

One

August 2009

Divine saw her latest customer out, surprised to note that there was no one outside her door waiting for a reading. It was the first time that day that there was no line outside her RV. A glance at her watch explained why—it was dinnertime. That was the only time she ever had a lull in customers. Right now the food stalls would have ridiculously long line as everyone at the fairgrounds converged on them in search of greasy treats to power the rest of the evening's rides and fun. Which meant she had a few minutes to catch her breath and relax a bit.

She'd barely had the thought when she spotted a couple of women moving purposefully toward her trailer. After a brief hesitation, Divine quickly flipped the "Back in five minutes!" sign, let her screen door slide closed, and descended the few steps to the ground. Ignoring the fact that the women were looking alarmed

and rushing forward, she slipped around the side of her RV. Most customers would have stopped then, sagged with disappointment, and waited, probably impatiently, but waited just the same, so Divine was a little surprised when her arm was grabbed from behind. She was more surprised, however, by the strength in the hand that latched on to her . . . until she turned and noted that it wasn't one of the women at all, but a man.

A couple inches taller than she, dark-haired and good-looking, he was built like a linebacker. He was also looming over her, deliberately invading her space in a threatening manner as he growled, "What the hell did you say to my wife?"

Divine rolled her eyes with exasperation, wondering how she was supposed to know since she didn't know who his wife was. She was about to say as much, but then realized that there was something familiar about the man and quickly dipped into his thoughts. A heart-beat later she was relaxing.

"Allen Paulson," she murmured his name, getting an almost childish satisfaction when his eyes widened incredulously.

"How do you—?"

"I told your wife that you were having an affair with your buxom, blond, twenty-year-old secretary, Tiffany," Divine interrupted sharply, silencing him at once. "I told her that this Tiffany was pushing for marriage and that you, not wanting to lose her, but unwilling to give up your wife's money, preferred widowhood to divorce. I told her about your plans to bring about that widowhood on your upcoming vacation. I believe it was

either her drowning or suffering a fall while camping in Yosemite National Park?” She tilted her head. “As I recall, that trip was scheduled for this week, wasn’t it?”

When his mouth dropped open and his hold on her arm eased, Divine added, “I’m guessing by the fact that you’re here rather than in Yosemite, that she listened to my advice to make an appointment with her lawyer the next morning to change her will as well as remove you as the beneficiary on her life insurance.”

His hand dropped away, falling limply by his side.

“No doubt she also listened to my advice and hired a private detective. I gather she sent him to get photographic proof of your infidelity at that cheap little motel you like to take your secretary to every day at lunchtime?” She slipped into his thoughts briefly, read the answer in the chaos there, and smiled with satisfaction. Not only had the wife done that, she’d then taken the proof straight to a good divorce lawyer. The woman was now safe and on her way to being single again. After that, though, the woman had told her dear hubby that the fortune-teller at the carnival was the one who had given her the heads-up and put her on this path and it had been the best twenty bucks she’d ever spent. Which was why Divine now had an irate and soon-to-be divorced and destitute husband on her hands.

Divine waited, braced for the man’s anger. But instead of the explosive rage she expected, he asked in a small, frightened voice, “How did you know? No one knew. I didn’t tell anyone what I planned. Not even Tiffany.”

“Did you even bother to read the sign when you

walked your wife to my trailer that day two weeks ago in Pahrump?” she asked with amusement, and then reminded him, “Madame Divine. Let her do a reading and define your future,” she reminded him.

“Yeah, but that’s just . . . It’s a scam,” he protested. “You’re a carnie. You just scam people out of their money for a laugh.”

“Yes, of course,” Divine agreed coldly, and then tilted her head. “So why aren’t you laughing?”

Allen Paulson flinched as if she’d struck him, and then his awe and dismay gave way to the rage she’d expected earlier. Divine saw it roll over him, knew he was about to blow his top without the need to read him, but slipped into his thoughts anyway. It was like cutting through soft, half-melted butter with a ceramic knife. The man was so angry his thoughts were wide open. Divine wasn’t terribly surprised to read that he’d brought a gun with him and planned to use it. She waited until he’d pulled the weapon from inside his jacket and raised it, though, before reacting. In fact, she let him get so far as to put his finger on the trigger before snapping her hand out, latching on to his throat, and lifting him off the ground. She then whirled and slammed him against her RV.

When the gun fell from his hand and he moaned in pain, she released him. The man fell like a rag doll. He landed on his ass with his legs splayed, a dazed expression on his face, and Divine immediately dropped to straddle his lap. Gravel ground painfully into her knees, but she ignored that, caught him by the hair at

the nape of his neck, pulled his head to the side, and sank her fangs into his throat.

A little shiver of pleasure slid through Divine as thick warm blood began to gush from the wound, was collected by her teeth and passed into her body. It gave her an immediate rush as the nanos in her body swarmed, eager to collect this new supply of nourishment. The man had jerked in surprise when her teeth pierced his skin, and he'd raised his hands to try to push her off, but he never actually got around to exerting any pressure. Instead, he froze briefly, his mind overwhelmed as hers automatically began to transmit her own pleasure to him. In the next moment, he was moaning and tugging at her instead, pulling her closer with one hand, clasping her head with the other, and murmuring encouragingly, "Oh yeah, baby. Please."

He was also arching his body under her, rubbing a sudden hardness against her. Divine usually didn't cause pain in her victims, but this one deserved it. She also wasn't terribly eager to let a man who had planned to murder his own wife dry hump her there on the carnival grounds, so she deliberately withdrew the pleasure that she was experiencing and had unintentionally shared. But she also slipped into his mind to control his reaction to prevent him from screaming out in horror and pain as his mind cleared and he became aware of what was happening.

Divine was always careful not to kill her hosts. Why kill the cow that gave the milk? Besides, killing was wrong, no matter how despicable the person was, so

while she drank more than she normally would have, she pulled back and freed him at the point when he was weak and woozy, but long before the man could come close to dying.

Smiling coldly at his horrified expression, Divine stood, lifting him as she went. Once they were both upright, she released him, leaving him to lean weakly against the RV rather than have to touch him anymore.

“Listen carefully, Allen Paulson,” she said grimly. “You will not hurt your wife, or ever again consider harming or killing anyone for profit or any other reason. If you do, I’ll find out, and then I’ll find you . . .” She raised her hand to run one finger lightly over the wound on his neck. “And then I will finish this meal, cut your head off, and leave your cold dead body somewhere no one will ever find you. Do we understand each other?”

Allen Paulson nodded weakly. The man’s face was as white as his T-shirt, his eyes almost sunken with horror, and he was sliding slowly along her RV, obviously eager to escape, but afraid to try and be stopped. Divine scowled. “And if you tell anyone about this, *about me*,” she emphasized, “I’ll do worse.”

He began shaking his head frantically and whispered, “I won’t. I swear.”

She narrowed her eyes, and then her nose wrinkled as the acrid scent of urine wafted up between them. Glancing down, she saw the wet spot growing on the front of his trousers and stepped back with disgust. “Get out of here before I change *my* mind and wipe *yours*.”

Allen Paulson didn’t have a clue what she meant by

that—she could see it in his expression—but he didn't stick around to ask. He simply nodded wildly and sidled along the RV for a couple feet before finding the courage to turn his back to her and run.

“You should have wiped his mind.”

Divine stiffened at those words from behind her, and then turned slowly. She peered at the tall, fair-haired man who had spoken. He was a greenie, an unskilled laborer and supposedly a local who had been hired to help out at the carnival while they were in town. The name he went by was Marco. Divine knew this second-hand, because while she was normally in on the hiring process, using her “special skills” to help Bob and Madge Hoskins, who owned and ran Hoskins Amusements, this time she hadn't been here. Family issues had kept her away and the hiring had been done by the time she'd caught up to the carnival. Had she been here to help weed out the troublemakers in the hiring process as she usually did, she never would have allowed Bob and Madge to hire the man. One, she couldn't read him, and that was usually a sign of insanity in a mortal. This led into the second reason she wouldn't have hired him; the man, like herself, was an immortal. She'd sensed that about him quite quickly. Divine wasn't sure how she'd known. She didn't run into a lot of immortals. In fact, she'd arranged her life so that she wouldn't. But there had been a frisson of awareness as she'd first passed him on returning to the carnival just before noon that day, as if the nanos in her body recognized and sent signals to those in his. She'd been avoiding him ever since.

But that hadn't stopped her from finding out all she could about him. Not that there had been much to learn. He went by Marco, last name Smith, of all things. The women all thought he was a hunk. The men thought he was practically a god because he was strong and could do the work of four men, and Bob and Madge were hoping he'd not just help out through their stay in this town, but travel with them to the next and the next and so on. For herself, Divine was wary. She had avoided other immortals for a reason and had been doing so for a very long time. She didn't like having one around. It made her anxious and she disliked feeling anxious.

"Don't you have something to do?" she asked, moving past the man and toward the back of her RV. The sign she'd turned had said back in five minutes and that time was up. Besides, she'd snacked on Allen Paulson and felt better for it. Break time was over.

"You should have wiped his mind," Marco repeated, falling into step with her.

"He'll keep his mouth shut," Divine muttered, annoyed, mostly because she knew he was right. The truth was she hadn't wiped Allen Paulson's mind because it was slimy, and she hadn't wanted to have to spend any more time inside his mind than necessary. Besides, he deserved to go through life terrified that she might someday revisit him should he set a foot wrong.

"And if he doesn't keep his mouth shut?" Marco asked as they neared the end of her RV. "What if he goes to the police?"

"If he goes to the police, *and* if they don't immediately lock him up as crazy but instead come to speak to

me . . .” She shrugged. “I’ll wipe his mind, the officer’s mind, and leave this carnival for another.”

“Is that how you landed at Hoskins Carnival?” Marco asked as they rounded the end of the vehicle. “You didn’t wipe someone you should have and had to move on?”

Divine turned on him sharply, an angry retort on her lips, but just as quickly caught back the words that wanted to spill out and merely said with forced calm, “You’re an inquisitive fellow, Marco. It’s not healthy around here. Carnies mind their own business. I suggest you do the same.”

Turning away from him, she smiled at the two women who were waiting in front of her door. Others had joined them. In fact, Divine now had a line-up of half a dozen people and it was growing by the minute, but she reserved her smile for the first two only and said, “Which of you would like to go first? Or shall I take you together?”

“Oh, me first,” one of the women said eagerly. “This was my idea.”

Divine nodded and led the woman inside, leaving Marco and all thought of him out on her stoop.

“Here, mister.”

Marcus tore his gaze from the door Madame Divine had just ushered her client through and peered down at the small boy tugging at the top of his pant leg and holding out a half-eaten ball of cotton candy on a cardboard cone.

“Here,” the boy repeated, holding it a little higher. “I don’t feel good. You can have the rest.”

Marcus arched an eyebrow, but took the cotton candy. He suspected the boy didn't feel good because he was stuffed full of cotton candy, something drenched in mustard, powdered elephant ears, and—he considered the last stain on the boy's shirt and then decided it had to be—ice cream. The kid was a walking menu of everything he'd eaten that day. At least, Marcus hoped it was all the kid had eaten that day. Otherwise he'd be wondering if Dante and Tomasso hadn't fathered the little tyke. They were the only two people he knew, mortal or immortal, who could have eaten like that as a boy.

"Danny! What are you doing? Get over here and leave that man alone."

Marcus glanced at the woman rushing toward them from the midway and offered a reassuring smile even as he slipped into her thoughts to ease her mind that he wasn't a child molester and nothing untoward was happening. By the time she reached them, she'd slowed to a fast walk, and was smiling in a relaxed manner.

"I hope he wasn't bothering you?" she said apologetically as she took the boy's hand.

"Not at all," Marcus assured her.

The young mother smiled again and then nodded and turned away with the boy, saying, "Come on, honey. Your daddy is waiting with your sister in the Ferris wheel line. They'll be worried."

Marcus watched them go and then turned his gaze back to Madame Divine's RV. The door was closed now as were the blinds. He couldn't see the woman anymore, except in his mind's eye, and he was definitely seeing her there. Madame Divine was more than memorable

in her Gypsy getup. A white peasant blouse, worn off the shoulders, a crimson underskirt, a bright teal scarf skirt, an orange sash tied at the waist with gold chains hanging from it and tinkling merrily, a wide leather belt, and a crimson scarf around her head. Gold hoops had dangled from her ears, a gold chain hung around her neck, several gold bracelets dangled from her wrist, and knee-high black leather boots with stiletto heels strapped up the front of her legs had finished the outfit.

The woman looked damned sexy in the getup, so sexy in fact that when she'd straddled the would-be wife killer, Marcus had wanted to pull her off the man and onto his own lap. He'd been rather startled by that urge. Marcus hadn't been interested in women for a while. Okay, for a couple millennia. Still, he hadn't come across a woman like Madame Divine in quite a while either. The woman was walking sex in her getup, and his body was waking up and responding to it.

Obviously he had a Gypsy fetish, Marcus thought wryly. It made as much sense as anything else at the moment. Certainly more sense than his own life presently did. It appeared at the ripe old age of 2,548 he was having a midlife crisis of sorts. That was the only explanation for how he found himself doing a favor for Lucian Argeneau.

Marcus smiled wryly at the thought. Lucian Argeneau was not only the head of the powerful Argeneau clan, but also oversaw the Rogue Hunters and led the North American Immortal Council. Rogue Hunters were the immortal police force; they hunted down rogue immortals to be presented to the Immortal Coun-

cil, who then passed judgment on them and sentenced them to whatever punishment they saw fit, often death.

As the head of those two organizations, Lucian could arguably be the most powerful immortal in North America. It was hard to imagine him needing anyone's help. But he did. He was searching for a family member, his niece Basha Argeneau, who had been thought to be dead for millennia, but who might now be alive after all . . . and who he feared had gone rogue.

Which was how Marcus had come to find himself at the carnival, eyeballing the trailer of a woman he couldn't read and found incredibly sexy. Not that his not being able to read her bothered him. If this was Basha Argeneau, she was even older than he was, and younger immortals usually couldn't read immortals older than themselves. It wasn't like any of the other signs of having met a life mate were cropping up, like renewed interest in food and such. Thank God, because if she *had* been a possible life mate and *was* Basha Argeneau . . . well, that would have been a doomed relationship from the start. Because Basha Argeneau was considered rogue . . . and rogues were executed. The last thing he needed at this point in his life was a rogue life mate.

"Hey! Marco! Are you going to stand around stuffing your face all night or help me with the pogo stall?"

Marcus glanced around with surprise to find Kevin Morrow walking toward him. The twenty-year-old carnie was tall and stick-thin, his face a collection of freckles so thick that from a distance it looked like a tan. Up close though you saw that his face was defi-

nitely freckled, and it was also presently scrunched up with displeasure, reminding Marcus that he was only supposed to take a fifteen-minute break from helping to man the food stall.

“I was—”

“Stuffing your face,” the young carnie interrupted dryly and then turned away, gesturing for him to follow. “Come on. If you’re hungry you can have a corn dog while you work. It’s probably better for you than that sugary fluff anyway.”

Marcus blinked and glanced down at the cone with the half-eaten cotton candy the boy had given him several minutes ago. Or what had been half-eaten cotton candy. There was nothing left of the sweet treat now. Surely he hadn’t eaten it? He hadn’t eaten in more than a millennium. He didn’t remember eating it. But he did have a sweet taste in his mouth that was rather pleasant.

“Damn,” he muttered, tossing the cardboard cone into a garbage bin as he headed after Kevin. He’d eaten it. Couldn’t read Madame Divine, and was lusting after the woman. Oh, this wasn’t good.