

## CHAPTER 2

Immediately the door vanished, closing into silence as if it never existed. Giselle did a slow pirouette, examining her surroundings, and a whole bunch of “what the hell?” ran down her spine.

She stood in a narrow street, in the midst of a city. Although it was nighttime, the faint glow of a globed street lamp cast enough light to let her see the statues, fresco work, and gargoyles adorning the narrow, three-story buildings towering on either side of her. She could see only a few yards in either direction before the street took a bend. This was how she imagined Prague or Budapest looked – a city with an old, European air.

She touched the green metal lamp post. Hard and faintly warm and damp from the night. A low hum of electricity came from the globe. She took a few steps down the empty street, and her heels clicked sharply on the hard cobblestones beneath her feet.

For a role-playing fantasy, this was damn realistic, even to the smudge of a new moon overhead.

Too realistic, too expansive, for the back room of tiny shop in the heart of New Orleans’ crowded French Quarter.

Before she could pursue that disturbing thought, shouts and pounding footsteps broke the eerie silence. Giselle spun toward the sound. A man sprinted around the corner, his long, dark coat billowing behind him.

“Dom?” she whispered, though she couldn’t make out his face. Just the motion of his body struck a chord of deep, deep familiarity. Her shoulders shifted automatically, matching his rhythm, as her muscles tightened with burned-in memory. Her body had always been tuned with those fluid movements.

He passed through a circle of street light, and her heart leapt into her throat. For one brief moment, his face was Dom’s, matured into the compelling man he’d promised to be. The lean planes of his cheeks, the thickness of the brows, the sensual lips—

The moment vanished. Not Dom. Yes, he had the carved cheekbones, the strong jaw, but the features were subtly altered, giving a different whole.

A different, exotic, unbelievably masculine and enchanting whole.

He had pale, punk-spiked hair, although what color she couldn't tell, for the darkness washed out all hues, leaving the scene painted in black and gray and white. The streetlights glinted off a metallic stud in his ear.

Even with only intangible glimpses of the man running straight toward her, her body responded. Tightening and dampening. This man was as entrancing as her teen-aged lover had ever been. She didn't know him, but some primitive, atavistic, unthinking part of her knew him, desired him, recognized him as hers.

Not her past. Her future. Her powerful lover. Her fantasy.

“Mi amour!” he shouted, and even faintly breathless, his voice was warm amber. As he neared her, he caught a glance over his shoulder before his dark gaze seared across her. “You're here. At last. Have they hurt you?”

“No.” She realized she'd been standing still, waiting for him. No longer content to be passive, she took the necessary steps to join him. Toward making fantasy reality.

“Blessings be.” One of his elegant hands cupped the back of her head, while the other cradled her face, his thumb stroking tenderly across her cheek bones. “I have missed you, ached for you, needed you. I feared you would never return.”

And, then he kissed her.

No tentative, exploring first kiss this. He possessed her lips and mouth with a hungry need that spread through her like brush fire. Mutual lust consumed her. With a frustrated, starving grunt, she gripped his strong shoulders and pulled him closer, slanting her mouth to deepen the kiss. Opened to allow his tongue a sweeping claim, just as the burning at her fingers branded him as hers.

He groaned, and the hand cupping her head circled down her spine, each pass drawing her

closer until their skin should have fused had it not been for two, tissue thin, supple layers of clothing, one leather, one knit. His thick erection pulsed against her, ready for plunging into the moisture gathering between her legs.

A whirlwind spun around them, tossing the loose strands of her hair, wrapping his coat around her legs, and then the skies loosened a torrent of rain. This storm was no cooling refresher, but a steamy sauna. Humidity tried to grab what little breath she had remaining, and drops pounded against her eyelids.

Yet, neither one of them sought cover from the maelstrom of rain and desire. With the soaking of her clothes, she felt the tight tips of her nipples pressing against his chest and the hot ridge of his penis as he slid against her.

A spiraling energy rose from the pit of her stomach, seeking release. His hard muscles grew tauter as his arms steeled around her, refusing to let her explode, even as his tongue painted erotic pictures against her lips.

His hand reached her bottom, and somehow he managed to slip his fingers beneath the leather, the extra tension pulling it tight against her clit, arching her against him with the lung-stealing need to be filled with that thick cock of his. He slid along the curve of her butt, reaching to caress her from behind. One finger stroked her wet slit.

“Yes,” he murmured against her lips. “One kiss, one look, and my balls are so tight that I’m ready to come against my zipper. At least I’m not alone in this madness. You’re wet for me.”

His words drew her back from the precipice of orgasm, and she suddenly realized that the hand she had placed at his waist was wet and sticky. Not from the rain, which had ceased as abruptly as it started. Not from the sweat of sex. She lifted her palm and stared at the smear across it. Blood.

Her eyes rose to the gash across his temple. “You’re hurt.” She touched the ugly wound, and to her astonishment a shock arced from her fingertips to the raw wound. The edges of the slash began to knit.

“What the hell happened?” To him? To her? With that touch?

“Vasili got me,” he said with a grimace, then, slipping his hands from her butt, he lifted the hem of his shirt.

This time, she wasn't quite as surprised to see another ugly wound, a painful burn that spread across his ribs and flat belly. Blood oozed from the broken flesh. She drew in a sharp breath, aware that her ribs and belly burned in empathy, and reached out. “Can I heal that, too?”

He grabbed her finger, stopping her. “We can use more conventional means. Don't waste your magic.”

“My magic?”

“After that kiss we're both charged,” he said with a grin, then the grin faded. “But with such a long abstinence, we're not full power. We may need—”

A crackling charge rent the air, and he jerked backward. His hand flew to his shoulder. Beneath his outstretched fingers, the scorched fabric exposed raw skin.

“Shit. I thought I'd lost Vasili. Run.” He gave her a not too gentle shove down the street.

More crackling spun through the wet air around them, the sparks exploding from drop to drop. Her hairs set on end, anchored in pricks of pain. Someone was shooting – not guns, but something -- at them!

Giselle didn't need another incentive. She kicked off her impractical stilettos and ran, barefoot, in the direction of her lover's shove. Heart pounding the blood against her ears, her lover so close behind that his heat steamed the wetness off her hair, she ran.

Thank God for those hours she'd played tag and touch football with her brothers. She ran through the twisting streets, totally lost, guided only by a pointing hand and the words, “That way,” when she reached a corner.

Until he led her into a blind alley, and she ran headlong into a brick wall. From his curse as he bowled into her, she gathered her companion was just as surprised as she was.

“Ow!” Astonished, Giselle touched a hand to her scraped nose. “That hurt! Fantasies aren’t supposed to hurt.”

“No fantasy, mi amour. This is very real.” Her lover spun around, looking for an escape. “If Vasili catches us here . . .”

“Not a fantasy?” Her breath coming in pants, Giselle ran her hands across the wall. Brick, solid, rough enough to snag her skin and sweating from the continuing humidity as the rainstorm muted to warm fog. No, this was supposed to be a role-play fantasy. Some harmless, imaginary sex.

Except this wall was solid and real and blocking their escape. “Go away,” she told it. “You’re not part of my fantasy.” She slapped a palm against the wall. It stayed put.

“Sorry, love, but Vasili’s walls are too powerful for you to break down without being fully charged.” He bent for another of those swift, electric kisses. Then, with a speed that would have been insulting if she hadn’t felt his passion, he spun away from her, the black coat swirling in a very Matrix fashion statement, his attention caught on the alley mouth. “Hovno! Vasili found us.”

The air charged again, and a scorching pain sliced across the top of her head. She was hit? She reached to her forehead and her hand came away with a smear of blood. Shot? Oh. My. God. Somehow, some fricking impossible how, was this real?

Panic building, she pounded against the wall. “Let me out. Madame Claudine, let me out.”

Accept this is your fantasy. And you will see it to its end.

I want a dangerous lover. Had she really said that? God, she hadn’t thought that meant pain and someone shooting.

“Think, Giselle,” she muttered, raking a hand through her hair. “There’s gotta be a way out.”

A way out? From where? If she wasn’t in Madame’s back room, she was . . . Where was she? She gripped her companion’s arm. “Where are we?”

“Prague.” He gave her a hard, curious look. “Giselle? Mi amour?”

“Pyotrik,” A gravelly voice interrupted them. “And, my lucky day, your seeress.”

“No, alas for you, Vasili, not my seeress. She’s a miniscule talent.” Pyotrik, her companion, spread his hands in a gesture of innocence as he shifted away from her and directed his attention to the mouth of the alley.

The source of the gravel voice and the deadly shots, a man flanked by two companions, blocked their exit at the alley entrance. The companions looked dangerous enough -- if dead-eyed, bad-assed Ninjas worried you -- but it was the center of their trio who commanded the scene. A man – seven foot if he was an inch – with the face of a seraphim, all whiteness and warm gold. A man holding a swirl of fire in his hand.

Despite the angelic beauty, Giselle started instinctively toward Pyotrik, and then, just as instinctively stopped. Apparently Pyotrik thought it important to hide their bond, whatever the hell that bond was.

“Sometimes,” Pyotrik said, casually stretching his fingers, “I need a straight, vigorous fuck without all the sex magic charging distractions.”

Sex magic?

“You never could resist a pretty pair of spread legs.”

“Ah, Vasili, you know me too well.”

“Your weakness is caring for them.”

“What can I say? I enjoy their charms.” The glance Pyotrik spared her was brief, molten sex.

“Then you’re a fool.”

“To each fool his own madness.” Pyotrik gave a languid shrug.

Couldn’t Vasili see how false Pyotrik’s wastrel front was? Only took her one look at the hardened man, the alert body, the intelligent eyes that didn’t in the least match the careless smile. Then, again, she’d wager, Vasili wasn’t having completely inappropriate images – given the situation – of Pyotrik thrusting deep and hard into her, suckling and stroking her breasts, renewing that heart-stopping kiss. All from one little molten sex look.

“So, not your seeress?” Vasili angled, and the fireball in his hands shot straight at her chest. Before she could blink, it smacked her in the boobs.

Pain extinguished the scream in her throat. Giselle bent over, grabbing her thighs to keep from collapsing, dark spots wrangling in front of her vision. She gasped for breath. Sweet Jesu, that hurt!

Pyotrik reacted in a blur and beams of red light shot from his outstretched hand. One of the companions collapsed with a groan before fire met light in an explosion that stank of sulfur.

“She stays out of it,” Pyotrik snarled, hovering protectively over her, his red, glowing palms pointed at Vasili.

Vasili’s fire swirled atop his forefinger. “Hmmm, no automatic defenses,” he murmured. “I had to be sure; no one knows what your seeress looks like.”

Giselle stared at her chest, tears in her eyes. The fabric wasn’t touched. Just her nerves beneath. Above her tank, her chest wasn’t bleeding, but it burned like the most God-awful third degree burn.

“This should help, my pumpkin.” Pyotrik laid a warm hand against her chest, very briefly, his casualness at odd with the concern in his eyes. The sharpest edge of the pain disappeared.

Carnal images sharpened within her, spreading from where Pyotrik had touched her chest. The more carnal the unbidden images became and the more she embellished on the fantasy thoughts, the better she felt. The more the pain receded.

Did she only need to think about fucking for this sex magic thing to work? She turned an eye on Pyotrik, stroking him with her gaze, appreciating the elegant masculinity, the sensual curve of his hand, and her fantasy thoughts bent to a new pleasurable scenario. Her and him, both naked. Pyotrik behind her, his hands teasing her breasts as his cock teased her ass.

The pain vanished in a snap, and she saw Pyotrik’s breathing quicken before he straightened and turned to Vasili. “Not much sport to damage one of no talent.”

The pain convinced her like nothing else. This was real. Which meant she’d better stop acting

like a panicky ass and start putting her head toward figuring a way out of reaching the end of this fantasy while not getting shot again. She'd wanted danger, magic, and an exciting man? Well, she had all three in spades. Time to put up or shut up, and shut up didn't seem an option right now.

No, take that back. Shut up was her best option right now. Playing her bimbo-on-the-side role, she threw Pyotrik a poisonous look. The one she'd honed when her brothers had been particularly bone-headed and rebellious.

Vasili laughed. "Why do you dally, when you have the most potent seeress waiting in your bed? Why hasn't she fried you? Or could the rumors be true? That she has left? That she no longer powers you?"

"Or, she's more tolerant of my foibles than you?"

"Your foibles are of no interest to me. It's your work with the Custos Magi which concerns me."

"You're evil, and they can't let that go unchecked."

"Evil?" Vasili shrugged. "Such a slippery, situational word."

"Not in your case."

Half listening to their conversation, still bent over, Giselle rubbed a sweaty hand on her pant leg, not caring right now if she damaged the sleek leather, although it strangely seemed impervious to the rain and mist. Think of a way out.

For the moment, the men seemed to have forgotten about her, so she examined her surroundings. Solid brick behind. Solid buildings on either side, unbroken by a window or door. Unless she learned to leap tall buildings in a single bound in the next sixty seconds, the only way out of here was through the wall of men blocking the alley entrance.

And even that route was being cut off. While they dallied, the still-conscious Ninja had been busy. White waves streamed from his side-stretched hands, filling the alley mouth with some kind of steamy plasma. The relentless, undulating pearlescent lava stunk of sweet, rotting fruit.

She had a hunch that getting caught by, or trying to run through, that whitening wall would not be a good health decision.

Pyotrik scratched his cheek. “Why the chatting and that,” he nodded toward the plasma wall, “instead of outright killing me?”

“Where’s the key?” Another ball of spinning fire, unquenched despite the growing humidity, appeared again in Vasili’s hand.

Pyotrik shook his head. Although his attention seemed to be all on Vasili, Giselle knew to her bones that he was searching their trap, just like she was, looking for a way out. Unfortunately, between the white wall and the humidity now thickening to fog, searching for options was fast becoming fruitless.

“I don’t have the key,” Pyotrik answered.

“But, you know where it is.”

“You think that puny display of your fire will convince me to tell you?” Pyotrik sneered.

“You’ve used too much power chasing me.”

Vasili gave a snort of irritation. “Even with one of my triad incapacitated, we’re still two to your single. I expected more from you. You’ve become a weak flitter.”

She straightened, then it was her breathing hitching as she saw a way out of here. She’d never have noticed it if she hadn’t been bent over. Not quite leaping buildings at a single bound, but it would do.

Let’s hope Pyotrik was picking up her vibes and was charged enough to handle Vasili.

Otherwise this was going to be the fastest aborted escape in history.

And, fuck it, if she’d gotten real danger and real magic, then she was damn well going to get the real sex part of this fantasy.

She pulled to her full five-foot-six height – the stilettos would have made the pose a hell of a lot more effective – and gave them both her best affronted glare. “You two macho posturing seers leave

me out of this. And next time you want an uncomplicated fuck,” she spat at Pyotrik, “Pick someone else.”

She gave him a push, knocking him straight toward Vasili and then she ran.

“Stop her,” shouted Vasili, spinning to defend against Pyotrik, who had suddenly come to attacking life.

A thick rope of plasma streamed from the wall, directed by Ninja two. Like a homing snake, it coiled across the alley, straight toward the prey. Her. Behind her, she heard grunts and explosions, smelled sulfur.

“Invisibility would be a nice power right now,” she muttered.

The fog congealed around her, damp and cooling, sizzling against the magic stream. Obscuring her, even though it didn’t stop the living rope, which had begun to coil around her, still a yard from her body, but narrowing.

Her muscles twitched and burned beneath her scalding skin.

Escape was impossible while the Ninja stood at the foot of the building and controlled the plasma. So, take out Ninja two was next on the agenda. Hell, even if he hadn’t been a continued threat, she’d have stopped just to wipe that smug, superior look from his face. Instead of trying to evade him, she planted herself on the smooth cobblestones, and her clenched fist shot out.

Vibrations rose through the soles of her bare feet, up her calves and thighs. A surge of astonishing power swept through her, just as the heel of her hand landed an uppercut to his jaw.

One Ninja to the cobblestones. The plasma rope made a headless fish flop, sparks snapping from the ends like downed high voltage wires.

For the love of Mary where had that power come from? Five years of community ed self-defense and Tae Kwon Do classes and she’d never packed an earthquake punch like that. Her whole body vibrated and tingled.

“Vasili is bound.” Pyotrik sprinted out of the concealing fog and glanced at the downed Ninja.

“Good plan, mi amour. He’s a magic worker; he never expected a fist to the jaw.”

“Well, us talentless, casual fucks gotta have some defenses.”

He ignored the sarcasm as he enveloped her in a fierce hug, then a fiercer kiss. The swift kiss of desperate, hungry man, as his lips and tongue demanded hers and his fingers threaded through her hair.

She gripped him and kissed him back, admitting that she was scared and she needed him every which way. Tremulous vibrations swelled through her, renewing her sapped energy. Her breasts and pussy contracted, each point of contact an electric node, recharging and revitalizing. She rubbed against him, craving that vital contact. He groaned and rubbed back, his erection large against her.

“I want you,” he rasped. “I know we can’t. Not here, now. Vasili’s current incapacity is very temporary.”

She pressed back against the circle of his arms. “Can we get through the wall?”

For a second, he ignored her reasserted practicality to lean forward and plant a tiny kiss on her jaw. His heart thundered against her breasts. When he dragged away, his arm stayed draped across her shoulder, and his muscled body pressed the length of hers, as though even necessity could not break this bond. “Alas, a punch will not work on that wall. One touch, and you’re seriously scalded. Have you learned to generate a shield?”

“Fraid not.”

“And I haven’t enough power for two.” He let out a breath. “Then . . .”

“How about an alternative?” She grabbed his hand and led him to the foot of the building.

“These bricks stick out all the way to the top.” Releasing him, dismissing the moment’s ripping ache at the loss, she climbed onto the side of the building, her bare feet and hands finding purchase on the 3-D pattern of brick work she’d noticed earlier. Balancing on the small ledges formed from the brick outcroppings, gripping with her hands and feet, she moved a foot upward in demonstration. “I’m counting on you to know which way to turn once we reach that flat roof.”

In no time, Pyotrik was beside her on the wall. He caressed her cheek with his thumb, a gesture both tender and erotic. Even with the thick fog, there was no denying the admiration in his look. And the hint of worry. “You do realize, mi amour, all I said back there . . . about the women. All false.”

She touched his gentling fingers in understanding, then they both let go and started the climb up the wall. “I know. Lucky for you.”

His chuckle was low and confident. “There has been no one for me, but you, Giselle, my seeress. Although your absence has greatly tried me. I shall claim a reward, later, for my constancy.”

“I’m your seeress?”

That surprised him. “You don’t remember?”

“My body seems to, but my mind?” She shook her head. “I have a lot of questions.”

“As do I. For later.”

“Later,” she agreed. “Except . . . magic is fueled by sex acts?”

“You’ve forgotten even that?” He sounded horrified.

“Guilty.”

“Then I shall reacquaint you as soon as we get home.”

Already her body aroused with just the thought. “Good plan.”

The arduous climb forced them to silence, then, except for grunts and heavy breathing. The rough bricks scraped her palms and the soles of her feet. Halfway up her raw skin began leaving smears of blood on the surface. Her arms ached from pulling herself upward, and her calves burned from the tip-toe balance required to stay on the bricks. Fire streaked up her spine. She considered herself relatively fit, she liked sports, and thank God for her brother’s birthday party at the wall-climbing emporium, but this climb was a nightmare challenge.

She glanced over at Pyotrik, who was as intent on the climb as she, although it hadn’t stopped him from the occasional brush against her fingers, the helpful palm-on-her-ass boost upward. Of course, with the latter, he hadn’t been able to resist a tiny, intimate caress, for each touch between them

seemed to give them both renewed energy.

His face had lost all the blithe humor he'd put on for Vasili. This was the real man behind the frivolous mask – intense, hard, constant. For one moment, her fatigue blurred his features, and the resemblance to her first lover, Dom, returned. Then, the image sharpened back into Pyotrik's increasingly-familiar features: the spikes of his platinum-shaded hair, his strong cheeks and jaw, his thick brows. Damn what color were his eyes?

Despite her fatigue, the warm curl of desire, always simmering, grew a degree hotter. He shot her a quick, hungry glance, as though he'd felt the spurt, but neither one commented or slowed their ascent.

Giselle refused to look down, pushed upward by a sharp sense of urgency. The concealing fog was rapidly dissipating. Pyotrik had said Vasili's incapacity was temporary, and she had a hunch they were reaching the time limit. Especially as Pyotrik began moving faster, propelling her upward with him by his pressing motions.

Without warning, the bricks above her exploded. Masonry rained down on her, slicing into her cheek.

Vasili was awake.

"Shit!" Pyotrik, just above her, scrambled onto the roof. He reached down for her, while his other hand held his wand, pointing it down toward the attacking seer. Sending a river of his own red plasma downward.

Her path disintegrated, Giselle shifted to the bricks to her right, where Pyotrik has been climbing, and scrambled upward. Bricks disintegrated all around her, choking her with dust.

"Giselle," Pyotrik shouted, guiding her with his voice.

Their hands touched. Clasped.

Sudden, searing pain engulfed her back. Her spine, every nerve, was on fire. Her vision swam, faded with the unimaginable onslaught. Just get one breath. Okay, now get one more breath. Just one.

She struggled, unable to move, flattened against the building, her arm outstretched.

Red plasma deluged around her. Beneath her came a cut-off curse. The explosions stopped.

Too late. Her feet slid off the bricks, unable to find purchase. Going to smash on the cobblestones.

Warmth spread from her palm as fingers tightened around her palm. Her arm strained from the jerk of her body weight. Fresh pain shot through her shoulder, muscles tearing, as she was yanked upward.

“Giselle, mi amour, my seeress. Hang on.” Pyotrik’s frantic demands held her close. She felt herself gathered up in his arms, felt the electricity of his brief kiss, felt them speeding across the rooftops. Then, she felt no more. Not even his heat to counter the rising cold. Roof tiles, chimneys became mere blurs beneath speed and pain and her receding consciousness.

“Able to leap tall buildings in a single bound,” she murmured.

And, she accepted the absolute truth. She wasn’t in Madame’s back room any more. She wasn’t in New Orleans or Louisiana, or even the good ole USA. She was . . . some place else. Some place with the danger and the exciting man and the magic she said she wanted. She was here for the duration, whatever that fucking meant.

And what happened to her was no fantasy, no role playing, no trick of the mind or druggie hallucination. This was real. Every thrilling kiss and every stitch of pain.

“I wanted an orgasm,” she whispered, as blackness overtook her. “I wasn’t supposed to die.”