

CHAPTER I

The sudden hush in the busy little café should have been his first clue shit was about to fly.

Wrapped in his thoughts, Reynner savored his dark roasted coffee hot enough to scrape a layer off his throat, when he became aware of the unnatural quiet. Looking up, he got an eyeful of a tall female sashaying toward him, not in the least surprised she'd found him. Again.

Lustrous black hair framed a face of sheer perfection, one that made gods and men whimper for her favor. A long, fitted white dress with a slit up to her thigh hugged her body and fell to her ankles.

Oh, he understood the awed silence all too well since he'd once succumbed to that same sensual spell. Easing his grip on the mug, he set it aside, wishing he'd taken his coffee to go. A chair scraped on the linoleum opposite him. A moment later, her stiletto heel rode up his leather-clad leg to caress his inner thigh beneath the tablecloth.

He shoved her foot off him. In a measured move, he picked up a coin from the change on the table and spun it so he wouldn't be tempted to reach across and strangle her.

"Get lost, Inanna. I'm busy."

"Reynner..." She held out a hand in appeal, her topaz eyes luminescent with tears. "Don't do this..."

Ignoring the Sumerian Goddess of Love and War hadn't worked in the past, and certainly not now.

He cut her an implacable stare. "Don't do what? Ignore you? Or prefer other females?"

Her face darkened at his mention of the women. "Why would you want these weak, pathetic creatures?" Her tears vanished as fast as they appeared. "I'm powerful. I'll make it wonderful between us again."

Reynner leaned back in the wooden chair and ran a cool, dismissive gaze over her stunning face and lush body. More flighty promises, but no hint of an apology for what she'd done to him. The thought would never have entered her narcissistic mind.

"I enjoy *other* women."

"You lie."

Reynner shrugged. Picking up the fallen coin, he worked it between his fingers. He just wanted coffee and a few minutes of quiet before he went back on the streets. Instead, he got her.

It should have felt good torturing Inanna, but he got no enjoyment, just a prolonged headache that had started over two millennia ago.

How could he have known then that stopping at the Sumerian pantheon would so irrevocably change his life?

"You've become cold and unfeeling. One little mistake and you're still making me pay." Her sulky voice drew him back.

"*One little mistake?*" His tone made glaciers seem warm.

"It was just a teeny-tiny year—"

"*A year?*" His hands crashed on the table. The coin flew and disappeared beneath a chair. "It was a fucking century in Hell!"

Inanna jerked back and blinked. Several humans turned their way in curiosity.

“Your deception caught me unaware, never forget what I am,” he said, his warning clear.

Her eyes flickered. Not from fear, Inanna didn’t believe there was anyone more powerful than her, but with a gleam of sexual promise. She knew all too well what he was, and why she hounded him.

Empyreans were a race of beings as old as the celestial angels and just as powerful, but far more carnal.

She leaned forward and rested her arms on the table, her low neckline displaying an eyeful of cleavage. “I’ll make it up to you...” Her voice lowered to a smoky promise. “I’ll make you my consort.”

He’d rather be imprisoned in Hell again.

“You have a mate.”

“I am a goddess. I can do whatever I want. Come on, lover,” she wheedled. “It will be good between us again...then I’ll help you find what you seek.”

Reynner stilled, his instincts on alert. Did she know where the missing Stone was? But meeting her watchful gaze, he dismissed the thought. No immortal would know for sure. The damn thing hid from them all. Even if she could aid him, he would never accept her help. It always came with a price.

Reining in his irritation, he ignored her baiting and turned to take in the busy café.

The brunette waitress at the table farther down watched him from beneath her lashes while she served a customer. She’d been sending him all sorts of signals from the moment she’d set his coffee down. Ones he didn’t encourage since he had no interest in females as a whole. Besides, he knew what a jealous bitch Inanna could be.

A virulent hiss erupted from opposite him when she spotted the waitress. As if to prove his point, with a flick of her hand, the waitress flew backward, crashing into a table. Chaos erupted, drowning the female’s frightened cry. Two human males rushed to help her.

A cat-like smile curved Inanna’s mouth. But her eyes flared with ire as she played with the deep blue lapis lazuli stone set in intricate silver filigree around her neck. “Look at another human tart again, and I will hurt her.”

Of that, he had little doubt. With his mind, Reynner froze every customer in the café and rose to his feet. Fists planted on the table, he leaned forward, his anger leashed by a thin thread. Her scent of myrrh and exotic crap hit him square in the face, bringing back memories he far preferred locked away in permanent amnesia.

“Reynner...” Her breath came out in a tiny puff, her expression brightening with lust. She raised a hand to stroke his face. He jerked away. “You were a one-night-fuck gone wrong. Go find some other fool to dupe.”

“*Arghhhh*,” she shrieked and flashed out from the café.

Unfortunately, she’d be back with lust or vengeance on her mind. He far preferred the latter—*fuck!* He clenched down on his teeth at the sudden spike of pain in his left pec at her retaliation—one he could never escape. Breathing hard through his nose, it took several moments before it eased to bearable levels.

No, it never did to tell one of Inanna’s stature it was over. He’d learned that the hard way when she’d tossed his drugged hide into Hell in a fit of temper. And a worse nightmare had begun.

Reynner clamped down on the destructive memories that would take over and released the humans from his psychic hold. As the din resumed, he walked out of the café. The dissonance and sweltering heat of the Lower East Side welcomed him.

Itching for a no-holds-barred fight to haul him back from anger that rode him, he headed down the street, hoping to come across a horde of demoniis. Those soul-suckers made perfect punching bags, and he got to kill them.

More, it frustrated the hell out of him that he still couldn't get a bead on the foretold mortal female he'd been searching for. Only her blood could awaken the mystical scroll and lead him to the missing artifact needed to power the waning Stones of Light his world desperately needed.

Lucan, their mage, had foisted the job of finding the girl onto Reynner and pointed him to New York, the one place he'd spent the least amount of time over the centuries. But whomever Lucan had sensed was no longer here. Several weeks of tramping around this city had proven that.

Slipping his hand in his coat pocket, he snagged the last piece of cherry candy, unwrapped it, and popped the thing into his mouth. Perhaps it was time to move on—

His cell went off. Balling up the wrapper, he scored it into a nearby Dumpster before answering. "Yeah?"

"I'm at Club Anarchy, see you in five," the male on the other end said. Reynner's cell went dead. He scowled. When the archangel called, it meant more crap was about to fall. Usually on him.

Eve Leighton climbed out of the taxi and into a blast of humid air, half tempted to jump back into the cool, protective barrier the interior of the cab offered. The Lower East Side in late August, nope, not a fun place to be right now. Shutting the door, she turned and stepped right into the bile-inducing odor of stale beer. Christ! The stench nearly knocked her off her feet.

The human brewery grinned, displaying a mouthful of stained teeth. "Hello there, you-you gorgeousss thing."

Eve shot the drunk a withering look. She clutched her purse to her chest, dodged him, and quickened her pace. Her own fault for being late, she'd gotten lost in her work. Again. It took Eric's irate call to get her rushing from her studio to her apartment, and like a berserker, she'd changed and called a cab. But she'd forgotten a fundamental rule for Friday nights: always leave early. Traffic had been a nightmare.

Nine thirty-seven wasn't too late, she decided. Her friends couldn't get mad at her on her birthday. Then she wrinkled her nose wryly. Her bag vibrated, startling her. *Like A Virgin* belted out.

"Dammit!" Eve snatched her cell phone and shut off the song. Her new ringtone had Kataya's big footprints stamped all over it. She knew precisely why Kat had downloaded that stupid track.

"Eve, tell me you're on your way." Eric's annoyed voice grated in her ear.

"I'm here, just around the corner—"

"Good. I'll meet you outside."

"No-no, you don't have to—"

The line went dead. Darn it! She glared at her cell. She didn't need a bodyguard. Shooting a wary glance behind her, Eve grimaced when she found the greasy-haired drunk stumbling after her.

She hastened her steps and cut through the busy traffic. As she approached Club Anarchy, she blew out a wry breath. Why had she bothered wasting five precious minutes deciding what to wear when leather and skin seemed to be all the rage? Still, she straightened her strappy black top and smoothed her short skirt with its flippy hemline.

Two brawny bouncers guarded the club entrance, keeping order in the long line of noisy party revelers snaking down the alley.

Eric wasn't out front, but Kataya was, dressed in sleek, dark pants and a midriff revealing halter-top. Her belly button ring gleamed in the moonlight. She stood away from the crush at the entrance, smoking. Her corkscrew red hair was scraped into a French braid but a few curly strands escaped to frame her pale face. She waved when she saw Eve, her engagement ring glinting in the light from the streetlamp.

"You know Jake will have a fit if he finds out you're smoking again," Eve said as she neared her.

Kataya shrugged and killed the stub on the wall, then she hugged Eve. "He won't. He's in the Middle East. Happy birthday."

"Thanks..." Eve frowned at her tense tone. "What's wrong? You seem to be wound up tighter than my copper wire sculptures."

Kataya snorted, but her whiskey-colored eyes appeared troubled. "I haven't spoken to Jake in months... I miss him."

A tiny stab of envy pierced Eve's heart. Hastily, she blocked the unkind emotion. If anyone deserved happiness, Kataya did. Disowned by her parents when she became pregnant at sixteen, then losing her baby, Kat's personal life had been a mess until she met Jake.

Kataya popped a breath mint in her mouth. Her gaze fastened on the Band-Aids Eve used to cover up the scrapes and cuts on her hands. "What happened?"

"It's nothing." In a protective gesture, Eve balled her fingers, the old scars from her childhood accident pulling tautly over the new injuries. She shrugged. "I got a little too enthusiastic with my sculptures—I'm okay."

"Hmmn..." Kat murmured. "If you say so. Gloves, Eve."

At the reminder, she pulled out a dark red pair from her purse and drew them on. Kat didn't bat an eyelid, used to Eve's colorful handwear. Since she had to spend her lifetime wearing them, she might as well make a fashion statement. "So, who's here?"

"Eric, Brenna...and David," she mumbled the last name.

At her friend's innocent expression, Eve glared. "What did you do, Kat?"

"Nothing. I thought you liked him. Didn't you say he's the only one you can tolerate touching?"

"Yes. So?"

"So, I invited him." Kat glared right back. "You're twenty-five today, and you're going to get laid. Get rid of the damn V. Tonight. Tomorrow. But it's going to happen." With a huff, she turned away. "Whoa. Look at him."

"What? You've changed your mind about David and picked out a one-night stand for me now?" Eve taunted.

"Oh, shut up and just look, would you?"

Curious, since Kataya rarely paid heed to any guy except Jake, Eve glanced to where Kat nodded. Her attention instantly captured by a tall, pale-haired man heading for the club entrance. He moved with a lazy, sensual saunter, reminding her of a predator stalking prey...for something far darker. Erotic. Her tummy dipped.

“Have you ever seen anything sexier? Bet he’s totally scrumptious from the front. He’s got the whole”—Kataya waved a finger in an attempt to draw what she meant—“dangerous, X-factor thing going for him.”

Eve didn't speak, didn't breathe, her focus riveted. His long burgundy leather coat flared out behind him as he disappeared into the dark, gaping maw of the club. He had to be a movie star or something because the bouncers didn't even stop him.

“Oh, no, get your eyes off him, Eve.” Kat grabbed her arm, dragging her attention away from the entrance and stepping in line to enter the club. “He’s great to drool over, but the badass will probably fry your brains the moment you touch him. That would make your first time a little too *spectacular*.”

“Sheesh, you’re a total buzz-kill, Kat,” Eve grumbled.

She snorted. “So, yes, David.”

Her cover charge settled, they headed in. Rock music threatened to rupture Eve’s eardrums. Overhead, strobe lights worked the crowd on the dance floor, turning their movements to frenzied jerks and shakes. The sharp odor of alcohol and heavy perfume crowded her nose as they cut through the masses. Kat’s slinky strides took on a bump and grind movement as she headed for a table near the dance floor which their friends occupied.

Eve grinned and gave them a quick wave.

Eric, lanky and dusky skinned, shot to his feet and hauled her into a hug that made the air swoosh out of her lungs. His hazel eyes darkened with concern. “Next time, no excuses. I’m picking you up. I know you're busy but I see you way too little these days.”

Yep, growing up with someone gave them rights to play big brother. But then he was...in a way. After all, his parents were her guardians.

Thankfully, Brenna saved her from near asphyxiation and slung her arm around Eve's waist in a quick hug. Her crystal-blue eyes sparkled, a startling contrast against her caramel skin and silky black hair. She brushed Eve’s cheek in a quick kiss and said in her ear, “I’m so sorry, I couldn’t stop Kataya from her nefarious plans for your induction into womanhood.”

With a deep sigh, she couldn’t suppress, Eve slid a glance to David—the guy who would make her a woman, if her friend had her way. As if having boobs and PMS didn’t already mark her as one, she thought with wry amusement.

David waited patiently to greet her. An artist like her, his collection of paintings would debut tomorrow at Eric’s gallery. A few inches taller than Eve’s own five-foot-six, he was slender with overgrown sandy-brown hair that had a tendency to flop into his eyes. Colorful dabs of paint marred his navy tee. Eve hid her smile, knowing he’d probably forgotten to change. But then David’s philosophy ran along the lines “as long as I’m not naked.” She doubted even that would bother him.

“Hello, David.”

“Happy, happy day, Eve.” Pleasure lit his narrow, attractive face as his gaze skimmed over her in appreciation.

“Thank you,” she murmured. Yep, he made no bones about the fact he liked her. But the gleam in his light blue eyes and the empty wine glass showed that he’d already made headway into starting the party. He took her gloved hand and kissed her knuckles, making her smile.

She sat in the chair he held out and accepted the flute of sparkling wine Eric handed her.

“A toast.” He raised his glass. “To our girl, Eve.”

The music made speeches impossible, but emotion crowded her, and she basked in her friends' love. They accepted her despite the fact that she could never touch them without a barrier of protection. Not since the accident.

The car crash that had killed her parents didn't just leave her with scarred hands, but also a far bleaker legacy. She couldn't touch another without being drawn into their minds, seeing their thoughts, and feeling their emotions. And it wasn't without repercussions.

A sudden influx of strong, emotional energy from another, and unbearable pain followed, so much so that she sometimes lost consciousness.

Eve pushed the painful thoughts aside as Kataya had set a small bakery box on the table.

"Okay," she yelled above the music, tucking a few spirally red strands behind her ear. "Before we all get rip-roaring drunk, here..." She flipped open the cover to reveal a red velvet cupcake. The creamy icing on top simply read, 'Happy Birthday.'

Brenna stuck a pink candle in the center, lit it, and slid the box to Eve. She smiled, flashing twin dimples. "Because we love you and know you hate the fuss. So, make a wish, make thousands, and may they all come true!"

Overwhelmed, Eve tugged at the small, gold, half-hoop earring she wore. She didn't have any family, but this little group was hers.

Eve glanced at her friends' happy faces. Ten long years without physical contact and emptiness crowded her heart. Just once she yearned to hold them—to hold someone she loved.

Inhaling roughly, because she might as well wish for the moon, Eve blew out the candle.

They handed her a card and a small flat box covered in red foil and tied with a silver bow. They'd covered the card with well wishes and xoxo's. Then she ripped open the package and found a gold bracelet with four charms nestled in white tissue.

At a guess she knew exactly which charm came from whom. The daisy from Brenna, because Eve loved them, the ladder from Eric—probably for her success in her new venture, the clover leaf from Kat, for luck—she hoped, and the double heart? David.

She really, really wished he hadn't given her that.

"Thank you." She slipped on the bracelet then drank her wine to ease the tightness in her throat.

David nudged her arm, picked up the wine bottle. "Top up?"

"No, not yet."

She'd met David several months ago through Eric. Even though she could touch David without a painful influx of thoughts and feelings flooding her, it wasn't all smooth sailing. Instead, his creatively charged mind usually pulled her into a maelstrom of colors that left her with a low-grade headache.

If she decided to date David like he wanted, she'd have to tell him of her affliction. She could only hope he wouldn't run off in the opposite direction.

"Ready for your show?" she asked him.

David blew out a heavy breath, picked up his wine and took a deep swallow. "Ask me after."

Eve laughed. She understood his qualms since her own debut loomed in front of her just over a week away. Her stomach knotted at the thought. If her sculptures didn't take off, she may as well find her own cardboard box and call it home.

Eve pushed the gloomy thought aside. She wanted to enjoy this evening and not think of *what if*. Sipping her drink, she took in the crowded nightclub. Her attention wandered to the VIP section on the second level, corded off from the common folks for the rich and famous and their wild partying.

The hunk with the pale hair would be up there, she mused. Bet he wouldn't be alone for long. Women must be drawn to him like bees to pollen.

Ugh, when had she become this petty? And over a man? A stranger, for goodness sake!

"Dance?" David yelled in her ear. His smile took on a fiendish appearance in the eerie purple strobe light. He crossed his eyes, exaggerating his odd look and nodded to the dance floor. Eve laughed, putting the stranger out of her mind.

Perhaps Kat was right, maybe she should take a chance with David.

Heavy rock music blasted off the walls and settled in Reynner's head. Flashing lights almost blinded his sensitive eyes. He wished Michael had rethought their meeting place. The club thronged with people. And he didn't like crowds.

Reynner leaned against the steel balustrade running the length of the gallery that overlooked the dance floor. He ignored the skimpily dressed women trying to make eye contact, his attention on the approaching male.

Dressed all in black, the leader of the Guardians fit in with most of the club's clientele, but for his exceptional height of six foot nine. Strands of night-dark hair escaped their tie and framed a face that appeared carved from granite. Shades covered eyes Michael didn't reveal to the human populace.

The females tracked him with covetous looks, drawn by the angelic allure, but something about him made them keep their distance. Had to be the hands-off, hard-ass look the archangel wore like a mantle.

Michael had been the one to find him eons ago, killing demonis like some demented being after he'd escaped Hell. The archangel had hauled Reynner off to Exilum, a sanctuary for immortals and a place he now called home. Yeah, he owed Michael big time, and it was why he continued to hunt supernatural evil wherever he was while searching for the foretold one.

Michael handed him a squat glass before taking a swallow of his coke.

Reynner cocked a brow. "What's up?"

"Aethan's back in New York."

Hearing that name, Reynner's stomach churned. Nothing would ever ease his guilt. He'd accepted long ago that *he* should have been banished for Ariana's death, not Aethan. Not the male who'd once been his best friend.

"Anything else?"

Michael gave him a long, hard stare. "Why don't you meet him? Get this shit out of the way. You were friends once."

"Friendships fall apart all the time. Besides, it's too late for that." Three millennia too late. Aethan probably hated his guts.

Michael gave him a hard stare then shook his head. "You're one stubborn bastard."

Whatever. He needed to focus on finding the female tied to the scroll. Two damn months in this city, and still no sign of her. It was time to move on, to scry for another possible location. He had no desire to bump into his old friend and revisit a past they could never shake. Or put right.

"Thanks for the heads up." Reynner handed his untouched liquor to a passing waitress and headed out. As he cleared the stairs, a visceral hunger slammed him square in the chest. He skidded to a halt.

What the hell?

Inhaling harshly, he rubbed his sternum and scanned the place. Beneath the layers of liquor, sweat, and heavy perfume, a delicate fragrance with a tantalizing hint of peach seeped into him and stroked his senses. His body went into slow burn. Blood heated. His groin hardened. A strange, urgent need took hold of him. Compelled, he tracked the scent down the corridor. But the trail disappeared into the restroom where a pack of females took their own sweet time entering their shrine. Did women do nothing solo?

Irritated and forced to cool his heels, Reynner waited. His cell vibrated. He checked the text then ignored it. Damn interfering angel. Michael never gave up trying to fix a broken past.

Reynner leaned against the wall several feet from the bathroom door and willed off the light above him. With his height and hair, the attention he drew was a bloody nuisance. Throw in his cursed angelic allure—yeah, the shit was a guaranteed trouble magnet. He clamped down on his psychic shields, his attention fixed on the restroom, cell phone tapping against his thigh.

Whoever the female was that had worked her mojo on him would wish to the high heavens she hadn't. He'd made that mistake once with Inanna and had paid the price for his stupidity. He wasn't about to let it happen again.

Eve stared at her reflection in the restroom mirror, tucked her long bangs behind her ear, and inhaled a deep breath. Everything about this evening was heading in the direction she wanted. So why was she having second thoughts?

Deep down, she understood her hesitation. She wanted to fall in love—have what her parents had had before their deaths—but with her affliction, it was but a dream.

She raked back her hair and sighed. Earlier, she'd casually touched David's hand minus gloves, just to be sure, and colors had roared to life in her head. Thankfully, without the painful invasion of thoughts and feelings she normally got from others. But the impulsive brush had left her with a slight throb in her temples.

So what did she do?

Surrender to dating a man she liked despite the headaches or live a lonely life?

A noisy group of women entered and broke through her depressing thoughts. Her cell beeped. She grabbed her gloves off the basin, retrieved the phone from her bag, and read the text. A belated wish from one of her old coworkers.

Smiling at the exploding birthday cake gif, Eve left the bathroom and crashed face-first into a brick wall of muscles.

Aw, crap! Her open purse flew to the floor, scattering its contents. She stumbled back but her half-hoop earring caught on the soft fabric of his shirt, jerking her forward. Pain blinded her. Gasping, Eve blinked back tears as she pulled free. Calloused hands steadied her. At the strong grip, goosebumps flooded her skin and the fine hairs on her arms rose.

Her gaze snapped up. And up. The air rushed out of her lungs. Apology and throbbing ear forgotten, Eve gaped at the man holding her.

So beautiful...

But there was nothing feminine about him. A beautiful warrior. A towering wall of unyielding muscles, the only thing missing was a sword. Power stamped his tough body and etched the hard lines of his incredible face. His pale, moonlit hair was tied back to reveal the sculptured lines of his jaw. Eyes like midnight skies, stroked with a slash of indigo, remained cold. Flat.

Eve faltered at the complete lack of emotion on such a handsome face. She snatched her hands back from the soft leather of his burgundy coat, heat streaking her face at gawking like an idiot and lowered to her knees to gather her strewn things. Lipstick, brush, tissues...

She started in surprise when he hunkered before her in a rustle of leather, and in fluid moves, collected the rest of her things. The man smelled incredible. Wild and crisp like the forest after the rain. Without a word, he dropped her stuff into her bag, handed it to her, then picked up his cell and slipped it into his coat pocket.

It took her a moment to collect her scattered wits, aware of his cold, dark eyes studying her. Uneasy, she pushed to her feet and closed her bag. "Er, thank you."

Still silent, he rose, too. And startling all heck out of her, he reached out and touched her ear. Eve jerked away and winced, pain simmering to life once more, then she saw the blood smeared on his fingertips.

Oh, wonderful, she was bleeding. Before it dripped down her neck and her friends called 911, she hustled for the restroom again. She tore some paper towels from the dispenser and examined the wound in the mirror when another image joined hers. Her breath strangled her throat.

Him.

She swung around, wariness overriding her attraction when she looked into that cold, unforgettable face. "You can't come in here?"

"I just did."