The delivery is for you."

"But I didn't order it!" Wynter snapped.

The woman rolled her eyes and gave a loud sigh. "Look, lady. I just cart groceries and I've got five more deliveries to make this afternoon." She held the box out. "You gonna open the door or not?"

"I don't open my door to strangers," Wynter said.

That got her another loud sigh. "Then where you want me to put this?" She looked around then walked over and placed the box on a rocking chair flanking the door. "Don't worry about a tip," the woman grumbled and was off the porch before Wynter could reply.

Stunned by the whole sequence of events, Wynter watched the young woman walk to a mini-van that was parked in her driveway. It was the first she'd noticed the delivery van with the grocery store's logo emblazoned on the side. With her brow furrowed she stared at the van as it backed out of her driveway. She kept watching until she could no longer see the vehicle.

Tucking her bottom lip between her teeth—a nervous habit she could not seem to break—she swung her gaze to the box sitting in the rocker. For a long moment she glared at it then with a hiss, unlatched the screen door and went out on the porch.

"Who knew what I'd gone to SquareAway for?" she mumbled as she stood over the box. Her eyes narrowed for she realized there was a card attached by a red ribbon to the silk rose. She reached into the box and plucked the rose from between the bags of candy and corn chips.

"It wasn't a joke. It was kismet," the card said in a bold hand.

"Are you kidding me?" Wynter hissed. "Son of a bitch!"

Her stomach took that moment to rumble and her angry gaze fell on the stick of pepperoni. It was her favorite brand out of the three the store carried. Just staring at the dark stick made her mouth water.

"And how the hell did he know I like Hell's A'Popping salsa and smoky bacon squirt cheese?" she mumbled. "And Nestle Crunch?"

Suspicion drove deep in her gut and at that moment she felt as though she was being watched. Snapping her head around, she surveyed her street.

There were only four houses on the cul-de-sac with Wynter's house at the apex of the turnaround. Next door on her right Mrs. Wilder was working in her flower bed. On the other side of the Wilders, Mr. Finch was lifting the flag on his curbside mailbox. There was an empty lot between Wynter and the Jacobsens' and the newly-retired couple were vacationing in Maui this month.

No one seemed to be watching her but Wynter felt an icy prickle undulate down her back. She shifted her shoulders against the uncomfortable sensation. That was why she had moved to a gated community. She had thought it safer and since she was a well-known dark romance author, she needed to be where fans couldn't drive by or drop in at will.

And that brought up another question: How had the delivery girl gotten past Stuey, the guard at the kiosk? Normally, if there was a delivery, Stuey would call first to ask if it was all right to make the delivery. This time he hadn't. Considering how the young woman looked, that—in itself—was very strange.

Deciding to call to the security kiosk to speak with the guard, she hesitated for only a moment before bending down to pick up the box of goodies.

"No sense in letting all this treasure go to waste," she said aloud.

Booty, she thought as she fumbled with the screen door, wedging her body into the opening so she could bring the box inside. It was booty, a pirate's cache of delight that made her salivate and her stomach rumble again. Carrying the box into the kitchen, she realized she was already smacking her lips as the scent of the pepperoni stick wafted up to her.

"He reads minds," she said as she placed the box on the island. "That's how he knew. He's a psychic pirate."

This brought to mind another scenario she could add to the scene upon which she was working. Grabbing one of the notebooks she kept in every room in the house, she jotted down her thought then laughed.

"Oh, yeah, that will work," she stated.

Tossing the notebook on the counter, she lifted the phone and dialed Stuey at the security kiosk.

"Security, Richards. How may I be of service, Miss McGregor?"

The kiosk phone had caller ID and wasn't surprised the guard knew who was calling.

"Hi, Stuey. Ah, did you try calling me about the delivery from SquareAway?"

"I did try calling but it went straight to voice mail, ma'am," Stuey replied. "I left you a message. The lady had the proper identification so I made a judgment call. Did I do something wrong?"

Stuey Richards was in his late sixties and this was probably the only job he could find. It paid fairly well and Wynter knew he had a wife burdened with lupus at home. She didn't want to cause him any problems.

"No, I just wondered. The phone didn't ring. I must have turned the ringer off."

"So everything's all right, then?"

"Everything's just fine. Thank you, Stuey."

After she hung up, she checked the phone and sure enough his message to her was there and the ringer *was* turned off.

"I don't remember doing that," she muttered.

She stood there for a moment or two—just staring at the phone, wondering why she would have turned off the ringer—then laid it aside. Her hunger was nudging and her computer was calling. After piling a paper plate with a variety of treats from the box, she took it into her office.

"I didn't forget you," she said as Butterbean lifted his head to sniff the air. "I chopped up a few slices of pepperoni."

The cat got to his feet, arched its back, and then jumped to the floor. He waited patiently for her to put the napkin holding the pieces of spicy meat in the dish kept for him in the corner. When the food was served by his human, he deigned to partake of it once she was seated at her desk, eating slowly and delicately.

"Try not to show so much enthusiasm, Bean," Wynter laughed.

Stuffing a huge olive into her mouth, she groaned as the sharp flavor of the blue cheese exploded with the first chomp. "Heaven," she declared and popped a second.

Comfort food at hand, glass of Pepsi within easy reach, she put her hands to the keyboard once more.

"But I'm your bastard, Summer," he said, hands tightening on her shoulders. "Your bastard. Your lover."

He dragged her against him, molding her tightly to his hard length, imprisoning her hands between them. His mouth came down to capture hers in a ruthless kiss she felt all the way to the tips of her satin slippers. Beneath her trapped palms she could feel his steady heartbeat as his arms went around her to cage her in his strong embrace.

The thrust of his tongue between her lips made Summer's knees weak and she clutched helplessly at the soft fabric of his fine lawn shirt. Against her belly, she could feel the silver buckle of his leather belt pressing.

"A ghrá mo chroi," he whispered, calling her the love of his heart.

His sword hand dipped to cup her derriere, locking her lower body to his. The thick bulge between his legs flexed and Summer groaned low in her throat, aching for the sensations that delicious weapon could wield.

"You want me," he said, kneading the soft flesh of her buttock. He spread hot kisses down her chin, her cheek, the column of her neck until he pressed his lips into the hollow at the base of her throat. He ground against her suggestively.

"Pax, no!" she protested but they both knew it was no more than a token objection. There had been too much beneath the bridges of their lives for any flimsy word of denial to have meaning for them.

"You want me," he repeated. "You know you do."

He released his grip on her rump and brought that hand up to mold it around her breast.

"Paxton!" she gasped, her breath drawing in on a shuddery intake.

"Tell me you don't want me," he ordered then lowered his mouth to her breast, clamping his teeth lightly on the nipple straining at the bodice of her dressing gown.

"You cad!" she accused but lifted her hands to his black curly hair. She laced her fingers through the thick strands and held him as he drew on her nipple.

Her womb clenched as he pushed his erection against her thigh.

"He needs you, Lady Summer," he told her. "He aches for you."

As she ached for him, Summer thought. Despite what he was. Regardless of the bounty placed on his dark head by the king. She had loved him too long and too hard not to have become addicted to what only he could give her.

Paxton Drake—the scourge of the seas, the deadliest blade in the realm—snagged his hands in the silk front of her gown and threw it ruthlessly over her shoulders, dragged it down her arms, then tossed it away with a grunt of satisfaction. His amber eyes fired with lust as he took in the beauty standing before him.

Summer had no desire to cover herself. This man, this dangerous pirate had seen her naked many times. She let her head fall back and he walked her backward until she was against the wall. Leaning into her, locking his mouth on the sensitive area where her neck met her shoulder, he grazed his teeth over her flesh, laughing when she shivered. He was the bastard she had named him, she thought.

He smelled like raw, hot sex—a manly scent that played havoc with her senses. His hard body was tight against hers, one heavily-muscled thigh insinuating between hers so she all but rode him. As he rocked his erection against her, she clung to his shoulders, biting her lip to keep the moans at bay.

"You are mine, Lady Summer," he stated. "Mine to do with as I will."

"So you would like to believe," she had the presence to say although all she really wanted was to kiss her way over every last sun-kissed inch of his powerful body.

"I'll let you," he said.

Summer frowned. It was at times like this that she forgot he was gypsy-born, a foundling left on an earl's doorstep, a changeling with the ability to snatch wayward thoughts from the ether around him.

"Let's end this charade, lhiannon," he said between clenched. He dipped his knees, putting an arm beneath her legs and the other behind her back.

"This settles nothing," she said as he swept her into his brawny arms.

"We'll see," he replied.

It took only four strides of his long legs to carry them to her bed. He laid her gently atop the velvet counterpane. He sat down, drew off his heavy boots and set them aside. Standing, he tugged the shirt from his leather pants then unbuttoned the cuffs. All the while his golden gaze was hot on her nude body.

"You are the most beautiful woman I've ever known," he said in a husky voice. His fingers ran down the front of his shirt, flicking it open. Shrugging from the garment, he let it fall

to the floor while he made quick work of his belt and the jet studs that held closed the fly of his pants. "No other woman has ever satisfied me as you do."

Summer lifted her arms above her head and his fevered gaze fell to her breasts. "No other woman ever will, milord pirate," she replied.

Pax pushed the pants down his hips and the jutting evidence of his arousal sprang into view. His lady licked her lips and his shaft stirred, eager to satisfy the gleam that had entered her beautiful green eyes.

"You play with fire, milady," he said as he stepped out of the pants.

"I am fire, milord," she countered. She opened her arms to him. "I am on fire."

Dipping his right knee to the mattress, he swung his left over her prone body, straddling her. He stretched out atop her, sinking into her eager embrace, slanting his hard mouth over her soft lips, claiming what was his.

Wrapping her arms around her lover, Lady Summer Collins took his savage kiss and gave back in kind. She nipped at his full lower lip and smiled as he grunted from the slight pain. She swirled her tongue in his mouth—meeting him thrust for thrust—and raked her manicured nails down his scarred back.

"Witch," he accused as he slid his lips to her ear.

"I am what you have made me," she returned.

He kissed his way down her neck, her shoulder until he could fasten his lips upon the peak of her creamy breast. He laved her pebbled nipple, grazed his white teeth over the dusky tip, then drew it into his mouth where he alternately suckled and stabbed at the hardening nub with his hot tongue.

"Evil, evil man," she whispered.

"Aye," he agreed, "and about to get more so."

He trailed hot nips from her breast to her navel and when his head dipped lower still, she raked her hands through his thick curls and held him as he took possession of her most sensitive pearl—working it thoroughly with his lips and tongue.

Summer opened her legs wide to him, her knees falling apart as he pleased her. The stroke of his fingers along her wet folds, the gentle thrust of one fingertip into her aching channel as he applied exquisite torture to her clitoris caused her to dig her heels into the mattress, her hands into his hair.

Just as she neared the culmination of his expert ministrations, he slid his body over hers—slithering that hard muscled weight up hers—and rammed a hand under her rump to lift her. In one quick thrust he was inside her throbbing body. Two hard, grinding thrusts later she was coming in a whirl of spinning colors and quivering heat, clinging to his broad shoulders as he emptied his essence into her shivering body.

"Wow," Wynter said, slumping in her chair. Her face felt as though she sat in front of a roaring fire and she could hear the blood pounding in her ears. "That is good."

"Meow," Butterbean said in what sounded to his human as a bored tone.

"Well, I'll pad it, of course," Wynter said. "Add a few juicy details. Make the bastard suffer a little before she gives in. He"

The phone interrupted her train of thought and she groaned, getting up to run to the kitchen where she'd left her cell.

"Hello?" she said, a bit breathless.

"What did you eat first?"

It was *his* voice, she thought and the sound of it sent a tremor of excitement undulating down her spine.

"Who is this?" she asked, putting a hint of disapproval and condescension in her words.

"You know gods-be-damned well who it is, Lady Summer," he said. His words were sultry and for a moment she didn't pick up on the use of her character's name. "Tell me what you dove into first."

"You've got some nerve, you know that?" she countered and then it hit her that he had called her a name he had no way of knowing. A trickle of unease wiggled its way along her spine. "How did you ...?"

"I wasn't playing a joke on you, Wynter," he said and that accent triggered all kinds of carnal sensations in her body. "I was deadly earnest. I want to get to know you."

Unable to accept the bizarre situation, suddenly very frightened, she snapped the cell phone shut, cutting off his call. As she stood there with it still in her hand, it rang again and without a second thought, she turned off the ringer and laid the phone on the counter, backing away from it as though it were a venomous serpent.

"How did he get my number?" she asked aloud. Considering it was an unlisted cell and she was very careful to whom she gave it, Kaegan Cree having it made the situation even stranger and more confusing.

* * * *

Realizing she wasn't going to answer his call, the Reaper finally gave up. Through the bay window at the end of her kitchen, he watched her lean against the cabinet as she stared at the phone a good three feet away. He was tempted to use his powers to turn the ringer on—just as he had turned it off earlier so the Companion could deliver the box of goodies as the surprise he wanted it to be—simply because he got a kick out of her ringtone—Paperback Writer—but he sensed Wynter's fear and didn't want to add to it.

As though she knew he was watching her, he saw her turn her head to the window, brow furrowed with concern. He knew she couldn't see him but when she took a few hesitant steps toward the window, he stood very still. It wasn't as though he could become invisible. It was simply a matter of misdirecting her mind so she could not see what he didn't want her to see. Not all Reapers possessed a capacity to conceal themselves in such a way and it took a great deal of concentration to maintain the invisibility when a human was looking right at him. He breathed a sigh of relief when she turned away and went back to her office.

It was then he felt the demon's presence. He had been so wrapped up in Wynter he had allowed himself to forget the danger. As he turned, the treacherous entity struck with a vengeance.

Chapter Three

Even before the two-hundred pounds of enraged demon plowed into him, knocking him from Wynter's deck, Kaegan was overpowered by the stench of the fiend. To some it might be a pleasant smell but the intense whiff of cinnamon that flooded the Reaper's nostrils burned all the way through his cerebral cortex to disrupt all rational thought. The stench infuriated him as much as the waving of a red flag would affect an enraged bull. Transitioning into beast form, claws erupting, he sank his fangs into the demon's shoulder as they hit the ground. He barely felt the brutal raking of talons streaking down his back.

Locked together, rolling down the incline toward the six-foot high privacy fence at the back of Wynter's lot, the two beings were snarling so loudly it caused all the dogs in the cul-de-sac to commence barking and howling. The hissing from the pair startled the birds from the black walnut trees and sent chipmunks and moles scurrying underground.

Kaegan tore a chunk of flesh from the demon, hating the spicy taste of its tainted blood flooding his mouth. He snapped his muzzle at the bastard's throat—going for the jugular—but the entity used its back paws to gouge deep furrows in the Reaper's belly in an attempt to disembowel him.

"Enough!"

The one word was an infuriated boom of a command that caused the two combatants to spring apart—one with a yelp and the other a grunt. Paws scrambling on the grass, hackles raised, they spun to face one another, growling savagely, and eyes glittering with hatred.

"I said enough!"

Quivering with outrage, the dueling entities became aware of the undulating heat haze that had been conjured to hide them from curious eyes. To the human eye, there were no bloody lupine and canine forms beside the fence. Nor was there a tall, imposing male in a long gray robe standing vigilant guard over the enemies.

"Transition, the both of you," the mage demanded. "Now!"

Begrudgingly Kaegan allowed his wolf-like form to fade. He glanced down at his nakedness and grimaced as he saw the deep scratches tracking from his belly button to just above the public hair. He lifted his head to glare at the demon, lips skinning back to reveal blood-tipped fangs.

"Grow up, Kaegan!" the mage snapped. "And for the love of the goddess, clothe yourself! I've no desire to see your dangly bobbing in the breeze."

"Neither do I," the demon grumbled as he, too, changed from his canine form to humanoid. He waved his hand and a pair of jeans and a t-shirt hid his nudity. Talons retracting, he gathered his long black hair, conjuring a leather strip to tie the thick strands into a long queue.

"What the hell is he doing here?" Kaegan demanded as he, too, fashioned clothing to cover his tall frame.

"I am here to claim what is rightfully mine," the demon stated.

"Over my dead body!" Kaegan shouted and started forward only to come up against an invisible wall hastily summoned by the mage. It was like hitting an invisible membrane made from Jell-o left too long in the fridge and the Reaper leapt back with disgust.

"Pussy," the demon insulted.

A loud sigh came from the man in the gray robe. "One more word from you, Azzin, and I will cast you back into the Abyss without a second thought."

"You should not have brought him forth to begin with!" Kaegan berated the mage. "Wynter is mine!"

The demon opened his mouth to protest but when the mage narrowed his eyes, warning sparking red lights in the amber depths, Azzin snapped it shut. Clenching his hands into fists at his side, he struggled to get his rage under tight control.

"Do you dare to tell a Ridgelord what he may and may not do, Reaper?" the mage queried in a deadly voice. "Have you a desire to return to that cell you so recently vacated?"

Kaegan felt the admonition like a weighty lash across his shoulders. He winced and lowered his head respectfully. "Nay, Your Grace."

"Then I suggest you keep your mouth closed as well until I have had my say," the mage told him.

"She's looking out the window."

All three turned to the Companion, who was perched atop the fence, fish-net encased legs swinging from side to side, ankles clicking together. She sat with chin propped in the cup of one palm.

Kaegan and the others turned to glance at the house.

"She can't see us," the mage stated.

"No, but she senses something isn't quite right down here," the Companion commented. "Mayhap you should take this elsewhere, High Lord Kaleb."

"You may be right, Companion," the mage agreed and with the wave of his hand all four of them were transported to a field a mile distant from the subdivision. He motioned the males to sit on the ground—apart from one another—and paid no attention to the Companion who had run off to chase bright yellow butterflies.

Kaegan drew his legs up into the perimeter of his arms and turned to survey the rolling hills surrounding him. The field had recently been mowed and rolled hay bales—resembling giant pencil erasers—dotted the land. He inhaled the crisp, clean scent of the drying hay, thankful it helped to dispel the unbearable stench of the demon sitting ten feet away.

"Now, we need to set some rules for the competition," High Lord Kaleb declared.

Kaegan snapped his head toward the mage, his brows drawing together. "What competition?" he questioned.

"The competition for the hand of Wynter McGregor, of course," the mage replied.

"She is mine!" Kaegan proclaimed. "She always has been."

"Aye, but the McGregor's are blood-tied to Azzin's tribal clan," High Lord Kaleb reminded.

"A blood oath the Nightwind has never invoked!" the Reaper protested.

"Until now," Azzin said. "The cousin to whom I was bound has gone on to her reward and Wynter is next in line for my service."

Kaegan ground his teeth, speaking through the constriction. "She doesn't need your gods-be-damned service, Nightwind! She has me—just as she has always had me!"

"An inferior replacement for the real thing," Azzin scoffed. He shot the Reaper a nasty smirk. "Sort of like settling for the cheap knockoff store brand instead of the name brand."

When the Reaper would have sprung up to attack his enemy, the mage lifted a restraining hand—once more putting that invisible gelatinous barrier in Kaegan's startled face.

"One more outburst and I swear I will stitch your lips together, Reaper!" the mage threatened.

"You'd best listen to him, little boy," the demon suggested with a snort.

"And that goes for you, as well!" High Lord Kaleb cautioned.

The demon held up his hands, spreading them palm-out at shoulder height then mimicked zipping his mouth shut. His golden eyes glowed with spite when he turned them to Kaegan's angry countenance.

"Since there are two of you are from the same clan and are vying for the hand of the human, the High Council of Shadowlords has decreed there will be a competition. It will be a fair competition, pitting the two of you against one another on a level playing field where neither will have an advantage. What that means is that neither of you will be allowed to use your powers to win the lady. If you do, you will be automatically disqualified."

Kaegan watched the demon's sun-darkened face settle into a fierce scowl. Nightwinds relied primarily on their supernatural powers to influence mortal women. It was as much a part of their sexual charms as the air the nasty entities breathed. A muscle was working furiously in Azzin's jaw which signaled the bastard was mulling over the restriction that would put him at a distinct disadvantage.

"You will go to her as mortal men. You will court her as mortal men," High Lord Kaleb stated. "Your conjuring powers are to be set aside, and if you slip up and use them, the game is over. The decision will be hers, and it will be final. She will choose which of you she wishes to win her hand, and you will abide by that decision." He looked from the Reaper to the Nightwind. "You have questions?"

"The rules are unfair," Azzin said.

The High Lord folded his arms, thrusting his hands into the voluminous sleeves of his gray robe. "In what way are they unfair, Azzin?"

"The Reaper has the advantage," Azzin complained.

"How so?" the mage asked. "Do you not possess the male beauty of all the men of your clan?"

Kaegan grunted, grateful the mage didn't turn to send a glare his way but Azzin speared him with a savage look.

"You are tall and well-built. You cut a dashing figure and always have. Have you no faith in your ability to seduce a woman on your own merits without the use of magic?" Lord Kalen inquired.

"I will do well enough," Azzin mumbled.

"Then what concerns you?"

Azzin locked his eyes on the Reaper. "He has the Companion."

"Of whom he will not be allowed to make use," the mage stated. He cocked his head to one side. "I see one advantage you will have that he does not."

The demon looked to High Lord Kaleb. "What would that be, Your Grace?"

"Well, in regard to how long it might take to win the woman, the Reaper would be out of commission for at least a week at the beginning of each third moon cycle," High Lord Kaleb answered. He swung his gaze to the Reaper. "Locked in a containment cell while he Transitions to his wolf form." He looked to the demon. "You would have the woman all to yourself during that time."

Stamping down the impulse to cry foul, Kaegan could do nothing but sit silently while he watched the gloating gleam enter Azzin's eyes. He dug his fingernails into his forearms, using the pain to keep himself quiet.

"There is that," Azzin agreed.

"All is fair save for the use of any form of magic," the mage said. "Use of your powers will take you out of the game instantly." He looked from one to the other. "Is that understood?"

"Aye," Kaegan mumbled and the demon nodded.

"I want your word, Azzin," the mage commanded.

"Aye," the Nightwind agreed. "I will not use my powers." He turned to give the Reaper a smug look. "I will not need to. I am an incubus. Human women cannot resist me."

"You're an asshole," Kaegan said between his teeth.

"You are Cree," the mage reminded them. "You sprang from the same loins and are brothers. You"

"I do not claim him as such," Kaegan interrupted

"Nor I him," Azzin stated.

"He was a woman-hater, and you would turn him loose on Wynter?" Kaegan ground out, jabbing a thumb in Azzin's direction. "The goddess had good reason to turn him into a Nightwind demon."

"And make you a blood-sucking shape shifting prick called a Reaper," Azzin snapped.

"I am sworn to protect the McGregor women!" Kaegan shouted. "You are sworn to corrupt them!"

"To teach them to use the magical gifts with which they were born," Azzin corrected.

"What have you taught this particular McGregor woman in her many incarnations? I do not see her utilizing her pagan abilities."

"There's been no need!" Kaegan defended. "I have guided her into being her own woman without the having to resort to the use of magic."

"Isn't that why you were sent to prison, Reaper?" Azzin asked slyly.

Kaegan's face turned hard and deadly. "I did what was required to keep her safe."

"And killed a human male in the doing," Azzin reminded him.

"For which he paid dearly," High Lord Kaleb declared.

"Had she known how to wield magic, she could have handled the situation herself," Azzin said. "The human male would be alive and"

"I will hear no more on this!" the mage snapped. "What was done is done. The sentence was served and Lord Kaegan Cree is a free man." He narrowed his eyes at the Nightwind. "You would have done the same had you been in his place."

"The difference being I am sanctioned to kill humans who threaten my blood-mate," Azzin said. He pointed a finger at the Reaper. "He is not."

"This human female is without a mate," High Lord Kaleb stated. "Neither blood-mate nor bond-mate. One of you is to correct that situation. Since you both hold claim to her that is the reason for the competition. The High Council of Shadowlords has set the rules, and you will abide by them. The contest begins on the morrow." He spread his arms wide to the skies. "May the best entity win," the mage proclaimed and in a flash of light vanished from the field.

"I have always despised those arrogant Ridgelords," Azzin muttered as he got to his feet. "Even more than I hate Reapers."

"On that we agree," Kaegan growled.

The two stared at one another for a long moment. Each was trying to decide if he should attack his hated brother. In the end, Azzin snorted as though he couldn't be bothered then vanished in a plume of choking cinnamon smoke that made Kaegan's eyes water.

Kaegan fanned the air and then closed his eyes, willing his body to transform into the avian version of his clan totem, the raven, and took to the air.

Wynter turned from her survey of the backyard. Something had drawn her from her office but for the life of her, she couldn't see what. The neighborhood canines were beginning to calm down but Butterbean's fur was still sticking straight up on his back as he sat on the window ledge.

"Eagle, maybe?" she asked the cat. "A flock of Canada snow geese flying over?"

Butterbean turned his golden eyes to her, lowered his head as though asking: "You're kidding, right?"

"Well, what do you think it was, Mr. Bean?" she asked.

The cat yawned, arched his back in a long stretch then hopped down. With a flick of his bushy tail, he padded back to the office and the corner of her desk he preferred.

"Brat," Wynter called after him.

One final look and then she, too, returned to her office.

She sat down, re-read the last paragraph she'd written then hit the page break button to begin the next chapter.

Lady Summer ran her hands over his rock-hard body as he lay panting beside her. A fine sheen of sweat covered the carved muscles of his abdominal muscles.

"I think you wore me to a nubbin," he complained.

"I should have used my dagger on your manhood while you slept," she said, spiking her fingers through the wiry curls covering his chest.

"Then what would you have had to play with?" he asked. He laid his hand atop hers then pushed her palm down his body to the growing erection at the juncture of his thighs.

"Lord Chance's cock?" she answered.

At the mention of his hated rival, Pax released her hand and sat up. "You don't play fair, Summer," he said and swung his legs from the bed. He bent to snatch his pants from the floor. "If you want the weasel, be my guest."

She watched him drag his clothing up with angry little jerks, smiling at his manly pique. She liked to torment the handsome brute simply because she could. He was putty in her hands and—what was more—he knew it.

"You have a delicious body, Pax, but a rather one-track mind," she said. "Your jealousy of Chance is a prime example."

Pax snorted. "I'm not jealous of that spineless wonder," he told her as he sat in her boudoir chair to put on his socks.

"Green-eyed with jealousy," she commented.

"In case you forgot, my eyes are brown," he grumbled, casting her an irritated look.

"Amber, actually," she said as she turned to her side and propped her head on her hand to watch him as he tugged on his boots. "Eye color notwithstanding, you are jealous, envious, and resentful that Chance has everything you believe is rightfully yours."

"I'll get back what is due me," the pirate stated through clenched teeth.

"You've lost one thing you won't get back," she said as he stood. She felt a chill shivered down her body as he turned his angry gaze to her.

"And what's that?"

She smiled. "Me."

He took two steps to reach the bed, shot out his sword hand to wrap his fingers around her slender neck. Leaning over her, he put his face in hers.

"I've not lost you, sweeting, nor will I." He tightened his grip on her neck as he stared into her green eyes. "Play your games all you like, Lady Summer. Pit that dickless wonder against me all you will. In the end, we'll see who the better man is!"

Summer took his hard kiss—reveling in the ruthless lips that covered hers—without giving away the weakness this brutal man always stirred within her. She loved him as she never would another but knew she could never reveal that obsessive love to him. She could not allow him to see just how completely he wrecked her self-confidence and shook her resolve. There was no doubt in her mind should he ever discover how easily he could play her, he would use the power against her.

His tongue thrusting savagely into her mouth to give rise to her desire, the warm, masculine scent of him clouding her judgment, all but cast aside Summer's dogged determination to bring him to heel.

Not that she believed she could ever tame the wild streak in Paxton Drake. She wasn't sure she really wanted him tame and docile.

"You don't," he said and released his hold on her neck to slide his hand to her breast. He kneaded the full globe firmly. "You really wouldn't like me domesticated."

One final commanding squeeze and he removed his hand, turned his back on her and walked to the door. Her last sight of him was the broad back with its powerful width of shoulders as he closed the portal behind his departure.

Wynter paused with her fingers grazing the keyboard.

"Two men," she said. "Two glorious, imposing men fighting over her." She sighed. "Lucky bitch."

Butterbean sneezed then sneezed again as though such a thought had greatly disturbed him. He sprang from the desk and hurled himself from the room, running as fast as he could.

"No boogety-boggeteying, Bean!" she called out as she heard the flap on the pet door swing open.

After making a few notes on the progression of her novel on the ever-present notepad she kept beside her mouse pad, she began doodling as her mind worked over plot and dialogue and character creation.

"What does Lord Chance look like?" she asked, using the pen like a drumstick on the paper. "Tall. Well-built. Hair color?"

Pax, of course, was the man she'd met earlier in the day—right down to the cleft in his chin but what about his rival?

Leaning back in the chair, she began to picture actors whose work she admired and whose faces she found distracting. As the names came to her, she tried to picture the men but gave up. She had all their pictures on the computer. Tossing the pen aside, she pulled up the file and began studying the faces, discarding a few simply because she'd used them too often when creating characters for other books and novellas.

"You're gorgeous, Gerry, but you've already got nine books. And you are sexy as hell Hugh, my man, but a bit older than I imagine Chance to be." She turned her head to the side then shook it. "Nope, sorry, Karl. You're too dark. I'm thinking more on the blond side for Chance."

Deciding light and dark were needed for the rivalry, she chose a blond soap star whose features had the aristocratic slant she wanted for Lord Chance Garrington. Deciding the eye color was easy since the actor had the bluest eyes she'd ever seen on a man and there was a tilt to his chin that lent a certain arrogance to his countenance.

"Privileged son of Nyles Garrington, Fifth Earl of Haverstock," she proclaimed. "Half-brother to Pax. Same father, different mothers." She chewed on her bottom lip for a moment then picked up her pen. "Lady Gilda Durrant-Garrington is Chance's mother and the gypsy dancer, Mirela, who gave birth to Nyles' lovechild, Paxton. At the old Earl's death, Pax was given title to his holdings because Chance was in disfavor at the time—youthful discretion and all that—but there was a fierce legal battle and"

As the story unfolded before her mind's eye, Wynter hastily scribbled down the bones of the tale all the way to the surprise ending. When she was finished, she knew she had another winner on her hands.

"This is gonna be so good!" she said.

Unaware she was being watched by a pair of very interested eyes, Wynter put fingers to the keyboard once more to introduce her readers to Lord Chance.

Chapter Four

"He purchased the Brass Key Book Store on West Street," Rachel, Wynter's agent, said, "and he would like to have you do a signing at his grand opening."

"Rachel," Wynter complained, drawing the name out in a childish whine.

"I know, I know," Rachel said with a sigh. "You don't like signings but he's willing to jump through hoops to get you there—newspaper, radio and TV blitz, a fruit and cheese tray."

"Oh, a fruit and cheese tray!" Wynter mocked. "Why didn't you tell me that to begin with? You know how I love fruit and cheese!"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah" Rachel drawled. "Can the sarcasm. Will you just think about it?"

"I don't need to think about it," Wynter told her. "I don't like doing book signings any better than having garage sales. It's basically the same darn thing."

There was a loud, exasperated sigh from the other end of the line then silence for a moment before Rachel clucked her tongue. "I'm gonna let you tell him then." She continued on even though her client was protesting over the line. "The store is next door to the Better Buy." Before Wynter could complain again, she broke the connection.

"Shit!" Wynter fumed. She glared at the cell phone then started to punch in the number for directory assistance when she realized Rachel hadn't given her the new name—if there was to be one—of the book store nor had she given her the owner's name.

Slapping closed the cell phone lid, she tossed it to her bed and stood there glaring at it.

She knew, Wynter thought, as she turned from the bed in a huff. Rachel knew today was her day to hit Better Buy. Has she seen the bookstore being renovated and gone in to introduce herself? Had she met the owner and just happened to mention she was Wynter Skye's agent? Did she bully the poor man into offering her a signing?

"I am going to pull every hair out of your bleached blond head, Rachel Houghton!" she snarled as she jerked open the closet door.

While she dressed, her temper fluctuated like the mercury in a thermometer. By the time she was in the car, on her way to Better Buy, the mercury was nearing the boiling point, the bulb dangerously close to breaking. When she pulled into the parking lot, she could not keep her attention from straying to the red brick building beside the computer store. The sign caught and held her gaze like iron filings to a magnet.

She snorted.

"The BookWorm Emporium," she said aloud with a sniff of disdain. "How positively droll!"

Slipping into a parking slot, she resolutely kept her eyes from straying once again to the bookstore. She walked quickly and with purpose into the Better Buy and grabbed a shopping cart, wrapping her hands around the handle much as she had at the grocery store the day before.

She heard Rachel's voice in the back of her mind: "I'm gonna let you tell him."

"I have no intention of telling him anything, much less go into the store!" she said aloud and when a clerk gave her a bewildered look, she clamped her lips tightly closed.

Two new computer games, a new version of a graphics program, a box of blank DVDs and a couple of new gadgets later, she was at the checkout counter, unable to prevent her gaze from wandering to the bookstore.

"Debit or charge?" the bored checkout girl asked as Wynter paused with her bankcard hovering over the credit card machine.

"Debit," Wynter mumbled then swiped the card, punched in her pin number.

Once again, her attention drifted over to the bookstore, and she sighed. It was no use.

"Thanks and have a great day," the counter girl said in a monotone.

"You, too," Wynter answered dutifully. She picked up her bags and with leaden feet tramped to the front entrance.

Though she directed her movement toward her car, her eyes kept flicking to the bookstore, knowing she was going to give in to its siren call. Stowing the purchases in the trunk, she slammed the lid and headed for the store.

"Mistake, mistake, mistake, mistake," she mumbled, clutching her keys so tightly the metal was digging into her palms.

How did Rachel get her into these things? She wondered. Why did Rachel get her into these things?

There were two signs to either side of the door which informed passersby in bold red print that the BookWorm Emporium was COMING SOON! She could see someone moving around inside the store but hoped with all her being the door would be locked.

It wasn't and when she pushed it open, a bell rang overhead to announce her entry.

"We're not open yet!" a male voice called out to her from behind the shelves on her right.

Wynter started to turn away, feeling as though she'd been given a reprieve but in mid-turn the owner of the voice poked his head around the shelf, and she was caught like a deer in headlights.

"Sorry," she mumbled. "I"

"You're Wynter Skye!" he said and came from behind the shelf. He had a stack of books in his arms.

Heat infused Wynter's face. She hated being recognized because she never knew what to say. She cocked a shoulder in embarrassment. "Ah, yeah, I am."

"Miss Houghton said you'd be in," he said. "Let me get rid of these, so we can talk."

She watched him take three strides to the counter and couldn't help but admire the way his worn jeans clung to a pair of long legs. When he turned in profile to place the books on the counter, her eyes dipped to a world class ass molded by those tight jeans. She jerked her eyes up to his smiling face.

"Chance Barrington," he said, coming toward her with his hand out.

Wynter blinked. What were the odds of him having a name so similar to her new character? She felt his warm hand envelope hers and couldn't help but notice the strength in the long, tapered fingers.

"Sounds like a character from one of your novels, huh?" he asked, a killer grin turning a handsome face into sheer male beauty.

"Actually, yes, it does," she said and once more felt the heat rising in her cheeks.

He released her hand then folded his arms and leaned against the counter. "I rather see myself as the spoiled son of a very wealthy man, a rakehell who is irresistible to women and small children."

Wynter smiled. "A rakehell?"

"Sounds better than a bounder," he said, lips twitching.

"True," she said. She glanced around the store. "You have rearranged things."

"Spent the entire night working on it," he said. "Getting ready for today."

"You're opening today?" she asked.

"Oh, no!" he was quick to answer. "I wanted it to look nice for you so you would agree to the signing." His eyes twinkled. "I'm having a fruit and cheese tray, you know."

She shook a finger at him. "Shame on you. That's bribery."

"Is it working?" he queried.

She sighed. "Yes, I think it is."

He pumped a fist. "All right!" He went to her and took her arm. "Let's go over to the Coffee Urn and seal the deal. I'll even spring for a roast beef and sauerkraut on marbled rye with TI dressing and side orders of fries with ranch and spicy dill slices."

Wynter's eyes widened. "How did you ...?"

"Your sandwich, Wynter Skye Rye is on their menu," he said, cutting her off. "Saw it when I had lunch there yesterday."

She felt her cheeks flame yet again and looked down. "Ah, yeah. I forgot."

"You're a local celeb, Wynni," he reminded her. "You should be proud they named a sandwich after you." He caressed her arm. "Even if it is a heart attack in the making."

"I don't have it very often," she defended.

He put his free hand to his chest. "I promise you will not suffer for sharing your noon repast with me, Lady Summer."

Wynter jerked. "W...what? What did you call me?"

He shrugged. "Lady Wynter sounds so cold but Lady Summer" His thumb was making little circles on the outside of her upper arm. "Lady Summer sounds hot."

She found herself staring into his eyes and thinking they were the wickedest blue she'd ever seen. A ripple of desire shuddered through her lower belly as she gazed into the sensuous windows to his soul.

"Let's go," he said, breaking the spell and Wynter shook her head to rid herself of the image of him sweeping her into his arms and bending his head to take her lips.

He ushered her outside then let go of her arm long enough to lock the door to the bookstore. Turning back to her, he put a hand to the small of her back as they began walking toward the coffee and sandwich shop.

"I plan on hiring some college kids to dress up in costume to circulate among the guests on opening night," he said, glancing down at her. "I'm gonna have them learn some passages from your books to recite and—hopefully—after your reading, we can do a little skit from Love's Return." He leaned in close. "That's my favorite among your novels."

She looked up at him. "That's a novel idea—no pun intended. It should be an interesting evening."

"Well, I intend to invite the movers and shakers of the literary field," he told her. "I'll issue invites to the entertainment editors of the major state newspapers and have both radio and TV reps to interview you and the more important guest. I am also planning on having some special bookmarks made up to commemorate the grand opening."

"Sounds like you're going all out," she said as they neared the Coffee Urn.

He slid his hand from her back and stepped forward to open the door for her. "One thing you'll learn about me, Lady Summer, is I don't do things half-measure. My sire always told me it's in for a penny, in for a pound. If you're gonna do anything, do it right."

"An admirable piece of advice," she replied.

After ordering a couple of the sandwiches named after her, they took a booth beside the big front windows that overlooked the parking lot. Chance bought coffee for himself and a Pepsi for her. As they ate, he gave her more details of the grand opening he planned. When he was finished, she found herself staring at him with admiration.

"That's quite an undertaking," she said. "And expensive."

He shrugged. "I've got more money than Midas so it isn't more than a drop in the bucket," he bragged but there was something in his voice that told her everything he had was riding on the success of the bookstore.

"Well, I'll help any way I can," she said, surprised at her own words.

"Good," he stated and then gave a long, hard sigh. "I was afraid I was going to be forced to grovel and I'm not particularly good at groveling although" He looked at her with puppy dog eyes, head tilted to one side.

"What?" she questioned.

"I am sorely in need of a date this evening." He reached across to take her hand. "Take pity on me and accompany me to the midnight showing of Blood Feud. I've got two tickets. You know the seats are reserved."

Wynter gaped at him. "You're a vampire fan?" she asked.

"To the very marrow of my bones," he pledged, "and I hate going to movies alone." He batted his long lashes. "Please? Pretty please? I'll even spring for supper at the Texas Roadhouse, and then we can stroll through the mall before the flick and made snap judgments of the shoppers."

"You do that, too?" she asked, laughing.

"It's more fun than sitting in a bus station or airport," he answered. His grip tightened on her hand. "Whatcha say? Are you game?"

She felt self-conscious with him holding her hand and eased it from his grasp, folding her hands in her lap. "I haven't been to a movie in I don't know when," she said.

"I'll take you every Friday night if you're up for it," he said. "I am a movie aficionado and have been known to sit through back to back viewings if the movie really interested me."

"I've done that," she said. She looked at him in a new light—that of a man with a kindred soul.

"Then it's a date?" he pressed.

"I don't know," she said. "I was planning on heading home and getting some work done tonight. I live over in"

"Pebble Lake," he said. "Miss Houghton mentioned it."

"Then you know that's fifty miles away," she said. "I really don't like driving at night, and I've heard the movie is over three hours long. That would be well after four before I got to bed."

"I don't mind coming over to pick you up," he told her.

"That's a hundred miles of driving, Mr. Barrin"

"Chance," he interrupted.

"Chance," she responded.

"I'd really like you to go with me," he said.

She thought about it for a moment. The earnestness on his face, the warm glow in his blue eyes finally settled the matter, and she nodded. "All right."

"I'll pick you up at seven, and we'll get to the Roadhouse by eight or a little after. An hour to eat and then we'll head out to the mall and kill three hours."

"That's a lot of shopper watching," she said. "Maybe we can forego supper. If you pick me up at ten, we could still be in time for the midnight showing."

"Only if you agree to go out to supper with me tomorrow night," he said.

There was something so exciting about him, and she found it hard to look away from his handsome face. He appeared a few years younger than her—maybe in his early fifties—but the soul looking back at her was old and wise. His hair was thick and black but there were a few strands of gray beginning to show at the temples. He had a strong chin that screamed determination and the laugh lines at the corners of his remarkable eyes told her he was no stranger to humor.

"I don't kiss until the third date," he told her and Wynter lifted a brow at the news. "And I don't go to bed until the fifth."

"Fifth of the month or the fifth date?" she teased.

"Fifth hour of the date," he stipulated. He glanced at his watch. "If I come over to pick you up at ten and get you back by four a.m., we're good to go for sexual exploits with an hour to spare."

"Oh, really?" she asked, wondering what it would be like to have such a liaison with a man like Chance Barrington.

"It's better than a sharp stick in the eye," he said as though he'd intercepted her thoughts.

* * * *

Never in her life had she done such a thing, she thought as she opened the door and invited him in. It was so outside the norm for her, she felt numb from her temples to her toes. At the end had been so glorious, the man so thoroughly comfortable to be with, their attitudes meshing so perfectly that it seemed natural at the end of the date to ask him in for a drink.

However, a drink wasn't what she had in mind. With his hand in hers, she led him past the great room and up the stairs, hearing her heart jackhammering in her chest as he followed.

"I don't.... I'm not ...," she began as they reached her bedroom door.

"Shush," he whispered. "I know." He reached around her and opened the door, pushed it wide then swept her into his arms.

"Oh, my," she said. The scenario was too much like the wicked thoughts she'd been having all the way through the movie.

Into the shadowy darkness of her bedroom, he carried her. Only the light spilling from the hallway cut a wedge of illumination into the room. Unerringly he strode to the bed and leaned over to place her on the mattress.

Wynter licked her lips as she stared up at him. His face was nothing more than an ebon silhouette as he tugged the tail of his pullover from the waistband of his pants then crossed his arms over his chest to pull the shirt from his body. He tossed the shirt aside and put his hands on his belt as he kicked off his loafers.

She lay there like a bump on a log—unable to move as she watched him strip out of his clothing. It didn't surprise her in the least that he was commando beneath the khaki slacks or that even in the darkness she could feel the heat of his gaze searing her.

Not saying a word, he went to the foot of the bed and removed her shoes. He moved up to unbutton her skirt then tugged it from her hips. She could feel his smile as she arched her hips up to accommodate him removing the skirt with ease. When he held out his hand, she took it and he levered her to a sitting position, drawing her own polo shirt over her head. Clad only in

her bra and panties, she trembled beneath his long perusal, stamping down the urge to cover her near-nakedness from his view.

Naked, he climbed over her to stretch out beside her, drawing her into his arms. Against her thigh, she could feel the hard length of him pressing. He cupped her chin and after placing gentle kisses on her forehead, nose and chin, he settled his mouth firmly over hers.

The kiss was tender, soft, yet in the back of her mind, she had the distinct feeling he was placing a claim on her. His tongue slipped smoothly between her parted lips and in the doing she felt as though he was marking his territory. At the moment he moved his hand to cover her breast, she drew in a breath as tingles eddied down her sides.

"Umm," he said, his lips searing a path from her mouth to the hollow at the base of her throat. "You taste so good."

For the next hour, he gentled her with delicate touches and fleeting kisses. He moved slow and languidly until every nerve ending in her body was screaming for him to rip away the panties and bra and plunge savagely inside her. She writhed beneath his subtle strokes and light caresses. She ached to have him thrust his fingers between her legs, to take her nipples between his teeth to nibble.

"Chance, please!" she said finally, unable to bear the torture any longer. She clutched at his shoulders. "I can't take much more!"

She heard him chuckle low in his throat. He slid his hands down her sides to snag his fingers in the waistband of the panties. With one smooth move, he had them off her. Before she could take another breath, he shoved one hand under her back, pulled her up and had the bra unhooked and free of her body. Bare to him, he covered her with his hard, heavy body and nudged her legs apart with his knee.

"I wondered how long it would take you to realize you want me as much as I want you," he said.

"I"

That was as far as she got for he was suddenly inside her, and she was on fire with wanting him. She brought her legs up to capture his lean hips and all else evaporated around her save the weighty pleasure plunging expertly into her wet channel.

He took her gently but firmly at first but then the strokes deepened and the hard pounding that was soon slamming in her body was sheer ecstasy. His cock was like an iron rod covered in velvet and his wielding of it left no doubt in her mind that he knew precisely what each thrust of his hips, each prolonged hold deep inside her, each grind of his sex against hers was doing to her. She dug her fingers into his sweaty back, clenched her legs ruthlessly around his waist and arched her body up for each hard, determined thrust. His low grunts only accentuated the sheer lust bubbling up inside her and when they came—in unison and with vocal releases of the pent up pleasure being set free—she clung to him for fear she would spiral into oblivion so great was that pleasure. She felt as though star bursts were exploding around her as she came crashing back to earth. Her body tingled where it touched his and deep inside, she believed she could actually feel his seed pulsing as he emptied into her sheath.

"You belong to me," she heard him say just before he turned to his side to clutch her tightly to him. He continued the roll until she was lying atop him, her head pillowed on his shoulder, his strong arms imprisoning her, as though he had no intention of ever allowing her to leave him. "You are mine."

For just a moment those words frightened her. They had been spoken with such clear conviction, such finality.

She wasn't sure she was ready for such a commitment.
Not sure at all.

Chapter Five

Wynter stared at the condom in the wastebasket beside her bed, lower lip tucked between her teeth. Though she couldn't remember Chance slipping one on—and that should have been uppermost in her thoughts before the mind-blowing sex in which they'd engaged—she was grateful he had been the responsible one. It did, however, give her pause. It had been over a year, since she'd been intimate with a man, her plumbing had long since been removed, but the very real thought of contracting a STD made her shudder. As she listened to the soft humming coming from her shower, she thanked whatever angel was looking out for her that Chance had been conscientious about their lovemaking.

Finishing making the bed, she smoothed the coverlet and was plumping the pillows when he came out of the shower. Gentleman that he was, he'd insisted she go first and had made no move to join her—though she had kept a watch on the door through the glass door of the shower.

"I love standing under hot water," he said, towel-drying his thick hair. "The cold has always bothered me."

"Where are you from?" she asked as she sat down on the bed to watch him as he passed the towel over his wet chest. Her gaze dipped to the other towel wrapped around his lean waist.

"I was born in Babylon in ancient Mesopotamia," he replied with a grin.

Wynter's eyebrows shot up. "Oh, were you now?"

He nodded. "My father was a fire demon during Hammurabi's reign."

"Okay," she said, drawing the word out. "I'll buy that."

"Being desert-born, the cold bothers me," he stated.

"So you are" She cocked her head to one side, arched a brow. "How old?"

"I was 53 when I was sent to the Abyss," he answered. "I'm closing in on 3800 years but Nightwinds never look their age."

"Oh, my and here I thought I was with a younger man."

"I'm young at heart," he replied.

"The Abyss." She was enjoying the make-believe. "What exactly is that?"

"A prison where bad little boys are sent to atone for their sins," he replied.

"And were you a bad little boy?"

"One of the absolute worst," he said. "I made my living seducing wealthy women." He winked. "That's what incubus do, you know. I gave my calling an added twist by fleecing them of their fortunes. When one killed herself over my misdeeds, the goddess had had enough. The woman had no sense of humor, believe me. She sent me spiraling through the black, frigid depths of space to the Abyss." He shuddered. "A truly awful place, lemme tell you."

"Well, I hate to be the one to tell you this, sweetie," she said, "but I am not a wealthy woman."

"I gave that up the first time I was called from the Abyss to make better the life of your great-great-great—many times removed great—ancestress," he told her. "Now, I am blood-sworn to protect your line of McGregor women from the pitfalls in life."

"Ahh," she said, nodding. "Now I know why you're here." She smiled as he unwrapped the towel at his waist. Heat curled in her belly as she got a good look at the heavy shaft between his muscled legs.

"Didn't want there to be any lies between us," he said, stepping into his slacks.

"That's very good of you," she agreed.

"I'm not the only entity out to win you," he said. He pulled on his shirt.

"Entity?" she repeated.

"I'm a Nightwind. He's a Reaper, a lower class of being."

"I see."

"You've met him." He sat down on the chair beside her bed to draw on his socks.

"Kaegan Cree."

Wynter stared at him. "You know him?"

"Unfortunately so," he said. "He's my half-brother. His mother was a hierodule."

"A prostitute of the temple," she said, letting him know she knew the history of the time.

"In other words, a whore," he reminded her. "Our father was quite the lover."

"And obviously very potent."

"Like father, like son," he said, wagging his brows.

Wynter laughed but was uneasy with what she'd learned. The odds of the only two men to flirt with her in months knowing one another and even being kin to one another was unsettling.

"And is Kaegan closing in on 3800?" she teased.

"No," he said with a snort. "He's only around 400 or so. Just a babe."

"What about papa? Is he still around?"

"No, he was exorcised by a Catholic priest not long after Kea was hatched." He smiled.

"He's gonna call you today," he said, getting to his feet. At her perplexed look, he grinned.

"Kaegan. He's gonna call to ask you out."

"Really?"

"You should go," he said.

"Because ...?"

"You will have someone with whom to compare me." He gave her a long look. "Then you'll know I'm the right man for you."

"Oh I will, will I?" she queried, lips twitching.

"Most definitely. As much as I despise the little prick, fair is fair."

"What's his story?" she questioned. "Did he end up in the Abyss alongside you and get frozen in time?"

"Frozen in time," he echoed. "I like that but no. Although he did wind up in prison, it was a corporal one."

That stunned Wynter. "What did he do?"

"Killed a man who abused" He stopped as though he'd been about to reveal more than he should. "A woman. Truth be told, I would have done the same, so I can't fault him for what he did."

Something in his tone made her realize he was being truthful. Her brows drew together. "He really did kill a man?"

"It was an accident," he replied. "The courts called it manslaughter, and he spent twenty years in prison."

She decided she didn't want to know anything about it or the man who'd been incarcerated there. Every instinct screamed at her to forget all about Kaegan Cree.

"Don't do that," he said. "Give him a chance."

"You're encouraging me to date your rival?" she asked, unnerved by his seeming ability to intercept her thoughts.

"I want to win fair and square," he said, "and that's why I'm being upfront with you. I doubt he'll be the same but who knows?" He cocked a shoulder.

Wynter narrowed her eyes. "Win?" She clenched her teeth. "Am I missing something here? Have the two of you placed a bet on who could screw me over first?"

He sighed. "Wynter, Wynter, Wynter," he said. He came to hunker down in front of her, taking her hands, though she tried to pull them away. He managed to grasp them and held them firmly. "Sweetie, you've got to get over this predilection for thinking men are trying to screw you over." He tilted his head to one side. "Is it so hard to believe there are men who find you irresistibly attractive?"

Although she tried to jerk her hands free, he would not allow her to. "Yes," she said, feeling moisture gathering behind her eyes. "I've no illusions of how I look, Chance. I'm a sixty year old woman who is overweight and"

"Deluding herself into thinking she's unworthy." He shook his head slowly. "That isn't the case."

"I'd like you to leave now," she said, lowering her head, unable to look him in the eye. She was perilously close to tears.

He squeezed her hands, lifted them and placed a light kiss on her knuckles.

"Please, go," she said.

He eased his hands from hers and got to his feet. For a moment he stood there then went over to retrieve his loafers. She heard him walk to the bedroom door.

"Don't shut me out, Wynni," he pleaded. "Don't let misplaced pride end what could be a beautiful relationship before it ever starts."

She made no reply to his words, and after he left her, she sat with her shoulders slumped, listening to the front door close behind him.

"Meow?"

Butterbean came running into the room and hopped up on the bed beside her.

She picked up the furry feline and cradled him in her lap.

"I'm such a fool, Bean," she said.

"Meow," the feline said in a tone that suggested he was disagreeing with her.

* * * *

"I've been expecting your call."

Kaegan's hand tightened on the receiver. "You have?"

"Chance said you would be calling."

"Who?"

"Chance?" Wynter asked with a bit of annoyance. "Your brother? The bookstore owner who likes to pretend he's a demon in his spare time?"

"Oh, him," Kaegan said, wondering what lies the demon had told her.

"You are brothers." He could hear the suspiciousness in her voice.

"Much to my regret, yes," he admitted. "I call him Azzin."

"I don't want to know what that stands for," she said.

"So what gods-awful things did he say about me?" he inquired.

"He said you were the son of a hierodule, that you're about 400 years old, and you're something called a Reaper," she said with a sigh. "Your brother lives a very impressive fantasy life."

"Well, at least he didn't lie to you," Kaegan said, knowing full well she didn't believe a word the demon had spoken.

"He also said you spent twenty years in prison for manslaughter."

That surprised Kaegan but he couldn't deny it. "I did."

"All I'm gonna ask is if the man you killed gave you no other choice."

Those words surprised him even more. "If I hadn't taken matters into my own hands, he would have killed you" He winced. "Killed Eula. Her name was Eula," he was quick to lie.

"I believe in justice," she said. "While I don't condone killing, I don't condemn you for doing what you felt had to be done."

"I appreciate that, Wynter," he told her. "I want you to know I would never lie to you. I meant it when I said I want to get to know you."

"Listen, Kaegan," she said. "I really don't know what's going on here, but you can see why I would be very suspicious of both you and your brother. I'm not accustomed to men hitting on me and certainly not men as young as you."

"Age is in the mind of the beholder," he told her. "I have an old soul."

"And I am an old soul," she stated and when he started to protest, she cut him off. "But I've had a few hours to think about what Chance told me and I've decided I'm going to go with the flow. You and your brother may be playing me but at the moment, I'm willing to go along with it because—frankly—I'm bored with my life."

"We're not playing you," he said. "Vying for your attentions, yes, but there is nothing illegal or immoral about our wanting to be with you. We"

"I'm not even going to try to fathom why the first men who've hit on me in ages are brothers I meet a day apart in two different cities," she said as though he hadn't spoken. "I'm just going to suspend rational belief and just enjoy the attention—as you call it—for now."

"That's, ah, good," he said lamely. "I guess."

"I'm not rich and I'm far from famous," she said. "I don't have any stocks and bonds or hold any deeds to desirable property. I have no intention of ever marrying so what the two of you see is what you're getting. Any questions?"

Kaegan smiled. The defensiveness in her tone was abrasive but beneath it was an underlining of vulnerability.

"What time do I pick you up tonight and where do you want to go?" he asked.

"Seven and surprise me."

With that, she hung up.

* * * *

"Oh, Lord!" Wynter said as she laid the cell phone down on the counter and brought a trembling hand to her mouth. What had she done? She'd never acted so impulsively in her life, and it made her stomach churn just thinking about the way she'd talked to Kaegan Cree.

"You never take chances," Rachel had once accused. "Your life is so dull, a gallon of Brasso wouldn't put a shine on it! You need to get out, meet people, get some, and I don't mean salsa and chips, sweetie!"

Hiding her face in her hands she sat down on the loveseat in her office and made a whining sound that had Butterbean beside her in a flash, butting his head against her arm.

"I'm going to regret this, Bean," she said.

"Meow?"

"What if they are con artists? What if they are serial tag team rapists? What if ...?"

Bean made a chuffing sound that brought her hands down and when she looked at the cat, he was staring up at her with what she thought looked like human exasperation.

"A bit much?" she asked. "You think I'm over-reacting?"

Once again, her cat made that strange huffing sound then jumped down. Apparently, he felt his job was done for he hopped up on her desk to continue his nap.

"I guess you told me," Wynter said with a laugh. She slapped her palms on her knees. "Okay, no more pity party. Let's get to writing!"

* * * *

Kaegan was perched on a branch outside Wynter's office, watching her as she worked. In his raven form, he could keep tabs on her from the birch tree and had been doing so since his release from prison a few weeks earlier. Unlike the demon, he could not manifest himself inside the house in a mist of atoms.

The Nightwind had done so the day before but was prevented now from repeating the trick. Both were being watched closely by the Shadowlords and Kaegan had no intention of bending or breaking the rules of the contest. Any infraction regarding how he courted Wynter would put him out of the running and would be dealt with harshly. The thought of being sent back to prison made him shudder—and the leaves around him quake.

"Don't let me see you here again," the Prime Reaper Viraidan Cree, head of security at the prison had warned.

"No, milord!" he had sworn to the infamous Prime—the first Reaper to set foot on Earth.

Kaegan had no intention of ever being remanded to Baybridge again. He hoped Azzin had not told Wynter exactly where he'd been incarcerated since Baybridge was an institution for the criminally insane—and the only prison capable of holding otherworldly creatures who had run afoul of human and paranormal laws.

The mere thought of Wynter knowing he'd been sent to the asylum sent a ripple of fear down his spine. Finding out he had been interned in such a place would be a definite deal breaker.

He fluttered his wings in the avian equivalent of a human man hunching his shoulders to release the tension. It was getting late and he was hungry. He'd almost made his mind up to fly away when he saw Wynter get up from her desk and come to the window. He froze, hoping she'd notice him on the branch.

How many times over the centuries, he thought, as he stared at her face had he watched this woman in her many reincarnations? Each time he had gone to her and taken her to mate not long after her fortieth birthday. Why the goddess had set that particular time of her life, he wasn't sure, but it was a rule set in stone. Not once in all those rebirths had she known the hand of any other.

Until now.

The thought of other men touching what he considered his sent spirals of black rage through Kaegan Cree. He had known, had felt, had endured every single liaison she had experienced from her fortieth birthday until the night before when she had lain in the arms of the demon.

Knowing, feeling, enduring Azzin's hands on her had ripped the heart from Kaegan's chest—just as he knew the Nightwind realized it would.

It had been bad enough with those mortal men who had seduced and later abandoned her. He had wanted to kill each of them as he had Kory Kline, the co-worker at the newspaper where she was working.

Kline. The sick bastard had followed her home one evening with the express purpose of torturing and raping her. Kaegan had read it in his mind. Had he not intervened, the pervert would have carried out his sadistic plan. Though the authorities had no idea what had happened to the murdered man, the Shadowlords knew exactly what the Reaper had done. He had been tried, found guilty and sentenced—struggling violently against the incarceration for fear something would happen to his beloved Wynter while he was unable to protect her.

"We will see no harm comes to her," High Lord Kaleb had sworn.

The Shadowlords had not pledged that Wynter would not be subjected to the whims of men who would use then toss her aside. Men who would break her heart and leave her an old maid with a cat as her only companion.

"I should have been with you all those years, lhiannon," he thought at her and saw her eyes shift to the place where he was perched. He watched her smile.

"Hey, little buddy," he heard her say. "Aren't you a pretty boy?"

He cocked his head to one side—knowing it would make her laugh and when she did, it made his heart soar. He had always loved her laughter, the way her eyes sparkled when the dimples in her cheeks appeared.

She watched him for a few moments as he preened for her, hopping along the branch to amuse her. Her palm was splayed against the windowpane, her forehead resting on the cool surface as she observed him. There was wistfulness in her eyes that bespoke the desire to be as free and unencumbered as he. He could almost hear the sigh of regret as she turned from the window.

"I love you," he thought at her. "With all my heart and all my being, I love you, and always will."

Never could he allow the Nightwind to win her. Surely there were other McGregor women somewhere in the world who would welcome the demon with open arms. Wynter could not be the last of her line. That Azzin had come to stake his claim of this particular woman, at this particular time, reeked of a hidden agenda.

There had never been any love lost between the half-brothers. They could barely tolerate one another. Having a fire demon as a common sire had given them powers that Azzin abused and Kaegan had always been afraid to use.

Until the day he turned thirty-two and met his death at the hands of a warrioress who took exception to him not returning her fanatical love.

"Chaka," he mumbled. Even the bitch's name on his tongue made his gut burn, and he mentally put a hand to the place where she had run him through with her poisoned dagger.

She had spat on him as he laid gasping, the pain so unbearable all he could do was writhe on the ground. Hunkered beside him, it had been her intent to watch the light fade from his eyes but the arrival of the goddess had sent his killer fleeing.

All he remembered of the Triune Goddess winging down to him were the flash of copper scales in the sunlight, the thick talons that planted themselves beside his head as the ground shook beneath Her awesome weight. One moment he was staring up at the fiercest dragon he'd ever seen and the next he was floating high above the clouds in the arms of the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen—Her long red hair flying behind her.

What came next was a blur. He remembered her turning him to his belly, making an incision in his back and then experiencing pain far worse than that which had been caused by Chaka's blade. When he woke, he was told he was immortal and that one day, he would be called upon to do the goddess' bidding.

That day had come in 1479 when he had been sent to rescue a woman from her imminent death at the stake in Edinburgh, Scotland. He had spirited her to safety and taken her well beyond the reach of the authorities. That woman had been Deborah McGregor. She had become his mate, his wife, the love of his life, and he had offered her the gift of immortality. She had refused—as she had with every reincarnation since that time.

Now it had come down to Wynter and he knew in his soul he would do what was needed to win her hand...again. If he lost her in this reincarnation, he knew the goddess would return for him and whisk him away to wherever Reapers who failed Her missions were sent to atone for their sins.

Chapter Six

"Ground rules," she said as soon as she opened the door to him. She made a fist then thrust her thumb into the air. "No talk of demons and crap like that, of anything otherworldly."

"That wasn't me," Kaegan reminded her.

Her index finger popped into the air. "You won't mention your brother to me at all. This is our date."

"The less I talk about him the better I feel," he admitted. "Anything else?"

The middle finger made its appearance. "I want to know how you knew what I liked for comfort food."

He smiled slowly. "I can't do that and not break rule number thumb," he replied.

Wynter rolled her eyes. She pushed open the screen door to join him on the porch. "I can see you possess as much evil as you-know-who."

"Not me," he said, slapping a hand to his chest. "I'm not the incubus in the family."

"Uh huh," she said. Her gaze went to the low-slung sports car sitting at the curb and she whistled. "Sweet."

"It's not a black destrier," he said, "but it runs faster."

She smiled at his reference to a medieval war horse. "Probably costs more to maintain, too."

"You'd be surprised," he said, offering her his arm. When it was tucked through his, he drew it close to his side. "All things considered—money-wise—it would be about the same if we were back in the day."

She stopped walking as they left the steps and looked up at him. "What do you do for a living?"

"I don't work," he answered. "I've more money than Warren Buffett and Bill Gates combined."

She narrowed her eyes. "How come I've never heard of you, then?"

"I maintain a low profile but trust me. I am independently wealthy and I promise I won't stiff you on the check at dinner tonight."

Wynter sniffed and continued walking. "You better not because I've decided I want to go to La Maison du Temps in Iowa City and that is a very expensive place."

He winced. "French food? When did you develop a taste for foo-foo food?"

"I've always liked French cuisine," she told him as they reached his car and he leaned down to open the door for her.

"Not always," he said under his breath.

"Don't you like escargot?" she countered.

"I don't like slugs of any bent," he answered. He thought of the creature with whom he had a symbiotic relationship, the entity known as a revenant worm that had become a part of him when he was made into a Reaper.

"You don't know what you're missing," she said, sliding gracefully into the passenger seat.

"Slime and mucous and warty flesh?" he queried. He shook his head. "I don't eat oysters, either, because they look like phlegm."

Wynter laughed. "Well, I agree with you there." She settled into the cockpit of the very expensive foreign job when he shut the door. Her gaze followed him as he skirted the bonnet, opened his door and got in. "I bet you have a name for this beauty."

"I do," he agreed. "I call her gaoth-an-dubha."

"Which means?" she asked as she buckled her seatbelt.

"Blackwind in the Old Language."

She didn't ask what language for it sounded Gaelic to her. "An apt name."

"It is," he agreed. He turned on the engine, shifted into gear and pulled smoothly from the curb. "Nice neighborhood."

"I like it," she said and turned in the seat so she could look at him.

He was an extraordinarily handsome man with a clean profile that was marred only by the slight downward hook of his very masculine nose. That little hook did nothing to detract from his looks. Rather it lent a certain strong essence to his character.

"Are you ogling me, now, lass?" he asked in a thick brogue.

"I am." She tilted her head to one side. "You are very oglable."

He laughed. "Is that even a word?"

She shrugged. "Writer's license," she replied.

"How's your latest work coming?"

She thought of the erotic scene she'd written earlier that day and had to look away from him. "Pretty good."

"Who's your hero this time?" he inquired as he threw up a hand to wave to Stuey as they rolled past the security kiosk.

"His name is Paxton," she said. "He's a pirate." She heard him sigh and looked around, one eyebrow raised. "What was that sigh for?"

"Pirate, vampire, gunslinger, knight, Comanche brave." He shrugged. "Why don't you make him something else for a change."

"Such as?"

He cocked a shoulder. "A Reaper."

"Ah," she drawled. "So tell me what a Reaper is and maybe I'll consider it."

"He's an alpha male, of course."

"Of course," she acknowledged.

"A warrior among warriors." He cast her a fleeting look. "The deadliest of the deadly. A badass with a penchant for rescuing damsels in distress."

"Sounds like all the rest of my creations," she said.

"He's nothing like that."

"What makes him different, then?"

"He has the strength of ten men."

"So do vampires," she stated.

"Aye, but he can shift into a wolf or a hell-hound or a werecat."

"A vampire can turn into a bat."

Kaegan sniffed disdainfully. "Some hero. All that is is a flying rodent. A Reaper can also shift into his clan totem such as a raven or an owl or a hawk."

"That's sexy. What about longevity? Is he immortal?"

"The only two ways he can die is if you take his head or give him a concentrated dose of pure garlic," he answered.

"Is he born a Reaper or is he created like a vampire or werewolf?"

"Created by the Triune Goddess, Morrighunia," he replied. "She comes to him as he lies dying and takes him to Jeeoil, the Home of the Gods, and transfers a hellion from Her body to his."

"A hellion?" she queried. "What's that?"

"It's a parasite called a revenant worm," he explained. "An ugly little piece of work that resembles a tomato horn worm on steroids. It burrows down into a cut over the Reaper-to-be's right kidney and starts to reproduce."

"Ewww!" Wynter said. "That's disgusting!" She shook her head "No, that wouldn't be romantic at all!"

"But just consider what that symbiotic relationship brings to the Reaper," he said. "Along with the superhuman strength and longevity, he has vast psychic abilities such as telekinesis, telepathy, clairsentience, and clairsaudience. He has a vast immune system thanks to the secretions given off by the hellion." He paused. "And he can make others like himself."

"Why would he want to?"

"Well, let's just say his lady has terminal cancer. He can cure her to save her life."

Wynter's eyebrows shot up. "How?"

"By transferring a fledgling from his body to another one. The parasite will attack the cancer, kill it and give his lady the same powers he has"

She thought about that for a moment. "Any drawbacks?"

"A few for the male Reaper," he answered. "If he is of the wolf clan, he will have only one mate although hell-hounds and werecats have been known to have several."

"I wouldn't consider that a drawback. Having one mate, I mean."

"It is only if the mate dies," he said. "The Reaper will spend the rest of his life in mourning."

"Oh, now that's sad," she said. "Tragic and sad, but interesting." She opened up her purse and took out a pad and pen. "Go on. What other drawbacks?"

"He Transitions once every three months and has to be confined to a place where he can't harm humans."

"Transitions," she repeated, tapping the pen against her chin. "Like a werewolf would at the turn of a full moon?"

"Something like that," he replied. "Only far more lethal and far more intense."

"He's more beast than a normal raging beast."

"Precisely," he said. "And completely uncontrollable. Silver bullets wouldn't faze him although garlic...in a large enough dose...will kill him."

"Is that all? Drawbacks, I mean?"

"He has to take Sustenance every day as well as a drug called tenerse that keeps him from Transitioning out of cycle." His fingers flexed around the steering wheel. "The tenerse is injected into his neck and it hurts like hell."

"Umm," she said and began writing furiously. "Into the carotid artery?"

"Yeah," he said, flinching.

"Ouchie."

"You have no idea how ouchie it really is," he mumbled and wished he hadn't said it. She didn't need to know about the pain.

"Fascinating," she said, scribbling a few more notes before closing the pad and putting it back into her purse along with the pen.

They were almost to the I-80 ramp, the sports car tooling along so quietly she could barely hear its engine. The sleek dashboard, the creamy leather seat, the plush interior made her feel very sensual and when he slid his right hand over to cover her left one, she felt a tingle of electrical current past between them.

"Can I tell you a story?" he asked.

"Sure. What kind of story?"

He turned to lock his gaze with hers. "Of unending love and unbreakable devotion. A love story that has spanned the centuries."

"You betcha!" she said. "My kind of story!"

"It begins in Edinburgh, Scotland in 1479. There was to be a mass burning of people accused of witchcraft." He squeezed her hand. "The crowds gathered early for it was said a noblewoman was among the accused. She had been falsely charged by a rival and had been languishing in a cell for many months before that fateful day. It was a carnival-like atmosphere that greeted our hero as he rode through the cobblestone streets on the way to the execution."

"The noise of the crowd, the vendors hawking their wares, chickens clucking and sheep baaing all added to the din that greeted him. His mount shied—canting sideways along the street—as children ran among the stalls and darted past. It was hard to keep the beast under control for the smells of those gathered was overpowering and the animal's nostrils flared, its eyes rolled."

"Easy, boy," Kaegan said, leaning forward to pat the stallion's neck. "We'll find the woman and be gone before the smells get too bad for us."

Burning flesh was something one never forgot after experiencing it just once. The accompanying screams as the victims met their gruesome deaths would be forever an echo in many a nightmare.

Leading the big black to the stables, Kaegan paid the owner a hefty sum to watch over the animal until he returned. "I won't be long so don't bother unsaddling him."

"Here to see the executions, eh?" the man asked jovially. "I'll warrant there be many such what have come to our fair city today."

Not bothering to answer, Kaegan left the stable with a grim look upon his handsome face. On the world from which he'd been taken by the goddess, he had been a warrior of merit—the middle son of a Duke—who had been honored with induction into the Order of Taibshe, the ultra-secretive organization whose time-honored membership of male warriors are tested in the cauldron of adversity to be found worthy of joining. Before a member ever draws his sword, he must know the final outcome will be death. Among the powers granted to a member was the art of misdirection—an art that would come in handy this day.

Shouldering his way through the thick of the crowd, he came to the place where the stakes had been raised for the executions. A shudder rippled down his spine for he had met his death on Gaelach in a blazing inferno while trying to save a group of young nuns. He knew the absolute agony fire could bring to the flesh and had no desire to ever experience such pain again. His heart went out to the men and women who would meet that gods-awful fate today but he could save only one—the woman he had been sent to retrieve.

He stopped, reached into the pocket of his coat and drew out the pen and ink drawing of Lady Deborah McGregor. He unfolded the parchment and looked down at the gently smiling face. He had looked at the drawing many, many times over the last few days and would know

the woman by sight no matter how frail she was bound to be from her imprisonment. What he needed was to gaze upon that sweet smile just once more to remind himself of the importance of his mission.

A roar went up and he felt another shudder ripple through him as he hastily folded the drawing and returned it to his pocket. Heads were turning toward the far end of the square and people were standing on tiptoe, craning their necks, shoving one another aside in their haste to see what was transpiring. Like a human wave, the people surged forward, the racket becoming deafening. Boots and worn-out shoes, bare feet scraped over the cobblestones as the rubbernecks pushed their way closer to the place of execution.

Mindless of the milling throng that acted like a living barricade, Kaegan wedged through those assembled until he was at the forefront, within a few feet of the piles of rushes that would be placed around the prisoners' feet. His gaze moved up one stake. There were places where the green wood was soaked overnight to slow the burning process. Here in Scotland, that wasn't done. In most cases, the victims were garroted before the fires were set so he had only a small window of time to get to Deborah before her life was ended.

Another loud clamor went up as the prisoners were brought out. They were a motley bunch of humanity—bruised and battered, half-starved and filthy. Wrists tied behind them, they were herded toward the stakes. Most were trembling. Some were crying. A few had to be half-lifted and carried along, their piteous sobbing like a sharp dagger to Kaegan's heart. He tried not to look them in the face for he knew he would see them again when he closed his eyes this night.

She was the next to the last to be drawn forth. Her ragged skirt dragged behind her, one thin shoulder could be seen through a rent in the sleeve of the once-beautiful silk gown. Her long brown hair was matted with straw, dirt and grime blotched her pale face.

"That's her!" a woman behind Kaegan said. "That's the McGregor witch!"

At the sound of her clan name, she looked up—searching the crowd—and her eyes briefly met his before moving on. There was so much sadness and resignation in that bewildered gaze it ripped a hole in the very fabric of his being. He felt it all the way to the marrow of his bones.

He knew whose face she sought in the crush of bodies pushing at his back. She was looking for her betrothed among those gathered but he knew Desmond MacDonough had fled Scotland with the very woman who had turned Lady Deborah over to the authorities, the same woman who had signed her rival's death warrant.

"Look at me," he pleaded and once more the green eyes flicked to his. He smiled to give her a measure of courage and when her lips trembled in an attempt to return the gesture, he saw a single tear slide slowly down her ashen cheek.

Misdirection, he thought as he watched them tying her to the stake.

Misdirection, he repeated again and again as they piled the rushes at her feet. The black-clad execution stood off to one side with the garrote in hand, his hooded gaze passing indifferently over those he would send to their deaths.

Misdirection as the last prisoner was secured and the last bundle of rushes had been laid.

"Misdirection", he whispered as the executioner walked behind the row of victims and to the man on Lady Deborah's left—the last out, the first to be dispatched.

He felt the transition undulating down his body. From head to foot he could feel the numbness, the lightness that overtook him, that settled over him like a soft silk sheet. He moved quickly—so quickly no one saw the movement—and was behind her before the executioner had completed the task of sending the prisoner to whatever reward lay beyond physical death. He

sliced through the ropes that bound her wrists to the stake and had her in his arms before the man in black moved unseeingly past the empty spot where she had stood to swing his garrote around the next victim's throat.

"What are you doing?" she whispered in a rusty voice.

"Shush, milady!" he warned, carrying her through a crowd that moved aside. Those he passed neither saw nor felt his passing nor realized anything was amiss. They simply did not see him. They saw what he wanted them to see—the executioner moving from one poor soul to another.

Misdirection, he had learned long ago was a larger movement concealing a smaller movement. The eye being directed to something more important to the viewer therefore taking advantage of the limits of the human mind in order to give the wrong picture and memory.

"Misdirection is a form of mass hypnosis," he remembered his instructor saying. "It changes the subjective experience, alters perception, sensation, emotion, thought and behavior so your target will see what you want them to see and not see what you don't wish for them to see."

And so he had moved quietly and swiftly through a crowd whose attention was turned from him. If they perceived his passing at all, it was in the slight rush of wind that was left in his wake.

Walking right past the stable owner, he carried her into the stable and hoisted her atop his mount. Putting a finger to his lip to silence the question he saw forming on her mind, he led the horse from the stable and along the cobblestones. The stallion—finely attuned to his master's mood and under the influence of that man's mind—moved as quietly and daintily as possible.

He saw her twist around in the saddle as the whoosh of fire broke the sudden stillness of the crowd. Her gasp as the rushes began to blaze cut him to the quick.

"Be at ease, milady," he told her. "They are beyond their suffering now."

Once they were beyond the crowd, he swung up behind her, bracketed her body with his arms and drummed his heels into the stallion's sides. The horse sprang forward. Soon they were on the road, the wind whipping her long hair, her back pressed firmly to his chest. Her hands—nails cracked and fingers smudged with grime—were clutched so tightly on the pommel, her knuckles were white. He laid one gloved hand over hers and felt the tension almost instantly relaxed.

For over an hour he kept his mount to a goodly pace but once they had put an adequate distance between them and the city, he slowed the beast to a walk, circling back a few times to make sure they weren't being followed.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"Kaegan Cree, milady," he introduced.

"Did Desmond send you?" she asked, turning her head so she could look up at him.

Kaegan glanced down. The light of hope was in her eyes and he hated to extinguish it but it was best she know the truth of the matter.

"Nay, milady. He is long gone with the Lady Rosalyn," he replied. "They left the night you were arrested."

She continued to look up at him for a long moment then faced the front again. "I see," she said in a soft voice.

"He did not deserve you, milady," he said. "You are well rid of such a craven coward."

She sighed. "I fear you are right, milord." Her shoulders sagged. "I fear I was a fool for having trusted him at all."

"You can trust me. I will see to your protection, Lady Deborah," he stated. "You have no reason to fear."

"You have not said who sent you to rescue me," she reminded him.

"A friend who wishes to remain anonymous," he said.

"Do I know him?"

"Her," he corrected. "And nay, I would venture to say you've never met. She took interest in your plight and wished to see justice done."

"Then you are her paladin?" she inquired.

"Nay, I am your paladin," he replied.

"Mine?"

"Aye, yours and yours alone."

She twisted her head to give him an inquisitive look then sighed again, laying her cheek against his broad chest. "Fancy that," she said and he felt her relax against him.

He tightened his arms around her and swore it would take a regiment of blade-wielding berserkers to take her from his hold.

"My, oh my!" Wynter said. "You've a way with words, Kaegan."

"'Tis the gods-gospel truth," he replied. "Every last word of it."

"An ancestor of yours?" she asked.

"And yours."

Wynter's eyebrows shot up. "Get outta here!"

He shook his head. "The Lady Deborah McGregor and Kaegan Cree became lovers. No children ever came of their unions but the love only grew stronger with time." He stroked her hand. "Stronger and surer."

"Unions?" she repeated.

He turned to give her a look that made her tingle from head to toe.

"We have been lovers since that day in 1479," he said, eyes fusing with hers.

"Reincarnation," she said. "You believe in reincarnation? You actually believe there is such a thing?"

"I have lived the lives, milady. I *know* there is," he stated.

She looked down at the strong hand that covered hers and felt another tingle go through her body. The wicked little muse that perched upon her shoulder as she wrote her romance novels kicked her in the chin with his pointy little boot then whispered in her ear. She smiled and nodded.

"Okay, if we've been lovers all through the centuries, you should be able to tell me if I have a birthmark and where it is," she said with a gleam in her eye.

He never hesitated as he changed lanes—moving around a slow-moving semi. "You do. It's on the inside of your left thigh, almost in the crease where the thigh meets the pelvic arch and it looks like a little star." He glanced at her. "The authorities in Scotland believed it to be a witch's mark and thus proof you were practicing the dark arts."

Wynter's mouth dropped open. "How did you know that?"

She watched him smile.

"I've kissed you there many times, milady." His hand massaged hers. "Many, many times."

Wynter snatched her hand from under his and just sat there staring at him. Her heart was pounding so hard she could hear the blood pushing against her eardrums and she felt chills

prickling along her sides. At last she shook her head to clear the strange thoughts that were suddenly flitting through it.

"So," he said as though realizing she wanted to change the course of the conversation. "What did you think about last night's Fringe episode?"

Chapter Seven

"I love crème brûlée," Wynter said wistfully. "I could eat my weight in crème brûlée."

Kaegan laughed. "You could have had another."

"And gained another five pounds?" She shook her head. "No, thanks. I'll stick to my nice, round one hundred and" She coughed. "Whatever pounds."

"You're not overweight, Wynn timer," he told her.

"I have no illusions about how I look, Kaegan. I'm a borderline fatty," she stated.

"You know there are men who like Rubinesque figures," he reminded her.

"Yeah, well any more junk in my trunk and I won't be able to keep the lid shut," she complained.

He chuckled at that and she liked the sound. In the darkness of the car, his face was illuminated by the dashboard lights but she could imagine the twinkle in his amber eyes.

"Are you ready for more of Lady Deborah's tale?" he asked.

She almost told him no but her curiosity and the interest of her evil little muse who was straddling her shoulder replied she was.

He flipped on the turn signal as he eased around a minivan. The traffic on the interstate was heavier than it had been on the way over to Iowa City and there was lightning in the west.

They rode for a while longer until he heard her stomach rumbling

He shook her gently. "There's an inn about a mile down the road," he said. "We'll stop there and get a room. He looked up at the sky where storm clouds were beginning to build.

"As you wish, milord," she said, yawning. She sat up straighter, realizing she must have fallen asleep against his chest. "I truly apologize. I didn't get much sleep last eve."

"Understandable," he replied, knowing her thoughts had been on her impending execution.

"I must look like a fright," she said and gathered her long hair over one shoulder. She began to braid it.

Realizing her appearance concerned her, he reined in the stallion and dismounted. He held his arms up to help her down.

"Why are we stopping?" she asked, clasping his arms as she slid from the horse.

Kaegan nudged his chin toward a copse of trees. "There's a stream there. I've soap in my saddlebag."

She wrinkled her nose. "Do I smell that bad?"

"Nay," he was quick to reply. "I just thought you would like a bath."

Her eyes lit up. "I would!"

"Let me go check for varmints, first," he told her.

When he returned, he told her he would wait where he was until she was finished. He fished in his saddlebags for the soap and handed it to her.

Looking down at the tattered gown, she hunched her shoulders. "I hate putting this back on but"

"You won't have to," he said. "I've left you a towel and a gown as well as under things and a pair of new shoes at the water's edge."

She blinked. "Where, pray tell, did you procure such things, milord?"

Thunder boomed overhead and she flinched.

"Be quick with your bath, milady," he warned. "The storm will be here in half an hour."

She opened her mouth as though she would protest but then she shook her head and hurried away, glancing back at him over her shoulder with a look that amused him. He soon heard her splashing in the water and found a log to sit on while he waited.

Overhead the wind picked up and the smell of approaching rain filled the air. He turned his gaze toward the stream. "Best hurry, milady!"

When she returned, her hair was wet but she had plaited it into a tight braid then tucked it in a bun beneath the mesh snood he had provided for her. The pale green gown he had fashioned for her from the powers at his command fit her like a glove, the bodice showing off the lush swell of her bosoms. The leather shoes were just visible at the scalloped hem.

She came to stand in front of him, smoothing her hand down the skirt. Her verdant gaze locked on his. "I'll not ask you how you came by the gown, milord." She cocked her head to one side. "I've a feeling such knowledge would be dangerous in the wrong hands."

Unable to speak, he stared at her for to him she was a vision of loveliness. The drawing in the pocket of his coat did not do her justice. Her full figure was a mouthwatering temptation he longed to wrap his arms around. The cupid's bow of her lips drew his gaze like iron filings to a magnet.

"Milord?" she questioned and even her voice gave rise to a passion he was finding difficult to conceal.

"I am a Reaper," he blurted out.

"I beg your pardon?" she queried, brow furrowed.

"A Reaper is a champion of the goddess. I have certain abilities She gave me so I might do Her bidding."

"Goddess?" she repeated, her eyes widening. "Are you speaking of the ancient Druid beliefs, milord?" She took a step back. "Do you not believe in God?"

"In my god, aye," he said. "There are more than one in the universe, milady."

Such talk obviously frightened her for she moved back even further, making it necessary for him to stand. He placed his hands over himself so she could not see the erection there.

"I am not of the devil, milady," he was quick to tell her. "I am not evil."

"I did not say you were but, milord"

Her words were punctuated by the shriek of lightning zinging into the stream and she cried out, throwing herself against him in terror.

"We must make for the inn!" he told her and scooped her up, carrying her quickly to the spot where his stallion was ground-tied. He flung her atop the saddle—astride his time—and vaulted behind her. As she clung to the pommel, he kicked the beast into motion in an attempt to outrun the storm that even then was starting to drop rain upon them.

Racing his mount over the heather and onto the winding road, he urged the animal to a faster clip as the sky grew darker and the wind became a force with which to reckon. By the time the inn was in sight, the rain was falling in earnest and they were fast becoming soaked to the skin.

The innkeeper looked up from the fire he was tending in the hearth as Kaegan carried his lady in. "Milord!" the man exclaimed. "Please bring your lady-wife to the fire!"

Kaegan felt Deborah shudder—whether from the man's false assumption they were married or from her earlier brush with death. He made a soft, shushing sound to ease her as he

took her to a chair the innkeeper pulled up to the growing flames. Once more he felt her shiver and knelt at her feet, clasping her hands in his.

"You're safe now, milady," he said, looking into her eyes. "No harm will reach you here."

Deborah's bottom lip trembled and she nodded, keeping her gaze from the hearth and the fire leaping there. She clutched at his hands as he started to rise.

"I'll see to a room," he said. "I know you are far worn out from our long journey."

"Bad day to be out and about, milord," the innkeeper said. He was smiling jovially as Kaegan rose.

"Your best room," Kaegan said, "and a hearty meal. We've been traveling hard to outdistance the storm."

"I'll send a lad to see to your horses."

"We've only the one horse," Kaegan said. "My lady-wife's threw her and ran off, may the devil take the beastie."

"A shame that but I've another mount I will sell you for a fair price if you are willing, milord," the innkeeper suggested.

Kaegan nodded. "We will speak on it when my lady is resting."

A blast of wind shook the inn then the rain came down in a heavy torrent that slapped against the windows. Deborah cried out as a skirl of lightning struck close by and Kaegan turned to her, opening his arms to her as she ran to him.

She buried her face in his doublet. "I hate storms," she said, trembling.

"Which room in ours?" Kaegan asked the innkeeper.

"The first on the right, milord. The door is open."

Sweeping her into his arms, the warrior carried the lady up the stairs as though she weighed no more than a child. Once in the room, he kicked the door shut and carried her to the bed, sitting down with her in his lap as he gently cradled her, shushing her as she made little mewling sounds with each crack of lightning and boom of thunder.

"I'm here, love," he said, smoothing his big palm down her cheek. "No harm will come to you in my keeping."

She lifted her head to look at him and in that one look something passed between them that shook him to his core.

"Milord?" she whispered, searching his eyes.

Unable to resist the temptation, Kaegan lowered his mouth to hers to claim hers. Gently but firmly he thrust his tongue between her lips. Her soft groan was all the permission he needed to deepen the kiss. He slid his hand from her face to her breast and molded it in his palm.

Instinctively Deborah ground her body against the thick bulge that was wedged against her rump. She wanted this man as she had never wanted Desmond. She ached for him. Her nipples tingled wanting to feel the pressure of his lips upon them, the sweep of his tongue. When he pulled back—their lips parting—she sighed his name, her arms snaking up to wrap around his neck.

Kaegan groaned deep in his throat and levered himself from the bed. He turned, put one knee to the mattress and deposited Deborah in the center of the bed, following her down to cover her with his body. He rained kisses on her forehead, her cheeks, her chin then placed a playful one to the tip of her nose. His gaze was as hot as the flames in the hearth below stairs, the heat from his body enveloping her.

"I am not a maiden, milord," she said. "I foolishly gave myself to him."

"A man unworthy of you," he replied.

She lifted a hand to lay her palm against his cheek. "I believe I am looking at the man destiny reserved for me."

He nodded slowly. "You are and before this day is through, he will claim you as his own."

A delicious shudder rippled through Deborah and she smiled but the smile fled as a horrible cacophony of shrieking lightning zinged around the inn. Once more she pressed her face to his chest and he turned to his side, drawing her with him and into the safety of his embrace. He flung one leg over hers to encase her in the shelter of his arms. He began to croon to her in a soft lilting brogue, in the ancient language of his people. He could feel her beginning to relax although with each new snap of lightning, she flinched.

A knock at the door, the innkeeper informing his guests their meal was ready, had Kaegan releasing the lady and going to the door. He opened it and stepped aside as a woman who was most likely the man's wife, gave him a clumsy curtsy then bustled in with a tray laden down with food that smelled very good.

"Roast beef and gravy," the woman announced. "Spring potatoes with chives and a spot of vinegar, fresh asparagus and a wedge of cheese." She put the tray on a small table in front of the window. "Ale for you, milord, and a cup of cider for milady."

"It smells heavenly," Deborah said, swinging her legs from the bed but cowering as another loud crack of lightning lit the sky.

"Bad day, it is," the woman said. "Enjoy your meal and if you've a mind for anything else, just yell. You be the only guests we got."

"Thank you," Kaegan said and handed her a coin which she took with another curt bob. He closed the door behind her departure then went to the table to draw out a chair for Deborah.

"I've not had decent food in many a day," she said, licking her lips.

They ate in silence for the pounding rain and constant shrieking of the lightning and thump of thunder made casual conversation impossible. The rain drumming on the roof sounded louder than normal and when the hail started, Kaegan looked up at the ceiling.

"That's not a good sign," he said.

"What?"

He raised his voice. "Not a good sign," he said, pointing to the ceiling.

Outside the windows, it turned inky dark and the wind whistled cruelly through the eaves. They finished the meal and Kaegan told her he thought it best if they went downstairs.

For the next hour they stayed below with the innkeeper and his wife and indentured servant lad. When the storm passed, they bid the others a good eve and retreated to their room, taking along two cups of mulled cider. Kaegan had bid the lad earlier to retrieve his saddlebags and the boy had taken them to their room.

"I've something we can do to pass the time," the warrior said. He opened his saddlebags and pulled out a deck of cards. "These were in the pocket of my coat when She sent me here."

Deborah had never seen a deck of cards and could not read but he laid the well-worn deck on the table and taught her what each picture meant. In less than thirty minutes, they were playing a child's easy game and—being a quick study—she was winning more times than not.

"Would you teach me to read, milord?" she asked, her eyes bright. "I would so love to learn to read the manuscripts in my father's library." She put a hand to her mouth. "And write them, too!"

"Well," he said, shuffling the cards. "Reading and writing go hand in hand, milady. I would be honored to teach you." He gave her a probing look. "You've tales you want told then?"

"Oh, aye," she said and her eyes turned dreamy. She tapped a finger on her temple. "I've many a tale screaming to be let out." She lowered her voice. "I know there are no women writers and that such would not be looked upon with disfavor but, oh how I would love to tell the stories clogging up my brain!"

"Tell me one of your tales," he said, laying the cards aside.

Deborah's cheeks filled with color and she ducked her head. "Truly?" she asked in a timid voice.

He leaned back in the chair and crossed his arms. "I am all ears, milady. Spin your tale for me."

Over the course of a couple of hours Kaegan sat spellbound as the lady wove the most fantastic and entertaining stories he'd ever heard. He was mesmerized by her ability to make the tales so intriguing he was mentally on the edge of his seat waiting for the ending. When she finished with the third of her elaborate tales, he shook his head in wonder.

"You have a gift for word weaving," he complimented her. "I am impressed."

"Think you I could hold a reader's attention, milord?" she queried, eyes agleam.

"I do," he said and when she yawned, he unfolded his arms. "I think you've tired yourself out with your tales."

She turned to look at the bed. "Aye," she replied, tucking her bottom lip between her teeth.

"Milady?"

Her attention returned to him and he could see the uncertainty on her lovely face. He reached for her hand, took it between his and locked gazes with hers.

"We've only the one bed but if it will ease your mind, I will sleep on the floor."

"No!" she was quick to say then crimson stained her cheeks. She tried to look away but she found she could not. She felt compelled to stare into his beautiful amber eyes and what she saw there both frightened and excited her. "I mean there's no need. I would like to sleep beside you, milord." She swallowed hard. "And all that that entails."

He caressed her hand. "Are you sure?"

"Aye," she whispered. "Very sure."

"What happened then?" Wynter asked, unable to tear her gaze from Kaegan's profile.

They were nearing an off-ramp and Kaegan slid over to take it. There was no light at the end of the ramp—only darkness for it was a county road that led both north and south to small towns. He drove a few hundred feet along the northbound lane then pulled into what was most likely an entrance to someone's cornfield.

Wynter looked about them, saw nothing and was a bit apprehensive when her companion turned off the engine. She looked around at him.

"He stood, held out his hand and helped her to her feet," Kaegan said, his voice low and husky. He reached down to flick open his seat belt. "Then he drew her to him."

Wynter felt a tingle go through her as he put out a hand to cup her neck. He pulled her face toward his to slant his mouth over hers. He kissed her thoroughly—flicking his tongue briefly past her lips—then moved back.

"He knelt before her and removed her shoes then stood to remove her gown, her chemise and the stockings. When she was bare to him, he brought her to him and pressed her naked body as close to his as space would allow."

"Oh," Wynter said on a long breath. His hand still cupped her neck and he was rubbing the pad of his thumb along her jaw line. She felt electrical currents of desire rippling through her lower belly as she gazed into his eyes—which even in the dark were glowing.

"He ran his hands down her back and she purred for him like a kitten. His palms slid to the turn of her rump and he molded those soft, plump cheeks in his palms, drawing her lower body against the hard erection that pulsed between them."

"Her head fell back," she whispered.

"When he removed the long braid from its snood," he added.

"And his lips went to the hollow at the base of her throat."

"Aye," he agreed. "To kiss the pulse that was a rapid tattoo beneath her silken flesh."

"She strained so the tips of her breasts grazed the leather of his doublet."

"The nipples growing hard at the abrasion," he amended.

"Aching with need to have him take them into his mouth, to suckle them."

"Which he did," he asserted. "After he kissed his way down the lush plane of each one. He drew those stiff peaks between his lips, flicked his tongue over them, grazing the sensitive nubs with his teeth then drew upon them firmly."

"As her hands raked through his dark curls to hold his head to her chest," she amended.

Kaegan lowered his hand to her breast and Wynter arched into his palm, pressing herself against it.

"He wedged a hand between them to rub the curls at the juncture of her thighs."

"And found her hot and wet, eager for his touch," she allowed.

"He eased a finger into that heated moistness and she hooked a bare leg behind his, rubbing against him like the cat to which he'd likened her."

"Then she pulled his head down so she could take his mouth, plunging her tongue deep inside the warm recess, feeling his cock leap at the invasion," she said.

"Unable to bear the agony of not having her any longer, he stepped back to tear at his clothing," he growled. "He shrugged out of the doublet, ripped the fine lawn shirt and dropped his pants to the floor."

"Aggravated beyond endurance when he discovered he still had on his boots," she teased.

"Boots he made haste to remove so he could bare himself to her," he acknowledged.

"And what a sight he made for her as he stood there in all his masculine glory," she said in a breathless voice. "His cock jutting hard, the tip weeping with a single drop of glistening seed."

Kaegan shoved his hand behind her and tried to jerk her to him but she was restrained by the seatbelt. He swore, fumbling with the buckle and when it snapped free, he pulled her over the console and to him, his mouth slanting ruthlessly across hers.

Deborah spiked her fingers through his hair and gave back to the kiss as much fervor and heat as he was applying. His hands were roaming down her back, his arms steel bands as he molded her to him. She dragged her mouth from his, sliding her lips along his cheek.

"He swept her into his arms and carried her to their bed," she whispered in his ear.

"Where he lay her down then spread himself atop her, wedging her legs apart with his knees."

"Reaching between them to position himself at her opening," she said with a moan.

"She was no virgin with whom he had to be careful yet she was as precious to him as a rare crystal vase so he did not thrust mindlessly into her wet sheath but firmly, going deep."

"He was much larger than Desmond," she said, "and he stretched her, filled her as she could not imagine ever being filled. His cock was thick and hard—velvet over steel and when he moved within her, she clamped her legs around his hips."

"And raked her nails down his back," Kaegan continued. "With each slow thrust, her nails dug into his flesh until he was so on fire with need, with unrelenting passion he could no longer control the depth or the speed of his thrusts."

"Her legs tightened around him and his thrusts began powerful plunges that made the bed beneath them quake."

"The sound of their flesh meeting, the scent of their combined juices drove him mad, wild as any berserker riding hell-bent-for-leather across the purple moor," he stressed. "He plowed into her moist furrow like a man possessed."

"Intent on planting his seed and"

"Staking his claim to her," he declared. He pushed his hand between them to cup her between the legs.

Wynter drew in a sharp breath as he squeezed her through the fabric of her slacks. She reached for his cock as it strained at the front of his pants. "She was his."

He arched his hips toward her. "He was hers and always would be."

"Together they rode out their passion with bodies slick with sweat and passions soaring," she pronounced.

"Until he felt the first pulse of her pleasure begin like a ripple on a still pond. It spread around him and tightened, quickening, gripping, sheathing him in that hot, wet slickness until she had milked every ounce of control from his body."

"And he spurted deep within her," she said in a low, throaty voice. "Pulsing his essence into the very heart of her womanhood."

"Oh, God, milady," he groaned. "He drove into her until there was no strength left within him."

"And he collapsed atop her, his head to her breast, her arms around his sweaty back."

"And he lay there with his heart pounding and his body sated and knew a peace such as he had never known before."

"As did she," Wynter agreed.

For a moment, neither spoke then they moved away from one another. There was no room in the sports car. No back seat into which to climb. They were each breathing hard, each on fire with a need that glowed around them like a will-'o-the-wisp. He was the first to speak.

"I need you," he said huskily.

"As I need you."

He jerked then straightened up, his shaking hand going to the ignition. The mighty engine roared to life. He backed onto the highway and sped back the way he came, taking the westbound ramp much faster than he should have. There was no motel between where they were and her house—at least not one whose clerk would not know her face—so he drove like a mad man, praying no Iowa State Patrol was cruising that section of I-80. He took the Oakland Acres

exit on what he thought might have been two wheels and roared down the ramp, slamming on brakes to keep from shooting past the stop sign.

Wynter reached over to lay a hand on his arm. "Don't kill us, sweetie."

He nodded, unable to speak for his cock was on fire with need—aching and so hard he could have used it to cut through a foot-deep trunk of petrified wood. His speed was only marginally better as he drove northward to Highway 6. He did a rolling stop then jerked hard on the wheel, nosing the sports car westward and to the bed that awaited them.

Chapter Eight

Wynter was amazed at her behavior. She'd always been a responsible adult, acting like a responsible adult and she did have the forethought to ask him if he had a condom before they began stripping each other's clothes off the moment the front door closed.

"Condom?" he asked then nodded as he tore at her blouse. "I'll make one."

"From what?" she questioned. She was tugging at his polo shirt, ramming it up his broad chest. "A baggie?"

Kaegan growled. "Don't worry." His fingers were running the side zipper to her slacks, shoving them down her legs.

"Shoes!" she warned and he growled again, hunkering down so quickly she stumbled backwards. She had to grab hold of his shoulder to keep from falling over as he jerked her foot up and practically tore the shoe from her body. She barely caught a breath before he was removing her slacks. She gasped as he shot to his feet, his arms reaching around her so he could unhook her bra.

"Going too fast," she mumbled but her hands were on his belt, stripping it from his lean waist. "Going way too fast."

"Not fast enough," he replied as the bra came away from her body and he slid his hands around her to cup her heavy breasts. "Aye, milady. Aye!"

His words were a husky snarl as he bent forward to capture one peak between his lips.

"Mother of God!" Wynter hissed, her hands splaying in his dark curls. He was laving her nipples, suckling, plucking at them with his teeth and her entire body felt as though it were being steeped in a bubbling cauldron. She had to push him back so she could slide his zipper down and reach inside his pants.

"Aye!" he asserted and had her in his arms before she could wrap her hand around his cock.

He took the stairs to her bedroom two at a time with the ease of a seasoned athlete though he was breathing hard by the time he kicked open her door. She knew it wasn't from the exertion of the mad dash up the stairs but rather the overpowering lust that had him in its grip.

"Want inside you," he said, dropping her to the bed. He shoved his pants down his leg—bellowed with rage when he encountered the obstacle of his boots. He kicked them off so brutally one hit the wall to put an indentation in the drywall.

"Easy on the house, warrior," she warned. "You" She stopped for she realized he didn't have on any underwear and the cock that had sprung from his pants was the largest she'd ever seen. The sight of it made her eyes flare and her mouth go dry.

"Want. Inside. You!" he stated a second before he hooked his fingers in her low-cut panties and yanked them from her in a move that had her heart thudding hard in her chest.

"Want. Inside. You. Now!"

Wynter opened her arms and he all but fell atop her, scrambling on her body like an eel as he shoved her legs apart and wedged his lower body between them. Her nails raked down his back until she could grip his hard, firm ass.

"Condom!" she hissed as he reached down to position himself.

"Shit!" he responded.

What she saw happen next stunned her so badly she ceased to breath. He held up his hand, looked at it and—in a scene straight out of a TV show from long ago—blinked. A condom appeared in his palm and he brought the tin foil packet to his mouth to tear it open with his teeth.

"How did you do that?" she whispered.

"I'm a Reaper," he replied, not thinking and with expert ease slipped the condom onto his stiff cock.

"That's not possible," she said. She was staring up at his face as he looked down at her and could have sworn she saw red flames leaping in the amber depths.

"Magick, milady," he said through clenched teeth. "Believe in it or not, but it exists."

Wynter opened her mouth to speak but he thrust into her with a smooth gliding motion that filled her so completely she couldn't have spoken had her life depended upon it. She was no untried virgin but neither was she some sleazy skank who took men to their beds at every turn. She was experienced but never had she known such a complete taking as the one occurring at that moment. He hadn't simply thrust into her. He had impaled her on his hard shaft and was wedged so tight within her she could feel the pulsing of his blood.

"You are mine," he said. "You always have been and you always will be."

He eased his hips from hers and the slide of that hard tool made her drag in a quick breath. She literally saw stars as he surged forward again, seating himself deep within her wet folds and holding himself there.

"Look at me," he commanded.

She locked eyes with him, sweeping her tongue over her dry lips. His gaze dipped for just as moment to her mouth then slowly returned to stare into her very soul.

"For centuries we have danced this dance, milady. I have come to you and claimed you as mine. I have Joined with you before the gods and man and gone to sleep at night with you in my arms, awakened the next morn with you at my side. I have watched you grow old and frail and each time you have died, you have died in my arms. This time it will be different."

Her forehead creased. "I don't understand."

"You have never allowed me to make you immortal," he said. "I am warning you here and now. This time—whether you agree or not—it will be so." His stare turned red-hot. "This time, I will make it so."

A shiver ran through Wynter. "Immortal?" she repeated but before she could question him about what he meant by that unbelievable assertion, he jammed his hands under her hips and lifted her. She sucked in a breath.

"This time, there will be no death to take you from me."

Her head was spinning as he began to thrust firmly into her body. He was stretching her almost to the point of pain but she was hot, slick with her need for him. She clung to his upper arms as he continued to hold her captive with his unblinking gaze. She ached for him, needed him, and wanted him so badly it was like a maddening itch deep in her belly. She arched her back, lifted her legs to wrap them securely around his waist.

"My woman," he said in that gruff, husky voice that sent chills down her sides. "My mate."

He increased the speed of his thrusts until he was rocking their bodies atop the mattress. His fingers were digging into her buttocks as he lifted her up with each forward drive. His chest was slick with sweat and one dark curl hung over his forehead. He drove as deep as her body

would allow—held it—then made three quick, short pushes, pulling almost out of her, then driving deep again.

"Kaegan!" she cried out as the rippling, pulsing sensations of orgasm rushed up to take her over. She spiked her nails into his back, thrusting her hips up to meet each of his fiery thrusts. Her head lashed against the pillow as pure, unadulterated craving overwhelmed her and her vaginal walls undulated around his stiff cock.

He was like a piston as he drove into her. The slap of their bodies meeting was loud in the room. The bed vibrated beneath them and when he came, he threw his head back and bellowed his release.

"*Mine!*" he raged, the cords in his neck standing out. "*She is mine!*"

Wynter stared up at the strong column of his neck, watched the vein pulsing wildly there. She could feel his cum flowing into her, the jerk of his cock and when he was through, when all he could do was hover above her on arms that were quivering she drew him down to her, wanting the feel of his heavy weight pinning her down.

"Sleep, baby," she said, smoothing her hand over his back. "Sleep in my arms for a change."

There were so many questions she had, so much she wanted clarified. If he was, indeed, from beyond her time and space, she wanted to know the whole of it. If he did, indeed, possess the key to immortality she wasn't sure she wanted to unlock that door but she did want to know if it really existed. Just knowing the option was there gave her a feeling of serenity.

Cradling him, she gloried in the wash of his rapid breath blowing over her bare breast, cooling her flesh. His hard body was a wondrous gift she had never thought to be given. Young and virile and vital, handsome and strong and seemingly completely dedicated to her, he was a surprise she could never have imagined. She realized she would have been a fool to have turned down what he offered and she knew she would have regretted it bitterly if she had.

"I love you," she heard him say in a sleepy voice.

"I know, baby," she agreed and was surprised to realize she did know. She did not doubt for a moment his sincerity and that surprised her even more.

"Always."

"Yes," she whispered. "Always."

* * * *

Azzin paced back and forth across the deck outside Wynter's window and knew a fury unlike anything he'd ever experienced in his long, long life. His nostrils flared as the scent of lovemaking invaded his senses. Digging his claws into the palms of his hand, he growled low, savagely and looked about him for something to smash.

"*Come away!*"

The harsh command of the Ridgelord zinged through the demon's mind and he stumbled, slamming his hands to his ears. Such a painful reminder was like an electrical shock driving straight through his brain.

"*Now!*"

Allowed no alternative, the Nighwind dissolved into mist and dispersed into the darkness. As he sent his molecules traveling through the air, the anger was concentrated in his black heart. He was unaccustomed to losing a human woman to another man and he would be double-damned—again—before he allowed Kaegan Cree to take the McGregor woman from him.

When he formed once again into the shape of a man, he raised his eyes to the heavens.

"He used magic!" he accused. "By fashioning the condom, he used magic! Disqualify him!"

There was silence for a moment and then High Lord Kaleb appeared a few feet away, a stony look on his features. The mage lifted on dark brow.

"He used his magic!" Azzin repeated.

"Not to win her but to protect her," the mage responded. "My words to the two of you were that neither of you were allowed to use your powers to *win* her."

"He fashioned a condom!" the Nightwind repeated.

"You did, as well."

"He spoke of his past life!" the demon snarled. "Of their life together!"

"And you did not speak of past lives?" Lord Kaleb countered. "Who was the first to do so, demon?"

Azzin could hear his own black blood dropping to the ground from the scores of half-moon cuts in the center of his palms. He relaxed his claws but his breathing still bore the unmistakable rush of rage.

"He conjured that condom where she could see him do it!" he protested.

"So?" came the query. "He did not do it to woo her."

"It was an undue influence! She knows now he is of magick!"

The Ridgelord folded his arms over his chest and stared unrelentingly at the demon. "Why were you skulking outside her window? This is not your night with her. You knew your brother"

"Half-brother!" Azzin corrected.

"Was with her," the mage continued as though he had not been interrupted so rudely.

"Did you go to cause trouble as is your wont?"

The demon shifted from one foot to another, aching to wrap his hands around the mage's throat. "Nay, I did not. I was but protecting her, as well!"

"From what?" was the demand.

"She is a McGregor! All McGregor women belong to me!" Azzin shouted.

"Not all. Only those of the witchling line and Wynter McGregor is not a witchling nor was her mother before her nor the dam before that one. Her branch of the clan have had no dealings with your kind."

Azzin bellowed, enraged by the logic and driven past the point of rational thought because he could not take what he believed was his by right. He did not like to be stymied and especially not by a Ridgelord whose powers outdistanced his own.

"There are no others in the McGregor line to whom I can be bound," he said and winced for his voice had taken on a whiny, plaintive tone that embarrassed him.

"And you fear returning to the Abyss," Lord Kaleb stated.

"I do not want to return!" Azzin said and was even more embarrassed when his voice cracked and broke under the strain of his emotions.

"Have I said you will?" the mage countered.

"No, milord, but"

"Then count yourself lucky that I do not end the competition here and now, hand the win to your brother and be done with it. Screw with me and I will fling your wicked ass so deep into the Abyss, you will never see the light of day again!" Lord Kaleb shouted.

The Nightwind knew not to push any further. He bowed his head, the palm of his right hand to his heart. "It will be as you say, milord."

"Fucking-A, it will!" the mage snapped and was gone in a blast of choking gray dust that had the demon coughing and sneezing.

* * * *

Kaegan had heard every word between the mage and the demon. In that semi-wakeful state where his kind spent what passed for sleep, he had been privy to the entire conversation. Not that anything Azzin said surprised him for he knew the Nightwind would do all he could to win the contest. He also knew—eventually—Azzin would screw up, relying on the arsenal of abilities at his command when it began to appear he would lose Wynter to Kaegan.

And lose, he would, Kaegan thought as he tuned in to the soft breathing of the woman beside him. She was his by right of prior companionship and bond-mating. Lord Kaleb knew that and not even the Ridgelords could set that Joining aside.

So why—he wondered—had they set this obstacle in his path to having Wynter at his side once more?

"To teach you a lesson," the pragmatic little imp that served as his conscience whispered.

As if twenty years in Baybridge had not punished him enough, Kaegan thought. Twenty years without the woman he loved. Twenty years of a living hell for in the containment cell in which he was incarcerated, he had no way of reaching out to Wynter, of knowing what was happening with and to her. The lead lined chamber kept magick from escaping or entering. He knew only what the Prime Reaper Viraidan Cree wanted him to know.

"You know the old Serenian saying, Kaegan?" the Prime Reaper had asked.

"I know several," he'd replied and the head of Baybridge security had given him a hard look. "Which one do you mean, milord?"

"The one that states what is gained without effort is lost without thought; but what is gained through difficulty, is kept with care," was the answer.

"I know that one all too well," Kaegan admitted.

"Then think on it carefully for I've a notion you will be reminded of it often in the years to come," the Prime Reaper snapped.

Two days after his release from Baybridge, Kaegan had found himself standing in front of a house fifteen miles from the very prison in which he'd been jailed. Stunned to see Wynter through the window he thought the gods and goddesses had, at last, forgiven him for what he had done. Yet in the blink of an eye, he was told—in no uncertain terms—that he would have to work to get back what he had lost.

"You'll have to earn her trust and her love all over again," Lord Kaleb warned.

"I always do with every reincarnation," Kaegan replied.

"Not like you will this time," the Ridgelord declared.

Hearing a soft sigh escape his lady's lips, Kaegan opened his eyes to look at her as she slept. To him, she was the most beautiful woman in the world and always would be. Their bodies fit like two spoons in a silverware drawer. They were meant to be together. They had been created to be the complimenting half of the other.

As much as he hated this competition between him and Azzin, he realized it was a turning point for him. Quite possibly it was a turning point for the demon, as well. Perhaps the contest was a kind of punishment and object lesson for the Nightwind. Who knew what the Ridgelords had in their omnipotent minds?

Kaegan suspected this would be the last reincarnation for Deborah McGregor. No human life was infinite for there was measured time for the fragile soul incorporated within the frail

body. He was sure Deborah's race was run, the thread of her lifespan having reached its fraying end.

This time, he thought, he had to make sure she accepted the gift of immortality so they could continue on together. Life without her would be unbearable. She had to agree to having a fledgling from his body Transferred to hers.

Even it meant he had to force the decision upon her.

Chapter Nine

"Good morning." The voice on the other end of the phone sounded strained, not nearly as cheerful as the greeting had no doubt been intended.

"Good morning, Chance," Wynter said and flicked her eyes to the man stretched out beside her. Kaegan was watching her, a frown tight on his handsome face. "How are you?"

"I'm great," her caller replied. "Hope I didn't wake you up. I had some things I wanted to go over with you."

"No," she said, glancing at the clock. It was well past nine and she was usually up by seven. "Ah, what's up?"

"Well, we need to discuss the signing," he told her. "I've got some theater arts students who are going to be doing that skit I mentioned from *Love's Return*. I've got all the catering stuff down pat but I want to sit down with you and put together a press release. I've decided to take out a full-page ad in the *Des Moines Register*."

"An entire page?" Wynter questioned, eyes wide.

"I thought we could border the ad with the cover art from your books. Don't you think that would look sharp?"

"Yes, but"

"I'm having a special cake done with a rice paper cover of *Love's Return* and I intend to have a special gift basket for the bigwigs with a copy of the book, a bottle of the plum wine mentioned in the book, some chocolates."

Wynter was keenly aware of the forced gaiety in the bookstore owner's voice. It didn't sound quite right to her. There was something missing.

"Are you okay, Chance?" she asked. "You sound a little stilted."

"Could be because you're lying in bed with that fucktard of a brother of mine, pardon my French."

Wynter sucked in a shocked breath. "How did you know...?"

"I knew you had a date with him last night and I just heard him cough a minute ago."

She knew Kaegan hadn't made a sound for she was watching him from the corner of her eye but she let the lie pass.

"I think we do need to talk," she said.

"What about two o'clock today?"

"Tomorrow," Kaegan said softly. "Not today."

She turned her attention to him and nodded. "Tomorrow, Chance. I'll meet you at the store."

"Why not today?" Chance protested.

Wynter flinched as Kaegan took the phone from her.

"Because I said not today. Today, she's mine."

"She was yours last night! It's my"

"*Trasna ort féin*," Kaegan suggested then leaned over Wynter to hang up the phone.

"Should I ask you to translate that?" she inquired.

"Let's just say I didn't tell him to have a nice day," her lover replied. He returned to his side of the bed, braced his hands behind his head and crossed his long legs, his lips stretched into an evil grin.

"How *did* he know you were here?" she asked.

"Because he was loitering outside your window last night, eavesdropping, and got reamed a new one by the boss for having done it," he answered.

"And he got past the security guard how exactly?"

He shrugged, wobbled one foot, and looked at her. "If Reapers can transmute from man to wolf or bird, don't you think Nightwinds can do something similar?"

She elevated her brows. "Such as?"

"I believe they can change to vapor, cats, and something that is defined as a transmogrification," he replied.

"I don't know what that means," she said, forehead creasing.

"I thought writers were omniscient," he teased. "All knowing."

"We may be wordsmiths, Kaegan, but we don't have the power of the deities," she reminded him. "What does transmogrification mean?"

"Transforming into something grotesque or strange in nature." He held her gaze.

"There's a reason artists through the centuries have drawn demons as ugly-ass creatures."

"I doubt your brother was lurking on my balcony looking like Beelzebub," she quipped.

"The neighbors would have certainly noticed."

"Not if he didn't want them to see." He grinned. "Misdirection, milady."

"Humpf," she commented then swung her legs from the bed. "I gotta have some strong coffee to continue with this conversation." She heard him chuckle as she padded into the bathroom to relieve herself.

When she flushed the toilet, she caught her reflection in the full-length mirror and turned to look at herself. Rarely did she walk around naked and only then when about to take a shower. She wasn't enamored of how she looked—hips too broad, waist too thick, thighs too thunderous—so standing before the mirror was not something she made a habit of doing.

But at that moment she could not help staring for she looked different to her mind's eye—a bit thinner, a bit firmer—and when she turned to look at her ass—a bit less cottage cheese.

"Whoa," she whispered and ran her palm down her belly. Did it feel less bloated than the day before?

"You burned a million calories between the sheets last eve, milady."

She turned to see Kaegan leaning against the doorjamb, his muscular arms folding over his bare chest. He looked far too sumptuous for her peace of mind so she tore her gaze from his perfect male body and her gaze returned to the mirror.

Was her hair less filled with gray? Did it look fuller, shinier? Were her breasts a bit perkier?

Kaegan pushed away from the door and came over to her, stood behind her, his reflection a good head taller than hers. He eased his arms around her and pulled her to him, her back to his front. He lowered his head to place a lingering kiss on the plane between her neck and shoulder.

"I look different," she said, staring into her own eyes.

"It's in the good loving of a skilled man," he replied then raised his head just enough so he could look at her in the mirror. "Or is that the skilled loving of a good man? I forget."

"I'd say both," she said and turned in his arms, snaking her arms around his lean waist. She looked up into his smiling face. "You're changing me somehow."

He shook his head. "I'm not doing it, milady. You are."

"Are you going to tell me I am the witch Lady Deborah was reported to be?"

"She was no witchling, Wynni. She was bewitched by an unfaithful lover and ruthlessly betrayed by that man's mistress. The only magic in Deborah McGregor was the pure sweetness of her soul."

"Yeah, well, sweetness of the soul could never be attributed to *this* McGregor broad," she said and stepped back, releasing her hold of his luscious body. "I can be hell on wheels when I have to be."

"True," he agreed, "but that's just your soul maturing. The adversities of life have a way of hardening the delicate essence that makes you human. Sickness and pain, heartache and hard times will toughen you. Over the centuries you have developed a thicker skin and a sturdier personality than Lady D. had."

"Did you teach her to be stronger?"

"I guided her to find the strength she needed, yes. Together, we lived many lives where danger was but a step away. She had to learn to be strong and resilient."

She looked to the shower. "Will you tell me another tale of Kaegan and Deborah while I bathe?"

"While we bathe?" he countered with an arched brow.

Wynter smiled. "Only if you'll wash my back."

"I'll wash all of you," he said in a husky voice then reached down to run his palm between her legs. "Every inch of you."

A moment later, they were under the hot spray of the shower.

"The voyage across the ocean was hellish," he said as he lathered the soap between his palms. "The heat below decks was unbearable"

* * * *

Kaegan clung to the ratlines, his bare feet sure on the crosstree as he made his way to the crow's nest to begin his watch. It was the second dog watch and the bell had been rung to signify it was 4:30 and still the stifling temperatures of the July day bore down on his bare shoulders like heat from a baker's oven. He was slick with sweat; the waistband of his cotton pants was soaked. Reaching the crow's nest, he swung over the basket and gratefully accepted what little bit of breeze there was that high up to cool him.

He sensed her the moment she came on deck with the woman who was her traveling companion. His gaze went unerringly to her as he arched the sweat from his brow—the better to see her.

She was dressed demurely in a striped gown that matched the color of her green eyes. Her hair was coiled firmly into a chignon that looked almost painful in its unrelenting restriction of her fine tresses. With no breeze wafting across the deck, every hair stayed in place as she strolled to the rail, completely ignored by the sailors going about the day to day tasks assigned to them.

Though it irked him that no man paid attention to her, it also relieved him in a way. He didn't want other men looking at what was his. Over the one-hundred and thirty-seven years since he'd first laid eyes upon her, he'd made sure no other male infringed on Deborah McGregor's time. There had been a wicked clash of broadswords outside Glasgow in 1556, a brutal dagger fight near Inverness in 1642, and a duel with pistols at dawn in a misty-shrouded field in the Highlands in 1768. There had been a fistfight or two but those were of no

consequence and no man had died at Kaegan's hands. Wounded? Aye. Set down and disgraced? Aye. But though there was blood on his hands, no soul had been sheared from its earthly vessel.

Now here they were in the summer of 1850 mid-way across the Atlantic on a ship that was carrying many a Scots immigrant to America and the freedom that awaited them there.

She looked up—shielding her eyes from the harsh sun—and he knew she had felt his intense stare.

"Hello again my love," he whispered. "My darling Deborah."

He preferred that name to the one she'd had in her second reincarnation and a thousand times better than the one she'd had in the fourth—Henrietta. Mary was such a common name and his lady was not a common woman. She was extraordinary and each time he had come to her between that hellish day in Edinburgh and now, she had accepted him with a quickly passing unease—just as he hoped she would take him to her in the same way this time.

The woman beside her said something to Deborah and she looked away, following the pointing finger of her companion. He glanced past them to the leaping dolphins following alongside the ship and smiled. He could imagine the excitement in her eyes as she gazed upon the frolicking mammals, could almost hear her laughter as she curled her fingers over the rail to watch.

For a long time the dolphins trailed the ship and then they simply vanished. It seemed as though they had come out only to entertain his lady and—their job done—had gone back to the depths of the ocean.

All during his watch he divided his time between scanning the horizon as his duty dictated and keeping a close eye on Deborah as she strolled the deck. She and her companion—a hideously ugly middle-aged woman named Gertrude—found a spot where they would not be in the way and sat perched on two crates, watching the activity on deck. Below decks would be sweltering so those passengers able to move about came and went, finding it almost as uncomfortable above deck as below. The women vigorously fanned themselves and the men spent much of their time mopping the sweat from their faces.

By the time his watch was over and he was nimbly climbing down from the crow's nest, the sun was setting and his belly rumbling. He made it a point to gain Deborah's eye and nodded politely to her as he went below to wash off before sitting down to supper with his mates.

"A handsome brute was that one," he heard Gertrude comment.

"Indeed," Deborah agreed.

"He was a'watching you the live-long day, lass."

He stood at the bottom of the ladder, listening to the women's quiet voice and when Deborah agreed she knew he'd been observing her, he smiled.

"You could do worse than a sailor boy, I suppose," Gertrude said, "although you'd never see that much of him."

"Stop trying to get me married, Gertie," Deborah said with a laugh.

"You ain't getting no younger. High time you started looking to settle down," was the retort.

"Mayhap I'll find a suitor when we reach the West Indies," she said. "Mayhap Mr. Groves will have a steward or worker who doesn't mind a little extra pounds on his wife."

"Go on with you, now!" Gertrude snapped. "You've got meat on your bones, aye. Not like that skinny as a rail Florence Tate! Big wind come along and blow that one clean off this boat!"

"The evening meal is being served, ladies," young Willy McConnor announced to the women when he saw them sitting off to one side.

Kaegan moved away from the ladder. He didn't want to be downwind of his lady when she came below. The stench of the sour sweat clinging to him was offensive to his own sensibilities. He hated to think what it would do to a lady's fine nostrils.

Hours passed and it was so humid below decks, Kaegan slid out of his hammock, pulled on his shirt, and went topside. There, at least, a freshening breeze was rippling the canvas and wafting gently over the deck. He went aft, enjoying the way the moonlight played like a silver ribbon over the dark waves. Leaning against the rail, he looked down into the shimmering waves, breathing deeply of the salt tang of the water.

"It's peaceful, isn't it?" he said softly.

"Aye," came the reply and she moved out of the shadows to join him at the rail. "I imagine you have experienced that peace quite often."

He turned his face to her. "No, milady, I have not. This is my first sea voyage and—most likely—it will be my last."

"You're not a sailor by trade, then?"

"No, milady. I took work on this ship for passage to the islands."

"I see," she said and a slight gust of wind blew the skirt of her gown against his leg. "What sort of work do you do?"

"I am a warrior, milady," he answered. "A soldier by preference."

"Ah," she replied, drawing the word out.

He wanted to tell her he had taken that particular ship to make the journey with her, that it was past time for them to begin this reincarnation of her life together but there was time for that.

"May I know your name, milady?" he asked, simply wanting to hear her say it in her soft Scots brogue.

"Deborah McGregor," she replied. "And you?"

"Kaegan. Kaegan Cree."

"And where do you call home, milord?"

"Gaelach is my home," he said. "It's a far piece from the rainy shores of England."

"I am from Scotland and I am going to Barbados to work for Lord Robert Groves who owns a sugar plantation there," she told him. "I will be governess to his young daughter."

"Teaching her to read and write," he said with a gentle smile. She had always been connected in some way to the art of literature.

"And to cipher," she amended.

"An important instruction," he acknowledged. He braced his elbows on the rail, threaded his fingers together, and gazed out to sea. "I, too, will be working for Lord Robbie."

He heard her light gasp. "Truly?" she asked.

"As head of his troop of guards. Although slavery has been abolished on the island, there was a large rebellion in 1816 and Lord Robbie is a very prudent man."

"The Bussa's Rebellion," she said. "Over twenty-thousand slaves from seventy plantations took part in the rebellion."

"That would be the one," he agreed.

They were silent for a moment then he cleared his throat. Still not looking at her, he asked if she would be agreeable to him calling upon her at some point in time.

Deborah McGregor was also leaning on the rail. The night breeze blew tendrils loose from the severe chignon she wore.

"I would be hurt if you did not call upon me, milord Cree."

"Kaegan," he said.

She moved a step closer to him. "Deborah," she said and when he unclasped his hands and reached over to take her left one in his right, she took another step closer.

* * * *

"She was a regular hussy, huh?" Wynter asked as Kaegan slathered the soap down her arm.

"She knew a good thing when she saw it," he countered.

"And did they get it on while they were enjoying those peaceful and balmy South Atlantic nights, milord?" she queried.

He ran his lathered palm across her upper chest and to the other arm. "What do you think?"

"I think she jumped his bones and had her wicked way with that half-nekkid boy," she said with a grin.

"It wasn't quite like that," he said, chuckling.

"She didn't jump his bones?" she questioned as he slid his palm to her breast.

"Oh, she did but it wasn't until they'd had a few more conversations," he replied.

"Brazen hussy, she was," Wynter pronounced. "Hot to trot after than brawny, sun-kissed god of a man."

Kaegan plucked at her nipples. "You should know. Didn't you write that scene in *Love's Return*?"

Wynter flinched, startled by his words. Indeed, she had written that scene! She had called her lovers Drake and Maureen. She stared at him as he caressed her breasts. "Kaegan! Are all my books patterned after our lives together?" she whispered.

"Most of them," he said. "But you manage to forget a few important details here and there. Like what happened before Deborah reached the West Indies."

"The ship was attacked by pirates," she said. "Blackjack Bouvier"

* * * *

"Sail ho!" the lookout cried and Captain Reece VanLandingham looked up to the crow's nest.

"Where away?" VanLandingham demanded.

"Off the starboard beam, Cap'n!" the lookout replied.

The black ship was bearing down on the *Lady Gayle*, its black sails pouring on speed as it tacked into the wind. Atop the mainmast the skull and crossbones snapped.

"Pirates!" the First Mate yelled.

"Man the cannon!" Captain VanLandingham ordered.

Kaegan ushered the passengers below and closed the hatchway. Barefoot, he ran to help crew prepare for the coming fight. Drawing the dagger from its sheath at his thigh, he knew the three-masted squarerigger speeding toward them was over two hundred tons of floating death. The ship would be carrying at least a hundred pirates and even from the distance between them he knew there would be twenty cannons primed and loaded plus several swivel guns aimed at the passenger ship. They didn't stand a chance against the better armed pirates who outnumbered them.

Shots were exchanged—the cannon balls from the passenger ship falling short of their target—and when one of the pirate broadsides hit the Lady Gayle, teakwood went flying. A flag of surrender was run up the mast for the sailors aboard the Lady Gayle were not fighting men and their captain was a coward. When the grabbling hooks were thrown over the rail and the two ships were lashed together—pirates swinging across to take possession of the passenger ship and its cargo—the crew crowded together, hands in the air.

He came aboard the Lady Gayle with a swagger that said the sea was his domain and all who sailed upon it, his servants. Dressed in silk and brocade with a cutlass strapped to his waist and a tri-corn adorned with a scarlet red plume, he looked the dandy but one look into his hooded eyes and you knew he would be a deadly opponent.

* * * *

"Did you know your brother was going to show up?" she asked then groaned as his soapy hand slid between her legs.

"Aye, I knew, but he was supremely surprised to find me there and even more surprised to find a McGregor female on board the ship. He had his little witchling aboard the *Nighthawk*, his pirate vessel," her lover replied as he slowly rocked his palm back and forth across her sensitive flesh.

"Kaegan," she said, reaching down to grab his wrist. "Don't start what you can't finish."

His amber eyes twinkled. "Milady, I have every intention of finishing it." His middle finger slipped into her, parting her soft folds like the petals of a flower. He backed her against the shower wall until she he was hard against her.

"The s ... story," she said, licking her lips. "You were t ... telling me the story."

"You know the story," he said, lowering his lips to her ear. His words were a gentle whisper, a mere breath of air against her ear. "You wrote it."

"Yes, but" She stopped for his finger was touching that infamous spot inside her that made her knees weak as he pressed upon it.

Kaegan rubbed his erection across her hip. "Wouldn't you rather have this than a story, milady?"

"You don't play fair," she complained.

"Never said I did."

He withdrew his finger, gripped her hips and lifted her with ease, bringing her down upon his rock-hard shaft. He laughed when she locked her legs around his waist and used his muscular thighs to thrust upward into her moist heat.

"You" she began but he slanted his mouth ruthlessly over hers to shut her up and used his well-honed body to make her forget everything but the hard cock driving into her sheath.

Chapter Ten

"You are an evil, evil man," Wynter said as she slathered mustard on a thick slice of potato bread.

"I can be," he agreed. He was slicing ham and layering it on a platter beside the tomatoes and lettuce she'd already prepared.

"Kaegan and Blackjack fought," she said as she reached for a leaf of lettuce. "Slashing cutlasses striking fire across the deck, the skirl of the blades punctuating the hot morning."

"And from the deck of the *Nighthawk*, Siobhan McGregor stood watching the swordplay."

"Deborah looked across and saw her, recognized the same fear she, herself, was feeling for her man and decided to put an end to the fight before one or both combatants were killed."

"Siobhan understood the look Deborah sent her. She nodded her agreement and being the wilder of the two, swung over to the deck of the *Lady Gayle* with a dagger clutched between her teeth. She nodded at Deborah—who snatched a blade from the hip of a man standing close to her—and the two women began to circle one another."

"Cap'n!" cried one of the pirates. "Yer lady be a'fightin'!"

Kaegan shook his head as he laid down the knife he'd been using and reached for the jar of hot and spicy dill slices. The sound of the lid releasing its seal punctuated Wynter's next word.

"No! Blackjack cried out as he saw his lady jumping back from a swipe of Deborah's knife."

"Fear for the lives of the women they loved made both men come to a standstill with horror registering on their sweaty faces." He paused after fishing a slice of pickle from the jar. "I believe the exact words from the novel were: Instantly the warriors came to a standstill, the danger of the situation driving through their hearts like ice-cold steel."

"Milady, what are you about?" Kaegan shouted to Deborah, who paid no heed to the fear in her lover's voice. She feigned another swipe across Siobhan's midsection then deliberately stumbled, causing Siobhan to spin away and strike out with her own blade—narrowly missing Deborah's arm."

"Pirates from the *Nighthawk* and crewmen from the *Lady Gayle* stood back, watching the fight, placing wagers on which woman would win," Kaegan said.

Wynter squirted ketchup atop the mustard on her sandwich then sprinkled a healthy dollop of Tabasco atop that before adding a slice of pepperjack cheese.

"Too afraid to move, Kaegan and Blackjack were like stone statues. Each held his breath," she said.

After layering lettuce, cheese, tomatoes and pickles on his own sandwich, Kaegan added a thick slice of ham then a large spoonful of mayonnaise. "They didn't dare move, dare breathe, for fear their lady would be hurt."

"Then Siobhan went down—her heel catching in a coil of rope—and there was an audible gasp from among the men. Deborah quickly followed her, putting the edge of her blade to the other woman's throat."

"But the tip of Siobhan's blade was poised over Deborah's heart," Kaegan said, slapping the other slice of bread atop his sandwich. "One false move and either—or both—women would be on their way to the Gatherer's arms."

"Deborah was straddling Siobhan, looking into her eyes. Neither would have hurt the other but the men had no way of knowing that," Wynter said as she took a seat at the kitchen island.

"Get your men aboard your ship, Captain!" Kaegan said as he, too, sat down. "Deborah's words rang out over the sudden silence like a death knell."

"I'll not leave without my lady!" Wynter said in a gruff voice intended to sound like that of Blackjack Harrington.

"Go, Kit!" Kaegan spoke for Siobhan in a falsetto. "I've been bested by this wench and given my word to her that no harm will befall her menfolk if she lets me live."

"Lass," Wynter corrected. "She said lass, not wench."

"Yeah, right," Kaegan said. "I've been bested by this lass!"

"Yadda-yadda-yadda and Blackjack finally takes his crew and departs the Lady Gayle," Wynter continued. "Deborah walks Siobhan to the rail, they embrace—as sisters in crime—and then as the Nighthawk sails away to allow the crewmen of the Lady Gayle to repair the damages done to their ship, the two women wave goodbye."

Kaegan said nothing for a moment then stopped with the half-eaten sandwich almost to his lips. He put the food down on his plate then turned to give Wynter a perplexed look. "He knew you were mine back then," he said, his forehead creased. "That rat bastard knew it then and still he comes after you to" He stopped, realizing he shouldn't tell Wynter about the competition.

"He comes after me to do what?" she prompted.

"To piss me off," he finished, lifting the sandwich and taking a huge bite, chewing it rapidly with his eyes narrowed.

Wynter could almost see the steam coming out of her lover's ears. Something had put a bur under his saddle but she didn't think he was going to enlighten her concerning what it was. She shrugged.

"So, what are your plans for today?" she asked to take his mind off his anger and to dissipate the thunderclouds smoldering in his eyes.

"What would you like to do?" he inquired then snapped the fingers of his free hand.

"How 'bout taking a ride on Black Beauty? We could go over to Lake Red Rock"

"Black Beauty?" she queried.

"My motorcycle."

Wynter grinned. "I haven't been on a bike in years!" She nodded. "I'd like that!"

"Okay," he said, swiping a napkin across his mouth. "I'll take the car home and get her and be back in half an hour. Put on some jeans and bring along a jacket just in case."

When he was gone, Wynter cleaned up the kitchen, stacked the dishes in the dishwasher then went into her bedroom. Butterbean was stretched out atop her pillow and gave her a droll look when she shooed him off the bed.

"Where were you all night, Bean?" she asked as she made up the bed.

The feline made a sniffing sound and padded out of the room.

"Jealous!" she called after him.

* * * *

Her arms around his waist, hair blowing in the wind, Wynter was enjoying the feel of the powerful motorcycle between her legs. Kaegan was adept at weaving the bike through the traffic on the interstate and once on the two-lane road that led to Lake Red Rock, he executed the curves with careless ease.

It had been a good day and now that the sun was setting, the air was cool with another hint of storms building in the west. They were racing toward home after a great supper of barbecued ribs and a pitcher of Cherry Pepsi. She was tired but it was a good tired, a relaxed tired and she looked forward to filling the spa tub and soaking, making love in the warm, bubbling water.

As though he'd read her thoughts—and she supposed he had—Kaegan covered her hands with one of his and squeezed. She laid her cheek against his back and closed her eyes.

Two men, she thought. Two wondrously glorious men were vying for her attention and just the thought of it made her tingle all over. She'd never given any thought at all to settling down because she never imagined it being an option for her. The men she'd dated in the past had not seemed inclined to want to take the relationship to another level. She had resigned herself to becoming the strange old woman with a cat or two or three.

Now she had to re-think that decision. Kaegan had made it clear he expected them to continue into a strictly monogamous relationship but she wasn't all that sure that was what she wanted at this point. She couldn't help but wonder what would happen if she continued seeing Chance.

She felt Kaegan's hand clench hers and stopped breathing, her eyes snapping open. She had to be careful of her thoughts around this man! Every thought she had seemed to fly straight to him. Biting her lip, she forced her thoughts from the men and to the Iowa countryside by which they passed.

He took his hand from hers and pointed to the woods along Highway Six. At first she didn't see what he meant then she saw a huge wasp's nest hanging like an oversized gray football from one of the black walnut trees. She twisted her head around to keep it in sight, marking the place so she could come back with her binoculars to get a better look at it. The giant nest reminded her of a short story she'd written a few years earlier after a trip to Cancun.

The substitute guard—Roy something or other—was on the kiosk when Kaegan drove up to the security checkpoint. He waved them through with only a cursory glance before going back to the magazine he was reading.

"Not good," Kaegan said as he rolled into the gated community, going slowly to keep the engine noise down. "He doesn't know me from Adam and I don't think he even noticed you."

"I'll mention it to Stuey," she told him, a bit annoyed that the security was so lax.

Once they were in her home, she asked if Kaegan would like a glass of plum wine.

"I just want to kick my shoes off and sit on the deck awhile," she said.

"I'll take a rain check on the wine," he said. "I've got a bitching headache."

"Want some ibuprofen?" she asked.

"That wouldn't help," he answered. "I need tenerse and I don't have any extra with me."

"The drug you said that keeps you from" She stopped, her lips parting. "Are you going to *do* that?"

"In a few days," he said, "but not tonight." He drew her into his arms. "Tonight, I'm going to sleep beside you again if you'll let me. I just won't be able to make love to you."

She laid her head on his chest. "We'll let it slide this time," she said. "Just don't make a habit of it." She smiled when a laugh rumbled through his chest.

"Yes, milady," he agreed.

She moved back, looked up at him, and then placed her palm on his cheek. "Take your boots off and go lay down on the chaise on the deck."

"Yes, milady," he said again.

Wynter watched him sit on the sofa to remove his boots then saw him put a hand to his temple to rub. "Would an ice bag help?" she asked. "That always helps me when I get a migraine."

He shook his head. "The only thing that helps is the quiet and sleep. My body is craving the tenebre."

"Then bring some over to have on hand," she said as she headed for the kitchen but a thought took her and she stopped, turned to look at him. "Should you bring over some of the other stuff, too?"

"What other ...?" he started to ask then realized she meant the Sustenance. He didn't think she'd appreciate having plastibags of donated blood in her fridge. "Nah, that's okay."

"It's all right, Kaegan," she said softly.

He cocked his head to one side. "You're dealing with this better than I thought you would. Usually it takes you several months before you accept what I am and what I need in order to thrive."

She shrugged. "How many times have you materialized a condom in your hand before?"

Kaegan grinned. "Would you believe that's the first time I've ever used one with you and did you notice we didn't have one in the shower?"

The answering smile on Wynter's face slowly faded and the color drained from her face. She put a hand to her mouth. "Oh, shit."

"You don't have to worry, milady. Reapers can't carry STDs—their parasite wouldn't allow it—and with your plumbing gone, I couldn't get you pregnant."

"What about Chance?" she asked. "Is it the same with him? Do Nightwinds carry STDs?"

Kaegan's expression turned hard and a muscle jumped in his cheek. "Why do you ask?" he asked, his tone clipped.

Wynter saw fury building in his golden eyes as he sat there and when he got to his feet, she took a step back. His hands were clenched at his side, his body language was as tense as the line of his jaw.

"It was just a question, Kaegan," she said, knowing she had truly angered him. He was all but quivering with rage. It snapped in the air like the lightning that was lighting the night sky.

"You intend to let him screw you *again*?" he demanded. "After everything I told you about us?"

The possessiveness registering on his handsome face was unmistakable. For a reason she couldn't explain, that jealous look irritated her. She thought of herself as her own person and didn't take well to being dictated to. That was one of the reasons she'd become a writer. She was her own boss and answerable to no one—not even the publisher who contracted her works. She'd made sure of it in the way her contracts were worded.

"You don't own me, Kaegan," she said, defiantly, chin raised. "I will see whomever I like."

He took a step toward her—his shoulders as rigid as a board. Although she held her ground, her heart was triphammering in her chest and she could hear the blood pounding in her ears.

"You have always been mine," he stated. "Not his. Never his. We"

His words irritated her even more and she narrowed her eyes.

"Things change," she said. "I'm my own woman."

His gaze mirrored hers. "Is that your way of telling me you intend to keep seeing him?"

"If I want," she replied.

He stared at her for a long moment then nodded slowly. "All right. If that's what you want."

Without another word, he strode to the door and jerked it open.

"Aren't you forgetting something?" she called out and when he looked back at her, she pointed to his boots.

Kaegan never missed a beat. He fanned his hand across his knees in a dismissive gesture and in the blink of an eye, another pair of boots appeared on his feet. He pushed the screen door open and let it bang behind his departure.

Wynter stood where she was and when the motorcycle roared to life, she cringed. It deliberately raced the engine then peeled out like an angry teenage boy. She sighed—knowing he'd left behind tire marks.

* * * *

Kaegan was enraged and what he wanted more than anything was flesh to hit—the demon's if he could find the son-of-a-bitch. He wanted to feel bone crunch and see blood spurt—black blood. Nothing would please him more than to rip the Nightwind a new one then reach up through the demon's body cavity to pluck out the bastard's evil heart.

Not bothering to slow down as he roared toward the kiosk, he barely noticed the security guard's pale face through the glass as he plowed through the flimsy wooden barrier gate, not even bothering to skirt the yellow and black arm. The windshield of his bike caught the arm and snapped it off, sent it flying into the night.

Nor did he slow down at the end of the entry road that T'd with Highway Six. He took the turn in a wide swing that took him dangerously into the eastbound lane only a scant two feet from the front bumper of an oncoming pickup truck. Ignoring the blast of the truck's horn, he sped up until he had the speedometer pegged out. Luckily there were no cars in the westbound lane to hinder his mad dash. His only thought was getting to Des Moines and finding Azzin.

At some point as he neared the intersection that would take him to the interstate, it occurred to him he could fly faster than his bike could roll and he geared down, pulling off on the side of the road in a savage spray of flying gravel. Getting off the motorcycle, he wove a concealing spell around the expensive machine to protect it then Transitioned, taking to the air in raven form, his talons curled.

"Well, aren't you the clever little bird?" a snide voice whispered in his mind.

"Fuck you, Azzin!" he sent back.

"Not even if I found you attractive, wolfboy, which I don't," came the reply.

"I'm going to mutilate you!"

There was mocking laughter then a whisper that cut through Kaegan's brain like a sharp blade: *"You gotta find me first, asshole."*

From the moment he began winging toward Des Moines, he had his half-brother's scent. Now, it had vanished along with the trailing skirl of the bastard's taunting laughter. Landing atop the Ferris wheel at Adventureland in Altoona, Kaegan shook his feathers and screamed silently. Azzin had gone to ground and there would be no finding the demon until he surfaced again.

Watching a redtail hawk soaring upon the thermals, the Reaper mentally warned the raptor away and the hawk flexed its wings and was gone.

There was nothing to do but return to his bike and slink back to his own abode though the blood of vengeance was still pumping furiously through his black veins. Emitting a caw of aggravation, he sprang from the Ferris wheel gondola and headed home.

Chapter Eleven

Wynter stared at the phone all evening, expecting Kaegan to call but he didn't. It disturbed her to know she didn't have a way of contacting him for he'd never offered her a cell phone or land phone number. She didn't even know where he lived although from things he'd said, she suspected it was in Grinnell, eight miles away. When she went to bed, she tossed and turned, trying to will the phone to ring. Sleep claimed her but nightmares plagued her—waking her every couple of hours to send her to the bathroom to relieve herself. By the time the first faint rosy fingers of light began clawing through the cracks in her bedroom drapes, she was more than ready to leave her bed for the much needed strength of several cups of coffee.

Out of sorts, more than a little hurt that she hadn't heard from Kaegan, she sat at the kitchen table and stared blindly through the window. Listlessly she drank her coffee while a dozen thoughts swirled through her head.

Was she wrong to want to hold onto the unaccustomed feeling of having two handsome men—well, males if not men—vying for her attention? Was it such a terrible thing to enjoy being courted? To have the men sparring over her? It wasn't something that had ever happened before and she found it exhilarating, thrilling, and more than a little wicked. Never in her life has she been intimately involved with two men at the same time and she found it intoxicating, addictive, and just downright absorbing.

Yet

She sighed, her shoulders slumping. She felt a stronger connection to Kaegan than she did to Chance and—truth be told—she liked him much better, too. Chance was a bit too slick, too cosmopolitan. Kaegan was more down to earth and earthy and—she had to admit it—sexier with a warrior's swagger than made her lower belly do flip-flops.

"Every woman should have a man to work outside the house and one to work inside the house," she said with a sigh.

"Meow?" Butterbean inquired.

"You know, Bean," she said, glancing down at the feline who was sitting beside her foot. "Then the woman could sit in the recliner with chips and salsa and Cherry Pepsi and read all day." She sighed again. "There should be one man to earn the living for them and one man to do the housework. Doesn't that sound fair to you?"

"Meow," Butterbean agreed then lifted a paw to either wipe his mouth or lick his toes.

"And both to satisfy their lady's needs," she stated with a nod. Lifting the coffee cup, she realized it was empty so set it down again. Doubling her fist, she put her elbow on the tabletop, propped her chin against her knuckles and sighed yet again as she stared out the window.

She knew, of course, what she was doing. Procrastination was the worst kind of drug for a writer. It was far more addictive than crack and could ruin the best of them. The walk down that slippery slope led to an even worse condition: the dreaded Writer's Block.

"I'm not getting a darn thing done," she complained but made no move to leave the chair or take her eyes from the backyard.

When she'd been sitting there despondently for half an hour longer, she decided a mind was, indeed, a terrible thing to waste and pushed up from the table. Carrying her cup to the sink,

she rinsed it out then placed it in the dishdrainer. For another few moments she stood staring at the build-up of lime around the bases of the faucets and spout. The thought of getting out the denture brush she kept in the drawer to clean the gunk flitted through her mind but it passed without her acting upon it. Another sigh, a lower slumping of the shoulders, and a disgusted cluck of her tongue as she resolutely turned away from the evidence of the white crap clinging to the base of her faucets.

Padding into the bedroom, she peeled off her nightgown and dressed in a casual ensemble. She didn't want to dress again before going over to Des Moines to meet with Chance. She did her hair, eschewed the use of makeup—as she usually did—spritzed on some gardenia-scented perfume and then headed for her office.

Butterbean was already stretched out on her desk, his whiskers twitching as he walked through his little cat dreams.

"Lazy little bastard," Wynter named him as she took a seat and reached for the mouse.

There were over a hundred emails awaiting her at Hotmail. The junk folder was filled with penis enhancers, breast enlargers, offers to help her get out of debt and at least a dozen solicitors letters informing her she had inherited tens of millions of dollars from Nigeria, Russia, England, and Germany.

"Man, I've got long-lost relatives all over the place," she mumbled as she happily deleted each phishing scheme.

Among the legitimate emails were fan letters, copies of reviews of her work, requests for bookplates and interviews and autographed photos and several invitations to join Yahoo groups. She answered the most important and flagged the others to be looked at later according to priority.

Email read, she moved over to the few Yahoo groups to which she already belonged and scrolled through the messages. She visited a few websites mentioned on the various lists then closed out of the Internet and pulled up her latest WIP.

She sat there staring at the last scene she'd written—a confrontation between the gorgeous pirate Pax and his hated half-brother Chance. The more she stared at the screen and the blinking cursor, the deeper into depression she sank. She knew it wasn't Writer's Block or even procrastination that had dried up her creative juices. It had been the fight she'd had the night before when Kaegan had stormed out on her.

Slouching in her chair with her fingers still touching the keyboard, she hung her head. She had always hated confrontation. Even as a child she had avoided them whenever she could. Conflict and quarrels, upsets and clashes of personality never failed to give her a sour stomach, make her blood pressure rise. She was basically a lover, not a fighter, and being on the outs with anyone made her feel miserable.

"And I don't have his phone number to call to him and apologize," she said aloud.

Slowly she lifted her head and stared awhile longer at the blinking cursor. She found herself counting the number of times it winked at her then threw back her head and hissed, snatching her hands from the keyboard.

Butterbean opened one eye to glare at her for interrupting his nap attack then stretched, using a back leg to kick a piece of paper off the desk.

"Brat!" she snapped and leaned over to pick up the paper. As she straightened, she glanced at what was on it then did a double take, blinking as she saw what was scrawled in a decidedly bold script: Kaegan Cree. The name was followed by a phone number and under that, the handsome man's Grinnell address.

Chewing on her bottom lip as she held the paper in her hand, Wynter let her eyes drift to the telephone she kept turned off on her desk. She stared at it for a second longer then reached out to retrieve it. Not giving herself time to think about what she was doing, she flipped it open and began punching in his number with her thumb.

The blood rushing through her ears and heart thudding in her chest, she waited impatiently for him to answer but as the ringing continued and did not go into voice mail, she groaned.

"Come on, Kaegan, pick up" she said. "Please pick up."

After about the tenth ring it became obvious he wasn't going to so she reluctantly ended the call. More depressed than ever, she got to her feet and left her office. She couldn't stand being cooped up in the house and decided she'd leave early for Des Moines, maybe stop at Merle Hay Mall and make a run on a few shops, desperately needing the distraction overspending would surely bring.

Grabbing her purse and keys, she went through the kitchen and into the breezeway that led to the garage, glancing momentarily at the washer and dryer as she did. There were clothes that needed washing, floors that needed vacuuming, furniture that needed polishing but those were things she considered busy work—necessary busy work but mindlessly boring stuff that could wait until the next day.

"Or the next," she said as she got into her car and hit the garage door opener.

As she backed out, she thought she saw someone standing on her porch but when she stopped and craned her neck to look around the mailbox, there was no one there. Just her mind playing tricks on her, she thought.

"Or wishful thinking," she mused as she put the car into drive.

From the shadows of the porch, Kaegan watched her until the car was no longer in sight. He shouldn't be there for today was Azzin's day with her but he hadn't liked how the evening before had ended. He'd acted like an idiot—a jealous fool—and was ashamed of his childish outburst. Although he blamed it on the bitch of a headache that had been boring through his skull, he knew it was really the resentful and envious feelings for his half-brother that had caused the problem.

One more day, he thought as he sat down on the top step, burying his face in his hands. He had cloaked himself with misdirection so Wynter's neighbors did not see him but at that moment he didn't care if they did or not. He was nearing his Transition and would be out of the game for at least five days if not longer. That didn't set well with him for he knew gods-be-damned well the Nightwind would have the advantage and make the most of it.

* * * *

"You know what Baybridge is, don't you?" Chance asked over lunch.

Wynter looked up from her taco salad. "The institution for the criminally insane?"

"Is there another?" he countered.

A bit irritated at his droll query, Wynter stabbed a piece of tomato with her fork. "I pass by there all the time on the way home. What of it?"

"That's where he was for twenty years."

Fork halfway to her mouth, lips parted, Wynter raised her gaze to her companion. "I beg your pardon?"

"Kaegan," Chance said. "That's where he was incarcerated."

A shudder rippled through Wynter and took her appetite with it as it passed. Slowly she lowered her fork. She said nothing to the statement, lifting her napkin from her lap, instead, to blot her suddenly dry mouth.

"He killed a man with his bare hands," Chance continued. "Manslaughter but homicide just the same. He snapped the guy's neck like a twig then relieved him of his"

"I don't want to hear this," Wynter interrupted him. Her fingers were gripping the napkin so tightly her hand was beginning to cramp. She laid the napkin beside her plate.

Chance gave her an apologetic look. "I'm sorry, Wynn timer, but I thought you should know. He has a violent temper and"

"I said I don't want to hear it!" she snapped. "I came here to discuss the book signing and not my relationship with your brother." Her hand was trembling so she shoved it into her lap to clasp her other hand.

"I apologize," her dinner partner said. He pushed his plate aside. "I won't mention him again."

"Thank you," she said, her jaw clenched.

"All right, let's discuss the signing, then," he said with an encouraging smile. "I think I told you I have the actors lined up to do the scene from Love's Return."

"Which scene?" she asked, almost defiantly.

His forehead creased. "Beg pardon?"

"Which scene are they going to act out?"

"I thought the one where Deborah is on the ship and meets"

"Chance and Siobhan?" she demanded.

"Ah, yes, that was the one."

Wynter stared hard at him. "Why did you pick that particular one?"

"No special reason," he said. "I just thought it was a good scene. The two male actors have studied fencing and the two female actors engaging in a dagger fight would make for heart stopping entertainment."

"And you could rub it in his face because that was when you and I first met," she said as a muscle flexed in her jaw.

Chance narrowed his eyes. "I see there have been some tales told out of school."

She lifted her chin. "I've had to come to terms with a lot of stuff that is so far beyond the norm that I'm having a hard time accepting a lot of it. I know what you are, what he is, and even though all of it is far outside the realm of what I think of as ordinary I am learning to adapt. I can accept the magick and the fact that neither you nor he is" She lowered her voice.

"Entirely human. What I can't and won't accept is being played, Azzin. If you are set on courting me, you'll do it squarely and fairly as who you are and not who and what you are pretending to be."

He stared at her for a long moment then slowly nodded. "All right. I can agree to that. The Ridgelords won't allow either of us to use our magical abilities to win you but if you know we possess them, they aren't secrets now, are they?"

"It makes no difference," a voice droned in his head. *"Use your powers and lose the competition!"*

The voice belonged to High Lord Kaleb and the tone was filled with warning.

"I think the scene where Kaegan and Deborah discuss their future together would be better," she told him. "It's a tender scene and the women coming to the signing would prefer that to a fight scene between two women."

"All right," he agreed.

"Now that that's settled, what else is on the agenda?" she asked in a businesslike voice. "I have some thoughts about the guest list."

The Nightwind could feel the Reaper close by but he couldn't see him. He surreptitiously glanced around the diner but neither Kaegan's aura or scent could be detected among the customers. Nevertheless, the flesh down his back tingled and that was a good sign the warrior was with them.

"You are not supposed to be anywhere near her when I am!" he sent.

"You weren't supposed to call her when she was with me but you did."

Seething, but maintaining a gentle smile he was finding it hard to keep in place, the demon did his best to ignore his rival. He ground his teeth, dug his nails into his palms as he listened to the suggestions Wynter was making. He found himself staring into her green eyes and realizing he was looking past her age—wrinkles around the eyes, a bit of sagging flesh at the line of her jaw, tiny brackets at the corners of her expressive mouth—and seeing into a soul that was starved for affection. It was an insight he'd been given many times over the centuries from the witchlings of her clan.

"Why not wicca?" he asked.

Wynter stopped in mid-sentence, thrown off by the question. "Excuse me?"

"Why did your branch of the clan go one way—to the Nazarene—and the others toward the goddess," he explained. "You are just as lonely, as alone and lost as all the others yet you never once even thought of reaching out to Her." He tilted his head to one side. "Why not?"

"I'm not lonely," she defended.

"Aye, but you are," he said in a chiding voice. "I can see it in your eyes, Wynter. All the tell-tale signs are there, all the traits that your ancestors had but you never cried out for help. You never sought the Lighted Path or even the Dark Road. You never voiced your loneliness."

"I've been content enough with my life," she told him. "I had a few bad relationships. There was one man I dated who beat the crap out of me on our last date but he's the only man I ever let do that to me."

"Kory Kline," the Nightwind said.

Wynter was taken aback. "How did you ...?"

"I know all there is to know about you, Wynni. Tell me: whatever happened to Kline?"

She shook her head. "I don't know and I don't care to. He didn't show up for work one day so everyone assumed he skipped out on all the bad debts he had. I heard he was into a couple of high-powered bookies."

"It's a good thing you didn't marry him," he mumbled, reaching for his water glass.

"That was never really a consideration," she lied. "It's true I thought of getting married but it wasn't something I actively pursued. I didn't think I wanted children and when I had developed the fibroids and they did the hysterectomy I was only mildly disappointed that there would never be a son or daughter to raise." She shrugged. "It would have been difficult without a husband and the right man never popped up."

"You mean Kaegan," he said, his lips twisting with distaste.

She leaned back in her chair. "I asked you not to mention him."

"He's like the elephant in the room," the demon said and swept his gaze about in search of the Reaper.

"I won't discuss him with you, Azzin."

The demon winced at her use of his name. He started to say something he knew he might regret but the ringing of her cell phone saved him.

Wynter pursed her lips and reached for her purse, opened it to retrieve the phone. She flipped it open with a snap of her wrist, glanced down at the screen with a frown then said, "Hello?" She listened, her forehead creasing. "Yes, this is she. Who is this?"

He watched the color drain from her face, saw her eyes widen and reached out to put a hand on her arm. "What's wrong?" he asked. "What's happened?"

Wynter began to tremble, her eyes searching the table top as though she were looking for an escape. "Is she all right?" she inquired, voice breaking.

"Wynter?" the demon questioned as he tightened his grip on her arm.

"Where did they take her?"

He felt fear washing over her and when her bottom lip began to quiver, he looked around, signaling for the waiter.

"No, no family," he heard her say. A tear rolled down her cheek. "I'm leaving now."

When she closed the phone, she lifted her eyes to him. "Rachel was involved in a car accident. They've taken her to Mercy."

The waiter must have sensed a problem for he hurried over with the check. He didn't get a chance to say anything for Wynter's dining companion stood, fished in his pocket for his money clip then peeled off a hundred dollar bill.

"Keep the change," he said.

"I hope everything works out all right for you," the young man said.

With his hand to the small of Wynter's back, the demon ushered her from the diner.

"We'll take my car," he said.

She nodded, too upset and numb to argue. She barely glanced at her car as he helped her inside his. Hands twisting, she sat like a statue as he pulled into traffic and headed for the interstate—the quickest way to get to the medical center.

The Nightwind glanced at her from time to time as he drove faster than was legally permitted but not caring for he was unconsciously using his own demon form of misdirection to keep patrol cars out of his way.

"She'll be okay," he said.

Wynter nodded but didn't speak. She turned her head to stare out the passenger window, her bottom lip tucked between her teeth. By the time they arrived at the main entrance and Azzin turned his car over to the valet parking attendant, she was shaking so badly she could barely walk. He had one arm around her shoulders and his free hand gripping the upper part of her right arm.

The nurses in the surgical waiting area were helpful and polite but they could tell her nothing other than Rachel was in surgery.

"A doctor will be out to talk to you," a nurse assured her.

For the next hour Wynter sat hunched in her seat with Azzin's hand clutched in hers until a man in scrubs suddenly appeared before them, his face mask dangling in his left hand.

"Ms. McGregor?" he asked and offered his hand when she sprang to her feet. "I'm Dr. Lyons." He turned his attention to the demon. "Are you her husband?"

"A good friend," Azzin corrected.

"How's Rachel?" Wynter said, searching the doctor's face when he looked down at her. Before he answered, she knew. She could see it in his eyes and her knees buckled.

"I am so sorry," Dr. Lyons said as Azzin helped her sit down. "We did all we could but there was extensive damage. The vehicle rolled several times and was struck broadside by a semi."

"Oh, God!" Wynter whispered and snatched her hands from Azzin to bury her face. Tears erupted with a choking sound.

"She was wearing a Star of David so we presumed she was Jewish?" the doctor inquired.

"I believe she was," Azzin said, plucking the knowledge from Wynter's grieving mind.

"Would you like us to call a rabbi?"

"Wynter?" Azzin queried gently. He looked up at the doctor because he knew nothing of Jewish funerary customs and apparently the doctor didn't, either. He shrugged.

"We'll call a rabbi," the doctor said. "Again, I am sorry for your loss, Ms. McGregor." He reached out to clumsily pat her shoulder then padded away softly on his bootie-covered shoes.

Wynter raised her head, gave Azzin a look that made his heart ache. "Should I go see her?"

"Tell her it is part of her friend's custom that she not be seen by loved ones after her death," Lord Kaleb whispered in the demon's mind.

"Is that true?" Azzin sent back.

"Close enough to comfort her," the High Lord answered. *"She does not need to see what is left of her friend."*

"Jewish tradition says the dead must not be viewed," Azzin told her and was relieved when Wynter nodded.

"That's why they don't have open caskets," she said, rummaging in her purse for a tissue. "I remember her telling me that when her uncle passed away." She looked up at him. "She has to be buried as soon as possible. I remember her saying that, too."

Azzin nodded, not knowing what to say to help her through her grief.

"I should speak to the rabbi," she muttered.

"Then I'll take you home," he said.

"I've got my car."

"I'm not going to allow you to drive, Wynter," he stated firmly. "You'll stay with me tonight." He thought she might balk at that but she didn't. Instead, she leaned against him, putting her sorrow on his shoulder and he wrapped his arm around her.

"Butterbean will wonder where I am," she said.

"He's got food and water, doesn't he?" he asked, remembering seeing the automatic feeders in her kitchen.

"Yes, but he'll be pissed when I don't come home."

Azzin smiled, understanding felines much better than any human ever would. "He'll get over it." He squeezed her shoulder. "Take him a box of treats and he'll be good to go."

"Miss McGregor?"

Wynter looked up. A handsome middle-aged man stood before her. "I'm Rabbi Josef Rebelsky," he said.

A few feet away, Kaegan stood watching. He knew the demon was aware of his presence but the bastard never once gave him an opening that would allow Kaegan to go to Wynter, to add his strength to hers. Had the tables been turned, he would have offered Azzin such an opening but the demon was not one to give an opponent any advantage.

"*She'd rather be with me right now,*" he sent and his angry gaze met the self-satisfied one of the demon.

"*Keep thinking that, wolfboy,*" the Nightwind taunted.

After the arrangements were set into motion for Wynter's friend's funeral, the Reaper could do nothing but watch as the demon led Wynter away, taking her with him to his lair, the expensive home Azzin had purchased in West Des Moines. The only good thing that came of that evening was Kaegan now knew where the demon went to ground.

Chapter Twelve

He took her purse and placed it on the foyer table then led her into the vaulted great room that overlooked a man-made lake ringed with antique-looking park lights. Through a sweeping twenty foot high, forty foot wide section of window wall, she could see the glow from the lights undulating around the water in shimmering pockets of gold as the sun slowly sank in the west.

"Pretty view," she said listlessly.

Azzin took her to a large semi-circular leather sofa that faced the window and told her to sit. "Kick off your shoes. I'll get us a brandy."

So numb and tired she could barely move Wynter made no comment to his suggestion. All she wanted to do was curl up on the soft leather and watch the twinkling lights reflected on the night-darkened lake. Removing her shoes, she tucked her feet under her, leaned against the thick rolled arm of the sofa and collapsed against the cushion.

"Here, drink this," her host said as he slipped a brandy snifter into her hand.

She didn't question his order but took a cautious sip. The heady liquor burned a path down her throat and made her eyes water but the flavor was delicious. She took another small taste before asking what kind of brandy it was.

"Chrystallusian plum brandy," he said. "Very hard to come by."

"And very expensive, I bet," she mumbled.

"Why not have the best if you can afford it?" he countered, taking a seat beside her.

"Why not?" she echoed. Her gaze swept the opulent room and she knew the furnishings she saw were worth more than her home and everything in it—many times over.

"All of it could be yours," he said softly as he took a healthy drink from his snifter.

"Too much for me," she replied. "I'm basically a country girl at heart." She turned to look at him. "Don't read my mind, okay?"

He nodded to acknowledge her request. "No magick tonight."

She closed her eyes and laid her head against the sleek back of the sofa. "Rachel is the first friend I've lost," she said. "At least that I know of." She opened her eyes. "I'm sure there are some people I went to school with who have passed on but since I have never attended any of my class reunions, I have no way of knowing."

"I thought that was a rite of passage," he commented and when she looked at him with a puzzled frown, he smiled gently. "Class reunions."

She shrugged. "Not something I wanted to do. I'd rather remember high school as that gawky time when I wore glasses, was flat-chested, and my face looked like a cheap pepperoni pizza."

Azzin chuckled at the description. "Ah, such fond memories, huh?" he queried.

"No, really. It was such an innocent time," she said. "I don't mean with the world. Vietnam was going on and our boys were being slaughtered but there was also Flower Power and the Beatles and Mick Jagger singing about not being able to get any satisfaction." She closed her eyes again. "It was an innocent time despite the turmoil with civil rights and the Kennedy and King assassinations and all the acid-tripping."

"What you're saying is it was an innocent time for you and a time you want to remember because back then you had no real responsibilities in life," he said quietly.

"That's what I'm saying. The people I knew were as innocent of life as I was. What we grew up to be or how we look now would ruin the illusion. I want to remember them as I knew them in 1966. It was supposed to be the best time of our life—our senior year."

He reached out to take her hand and she threaded her fingers with his. They sat quietly until she had finished her brandy and he took the snifter from her. He pulled her to him and she lay down with her head in his lap, her body in the fetal position.

"You don't get old, do you?" she asked.

"No."

"And neither does Kaegan."

"True," he agreed. He started to tell her she didn't have to, either, but that was not something he could offer her. Power, riches, knowledge of the arcane world—yes—but he could not grant her immortality. Only the Reaper could do that.

"What's it like living through so much history?" she asked.

He thought about his answer then put a hand to her hair to stroke the soft strands.

"Interesting," he replied.

"What was the most interesting era to you?"

"The old west," he answered. "The men were larger than life and the women were still capable of accepting that they were created to be protected by those men."

"I'm not a women's libber, either," she said. "I like to have doors opened for me. I like being treated respectfully. I am a firm believer in the Donna Reed school of femininity."

"You'd best keep that opinion to yourself if you don't want to be tarred and feathered by the Feminazis," he joked.

"Screw 'em if they can't take a joke," she replied. She yawned and he eased her up, sliding his legs from under her head before turning and scooping her into his arms.

"It's not even eight o'clock yet," she complained as he carried her.

"No, but I'm gonna take you up to the bedroom and tuck you into my bed," he said.

"I don't have a gown."

"I think I have a couple," he countered.

"You mean you're gonna create a couple," she said.

"I could but that would get me in trouble with the Shadowlords."

"The who?" she asked.

He ignored her question. "We can watch whatever comes on at eight and keep watching until you're ready to go to sleep."

"Do you have the Sci-Fi channel?" she queried.

"I have them all," he answered as he started up the curving stairs.

"Good, then we can watch Sanctuary," she said although the tone of her voice let him know she didn't care one way or the other. He knew her thoughts were on the friend who—at that moment—was lying on a stainless steel table in the Mercy Hospital morgue.

"What's Sanctuary?" he asked since watching television was something he rarely did.

"You'll like it," she said. "It's about all different kinds of creatures. They call them abnormals."

"That would be yours truly," he declared. He carried her into his bedroom.

"Holy shit," she breathed as she took in the luxurious interior. The bed was the largest she'd ever seen—easily half again as big as her king-sized Hollywood bed.

"I like my comfort," he said, placing her on the bed.

A loud sigh escaped her lips for she sank into the mattress as though it were a marshmallow. The coverlet beneath her was thick and plush.

"Fake fur," he lied to ease her mind. "Not the real thing."

She fanned her hand along the lush pile then craned her neck to look at the massive headboard that stood a good five feet up the wall behind her. "This is decadent, Azzin."

"Like I said: I like my comfort."

Bracing her body on her elbows, she surveyed the huge bedroom. There were double armoires that took up a large portion of one wall. Between them was an ornate desk with a form-fitting leather chair. Against another wall, two overstuffed red leather chairs flanked a small two drawer chest upon which sat the most beautiful brass lamp she'd ever seen. In front of the wide bank of windows was a sofa and two end tables, a coffee table and two adjacent loveseats—all upholstered in dark green plaid. At the opposite end of the room was an intricately-carved table with two chairs pushed beneath it and to the side a wet bar complete with a mini-fridge.

"This is something out of GQ," she whispered. "An article titled, The Bachelor Pad To End All Bachelor Pads."

"Wait 'til you see the bathroom," he boasted. "I have a sauna, spa tub, glass walk-in shower, exercise area, a bidet, toilet, twin sinks and his-n-hers walk-in closets."

"Damn!" she stated, staring at him in awe.

"All the necessities," he stated.

Despite the grief that was eating at her, she couldn't help but admire the lavishness of her surroundings. She marveled at the amount of money that had gone into decorating the room. Even the paintings on the wall were easily recognizable as being expensive and one of a kind.

"Being a Nightwind pays well, doesn't it?" she asked as she lay down and turned to her side, tucking her hand under the thick pillow beneath her head.

"Sound investments in stocks and bonds and real estate over the centuries pays exceedingly well," he answered. He slipped off his shoes then went around the other side of the bed and crawled onto the mattress, moved over to stretch out beside her. "Want me to find that gown for you?"

"Not yet," she answered, not sure she wanted to get beneath his covers.

Azzin read her thought and frowned. "The sheets are clean."

"Don't," she warned. She was facing him and the look on her face stated more than the one word.

"I'm just saying."

"I lost a good friend tonight, Azzin. The only thing on my mind right now is how I'm going to make it through the week without Rachel calling to kick my butt."

He smiled tenderly and reached out to slip a lock of her hair behind her ear. His knuckles grazed her cheek before he withdrew his hand. "I'm here for you."

"And I appreciate that, but" Her voice trailed off then she drew in a shaky breath. "Do you have any Pepsis in the fridge?"

His eyebrows slashed together. "No, do you want one?"

"I really do," she said. "A Cherry Pepsi."

He knew he could conjure one but he also knew Lord Kaleb was watching. He sighed. "I'll have to run down to the convenient store."

"Would you?"

"Of course." He scooted over in the bed then leaned down to get his loafers. "You want anything else while I'm going?"

"Salsa and chips?" she said. "An Italian sub with all the veggies except onions and cukes?"

"You're hungry," he said. "That's a good sign. You barely touched your lunch."

Wynter discovered she was hungry but that wasn't the reason she was sending him away. "Some dill pickles and pepperoncinis on the side, maybe?"

"Massive heartburn waiting to happen coming right up," he said. "You want pepperjack cheese on that sub?"

"Please."

He sighed. "Woman, you'll have nightmares all night."

"I'm going to anyway," she prophesied, knowing she wasn't going to get much sleep in the coming nights.

He started out the door then stopped to give her a concerned look. "You want to come with me?"

She shook her head. "If you don't mind, I'd like to take a hot bath."

"There's a robe in the armoire in the bath. Hasn't ever been taken out of the package."

Wynter cocked her head to one side. "My size?"

"What do you think?" he asked before exiting the room.

She heard him downstairs then sat up when the front door closed. Swinging her legs from the bed, she hurried out of the bedroom and down the stairs. She made a beeline to her purse, opened it and rummaged inside for the slip of paper she'd folded and put there before leaving home that morning. Paper in hand, she placed the purse on the foyer table once again and ran back upstairs. Hand trembling, she picked up the phone on the bedside table and punched in the number from the paper.

The phone rang and rang and rang, her hopes evaporating with each hollow sound. She was clutching the receiver so tightly her hand began to cramp and by the time the twentieth ring came, she slowly returned the receiver to its cradle.

"Where are you, Kaegan?" she asked, feeling the prickling of tears at the back of her eyes.

She needed him, she thought as she looked down at his handwriting. She needed so desperately to talk to him, to tell him what had happened. For a long time she stared at the paper until she had the number memorized then slipped it into the pocket of her skirt. With shoulders slumped, she went into the bathroom and closed the door.

When Azzin returned, he found Wynter sitting in the shower—the water beating down on her bent head, legs bent and wrapped securely in the protection of her arms. She was crying, her shoulders shaking, and his heart broke. Opening the glass door, he reached in to turn off the shower then bent down to lift her out.

"Ah, baby," he groaned. "You're like ice."

He had no idea how long she'd been under the cold water but he knew he'd been gone at least thirty minutes. There had been a long line at the sub shop and though he was tempted to use his magick but common sense prevailed and he stood—huffing and puffing and glaring—in the line like everyone else.

He sat her down on his workout bench and turned to get a towel. She was shivering when he flung it around her, her lips trembling. He ran the soft fabric over her somewhat roughly in an effort to warm her, blotting her sopping wet hair, pushing it from her eyes.

"She's gone, Azzin," she said. "I'll never see her again. I'll never talk to her again."

She lifted her head and the look she gave him made his knees weak.

"I've lost my best friend and the last thing I said to her was" Her voice broke. "Screw you."

"It wasn't said in anger," he said, instinctively understanding that was the way the two women had interacted. "Was it?"

"No, but" Her shoulders shook. "That shouldn't have been the last thing she heard me say!"

He reached for his robe and wrapped her in it then lifted her again, carried her into the bedroom and sat her on the bed. He walked over to one of the armoires and took out a gown he'd purchased just for her. It was a long cotton gown down in pale green gingham and he helped her put it on.

Though the food and soda pop he'd fetched her was sitting on the table across the room, he knew she wouldn't touch it. After he tucked her beneath the sheets, he went over to put the sub in the mini fridge and brought back one of the cans of Cherry Pepsi, popping the lid as he sat down beside her.

"Here, this will help," he said.

"Nectar of the gods," she said on a hitching sob.

"If you say so," he replied with a snort. "I'll keep some on hand from now on."

It was the fleeting look she sent him that brought Azzin's world to an immediate halt. He knew at that moment he had lost the contest. Rage unfolded within him but he was careful not allow it to show. He forced a smile he prayed was not as hideous as it felt to his lips and reached out to gently cup Wynter's cheek. The contact drove the pain deeper into his heart and it was all he could do not to howl.

"Thank you," she said softly, lowering her eyes.

"I would do anything for you," he said then lowered his hand. His heart torn in half, he moved from the bed then looked around. "I forgot to tell you. I have Rachel's belongings out in the car. They gave them to me when you were with the Rabbi."

The color drained from Wynter's face. "Her b ... belongings?"

"Her purse, laptop and PDA," he said. "Stuff they were able to retrieve from the car. The PDA is intact, I think, but the laptop is crushed. You might be able to find someone to pull the data off it, though."

"Her purse?" she repeated and fresh tears filled her eyes. A tremulous smile tried to form on her lips. "Her suitcase, you mean."

Azzin didn't feel like joking with her and just nodded. "It's fairly large," he said.

She slid her palm over the top of the soda pop can. "Would you get it for me?"

"Now?" he queried, forehead creasing.

"Please?" she countered.

Against his better judgment, he agreed and left the bedroom. All the way down the stairs and across the foyer, he had to clamp his jaws tightly shut to keep the furious bellow from spilling forth. The pressure of his unhappiness was building in leaps and bounds and if the Reaper had been nearby, he would have gladly slain the bastard a thousand times over.

"You won't win," he sneered as he took the hallway to the kitchen and then the mudroom beyond, jerking open the door into the garage with a vicious snap of his wrist. "I won't let you win, you miserable freak!"

Retrieving the purse—that, indeed, more closely resembled an overnight bag than what it was intended to be—he stomped back up the stairs. Seeing Wynter glance up at him with a touch of fear in her eyes, he battled to get his emotions under control.

"You sure you want to do this?" he asked, coming no closer to the bed.

"I need to find her address book. I need her lawyer's number," she told him.

"Wouldn't that be in her PDA?"

"Probably but its password protected and unless the password is in her address book, I couldn't get into it."

He didn't care one way or another. He brought the purse to the bed and put it in her lap. "I'm gonna take a shower," he announced then pivoted on his heel, walking off before she could say anything. He closed the door then stood in the center of the bathroom with his fingernails digging into his palms.

Wynter glanced at the door, felt his withdrawal but at that moment it wasn't as important as Rachel's purse. It sat like a walrus in her lap and she thought it felt almost as cold and moist as that arctic mammal. She let the handles fall to the sides then ran her hand along the zippered closure.

"My God, Rach! Why on earth do you need such a huge bag?" she remembered asking her agent.

"Have you ever seen all the stuff I have to lug around?" Rachel had demanded. "I've got nine clients and in this bag are ten boxes of business cards—I have a box, too, you know—and brochures for all the books I rep! This is a working woman's portable office."

It took all the courage she had to run the zipper along the puckered edge of the bag. The scent of Rachel's perfume and the musty smell which all purses possessed wafted up to greet her.

"Oh, Rach," she whispered, nose and eyes prickling with the tears she was striving to keep at bay.

There were the usual things a young woman would have in her purse: tampons, aspirin, a small cosmetic case filled with lipstick, blush, powder, eye shadow, eyeliner pencils and mascara plus a bottle of clear fingernail polish. Another small grooming case with nail clippers, tweezers, nail file and buffer. An extra couple of pairs of panty hose still in the packages, assorted breath mints, pens, tissues, a wallet that was unsnapped, a mini-photo album, and odds and ends almost all women have stashed in their purses. The address book was there and tucked inside it was an envelope. When she opened the book the envelope fell in her lap and she was stunned to see her name written in Rachel's scratchy scrawl.

She knew—before she slipped her thumb under the envelope's sealed flap—what the letter contained. It was so like Rachel not to leave anything to chance and the first words that popped out at her when she unfolded the single page housed inside the envelope said it all: If you're reading this, I'm toast.

Everything was there: lawyers name and number and the list of things he would take care of like bank and credit card accounts, the sale of Rachel's condo and whatever furniture and furnishings Wynter didn't want, the notification of parties whom Rachel felt would like to know she'd died, the disposition of all that had been Rachel Houghton.

"Just remember, kiddo: LIVE your life! LAUGH more and find LOVE. It's waiting for you. You just have to open yourself up to it. And don't mourn me too long. I know it sounds cheesy but I'm in a far better place than Urbandale, Iowa ... believe me! Hugs and kisses and best wishes from my soul to yours. I love you, my favorite Paperback Writer."

Wynter read the last line and lost it. A yowl of grief rumbled up from the very marrow of her being and she clutched the letter to her chest as tears cascaded anew. She didn't hear Azzin come back into the room until he was shushing her, folding her in his arms and cradling her against his bare chest.

His hand to her head, he held her as she cried—her tears falling to the towel he had tucked around his waist. He crooned to her in a language she didn't recognize, taking the purse from her lap and placing it on the floor as he soothed her.

When the tears stopped falling and the numb, deadened lassitude washed over her, he tucked the covers around her and reached for the light.

"Don't go," she begged. "Stay with me, Azzin."

It had been his intention to let her sleep alone because he knew it was not his arms she wanted or his shoulder upon which to cry but he was what she had. That knowledge stung his pride and made him just a little crazy, craving vengeance against a man who wasn't there upon whom to vent it.

"Are you sure?" he asked, searching her eyes.

"I don't want to be alone tonight," she said in a small voice and when she moved over in the bed to give him room to lie down beside her, he didn't question his good luck.

Neither did he bother with the matter of decency. He let the towel fall from his hips and climbed naked into the bed for that was how he normally slept. If it bothered her, he didn't care. She surprised him by molding her body to his, her head on his shoulder, her arm over his bare chest.

"You are bent on tormenting me, aren't you?" he asked, unable to stop the self-pitying question from escaping.

"Make me forget, Azzin," she said. "Make me feel something other than this awful numbness."

He didn't question her request though he knew he should deny it. His hand went to her breast to fondle her. In what little bit of soul he had left, he knew she would regret doing this come morning. She would view it as a terrible betrayal of her friend, of a greedy need to reaffirm her own existence and prove she was alive, a disloyal act at a moment she should be mourning.

"Let me lose myself in you," she said, her voice thick with pain.

Azzin was accustomed to women using him. The goddess had created him to be used. Tonight he felt he was the one doing the using.

"You want to forget?" he said through clenched teeth. "I'll see that you do."

For over an hour he used her body ruthlessly—never giving her a chance to catch her breath as he fondled and caressed, massaged and probed, tweaked and suckled and treated her far rougher than was his bent. There would be bruises on her soft flesh come morning but she would not forget it was his body that had assuaged her grief. She would never forget it had been he who had pushed aside the debilitating sorrow that rode her with wicked spurs. He took her to heights of unbridled passion and left her there to moan and groan and plead with him to finish then he would start all over again until the only thing on her mind was his body, his hands, his cock he denied her time and time again until he had worked her into a frenzy of need.

"Azzin, please!" she begged yet he denied them both the pleasure of release time and again until she was sobbing, quivering with such a keen desire nothing save what he was doing was registering in her mind.

When at last he lifted her legs—jerking them up and cradling them in the crooks of his arms—and plunged into her with a fierceness that made her cry out, the only man Wynter McGregor saw was Azzin Cree. The only man she felt was Azzin Cree. The only man she heard and smelled and tasted was Azzin Cree.

The Reaper never crossed her mind's eye.

Chapter Thirteen

Sore, feeling thoroughly used, Wynter crept from her lover's bed and shuffled into the bathroom and gently closed the door behind her. Azzin was lying on his back, sleeping soundly with an arm thrown over his face so she had no desire to wake him. As quietly as she could, she used the toilet then went to the sink, looking up into the mirror as she braced her hands on the counter.

"You look like shit," she said to her reflection.

There were dark circles beneath her eyes and her hair was standing up in like the wiry whiskers on an old man's weathered cheek. Pale, eyes lusterless, she hated the way she looked. The sun crinkles at the corners of her eyes looked deeper, carved into her flesh. The brackets beside her mouth seemed to pull her cheeks toward her chin and the slight waddle at her neck made her want to cry.

"Crumpled, wrinkled, creased, and graying," she said, looking herself in the eye. "Aren't you just the sweet little Love Goddess?" Tears moistened her gaze.

She washed her hands, splashed water on her face and borrowed Azzin's comb to force her hair into some semblance of acceptability. Her morning mouth made her grimace but she drew the line at borrowing his toothbrush. Instead, she used her index finger to scrub at her teeth. Her clothes were folded neatly over the heated towel rack so she dressed—hating the feel of unclean underwear against her skin.

Easing the door open, she was relieved to see Azzin had turned over to his side and drawn one knee up. He was naked and she took a moment to admire the purely physical beauty that he presented. With his dark hair and deep tan, he was a veritable god but she knew in her heart of hearts he wasn't the one she wanted or needed.

Tiptoeing as quietly as she could, she picked up Rachel's purse and left his bedroom and walked gingerly down the stairs—afraid one would creak loudly to give her away. Her shoes were beside the sofa and she slipped into them then went into the kitchen to find a phone, grateful the directory was sitting beside it. Leafing through the book until she found a cab company, she had a moment of panic when she realized she had no idea where she was. Hastily pulling open a drawer, she breathed a deep sigh of relief when she found a light bill with the name Chance Barrington on it. Giving the dispatcher the address, she shook her head, wondering how long the Nightwind had lived there and just how much of the Barrington identity he'd instilled into the community.

She had to wait about twenty minutes for the cab to arrive and was out the door with her purse and Rachel's in hand as soon as she saw it coming down the street, meeting it as it pulled into the driveway.

"The Graciano Diner," she told the cabby as she got into the vehicle.

The cabby glanced at her in the rear view mirror before he backed out of the driveway. "Diner ain't open this early, lady," he informed her.

She looked up to meet his eyes in the glass. "I know but I left my car there."

"Okay," he said.

As they pulled away from Azzin's house, she rummaged in her purse for her cell phone, took it out and tried calling Kaegan yet again. The phone continued to ring until she gave up and snapped the phone shut.

After retrieving her car, she sat in the parking lot of the diner and called then found the card the rabbi had given her the night before. She called his home and spoke with his wife. She found out he had set the wheels into motion for Rachel's services. The funeral would be the next day graveside in the Emanuel Jewish Cemetery adjacent to the northwest corner of Woodland Cemetery in Des Moines. The burial was being seen to by the Charnesky and Sons Funeral Home.

"There are permits needed, certain expenses," the rabbi's wife told her.

"I'll be calling her lawyer next. I hope he'll handle it," Wynter said. "I just ... I'm" Her voice broke.

"If he doesn't, let us know and we'll see what we can do."

When Wynter called Rachel's lawyer, his secretary informed her he would be in court all day but that she would have him contact her as soon as possible, which would most likely be the next day.

"But I need to give him all the information for Rachel's funeral arrangements," Wynter protested. "There are permits and"

"I will handle all that. Give me the name of the funeral home, the rabbi, and the cemetery where she will be interred. I'm assuming it is at Emanuel," the secretary said in a snappy, officious voice.

"Yes." She gave the woman the numbers.

"I'll see to what's needed and Mr. Olson will contact you as soon as possible."

"You don't have my phone number."

"Oh, yes, we do, Miss McGregor. It's in Miss Houghton's file."

There was a click and Wynter pulled the phone from her ear to stare at it. "Rude bitch!" she said.

For a few moments she sat there stewing then switched on the engine. She needed to be home before the tears started again. It was going to be a bad day, she thought, she *knew*. Yesterday Rachel was in her world and now she was gone ... forever.

Pulling into traffic she forced her mind from her grief. It wouldn't help if she wrecked her car, hurt herself or someone else because she was distracted. She concentrated on her driving and tried to keep her mind off everything that was pushing at her brain.

* * * *

Kaegan could feel Wynter's pain as the door closed behind him. The hollow sound of the lock engaging made him start—as it always did. He went to the bunk and hopped up on the slick stainless steel platform.

"See you in a few days," the Companion said. She slid down the panel that blocked her face from his view and it finally registered on him that she'd shaved her head.

Reclining on the platform, he shivered. His bare flesh against the cold metal was uncomfortable for a moment but it didn't take his overheated body long to warm the surface. He could feel the sweat popping out all over him. Soon, the pain would become nearly intolerable.

While he was still capable of rational, human thought, his mind went back over the last day's events. He had followed Wynter over to Des Moines in his avian form—keeping track of her car speeding below him on the interstate. He had sat in the corner of the diner watching her

interaction with the demon and was pleased to note she was simply going through the motions with the Nightwind. He knew she was concerned over the way things had ended between them the night before and he sensed the demon was aware of her dwindling interest in him.

Though he knew better than to show himself, was pushing the strict interpretation of what the Shadowlords were allowing in the contest, he was tempted to go to Wynter when news of her friend's accident came. It was all he could do not to materialize at her side when she learned her friend had died. Her pain and grief cut him to the quick and he would have done just that had not Lord Kaleb jerked him away from the hospital and brought him where he was at that moment.

"You were a hair's breadth away from screwing up royally, Reaper!" the High Lord accused. "You have won the contest. Do not throw away the victory!"

"She is suffering!" Kaegan told the Ridgellord.

"Aye, she is, Reaper, but she will make do until you can be with her. You are but hours from Transition. What good would it do to start what you could not finish?"

So there he sat in the very belly of some South Dakota cave where he knew there were several containment cells that had been built far beneath the ground and away from prying human eyes.

Once the Transition began, he would be incapable of human words and he would bear no resemblance to a man. Fur would begin to sprout soon. Fangs would descend. Talons would form. Joints would pop and bones elongate. A muzzle and pointed ears and brutal red eyes would appear as the pain intensified to nearly intolerable proportions. At least, all that would remain human of him would be his thoughts.

The hellion inside his body flexed and he doubled up—drawing his knees to his belly as the agony rippled through him. The revenant worm was storing her own Sustenance inside her body so she could feed her nestlings while he was in Transition and unable to take Sustenance on his own. Spiny protrusions on her back stabbed into his kidney to anchor her body steady as she turned to sink her proboscis into the bone of his hip. The proboscis—like the needle of a syringe--contains a groove down its front inside which reside several extremely slender, exceedingly sharp, saw-toothed stylets which allow the parasite to inject the stylets into the bone to draw out the marrow. It hurt like hell and he panted as she drew the marrow from him.

"Damn, bitch!" he hissed for it seemed to him the hellion was being particularly brutal in her drinking. He writhed on the bunk, reaching up to drag a hand down his face—a hand that shook violently and already was coated with a thick layer of fur.

* * * *

Wynter drove right past the exit that would take her to Kellogg and headed into Grinnell. She would go to Kaegan's house and hope he was there. She needed to talk to him, see him, feel his arms around her. She missed him worse with every passing minute. Twice her cell phone rang and she picked it up to see who was calling on the off-chance it was Kaegan.

It wasn't. It was Azzin and at the moment she didn't want to speak to him. She felt like a slut slinking from his bed without so much as a note left behind to explain her departure. Yet even though she felt bad about it—dirty and ashamed of herself—she hadn't been able to face him. It was more than just rolling around in the hay with the man while her friend lay on a morgue slab. It wasn't just the inappropriateness of her shocking behavior. It was simply because she realized he was not the man for her and she'd never been good at breaking up with guys. Truth be told: they'd been the ones to doing the breaking up, never her.

Once again her cell rang and she took it off the passenger to look at the number. This time it was an anonymous caller but instinct warned her it was Azzin. She turned off the ringer and

tossed the phone to the seat, resolutely putting it out of her mind as she flexed her fingers around the steering wheel and shifted in her seat. She was ten miles from Grinnell and her palms were beginning to sweat.

* * * *

Throwing the cell phone as hard as he could across the room, Azzin released a long, undulated yowl that shook the glass in the great room's windows. The phone disintegrated on impact, the pieces skittering across the highly-polished oak flooring.

She was avoiding him he thought as he started pacing, plowing a hand through his dark curls. She had snuck out of his bed like a thief in the night and he'd never had that happen to him before. It rankled. It tore at his pride. It caused his heart to ache and that was something he'd never experienced before, either.

His hatred for the Reaper tripled at that moment. It became a virulent life-form of its own—suppurating and festering, washing over him like bubbling acid.

"You will *not* win!" he growled.

In the space of twenty minutes, the great room lay in shambles. Broken glass, torn paintings, ripped fabric, and demolished furniture littered the floor. The air was filled with floating feathers from ripped pillows and shredded scraps of paper. The destruction was complete and in the center of the maelstrom, the demon stood with his hands clenched, head thrown back, howling savagely.

* * * *

The dream came—as he prayed it would. He was incapable of moving now. Lying curled up in the corner of the containment cell with his back to the titanium walls, the creature that had been Kaegan Cree stared with bloodshot eyes at the slick walls, floor and ceiling of his prison. The Transition would claim him for at least five days—if not longer—and in that time all he would have would be the dream.

He whimpered, his lupine throat closing against the whine. His paws jerked in reaction to the pain that had invaded his body as he lay on his side. He panted, tongue lolling and fangs glistening, ears twitching and his thick, bushy tail thumped once upon the cold metal floor then lay still. His normal body temperature was 101° but now was over 110° and rising and would continue to rise until it reached 120°. His fur was already slick with sweat. The heat would be nearly unbearable but such was the way of the Reaper.

The dream.

All he had was the dream and he let his mind sink into the soft silky texture of it. The faint scent of gardenia drifted under his distended nostrils then spiraled down to the very core of his being. There, it pulsed with a sweetness and light that took him beyond the agony in which he dwelt. It lifted him up and away from the hard metal floor and deposited him in a soft, green meadow where cool breezes played over his heated flesh.

"I was afraid you would never speak to me again."

Her voice was so gentle, filled with longing and when she reached out to touch his cheek, he turned his lips into her palm.

"I was jealous, *lhiannon*," he whispered. "Jealous men do stupid things."

"It's you," she said, caressing his face. "It's you I want, Kaegan."

His heart soared. "Would you grant me the right to say the ones of Joining to you, then?" he asked. He took her hand to lay her palm against his heart. "The words that will bind us together in this life as it bound us together in the lives that came before?"

"Yes." Her eyes glistened with tears.

He dropped to one knee, her hand clutched in his.

"With all my heart and all my soul and all my being I pledge myself only unto you, Wynter McGregor. What is mine will be yours. You, I have chosen of mine own freewill and without reservation or protest. I will walk the day and sleep the night at your side and at no other's. I pledge myself only unto you for as long as there is life for us both. I will be, forever, your true mate in word and deed. We are one flesh, one inseparable entity and until the end of time, once mated, never separated."

She smiled and dropped gracefully to her knees before him.

"With all my heart and all my soul and all my being I pledge myself only unto you, Kaegan Cree. What is mine will be yours. You, I have chosen of mine own freewill and without reservation or protest. I will walk the day and sleep the night at your side and at no other's. I pledge myself only unto you for as long as there is life for us both. I will be, forever, your true mate in word and deed. We are one flesh, one inseparable entity and until the end of time, once mated, never separated."

In his dream he laid her down—their clothing dissolving like mist so they were flesh to flesh. He lifted her arms over her head and threaded his fingers through hers, easing her thighs apart with his knee, keeping most of the weight of his body from crushing her.

"I have longed to say those words to you in this lifetime," he said. "Each time I say them, with each new incarnation of our spirits and bodies, the words have greater meaning."

She hooked a leg over his and smiled into his serious eyes. "This time, the words will be consummated, my love," she told him. "This time we are one flesh, one inseparable entity that will go on until the end of time. This time, mated, we will not be separated."

His heart fisted against his chest. "Are you saying what I have waited for so long to hear, *lhiannon*?"

"This time, I will accept your offer of immortality, Kaegan Cree," she replied. "This time I accept your fledgling."

His cock throbbed between them, aching to be buried in the soft, moist channel between her silken thighs. She was his and he wanted her to feel the intensity of the love he held for her. It had taken centuries to reach this point in time when it was more than the sum of the two of them. It was all.

He unlaced the fingers of his right hand and trailed his palm down her body, slipping it between them to take hold of his shaft. Slowly, he guided it into her gentle heat, burying it to the hilt as she brought her legs up to encircle his waist. She arched up to meet him and he took possession of her fingers once again, holding them tightly as he began to thrust slowly and sensually into her body.

Their eyes held, locked, bore into one another like living flame. He fantasized he could see into her very soul, the core of her being as she looked back at him with such pure and undiluted love it made him humble.

Her fingers tensed around his and he increased the rhythm of his pushes. He began to rock his hips, to rotate them and her legs tightened around him. When that first faint clench began in her vaginal muscles he increased the speed until their bodies were slapping together and the climax burst over them like fireworks.

"Mine!" he growled and jerked one hand from hers to jam it beneath her hips to raise her up for deeper penetration. He rammed into her hard and he heard her grunt but the look in her eyes held no pain. It held desire and undulating passion as her body milked his.

"Mine!" she answered fiercely, lifting her chin. "Forever mine!"

Over and over the dream played in his mind on a loop that had him writhing on the cold metal floor. His body ached for relief and he whined with the need. Paws jerking, sides heaving, he lived through the sweet torment time and time again until exhaustion claimed him and all he could do was lay there and whimper.

He could not say her name for in his lupine state he was beyond anything that resembled humanness but his heart cried out *Wynter!*

Chapter Fourteen

She had no trouble finding his house. Pulling into the driveway, she got out and went to the door, rang the bell several times, knocked, and when no one answered, tried peeking in the through the living room drapes but could see nothing inside the shadowy house. She went around back and knocked on the kitchen door, waited and—disappointed—went back to her car. She got in and sat there looking at the house, watching the curtains but nothing moved and at least she sighed and turned on the car.

It was when she was going back up the street that a car passed her and one quick glance at the driver set off an alarm in Wynter's brain. She glanced in the rear view mirror then the side mirror and when the driver of the passing car pulled into Kaegan's drive, she braked, turned in her seat and waited until the driver got out of the car.

"That's the girl that delivered my groceries!" Wynter said and whipped into a neighbor's drive, turned around and drove back to Kaegan's house.

The girl in another strange, Goth-looking outfit was opening the door to Kaegan's house when Wynter pulled in behind the younger woman's car. She hurried out of the car and to the door, punching the doorbell as though it were her enemy. As soon as the door opened, Wynter felt a shaft of anger ripple through her. She opened up with a barrage of words that would have done a Panzer unit proud.

"You delivered a box of groceries from SquareAway to my house at Pebble Lake. It was"

"A six pack of cherry Pepsi, bottle of hot chunky salsa, a bag of chips, a jar of stuffed olives, a stick of pepperoni, box of Chicken in a Bisket, bottle of spray cheese, a bag of Nestle Crunch mini bars and a single red silk rose," the girl interrupted, a big grin on her painted black lips. She popped a big wad of bright pink bubble gum. "Yeah, I 'member."

Lifting her gaze from the young woman's heavily-kohled eyelids to her bald head, Wynter winced. "You cut your hair," she said because she couldn't think of anything else.

The girl put a hand to her shaved dome. "Yeah, got tired of messing with it. Thought I'd do the Sinead thing for awhile." She popped the bubble gum again. "You looking for my Reaper?"

Anger, jealousy, possessiveness, envy—a myriad of emotions flashed through Wynter and she stood there hip-shot with narrowed eyes. "I wasn't aware he belonged to anyone."

A wide grin tugged at the black lips. "Sweetie, he don't belong to me," the girl said. "He's all yours. I'm like his, you know, his parole officer." She tapped her palm against her heart twice. "I'm a Companion." She stepped back. "You wanna come in?"

"Parole ...?" Wynter shook her head. "You don't look like any"

"The demon told you Kea was in Baybridge, right?" the Companion asked.

Wynter nodded.

"That's where all our kind is sent when we fuck up. The Shadowlords assign a Companion to a parolee to make sure he or she walks the straight and narrow once they're released. Our boss, Lord Kaleb" She motioned Wynter inside. "Hey, come on in. I won't bite you. I promise. We don't need the neighbors hearing this."

"Where's Kaegan?" Wynter asked, not sure she wanted to be alone with the strange young woman with the black lips, eyelids and fingernails.

Once more the bubble gum popped. "In a containment cell up in South Dakota."

Wynter's eyebrows shot up and her stomach did a flip-flop. "He's in prison again?"

"No, no, no, no, no!" the Companion said, laughing. "He's in Transition." She cocked her head to one side. "Didn't he tell you about that?"

"Transition," Wynter repeated then realization hit her. "I haven't been able to reach him."

"Well, there you go!" the Companion said. "That's why. Don't got no cell phone service in one of them cells."

Breathing a sigh of relief, Wynter finally entered the house, shocked to find a room in absolute shambles. Her lips parted. "Dear God, what happened in here?"

"Don't mind the mess," the Companion said. "He's not much of a housekeeper." She giggled. "I don't come in here unless I have to but he asked if I'd come over just in case you dropped by."

Wynter put her hands on her hips. "Well, I'm here and I'll be damned if I'm going to let him get away with this shit."

The Companion grimaced. "If you're planning on cleaning, I'm outta here. I don't do floors and windows and laundry."

"Then you'd better get gone," Wynter snapped. She was surveying the mess that littered the floor, the sofa, every chair and table and was stunned to see a pair of leather pants hanging from the rod of one of the dining room drapes. "What a pig!"

"Always was and always will be. Reapers are like that," the Companion warned. "Well, at least when they don't have a mate around to ring their chimes."

"I'll do more than ring his damned chimes," Wynter growled as she headed for the kitchen.

"Yeah, like, I'm outta here!" the Companion stated and in a flash was out the door.

Wynter spun around and hurried to the front door. "Hey, you aren't going anywhere until I"

She stopped for the Goth chick—and her car—was gone.

"How the hell did she ...?" Wynter whispered as she went out on the stoop and looked both ways for any sign of the car. Heart pounding, she glanced around the neighborhood but it didn't appear there were any rubberneckers out and about to have seen the vanishing act.

Shaking her head, she went back in the house, flinching as she took in the mess that was Kaegan's home.

"Baby, things are gonna be *so* different when you come back!" she mumbled.

* * * *

Dreaming again.

Or still.

He wasn't sure and didn't care as long as he was able to lose himself in Wynter's arms. The pain had subsided to a scalding ache deep in his bones but he was able to push it aside as his thoughts centered on the woman he loved. She was his anchor, his salvation, the only bright beacon in his otherwise dark-stained life.

There was nothing he would not do for her.

Including murder.

* * * *

Wynter thanked the rabbi and his wife, the legal aide who had come to represent Rachel's lawyer, and the three cemetery workers milling about, waiting for everyone to leave so they could close the grave. She clutched the lawyer's card in her hand as she walked back to her car more depressed than when she'd arrived at the cemetery.

"Is this it?" the legal aide—a blowsy blond in a skirt much too small for her ample hips. "Didn't she have any friends?"

Getting into her car, Wynter gripped the steering wheel then laid her head on her crossed hands. She was all cried out but the sorrow was like a thorn in her side, working its way to her heart.

No, she thought, there were no friends, only passing acquaintances. The four clients she'd called personally to inform them of Rachel's accident were more concerned with getting another agent than actually caring the woman had died. The neighbors on the same floor of the condo were likewise indifferent and their distress was over who would buy Rachel's place.

"Not much of a turnout," the legal aide had pronounced with a sniff. "Should tell you something."

Digging her nails into her palms, Wynter had kept the snide and brutal remarks to herself although she was sure Rachel would have applauded her had she verbally jumped on the bitch and ground her to mush.

She thought of the lavish Catholic funerals she'd attended, the wake the day before, the churches filled with mourners, the long corteges to the cemetery, the meals afterward. So vastly different than what she thought of as an impersonal sending away of her best friend.

Depression bore down on her shoulders and she lifted her head. There would be no more tears. The grief would last but the tears were gone.

"Mr. Olson would like you to come to his office at three this afternoon," the legal aide who had never bothered to give her name had informed Wynter. "He will announce the disposition of Ms. Houghton's estate." She extended the lawyer's card. "Just give this to the guy at the parking structure gate. It validates your parking."

"Fine," Wynter had grated, turning her back on the woman. Throughout the ceremony she'd clutched the card as though it were a lifeline.

Unable to remain a moment longer at the cemetery, Wynter cranked the car and drove away, wondering where she could go for the next three and a half hours. She wasn't hungry but she sure could use a stiff drink. It didn't seem like a good idea to visit a pub at that hour of the morning although she could hear Rachel saying the sun was over the yardarm somewhere in the world.

After driving aimlessly for over an hour, indifferent to the faster moving traffic around her, she finally found herself at the Jordan Creek mall. She still had over two hours to kill so pulled into a parking spot and went into the huge mall. Spying a bench, she made a beeline to it and plopped down. At least there was activity around her and at that moment in time she truly didn't want to be alone. When someone sat down beside her, she didn't even glance their way until a hand reached for hers.

She jumped, snapping her head toward the intruder and was surprised to see Azzin.

"Are you okay?" he asked. When she didn't answer, he squeezed her hand. "I thought about going out to the cemetery but I didn't know if I'd be welcome."

She withdrew her hand from his, turned her head away. "You knew her," she said in a defensive voice. "You had business dealings with her. It would have been polite to show your respect."

"I wanted to be there for you. I didn't want you to be alone," he said, "but I didn't think you wanted me. If you had, I think you would have called so I didn't intrude."

Wynter made no comment to his statement. She wasn't angry at him but her guilt over having left him as she did the morning before was poking at her like a tongue to a sore tooth.

"It's no coincidence that you're here, though, is it?" she asked softly.

"No, it isn't," he replied. "I felt your grief. I was created to respond to a woman's needs."

That wasn't the best thing for him to have said and he realized it the moment the words left his mouth but—thankfully—Wynter hadn't heard. She was staring at a couple who were window shopping.

"I was the only one who knew her at the funeral," she said. "It was so sad." She tore her eyes from the hand-holding couple. "I can't think of anything worse than dying and not having anyone there who loves you to send you on your way, Azzin."

"That won't happen to you," the demon said.

"No parent or sibling or husband or child," she said as though he hadn't spoken. Her gaze drifted back to the couple. "I never thought about it until now but other than Rachel, I don't have anyone, either."

"You have me," he said softly.

Wynter looked around at him. "But you aren't human, are you?"

Azzin winced. "I" He shook his head. "No, not entirely. Not anymore."

"And you'll go on forever, won't you?" she queried.

"Nothing lasts forever, Wynni," he said. "Eventually, my usefulness to the goddess will cease to be and She'll relegate me to the Abyss until time ends."

"I don't want to talk about this anymore," she said and got to her feet. She thrust her hands into the pocket of her black blazer and started walking, the Nightwind keeping pace with her but staying silent.

They walked for over an hour—winding in and out of quaint little shops, avoiding the chain stores. On the second level, they stopped at a kiosk that sold sunglasses.

"I have to meet the lawyer at three p.m.," she said.

"Want me to go with you?"

It was asked matter of fact, no pressure, no inflection in his voice. He didn't even glance at her as he spoke.

"Yeah," she answered and he let it go at that without comment.

Continuing on he heard her stomach growl and sighed.

"You didn't have breakfast, did you?" he inquired.

"I couldn't have eaten a single cornflake," she told him.

"Well, you need to eat," he stated. "Where's the lawyer's office?"

"On Grand."

"Okay. I know a sandwich shop that sells a killer ham and potato chowder. You could eat a cup of that, couldn't you?"

He'd lost the contest so there was no reason not to use the powers he had at his command. Into her mind he placed the image of a piping hot cup of soup and a tall glass of iced tea. Under her nostrils, he wove the scent of baked ham and buttery potato sprinkled with garlic. He drove the image and scent deep.

"I might could go for that," she said.

"Great," he said. "I'll drive."

When she nodded without protest, he turned his face away, not wanting her to see the gleam of satisfaction that lit his red-glowing eyes.

* * * *

Something jarred him from his dream and his lips peeled back from his fangs. He sniffed the air, growled, his hackles spiking the fur along the ridge of his back. Shakily he got to his feet and stood facing the door, continuing to growl. Quietly he padded to the door, lowered his muzzle to the edge where it met the titanium floor and sniffed again. No scent came to him but something was pressing on his senses, alerting him to danger. He lifted a paw, scraped at the door—thick nails shrieking down the metal. The threat of impending disaster increased and he whined, scratching savagely at the door now with his front paws. Something wasn't right. Something was very, very wrong. Frustrated, he threw back his head and howled.

* * * *

"Basically, she left everything to you," Lawyer Olson said. He was a tall, lanky gentleman with a shock of snow-white hair which he wore slicked back from a high forehead and clubbed at the nape of his neck with a silver hair clip. "It'll take a couple of weeks for all the inheritance taxes and other legalities to be settled but if you'd like to move into the condo"

"No!" Wynter was quick to say with a firm shake of her head. "I couldn't."

"Would you like to sell it, then?" Olson inquired.

"Yes," Wynter stated. "Definitely."

"What about the furnishings?"

Wynter was twisting a tissue in her hands and looking down at it. "There are some pieces I would like. The rest can be sold." She looked up. "Could you handle that?"

Olson frowned. "I suppose so." His tone, however, suggested he would prefer not to.

"Are there arrangements for whom should get her client list and files?" Azzin interjected and smiled gently at Wynter when she gave him a surprised look.

The lawyer looked down at the will. "I have an address for a Mary Wolford in New York City. I'm to send that information to her as soon as Ms. McGregor gives it to me. The files will be in Rachel's home office."

"I'll get them to you later this afternoon," Wynter replied. "I want to handle her affairs in a timely manner."

"Always a good idea," Olson agreed. He closed Rachel's file, clasped his hands to rest them on the folder. "Is there anything else I can explain to you or do for you, Ms. McGregor?"

"No, I think you've covered all the salient points," she answered. She got up—Azzin rising with her—and held out her hand. "Thank you for taking such good care of Rachel."

"She made things very easy for me," Olson said with an ingratiating smile. "If you don't have a lawyer" He let the words dangle.

"I do," she said, "but thank you for the offer." She released his hand.

Going down in the elevator, Wynter wiped her hand on her skirt. "His palm was wet," she commented.

He was silent as they walked to his car. The parking structure was hot, the smell of gasoline and oil, diesel fuel and baking concrete overpowering in the heat. When he opened the passenger door for her, more heat pulsed from the interior.

"I can't say I cared for Mr. Olson," she said as she slid into the seat.

"The sooner you're done with him, the better," Azzin commented.

"I believe you're right." She pulled the seat belt around her and clicked it into place.

"Kaegan, too."

She looked up at him as he stood at the opened door, leaning toward her. "What?"

The Nightwind reached out to wrap his broad hand around the back of her neck and the moment he did Wynter's world went completely dark. She slumped in her seat, her head tilting to the side.

"Sweet dreams, bantling," the demon said and adjusted her in the seat to make it look as though she was napping. He closed the door and hurried around to the driver's side.

When he left the parking structure he turned north toward the interstate. Fifteen minutes later he glanced in his rear view mirror where Des Moines, Iowa was disappearing behind him.

Chapter Fifteen

High Lord Kaleb cursed but there was nothing he could do. The goddess Whose hand held the demon's leash was clamped brutally to his shoulder and the other Shadowlords—equally enraged by the actions of the Nightwind—were held at bay by the goddess' stormy gray eyes.

"The One who rules us" the High Lord began then winced as pain shot through his body.

"Morrigunia does not hold sway where *I* tread!" Lilith, the demon goddess snarled. "You have interfered with my Nightwind for the last time, Ridgelord!"

"He lost the contest," Lord Kaleb protested. "The Reaper won. The woman is his."

"Not if Azzin can sway her to his cause," Lilith declared. "And believe Me, he will!"

"Through means unfair and unnatural," Lord Mazon said.

"All is fair in love and war," the goddess replied with a laugh. "Have you not heard that?"

"The Reaper is out of commission. He can not defend his lady," Lord Janus objected. "There will be hell to pay when he comes out of Transition."

Lilith waved away the objection with Her free hand. "Let the Reaper try." Her dark eyes narrowed. "If he can find the human female."

"This is not right," Lord Kaleb said from between clenched teeth. The pain in his shoulder was excruciating where the goddess' blood-red nails were digging into his flesh as She kept him in his seat.

"Take Your filthy paws off him or suffer the consequences of Your actions, bitch."

Every eye jumped to the far corner of the room.

She sat on an invisible cushion of air four feet off the floor. Long red hair floating around an exquisite face centered with eyes the color of spring grass and lips ripe as cherries, the sight of Her made every male in the room instantly hard.

"Crone," Lilith stated with a hiss.

"Hag," the Triune Goddess returned in greeting, a mean smile on Her lovely face.

Lord Kaleb breathed a sigh of relief as the demon goddess released his shoulder. He put a hand to the ache and—as every Shadowlord did along with him—slid from his seat to one knee, head bowed in respect.

"Get up, Kaleb," Morrigunia ordered. She swept Her gaze across the other Shadowlords. "You, too, Magi."

The Ridgelord and his Council got to their feet. He was overjoyed to see the goddess under Whose authority they existed. Morrigunia, the Triune Goddess of Battle, Strife, and Fertility; the Nubile Lass, the Fertile Wife, the Wise Grandmother; the goddess associated with sovereignty, prophecy, war, and death on the battlefield; She Who created the Reapers to defend mankind; the warrior goddess Who took the form of a dragon with copper scales when angered.

She, who was Lilith's fraternal twin and the white to the demon goddess' black—the two sides of the same powerful rune coin.

"Do You truly believe I would allow one of Your piddling incubi to win over one of My Reapers, You greedy slut?" Morriguna queried Her sister.

"Who has the human female, whore?" Lilith returned, chin raised, eyes defiant.

Morrigunia gave a decidedly unladylike snort and rolled Her verdant orbs. "Only as long as it takes Cree to return to human shape so he can kick some demon ass." She arched a shapely sanguine brow. "When has a Nightwind ever bested a Reaper, harlot?"

"Harlot?" Lilith repeated. "Pot, kettle, You trollop."

"Cree will make mincemeat of Your demon," Morrigunia said. "Now get the hell away from My Magi before I turn You into ash!"

Lilith replied with a loud snort of Her own then vanished in a plume of choking sulfur smoke.

As soon as Her twin departed, Morrigunia spun around and fixed Lord Kaleb with a steely green glitter. She lifted a slim hand to point a scarlet-tipped fingernail at the Ridgelord.

"You go to Kaegan and calm him, Magi. He is beside himself knowing something is amiss and not able to do anything about it. The moment he Transitions to human, I want him out of that cell and on his way to the Prime Reaper. Drive him there, yourself."

"Viraidan?" Lord Kaleb inquired, brows slashed together.

"How many Primes do I have on this world, jackass? Which is the most powerful?" Morrigunia thundered so loudly the Shadowlords were forced to clap hands to their ears.

"It will be as You order, Mo Regina!" Lord Kaleb agreed, feeling a trickle of blood easing from his left ear drum.

"Fucking A, it will!" the Triune Goddess roared before She, too, vanished in a cloud of copper cloud.

"Why is She sending Kaegan back to Baybridge?" Lord Janus asked as he shook his head to clear the ringing.

"For the Prime's help," Lord Mazon said. "After all, he deals with a Nightwind on a daily basis."

"Cedric," Lord Janus supplied with a nod. "I had forgotten about the Aged One."

"Let's hope between them the Prime and the Nightwind can help Kaegan find his lady else our Reaper will turn this country upside down in his search for her!" Lord Kaleb prophesied.

* * * *

Viraidan Cree had been jittery all morning. His vicious snarls were aimed at the security guards at Baybridge so his men left him alone, thinking perhaps the Prime had engaged in an argument with his lady-wife, Dr. Bronwyn McGregor-Cree. No one came near the black-clad head of security unless it could not be avoided.

"I'm going to work out!" Cree told his second in command. "If someone comes looking for me, tell them where I am!"

Climbing aboard his motorcycle, the Reaper roared from the parking lot with a squeal of tires.

"*Your mate is in high dudgeon, milady,*" Cedric—the Nightwind—informed Bronwyn.

Bronwyn glanced down at the black cat who padded along beside her left leg. "So I gather."

"*In a really bad mood,*" Ralph, the Bugel-Noz who—in the form of a scruffy brown dog—trotted beside her on her right.

"I can't imagine what set him off this time," Bronwyn mumbled as they passed a lab technician in the hallway.

"*Does it take anything?*" Ralph inquired.

Bronwyn glanced at the Bugel-Noz. He was the last of his kind—in his usual form a hideously ugly, deformed being so hideous people fainted at the sight of him. But Ralph was a

generous, loving, and gentle being who craved human companionship. He had taken the form of a sweet and humble canine whose only fault was the propensity to expel extremely atrocious puffs of bowel gas.

"He'll work off his anger," Bronwyn said. "With whatever that stuff is he does out there in the pasture."

"*Stuff?*" Cedric questioned.

"It's like kung fu or jujitsu or something," Bronwyn explained.

"*Cagey laue ry laue*," Ralph informed her. "Translates as hand to hand fighting."

"Ah, so that's what it's called. I never knew," Bronwyn said. She sighed. "All I know is he looks scrumptious doing it."

In response to her comment Cedric made a sound that suspiciously resembled hawking up a fur ball and Ralph farted in response.

Cree laughed for he'd homed in on his lady's thoughts and was listening in on her psychic conversations with the two entities that followed her when she wasn't working. That she was pregnant with their first child—a son—was cause for him to be grateful for the undivided attention paid to their mistress by the beings. As he pulled into the pasture where he practiced his special brand of martial arts, he once again felt the hard press of anxiety pushing down on his shoulders.

"Something's coming," he grumbled. "Something I'm not going to like."

The Prime Reaper stripped off his shirt, tugged off his boots and dropped to his knees on the grass he mowed himself—with a non-motorized push mower. Closing his eyes, he let the two facets of his being slip apart. The young human male, Sean, was pushed aside at times like these while the brutal warrior, Viraidan, came roaring to the surface. There was no room for gentleness or guilt such as the human side of his personality felt. When he fought, the Reaper wanted only the savage half of his soul to surface. When he trained, it was the warrior—not the boy—who came forth.

Inside him, his hellion flexed.

"Knock it off," he snapped. "I've no time for your foolishness."

With his palms flat on his thighs, he drew in deep breaths—ignoring the pain the revenant queen was deliberately giving him. He was used to it for he had endured it for centuries. He was—at least to his knowledge—the second oldest of his kind. He had been a Reaper long before his spacecraft crash landed in what was Ireland in the 4th century B.C. He had been feared, hated, and the Celts had done their best to kill him but he had survived an exacting punishment in a rancid bog for thousands of years before being discovered by a scientist and his hellion saved. He had been brought back to life in the body of Sean Cullen, a young human male when Viraidan's hellion had been Transferred to Sean as the young man lay dying. Now, he and Sean were encapsulated in the same body—both desperately in love with Bronwyn McGregor.

Once more the hellion shifted and the Reaper's eyes popped open. Nothing angered him more than to be at the mercy of the revenant queen.

"What?" he snarled, not expecting the loathsome thing to answer, but She did.

"*Your help will be needed.*"

"Whoopee. Like I don't have enough shit to do?"

"*You must give it, Cree.*"

"Aye, well, we'll see about that!" he said as he sprang to his feet. He took a deep breath then began the slow, complex moves that turned his honed muscles hard as granite.

The creature relaxed and the Reaper continued the movements that brought him peace.

* * * *

In his cell, Kaegan howled until his throat was raw. He was infuriated that he was imprisoned in his lupine form when he knew something bad was happening to Wynter. He could feel it in the marrow of his bones even though the iron sheathing beneath the titanium walls, floor and ceiling should have prevented him from receiving any kind of psychic transmissions at all. Though he raged, clawed viciously at the metal walls until his talons bled, he was trapped and likely to be for days to come.

Lord Kaleb winced as he heard the inhuman sound coming from the con cell as he walked down the stone corridor. The sound reverberated off the walls to set his teeth on edge. Not for the first time in his long existence did the Ridgelord thank the Great God and Goddess for not making him a Reaper.

It wasn't the turning into the wolf-like creature or the pain involved in that Transmogrification that bothered him. It was the time a Reaper was forced to spend locked within the lonely walls of a containment cell that bothered Lord Kaleb the most. Like all Reapers, Kaegan hated to be closed in but Shadowlords were extremely claustrophobic, unable to draw a decent breath when confined in a small room such as the con cell. One or two over the centuries had gone stark, raving mad while locked in tiny cells such as an oubliette—a small space accessible only from a hatch in a high ceiling.

The Ridgelord knew the Reaper was far from reaching the end of his Transition. It would be several more days before Kaegan would revert back to humanoid shape. During that time, it would take all of the High Lord's persuasive abilities to even partially calm the raging beast. He opened the hatch that covered a five inch square titanium mesh-covered access hole so he could look into the cell.

Almost immediately the beast sprang at the door, pounding it with its paws. It took all of Lord Kaleb's courage not to spring back from the attack.

"Reaper? We are setting into motion the help you will need. You know he will not hurt your lady. Let your mind be easy on that."

The ungodly howl, the vicious snarl, the wet black nose pressed painfully to the mesh, red eyes glittering with hatred, the glistening fangs dripping saliva—signs the Reaper had reached a rabid state.

"As soon as you Transition, I will be here to take you where you must go. We will see your lady is returned to you."

Another brutal yowl, thick claws scraping against the metal door, attempting to hook into the mesh to rip it away.

"Your paw is bleeding," Lord Kaleb said gently. "You know you can not escape. I beseech you not to injure yourself. All will be well."

The beast hit the door so hard it rattled and the Ridgelord moved back. He knew the door would hold. There were five four inch thick bars locking it in place. The cell had been designed and constructed to hold Reapers, werewolves and other creatures whose strengths were ten or more times that of a human male in his athletic prime. It would hold Kaegan Cree.

Knowing the raging animal on the other side of the door was beyond rational thought, Lord Kaleb closed the hatch and with shoulders bowed, returned to the center of operations deep in the heart of Wind Cave. With every step he took, he ached for the creature in the con cell.

* * * *

Azzin looked away from the television to check on Wynter. She was sleeping soundly and had been for several hours now. Since leaving Des Moines, he'd awakened her a handful of

times so she could stretch her limbs, relieve herself and eat. Even then he kept her under a tight psychological control that enveloped her mind so completely she had no idea she was being manipulated. As far as she knew, they were husband and wife, traveling to New York where he was to undertake a new job.

Watching her sleeping so peacefully in the motel bed, the Nightwind was very pleased with his successful ability to manage Wynter. His hold on her mind was so strong, so all-pervasive she was convinced her name was Anjali Kenjura and that she had been married to the man of her dreams for over forty years. He had instilled within her a need to touch him often, to kiss him, to slip her hand in his as they walked, to snuggle close to him as they slept.

What he had not done was pushed her into a sexual encounter. The reason was simple: he disdained sex in motel rooms—equating it to things cheap and tawdry. Until they were in the bed they would share from that time forward, he could bide his time, tamp down his raging need to be inside her, to spill his seed into her warm, slick body.

"Stop thinking such thoughts!" he said aloud and deliberately looked away from the woman on the bed. "It wouldn't be right to touch her when she's unaware."

He was hard as stone beneath the white terry cloth robe he'd donned after they had shared a bath together. The ache was exacting and he put a hand to his cock. Rubbing slowly at first, he settled back in the chair, shot out his legs and parted his thighs. He cupped himself then flicked aside the edges of the robe so he could look down at his shaft. It was rock-hard, the tip glistening with a bead of pearly pre-cum. He ran his thumb over the droplet then wrapped his fingers around the broad head. Closing his eyes, he began the rhythmical slow dance that would bring him to release. As his hand moved, he thought of the woman on the bed and the soft, silky texture of her vaginal walls gripping him tightly. He could smell her essence from across the room—that sweet, musky scent that drove him mad with need. Sliding his tongue past his lips, he could almost taste the salted honey of her juices on its tip. Clamping his teeth together he increased his speed, the first ooze of blood from where his teeth met his tongue giving him more pleasure than pain.

All the while his hand slid up and down his cock, his thoughts were on Wynter McGregor and for the first time in his long, long life he began to experience the intensity of that inexplicable emotion called love.

Chapter Sixteen

"Azzin?"

The demon's head snapped up and he jerked his hand from his shaft, scarlet infusing his cheeks. "Aye, my love," he said huskily, willing his cock to soften. He cleared his throat. "Did you sleep well?"

She was propped on her elbows, her eyes warm and loving as she looked at him. "I did." She rolled so her weight was on her left shoulder and extended her right hand to him.

Getting up cautiously, afraid the tell-tale bulge was poking at the front of his robe, he adjusted the folds and went to her, taking a seat on the mattress beside her. He put a hand to her cheek and she tilted her face into the cup of his palm.

"But I had a strange dream," she said, her forehead creasing.

Fear lanced through the Nightwind. "What kind of dream?"

"There was a cat," she said. "A big buttery yellow cat and he was crying"

"Shit!" Azzin said then quickly forced his will into her mind. "Sleep, Wynter. Sleep!"

She collapsed like a deflated balloon and he sprang from the bed, flinging off the robe as she fell into a deep, deep sleep.

He'd forgotten all about the cat that had been left behind in Iowa. Guilt rode him with brutal spurs as he dressed. Nightwinds had a special bond with felines, were sworn to protect the animals, to nourish them. To have forgotten Wynter's beloved pet was a serious mistake in Azzin's book. He felt horrible that he had done so.

Willing himself into vapor form, he sped westward, winding his way as quickly as he could to Wynter's home. He had no trouble getting inside for he simply wafted through a crack in the foundation. He simply materialized in her office to find Butterbean glaring at him.

"Meow!" the cat protested with narrowed eyes and twitching whiskers.

"A thousand pardons, friendling," Azzin said. "I am most ashamed of my carelessness in regard to your wellbeing."

Butterbean made a sniffing sound that made it clear to the demon what the cat thought of the Nightwind's apology. He turned his back on Azzin and shook his right rear leg rapidly three times—the feline equivalent of giving someone the finger.

"I *am* sorry, Bean," Azzin said in a contrite voice. "It will not happen again." He glanced around the office. "Where is your carrier?"

The cat turned its head to give the demon a look as if to ask how Azzin planned on transporting him through the cosmos in a carrier.

"Right," Azzin said, properly chastened. He walked slowly to the cat and bent down. "I will carry you in my arms and buy a carrier when we get to Cincinnati and your mistress."

Butterbean stiffened then the feline relaxed, allowing the demon to pick him up.

"Close your eyes, little one," Azzin warned. "Sleep. The journey will be unpleasant for you otherwise."

Just as his mistress had, the cat fell into a deep slumber—easier on his system as the demon dematerialized and shot eastward with Butterbean wrapped securely in his arms. In a few minutes the demon was carrying the cat into the motel room and placing him lovingly beside Wynter.

Taking his car keys this time, Azzin put the Do Not Disturb sign on the door knob and left the room. He frowned as his gaze fell on his Mazda 3. The car would be too small for a carrier and he dared not let Butterbean roam free in the backseat. Sighing heavily, he got in and drove to a car dealership where he traded his beloved car in for a mini-van, speeding the paperwork along with magical demon ease.

His next stop was a pet store where he purchased a large carrier designed more for a oversized dog than a feline. With cat food, watering and food bowls that attached to the carrier's wire sides, a comfortable bed with extra padding, and a litter box that automatically cleaned itself, he drove back to the motel.

While Butterbean was still sleeping, he carried the cat to the carrier and placed him in the cat bed then slid it into the carrier. Filling the bowls with water and food, shoving the litterbox to the rear of the carrier, he whispered the feline awake.

"Meow?" Butterbean questioned, blinking.

"As soon as your mistress is dressed, we will be leaving," Azzin assured the cat.

Butterbean made that sniffing sound again then went over to smell the food. Whiskers twitching, he daintily took one jackstone-shaped kibble and munched it. The repast must have satisfied his stringent requirements for he then dove in with relish.

Azzin laughed and returned to the room, gently waking Wynter with a command. He planted in her head a memory of the cat as her pet and the new van as their mode of transportation. She stirred, opened her eyes and smiled.

"You're up early," she mumbled.

"You're abed late," he corrected then glanced at his watch. "It's almost nine."

Wynter's eyes widened. "Oh, Azzin! Butterbean needs to be fed!"

"Already done," he assured her. "Now, up and at 'em, milady. We've a long day on the road ahead of us."

Wynter threw back the covers and swung her legs from the bed. "I'll be ready in two shakes of a cat's tail."

Azzin grinned at her as she disappeared into the bathroom.

"It will be all right," he said to himself. "By the time the Reaper is released, she will be mine completely with a marriage license to prove it!"

* * * *

Lord Kaleb jumped back as the door to the con cell shushed open on its pneumatic hinges, the titanium panel sliding into a pocket in the thick wall. The Reaper came out like an avenging angel—hands clenched into fists, teeth clenched together and eyes crimson red.

"I have your tenerse," the High Lord said and stepped forward to administer the fiery drug into the column of Kaegan's neck.

"Sustenance!" Kaegan growled through his clamped teeth.

The Ridgelord withdrew the vac-syringe needle from the Reaper's neck. "I didn't bring it with me but there is plenty in the control room." He glanced at the naked warrior who ignored his words. "If you will follow"

"I know where the hell the control room is, Shadowlord!" Kaegan snarled and started forward, his bare feet making slapping sounds on the stone floor. "Where is my woman and that thieving bastard who took her?"

Lord Kaleb fell in beside him. "They are in Watertown, New York," the Ridgelord informed him. "The Nightwind is planning a Joining ceremony tonight."

Kaegan came to an abrupt stop. He swung his head toward the High Lord. "You've got to be shitting me!" he snapped. "How could you allow such a thing?"

The High Lord pushed the vulgar words aside, making allowances for the Reaper's foul mood. "The Joining will not stand, Cree. She is yours by right so no matter what Lilith does"

"The demon goddess?" Kaegan questioned then plowed a hand through his hair. "I should have fucking known that bitch would have Her pointed finger in this!"

"She was warned by the Triune Goddess so I am sure there will be consequences."

"Oh, I *know* there will be consequences. You can count on there being consequences!" Kaegan said with a snort. He continued walking, his shoulders back and spine rigid.

"Unfortunately human law enforcement has become involved in the situation," Lord Kaleb told him, "so we must tread carefully."

Once again the Reaper stopped and turned to his companion. If it were possible for smoke to be issuing from Kaegan's ears, it would have been wafting all around them. "Why?"

"The lawgiver who is handling the lady's friend's estate has been unable to reach her. Her vehicle was found in a mall parking lot and there has been no contact with her for five days so he contacted the authorities who now are looking for her," the High Lord replied. "I believe the correct terminology is an all points bulletin has been issued for her whereabouts."

"What about her cat?" Kaegan demanded. "Is it all right?"

"The Nightwind retrieved it."

Kaegan tucked his lower lip between his teeth and worried it, his eyes narrowed. "This could work to our advantage," he said after a long moment's thought.

"How so?"

"I'm sure some of Wynter's neighbors have seen both the Nightwind and me picking her up. If I show up at the police station to add my fears for her safety to the lawgiver's and mention the demon's obsession with her, add a strong suggestion they should look his way, that will put the onus on that prick of a half-brother of mine. You and I both know Azzin will have clouded her memories by now. When the lawmen find her she will be confused, unable to think clearly so they will think he drugged her to keep her calm and compliant. I'll make sure they find the appropriate drugs in his car."

"Then they will arrest him for kidnapping and with possession of illegal pharmaceuticals?" Lord Kaleb asked then nodded thoughtfully. "That would work."

"I'll make it work and I'll see that asshole in jail for daring to abscond with my woman!" Kaegan stated.

* * * *

For nearly as long as there had been Reapers, there have been Nightwinds. The two entities had been created within hours of one another by the twin goddesses, Morrigunia and Lilith. The first, however, had been the Reaper Cainer Cree—although not created at Morrigunia's hand, the goddess had been there at his re-birth. She had watched in rapt fascination as he had been created out of a jealous woman's spite. Upon realizing She could use the powerful strength, psychic cunning and vast healing abilities of this new creature to Her advantage, the Truine Goddess had, in turn, created Viraidan Cree, a nephew of Cainer's. Unfortunately, the goddess had touched the fledgling She extracted from Cainer while he slept and because She had, Her touch had tainted the parasite with madness. It was a madness that manifested itself in Viraidan as warrior brutality and overpowering lust. Fortunately once the human Sean Kullen's persona was introduced into the mix, that madness was tempered and the Reaper became a gentler, saner version.

Realizing it was safer to nourish the fledglings within Her own body—teaching them compassion and restraint while they flourished inside Her, the Triune Goddess had successfully created hundreds of Reapers across the cosmos to do Her bidding.

Upon seeing what Her sister was about, Lilith decided She, too, would create an all-powerful being to do Her bidding. Her creation would be a demon, like Herself. She, too, visited Cainer Cree while he slept and harvested a nestling from the Reaper's body. Fascinated by the horribly ugly, evil-looking creature, Lilith kept it nestled to Her bosom until She and Her lover-god, Raphian—the Destroyer of Men's Souls—found just the right candidate to receive the fledgling. By then, the revenant worm had matured and the evil it had absorbed from Lilith's body became its driving force. Once introduced into the first Nightwind—a hapless warrior named Syntian who had been executed for daring to avenge the death of his beloved wife—the fledgling morphed into something far more avenging and dangerous than the hellion that was housed inside Viraidan Cree. It was by the twisted hand of Fates that Syntian was from the same family as Cainer and Viraidan.

And so it was that through centuries and across tens of millions of miles of cold black space that the Cree family became the progenitors of both the Reaper and Nightwind. Though it was rare for there to be both Reaper and Nightwind on the same family branch, when it happened—such as with Kaegan and Azzin—the result was always lethal.

* * * *

As he paced the corridors of Baybridge, Viraidan Cree felt the pressure bearing down on his shoulders like a crushing boulder. Since awakening that morning, he'd had a bitch of a headache—the migraine from hell that was eating into his brain. An extra dose of tenses had not helped nor had the extra plaxi-bag of Sustenance he had swigged down like water.

Whatever had been pushing at him for a week was barreling toward him. He sensed it and it left a metallic taste of rusted iron in his mouth. Testy, snapping at everyone who dared cross his path, he was heading down to the con cells for he reasoned that whatever was coming his way did not need a human audience to see it.

Sitting down on the titanium bunk in the cell he usually came to during his Transitions, he propped his chin on his fist, his elbow on his knee and stared at the open doorway. His thoughts went back to the times when he had felt similar discomfort and the two beings that had caused it.

"Nightwind and Blackwind," he said aloud. "It's going to be one or the other."

Either did not sit well with him. Both made his temper rise and his black blood boil. He hated one as much as he hated the other—although he had learned to tolerate Cedric over the years.

"Think of the devil and he appears," the Reaper mumbled as the aged Nightwind appeared in the doorway.

"You've felt it, too?" Cedric asked. He walked over to the bunk and without asking, took a seat.

Viraidan clamped his teeth together, feeling his fangs aching to descend. "If that prick Danyon has found a way to return"

"Danyon Hart is long gone, Cree," Cedric reminded the Reaper. "Your lady sent him back to his lair in the Abyss and he can never return without her sending for him."

"You sure of that?" Viraidan pressed.

"I am very sure of that and you know Bronnie will never call Danyon forth again," Cedric said emphatically.

"Then what's coming?" Viraidan asked. "Another Blackwind like Ski' Ah Dubhgaoth? Have they sent another one after me?"

Cedric shook his head. "Not a Blackwind, either," he denied, speaking of the vengeful entities of the Amazeen tribe of warrior women who were sent to punish Reapers for whatever crimes—either real or imagined—the warriors had done to the Amazeen tribe.

"Then it's got to be another Nightwind," Viraidan stated.

Once again Cedric shook his head. "I am not sensing one of my kind but rather a different being."

Viraidan raked his free hand through his black, curly hair. "The gods and goddesses know we've got a shit-pot full of them incarcerated in the lowest level of Baybridge." He glanced at the Nightwind. "Far away from prying human eyes."

"Revenants, vampyres, lycants, all manner of oddities are jailed down there but I don't believe I've ever encountered what it heading our way," Cedric said. "Whatever it is, it is very powerful."

The Reaper frowned sharply. "You know of the mage who runs the Exchange? The one who calls himself the Supervisor?" Viraidan asked. "Or his brother at Tearmann who calls himself the Administrator?"

"Tearmann?" Cedric queried. "The institute that houses our paranormal counterparts?"

"Aye," Viraidan said. "I've met both and the Primes who handle security for them. That's almost what it feels like except" He shuddered—something the Reaper rarely did.

"Except?" Cedric prompted.

"More powerful."

The Nightwind swung his legs as though he were a little boy. "But I don't sense evil, Cree," he said. "Do you?"

Viraidan thought about it. "Not evil as such but immense power. It makes me think of a juggernaut careening toward me, a massive meteorite on a collision course."

"And it's close," Cedric said softly. "I feel it getting closer with every breath I take."

"Aye, and I get more on-edge with every one I take," Viraidan agreed.

* * * *

The house was precious, Wynter thought as she roamed from room to room, Butterbean padding quietly beside her. All the colors were pleasing to the eye, relaxing: sea-foam green and deep burgundy, a few accents in dark goldenrod. Calming, soothing, designed to envelope the viewer in a peaceful, tranquil state. The furniture was overstuffed and upholstered in all the fabrics, prints and varied shades of color she found comfortable. It beckoned her to sit, to recline, to take her ease.

Threading around her were the lilting strains of Celtic music—playing just loudly enough for her ear to discern the skirl of the tin whistles, the haunting melody of the fiddles, and the rhythmic beat of the bodhráns. The music was—no doubt—meant to reassure her, as well.

She wandered into the kitchen and opened the fridge. Her favorite beverage was there alongside the salsa to which she was addicted. Sticks of pepperoni, jars of feta-stuffed olives, wedges of hoop cheese—not something easily obtained, and in the freezer compartment, packages of her favorite kinds of Stouffer entres and appetizers. Likewise, the pantry was chocked full of all manner of appetizing treats to tempt her palette. There was nothing there she did not like, which she did not crave.

Going to the window, she stared out at the thick copse of trees that stretched as far as she could see behind the log cabin. Birds, bees, butterflies flitted here and there and at the edge of

the little silver-shot stream that ran beside the cabin, a deer was gracefully drinking water while a raccoon waddled about the undergrowth.

Serene. Tranquil. Restful. Country life at its best.

No neighbors for miles. No intrusion of electric or telephone lines to mar the scenery.

Everything was perfect.

Too perfect to Wynter's mind.

She looked down at Butterbean.

"Something isn't right," she said.

"Meow," the feline agreed and rubbed its face against her leg.

Her gaze wandered to the very expensive diamond wedding band that circled the third finger of her left hand. The stones glittered in the shaft of sunlight coming in through the window. Exquisite fire jumped from the gems nestled in the intricately-fashioned Celtic knot band.

"Fifty grand at the very least," she judged the jewelry. "My first house didn't cost that much."

A long sigh escaped Wynter and she turned from the window, the peaceful setting having just the opposite effect on her. Something wasn't right. Something was missing.

Slowly she made her way into the great room to sit down on the extremely comfortable loveseat.

"What the heck is wrong with you, Anjali?" she asked then a deep frown marred her forehead.

The name didn't sound right to her. It was a pretty name, a lovely name but it wasn't *her* name. Why she felt that way, she couldn't say but every time she said the name aloud, it was like a sharp goad. It struck the wrong chord. It bothered her.

Her husband had gone into town to pick up lunch simply because she'd thought a spicy Italian sandwich from Subway would hit the spot. She hadn't said it aloud. She didn't need to. All she need do is think of something she wanted and Azzin jumped to provide it.

"Azzin," she said aloud and that name sent a shiver racing through her. What was it about her husband that unsettled her, she wondered?

He was the epitome of kindness, the sweetest and most gentle of lovers. His touch was exciting and when he made love to her, she was never left wanting. He made her body sing with lust and fulfilled every ounce of need within her yet there was something

Too on edge to sit still for long, she pushed up from the love seat and went to the front door, opened it and walked out on the wide veranda that ringed the entire cabin, shooing Bean away as the cat tried to sneak out past her. She went to the redwood rail and peered over—it was a good ten foot to the ground from where she stood. The wide, graceful wooden steps—twenty in all—leading up from the cobblestone walkway glistens in the bright wash of mid-morning. A soft, warm breeze blew against her face and the smell of honeysuckle filled the air.

"Why am I so unhappy?" she thought.

She had all a new bride could want: a rich, handsome and attentive husband; a gorgeous, expensive and luxurious home with all the fancy amenities; all the accoutrements she could perceive, she possessed.

Another deep sigh pushed from her lungs and she leaned on the railing, watching a ground squirrel scampering beneath the lilac bushes, his mate playing tag with him. The two little beasties were so comical as they chased one another. It struck a chord in her heart and she

felt tears prickling behind her eyes. She tore her gaze from the wee creatures and turned her attention to the woods.

He was standing right at the edge of the forest where the meandering stream took a deer-leg turn around the back of the cabin. She stopped breathing as their eyes met: his golden stare so stately, so full of confidence. Her heart slammed hard against her ribs and she dared not move, grateful she had not allowed Butterbean to come outside. Eyes locked on her visitor, she drew in a slow, silent breath.

Black fur rippling in the light wind, the wolf was sitting on its haunches, its golden gaze locked on Wynter. He was a magnificent creature, a prime beast with an elegant tilt to his broad head. She could see his nostril twitch as he drew in her scent and was terrified he would spring toward her—not sure she could get inside the cabin before he leapt over the railing to attack her.

Keeping as still as she could, her stare was meshed with his. She could hear her heart pounding, feel it drumming in her ears. Her mouth was dry. She had never been so afraid in her life.

Then the wolf turned its head and from the sweeping canopy of bushes to its right a white she-wolf appeared, padding on velvet paws toward him. She was as striking and lovely as her mate was imposing. Smaller than he, her eyes were a deep forest green and when she came to his side, she butted him playfully with her head.

"Snorf."

Wynter clearly heard the sound the male wolf made and at once thought it was one of humor and affection. She watched as he stuck out his pink tongue and swiped it across his mate's face. He groomed her for a moment longer then turned his attention back to Wynter.

He grinned—showing long, dangerous fangs—then sprang up from his haunches, spun around and looped into the forest, his bushy black tag wagging. His mate whimpered, glanced at Wynter for a second or two then bounded after him.

"My God," Wynter whispered. What she had seen made her tremble and when she looked down at her hands, they were shaking. Swallowing painfully for her throat had gone as dry as the Sahara desert, she hurried back inside.

Chapter Seventeen

If it had been left up to the Reaper, he would have flown straight to Watertown but the Ridgelord would not allow it. They were in the elevator, conserving energy as they left the containment cells deep beneath Wind Cave.

"There are safeguards in place, Cree," Lord Kaleb insisted. "You would not get within ten miles of the McGregor woman before the Nightwind fled with her and we would have to start all over again."

"I want my woman!" Kaegan thundered.

The Ridgelord forced himself to stay calm and in a quiet voice assured the younger being. "And you will *have* her. First, we must find the way around the safeguards and there is only one other Nightwind in residence on this world at this time and he is at Baybridge."

Kaegan blinked, his lips parting. "We're going to Baybridge?" he questioned in a near whisper.

"It is the only way. The old one never leaves the asylum. He has taken up residence there with a witchling and the Prime."

At the mention of the Prime, Kaegan's face drained of color. "Viraidan," he said in a voice that held a touch of fear.

"A far distant relative of yours, aye," Lord Kaleb informed him. "As I'm sure you must have guessed. The Cree clan is the most powerful of the *Dháréag*. It is the *Bun-Ayraghyn*, the founding clan of the twelve tribes."

The history of his origins had never interested Kaegan and it only served to give him a headache when he contemplated it at that moment. He waved aside the Ridgelord's words. "You think the Prime will help me get my woman back?" he asked as the elevator reached the lowest human-traveled area of the cave and a hidden rock wall parted to allow them exit from the cage.

"Let me tell you a story. A few years past"

"Is this going to take a long time?" the Reaper interrupted.

Lord Kaleb arched a brow. "It will if you irritate me more than you already have," he answered.

Clenching his fists, the Reaper clamped his lips tightly shut and nodded to let the Ridgelord know he would remain silent.

"You need not know the history of the Prime and his lady. That is their story and his to tell if he were to see fit to. Let it suffice to say there was a Nightwind also enamored of the Prime's woman and the demon took measure's to abscond with the Prime's mate."

Kaegan's eyes flared. Such a thing was foolhardy at best and he could envision the fury an action like that would have caused in the brutal Prime.

"There were other factors involved," the Ridgelord continued, "the least of which being a Blackwind sent to arrest the Prime."

"Blackwind?"

"A caste of Amazeen warrioresses whose duty it is to bring Reapers to justice," Lord Kaleb said with a dismissive gesture.

The Reaper narrowed his eyes, the only indication he thought such a thing was ludicrous at best.

"At any rate, the Prime knows what it is to have a mate stolen from him by a Nightwind. He will aid you in recovering her."

They walked to the elevator visitors to this lowest part of Wind Cave used to return to the surface and got in. Lord Kaleb pushed the button and the cage's doors closed.

"But will his lady's old Nightwind help us thwart the younger demon?" Kaegan asked.

"Should it become necessary to involve her, the Prime's mate will see that he does. However, I don't believe involving her will be necessary. Once the Prime learns what has happened, he will assure the old one's aid for us."

* * * *

Bronwyn studied her husband and Cedric as they left her with Ralph in the clinic's dayroom. For the last week the two—Reaper and Nightwind—had been nearly inseparable. While that pleased her, it also caused a trace of concern for the two had never been close.

"*Perhaps it is the bantling you carry,*" Ralph suggested. He was leaning his heavy body against her leg. "*The impending motherhood has caused them to bond.*"

She looked down at the Bugel Noz in his canine form. "Do you really believe that?"

"No, but it sounded plausible, did it not?" came the answer.

"Not where those two are concerned," she said, nibbling worriedly on a cuticle.

"Something's up, Ralph."

"*They will tell you in their time,*" he told her.

"*She's worried,*" Cedric said as he padded along beside the Reaper. "*Perhaps you should allay her fears, Cree.*"

"And just how am I to do that, demon, when I don't know what the problem is?" Viraidan snapped. He felt like using one of his size thirteen boots to punt kick the Nightwind down the corridor.

"*Temper, temper,*" Cedric warned. "*I'll do truly bad things to you if you try.*"

"Milord?"

Viraidan jumped then pivoted at the sound of his name and scowled at Danforth, his second-in-command of Baybridge security. "Don't you ever sneak up on me again! What the fuck do you want?" he barked.

"There are visitors at the main gate, milord. They want to see you."

"They can want it one hand and shit in the other and see which one fills up first!" the Reaper snarled. "I'm in no mood for" He stopped. "Visitors?" The word was dropped like an atomic bomb.

"One of them was an inmate here," the man said. He lowered his voice. "The Reaper, Kaegan Cree."

Thunderclouds appeared instantly across Viraidan's face and his lips drew back from his fangs. He growled viciously and his eyes flared red.

"*Careful,*" Cedric warned. "*We might have humans lurking nearby.*"

Cree's second-in-command was a *stalcaire*, one of the half-human security guards that patrolled the confines of Baybridge under the Reaper's direction.

"Who's the other visitor?" Viraidan demanded.

Danforth shuddered. "A name wasn't given, milord, but he's a Ridgelord."

"Ah" Cedric hissed, the ruff on his back standing up as his back arched, his whiskers twitched. "*That's why the unease, Cree!*"

"What the hell did the brat do *now*?" Viraidan growled again and threw out an angry arm. "Bring them to my office."

"*My kind has no use for Ridgelords*," Cedric grumbled as Danforth hurried away to do his boss's bidding.

"Well, Reapers aren't that fond of them, either," Viraidan said. "At least this one isn't."

Fifteen minutes of angrily pacing his office later, the Reaper was in a high state of irritation when there was a soft knock on his door and it opened to the sight of a gray-robed mage striding in as though he owned the place.

"I am High Lord Kaleb," the mage announced, "of the Shadowlord High Council."

"I am Prime," was all Viraidan needed to say as he narrowed his eyes at the Reaper who came in behind the Shadowlord. His nostrils flared but he said nothing to Kaegan.

"I am Cedric," the Nightwind said as he took human form. He looked down his long nose at the Ridgelord. "I am"

"We know what you are," Lord Kaleb interrupted. He gave a slight inclination of his head.

"What the hell did you do, Cree?" the Prime Reaper demanded.

"He has done nothing," Lord Kaleb answered for the younger man. "We are here to ask for your help." He shifted his gray eyes to the Nightwind. "Yours, as well."

Viraidan's hellion twisted in his back and it was all he could do not to flinch. The pain was horrific but the message was received—here were the ones he was to aid. He swept a hand to the chairs placed in front of his desk. "Sit," he ordered then skirted his desk to plop down in his form-fitting chair.

Although Lord Kaleb's mouth twisted with annoyance at the demanding tone, he took a seat, indicating Kaegan was to follow suit.

"What's this about?" Viraidan queried as he lifted his feet to prop them on the edge of his desk.

"Your lady is Bronwyn McGregor, is she not, Lord Viraidan?" the Ridgelord asked, ignoring Kaegan's head snapping toward him.

Viraidan's look hardened. "If you wish to take in more than the last breath you drew, you'd best leave my woman out of this and she is Bronwyn Cree, not McGregor."

"The young Reaper's mate is Wynter McGregor," Lord Kaleb said as though he hadn't heard the threat. "And she has been taken by a Nightwind."

Cedric had taken humanoid form and positioned himself at the end of Viraidan's desk. He stood there with his arms folded over his chest but at those words, he stiffened as though someone had hit him in the back with a sledgehammer. "When?" he asked.

"Just within the past week," the Ridgelord answered. "While the Reaper was in Transition and unable to stop him."

"McGregor," Viraidan repeated. His sharp amber eyes glittered. "Kin to my woman?"

"As distant a relation to your lady as the young Reaper here is to you, Lord Viraidan, but kin, nevertheless," was the reply.

"Which Nightwind?" Cedric asked.

"His name is Azzin Cree. He"

At those words the Prime Reaper shot to his feet. His eyes turned midnight black with rage. "He is one of the *feohdys*?" he bellowed. "Here? On *my* world?"

"He is my half-brother," Kaegan said and the furious eyes of the Prime leapt to him. He held the other Reaper's enraged glower though he knew he should drop his gaze out of respect.

"He is a McGregor Nightwind," Cedric said calmly and reached out to put a hand on Viraidan's arm. "Not a Broderick Nightwind, Cree. He can not be after your mate for Bronnie was the last of the Broderick female line."

Viraidan shook off the restraining hand. "Is your woman the last of the McGregor female line?"

"She is not a witch, milord," Kaegan said. "There are no more witches of the McGregor female line and so Azzin"

"Stole her to keep from being sent back to the Abyss," Cedric finished. He nodded. "I see the problem." He looked at Lord Kaleb. "Did you help in this mess?"

The Ridgelord raised his chin. "We were going by the strict letter of the law in allowing there to be a contest. We thought"

"A contest for what?" the Prime Reaper demanded with a lethal growl.

"To see which the McGregor woman would chose, milord," Lord Kaleb said. "Reaper or Nightwind. It was only fair to"

"What do you need?" Viraidan asked, cutting the mage off. A muscle was working furiously in his lean jaw. "How can this *feohdys* be smashed, Kaegan?"

"We know where he has taken her," Kaegan said. Hearing the Prime call his half-brother an abomination in the old language made him uncomfortable for a reason he could not fathom.

"Then get your scrawny ass wherever that is and get her the fuck back! You are a Reaper. You will *not* let that prick best you. *I* will not let that prick best you!" the Prime shouted. He was sensing the younger Reaper's discomfort and it made him angrier still.

"Easier said than done, Cree," Cedric said in a soothing tone. "He will have set safeguards to keep the Reaper from doing just that."

The mage cleared his throat. "Safeguards you can tell us how to break?" he inquired.

"Of course," Cedric replied. "I will need to be there to do so, to see which ones he has used and in which order they should be broken." He glanced at Viraidan. "Else more harm might be wrought."

Viraidan picked up the receiver on his desk and barked a command to his secretary to inform his wife he would not be there for supper.

"Might be several suppers, Cree," Cedric suggested. "It depends on the complexity of the safeguards and if I will need to unravel them in such a way this Azzin will not know it is happening."

"Stealth mode," Kaegan said and three pairs of eyes much older than his own flicked to him with annoyance. He ducked his head. "Sorry."

"Tell her I will be away on business with Cedric so not to be concerned if I miss a few meals," Viraidan said, hanging up when his secretary repeated the feline's name, her voice filled with confusion.

"She will worry about you, nevertheless," Cedric reminded the Reaper.

"Can't be helped," Viraidan said. "Let's go."

"Thank you, milord," Kaegan said, bowing respectfully.

"Yeah, well, whatever," the Prime said, uncomfortable with the gratitude. He patted the younger Reaper clumsily on the shoulder—shocking both the Nightwind and the Shadowlord—then bulldozed past Kaegan to jerk open the door.

"That has to be a first," Lord Kaleb mumbled to Cedric. "A Prime showing courtesy to a bantling Reaper."

"It's the female-stealing thing. They've something in common now," the old Nightwind commented. He smiled at Viraidan's secretary who was staring at him with confusion. He waved a hand at her, erasing the memory of her seeing a strange man who had not entered Cree's office exiting instead of a feline. Wrapping himself in misdirection, he walked sedately beside the mage although the man's stench made his nostril's twitch.

"Do you think they might become friends?" the mage inquired.

Cedric snorted. "That happening is about as likely as you and I becoming bosom buddies, mage." He eyed the Ridgelord with an arched brow.

"Point taken," Lord Kaleb muttered.

* * * *

Materializing ten miles from the cabin inhabited by the demon and the McGregor woman, the quintet of otherworldly beings arrived at Talcott Falls, near the sleepy upstate New York hamlet called Adams Center.

"Beautiful," Cedric pronounced. The Nightwind had long been enamored of waterfalls and the one at which he was staring contained at least ten shelves of rock over which the white cascade fell. "Simply beautiful."

"Too close to the highway for my liking," Lord Kaleb said with a sniff. The sound of traffic buzzing by on Route 11 took away from the serene beauty of the waterfall. "I am told it is usually no more than a trickle in summer but with the recent flooding"

"That's the thing about mages," Cedric snapped. "They are buzzkills waiting to happen."

"The cabin is ten miles north, northeast of here," Lord Kaleb said as though he hadn't heard the Nightwind's insult. "I detect strong safeguards even from this distance."

"Cedric?" Viraidan questioned. "Can you tell what kind of protection the bastard has woven?"

"Very strong as the buzzkill suggested," Cedric mumbled. "Very strong and exceedingly intricate. It will take me many hours to unravel just the top layer. There are numerous layers beneath that one"

"Then I suggest you be about it," the Prime Reaper ordered. "The day's not getting any younger and neither are you."

"That's the thing about Reapers," Cedric said under his breath. "They are the very meaning of the word impatient."

"I heard that," Lord Kaleb agreed.

"Can you sense the *feohdys*?" Viraidan asked Kaegan.

"No, but I sense my lady," Kaegan said softly. "I also sense her confusion and uncertainty."

"That means the Nightwind's control over her mind isn't as powerful as he intended it to be," Viraidan told him, "and that's a good thing." He clapped a hand on the younger Reaper's back. "A good thing, indeed, bantling. That means she's not totally under his control."

It had been centuries since an older Reaper had called him bantling and normally Kaegan would have bristled at what could be perceived as a sly insult. Coming from a warrior of Viraidan Cree's stature, he didn't take it as such. He didn't dare.

"I can't concentrate with all the psychic power zinging around me," Cedric said. "I'm going to venture as close to the cabin as I dare and work from there."

Before anyone could gainsay the elderly demon, he was gone—vanishing in a puff of midnight blue smoke that smelled unnervingly similar to Ben-Gay ointment.

"So what do we do?" Kaegan asked. He was on edge, anxious and wanted nothing more than to rush to the cabin to confront his half-brother.

"I don't think the Nightwind will sense our presence but it would be wise to tamp down the psychic energy we are discharging," Lord Kaleb cautioned. "Even a hint of our nearness might make the demon flee."

"Do you think the State Police have received the APB from Des Moines yet?" Kaegan asked.

"I'm sure they have," Viraidan answered. "That would have been done within half an hour or so of your reporting the *feohdys*' disappearance and his connection to the missing woman. Too bad you don't know what last name the rat bastard might be using."

"Or the name he has surely given your lady," the mage put in.

"It doesn't help there are no photographs of Azzin to show around Adams Center," Kaegan said with a grimace. "Even the photograph of Wynter the lawyer gave them won't do much good if he's kept her hidden."

"Which you know he has," Viraidan stated. "He wouldn't risk someone recognizing a woman whose face adorns the back covers of a million or so books."

"Twenty-five million," Kaegan said with pride then puffed out his chest. "In the U.S. alone."

Viraidan and the mage exchanged a look and the Prime rolled his eyes before he walked over to a rock to perch. He stared at the bubbling water, thinking how he would like to bring Bronwyn to that spot to enjoy the sight. The image of his lady drifted across his mind and he sighed. He knew exactly how the young Reaper was feeling.

"We'll get her back for you, bantling," he said. "This I swear to you."

"I have all the faith in the megaverse in you, milord," Kaegan said.

The Prime Reaper turned his head to look at the younger man. "You do know you will have to put him down for this else he will try again."

Kaegan felt his heart thud painfully against his ribcage. "I suppose so," he said, his face grim.

"You must *know* so, Cree. You can't show weakness and you can't allow him to go merrily on his way," Viraidan stressed. "You have to end it. You must end *him*."

"But if he's arrested" Kaegan began but the mage interrupted.

"Eventually he will be released and when he is, he will come after her again," the High Lord told him. "You will be forever looking over your shoulder and hers."

"Can't we just send him back to the Abyss?" Kaegan queried.

"Only the demon goddess or a witch of the McGregor line can do that and I'll bet you dollars to stale doughnuts Lilith is laughing Her vile head off over the coming confrontation," Viraidan replied.

"A confrontation She believes he will win," Lord Kaleb said. "She hinted as much."

Viraidan sat up straighter. "You think She's got an ace in the hole, mage?"

Lord Kaleb nodded. "I fear She does but what that might be, I don't know. All we can hope is *Mo Regina* is watching over us and will not allow Her twin to win the day."

At the thought of Morrigunia, the Triune Goddess, the Prime Reaper fidgeted on the rock. He'd never been a religious man—although Sean had been and still was—but to that day he had nightmares of the Transference when Morrigunia had placed the vile fledgling into his back. He

had gone mad with the pain and the taint of the goddess' touch. He shuddered for if there was one thing in the megaverse Viraidan Cree feared, it was the Triune Goddess.

Chapter Eighteen

Azzin left the arch of the graceful stone bridge that spanned the meandering stream and took the cobblestone path to the front door of the cabin. The sound of the stream trickling over the rocks soothed him and reinforced the decision he had made as he winged his way back to the woman with whom he was obsessed. He glanced at the stream as it wound around the side of the cabin and was very pleased with what he had created here in the deep woods of the North Country. It was a peaceful setting, serene but—even more importantly—isolated from humankind.

He climbed the steps, admiring the creativity of his imagination and the hidden memories inside Wynter's head that had fashioned the cabin and its surroundings. He had taken everything from her unconscious mind and fashioned it into reality just as it abided there in the waves of energy inside her brain.

"Lucy, I'm home," he called out and smiled as Wynter poked her head around the corner of the kitchen doorway. Her answering smile was filled with warmth and it helped to cement his resolution.

"I didn't hear the car," she said, glancing past his shoulder as he closed the door, shutting out the unwanted world.

"You must have been preoccupied with what you were doing," he hedged as he went to her, taking her into his arms. He kissed the top of her head then crooked a finger under her chin to tilt her face up. "What is that wonderful smell?"

"Lasagna," she pronounced. "I was just starting the salad."

He lowered his head to claim her lips. His played over hers at length—tasting, teasing, pressing firmly to remind her to whom she belonged. When he drew away, he reached down to thread the fingers of his right hand through hers. "There's something I want to show you."

A light frown shifted over Wynter's face as she looked toward the kitchen but his fingers tightened over hers and she looked up at him. "How long will it take?" she inquired. "The lasagna is almost ready."

He waved his left hand as though making a careless, silent statement when in essence he used his power to turn off the oven. "It won't take long," he lied then led her toward the cellar stairs.

"Am I finally going to see what you've been working on down there?" she asked, excitement rife in her voice.

"Indeed you will," he replied. He let go of her hand to fish in his pocket for the key to the thick padlock nestled in the heavy hasp.

"If it's your first three wives, I'd rather not know," she said with a pretend shiver.

Azzin laughed. "It's just the first two, sweetie. You are my third." He lightly bumped her with his hip as he unlocked the door.

Although there was a look of expectation on her face, there was something darker lacing through her eyes and the demon caught a glimpse of it. He knew she was a bit unnerved by his secrecy but he had used all of his power to reassure her, to calm her fears. Apparently, he thought, he had not done as good a job of alleviating those concerns as he imagined he had.

He cupped his hand to the back of her neck, lowered his head to place his forehead against hers, staring into her lovely green eyes. "You know you are my heart, don't you, Anjali?"

Just as it always did, his use of her name did not ring true in her mind. There was a false note, a bit of artifice that rankled. It was a lovely name but somehow it did not feel right to her. It did not feel as though it were *her* name. Nevertheless, her lips pulled into a sweet smile.

"Of course," she answered.

He kissed her nose then straightened. Opening the sturdy door, he snaked his hand inside the dark space to flip a switch. The ebony expanse brightened to reveal a stairway.

"Watch your step," he said, preceding her down the wide wooden steps.

Wynter hesitated before placing her foot on the first step. She had a sense of foreboding, of unease as she looked down the steep steps. Beyond, the cellar was dimly lit as though by candlelight and that set the hairs on her arms to stirring.

Azzin stopped halfway down and turned to look up at her. She was paused in the doorway. He could smell her fear, hear the blood racing through her veins. He willed his voice low, hypnotic and drew her gaze to his—fusing them.

"Come with me, Anjali," he ordered and extended his hand toward her.

Pulled to him by a force she could neither explain nor deny, Wynter stepped onto the step and slowly descended the stairway. She took his hand—flinching as his fingers gripped hers in a tight clench from which she knew she could not escape. He turned from her and continued down the steps, drawing her with him. The lower she went, the colder she felt and the faster her heart raced.

"Listen only to my voice," he said in a low, commanding tone. "Hear only me and pay close heed to the words I speak." He reached the bottom step and turned to look up at her two steps above him. "Blot out all else save my voice and my eyes. Do you understand?"

She nodded, her gaze locked on his. Her breath was ragged in her throat but she neither heard nor felt it. She was lost in the swirling depths of his amber eyes, being drawn down into a maelstrom of flickering red lights.

He tugged her from the stairs and she went willingly although her body was stiff, her lips trembling.

The room into which he led her was lit in each of the four corners by black candles set in brass candle stands that were nearly as tall as she. Overhead was a circular brass chandelier suspended from four gleaming chains; it held a dozen black pillar candles.

Below it were five fat black twelve inch diameter candles perched atop brass holders that grabbed and held her full attention for they had been placed at the five points of a blood red pentagram drawn on the shiny, coal-black floor. Framed within two concentric circles—the space in between decorated with strange symbols—the pentagram's points were not equal. The longest point of the pentagram—the point that seemed to be aimed straight at her appeared to contain the beard of a goat while the upper two legs contained the animal's horns and the two horizontal points, the beast's ears.

Wynter froze as she stared at the plain wooden chair that sat inside the pentagram, its legs aligned just above the longest point of the pentagram's arms.

"Sit, my beloved," Azzin commanded.

Though her shoes scraped against the stygian stone floor, Wynter moved to do his bidding. A low whimper escaped her trembling lips as she sat.

"It will be a long night, sweeting," he said and her eyes left the floor to level with his. She was stunned to see him clothed in a long hooded robe the color of fresh blood. "You have much to learn before the dawn breaks." He brought his hands up, holding them at waist height.

A book appeared in his hands and the musky smell of it wafted under her nostrils. She knew it was old—perhaps older than time—for the thick black binding was worn and tattered. Instinctively she knew it had been handled many times over the centuries by many hands.

"What is that?" she asked and heard the break in her own voice.

"The Book of Shadows," he told her. "The McGregor women's bible."

"McGregor?" she questioned, brows drawing together in confusion.

"Your name is Wynter McGregor," he replied. "Until now, it was necessary to keep that a secret but now it can be revealed. You are Wynter and I am your husband, Azzin."

He was standing outside the pentagram and now he stepped over the first circle. She saw his lips move then he stepped over the second circle and came to kneel in front of her.

"Here within is the wisdom of the women of your clan, given at my hand and signed in my blood to each from Deborah unto you," he said.

Under the smell of the muskiness of the aged book was a cloying scent of some strange incense and as she breathed it in, her head began to ache, her eyes to play tricks on her. She fancied she saw shapes flitting about the room, faces looking at her from the shadowy corners the candlelight did not reach. Her limbs grew loose, her face lost all expression.

"Page by page I will teach you this night everything you should have been taught years ago," he said, his voice low and compelling. "Every spell, every chant, every entreaty to the Dark Ones will be known to you by the time the sun rises on a new day. You will be able to wield magick as well as any witchling from your clan."

He laid the book reverently in her lap and she was stunned at how heavy it felt as it weighed upon her thighs. He turned the pages in large sections until he reached the back. There he directed her eyes to a blank page, the parchment lit by an unholy green light.

"There must be a covenant between us, Wynter McGregor," he said. "Between you and your Nightwind. It must be sealed in your blood and mine."

Upon the blank page, words appeared and she looked down at them, unable to cipher their meaning for they were written in a strange, runic language.

He crossed his hands in front of him and in his right hand a quill appeared. "Lift your hand and I will take from it a single scarlet drop of your precious blood," he said.

Having no control whatsoever over her flesh, Wynter held her hand out to him and he used the sharp tip of the quill to prick her finger. She flinched as a bead of blood welled on the tip then was sucked into the hollow of the quill.

Azzin wrapped his hand over hers and lowered her hand to the parchment page. "When you sign, you swear to be my lover for as long as you draw breath. You promise to give yourself only to me, as a wife to her lawful husband. You pledge to do as I bid. This you must do as you sign."

Wynter hesitated with the quill shaking violently in her hand, the tip poised above the page. A part of her wanted to do as he ordered while another part was screaming at her to keep still, to refuse to sign.

"Sign the Pact, beloved," the demon whispered.

Wynter held her breath as the tip of the quill touched the parchment. She began to write her name. The words came from some misty place far beyond where she sat, from a softly

accented voice she did not recognize and Wynter repeated them with hardly a quiver in her voice as she scratched her name on the page.

"I will give myself only to you and do as you bid while we are together."

Azzin licked his lips as he stared at her signature on the page. In such haste to complete the ritual, he did not realize her words to him were not exactly the ones he had demanded she say. Before the rune was complete upon the page he had conjured a dagger and this he drew across the palm of his left hand, taking the quill from her to dredge it through his blood.

"I pledge to lay the world at your feet, beloved," he said as he scrawled his name. "I will forever be your champion, your lover, the master of your soul."

Dazed, lightheaded from the strange incense and the dusty smell of the old book, Wynter barely moved when the quill disappeared and the pages of the tome ruffled to the very beginning.

"Now you will learn your heritage," he said. "Now you will become a Chosen One."

He began to speak in a language she was stunned to realize she could understand. His words were low, insistent and wound through her brain like tentacles to wriggle deep into every crease, every hollow and fill it with knowledge. As the long night continued, she drew in his words as though she were parched soil and he, a steady, burgeoning spring rain.

But a portion of her soul remained beyond the circle in which she sat. She could see it hovering there and knew that was a good thing for that meant the Nightwind could not invade that part of her being. Realizing that, she relaxed and let the forbidden knowledge flow into the counterpart of her soul.

She was sure she was going to need that knowledge before the night was through.

* * * *

In the lightless realm of the Abyss, Lilith waved Her hand over the bubbling cauldron of sheep's blood that was Her portal to the human world. Through the wafting red-tinged mist of vapors, She saw the McGregor fleshling sitting in the pentagram, drawing in the knowledge from the Book of Shadows.

A hard smile tugged at the goddess' scarlet lips. She was pleased with Her Nightwind's progress with the woman. So satisfied was She that She failed to see Her twin's wavering outline beyond the First Circle of Magick that encompassed the pentagram.

* * * *

Hovering beside the McGregor woman's soul, Morrigunia, the Triune Goddess, put a slim hand to Her mouth to keep the laughter from erupting. She had sensed Lilith's intrusion though She could not see Her. In keeping the centrix of Wynter McGregor's soul intact, away from the evil that was rapidly infusing the human woman's brain, She was preserving the humanity and compassion that would insure Wynter wielded her magick from the White Pathway inside of the Black.

"You aren't as smart as You think You are, Sister," the Triune Goddess whispered. "Nor as powerful!"

Her amusement faded and a hard spark ignited in Her deep green eyes. Cocking Her head to one side—long red hair falling in a cascade toward the ebon floor—Morrigunia heard a soft voice calling out to Her.

"You know I am here?" She asked.

"I do," he answered. *"Is she safe?"*

"She is and always will be, Reaper," the Triune Goddess replied. *"You risk the demon hearing you. Cease speaking."*

The Nightwind had stopped in mid-sentence as he spoke to Wynter and raised his head, glancing about the room, searching for the whisper he had heard. When nothing moved, no other sound came, he looked down at Wynter and began lecturing her again.

Morrighunia let out a long breath. She would need to chastise Her Reaper for calling out to her, for risking the demon knowing he was close by, but his punishment would not be too severe. The man loved the woman and love was a powerful force—even more powerful than hate. His lapse in judgment could be forgiven under the circumstances.

“All is well and as it should be Reaper,” She sent to him. *“Fear not for your lady.”*

She closed Her eyes and sought his presence and was surprised that he was as close as he was to the cabin. A frown marred the perfection of Her brow and She hissed, warning him to move back lest the Nightwind discover the presence of not only the Ridge Lord but two Reapers.

Kaegan felt the reprimand of the goddess as a stinging slap to his cheek and he staggered beneath the unexpected and forceful punishment. Despite every intention of staying where he was, he turned and his feet carried him back to the others as though he were a puppet on a string.

“She can be a mean bitch,” Viraidan said as he looked up from the stick he was whittling. At Kaegan’s surprised look, the Prime Reaper snorted. “You’ve got a bright red handprint on your face.”

“The goddess is watching matters,” Lord Kaleb said. “Best you heed Her warning.”

Reaching up to touch his cheek, Kaegan nodded. “Do you think Cedric is making any headway in dismantling the protection Azzin placed around the cabin?”

“He’s an ancient Nightwind,” the mage replied. “If it can be done, he will do it.”

“But *can* it be done?” Kaegan asked.

“The goddess will see to it,” Viraidan mumbled. “She loves to create havoc and” He sucked in a breath and brought his hand to his mouth. The dagger had slipped, nicking his thumb and the cut was deep. He sucked on the wound, speaking around the obstruction. “The gods-be-damn it!”

“Best *you* heed Her warning, as well,” Lord Kaleb said with a grin.

Chapter Nineteen

Wynter could feel the goddess walking through her mind. Instead of being afraid, she felt safe, secure, protected by an entity that had only Wynter's welfare at heart. There was another shadow lurking there, too, but the words that One spoke were drowned out by a sweet, gentle voice bidding Wynter to pay close heed to the Nightwind's current lesson.

"This is how he can be defeated," the goddess whispered. *"What he says, do the opposite and you will have him in the palm of your hand."*

Although the spell Azzin was teaching was for an entirely different purpose, Wynter listened carefully to the words and began to reason that if the spell was reversed as the goddess suggested, she could gain great power over the demon. He was using the spell to try to control her but the opposite would happen. She would turn it against him and he would be unable to prevent her. His fate was being sealed even as he continued speaking.

"Keep your mind open, Beloved," Azzin said, sensing her attention drifting. "Listen to my words and obey."

"He took you from the man you love," the goddess whispered. *"And he expects you to comply with his wishes? Will you do so, fledgling?"*

Wynter mentally shook her head. *"Hell, no!"* she thought.

"The man you love is a mere half-mile from where you sit," Morrigunia told her. *"He has come to rescue you and he has brought a formidable army of beings who will not allow you to lose your soul to the Nightwind."*

"Do you hear me?"

The harsh, strident voice of the other shadow startled Wynter and she flinched.

"You must answer Her," Morrigunia cautioned. *"As though you are deep under the demon's spell."*

"I hear you," Wynter mumbled in a monotone.

Azzin's words cut off in mid-sentence. "Who do you hear?" he asked suspiciously.

Wynter turned her gaze up to the demon, deliberately trying to make her face lax and blank as though in a trance. A half-smile trembled on her lips. "The goddess," she said.

"Tell him Her name," Morrigunia whispered. *"The hag is called Lilith."*

"Lilith," Wynter supplied.

The Nightwind blinked. "She speaks to you?" he asked in an awed voice. *"Mo Regina speaks to you?"*

Slowly Wynter nodded her head then lowered her eyes lest he see the hatred for him lurking there.

"That is an honor beyond compare!" Azzin stated. "You have no idea what an honor it is!"

Wynter said nothing. Instead she looked dreamily about her then up at the demon. Already she could feel the power of what he had been teaching her seeping into her soul. Her fingertips were tingling and she had the urge to hold up her hand to see the sparking of energy flowing from the tips. The Nightwind was continuing to speak but she tuned him out, listening

to the words of the goddess who was taking the demon's words and twisting them to mean something entirely different.

"Another Nightwind—a friend and devoted servant of Mine—is working to dissolve the spell the demon placed around the cabin. He is almost finished with his work. The moment he has broken through the protection, your beloved will be on your doorstep," Morrigunia informed her. *"Listen now only to My words. Let me lead as the voice of the Multitude"*

Those words came in a barrage of light and the sweet smell of lavender. Peace settled on Wynter but along with it came great empowerment. She felt as though she could command the winds to sigh gently or roar dangerously. A glowing ember sparked in her mind and then blazed into life. With it came the chanting voices of hundreds, thousands, millions of women like herself who had once known the pressure of an iron boot upon her neck, a gag across her lips, water closing over her head to drown out every independent thought. She saw freedom reaching out a hand to her and she lifted her own to grasp it firmly.

"Aye," she heard the demon say. "Accept what Lilith offers! Take Her hand. Let Her lead you!"

A slow, determined smile tugged at Wynter's lips. It was not the withered, clammy hand of the hag reaching out to her that she extended her own toward. It was the soft, firm hand of an angel stretching toward her that she wanted.

"Take My hand and become One with the Multitude," Morrigunia whispered.

The soft, firm hand closed around her own and Wynter felt a jolt of pure white energy snaking through her fingers and up her arm. Bathed in a soft, lavender light she saw whole vistas of possibilities opening up to her. She felt her feet leave the floor and she rose on a cool, velvety breeze. From the below her, she saw the demon frowning, his brows drawn tightly together.

"Wynter?" she heard him question. "What are you ...?"

She felt the protection runes snap apart and Azzin howled with fury. He threw his hands into the air as though he meant to grab her, pull her down from her lofty perch but his fingers never touched her. Like a flash of pure hell-fire, Kaegan materialized beside his half-brother to wrap indomitable hands around the demon's neck.

"Bastard whelp!" Azzin shrieked. Black claws erupted from his fingertips and he reached up to gouge the sharp points down Kaegan's arms.

Flung back like chaff in the wind, Wynter slammed into the cellar's stone wall and slid down it, the chair in which she'd been seated crumbling beneath her weight. She sat down hard on the floor with an oomph of sound pushing from her lips.

"Are you hurt, milady?"

Dazed, she looked up into dark amber eyes where crimson red flames danced and could not speak. The thought went through her mind that if she had thought Kaegan handsome, the man leaning over her had to be a god.

"Milady?" He held out his hand.

"Who are you?" she whispered, completely absorbed by the striking visage of this man who had obviously accompanied her lover to the rescue.

"Cree," he said then cocked a negligent shoulder. "The only Cree who matters at any rate." He hunkered down in front of her. "Viraidan Cree. He nudged his chin over his right shoulder though didn't seem to even notice the two half-brothers locked in a deadly embrace. "He's a distant something or other."

"You're a Reaper," she said then ran the back of her hand across her mouth. It embarrassed her that she was actually drooling as she stared into Cree's mesmerizing face.

"I am Prime," he said as though that should account for it all. Once more he held his hand out to her. "Let me help you up, milady."

Behind him she saw two men hovering at the foot of the stairs. One looked to be ancient and she wondered if he was the other Nightwind the goddess had mentioned. The other man looked like an insurance salesman and that thought made her giggle as she settled her hand in the Prime Reaper's.

"Are you going to do something about that?" Cedric asked. He had long hated violence and seeing the two beings pummeling the hell out of one another offended his sense of peace.

"No," Viraidan replied. "Not my place to intervene."

"The fledgling is going to kill the demon," Lord Kaleb remarked but he said it in a way that made it clear he wasn't in the least concerned about the impending death.

When Wynter gained her feet—feeling the shock of those strong fingers wrapped around her own all the way from nail to vagina—she cleared her throat. "I don't want either one to die," she said.

"Then you'll have to be the one to stop it," the Prime Reaper said. He cocked his head to one side. "Something tells me you can."

"Hell-spawn! Back off! You've lost again!"

The shriek drew the attention of everyone save the combatants as Morrigunia materialized in all her fiery red glory. Hair whipping about Her head, She pointed a rigid finger at the far end of the room. Eyes flew to where the goddess was pointing.

What could only be the Demon Queen suddenly appeared in the dark corner. Her beautiful face was creased in an infuriated grimace that made Her eyes flash with lightning. Her entire body was shimmering with fury—crackling light coming from her fingertips.

"Interfering bitch!" Lilith screamed. "She was one of Mine!" She lifted a hand to throw a ball of fire at Her sister.

Morrigunia waved the fireball aside, dousing it with icy wind from Her ruby lips. "In Your dreams, prune face," She said with a laugh.

Viraidan took Wynter by the arm and pulled her with him to where the old Nightwind ... who looked a lot like the late actor John Carradine ... and the mage were standing. Well out of the way of the battling siblings—both male and female.

"Don't worry," the Prime Reaper told Wynter. "Your guy will prevail."

"As will our goddess," the mage added.

It was a vicious fight between the half-brothers and a rather comical one between the sisters. The entire cellar was bathed in strobing light and filled with grunting from the men, laughing and hissing from the women.

"Quite a spectacle," Cedric observed with a yawn. "Disconcerting, but oddly entertaining."

With a spinning back kick, Kaegan sent Azzin staggering across the floor just as the two goddesses vanished in a haze of choking smoke.

"They're taking Their fight to a different plane," Cedric informed Wynter.

"No," the mage disagreed. "Alael has ordered Them to the Maitheas Arc, the home of the gods, where I imagine He will chastise Them. Such fighting among the gods and goddesses is forbidden."

It was at that moment that Azzin struck. A black-handled dagger with a curved, serrated edge appeared in his hand. He pushed away from the wall and dove straight at Kaegan, whose eyes had gone wide and face pale.

“No!” the mage shouted and rushed forward to place himself between the dagger and the young Reaper.

Wynter reacted instinctively, throwing a hand up to freeze the three males in mid-step. Although she had no idea of the importance of the dagger, it was plain to her that it represented something both Kaegan and the mage feared.

“Neat trick,” Viraidan said with a grin, folding his arms across his chest. “How’d you do that, wench?”

“Magick,” Cedric said in an awed voice. “Very powerful magick.”

Wynter ignored them both and walked over to Azzin. Although his body was completely immobile, his eyes followed her, tracked her as she went to him and plucked the dagger from his hand. She examined it, pulled in the dark energy flowing from it and understood that it could snuff out the life of an immortal.

“What is this thing?” she questioned.

As though the answer were being pulled from his lips, Azzin replied, “The blade of Namtar.”

“The ancient god of fate and death,” Cedric provided. “A very powerful entity.”

Wynter twisted the knife as though screwing it through a block of wood. “And this could take Kaegan’s life?”

“It can extinguish his immortal soul,” Cedric answered. “He can not be killed unless you behead him.”

“Or burn him to ash,” the Prime Reaper injected. “Been there and done that although my killers didn’t turn me to ash.” He shuddered with the old memory that still came back to haunt him from time to time.

Slowly she lifted her eyes to the demon. “You would have killed him?”

“Aye.” The one word was drawn out with a hiss.

She cocked her head to one side. “Will this take Azzin’s immortal soul?”

“He’s a demon,” the mage said. “He has no soul.”

“True, but it can send him to the Abyss for all eternity,” Cedric supplied. “He will never be able to leave it.”

“Good,” she said and plunged the dagger into Azzin’s belly. “Go to hell you son of a bitch!”

All the while her gaze held his, registering his reaction. First there was fear, then surprise, and finally disbelief as he began to fade.

Kaegan was winded, his heart pumping thick black blood through his veins. As his half-brother vanished, he slumped and leaned over to plant his hands on his thighs, allowing his head to sag to his chest.

“A woman after my own heart,” Viraidan said with admiration.

Wynter turned, flipped the dagger over until she was holding it by the blade. She held the dagger out to the mage. “I think you should take possession of this vile thing.”

“Indeed,” Lord Kaleb said, grimacing as he accepted the powerful weapon. “I shall dispose of it properly.”

“I think our job here is done,” Cedric said, locking gazes with the Prime Reaper. “I am sure your lady misses you, milord.”

Viraidan looked about the cellar. “What’s gonna happen to this place?” he inquired, staring at the pentagram. “We can’t leave that for the authorities to find.”

“Burn it to the ground,” Wynter said between clenched teeth. “It holds too much evil to allow it to remain standing.”

“All righty then,” the Prime Reaper said with relish as he rubbed his hands together. “We’ll torch the gods-be-damned thing.”

Straightening, Kaegan watched his woman walking toward him. He opened his arms to her.

Epilogue

"I could no more hurt you than I could lie down and die of my own accord."

He moved his free hand to her face and used the rough pad of his thumb to smooth a slow, sensuous line over her bottom lip.

"Such a beautiful mouth," he whispered and his head began to lower toward her.

She would dream of his lips descending to hers for the rest of her life. Their softness was like a feather's touch, but the pressure was exquisite and the feel of them against her own was enough to melt any resistance she might have entertained. When his tongue parted her lips to slip inside, she lost all semblance of maiden modesty and wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling him eagerly to her.

"Mine," he whispered against her mouth.

"Always," she agreed though her expression said she had no idea why she'd said such a thing.

He reached up to pull the pins from her hair, letting the heavy burgundy red mass cascade over her shoulders. He arranged it as he liked.

"Much better. I prefer you wear it this way," he told her. "Will you do so?"

"Aye, your grace," she agreed and became lost completely in his dark gaze.

Wynter sighed as she sat back in her chair.

"Good scene?" Kaegan asked. He was lying on the sofa in her office, Butterbean stretched out on his belly and chest.

"Oh, yeah," she said, glancing around at him.

His shoulder-length hair was as sleek and glossy as a raven's wing and was tied back from his clean-shaven face with a bit of dark ribbon. Thick, arched eyebrows curved gently over eyes the color of dark amber and those glowing eyes were shielded by the longest lashes she'd ever seen on a man. The almost perfect shape of his nose hinted at softness to his nature while his lips—those sensuous lips she had so admired—gave lie to the suggestion of softness and labeled him aggressive and perhaps a tad cruel.

"You're ogling me again," he complained, brows drawn together. The hand he was using to stroke the cat's thick fur stopped. "Is that an invitation?"

She forced her stare from his lips to the compelling darkness of his eyes and was caught--and held--by the sensuality lurking there. That stare gave her an idea and she leaned forward, hands to keyboard.

Madelaine felt as though she were drowning in that intense gaze, being pulled down through a maelstrom of dark needs that set her blood to singing and her juices to flowing. She sucked in a wavering breath and felt her knees growing weak as his strong sword hand closed around hers.

"Welcome to my home, Milady," he whispered, turning her hand so that the underside of her wrist was revealed.

He did not release her from his magnetic gaze as he lowered his head to place his lips to

the erratic pulse at her wrist. He was watching her from beneath that long sweeping fan of lashes and as his tongue moved slowly, languidly over her flesh, she felt a leap in her pulse that brought a smile of satisfaction to the Prince Rakin's lips.

"Soft as satin," he murmured against her wrist and his teeth grazed her flesh for just an instant before he lifted his head to look down at her.

He is taller than I expected, she thought as she stared up at him. He's at least a foot taller than me. And his shoulders are so wide, so powerful. He was nothing like the Middle Kingdom men she had compared him to in Virago.

"I'd better be the model for the bastard," Kaegan complained as he returned to stroking Butterbean.

"Egotistical nit-twit," Wynter mumbled as her fingers flew.

"Come," he said, leading her with him to the settee across the room.

He did not relinquish her hand, but instead tightened his grip possessively as though he had no intention of allowing her to escape him; and when they were seated, he placed his free hand over hers: the better to insure her staying.

"I trust your room is comfortable?" he asked and his voice was dark silk as it settled around her.

"Yes," she answered, unable to tear her eyes from his.

"And your trip? Uneventful?"

He was making slow, lazy circles in her palm with his thumb and the sensation was causing her blood to race.

"Most pleasant," she heard herself say.

"I am glad. I wish only the best for you, Sweeting."

Madelaine could do no more than gawk at him as he lifted her hand to his lips and kissed the tips of her fingers this time. She felt as though all the bones in her body had melted and she was no more than a mound of clay ready--and more than willing--to have this man's strong hands mold her to his liking.

"I intend to make sure your life here at Mildendale fulfills all your fantasies, Milady."

His smile was a white-tooth gleam of sexuality and she lazily lowered her gaze to the sharpness and length of his canines. The smile was boyish, but there was nothing boyish about the lethality of those teeth.

"Be easy, Sweet One," he whispered. "Their sting is not for you."

She looked up into that fevered gaze and thought she saw red flames leaping in the dark orbs.

She shivered.

"You have nothing to fear from me, my love," he was saying to her and his voice seemed to be coming at her from far, far away; from beneath waves of cool wind.

"I ... I am nervous, Milord," she managed to say. She felt strange, held captive by his penetrating gaze. She swayed toward him and his hands moved to her shoulders.

"It's nothing but chick porn," she heard her lover grumble.

"What?" she asked, turning her head to look at him.

"What you write," he replied. "It's nothing but porn for women."

"Humpf," she sniffed and turned to the computer.

He swept her up in his arms and carried her to a thick animal skin rug lying in front of the roaring fireplace. Gracefully, he knelt down—dipping one knee to the fur—and lowered her gently.

The fur was so soft, so inviting, Madelaine sank into its lushness and felt as content as she could ever remember feeling. With regret, she released her hold of Rakin's neck and let her arms drop slowly to her sides.

He was kneeling over her, his strong-looking fingers running unhurriedly down the pearl buttons of his white lawn shirt. Never taking his eyes from hers, he slowly pulled the tail of that soft shirt from black leather britches that encased his lean hips like a second skin. Leisurely, he pulled the shirt from his broad shoulders and the thick dark pelt of hair that formed a curly V from between his manly paps to the deep indentation of his naval gleamed in the light cast from the fire.

Madelaine was unaware that she had put out the tip of her tongue to curl it over her bottom lip. She caught her breath as his eyes widened and he stilled, his hands on the wide buckle of the leather belt he was in the process of unbuckling.

"At this moment, I am a mere man, Sweeting," he said in a husky voice. "Every impulse I have bids me throw myself upon you and ravage you. Help me to not give in to those animal instincts, Madelaine."

Unaccustomed to men, Madelaine was at a loss to know what to say. She knew how the sexual act was preformed but she had no knowledge of how a woman should—or could—control what a man did during intercourse. Her knowledge of the Birds and Bees was more along the lines of what went where and what occurred if a man's seed took hold inside a woman's belly. Other than that rudimentary knowledge, she had no idea of how she should behave.

"W ... what should I do, Milord?" she asked in a small, nervous voice.

Rakin's face softened and his eyes—so dark only the moment before—took on a gentle look. "Enjoy the pleasure I intend to give you," he said.

A look of confusion passed over Madelaine's pretty face. From what the cook at Holy Dale had told her, men took pleasure from sex but women gained none. The memory of what Kanika had told her flashed before Madelaine's eyes—a woman thrown to the ground, her gown hiked up, a man throwing himself upon her, forcing his way into her, the woman crying out with pain as the man pumped his body against hers.

"No, Beloved," Kaegan grouched, shaking his head. "Such is not the way a man makes loves to his lady. What you imagine is nothing more than rape."

Wynter hung her head in exasperation, her fingers poised on the keyboard. "Do you mind?" she said through clenched teeth.

"Aye, I do mind," her lover replied and sat up, swung his legs from the sofa and placed the cat beside him on the seat. "Forced seduction is not politically correct."

She whipped her head toward him. "Do I care?" she snapped. "Does my publisher?" She sniffed. "Some women still enjoy a good forced entry, you know, between their hero and heroine!"

"Really?" he said, getting to his feet. He moved with feline grace toward her.

Wynter trembled. The tone of his voice sent shivers down her flesh and deep inside her lower abdomen, she felt a sweet clinch.

"Let's see," he said. He held out his hand to her.

She obeyed, taking the hand he offered and he drew her to her feet. He released her hand and ran both of his up her arms, across her shoulders to the top button of her blouse.

Swallowing hard, Wynter felt the tips of his fingers against the hollow of her throat as he slipped open the first button. Her breathing quickened and became shallower as he worked his way down to the waistline of her skirt.

"Look at me," he ordered softly and her eyes leapt from his chin to the heat of his eyes.

She sank into that heat and became boneless, unable to move a muscle as his hands spread open her blouse, unhooked the closure of her waistband and worked his way through the tiny buttons that held the skirt snug to her hips. Standing there as though paralyzed, she wasn't even aware that he had tugged the skirt down her body and tossed it aside.

She sank into a sweet lassitude that made her as pliable as warm taffy and smiled dreamily at him, her smile widening as he returned the gesture.

"What are you writing in your mind, now, milady?" he asked as he cupped her breast beneath the lacy bra.

Wynter sighed. She was re-writing the scene in her mind just as he knew she was.

"Something tells me you are going to be an adept student," Rakin whispered.

She did not feel the coolness of the air wafting over the cotton of her camisole and bloomers nor did she feel the smoothness of his hands removing those garments. Beneath her bare rump, the sleekness of the fur enticed her and as his fingers rolled the stockings and garters from her legs, she sighed deeply.

"Something tells me you are going to be an adept student," Rakin whispered.

Her eyes followed him as he stood. Her gaze lowered from his face to the bare flesh of his broad chest to the belt he was slowly pulling from its loops. Dreamily, she watched him unbutton the studs at his crotch then peel the slick leather from his lean hips. Her breath caught in her throat as the wiry curls at the juncture of his taut thighs slid into view and the thick staff that sprang from that spiky patch jutted forth. She did not hear the groan that escaped her throat.

Barely breathing, she watched him step from the tight confines of his britches, toss them aside, then sink unhurriedly toward her, stretching out his tall body beside hers.

Rakin propped himself up on his elbow, his hand threaded through the dark sleekness of his hair as he stared down at Madelaine. His gaze drifted over her from burgundy curls to the wild pulse beating in her neck to the turgid peaks of her lush breasts then moved downward. Beneath his scrutiny, her body burned with heat and she began shivering with the force of the emotions bombarding her.

Lazily, he reached out his free hand to twirl a lock of her hair around his index finger. "Kensetti women would kill to possess hair as lovely as yours," he said, lifting the lock to inhale it.

Releasing the lock of hair, he put his index finger to the hollow of her throat and stroked her flesh gently. Very slowly, he ran his finger down her chest until he could splay his fingers upon her sternum, the tips of his fingers stretching toward the peaks of her breasts.

Madelaine moaned for the heat of his hand was intoxicating and she felt a growing ache deep in her belly. She writhed beneath his touch, unaware she did so.

His hand traveled lower, the tip of his middle finger dipping into the well of her navel, the heel of his palm coming to rest just at the silken fringe of her pubic hair. He said nothing but his eyes spoke volumes. There was passion lurking in the dark rum depths. His finger circled

her navel slowly and the base of his hand pressed firmly against her belly.

"Ah," Madelaine sighed, reveling in the weight and pressure of his strong hand upon her flesh. The force pressing down on her belly seemed to heighten her awareness of that area between her thighs that had began to ache so sweetly. Her crotch felt heavy, very sensitive and a part of her actually felt as though it were throbbing.

"Uh huh," Kaegan said and with practiced ease, reached around her to unsnap her bra. "It will be if it isn't already." He tugged the bra from her body and tossed it aside. His fingers went to the waistband of her panties, sliding his palms under the elastic to push them down her hips.

Rakin's hand slid up her belly, dragged over her ribcage, his fingertips feathering along the skin until they came to rest beside her breast. Before she could take another breath, his hand was over that weighty globe, the erect nipple pressed into his palm, his fingers gently kneading the softness.

"Sweet," he said, caressing her. With each movement of his hand, his palm touched then arched away from her straining nipple, sending shivers of delight racing along her sides. He gently twisted the mound, swirling his palm over her then pressing it firmly down until her nipple was a hard little pebble aching to be plucked.

And pluck it, he did with the hardness of his short fingernails.

Madelaine arched her body upward at that intimate touch. Her face burned as her body ached and she could not lie still beneath the sensations he was causing in her lower body. When he leaned over her and replaced his fingertips with the hot, moist prod of his tongue, she gasped loudly and shuddered, squeezing her eyes tightly shut. The self-imposed blindness only added fuel to the fire already beginning to creep out of control and his tongue and the sweet pressure of his suckling lips fanned those flames to a roaring fire that threatened to consume her.

Rakin was licking her nipples very, very slowly, his tongue dragging over that highly responsive area from base to erect tip. Now and again, he would lightly clamp his teeth over that straining peak, chuckling softly to himself at the mew of pleasure that came from Madelaine's throat.

Feeling as though she were standing in front of a roaring inferno, Madelaine longed to feel the full length of Rakin's body pressed to hers. She threaded her fingers through his dark hair and pressed his face closer to her breast, trying to turn so she could feel the heat of him along her.

"Atta boy, Rakin," Kaegan quipped. He lowered his head to her breast and drew the taut nipple into his mouth.

"Bad boy Kaegan," Wynter said with a sigh, threading her fingers through his thick hair to anchor his head. She closed her eyes.

Releasing her nipple from a delicate grip between his teeth, Rakin lay down, pulling her into his embrace, nestling her head in the crook of his shoulder. He held her firmly, enjoying the seeking of her fingers through the crisp hairs on his chest. She was trembling—and ready—but he pulled her even closer until she was forced to wedge her leg between his thighs.

"Oh," Madelaine said on a long sigh as the hardness of his shaft stabbed at her thigh.

Shyly, she slid her hand under his encompassing arm and touched the head of his cock.

"A man's rod is designed to give great pleasure to his lady," Rakin said, willing his body to complete control despite the animalistic urge he had to ram into Madelaine's lush body.

"It is so smooth," she said, circling the head of his penis with her index finger.

"Yet as hard as steel," he said.

Madelaine moved her hand lower until she could wrap her fingers around the width of his shaft. She drew in a breath. "It is so large!" she protested.

"Aye, but it is no larger than the opening through which I will guide it," he assured her.

"I am that large?"

"Touch the tip of him again," Rakin bid her.

She obeyed and drew in a breath at the moistness she found there. She ran her finger along the slit in his tool, smearing the juice she found there.

Rakin released his tight hold and placed his arm down on the mattress. "Taste it," he told her.

Madelaine had had very little instruction on the act of coupling and what she had been told now seemed untrustworthy. She held no preconceived notions of what should or shouldn't be done so did not question his order and lifted her finger to her tongue.

"It is salty," she pronounced.

"Like tears," he said in a thick voice. "He's crying for want of you."

"Umm," she said and returned her hand to his cock, smiling to herself as he shifted his legs further apart. She slid her hand down his hard length then lightly touched his balls. "What are these called?"

Rakin had to swallow before he could answer for she was gently caressing him. "It is called a scrotum."

"The purpose of which is?" she asked.

"It holds the sperm from which you and I will make our future children," he said softly.

"Ah," she said, weighing them in her hand. "They are wrinkly."

"They are sensitive," he said.

She released his balls. "Am I hurting you?"

"No," he was quick to reply. "You are pleasuring me, Sweeting."

"Take your clothes off," Wynter ordered. "Now!"

Kaegan had moved to her other breast but released her nipple with a loud popping sound. "As you wish, milady," he said and fanned his hand down his body. The clothing vanished.

"That's more like it," she said as she slid her arms around his bare middle and pulled him to her. "Now, kiss me you fool!"

The Reaper's mouth crushed hers with a kiss that made her toes flex against the carpet. She clung to him, another scene playing across her mind's eye.

Her questing hand returned to cup him gently. The tip of her middle finger touched very soft flesh beneath that weighty sac and she stroked the area. "So very soft," she told him.

"And so very sensitive," he said, panting.

"Do I have such sensitive places, too, Milord?" she asked.

One moment she was lying beside him and the next she was flat on her back, his body sliding down hers until he could grasp her hips in his hands and drape her legs over his broad shoulders, his hot breath fanning over the very core of her open crotch.

"Let's see if I can find any," he said gruffly.

Madelaine nearly came out of her skin as his tongue dragged over her nether lips. She shrieked so loudly she stuffed a fist to her mouth. He was lapping at her—his tongue spiraling along the folds of her sex—and when he touched something down there she bucked against him like a wild bronco.

"I think I found one of those places, Sweeting," he said with amusement only a split second before his lips closed on that highly sensitive area and Madelaine had to stifle her cry with palm pressed tightly over her lips.

Something began to spread through Madelaine's lower body and her hips were undulating as Rakin worked his teeth lightly over her erect little clit. She was itching deep inside her and she pushed against his invading mouth with tiny little jerks that soon became a quick rotation of her pelvis.

"Um hum," she heard him grunt.

It was his finger slipping firmly inside her that brought an exquisite sensation rippling through her womb—clenching and spiraling—and carrying her into a realm to which she had never before ventured. She felt a rush of blood invade her upper body then a pleasure so intense, so all-invasive, that she felt as though she were spinning out of control and falling, falling, falling until she landed softly in a warm place that cradled her gently. Her heart was pounding. She was gasping for breath. Her body was trembling uncontrollably, her legs shaking as though she had the ague. Her skin crawled with energy and was so sensitive she thought she could feel each individual hair on her flesh stirring.

"Did I find it?" the Reaper asked with a chuckle as he slid up her body and gathered her to him, holding her securely in his strong arms.

"You gods-be-damned sure did," she whispered and felt perspiration clinging to her body.

"When I take you, Sweeting, you will discover a pleasure much more intense than that which you just experienced," he told her.

Madelaine pulled her head back and looked up at him, her eyes wide. "It can be more pleasurable than what I just felt?"

"Much," he said and put his lips to her ear. "Imagine my cock—as hard as steel—buried deep in your tight sheath. Imagine it as warm as honey sliding in and out of you, going deeper, and filling you completely. Imagine my body covering yours—the weight of it pressing you to the fur and hot against your skin, my knees pushing yours wide apart, your legs wrapped around my waist to anchor me to your sweetness."

Madelaine felt goosebumps popping out along her arms and there was an ache, an itch developing in her nether regions again. She gripped his forearm, liking the feel of the crisp hairs beneath her palm.

"Then," he said, running his tongue along the spirals of her ear, "imagine me thrusting into you, the friction causing such an exquisite awareness between your thighs and in your sheath that your knees feel weak."

"Sheath?" she questioned.

"This," he said and reached down to fondle her between the legs.

"Sheath," she stated. "That is what it is called."

His fingers found the pearl of her clit and began to roll it.

"Oh, I like that, Milord!" she said, arching her hips up.

"Perhaps you would like to pleasure me awhile before I take you," he said in a husky tone.

Madelaine reached for his shaft but he stilled her hand.

"Taste me," he asked. "Take me in your mouth and suckle me."

Wynter sank to her knees, her palms trailing down his hips, his legs. She leaned toward his turgid shaft and took it between her lips. She drew on the smooth head then pulled it from her lips. "He's oozing," she said, smiling.

"He's ready like a big dog," he told her. His hand was smoothing over her hair.

She slid him into her mouth once more, lathing his head with her tongue, drawing on the fluid that escaped his slit.

Rakin could feel the blood pounding in his ears and knew if he didn't stop her, he'd come in her mouth. He didn't want to break her into the sweet act of a woman loving a man in this unique way with such abruptness. He put his hands on her cheeks and lifted her away from him.

"I need to be inside you," he said, his breath erratic. "I need my cock buried within your sweet body."

She stretched out beside him and opened her arms. "I am ready, Milord," she said.

He eased over her, placing himself gently between her spread thighs. "No matter how easy I am with you, Sweeting, there will be a brief moment of discomfort."

Madelaine nodded, her lower lip tucked between her teeth. "I know," she said.

"But it won't hurt but a moment and then never again," he assured her.

"All right." She tensed, lying there like a sacrificial victim, her eyes squeezed shut. She opened them when he blew a soft breath over her face.

"You are not my prey, my love," he said. "You are my lady, soon to be my woman. I want to see your lovely eyes as I make you both mine and a woman." He lowered his mouth to hers and kissed her sweetly. "I want your breath in my mouth at the moment we become one."

His mouth captured hers in a heady kiss that took her breath away. Her arms encircled him and she lifted her hips to lock her legs around him. They were looking into one another's eyes as he slowly—but firmly—pressed into the tight warmth of her.

Madelaine felt a momentary prickling sensation within her but it was not what she would have labeled as painful. It was a slight discomfort that gave way to the sensation of being filled with her lover's shaft. There was a wondrous ache that infused her and when he gently withdrew and went deeper, she dug her nails into his back for the feeling was so powerful, so pleasurable, she wanted more of it.

Rakin felt her shift against him, lift her hips in invitation and he pushed a bit deeper, held himself there until she wriggled again then began to piston in and out of her—slowly at first and shallowly—but then a bit faster and a bit deeper until she was clawing at him, panting in concert with him. His stroked lengthened and quickened until he was ramming at her with such power, such raw energy, he had no other thought than to satisfy the burgeoning lust that was building to a crushing crescendo within his pumping body.

Kaegan went to his knees, wrapped his arms around her and pulled her to the floor. Covering her with his hard body, he reached between them to take hold of his cock.

"Be gentle with me," she said in a low, throaty voice as she clutched his hips.

"That's not what you want," the Reaper replied.

He thrust his rod into her wet channel then slid his hands beneath her hips to yank her up so he could fill her completely. He laughed low in his throat when she arched a leg over his hip then crossed it with the other. She clenched her legs securely around him.

"Now that's what I'm talking about," he said as he began pumping into her—hard and deep.

Wynter tightened her hold on his hips, arched herself up as far as she could, reveling in the intensity of his rhythmic thrusts, the force of them. She could hear their lower bodies slapping together, punctuated by low grunts of need from him and tiny moans of pleasure from her. Her nails were scoring his broad back but she was as unaware of that as he was of the indentions his nails were making in her rump as he held her to him, lifting her to meet his powerful thrusts.

When pleasure spilled over to satiation, her cries were muffled within his mouth. His growl of completion was lost between her lips as their tongues dueled. With one last deep thrust, he stilled—holding his cock at the very core of her—and felt the last of her clenches relaxing around his spent member. He jerked one last time within her then collapsed atop her, his mouth sliding from hers so that his lips were pressed against the line of her jaw, his heavy breathing fanning a stray wisp of hair at her temple.

Wynter gathered him to her, moaning a little as his shaft slipped moistly from her body and lay upon her thigh. She stroked his damp hair and crooned to him as though he were a child.

"Gentle is for pussies," she heard him say.

"Not this pussy," she said with a snort.

He turned so they were facing each other.

"I love you," he said softly, his eyes sweeping over her sweat-pebbled face. "Marry me."

"Transfer a fledgling to me and I will," she responded.

His frown was immediate. "I've told you"

"I want to be with you for all time," she said, stressing the last two words then repeating them. "All time."

"But Wynter"

"All. Time," she repeated. "You're not going to get away from me that easily, stud."

"I don't want to," he denied.

"Then transfer a fledgling and make me a Lady Reaper before our son arrives."

Kaegan blinked. His lips parted. "The adoption went through?"

"Like a hot knife through butter." She smiled. "We're going to have a family."

Kaegan gathered her to him and squeezed so hard she thought he'd break one of her ribs.

"I'm gonna be a father!" he said, showering kisses across her cheeks, nose, chin and forehead. "I'm gonna be a *dad*!"

The happiness on his face settled securely in Wynter's heart. That happiness was even better than salsa, chips, cherry Pepsi, jar of blue-cheese stuffed olives and a stick of pepperoni. It was a sixth food group that fed her very soul.

The End