

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

The Twelve Quickies of Christmas



Book 1

Angel In Moonlight
Ashleigh Raine

ANGEL IN MOONLIGHT
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Ashleigh Raine

Dedication

To Honey and BeeBie, we'd never have made it this far without you holding our hands...and our hearts...

To Gail, for opening her home.

To Bree, for crying happy tears.

To our Fake Reality group. For being there everyday, for the unending support and for always demanding more. You keep us smilin'.

Chapter One

The tall, majestically engraved doors opened, affording Lita entrance into the High Chamber. This was her first time within these walls and for some reason, she'd thought it would be different. Lita had imagined the room as cold and devoid of color, but the warm lighting and murals of Polgaran life adorning the walls were actually somewhat welcoming.

She forced her feet to propel her forward, down the long stretch of open space, toward the tables where the Controllers presided. They sized her up, scrutinizing her so closely she could feel their heavy stares right through her skin to the very core of her body. For the first time in her life, she wished her clothing offered a bit more modesty. She took a deep breath, keeping her jitteriness at bay, forcing herself to remain cool and calm on the outside as protocol required. This was her only chance to ask for what her heart truly wanted so she willed her excitement not to screw this up.

Lita stepped onto the interrogation platform. Many lives had been judged on the very same white square of marble beneath her feet. Her nerves raged to explosive proportions. Imorga, High Controller, nodded toward the Herald. Lita immediately bowed her head and clasped her hands behind her back, showing the proper respect for the Controllers as the Herald began. "Lita, of the Damescine sect, high Platine quadrant, first time requesting audience of Controllers. Humbly petitioning permission for withdrawal from Polgara."

At the Herald's words, some of the Controllers burst into laughter. Lita cringed. She had known her petition would be considered unusual. Everyone wanted to come to Polgara; no one wanted to leave. Amid the fading chuckles, Lita heard clicking and sliding and snapping. It sounded like they were looking her up in the main directory, seeking something in her past that would explain her desires. But they wouldn't find it in their directories.

Lita remained in her stance of obeisance, waiting for the Controllers to give her permission to move. If it didn't come soon, her calm, collected exterior was going to be rattled away by her shaking, quaking interior.

"By my lead, Lita, you may naturalize. I would certainly benefit from seeing your eyes as you stand before me while petitioning such a large request."

Lita took a deep breath and lifted her head to meet the penetrating stares of those who held her fate in their hands. Her attention rested on Imorga as she continued.

"We will consider your petition if you would express your reasons for requesting departure from our fine world. You are aware that this may be your life's only chance to speak in our presence."

Lita nodded in reply as she tried to find the right words. "I seek knowledge of other worlds. I have the desire to learn how other beings live outside of our dimension, to further discern what brings others to Polgara."

She couldn't tell the Controllers the full reason she wanted to leave, because they would never understand. For twelve years, her companion, Stephan, had sought her out each time he'd come to Polgara. They had shared their bodies, their passions and their desires, but love was never involved until the last time he visited. But it wasn't love for Lita. Stephan had found his heart link and Lita had sensed the depth of the love Stephan would share with his woman. Although Lita was quite happy for him, the joy also made her hunger. Human emotions were so much stronger than Polgaran and Lita wished to identify and experience them for herself.

Imorga shook her head. Lita's stomach clenched. Was she being so quickly dismissed? "Have we not respected and cared for you as Pleasurers require? Why would you seek to learn the darker, non-pleasurable side of existence? There is no place as perfect as Polgara."

"Yes, High Controller Imorga, I have been treated with great esteem as befitting my station. What I seek is to understand the differences between Polgara and other dimensions, to offer that regard to my future companions. I would like to visit a human dimension."

"You want to experience human emotions? In a human dimension? Have you no idea how cruel humans can be? I assure you a human existence is nowhere near the exaltation you afford it. Be that in day-to-day activity, emotion, or environment, a human existence can be quite chaotic and potentially dangerous." Imorga cast a glance down the table at her fellow Controllers and they nodded in agreement.

Lita's pulse raced. They were going to deny her. She had to convince them otherwise. Although far from rational, Lita knew she absolutely needed to experience more than a life of lust and pleasure on Polgara. "Please understand, I do not seek to leave forever. I want only to experience human emotions for all their splendor and reckless abandon. I cannot do that here on Polgara. I know it displeases you that I seek to leave Polgara, but High Controller Imorga, if this was not so paramount to my vitality and experience, I would not waste what could be my life's only chance to speak in your presence."

Gliding her fingers back and forth over the table in front of her, Imorga met the eyes of all her peers. Lita watched, hopeful, near desperate. She'd never desired something so badly in her life.

Imorga returned her stare to Lita. "I shall grant you one year in a human dimension. You must return promptly at the end of that time. If we are forced to retrieve you from that dimension, you shall forfeit all memory of your life away from Polgara. Do not forget, the existence of Polgara and the Pleasure gods and goddesses that serve here are a secret most of humanity is not privy to. If you in any way compromise our existence, if you bring undue attention to yourself, the same

punishments will apply. I should hope your trip provides all that you seek. Lita, you have one year. You are hereby dismissed.”

Chapter Two

Lita knew she was going to die. Shivers wracked her frozen body, and her teeth clacked together uncontrollably. Ice-cold wind pierced her clothing, the flimsy material of her dress offering no protection from its harsh attack.

Something, somewhere had gone horribly wrong. Whenever Lita had questioned Stephan about his dimension, he'd spoken of beautiful twilights over water and waves crashing onto sandy beaches. When she'd asked him where he would go if he could ignore his Shadow Walker duties, he'd talked about tropical islands where the sun shone all the time. So she'd chosen an island as her final destination on this dimension.

This place was not at all how Stephan had described an island.

Everything was miserably frigid and covered in an icy substance. If her travel bag hadn't included her toothbrush and other non-clothing essentials, she would have dropped it in a trashcan somewhere because none of the clothing she'd packed stood a chance against the chill.

Lights beckoned in the windows of the buildings towering over her. Although her feet were numb—her soft leather slippers completely soaked through—she forced herself to keep moving forward, hoping that she might find somebody who could help her, someone who could explain how Manhattan Island could be so cold.

A loud blaring noise caught her off guard and a bright yellow vehicle sped past, drenching her in dirty ice water. She looked down, not surprised to see small bits of ice clinging to her hair, and her nipples frozen peaks stabbing through the front of her dress. For just one moment she wanted to sit down and give up, or tread back into the trees where she'd arrived and beg the Controllers to let her return to Polgara.

But even though she'd never been so wretchedly cold, something about this world enigmatically called out to her, even through such misery. She turned down another street. If she didn't find some kind of shelter soon, she'd likely turn into an ice sculpture.

Another vehicle like the one from earlier stopped in front of her and a heavily bundled woman, arms full of bags and brightly colored boxes, emerged from its depths. One of her precariously placed parcels slid off the pile and into the ice on the ground. The woman didn't seem to notice as she headed toward a building.

Lita bent to retrieve the fallen item, her frozen fingers fumbling to grasp the small, cheerfully wrapped package. "Wait. You dropped something."

The woman pushed the door open with her foot, and threw a glance back over her shoulder. "Whoa, thanks. You startled me. I didn't see anyone over my pile of goodies."

Give me a sec to set these down and I'll grab it from you." The woman disappeared inside.

Lita stepped closer to the open door. Heat poured from inside and another involuntary shudder wracked her small frame. She closed her eyes and tried to soak in as much of the warmth as possible, reminding herself that if she ever got the opportunity to go to another dimension again, she would take the time to do some solid research.

Without any warning, strong arms surrounded her and she was lifted off her feet and pulled into the thawing heat of the building. She tried to grab hold of something to anchor her, instead dropping the package and her small bag of belongings. Lita opened her eyes to see a booted foot kicking the door shut, closing out the cold.

In the back of her mind an unfamiliar instinct kicked in, that she should fight, run, hide, that she should be scared. But her empathic abilities kicked in as well and she knew without a doubt that this man was not someone she needed to fear.

Pressed against his body, Lita welcomed his warmth into her. She fought the urge to nuzzle deeper into the pleasurable heat. Looking down at the large arms surrounding her, she felt the strange compulsion to cover them with her hands, to see what they looked like together. As though he'd read her mind, he took her hands in his and began rubbing the life back into her fingers with a touch so gentle and caring, it nearly took her breath away.

She tilted her head back, wanting to see the face of the man whose touch echoed throughout every inch of her body. But all she could see were his eyes, such a dark blue they were almost black, staring down at her, calling her to him. Lita became lost. There were layers of life in his eyes. Something lost, and something desperate to be reclaimed.

"Ben?!"

The voice echoed loudly in the empty hall, painfully jerking Lita out of the man's compelling stare. He cautiously separated himself from her, then disappeared down a hallway, a door closing quietly behind him. The expression on the woman's face was one of pure astonishment. "Well, I'll be goddamned. My brother, Ben...he hasn't shown interest in anything or anyone since.... I don't know what got into him. I'm sorry if he frightened you. Ummm...are you all right?"

Lita's mind and body spun dizzily from the aftereffects of his touch and the look in his eyes. She'd felt as though she were being pulled within his mind, and if she were to let go and fall into him he wouldn't hesitate to catch her, drawing her so deep within him she wouldn't ever want to resurface. Her words came out as a whisper. "Yes. I'm okay." Lita looked down the hallway where Ben had disappeared. "He didn't scare me at all." She returned her attention to the woman and gave her a small smile. "He just wanted to take care of me."

"Yeah, he's like that...or...used to be like that. He..." The woman let out a soft sigh and slowly shook her head, then her gaze returned to Lita and her eyes lit up with

concern. "Wait. Is that all you were wearing? It's below freezing outside." She hesitated then reached for Lita's hand. "What's your name, hon? I'm Gail Stanton."

Lita let Gail take her hand. Her touch was sweet and caring, like her brother's. "I'm Lita."

Gail gently squeezed Lita's hand. "Such a pretty name. You know, it's Christmas Eve and well... Would you join Ben and me for dinner tonight?" Her face lightened in a sweet smile. "I understand if you have other plans. It's just that you brought some life back to my brother...please, let me give you something in return. I know Ben would be delighted to have a guest. Christmas was always his favorite holiday."

"I'd like that very much. Thank you." Comforting warmth swept through Lita as Gail took her by the hand and led her into the apartment.

* * * * *

Lita had never expected she would begin to experience stronger emotions after such a short time among humans. There was such freedom in knowing she was on her own, that she didn't have to answer to anyone but herself.

Even though she'd only met two humans so far, their hearts were good, and far from cruel like the Controllers had warned her about. Gail was a beautiful and kind soul, offering Lita food, clothing, and even opening her home.

Ben was still a mystery. When Lita thought of him, it was as though she was stepping into the unknown. There was confusion and astounding beauty swirling together in a paroxysm of chaos.

Lita leaned forward and stared into the mirror, which was still foggy from her recent shower. She almost expected to see some type of visible change in her appearance. Other than the thick white sweater and leggings Gail had given her, she still looked like the same Lita. But inside, she *felt* so much. Confusion, joy, laughter, sorrow, anticipation, fear...even desire. Did all humans feel so much all the time? It was overwhelming, but she felt more alive than she'd ever felt before.

With a new bounce to her step, Lita opened the door and walked out of the bathroom. The mingled scents of dinner practically engulfed her, prompting her stomach to growl appreciatively. If her time in this dimension was starting with a meal that smelled this good, she knew it was going to be a great year.

Walking into the dining room, Lita stopped in her tracks, soaking in the awe-inspiring sight before her. It looked as though Gail had cooked a meal to feed hundreds of people. Or was this just another difference between here and Polgara? Did humans really consume *that* much food? There were plates and platters and bowls full to overflowing. A couple bottles of wine graced the table as well. Until that moment, she hadn't even realized just how thirsty she was.

Then her eyes met Ben's. Just like earlier, she felt drawn to him, and as though pulled by an unseen hand, she walked around the table and sat down next to him. "Is it

okay if I sit..." Her sentence remained unfinished. Somehow she knew he wanted her close to him.

"Merry Christmas, Lita." Gail laughed as she came into the dining room with a plate of sliced ham and set it in the middle of the table. "Did you enjoy your shower?"

"It was wonderful, actually." Lita smiled up at Gail. "This all looks so delicious. There's so much food."

"Family tradition. We always have good leftovers during the holidays. But truthfully, this was easy to throw together. You should see our place during Thanksgiving. I cook for days." Gail grinned and sat down across from them both.

Lita's attention shifted to Ben as he poured wine into a glass and held it out to her. Gail's gasp echoed in the sudden silence of the room.

Lita took the glass from him, letting the tips of her fingers graze over his. With just that little touch, the deep pull between them began in earnest and she lifted her gaze to his. Fear, pain, need, desire. Rampant emotions hurled toward her and she placed her free hand above his wrist, her anchor in the storm. He needed help. He was trapped inside. What had happened to him?

Lita forced her gaze away before she became lost. She took a deep breath to regain control, then managed a small smile. "Thank you, Ben. You read my mind."

She tried to remove her hand from his arm, but he covered her hand with his, stroking her fingers like he'd done earlier, soothing and calming. An apology.

Gail let out a ragged sob, pulling Lita further out of the trance Ben held over her. She looked at Ben's sister, who watched them both, her eyes wide in wonder, one hand fisted over her mouth, holding back her sobs. Gail lowered her hand to the table and nervously ironed out imaginary wrinkles in the tablecloth. Her voice was a soft whisper as she spoke. "You must be a miracle worker or something. My brother's been little more than a shell for over a year now." Tears streamed down her face. "Who are you?"

Lita froze. How could she answer that? "Just someone who understands what it's like to be trapped. How long has Ben been like this? What happened to him?"

Gail swiped a hand across her face, wiping away her tears. "I don't really know for sure. He was coming home from work, just like usual...he's a senior graphic designer. That night he was supposed to meet some co-workers for a drink but he never made it. I was beside myself with worry for the next three days because he was nowhere to be found. I looked everywhere I could think of. On the fourth morning I opened my door and he was just sitting there on the steps like he didn't know what else to do. I almost wasn't sure it was him because he was just gazing off...like he was completely lost in thought. I got him to come inside, but he's never spoken. And the doctors can't find anything wrong with him. He eats, takes care of himself, showers, gets dressed every morning...but he doesn't interact with anyone. It's like he's in his own world. Until now."

Lita's mind raced. She'd heard stories of demons that fed off the creative minds and souls of others. Usually, the victims ended up dead, or the small part of them remaining

was so weak they could never find their way out again. But there were some that were strong enough, and their souls repaired themselves. Could that have been what happened to Ben? She knew he was trapped inside himself, that who he was still existed. She *felt* it. Maybe he just couldn't find his way out?

Gail took a deep breath and looked across the table at her brother. "The doctors think that one day he'll just snap out of it, that it's all in his mind. And maybe it is, but I can't imagine what could've happened to him to make him lose his way like this." Gail reached out her hand and placed it over Lita's free hand. "Lita, my brother was...is a good man. Everyone loved him. He had a good life. And he's all I have left. Whatever you have with him..." Gail lowered her head. "I know I sound crazy, but it's just that for some reason my brother is responding to you when he hasn't responded to anyone else. You give me hope.. And for that, I thank you."

Lita smiled at the beautiful woman across from her and squeezed her hand, before pulling away from her grasp. Lita held up her wine glass in toast. "Merry Christmas, Gail. May all your hopes come true." The two women clinked their glasses as Lita silently prayed that she could help Ben find his way home.

Chapter Three

"Are you sure you don't mind sleeping on the couch?" Gail asked as she carried a stack of blankets into the living room. "I can sleep here if you want to crash on my bed."

"I'm sure. You've already given me so much. I'm not going to kick you out of your bed, too. Besides, I like it here. I've never slept next to a tree covered in lights before. It's beautiful. And so many gaily wrapped packages. I think I like this Christmas thing." Lita moved to the couch to help Gail lay out the blankets.

"I still can't believe you've never experienced Christmas before. Where did you say you were from?"

"A place far from here in spirit and location." Lita paused as Gail gave her a funny grin. "But I'm really happy to be here now."

"Full of mystery, aren't you? Okay, if you have nowhere else to go, can I convince you to join us in our celebration tomorrow? Eggnog, and carols, and—"

Lita laughed. "I'd love to spend more time with you and Ben. Thank you for everything. You've both been so kind."

Gail finished making up the couch and turned and embraced Lita. "You're welcome. There's something special about you. I just know it." Gail stepped away, a light blush covering her cheeks. "If you need anything, just holler. I'll see you in the morning." She turned off the overhead light on her way out of the room.

Lita settled on the edge of the couch, not ready to snuggle comfortably under the blankets. Ben filled her every thought. The man he used to be was locked deep within himself, fighting to come out. But was there anything she could do to help him?

She wasn't a healer by conventional definition. Her touch couldn't fuse a broken arm or close a wound. But as a Pleasure goddess, her hands healed in other ways. She gave pleasure to soothe, and to help the mind, body and soul relax.

Would it be enough to bring Ben out of his locked-in state? He wanted his life back. She knew this by his touch and the look in his eyes. But to give him that chance, she'd have to walk a fine line to avoid calling attention to herself. The Controllers would pull her back to Polgara, erase her memories of this dimension and maybe even punish her further if they felt she'd compromised Polgara in any way.

For some reason, none of that mattered. She'd help Ben however she could and suffer whatever consequences came of it. Her mind made up, Lita rose to her feet, ready to head down the hall to the room she'd seen Ben retreat to earlier.

He was watching her, standing in the shadows at the edge of the living room. Somehow, she wasn't surprised. Ben knew her movements before she made them.

Silently, he walked toward her, still dressed in the dark green dress shirt and black slacks he'd worn to dinner. She stepped around the couch to meet him halfway. When they were close, Ben reached out and took her hand in his.

Emotion stirred within her, the lonely chaos she'd briefly sampled earlier. But a beacon of hope shone through as well. She couldn't let him down.

Together they walked down the hall and into his room, unsure of who was leading whom. They stopped at the edge of his queen-sized bed, a pool of moonlight washing over them with a subtle glow. Ben took both of her hands in his, and cautiously, Lita lifted her gaze and lost herself in his eyes. Her heart pounded painfully, making it difficult for her to breathe. For the first time, she was afraid of what she was going to do. What if she couldn't bring him out of his locked-in state? What if she made things worse?

Ever so carefully, Ben's hands slid up her arms then neck, until he was cradling her face. With the softest of touches, he lowered his face to hers, until they were resting forehead to forehead.

Desire flooded through Lita. A desire to help him...but also so much more. A desire to be with him, love him, and take away his chaos. A desire to make everything in his world okay.

Lita raised her hands to his temples and began massaging his scalp. Every touch was meant to stimulate the senses and relax the body. She combed her fingers through the soft brown locks curling at the base of his neck. His slow exhale burned hot against her throat and she arched into him.

Oh Goddess, she needed this man, needed him to be healed, to be with her completely. Moving her hands to his face, she ran her fingers along the line of his jaw. The rough sandpaper feel burned against her fingertips. She wanted to feel that roughness as he kissed her neck, the scraping sting as he possessed her body with his mouth. She wanted to hear his voice growling out her name, feel him thrusting hot and hard inside her.

Lita stopped in mid-caress. This was a healing...not a seduction.

Then his arms circled her body, further pulling her against him. She trembled at the full body contact. Even through her clothing, his touch excited her. And her touch obviously stimulated him. His rock hard cock pulsed against her stomach. She had to regain control, to remember exactly what she was trying to do.

"Ben...I need you to look at me."

He lifted his head, still keeping their bodies close. His eyes sought hers and she shivered under the onslaught. With raging intensity, his thoughts pummeled her. Chaos still reigned inside of him, his yearning to be free battling for survival. But the strongest emotion was his need for her.

Lita had felt craving and desire from her clients in the past. But she had never felt this depth of attachment, the feeling that his thoughts, even in the chaos, completed her. "You feel it too, don't you?" she whispered.

He answered by lowering his head and kissing her.

Any idea that she could remain in control disappeared as his kiss lit her senses. She stood in a whirlwind of tangled emotions, his and hers, joining together, filling her. It was impossible to tell where his thoughts ended and hers began. Resolutely, she let herself lose control, realizing that to bring him back, she had to merge with him without restraint.

The taste of him burned hot on her tongue, a mixture of peppermint and the sweet wine from dinner. Yet at the same time, she knew the way she tasted to him. It was an exchange of thoughts and hungers. All in one kiss.

In the back of her mind, behind the lust and pulsing desire burning her core, she saw a cord strung tight between them. A solid connection merging them together. Lita's heart rate sped up. It had to be a mistake.

Ben was her heart link...her soulmate. She'd seen it before in others, had known when a connection burned true between people. But Polgarans didn't have heart links—it went against their nature to be linked to only one other. Yet there was no denying it, and nothing could make it go away. They were bound forever, no matter the consequences.

And if Ben discovered that link within himself, he could use it to find his way out.

She didn't know where she found the strength to stop kissing him. When he tried to pull her back, she shook her head. "No, Ben. Undress me. And let me undress you."

As though he'd only been awaiting her invitation, his hands swept under her borrowed sweater and carefully pulled it over her head. She wore nothing underneath. His eyes glowed appreciatively and he knelt down in front of her and kissed each pebbled nipple.

Lita's knees grew weak at the simple touches he bestowed upon her. Years and years of sex with hundreds of people, and she'd never felt like this or craved so deeply. Why this man? Why now?

Love. It was that simple. His touches were more than just physically pleasurable. They reached to her soul, filling the emptiness inside of her she'd never before realized existed. How would she be able to return to her duties as a Pleasurer? Sex with anyone but Ben would be cold...meaningless.

But she couldn't think about that now. Now she wanted to feel loved and love in return.

Ben lowered his thumbs beneath the waistband of the leggings, and tugged them off her body. He stayed on his knees, his hands holding her hips. Gently he placed a kiss at the top of her slit. Lita let out a soft whimper and sank down, letting his hands guide her to the floor.

Her hands shook as she unbuttoned his shirt. Inside her mind, she felt him pulling closer, using their heart link as a handhold, working his way fully out of the madness he'd been locked in for over a year. It was as though he'd wrested the control from her,

and she was getting lost in his chaos. But this new experience didn't frighten her. Her body wanted him, yes. But so did her heart and soul.

When the shirt was removed, she discovered the strong muscles of his chest, shoulders, and tight stomach. He was lean but toned and everything about him beckoned to her. She wanted hours to explore his body, days to learn every place he loved to be touched. Unable to stop herself, she moved closer, straddling his legs, and ran her face over his chest, loving the feel and smell of him. She tongued his flat nipple, delighting in his masculine taste. He groaned and fisted his hands in her hair, holding her against him.

Lita could feel his cock throbbing through his pants, against her open pussy. Slowly she ground down against his cock, soaking the fabric of his pants with her juices. They both let out quiet moans.

In one swift movement, Ben stood up, taking her with him. He lowered her onto the bed, and then hurriedly removed his pants and briefs, freeing his cock from its confines. Newfound exuberance rippled through her body. Then he surged over her, the flesh of their bodies touching from head to toe. But he didn't enter her, not yet.

Lita knew there was more she was supposed to be doing. This wasn't about sex.

And then he kissed her and everything made sense. It wasn't only about sex between them. What they were going to share went far beyond anything that simple. Their minds and bodies were merging as they fought together to bring his soul out of where it was hiding.

This was about bringing him home.

Lita spread her thighs beneath him, wrapping one leg around his waist, inviting him to come inside. This was the first time she'd ever wanted a man so badly she thought she'd die without him inside her. One of his hands skimmed down her body and slid between her legs. He dipped a finger inside of her, slowly thrusting, pressing. Lita arched into his thrusts, wresting her lips from his so she could speak. "Ben...please. I need you. I need this. Come inside me. I'm yours, now. Free your mind and find me."

Ben's fingers grazed along her skin, lighting a fire everywhere he touched. Finally he brought his hands back to her face, caressing her jaw, cheeks, even brushing his fingers lightly over her eyes. It was as though with his touch, he was memorizing her.

His hands came to a halt in her hair, holding her still beneath him. Then he looked down into her eyes. Lita gasped as the cord inside her pulled taut and a tidal wave of unleashed emotion rushed through her. The black chaos that filled him crumbled into nothingness as he sank into her, mind, body and soul. He'd broken free.

Heady outbursts of emotion rocketed through her. Hers, his, theirs. There was no separating them. Their thoughts mingled as their bodies mated. His cock filled her pussy, pressing against her womb with every downward stroke. She tightened her sheath around him, stopping him from pulling out, not wanting their joining to end. She could feel how badly he wanted to fill her with his sperm, and knew he could feel

her tension building inside. Back and forth, emotions, thoughts, desires flew and within moments they were both panting on the edge of fulfillment.

His hands cradled her face, holding their gazes steady as his thrusts increased in speed. The slick glide of his cock in and out of her became a branding on her soul. No lover had ever taken her so high. Lita stifled her cry as the first orgasm hit her, bursting inside her with explosive intensity. She kept her gaze locked with his and she knew he felt her pleasure.

He spoke then, the first words she'd heard from his lips. It came out in almost a growl, his voice hoarse from disuse. "Angel. Mine." Then he sealed his mouth over hers as his come flooded her cunt. Lita wrapped her arms around him. Holding him to her, feeling his pleasure, coming again with him, knowing she'd never be the same.

Knowing she had to disappear from his life by morning, and could never see him again.

Chapter Four

December 21

One year later

“And you’re sure there’s nothing we can do to convince you to stay on with us?” Dresden Mathers’ deep voice filled the limousine. “I have some friends in the INS... You don’t have to return to Poland.”

Lita smiled up at the man who’d become like a father to her over the last eleven months. She looked around the car at Aimee and Mrs. Mathers—Colleen—and saw the family she’d always wanted and been blessed to have during her time on this dimension. How she wished she could tell them the truth about who she was and where she was from, make them understand that if it were her choice, she’d never leave. “I would stay if I could. You know that. But I have a duty to my people—”

Mrs. Mathers placed a hand on Lita’s arm. “You’re always welcome back, Lita. Always. Aimee loves you. We love you. You’ve been the best nanny we could ever have hoped for.”

Tears filled Lita’s eyes. “Thank you. I love all of you, too.”

Aimee wrapped her tiny arms around Lita and leaned against her. “I’ll miss you.”

Lita stroked Aimee’s auburn curls, a familiar, comforting gesture Lita had done hundreds of times. This time it brought an ache to her heart. Her time on this dimension was almost up. No more pillow fights with Aimee. No more excursions through Central Park. In three days she would step back through the portal and be a Pleasure goddess again.

But she was far from the same person who’d left there one year ago.

She had come to this dimension to experience a life without boundaries, to understand the depth and range of emotions, to learn more about the human race in all its chaos and beauty.

New York had shown her what humanity was all about. Lita had grown to love the honking taxicabs, the buildings so tall they met the sky, and the bustle of people during rush hour. New York City teemed with life, a constant flow of contrasts—the best and worst of society living together in discordant harmony. Life was rougher, stranger and unpredictable on this dimension, but that’s what made it beautiful.

Polgara, in all its perfection, could never match the vibrancy of humanity. It was a land of comfort and pleasure. But how could one appreciate comforts and pleasures, without knowing pains and sorrows?

Lita sighed as she let her mind wander back to her first night on this dimension.

Ben.

The hollow emptiness inside echoed his name. He'd left a hole in her heart, showing her that the pain of loss never went away. She wondered what he was doing, if he'd gotten his life back, and if he ever thought of her.

Occasionally she felt a gentle tug on the heart link that bound them so closely together. Although she'd been tempted to open herself up to him again, to see if she could still feel him, hear his thoughts, be one with him, she'd firmly pushed the temptation away. Nothing could come of it. She couldn't change who she was, or the life that lay ahead of her.

Thank the Goddess for the memories, though. Lita had experienced love that night with Ben, a love that would haunt her for the rest of her existence. That was something she would never regret.

The car came to a stop in front of the hospital, and Lance, the chauffeur, got out and opened the door for the Mathers family. One last event as a nanny, then tonight she'd check herself into a hotel and spend her last three days just as a human. Walking the streets of New York, saying goodbye to the city she called home.

Lita gathered Aimee close, and walked with the family into the hospital. She surrendered her cream wool coat and purse to the smiling coat check girl, then helped Aimee out of her jacket. A new children's wing was being dedicated tonight, and Dresden Mathers, head of the foundation that had donated the majority of the funding, was one of the guests of honor.

An extra sparkle of emotion and energy filled the air, buzzing across her skin like a lover's caress. At the same time, something else flickered to life inside of her, like a memory, or something nudging at the edge of awareness. Tinges of sorrow mixed with anticipation. It seemed to creep inside, filling her up until she could barely hold still. She looked around, trying to figure out what was affecting her so.

A string quartet played holiday music, and servers swept through the crowd with gleaming silver trays of drinks and hors d'oeuvres. The hospital was decorated for Christmas, tinsel, lights, mistletoe and holly filling every available space. Only one area remained clear, the wall at the entrance to the new wing, covered by a large black tarp. Scattered reporters and a news crew had parked themselves in the front, near where the dedication would take place.

Nothing in particular jumped out at her. And then it hit her. She was in a hospital. It had to be the residual emotions of the patients affecting her so strongly.

She let out a relieved laugh as the dedication ceremony began.

Just a few minutes into the ceremony, Lita felt a gentle tug on her hand. Aimee grinned up at her. "Lita. I need to go potty."

Lita smiled. "Okay, sweet cheeks, let's see if we can find a bathroom."

It was easier said than done. The hospital was a maze of rooms and hallways and it took them several minutes to find a public bathroom. Once Aimee was taken care of, they headed back toward the ceremony.

Lita made her way through the crowd, trying to get back to Dresden and Colleen. Suddenly she paused, goose bumps covering her flesh, the hair rising on the back of her neck. Something was wrong. People were pointing at her, their eyes wide in wonder, whispering words she couldn't hear over the noise of the crowd. Unsure, Lita picked Aimee up, holding her close. As a whole, the crowd's attention shifted to her, and they cleared a path for her to make her way to the front.

What was going on? Was she interrupting something?

Lita's gaze flitted over the guests dressed in their formal best, trying to find an answer to her questions. She froze as she saw what had everyone whispering in wonder.

The big black tarp covering the main wall at the entrance to the wing had been removed. A mural filled the wall, a larger than life image of a woman standing in snow, a filmy rose fabric delicately wrapped around her. Long, dark hair surrounded her upturned face, cheeks rosy from the cold.

But it was the almond-shaped violet eyes that made the mural come alive. The artist had captured a whirlwind of emotions in their depths. There were questions in the eyes, as well as need, love, and a desire to understand life.

Aimee clapped happily, shocking Lita out of her vision. "Lita, it's you!"

Lita struggled to draw breath into her suddenly tight chest. How? What? Who?

There was only one answer that made sense. She searched the area for the man she knew was there. Her gaze was drawn directly through the crowd of tuxedo-clad men, to the only one that mattered. Ben stood just to the left of the mural, his eyes locked on her.

Their heart link flared brilliantly to life, pulling taut. Emotions crossed the distance. Disbelief, desire, need, love.

Then the second wave of emotions hit her with brute force.

Anger and betrayal.

Ben's mouth lifted in a grim smile. "Angel."

Chapter Five

Goddamn...his angel was real. A divine, heart-wrenching temptation, stepping through the crowd of people as beautifully as she'd come into his life nearly a year ago. All this time, he'd thought she was an ethereal angel from some other world, come to bring him back to the life he'd loved so dearly.

But so much for dreaming.

A knot had formed in his stomach the instant he had arrived at the hospital, and he'd thought it was just nerves. He'd given his speech, once again telling the story of his angel. It wasn't until this very moment that the last piece of the puzzle fell into place.

Bitter betrayal hit him like a punch in the gut, taking his breath away. She was someone's wife. The child on her hip made that abundantly clear. Then Dresden Mathers stepped to her side, leaning in close—familiarly. Lita nodded and brushed a kiss over the sweet cherub's head and transferred her into her father's waiting arms and out of the chaos of questioning reporters.

Ben's angel was the wife of *The Dresden Mathers*. No doubt living in an unimaginably luxurious mansion. He'd even liked Mr. Mathers when they'd met briefly, thought he was a good man. Ben snarled. They obviously had the same taste in women.

The night she'd stumbled upon his doorstep without so much as a coat had been some quick adventurous little escapade. Poor little rich girl. Slumming it up for a few hours of fun just to spice up her perfect little life with her perfect little family, in her perfect big house. Why else would she have disappeared without a trace before morning?

Sure, Ben owed his recovery to her, but that didn't stop his heart from breaking. Lita had become the inspiration for his entire life, not just his paintings. He cursed himself. He'd pinned an otherworldly angel on a woman who was just that. A woman.

But something deep within him screamed that he was wrong. His chest tightened painfully, and his breath came in quick, short gasps. Like he just knew she was frozen in fear, terrified as the reporters closed in on her. Like she was shouting at the top of her lungs in sheer horror.

Without a second thought, he blasted through the sea of reporters, put an arm around her and ushered her toward the exit. The instant he made contact with her, his world shattered once more as her thoughts and emotions flooded his senses.

She wasn't married with children. She wasn't a liar. She was definitely a temptress, but that was just because of her beauty. Beauty only his loving angel could possess. He

was shocked that any ill thoughts had crossed his mind in regard to this woman. How could he have made such horrible assumptions about her?

But how could he not? He'd spent the past year questioning both her disappearance and whether she was even real to begin with. Although part of him had known she had to exist. Even though he couldn't explain it, he'd never stopped feeling her. He didn't try to rationalize it. His life hadn't followed rules of logic since a dark and unfathomable evil had tried to rip his soul away.

Pushing through the crowd, Ben held Lita tightly against his chest, keeping out the throng of relentless story-seekers. He could hardly keep his voice from shaking as he spoke to the horde. "I'm sorry, but we have no comment. Please leave us be. I owe this woman my life."

The vultures kept shouting out their questions, following close behind them. Stroking her hair, Ben led her away, protecting her the only way he could. "Angel, are you okay?"

She nodded her head, but he felt a tornado of extreme emotions twisting through her. He tried to ignore the cameras' flashing, recording their reunion for the ever-hungry press. After retrieving their jackets from the coat check, he helped her into a long creamy white overcoat. He couldn't help but wonder why she hadn't had it with her on the night they met. There were still so many mysteries about that night—about her—but his main concern was getting her somewhere they could finally talk in private.

Outside, he hailed a cab and instructed the driver to his place. They settled in as the cabbie sped away, their bodies only inches apart, their emotions even closer. Yet the distance seemed unbearable. Her whole body radiated an alarm he couldn't quite understand, but it was clear that the reporters had brought out a deep-seated fear. All he wanted to do was pull her into his arms and take away the chaos she was feeling.

Hesitantly, he reached over, taking her hands in his, warming them up just like he'd done when they first met, hoping she wasn't terrified of him as well. Lita's head shot up, her eyes wide. "I hadn't even realized they were cold."

"I guess I just knew before you did."

Those violet eyes he'd never forgotten filled with tears and she crumbled into his arms. He wrapped himself around her, holding her to him, this time planning on never letting her go. There were so many questions he wanted to ask, so many things he needed to tell her, but where could he start when the woman of his dreams showed up in the flesh?

Over the past year, he had used the link he'd shared with her to draw out his ideas and images so that he could paint her true to her beauty. Once the press had found out that his beautiful subject was the angel who'd healed him, his popularity had risen. His art was considered among the greatest for his ability to relay emotion. He didn't know how to tell everyone that he just painted what he saw in his heart for his beautiful angel.

When they arrived at his place, he threw a handful of money at the driver and helped Lita out of the car. He was afraid to move from her side, thinking that if he turned away she would disappear again. Once inside his place, he paused. He knew where he wanted to take her. Straight to bed, make her his, possess her until she never left his side. Primal instinct demanded that satisfaction.

Instead he helped her remove her coat, relishing the vision she made in shades of white. It was as though she'd stepped right out of his memories. His blood heated in response to the mixture of memories and her presence. Quickly, he shed his overcoat and tuxedo jacket, removing his cufflinks and rolling up his sleeves. They watched each other, the space between them simmering with longing and tension.

She spoke first, her voice so quiet he stepped closer to hear her words. "Is this your place? Gail...?"

"Just me. I moved here after..." *you healed me...after you left me...* But he couldn't say that. "Years ago, Gail worked for the Red Cross. When I got better, she returned to the job she loved. She's in Africa right now, helping children."

"I'm glad she's doing what she loves."

"Me, too. She sends postcards or calls whenever she can. She's supposed to be back in late January."

Lita nodded then they both grew quiet again. He wanted to keep the conversation going, but his brain had apparently stepped out for coffee. *That's it! A drink! Maybe that'll help.* "Is there anything I can get for you? Something to drink maybe?" Placing his hand on her lower back, he slowly guided her into the living room where he hadn't quite finished decorating the tree before he'd left for the hospital dedication.

She smiled at him and his whole world brightened. "No, but thank you. I'm just a little overwhelmed." Her gaze fixed on the Christmas tree and her eyes seemed to glaze over. She rubbed her hands up and down her arms, seemingly lost in thought.

If only he could read her mind. The connection still flickered between them, but all he was receiving was a brash mix of confusion, fear and deep loneliness. Even though he sought some answers, she didn't seem to be in the right place to provide them. Would she leave again if he asked the wrong question? He didn't want to scare her away. If she needed to go slow, he could certainly do that as long as she stayed. At this point, keeping her with him was more important than anything. But curiosity still nagged at his heart.

He brushed by her, unable to stop himself from running his hand over her hair before he moved behind the Christmas tree. Damn he wanted to touch her bare skin, fist his hands in her hair, and hold her still beneath him as he fucked her all night long. Clenching his jaw, he leaned down and plugged in the tree lights. His jaw loosened into a smile as her eyes lit up along with the lights. So damn beautiful... His cock twitched beneath his tuxedo pants.

Before his erect friend could make himself too obvious, Ben knelt down and opened the chest where he kept the Christmas tree ornaments. The stilted silence between them

was painful and suddenly he couldn't take it anymore. "What have you done this past year? Where did you go after you helped me out?"

His questions hung in the silence. If she didn't reply, he'd know she didn't want anything to do with him. It wouldn't surprise him. She'd left him without a word once. Maybe he was just reading more into what they'd had. He'd never met anyone he truly felt understood him and who he might have a chance at understanding as well. Or maybe she had been sent to him by a higher power, but only to help him that one time. And the rest of his life, he'd be on his own.

But that wouldn't explain why she'd stumbled back into his life again.

Silently, she knelt down next to him, her knee pressing against his leg. With a small smile she reached into the box and removed a gift box shaped ornament. "I've been a nanny. But today was my last day."

While that wasn't exactly the answer he'd been looking for, he thanked his lucky stars that she'd even answered in the first place. He stood and offered his hand to help her up. She placed her hand in his and a jolt of awareness shot through him. Their eyes met and held as she rose to her feet. His heart rate increased as she laced her fingers with his. She'd given him the invitation he needed. Hopefully baring part of his soul wouldn't scare her away.

Finding himself short of words, he just spoke straight from his heart. "I can't tell you how glad I am to see you again. You've been my inspiration this past year. I-I've done so many murals and paintings of you...I've been thinking that maybe you were only a dream, that—"

He stopped as she placed her free hand on his chest and moved even closer to him. Her gaze lowered to where her hand rested on him and she brushed her fingertips back and forth over the polyester of his tuxedo shirt. Did she have any idea what her touch did to him?

Nervously, she took a deep breath and began to speak. "I left you last year because I was scared, because I didn't understand what had happened between us. But I've never stopped thinking of you. Every morning I wake up missing you. I've never felt like this before. I've loved you for the last year." Lita paused and lifted her gaze to his. Her eyes were strong though still tinged with fear. "I love you, Ben."

Everything else he'd planned on saying evaporated from his mind. She loved him. And he knew it to be true. Could feel her love for him wrapping around his heart. The heart that loved her back just as completely. He could think of nothing else but kissing her, being one with her. Dropping the ornament he still held in his hands, he pulled her to him, his lips crushing down on hers. She reacted with equal fervor, inviting his tongue through her parted lips, drawing him within her as though feeding a deep, longing hunger.

The kiss pulsed through his veins, heating his blood, bringing his cock from half-hard to full erection. Lita was everything in his life that was missing. He'd had a few

one-night stands in the past year, unsuccessfully seeking an end to his hunger, but Lita was the only woman who could satisfy his every need.

Lita broke the kiss, her lips trailing along his jaw, her fingers fumbling with the buttons of his tuxedo shirt. She spoke through the kisses. "Ben, oh Ben. I need you so much."

Ben pulled away from her enough so he could look down into her desire-glazed eyes. "Tell me you won't leave me tonight, that you're not going to disappear before morning."

Pain rippled through their connection, and he clenched his hands into fists. No. She would not leave him again. He'd be damned before he let that happen.

Her eyes saddened and she traced a hand down the side of his face. "I won't leave you tonight. I promise you that. Let me be with you."

It would have to be enough for now. Later he'd make her stay, but now he needed to sate his hunger, to remember what it felt like to be whole again.

Growling, his primal side raging to the surface, he lowered his hands to her ass, grasping her fullness beneath his fingertips and lifting her off the floor. Her reaction inflamed him further as she wrapped her legs around his waist and crushed her breasts against his chest. She was his. Nothing and no one could tell him differently.

The bedroom was too far away. Somehow he managed the few steps to the couch without ripping the clothing off her body. She removed his bowtie and loosened his collar and her lips and tongue teased the flesh of his throat before moving back to his mouth. Desperate longing tensed his muscles. His head and cock pounded his mind with "Now, now, now," but his heart demanded he take the time to show her how she filled his world.

With a calm patience he'd been unaware he possessed, he eased her onto the couch. He remained on the floor, kneeling over her, unable to pull his lips from the sweet sensuality of hers. She placed her hands on either side of his face, then slid them down his neck to his shoulders and tugged on his shirt. She'd managed to unbutton it completely and together they removed the garment. Her sweater, white linen pants, stockings and panties disappeared the same way. Ben marveled at the ethereal beauty before him. The glow of the Christmas tree lights seemed to dance across her skin. But before he could look his fill of his angel clothed only in the silk and lace of her bra, her hands locked behind his neck and she tugged. She wanted him closer. But as much as he wanted to give in, he wouldn't.

Instead, he worked his hands around underneath her grasp, then let his fingers sway to the curve of her breasts. He teased the tight velvet peaks of her nipples, letting the lacy roughness stimulate her further. He felt her emotions both relaxing and exciting as he moved one hand over her hip, letting his thumb just graze the top of her slit. She moaned and tilted her hips in response, her hands pulling at his shoulders once again.

He spoke against her lips. "Oh, no, Angel. I'm not done with you yet." He wove his hand back from her hip to cup her ass. "Last year, it was all about me. This time it's all about you." Kissing her one more time to stifle her protest, he slid his hand back over her hip, holding her still beneath him. Slowly, he trailed his tongue down, kissing her neck, fully tasting each inch of skin, doing what he'd spent a year imagining he would do if given another chance.

Minutes or hours later – time had ceased to matter – he made his way to her breasts, suckling each nipple through the lace before unclasping the flimsy material, and removing it from her body. Her areoles looked like tight little rosebuds against the white of her skin and with hands and mouth he continued making love to her breasts.

Lita's hands no longer coaxed him closer, they wound their way through his hair and massaged his scalp just like their first night together. Except this time, he felt like he was somehow trying to heal her. As though there was so much more behind her violet eyes that she had yet to share with him.

His hands and mouth moved lower, tasting her stomach, teasing her bellybutton, then as she arched her hips in silent plea, he willed himself not to let his primal instinct take over completely. The whimpering sounds of her desire further hardened his cock until he was sure his tuxedo pants would tear under the strain. His hand slid to her inner thigh and she opened her legs, as though she were a flower blooming for only him. Wetness coated her dark tendrils.

"My angel," he whispered, blowing lightly against her pussy. She gasped in response and lifted her sex to him, offering herself completely. "Mine," he said again as he inhaled her special sweet fragrance. "Mine," he repeated before he tasted her juices. Never would he have enough of this woman. He held her down as he loved her completely, gently nibbling and licking her labia, sliding his tongue through her folds, then suckling her clitoris until she came, moaning his name.

More moisture poured forth, coating his mouth as her body wracked with pleasure. He could feel everything through their emotional connection. The female orgasm had always astounded him, but sharing it with her, tasting her cream, nearly sent him over the edge. Love made the climax more powerful, the pleasure so intense he grit his teeth to keep from coming in his pants.

Hurriedly, he shucked his pants and underwear, practically chafing his cock in the process. He traced up her body kiss after kiss, his hands caressing, stroking as he climbed on top of her. She wrapped her legs around his hips. They needed to be joined as one. He entered her, burying his cock to the hilt within her spasming sheath. They found a matching rhythm, grinding, swaying, thrusting, finding pleasure in every movement, every touch, every emotion shared. Their mouths locked on each other as possessively as their sexes.

This time they came together, their minds and bodies so tightly interwoven the pleasure continued flowing between them until their bodies, unable to withstand any more, relaxed, and they fell asleep, still united in every way as one.

Chapter Six

Lita woke up with a smile on her face and Ben's cock thickening inside of her. Until last night, a year had gone by since she'd had sex, the longest she'd gone since becoming an active Polgaran goddess. Her pussy felt swollen and tender, but the moment he began to move inside of her, warm wetness seeped from her vagina, easing his passage. She let out a rousing moan as he began a slow, sweet worshipping, each stroke a quiet claim on her soul. Closing her eyes, she let herself simply feel every sweep of his hands down her body, every thrust of his cock, every kiss he placed on her neck, throat and face. More memories to hold on to.

"I love you, Lita."

She opened her eyes to see him watching her, his look both intense and tender. Even though their bodies were skin to skin and their heart link shimmered with their connection, she felt a frenzied need for more. With a fever born of desperation, she caressed her hands over his entire body, memorizing the feel of his skin beneath her fingertips, the play of his muscles as he flexed and moved above her. Lifting her legs, she invited him deeper. "More, Ben. Please. More."

His midnight blue eyes darkened to near black as he pressed even deeper within her core. Lowering his head, he suckled her breast. His tongue brought her flesh to life, sweeping in warm circles around her nipple. Then he lightly bit her erect nub. The resulting zing shot straight to her cunt.

"Ben!" she screamed, but he just chuckled around her breast and kept feasting. It was a game for him, biting then soothing, heating her flesh, then blowing cool air over it. She squirmed and begged beneath him, needing an end to the sensual torment.

As though he felt her breaking point, Ben slid a hand between their bodies and began circling around her clit, not quite touching the swollen bundle of nerves that would take her over the edge. Lita's breath came in rapid pants as the circles narrowed. Almost there...almost...and then he finally touched it. Starbursts shattered inside of her, wicked blasts of light and pleasure filling her from head to toe.

Holding her tightly, he stroked her hair away from her face and kissed her forehead.

"Ever made love under a Christmas tree?" he whispered between kisses.

"No. You?"

"No, and I think we should remedy that. This couch limits what I can do to you." Ben carefully slid off her body and reached along one edge of the couch, producing a fleece blanket and a knitted afghan. He spread the fleece blanket beneath the tree. The afghan remained folded but within arms' reach.

Lita placed one foot on the floor to stand up.

“Stop.”

She looked up at Ben’s command. “Just let me look at you for a moment. I’ve waited a year for this.”

His gaze caressed her body with an almost physical sensation. Her body reacted, nipples hardening, a rush of liquid heat filling her pussy. Ready again for whatever he offered.

Just like one year earlier, she felt pulled into him when she looked into his eyes. For a moment it was as though she’d climbed into his mind, could hear his thoughts, see through his eyes. *The most beautiful woman who ever existed. Mine. All the love I’ll ever need. My inspiration, my redemption, my soulmate. In one smile, she breathes life into me. My body quenches its thirst and warms all that is cold when I am inside of her. Show her my love, my passion, my hunger, such that she will breathe into me and make me whole.*

His thoughts filled her, warmed her, made her complete. Her emotions bubbled up inside. She wanted to cry and laugh, to sing and shout. Instead she just spoke the words of her heart. “I love you, too. Forever.”

He held his hand out to her. “Come here, Angel.”

She didn’t need to read his mind to know what he wanted. With fluid movements, she shifted off the couch and walked toward him. His cock pulsed an angry red against the flat planes of his stomach. He’d given amazing pleasure to her and hadn’t climaxed, so she’d return the favor.

She lowered to her knees in front of him and took the thick head of his cock into her mouth. He let out a quick hiss of breath through his teeth as she swirled her tongue around the head, mimicking the lovemaking he’d done to her breasts earlier. One of his hands twisted in her hair, coaxing her to take him deeper. Slowly she let him fill her mouth until his head nudged the back of her throat. Then she began rocking back and forth, suctioning him in and out, moving faster until his body trembled.

“God, Angel. You’re killing me.” Ornaments fell from the tree as he grabbed on to it. A strip of silver garland fell to the floor next to where she knelt, giving her an idea.

“Angel, what are you...” He let out a strangled moan as she wrapped the soft length of garland around the base of his cock, using the ends to tease his sac. His grip in her hair tightened and he began fucking her mouth in swift, sure strokes. He came with a roar, his salty fluid spurting down her throat. Pine needles rained from the tree he still held tightly in his grasp. She drank from him until he was empty, then reluctantly eased his shaft from her mouth.

She carefully unwrapped the garland from his relaxed cock. He sank to his knees in front of her, resting his head on hers, taking deep, gulping breaths.

“I’ll never look at garland the same way again,” he chuckled.

Taking the strand of garland from her hand, he wrapped it around her wrist, then circled his own. As he finished binding them together, he lifted his free hand to her face. They just stared into each other's eyes, not needing to say a word.

Together they lay down on the fleece blanket, covering up with the afghan. Several minutes passed as they held each other, kissing, touching, loving. Ben relaxed and soon his breath became deep and even as he drifted into dreamland.

Lita smiled lightly. She was warm, comfortable and for the first time in her life completely content. The man she loved slept next to her, their hands tied together, his head nestled into her hair, his body heat better than any blanket. Only one thing hampered her joy.

She had less than seventy-two hours left with him.

Returning to Polgara was an unfortunate given. But there was no way to explain that to Ben without causing a vicious fight. How could she tell him that she was a Pleasure goddess and that she gave freely of her body? He wouldn't—couldn't—understand. And even if she did tell him, what good would come of it? Under the best of circumstances he'd be given access to Polgara, and they could see each other on occasion. But what kind of life would that be for him?

As she pondered their quandary, she looked above at the Christmas tree. A crystal angel hung from a branch just within reach. Something about it called out to her and she reached up, taking it into her unfettered hand.

Air left her body in a swift rush as a vision filled her mind. Ben, decorating a tree, surrounded by three children. Laughter rang out as the kids took turns asking their daddy to lift them high to put their favorite decorations on the tree. Then the littlest one, a young girl with her daddy's smile, handed Ben the angel ornament Lita held now, and said, "Daddy, tell us the story of the angel. How she saved you so you could be my daddy..."

Tears filled her eyes and the vision faded. She wanted to curse the Goddesses, to scream at the unfairness of it all. Her visions, while infrequent, were never wrong. Ben would have a family, he would find a woman who could love him, give him children, be with him forever. The fact that their hearts were linked must have been a mistake. Although she'd known she couldn't stay, and she wanted Ben to be happy, to be so clearly shown that the man she loved would find love with someone else...it was more than she could bear.

In his sleep, Ben murmured, "I love you, Lita." He kissed her cheek and squeezed her tightly.

A small glimmer of possibility flickered in her heart. Maybe she didn't have a choice about returning to Polgara, but at the very least, she and Ben deserved these next three days. She would have to give and take what she could, love a life's worth in that time.

Lita ran her free hand over Ben's back, memorizing the smooth feel of his flesh beneath her fingertips. He stirred, but did not awaken. She loved this man and nothing

would ever change that. If all she had was three days, then she'd give him her everything in that time. No regrets.

Chapter Seven

“Shopping? But I thought men didn’t like to go shopping?” Lita asked on Christmas Eve morning.

Ben grinned at her, looking just like a little kid. It was a sad reminder of the children he would have after she was gone. She brushed those thoughts away. Today was her last day with him and there was no room for painful thoughts when every second had to count.

Ben had told her he wanted to give her a Christmas to remember. Two days with him had already sped by much too quickly. It seemed the more Lita tried to hold onto her time with him, the faster the seconds slipped through her fingers.

They’d spent a day lazily learning each other’s bodies all over again. Touching, tasting, loving. In between the lovemaking, they talked about their year apart, the changes in their lives. But Lita couldn’t bring herself to tell Ben that she’d be leaving him on Christmas. Guilt gnawed at her gut, but she didn’t know how to start.

They’d visited the Mathers’ that first night and picked up her belongings, then Ben had taken her to his favorite café. The angels hanging in the window told them they were in the right place.

The next day they’d gone to one of Ben’s favorite escapes from the city, making snow angels, tobogganing, and having a snowball fight that escalated into a quickie in the snow. It was one of the best days of her life.

And today they were going shopping. Grinning from ear to ear, Ben wrapped his arm around her, leading her toward the door. “It’s a family tradition. Gail and I wait until the last minute to get our Christmas shopping done, then we run around frantically trying to find the perfect gift. Let’s go. This’ll be fun.”

Christmas music played over the speakers as employees in Santa hats rang up the season’s final purchases. Hand in hand, Ben and Lita walked through the crowded stores, laughing at the last minute gift ideas each store was offering. They picked out a gorgeous hand-knit sweater for Gail and the newest books by all of her favorite authors. Ben bought a singing Christmas cactus and an ugly reindeer sweater for himself—another tradition he promised her, to buy things he could laugh about the rest of the year.

“So we’ll meet back here in an hour, okay?”

Lita glanced up from the bin of Christmas ornaments she was digging through. “What? Where are you going?”

A sparkle in his eyes, Ben cupped his hands around her ass and yanked her against his body. "I can't shop for you if you're with me." He winked, dropped a kiss on her forehead and stepped away. "One hour."

"One hour. Okay. I'll be here." Lita watched Ben walk away. One hour seemed like forever when all they had was half a day left together.

She wandered up and down the aisles, trying to find something she could get for Ben while cursing herself for not telling him she was leaving. Just when was she going to break it to him? Five minutes to midnight when she grabbed her belongings, kissed him goodbye, told him it had been fun and walked out the door and back to Polgara?

Suddenly, a strong hand clamped over her mouth and an arm swept around her waist, sweeping her off her feet and dragging her into an empty storage room. Fear rocketed through her body. She fought against her assailant, biting down on his hand, screaming silently in rage.

A smooth golden voice purred into her ear. "Dammit, Lita. Shhh. It's me, Ty." He lowered her to the ground and she spun around to meet his eyes.

"Tynan? What are you doing here?" The question was barely out of her mouth when realization struck her. He was a Shadow Tracker. There was only one reason he'd seek her out. She scrambled backward away from him until she hit a wall. "No. I won't let you take me back. Not now. I still have twelve hours!"

Tynan stalked toward her and Lita crossed her arms, staring belligerently into his penetrating gray-green gaze. "I said no."

His long silver-streaked black hair fell wildly around his shoulders as he shook his head and gave her a wolfish grin. "Take it easy. I'm not here to take you back, Lita-love. Tresca asked me to warn you."

"Tresca? But how? And why? Warn me about what?"

Tilting his head to the side, he looked at her curiously, a frown creasing his brow. "I spent a session with Tresca yesterday. There's big gossip going on that you broke some pretty serious rules. Hundreds of newspapers around this dimension are running a story about a healing angel and the man who loves her. Reporters are researching your past. And you know what that means—too many questions are coming up without any shred of an answer."

Cold fear shot down Lita's spine as she slumped to the floor. She swallowed hard, trying to speak past the lump in her throat. "The Controllers are going to erase my memories, aren't they?"

Ty knelt down next to her, caressing her face, sorrow reflecting from his eyes. "Yes."

* * * * *

The diamond ring was perfect. Ben had looked in all three cases, but as soon as he'd seen this one, he'd known it was the one for Lita. A glistening solitaire with a baguette on either side. Simple but beautiful.

He completed the transaction and put the velvet box in his pocket. Tonight he would propose to her under the Christmas tree then convince her to marry him immediately. Next week. Tomorrow. The sooner the better.

But then sudden fear gripped his entire being. Lita was in trouble. Letting instinct guide him, he bolted to the back of the store.

Crashing through a door, he saw Lita in the arms of a long-haired man. *Bastard!* She wasn't fighting and didn't seem afraid any longer, but she was clearly shaken. The man glanced back at him before giving Lita a pointed look and taking off through the depths of the storage room.

Ben rushed to her and she looked up at him, her eyes weary...defeated. Whatever that bastard did to her, he swore, he'd... His thought was left unfinished as she wrapped her arms around him, resting her head on his shoulder. "What was that all about? What's going on? Angel? Are you okay?"

"Ben. I don't know how to tell you, but I know I have to." She spoke so softly he could barely hear her words. "Let's just go home...and talk. I don't ever want to be away from you. I love you too much for that to happen."

His heart did flip-flops in his chest. Was she going to leave him again? His worst fear realized twice in his life? "I love you, too, Lita."

The cab ride home was spent in silence but his thoughts whizzed loudly around in his head. From thinking everything was somehow going to be okay all the way to how stupid could a man possibly be to allow himself to be strung along like this. Lita just buried herself as close to him as possible. His heart went out to her, but he feared what she had to tell him would only hurt more than her silence.

When they finally set foot in his living room, it was everything he could do to keep himself from holding her. He needed the distance for clarity, otherwise he'd lose himself in her again.

They sat on the couch and she stared at her hands, as though afraid to speak. He asked her with his eyes and through their link to just talk to him, promising that no matter what she said, he would hear her out. But that wasn't an easy promise to make, especially with so much on uncertain ground. With each moment, he'd been simmering and the anger was getting harder to hold at bay.

Then she spoke. "I've got nothing else to lose."

"What?" He tried to keep the anger from his voice, but he couldn't completely remove the harsh edge. He softened and took a deep breath. "Angel, I just need to know what the hell is going on?"

Lita took a shaky breath, then looked up into his eyes. "I'm not an angel, but I'm not a human either. I'm from a different dimension. A place called Polgara. The night

we met was my first night on this dimension. I was given one year here, and tonight my year's up."

Stunned speechless, he backed away from her, his jaw agape. What the hell was she saying? Different dimensions? Although that would explain her curiosities about everything, her simple joy in things he took for granted. But no, that was absurd. Maybe she was just as lost as he had been when she'd found him.

But an inkling of belief wove its way through him. He *knew* she was telling the truth. Hell, he'd known from the moment he first saw her that she was different. And what they shared was different. He'd accepted it because he wanted it, but the connection they shared, that wasn't normal either. But it was *right*. Or at least it had been...

"I wasn't supposed to fall in love. Ben, where I'm from, the emotion of love doesn't exist to the depth it exists here. I'm a Pleasure goddess. I give of my body, but not of my heart or soul." She paused as though flailing through what she was telling him.

Did I fall in love with some kind of weird inter-dimensional prostitute? Each word falling from her lips was another blow to his heart.

Lita locked her gaze with his. It was obvious she was trying to remain strong, but her lower lip had begun to tremble. "The moment I saw you everything changed. You're my heart link. That connection that brought us together...Polgarans don't get that type of connection. But we have it! I know you feel it. Please tell me you feel it." A few tears streamed down her face, her eyes begging him to admit aloud that he indeed understood.

But he just couldn't bear to hold her gaze. He looked down and turned away. "I don't know what to make of any of this. You've made claims that should be impossible and to top it off, you were going to leave me without saying anything. Just like before?" Hurtful words were brewing in his thoughts, but he couldn't find it within himself to start flinging them at her. She'd know how he felt. She would feel it through their...heart link...as she called that gnawing magnetic unexplainable connection which was the source of his greatest joys and harshest sorrows.

As she spoke, he looked back into her violet eyes. "No, Ben! I just didn't know how to tell you. I didn't want to fight. I ran away from you that first night because I was afraid, but it wasn't fear for what I felt for you. I couldn't explain how I healed you. And I'm not supposed to tell anyone about who I am or where I'm from. But I screwed up. The reporters the other night, they spread our picture, our story over newspapers everywhere. The High Controllers on Polgara saw it. They're going to punish me for my indiscretion. Ben, they're going to wipe my memory of my entire time here." At that, her tears finally broke. "They're going to make me forget you."

He pushed back across the couch and pulled her onto his lap, wrapping her in his arms. Her anguish through their link as strong as the betrayal he was feeling. "Lita, I..." *just don't know what to say. I'm so confused. So hurt. So in love with you. But I can never have more than a few short days and nights with you. How cruel can my life get?*

"I'm so sorry, Ben. I didn't know this would happen if I came here. I just wanted to see what human life was like. I didn't want to get involved or attached or...I never wanted to hurt you." She buried her head against his chest.

"When must you leave, Angel?" He soothed her with gentle caresses.

"I am supposed to return to Polgara just after midnight, but I'm not going to. I can't. I need to be with you."

"Then don't go to them. Stay here with me." He'd been afraid to speak those words before, afraid she'd leave him if he forced it, but now, there were no holds barred. "Lita, stay with me forever if you can. Don't go to them."

"They'll find me. The man who came to me today, he's a tracker. He came to warn me of what is to happen. If I don't return, they'll send more trackers after me. There's no escape."

"But you said they'll just wipe away your memories of me, right? We can start over, Lita. If we really are linked, no one can separate us. No one. I don't care how strong. No one. I won't allow anyone to take you away from me again. Angel, you are mine."

She lifted her face to his and kissed him, needing him as close to her as possible. "Ben, I am yours."

For hours, they sat in silence, kissing, touching, watching the clock tick the minutes by. Night came, and they sat in the dark, not moving, just holding each other.

Near midnight, Lita shifted in his arms, and he felt something in his pocket press against his hip. The ring. He'd been so caught up in the maelstrom, the gift had slipped his mind.

He removed the box from his pants, and slipped the ring into his hand before dropping the box to the floor. "Angel, love. I need to ask you something."

Lifting her head from his chest, she gifted him with a small smile. "Anything."

"Marry me?" Before she could respond, he placed the ring on her finger then brought his mouth to hers. Her answer was in her kiss, and the urgency between them. In a mad rush, they removed their clothing and Lita lowered herself onto his cock. The loving was simple. No words were necessary. They were together, nothing else mattered.

Midnight struck and they didn't move, completely meshed with each other.

Then his angel was swept away from him. He tried to hold on to her, but everything in his world faded to empty blackness.

Chapter Eight

The tall, majestically engraved doors opened, affording Lita entrance into the High Chamber. She walked down the long stretch of open space, toward the tables where the Controllers presided, her back straight, head held high. Her hands were clenched into fists at her side, the engagement ring Ben had given her turned inward so she could feel the diamond pressing into her hand. *Never forget...never forget...never forget...*

Lita stepped onto the interrogation platform, automatically shifting into her stance of obeisance as the Herald announced her presence. She didn't even listen to his words. She knew why she was there.

Two weeks had trudged by since the night Polgaran security had ripped her from Ben's arms. She'd spent that time in the solitary loneliness of her room, suffering a range of human emotions, grief, pain, disbelief, love.

Now she was angry and scared. She couldn't fathom not having any memories of Ben. It was bad enough that she'd lost him, but to lose her memories, too...

Imorga's voice rang out in the chamber. "By my lead, Lita, you may naturalize." Lita lifted her head at the command to see Imorga regarding her...curiously? No, that couldn't be right. The look disappeared as Imorga continued. "You may speak to these offenses."

Lita squeezed her fist, feeling the sharp sting of the diamond digging into her palm. *Never forget...never forget...never forget...* "I am aware of the consequences of my actions. Not only did I bring undue attention upon myself, compromising Polgara and its entire people, I also did not willingly return at the end of my designated time. I did all of this with the complete knowledge of the punishment due me upon my return. But with your permission, before you remove my memories, may I tell you a story?"

Imorga nodded her head thoughtfully. "It would please me to hear tell of your experiences."

Trembling both inside and out, Lita met Imorga's eyes and began to speak. "I spent a year among humans, embracing their emotions. I witnessed the give and take of humanity, saw the best and worst that their world had to offer. That world became a home to me, accepting me, teaching me.

"And I fell in love. Deeply, passionately, beyond anything I'd ever imagined love. Ben is my heart link. I can feel him, a part of me even now, no matter how far away he may be. I know he loves me, that he misses me, that he needs me, just as much as I do him. Not even erasing my memories will change that. When you're done, I may not remember his name, or his voice..." Lita choked on a sob but forced herself to continue. "But the connection between us will always be there. I will always love him, even if I don't know who *he* is."

The Controllers were silent in their regard. Lita wiped the tears from her cheeks and returned their stares. *Never forget...never forget...never forget...*

Imorga got to her feet, and walked down the few stairs from the dais toward an open doorway. "Come, Lita. It is time."

Lita wanted to protest, but knew it would be to no avail. She'd said her piece, there was nothing left for her to do but follow Imorga out of the chamber and accept the punishment she had earned for falling in love. Anguish slowed the blood running through her veins until she felt as though she were moving in slow motion. They entered a hallway, lush carpets blanketing the floors, engravings and murals covering the walls. They walked in silence, moving through a maze of hallways.

After several minutes, Imorga opened a door and stepped inside. Lita squeezed her hand around her engagement ring again and took a deep breath. *Never forget...never forget...never forget...*

She entered the room, then froze, her eyes widening, her whole world going topsy-turvy all over again. Lita turned in a circle, soaking it all in. Paintings covered the walls of the room, in brilliant, vibrant color. Her life with Ben. Their first night together in the bed at Gail's place, their bodies awash in moonlight. Under the Christmas tree. Bathing together. Playing in the snow. Each scene meshing with the next, a timeline of love.

"God, Angel, I missed you."

Was that really his voice? Lita turned to the sound, afraid to believe it could be possible, until Ben stepped into the room behind her.

Then she was in his arms, not ready to question how or why, just so thankful he was there. Needing to remember his smell, his touch, and the way only he could make her feel just by being near him.

His warm mouth lowered over hers. The kiss began soft and tender, a gentle caress of lips, a whisper of breath shared between them. But an urgency to make up for the last two weeks filled her and she nibbled on his lips then pressed her tongue deep into the sweet recesses of his mouth. He groaned and pulled her closer, the kiss becoming a duel of desire.

Their heart link shimmered in stunning glory, unwilling to be denied, almost blinding in its brilliance. Lita felt the warm glow of Ben's love heating her to her core, filling her up inside. She returned the love tenfold, and knew he felt it, too.

A gentle cough was the only reminder that they were not alone in the room. They separated their mouths but not their bodies, turning ever so slightly toward Imorga.

"Ben is an admirable artist, Lita. His use of light and color to bring his subject's emotions to life is stunning. Yet even more admirable is his devotion to you. That was made very clear over the last two weeks. I instructed him to tell me his side of the story. He looked around the High Chamber and requested permission to paint the story instead. An unusual request. But one which followed your initial unusual request. My permission was therefore granted and much deservedly, I might add."

Ben nodded to Imorga then, meeting Lita's gaze, winked and dropped a kiss on her forehead. Smiling, she turned back to Imorga, the questions beginning to flow from her lips. "What is to happen? What—"

"Very few things are more powerful than Polgaran law, Lita. You see, not even High Controllers can deny a bond between two heart links. For Polgarans that connection is a rare jewel, an anomaly not to be ignored. But your..." Imorga pursed her lips as though she tasted something sour, "indiscretions on the human level caused us great concern. You, I have little fear, will commit no further such indiscretions, however we in turn, questioned whether Ben could be trusted with our secret. As I gaze upon this room once more, I am quite pleased to inform both of you that our concerns have been allayed—his allegiances lie within the best of intentions. I trust he will do nothing to harm you or the Polgaran people. Lita, although Polgaran by birth, you are free to live life with your heart link. You must continue to keep Polgara a deep secret within your soul, and live as a human, again and forever."

Tendrils of joy crept from her heart, filling her body, until only one tiny little bit of fear remained. "I have only one question, High Controller Imorga. I had a vision, of Ben with children of his own. My visions have never proven wrong, but Polgaran's can't..." Her question trailed off as a grin grew wide across Imorga's face. It was the first time Lita had seen her smile, and it made her beautiful and radiant and not someone to be feared.

"Lita, the moment you met Ben, the rules changed. A Polgaran goddess cannot be impregnated by anyone *but* her heart link. I do believe the family you envisioned has already begun." Imorga's eyes sparkled, as she lowered her head knowingly toward Lita's stomach. Then her expression became serious once again. "Lita, of the Damescine sect, high Platine quadrant, you are hereby relieved of your duties as Pleasurer and are free to live the life which fate has gifted you for it is a rare experience indeed."

Imorga turned and left the room, leaving Ben and Lita alone.

Lita turned to Ben as he lifted her hand. He twisted the ring such that the diamond was no longer clenched within her fist. Then, he kissed her palm as though trying to remove the indentations etched from the diamond. His eyes locked hot on hers. "I love you, Angel. Marry me?"

Laughter bubbled up inside, the joy filling her completely. "Yes, Ben. Yes. I want to be Mrs. Lita Stanton."

Sweet and tenderly, his hands lowered to her belly. His eyes glowed with wonder. "A baby? Is that what she meant, Angel? Are we really going to have a baby?"

The heart link between them pulsed even stronger, and Lita focused on it, soaking in all the love between them. Then she looked closer at their heart link, and smiled at the tangential lines forming there. New souls finding life from their love. She laced her fingers with his and looked up into his smiling eyes. "Yes, Ben. I do believe some day, we're going to have five."

About the author:

Sometimes two people meet, become good friends, and share a lot in common. When you're really lucky, you meet someone who understands you, who thinks like you, can finish your sentences and together, the both of you can create whole new worlds.

Ashleigh Raine is the pen name for two best friends, Jennifer and Lisa, who share a passion for strong alpha males that succumb to the women they fall in love with. These two met in junior high where they were band geeks (but they swear they really were cool...they were percussionists after all!) But love of the arts didn't end with band. By high school, the two had a small following of fans for their stories and the characters they created...characters that would become the inspiration for their Talisman Bay series. They want to thank those fans for their continued support and interest. They couldn't have done it without them!

Both Lisa and Jennifer are married to their soul mates, who are the best support and inspiration. As Ashleigh Raine, this duo has many stories to tell, as their collective mind never stops creating fantasies that must be written down. They write larger than life stories, with adventures, hot sex, peril, hot sex, mystery, and more hot sex...but most assuredly they have a happy ending, usually with hot sex. Watch for many titles coming soon from this duo who are glad to have found their niche in writing erotic romances.

Ashleigh welcomes mail from readers. You can write to her c/o Ellora's Cave Publishing at P.O. Box 787, Hudson, Ohio 44236-0787.

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