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"He's too happy." Freya, goddess of love, stared into her all seeing mirror and studied the Phoenix who'd gotten away from her, Viking chieftain Alrik Gunn. He'd been one of her favorites. Stubborn. Vengeful. Deliciously handsome. But thanks to the mortal woman at his side, Calleigh McCarthy, he'd found a loophole in her system. The mortal woman had given one of the three changes meant to transform her life to Alrik. Changes he'd been charged to give to her.

Freya had yet to get over it.

Eros crossed his arms. "Happy is good. He deserves happy. Let him be."

She raised a brow at the original Phoenix. "Are you telling me what to do?"

Eros shook his blond curls. "Merely a suggestion."

She narrowed her gaze. "Valentine's Day is nearly upon us. Shouldn't you be out shooting your magic arrows into the lovelorn?"

"My job as Cupid has nothing to do with this." Eros frowned. "They're in love. Why does that bother you so much? You should be happy for them."

"They only think they're in love." She snorted indelicately and her attention went back to the mirror and the disgustingly happy couple pictured within. "They've been married a little over six months. They've had no trials, no tribulations, no obstacles. They don't know any better!"

"Don't you think they went through enough when they first met?"

"When a sword is made, the metal is hammered to make it stronger. If they are truly in love, a few trials won't weaken them." And if they weren't in love, a few trials might break them apart. She crossed her arms and tapped one finger against her upper arm. Maybe Alrik would beg to be taken back into her service.

"Whatever you're thinking, I don't like it," Eros said.

"You don't have to like it." She slanted her eyes at him. "You're just a demi-god, lover. Now go fetch me my wine. This sort of thing makes me thirsty."

* * *

Calleigh smiled at herself in the mirror as she added a petite pair of diamond hoops to her ears. Life was good. No, life was *great*. She'd lost seventeen pounds since reopening the dance studio and started teaching again. Her cat, Snickers, hadn't gifted her with any dead mouse parts lately. And what was that other thing? She laughed and twirled so her red dress spun out around her like a budding rose, thankful that *other thing* was downstairs where he couldn't see her giddiness.

She was married to the most amazing man, amazing because he adored her in a way no other man ever had, he'd given up so much just to be with her and he was, without question, the kind of man other women looked twice at, but he never looked back—if he even noticed them in the first place. He was far too loyal, not to mention anything that smelled like betrayal was on his taboo list. He'd been through that already with his first wife.

Fortunately, that marriage was well behind him. Eleven hundred years behind him. She spritzed a little perfume on her wrists, rubbed them together and smiled. What other woman could say she was spending Valentine's Day with a former Viking chieftain turned male model?

"By Odin's good eye, you're a winsome lass."

She jumped, unaware that he'd been standing in the doorway. "You scared me. You shouldn't..." Words left her at the sight of him. The charcoal suit and cranberry tie her fashion photographer uncle Seamus had helped Alrik pick out set off his glacier blue eyes

perfectly. His dark blond hair grazed his shirt's crisp white collar. "You look very, very nice." But then, Alrik looked good in just about everything. And nothing.

He plucked at the suit's lapel. "Your uncle said this was by a famous tailor. Armano? I don't know who the man is but he makes a nice suit. Not that I like wearing such binding things." His gaze swept her from head to toe and back up again. "I'm not sure I like you wearing such binding things either." A sinful light sparkled in his eyes. "Perhaps we should take these garments off and celebrate this day in bed."

"His name is Armani and we have a reservation." She walked toward him, enjoying the delicious shiver of being ogled like a sex object.

He met her halfway and pulled her into his arms. "I have no reservations about the wicked things I wish to do to you, wife."

She planted her hands on his firm chest, unable to stop smiling. "You're a bad man, Alrik Gunn." Going up on her toes, she kissed him. Hard to believe this man was hers for the kissing whenever she wanted. Which was a lot.

Arms wrapped around her, he pulled away just enough to feather kisses across her jaw and down her neck. "I know we have to go, but I would be content to stay here with you."

She sighed and answered without opening her eyes. "That is starting to seem like a really good idea."

The doorbell rang.

She broke the embrace. "I'm sure that's the limo." For their first Valentine's Day, she'd gone all out. She wanted the experience to be really special for Alrik, especially after everything he'd been through in his life.

He crooked his arm toward her. "I cannot wait to ride in one of those long vehicles."

His fascination with cars had taken off once he'd gotten over his initial fear of them. She hooked her hand over his arm and let him escort her downstairs. "Seamus uses this company all the time. He says they're great."

Alrik answered the door while she got their coats. For a February in Brooklyn, the weather wasn't too bad, but it was still chilly, plus some of the city streets were like wind tunnels. Alrik told the driver they'd be right out, then came back to help Calleigh with her coat.

She slipped one arm through as Snickers came tearing into the living room. "You behave while we're out, you hear me young man?"

Snickers skidded to a stop right before the beautiful black satin pumps she'd bought for this night. He got a funny look on his little cat face, bent over and barfed up a hair ball with a loud, "Gwack."

Calleigh backed up just in time to avoid ruining her shoes. "Snickers! That's gross." She groaned. "Great. I was hoping I could clean up some cat vomit before we left."

Alrik shrugged into his coat. "Why would you hope that? Wait, was that sarcasm?" She laughed. "Yep."

"Good," he said. "I am getting much better at modern language." He stepped over the barf. "I'll get some plastic towels."

"Paper," she called after him, smiling to herself. Yep, much better at the modern language.

Vomit removed, they made their way to the sleek black limo. The driver opened the door and Calleigh slid in first. Alrik joined her as she looked around. Champagne chilled in the ice bucket and a stunning bouquet of red roses nestled alongside it.

"Look." She pointed. "Seamus was right, this is a nice company."

Alrik reached for the roses and held them out to her. "Nay, these are from me. When you told me about getting this car for us, I asked your uncle what I might do to make it more special."

"What a sweet thing to do." She took the bouquet and lifted it to her nose, inhaling deeply. "They smell wonderful—ack! What's that?"

A bee zipped out of the flowers. She swatted at it. A second later, her hand began to burn. "It stung me."

Alrik snatched it in his palm and threw it to the carpet, crushing it with his shoe. "There should not be bees this time of year." He glanced skyward, then cupped Calleigh's hand between his. He plucked the stinger out, flicked it away and gently kissed the spot. "I do not like that you are hurt. Is it bad?"

"Not terrible," she lied. She didn't want him to feel responsible because of the flowers. "Why don't you open the champagne? A little bubbly might help take away the pain." She smiled weakly. Her hand was throbbing.

His eyebrows rose. "You said it was not terrible."

"It hurts a little."

He frowned. "Bee stings hurt. Do not lie to save my feelings." He kissed her hand once more before letting it go and reaching for the champagne bottle. He pulled it from the ice, then stared at it.

"Peel the foil off, then untwist the little wire cage and take it off. Then gently work the cork out with your thumbs." Poor Alrik. His years trapped in Valhalla had left him a little low on skills, but he was a quick study and Calleigh didn't care anyway. He was sweet and wonderful and all that mattered was that he was no longer enslaved to the horrid goddess of love. What a piece of work that woman was.

Calleigh had only run into her once, but from that experience and everything Alrik had told her, Calleigh had sussed out enough to know that she was nothing like most people might have imagined. She was no angelic creature dispensing love potions while surrounded by flowers and blue birds. Instead, she was a mercurial creature of whims and wayward passions. As Alrik had explained it, the goddess controlled many types of love. Love of money, love of power, love of self. For what the goddess had done to Alrik, and for other reasons best left in the past, Calleigh had no use for her.

The pop of the cork caught Calleigh's attention and she looked up.

The cork smacked her in the eye. "Ow!" She clamped her bee-stung hand over her face. "You have to watch where you point that thing."

"I pointed it away from you and toward the ceiling. I don't know how that happened, unless..." Alrik glanced at the ceiling briefly, then slipped the bottle back into the ice bucket. Stars danced in her vision. "It must have ricocheted. I know you didn't mean it."

Alrik growled. "Something is not right."

"Everything's fine. I'll be fine. Just a few mishaps. These things happen." She squeezed his hand with her good one. "Pour us some champagne and let's have a toast."

He did as she asked and handed her a flute, filling hers then one for himself before returning the bottle to the bucket.

She lifted her flute. "Here's to our first Valentine's Day, the first of many."

He raised his glass to hers. "I love you, Calleigh lass, no matter what."

She clicked her glass against his. He had such a funny way of saying things sometimes. "I love you too."

He pulled her close to his side, his arm draped around her shoulders and they rode in companionable silence as the limo swept them over the Brooklyn Bridge and into the city. The building lights sparkled as they zipped past and Calleigh forgot the injuries to her hand and face. Tonight was going to be great.

No matter what.

Alrik rested his head against Calleigh's, content to just sit beside her and breathe her in. She meant the world to him and he hoped that everything that had happened was just ill-timed coincidence and not Freya up to her old tricks and trying to ruin their evening. The goddess had no reason to interfere. He no longer worked for her, thanks to the fair lass tucked against his side. He kissed the top of Calleigh's head, her curls tickling his nose.

The vehicle jolted over a bump and as both glasses of champagne splashed onto Calleigh a loud bang echoed through the interior.

"Oh no, my dress!" She brushed at the liquid but the fabric was already wet. "What else is going to happen tonight?"

The answer to that question worried him, too. The vehicle slowed and came to a stop. The partition between them and the driver whirred down and the driver turned to look at them.

"Sorry, folks, I think we have a flat."

"A flat what?" Alrik asked.

The driver gave him an odd look. "Tire. I swear I didn't see anything in the road, but we definitely hit something. Don't worry, I'll have it fixed in a minute." He put the partition back up and got out.

A few moments after the driver opened the trunk he knocked on the car door. Calleigh put the window down.

"Folks, I apologize, but the spare is flat too." He shrugged. "Normally, I could radio for another car, but on Valentine's night, we're booked. The best I can do is hail you a cab. I'm really sorry."

"Unbelievable," Calleigh muttered.

"Are we close to the restaurant?" Getting into another vehicle might not be a good idea. What would Freya do next? Cause them to crash?

"We're not too far. Just a few blocks. You'll be there in plenty of time for your reservation."

Alrik held his hand up. "We'll walk." He looked at Calleigh. "If that is all right with you?"

"Fine with me. Getting out of the car sounds like a great idea."

"If that's what you folks want, I'll let the company know. I'm sure they'll reimburse you." He opened the door for them.

Calleigh set her glass down and reached for her flowers, scooping them into her arms.

Alrik held onto her, keeping her from getting out. "Do you wish to go home instead?" "No, let's go have a nice dinner." She winked. "Maybe I'll eat dessert first." He smiled back. "That is exactly what we will do."

She slid out and he behind her, then he offered her his arm and they strolled toward the restaurant. Alrik didn't want to say anything about Freya being behind the evening's mishaps. Calleigh seemed content to believe it was coincidence. Better that than thinking the goddess of love was out to get you.

Other couples walked past, holding hands or arm in arm just like him and Calleigh. So many other couples and yet Freya was focused on them.

"It's a beautiful night, isn't it?" She hugged his arm tight. "You can even see a few stars."

He pushed away the unpleasant thoughts. Tonight was about Calleigh and making her happy. Nothing else mattered. "It is always a beautiful night when you're with me."

She laughed. "You're my very own Viking valentine, aren't you?"

The deep throaty rumble of thunder interrupted his reply. Fat raindrops followed a few moments later. So much for being left alone. If he could just get his hands around Freya's throat...

Calleigh shrieked and held the roses over her head. "Let's run for it or my shoes are going to be ruined."

"I can do better than that." He dipped and caught her up in his arms. "Which way?" She pointed with the bouquet. "Two blocks and then a left."

He took off in an easy jog. She stared at him while he ran. "Do I have something on my face?"

"No." She sighed. "You're just too good to be true is all."

"It's a husband's job to protect his wife and take care of her."

"So you're just doing your job?" Her mouth bent like she was trying not to smile. He liked that. Any distraction from the night's misfortunes was good.

"Aye." He bounced her a little in his arms and gave her a wicked smile. "And I will be doing another part of my job later."

She squealed, this time for a completely different reason. The lights of a grocer's store showed the color in her cheeks. It was the same pale pink that spread across her chest when she lay beneath him, eyes closed, lips parted...he swallowed. Those thoughts were going to make for a very long evening.

"Here we are," she said.

Someone from the restaurant opened the door and he dashed inside, putting her down once they were undercover. The smell of steak made his mouth water.

A group of young women in brightly colored dresses clapped from their seats at the bar.

"Nice chariot," one said.

"Yeah," said another. "Where do you find a guy like that?"

Calleigh straightened her coat and smiled. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

The women raised their glasses. "Happy Valentine's Day," they chimed.

One added, "At least someone's getting to enjoy it."

"Thanks," Calleigh said, then turned to him. "You're a big hit," she whispered, her eyes glowing. "I'll go tell the maître d' we're here."

Alrik moved away from the door and the women at the bar. A few gazed at him in a way he did not wish to encourage. Calleigh returned a minute later, her mouth twisted in an unhappy line.

"You're not going to believe this."

"What?"

"They have no record of our reservation. None." Tears lined her lower lids, making her bronze eyes look enormous. "I mean, really, what else could go wrong tonight? Do you know how hard it's going to be to find another place to eat on Valentine's night?" She sniffed and looked away. "Maybe we should just go home."

Damn Freya. This was definitely her doing. "Calleigh lass, don't weep." The desire to strangle the goddess of love overwhelmed him. How dare she make his wife cry?

"I just wanted tonight to be perfect. It's our first Valentine's Day."

He lifted her chin with his fingertips. "It is perfect. We're together." He put his arm around her and led her back outside. The rain had turned into a soft drizzle. Every cab that went by was full. His anger at Freya grew. "Come." He took Calleigh's hand and led her down the street until they stood under the awning of an apartment building. "I will be right back."

"Where are you going?"

"To find a place to eat. There are many restaurants on this street."

"Okay." She sniffed. "I love you."

"And I you, lass." He took off down the street, ducking into the first alleyway he came to. "Freya." He might be human now, but on Valentine's Day, any mortal could call upon the goddess of love. "Show yourself."

A crack of blue lightening brightened the alley, sending rats scurrying. Freya stepped forward out of the smoky wisps left behind. "Viking. How pleasant to see you again. Have you changed your mind about the little mortal? Do you wish to return to me?"

Her gown was a sheer slip of silk crossed with bands of gold that matched the ribbon tying off the blonde braids woven through her hair. Most men would find her irresistible. Alrik just found her irritating. "Stop your games. Whatever you are trying to prove, it won't work."

She raised one shoulder. "Whatever do you mean?"

He took a step closer and lowered his voice to a threatening growl. "You know exactly what I mean. The bee, the champagne cork, the flat tire, the rain, the canceled reservation, all of it was your doing."

She smiled. "It's just a little test."

He lowered his head. "You hurt my wife."

Freya waved his words away with a flutter of her hand. "The mortal will live. Well, not forever, but..." She laughed at her own joke.

Alrik snapped forward and grabbed her by the shoulders. "You will fix everything you've done. Do you understand me?"

Her eyes darkened to the blue-black of storm clouds. "Unhand me, Viking. What's done is done. If she no longer loves you because of a few minor inconveniences, that isn't my fault."

"She still loves him. Like I told you she would."

The voice came from behind Alrik. He spun, already recognizing who it belong to. "Eros."

"Alrik." He nodded. "Freya, fix what you've done and leave these two alone."

She tugged out of Alrik's grasp. "You're both fools if you think I will obey either one of you." She smirked at Alrik. "You're mortal now. What recourse do you have?"

He glowered at her. "If you do not do as I ask, I will find a Phoenix talisman and I will call a Phoenix of my own. And you will not like the changes I make."

She snorted. "Like I would let a talisman fall into your hands."

"I would." Eros walked to her side. "Do what he asked."

"Stupid mortals," Freya muttered. "Fine. All is undone."

The rain stopped.

Alrik studied the goddess suspiciously. He'd never trusted her, now more than ever. "All of it."

She rolled her eyes. "It's done, I swear."

Eros grabbed her hand, twisted off one of the rings she wore and threw it to Alrik. "Here."

"How dare you," Freya sputtered. "Give that back."

"Freya, my love, you are a horrible woman. That's a small price to pay for all your nonsense." Eros tipped his head at Alrik. "Give it to your wife. So long as she owns it, Freya cannot touch her." He laughed. "It's worth a small fortune, too. That probably doesn't hurt."

"Thank you." What Eros held over Freya, Alrik had no idea but he suspected the demi-god would pay later. Alrik looked at the ring. Diamonds surrounded a fat ruby atop a band of gold carved with cherubs and inlaid with more diamonds. Perfect for Valentine's Day. "This will make up for Freya's mischief."

"Mischief. Hmph. You make me sound like a spoiled child," she said.

Alrik gave her a look that said that was exactly what he thought of her. "Goddess, Eros, I bid you good bye. My bride awaits."

He tucked the ring into the inside pocket of his coat and jogged back to Calleigh's side.

Her face brightened as he approached. "Did you find a spot for us to eat?"

"Aye, that I did." He took her hand and they started walking back toward the way they'd first come.

"Shouldn't we be going the other way?"

"Nay. This is the correct direction." He smiled to himself. "How are your hand and your eye?"

She felt the spot above her brow. "You know, I don't even feel a knot there anymore and my hand..." She flexed her fingers in front of her. "I'd actually kind of forgotten about it. Doesn't hurt at all."

Good. Now he would not have to kill Freya. Killing a goddess often had unpleasant consequences. "Are you sure? Perhaps your hand is cold?"

"Cold? No, not really."

"Not even a little bit?"

She slanted her eyes at him. "Why?"

"I was just thinking I could warm it up for you."

"How? You're already holding my other hand."

As they reached the restaurant that had lost their reservation, he reached into his pocket and pulled out the ruby ring. "With this."

She glanced at what he was holding and stopped walking. Her chin dropped and her mouth opened, but no sound came out. "Oh, Alrik. It's...it's beautiful."

"Just like you." He slipped it onto her finger, not surprised when it fit perfectly.

She held her hand out and admired the ring for a moment before turning and taking his face in her hands for a kiss. "You are the most amazing man. I love it. And you."

He kissed her back, then reached for the restaurant's door. "After you."

She hesitated. "Honey, I don't think they're going to magically find our reservation." He laughed. "I think that's exactly what they're going to do."

Once inside, she went to speak to the maître d' again. This time, she returned with a smile. "I don't know what you did, but they have a table for us." She narrowed her eyes at him. "You're not still holding onto some super secret Phoenix powers you haven't told me about, are you?"

He winked. "Let's just say Cupid's a friend of mine and he protects those in love." No matter what.

About the Author

When the characters in Kristen Painter's head started to take over, she decided to exorcise them onto paper and share them with the world. She writes paranormal romance for Samhain Publishing and has the first of three books in her gothic fantasy vampire series, Blood Rights, coming from Orbit in fall 2011. She hopes to add a YA series to the mix as well and has also been published in non-fiction, poetry and short stories. The former college English teacher can often be found online at Romance Divas, the award-winning writers' forum she co-founded.

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