



ATHENA
MARIE

DHARMA
and
Desire

Dharma and Desire

A Visionary Romance Novel

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Dharma and Desire
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*To my soulmate, Christopher.
I couldn't have done it without you. (Especially the fight scene.)*

*You are what your deep, driving desire is.
As your deep, driving desire is, so is your will.
As your will is, so is your deed.
As your deed is, so is your destiny.
~The Upanishads*

September, 1955
Off The Coast of India

Daniel Murijah Devinder stood on the deserted deck of the passenger ship, staring into the turbulent inky waters of the Indian Ocean. It was well after midnight but he couldn't sleep. His grandmother's prediction weighed heavily on his mind. In his hand he clutched the ancient amulet she had tearfully bestowed upon him when they'd said their goodbyes. He wrapped the chain securely around his index finger and let go. The pendent fell, stopped with a bounce, and swayed gently in the salty night air. He could let it slip off his finger right now . . . let it disappear into the depths where it would never be seen again. But he knew it would do no good. Even the corrosive power of the sea could not erase what destiny had dictated to be.

A week later, the amulet tucked safely in his pocket, Daniel sat alone at a table in the back of *The Constellation Club*, a glass of ice water in his gloved hand. The popular jazz club was crowded with movers and shakers of San Francisco high society— all strangers to him. Though he'd spent his childhood in the states, America now felt foreign, surreal, and superficial. He checked his watch once again, then returned to glowering at the crowd—the men, like penguins, and women, like peacocks—all on drunken display.

The lights dimmed and a voice from somewhere unseen whispered huskily into the mic: "Ladies and gentleman, the woman you have all been waiting for. Miss Penny Fanning!" A hush of expectancy fell over the crowd. Preparing to sigh in boredom, Daniel inhaled. The starlet emerged from behind thick velvet curtains. Daniel's breath caught in his lungs.

She moved with a potent combination of grace and sensuality. Her skin was porcelain white, and beneath the spotlight her red hair shimmered like smoldering coals. She parted her heart-shaped lips, began to sing, and the universe fell still. Her voice was as soft and sultry as the velvet of her pale-pink evening gown.

Daniel's breath escaped in a short burst. He shook his head. *It couldn't be her.*

Dazed by an unwelcome combination of desire and disbelief, he studied her as she made slow rounds about the room as she sang. Her hips swayed to the beat of the snare drum, and the muted trumpet wailed through the smoky air. Every movement alluring, she almost seemed to move in slow motion. And although she hadn't yet seen him, he was keenly aware of the energy between them. Like a magnet, it lured her across the room until she was standing directly before him.

Their eyes met. She blushed and her voice grew weak. Unconsciously, Daniel touched his fingers to the amulet in his pocket. She recovered her composure and hurried to the next table, leaving a faint scent of gardenia in her wake.

Daniel whispered a foreign curse to the heavens.

It was her.

Penny stepped offstage and peered from behind the curtains at the strange man in the back of the room. She'd never seen him before, that much was certain. He was not the kind of person one would forget. In fact, he was the most striking man she had ever seen. He was foreign, Middle Eastern perhaps, with skin the color of cinnamon, and eyes that were dark and unfathomable. Dressed in an elegant black tunic embellished with red embroidery, and wearing leather dress gloves, he possessed an impressive air of nobility. Like the rest of him, his hair was dark, and the mass of thick, shoulder-length waves set him apart from the cookie-cutter men in his proximity. But more than his unusual appearance, it was his aura of power that separated him from the crowd. Blatantly out of place, he looked as if he belonged in sultan's robes in a desert palace, not in a jazz club in The Fillmore District. If the contemptuous expression on his face was any indication, he felt the same.

Suddenly, as if he'd felt her gaze upon him, he leveled her with a penetrating stare. With a gasp Penny stepped behind the safety of the curtain. She placed her hand over her racing heart and turned toward her dressing room, a strange sensation of foreboding churning deep in her belly.

"Beautiful, doll, just beautiful." Sam, her fiancé and owner of the club, entered her dressing room. "A little flat at the end of that last number, though."

"Yes, yes, I know. Help me out of my dress?"

"Not yet. I have a surprise for you." He took her hand and led her toward the door.

Penny sighed. It had been a long night and all she wanted to do was relax into a hot bubble bath. "Uh-huh, and am I going to like this surprise?" In the end, Sam's surprises often proved to be more work for her. The last one had been a stack of new releases he wanted performance-ready in three days.

"Well . . ." He considered it a moment. "Yes. Absolutely." She wasn't convinced.

As Sam led her through the crowded club, fans encircled her, gushing compliments and hoping for a moment in her presence. She plastered a smile on her face and clung tightly to her fiancé's hand. She still hadn't grown accustomed to so much attention. She doubted she ever would.

Before she realized it, she found herself standing once again before the mysterious man in black. Sam had led her straight to slaughter. Why?

"Penny, I'd like you to meet Daniel. My brother."

She took a step backward, her gaze whipping to meet Sam's. "What?" The man stood and reached his gloved-hand out to her. The menacing look she'd seen in

his eyes before was now replaced by what appeared to be genuine, though distant, kindness. She stared stupidly at his extended hand. "I'm sorry—" she turned back to Sam. "But you didn't tell me you had a brother!"

He shrugged. "It never came up."

"Never came up? But I've asked you about your family, and . . ." She trailed off when she noticed Daniel gazing back and forth between her and Sam, his brows raised. She straightened and smiled. "Excuse me. I'm being dreadfully rude. Pleased to meet you."

Sam pulled out her chair. He waved to the bartender for a round of drinks as they took their seats.

"I apologize for being such a shock," Daniel said. His voice was deep and velvet-edged with an accent Penny couldn't place.

"Oh, well, it isn't your fault." She tossed an irritated glance at her fiancé. "But . . ." She studied Daniel's face closer. "You are really Sam's brother?" She couldn't believe it. There wasn't the slightest resemblance.

"Half brother," they said in unison.

"And it's damn good to see you in one piece, brother," Sam said with a slap against Daniel's back. Daniel tensed in response. "What's it been? Fifteen years?"

"Twenty-two."

"How about that. Time sure does fly. So, this is the fiancée." He nodded toward Penny. "Whadya think?"

"Really, Sam," Penny said with a roll of her eyes.

"What? I can't show off my shining star?"

Daniel's stare was bold as he assessed her, his eyes running from the tip of her head to her hands neatly folded in her lap. Now that she was closer, she was surprised to see that his eyes were not brown, but a striking shade of amber. Something about the way they contrasted with his dark skin reminded her of a wild animal. Or perhaps it was simply the way he looked at her—with an odd combination of mistrust and curiosity. When his eyes once again met hers, disapproval lurked in their depths.

"You have a beautiful voice, Penny." Unsure whether his statement was a compliment or an evasion, she simply smiled and pulled a cigarette from her purse. "But you will not have a beautiful voice much longer if you smoke those." His reprimand stopped her in her tracks, the unlit cigarette dangling from her lips.

Sam cleared his throat, leaned forward, and lit her cigarette. Then he pulled an envelope from his pocket and slid it across the table to Daniel. "Your keys. You have the address?"

"You gave it to me in your letter."

"Right, right. I'm sorry I won't be available to help tomorrow, but I'm sure—"

“Excuse me,” Penny interrupted. “What’s happening?”

“Doll, Daniel is moving into One-A.” Sam not only owned *The Constellation Club*, but also the three-unit refurbished Victorian they called home.

“What?” She didn’t try to hide her annoyance.

Sam leaned toward her and spoke in hushed tones. “Daniel is going to be lecturing nearby, and the apartment is available.”

“I see. Well, isn’t this evening full of surprises.” The waiter placed her usual glass of champagne before her. She took a sip, swallowing back the words she wanted to say. “We’ll be happy to have you so close-by,” she managed half-heartedly.

Daniel arched his brows doubtfully. An awkward silence descended upon the table. All of this was happening so quickly. Under normal circumstances she’d be poised and gracious, but the presence of this man, her brother-in-law to be, discomposed her for reasons she didn’t understand. All at once she felt awkward, shaky, and unnerved. She took a deep breath. Suddenly she remembered Sam said he would be lecturing. She certainly wouldn’t have taken him for an academic.

“What do you teach, Daniel?” she asked.

“Comparative religion and Vedantic philosophy.”

Penny tried to hide her surprise. A theologian? With his piercing intensity and primal appearance, *heathen* seemed a more accurate description. Then again, perhaps his religion explained his disdain.

“I’ll be speaking at a few different organizations in the city, then down in Los Angeles, then teaching a course at Stanford,” he continued. “They are considering a religion program and that is my area of expertise.”

“That’s quite the gig there, little brother. Have to say I was surprised by your letter. Last I heard you were traipsing across India doing research for your book.”

“Yes, my traipsing days are over, I’m afraid. After the—” he glanced aside as if catching himself, “—after the book, I took a teaching position.”

“What book is that?” Penny inquired.

“The Bhagavad Gita. And most recently I’ve been transcribing The Upanishads.” Penny and Sam didn’t respond. “Ancient religious texts.”

“Oh,” they echoed together.

“I guess this is a pretty different world than what you’re used to, eh?” Sam glanced around the club, pride on his face. The crowd was growing wilder as the evening progressed—as usual.

“*Haan.*” Daniel gave a curt nod. “India is crowded, but the energy is . . . different.” Like Penny, he didn’t try to hide his annoyance. Sam didn’t seem to notice.

“I tell you, this club was nothing until I found my star here. She really put us on the map.”

“You don’t say?” Daniel murmured as he pulled a gold watch from his pocket and checked the time.

Sam jumped up and excused himself unexpectedly. “I’ll be back.”

Penny followed Sam’s gaze to see two well-dressed men with sober expressions enter the club. One was tall and thin, the other short and rotund, and there was something about the way they eyed their surroundings that made Penny shiver. She reached toward Sam in protest, but he was already gone, leaving her and Daniel alone in uncomfortable silence. She watched Sam greet the men and lead them toward the bar. It appeared Daniel was now her responsibility. So much for her bubble bath.

She turned and watched the musicians on stage for a few moments, then glanced toward Daniel to find him doing the same. In boredom, or perhaps annoyance, he tapped his long, gloved fingers on the table. Why was he wearing gloves indoors?

She studied him closer, wondering how he could possibly share Sam’s blood. The lines of his face were angular, his coloring swarthy, and his build lean—everything a stark opposite of her fiancé. Perhaps their lips were similar, she thought. Yes, that was the only similarity. Except that one side of Daniel’s mouth seemed to be permanently raised in a smirk. The image of them playing as children flashed through her mind’s eye. She couldn’t help but imagine them as the archetypes of the good and evil twin. But that was unfair. First impressions could be deceiving.

Daniel jerked his head toward her and once again she became the focus of his penetrating stare. She forced a friendly smile. In response, his expression only darkened. “Do you enjoy this?” he asked.

And sometimes first appearances were spot-on. “Sitting in strained silence with a complete stranger who knows nothing about me, yet obviously judges me unacceptable as a sister in-law?” He crossed his arms and studied her even more intently, as if she were one of the confounding texts he was trying to translate. Without breaking eye contact, she took a long, exaggerated drag off her cigarette.

“I mean this.” He motioned to their surroundings. “Do you enjoy what you do?”

“Of course,” she lied.

“Is that so?”

“I . . .” She hesitated. “Not all the time.” She’d never intended, nor dreamed of living a life in the spotlight. Yet here she was.

“And what is it you would prefer to be doing?” he asked impatiently.

“I haven’t the foggiest,” she said with a dismissive wave of her hand. Of course, that wasn’t entirely true, but she had no desire to engage Daniel on the topic.

The speed of his finger tapping increased. "One should know whether or not one is living their dharma and expressing one's authentic calling. If not, one should make necessary changes toward that end."

Penny rolled her eyes. She was in no mood for a lecture. "Oh, should one? Well, what about you? Is transcribing moldy old texts nobody cares about your authentic calling?"

He ignored her and stood. "Please give Sam my apologies, but it's been a long week. It was a pleasure to meet you, Penny. I look forward to learning more about you."

"And my authentic calling?" she laughed.

"Until tomorrow, then." He tugged at the bottom of his gloves in turn.

"I can't wait," Penny murmured on a long smoky exhale.

He grabbed an ivory handled cane that was leaning against the table, turned on his heel, and with a limp, headed toward the door.

"Ridiculous," Penny muttered as she crushed her cigarette in the ashtray. As she rose, the glimmer of something metallic on the floor by Daniel's chair caught her eye. It was a pendant on a chain. She retrieved it and cradled the heavy weight in her hands. Made of silver and copper, the round talisman appeared ancient. Geometric designs inlaid in the metal spread outward from a center point marked with an emerald. She'd never seen anything like it. She ran her fingertips over the strange design, sensing it was far more than a simple ornament.

Surely it belonged to Daniel, she thought as she slipped it into her purse. For it was just as mysterious as he.

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