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Edmond, Oklahoma
Dr. Joe C. Jackson College of Graduate Studies

All The World's My Stage

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS IN CREATIVE WRITING

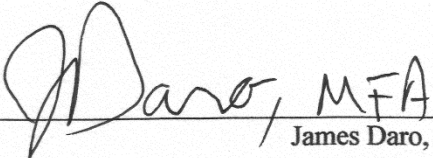
By
Linda Kim Treadway
Edmond, Oklahoma
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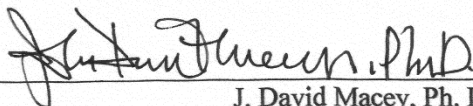
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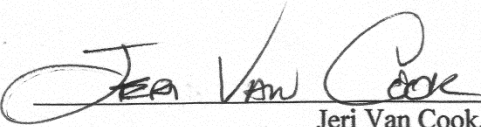
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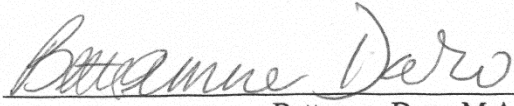
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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

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All The World's My Stage is the action-filled comedy of Kimberly Peterson's woefully isolated and loveless life. Middle-aged and single, her most recent love affair only exists in her dreams with her favorite movie star. While searching for inspiration for her next romance novel, she happens across the goddess Bali, trapped in a cheap statue in the local antique shop. In exchange for freedom from her tawdry prison, Bali promises to help Kim find true love.

Life on the run from Bali's evil twin sister and her mafia of Mau priestesses sure makes Kim's life more exciting. Things heat up when she partners with Gregorian Laydon, the super-sexy love god, who joins Kim's quest to rescue Bali from her enemies. Between vengeful deities and everyone concealing personal secrets, Kim's emotions go on a rollercoaster ride, making it hard to know which way is up. However, Kim courageously faces these challenges head on to: solve the puzzle of her past, save Bali, and win Greg's love, despite all obstacles.

All The World's My Stage shows the importance of self-reliance in a world that relies so heavily on partnerships. Kim's independence is the reason she can survive in this chaotic world of gods, warriors, and clairvoyance, as well as, finally allowing herself to fall in love. This is the story of strong will versus immortal gods, and the virtues that humanity holds over omnipotence. Love, we see, really does conquer all.

All The World's My Stage

Prologue

Egypt, Summer Palace, 305 BC

“Apollo, please, I didn’t have any choice,” Bali pleaded. As a goddess, she never found it necessary to explain her actions to anyone, but the look of utter hatred on his face demanded she do so now.

A moment ago, deep in thought, she'd felt a tingle of magic, calling her attention to Apollo's presence. Startled at first, then curious as to how he had found her, she became painfully aware of her isolation in this part of the garden. Only Ishe and she met here, making this bower feel safe, secure, theirs alone.

She had loved this place for that very reason. Now, it seemed not only disquieting, but like a violation somehow. Ishe had followed her here, he only fifteen to her sixteen, where he had first declared his love. After that, it became their special place, one that no one else knew about but them. Now that private connection felt violated, like this sanctum had been polluted by an outsider.

Located at the center of an elaborate maze, this courtyard, one of many in the royal gardens, remained deserted this time of day due to its distance from the palace. Most people rarely ventured this far.

“It doesn’t matter. You have interfered in my affairs for the last time.” He waved his hand and a golden statue, about a foot in height, in the form of an Egyptian Mau cat, materialized on the grey slate stones.

“Your mother’s symbol I believe,” he said with a sneer. It wasn’t a question. Her mother was well known to both pantheons. The cat represented her mother's worship symbol, the predatory symbol of a great warrior lioness.

She stared at the statue, mouth agape. “What are you going to do?”

“For your impertinence, I’m going to get rid of you once and for all,” he said, studying his finger tips, then fixing his intent gaze on her.

She took one step back and stopped. If she tried to run, he would catch her. His powers legendary, far surpassed her own. There was nowhere to run.

Bali looked around the courtyard. If she stood a chance of surviving this encounter, she'd need to do some fast talking. Taking a deep breath, she plunged in. "You cannot mean to banish me. That is not justice and you know it."

“I am a god. I can do as I wish,” he goaded. He smirked, making his usually sun kissed, blond good looks seem cruel and menacing.

“Listen, I can explain.” She held up her hands in supplication. “It is really quite simple. I saw Shatiri in the street as she passed by. You know I am a love-goddess and cannot help but bring together those who are destined to be united.”

He crossed his arms, not looking convinced. She continued in her defense, hoping his silence symbolic of a good omen, “Shatiri and Ashran are meant to be together. I had no choice. You cannot deny destiny.”

Apollo held up a hand, interrupting her. “I am a god, I can do as I like. Damn destiny.”

She shuddered. His blasphemy of the Fates only invited trouble. The three sisters didn't take such talk lightly. She would never speak so. But then, Apollo had been a reckless god since time began. It amazed her that he had gotten away with so much for so long without retribution from some pantheon or another, let alone the Fates themselves.

Her Egyptian House and his Greek House observed an uneasy truce. It wouldn't take much to upset the peace and throw them back into a warring state. This conflict could very well do just that.

“I have heard enough.” He turned and paced a few steps, throwing one arm out to cut off anything else she might have to say. “Your words do not absolve you. You should have checked before uniting those two. For your audacity in this matter, you will not be the only one to suffer, I assure you.”

“But...” she tried again.

“Enough!” he said, throwing his hand out once more as he turned back to her. “Shatiri was my favorite concubine and you stole her away. She was my property. Now she will have nothing of me for the love she now bears Ashran.”

She tried to speak but discovered her voice stolen. She clutched at her throat in horror, her eyes widened in disbelief. She looked around the courtyard, but saw no one who might offer help in her defense. Then she glimpsed a shifting, deep in the shadows behind one of the columns of the gazebo nearby. Were her eyes playing tricks on her? No, no one there to step forward and offer aid.

Apollo's booming voice rang out. Oh, no. Here it comes, the verdict. “I have heard all I need to hear. Bali of the Egyptian pantheon, daughter of the love goddess, Bastet, I sentence you to eternity inside this golden statue. Your punishment shall be to watch as the world passes by without your intervention, without your interference. Your powers are taken from you and given into the hands of my House.”

His words resonated inside her head like a gong. She clutched at her head as the ringing increased, making her dizzy. Then with a wave of Apollo's hand, she found herself surrounded by darkness.

This must be the inside of the statue, she decided, as what appeared to be Apollo's golden sandals filled her vision. Next, the courtyard stones and his feet disappeared,

replaced by blowing sand that quickly covered her, soon blocking all light. The suffocating darkness, the injustice of it all, threatened to overwhelm her.

She took slow deep breathes. Her racing heart began to even out.

What had her mother taught her when she was a little girl and the dark shadows painted ghoulish specters on her walls? Oh, yes. Bali closed her eyes and imagined a sunny day in the gardens, running and playing, chasing butterflies with her friends. She smiled. Such simple days of joy.

Remembering her mother's voice, singing her favorite lullaby, she began to hum along.

They would find her. They had to find her. She just had to hang on until they found her.

Back in the courtyard, a dark figure slowly moved out from its hiding place to stand beside Apollo.

“You were right to come to me with this matter. I will not have any god or goddess interfere in my business,” he said, hands on hips.

The figure bowed slightly. “Where did you send her?”

“That is none of your concern. However, for your wisdom, I will give you whatever you wish.”

“Thank you, Apollo, great god of Olympus.”

He nodded in recognition of the title, waiting for the woman's request.

“I know exactly what I want. There is a special power Bali possessed. I wish for it to be transferred to me.”

He eyed her with first surprised, then wary eyes. Powers of a goddess, even one of Bali's lowly status, could prove dangerous in the hands of another god. He stroked his

clean-shaven chin, considering. In this case, any power this goddess might wish to take would remain within the same House, so little harm could come of it.

Decision made, he said, "Granted. Name the power you wish to possess and it is yours."

Head still bowed, Apollo missed the woman's evil grin of triumph. Finally, she would take her rightful place in her House. The place she should have had since birth.

Chapter 1

I open the door to my favorite antique shop in Norman, Oklahoma. My best friend, Cheryl, reluctantly enters ahead of me as I hold the door for her.

"I don't know why you like to go antiquing. Dusty, dirty, and it smells," she complains. Her lip curls as she briefly examines a stack of tea stained linens draped over an old-fashioned, moss green print chair with carved, cherrywood feet. "And the only store we ever visit is this one."

True, but for some reason, this store never fails to lure me in.

I walk leisurely through the store, looking into every nook and cranny, satisfying my curious nature. "Oh, come on, Cheryl. Think of the history behind some of this stuff. It boggles the mind. Besides, it might help me out of my slump."

I spot a hat box on the floor and stoop to paw through its contents.

"Honey, I don't think you're going to find your inspiration in a dirty junkyard." She sneezes.

I duck my head to hide a smile. It never fails. Each time I talk Cheryl into coming along on one of my treasure hunting expeditions, she always says the same thing.

"Besides, our trip to London should give you all the inspiration you need to get going on your next book," she says, hunting for a tissue in her purse.

I frown at the reminder of the trip on which we will soon embark. I dread our coming excursion to London, which I know might seem odd since I have never traveled outside the country before. I should be excited, right? Well, I'm not; it feels too much like running away. I'm finished with that type of behavior, or so I hope. "Cheryl, I'm still not sure I want to go." I place the lid back on the hat box, not having found anything of interest, and move on to a table filled with antique toys. I admire a bright red vintage fire

engine. The tinkling laughter of a sandy haired little boy rings through my mind as he plays with it.

“Oh, no you don’t. Listen, trust me. It will be good for you, get you out of that stuffy apartment of yours.”

I grin and gesture to encompass our surroundings. “Isn’t that what we’re already doing?”

Cheryl rolls her eyes, then sneezes into her tissue again. “You call this getting out? We are inside after all. And you’ve been in this shop just about as much as you’ve been in your apartment. You practically live here,” she accuses.

I sigh and glance around, vaguely thinking: I need to find another antique store to explore. This shop didn’t get much new stuff in very often, but I usually found things I’d overlooked previously, so it never really got old. A laugh erupts in my mind, spawned by my own irony; everything in here is old, even the shopkeeper, Mr. Jeffers. I bite my lip to suppress a chuckle. “I know, but I love it here. The past fascinates me . . .” I glance at Cheryl again, “and it doesn’t cost me anything. Our trip is going to cost a fortune . . . well, at least a fortune for me.”

I grimace, not wanting to admit, even to myself, that even if I had a ton of money to burn, I wouldn’t. It’s in my nature, being a spendthrift. Or as Cheryl puts it, cheap. Deliberating turning my attention to my treasure hunt, I saunter over to the next table of goodies.

This is my chance, Bali thinks. They’re going to London. That’s in Europe. It has to be closer to home than this town in the middle of nowhere. I need to be careful not to let on about the value of my cage or she might not let me go when the time comes. People can be quite greedy when they don’t have money. Here they come.

What am I thinking? I can't control them. I'll be stuck here forever anyway. But maybe, maybe just this once . . . my powers might work? I'm up here! Oh, please, please, please take me home.

I roam for a few minutes then stop in front of a bookcase filled with all types of antique books, mostly tattered and worn cookbooks. On the top shelf sit a few non-literary items. The first, a brown wicker basket filled to overflowing with dried baby's breath. Next to that, two oddly shaped bookends that look like wooden baby shoes.

Then I spot it, a very dignified looking golden cat, covered in carved black symbols that at first glance, appear to be Egyptian in origin. How interesting. How did I miss that before?

Reaching up on my tiptoes, I stretch, trying to bring the statue down, but simply can't manage it. *Damn, I hate having short arms.*

"Cheryl, you're taller than me. Can you reach that cat on the top shelf?"

"Oh, no. I'm not going to touch anything in this store." She crosses her arms and strikes a stubborn pose. "I might catch something. If nothing else, I might get a sinus infection from breathing all this dust."

I blow out a breath in exasperation, more over the inconvenience of my shorter-than-average arms, than her refusal. "O.K. I'll get the manager. I might have questions about it anyway. Stay here and make sure no one else grabs it."

I head to the front of the store to track down an attendant, but not before I look back to find her glancing around the shop. I barely hear her say under her breath, "Honey, I don't think that will be a problem."

I roll my eyes. However, one could never be too careful. There is the chance someone might come in while I'm busy finding some help. The thought makes me pick up my pace.

A few minutes later, I return with the owner, Mr. Jeffers. "Yes, it's that cat on the top shelf. I'd like to see it please."

"Oh," the manager says. Standing so tall, he easily pulls the cat down. Envy sparks for a split second, then vanishes as he hands me the statue. "Strange, I didn't even know that was here."

"Wow, that's heavy," I say, weighing it in my hands. "What's it made of?"

"Lead," he repeats with a sage nod of the head.

"Lead? It's really heavy. Are you sure it isn't made of gold," I say jokingly. I wish. I never have that much good luck. Suddenly I hear a voice in my head reply, *that will soon change if I get my way.*

I look around, confused, then with a shake of my head, discount the voice as my imagination, which happens quite often. I write romances after all. My alter ego tags along and often offers an opposing opinion.

The manager obviously doesn't get my joke. He replies gravely, "No, Ma'am. That is made of lead. It might be gold plated, but I doubt it. Probably just gold paint," he sniffs.

Mr. Jeffers usual spiel is to brag about the quality of his merchandise. So, I can only assume his sudden pomposity reveals his embarrassment over this less than valuable item residing in his shop.

Gold paint! Lead! How dare he! No god or goddess would be caught dead in anything less than a precious metal like gold!

I hear the voice in my head again. Startled, this time I take a good look around, but see no one. “Who said that?”

What! You heard me?

“Of course I heard you. Where are you?” I peak around a partition to the left, then a wall to my right, looking for that voice.

The manager and Cheryl eye each other in confusion, then stare at me. “Who said what, honey?” Cheryl asks gently.

Catching the worry in Cheryl’s eyes, I decide it must be some teenage girl behind the shelving, pulling a prank. Or maybe my subconscious is just working overtime. The latter wouldn’t surprise me with all the material available in this store to spark my imagination. It never took much to do so. Except lately, I add, not wanting to lie to myself. In the end, I choose to ignore it. “Never mind,” I mumble, then add, “The heat must be getting to me.”

Turning to the manager, I ask, “So, how much do you want for it?”

“You want that thing?” Cheryl exclaims.

If she can hear me, I wonder if my other powers might work again also. Hmmmm.

I find myself staring at the statue in my hands, mesmerized by its shiny surface.

Then I hear that voice again. *You need it.*

The words circle round and round in my mind like an echo. In a wooden tone, I repeat, “I need it.”

“You need it? What do you mean, you need it?” Cheryl exclaims again. She shakes my shoulder jolting me out of my stupor. “Honey, are you O.K.? You have a strange look on your face.”

Wow, this is great. Maybe this person can help me . . . and by the looks of her bag lady style, could certainly use my help. Short, dirty blond hair, long brown skirt, with an equally long and loose-fitting tan blouse over it all. Obviously not the fashion plate like her bitchy friend. Of course, she has pretty blue eyes, like a soft summer sky. Probably her one redeeming feature, since the rest of her appears rather average. No makeup, no jewelry, and those glasses will have to go. This person simply screams help, and I'm just the goddess to accomplish the impossible.

Cheryl clears her throat and shakes my shoulder again, effectively bringing me back to reality. I shake my head. If that's my imagination, then I might need to check myself into a mental hospital.

"Honey, you may need to go home and rest. Let's go."

"No. No, I'm O.K." I take a deep breath and reply with calm assurance, "I meant, I like it."

"I don't know," she says doubtfully, "that thing gives me the creeps. Are you sure you want it hanging around your apartment. I can just see your cat and that thing. King Henry will probably take one look at it and arch his back, hissing." She hisses like a cat to demonstrate, holding her hands up like claws to give the full effect.

I giggle before covering my mouth with a hand and giving her a reproving look. "Shush. King Henry will love it."

With a finger to my lips I contemplate the statue. My decision made, I give Cheryl a shake of my head and a look meant to convey that she better not ruin my chances of haggling over the price. I really want this statue. With studied calm, I turn to Mr. Jeffers, and ask, "So, how much do you want for it?"

Before he can answer, something draws my focus back to the statue. I turn it over and over in my hands, surprised at how warm it feels. A warm rush washes over me, almost like a long lost friend, now found, welcoming me home.

It worked, yes! Now let's see if it works on this supercilious old man.

“You can have it for free,” the manager says, rubbing his forehead. He looks perplexed by his offer, as am I.

Whoohoo! Him too! My powers are back!

Cheryl and I look at each other then turn to the manager in utter amazement. “Free?” we ask at the same time.

“Yes, well, it’s not worth anything, and I doubt anyone else will want it.” Mr. Jeffers suddenly beams at me. “You come in here all the time, Ms. Peterson. It’s my gift to you.”

“Well, thanks, Mr. Jeffers.” I’m at a loss for the sudden and uncharacteristic compliment and offer. “I really appreciate that.” True, I come in here all the time, but I never buy anything. How strange.

“You’re welcome,” he smiles. “And, while you’re here, could you autograph my copy of your last book, *Summer Sonnets*? Mrs. Jeffers just loved that one.”

“Sure, I’d love to.” Pleasure and pride invade my very pores.

As Mr. Jeffers walks to the counter to find the book, I say to Cheryl, “See, being a writer can pay off in more ways than one.”

She rolls her eyes. “Yeah, you can get some really great junk. Let me see that thing.”

I reluctantly hand over the statue and warn, “Don’t drop it. It’s heavy.”

“Don’t worry. I doubt if a sledge hammer could break this ugly piece of tin.” As soon as she touches it, she gasps and draws her hand back. I snatch it up when she almost drops it.

“What happened?” I ask.

“It shocked me!”

I chuckle. “It what? It’s made of lead, Cheryl. Lead doesn’t conduct electricity,” I explain patiently.

“All I know is that thing shocked me when I touched it,” she grumbles.

“Maybe it doesn’t like you,” I taunt. Not getting many chances like this to tease her, I beam with a smug expression and continue, “Guess if you had been nicer, it wouldn’t have had to reprimand you.” I chuckle and turn away.

“The feeling’s mutual,” she mutters, as she trails after me.

As I head for the register to sign Mrs. Jeffer's book, I hear a giggle behind me. I smile. It never takes long for Cheryl to regain her sense of humor.

I frown. It didn't sound like her laugh. My stride falters, then steadily resumes as my focus intensifies on the golden Mau in my grip. All thoughts disappear, but one: This may be the best day of my life.

Chapter 2

I smile at Jon, who is smiling back at me, and sigh again. Daydreaming about my favorite movie actor does that to me. His gorgeous face is plastered across my computer screen. Probably not the best place for him, as he proves to be quite a distraction. And I'm already behind.

If daydreaming were an occupation, I'd be rich. I sigh again. All I've managed to do is avoid writing my novel for the past. . .I glance at the small antique clock sitting on my fireplace mantle and grimace. More than an hour has passed.

I place my chin in my hand and focus on Jon's smiling face. I can't help it. How can anyone be that good looking?

I glance to my small collection of DVDs. Most of them are Jon's movies. I contemplate watching one of them again. One I've already seen a hundred times pops to mind. *Romance in Paris*.

I snort. Someone really goofed on the title. It's more of a macho action movie than a romance; although, I have to admit it does contain some romance, if you call a sadistic girlfriend who betrays and tries to kill him romantic.

I sigh, resigned. With a last glance at Jon's photo, I bring my word processor window forward.

The blank white page taunts me to come up with something new and interesting. Two weeks. Two weeks and not one damn word. I don't get it. I've never had so many problems coming up with material for my books. I sit back and stare into space.

What's wrong with me? I cross my arms and look to the large poster of Jon on my wall. I love his movies. He plays strong characters so well. I've played before with the

idea of using him as a model for one of the heroes in my books. But what heroine type would complement him well enough?

I bite my lip and eye my journal sitting on my bookshelf. I retrieve it and sit back down. Getting the spark of an idea, I flip through the pages.

Ever since I discovered Jon, my ideal man—O.K., ideal in my mind because no man could ever live up to my imagination—I've been writing my thoughts down about him.

Jon. The name makes me smile. He prefers the name Jonny in real life. All his friends and family call him that. He uses Jonathan as his stage name. So formal. I can relate.

My family did the same with me, calling me by my middle name, Lynn. But I use my first name, Kimberly as my professional name. My friends even call me Lynn, which gets quite confusing sometimes when they also work in my profession. But somehow I manage to keep them straight . . . so far.

I look at his picture again. No. I've never thought of him as a Jonny, too juvenile, or a Jonathan, too stiff and stuck-up. Jon, that's what I call him. That's how I think of him; the middle road between playfully young and stuffily formal.

Placing the journal on my desk, I look back at the white blank page on my computer again. Then, what if . . . no. That's too creepy. Isn't it?

What if I wrote myself as the heroine? Is that too farfetched? I mean, what do I have in common with Jon? He's famous, a movie star, rich, and he goes out with model types. I'm none of those things, just plain old me; a plain Jane next to his sex-god perfection. Then again, they do say opposites attract.

He jet sets around the world. I've never even been out of the U.S. How would we even get together? I flush. In the story I mean.

I place an index finger on my lips, contemplating the possibilities. I shake my head. This is crazy.

With a huff I grab my coffee cup and rise to get some more tea. It's bad enough that I daydream about that beautiful smile, his incredible body, and those intense crystal blue eyes. My cup runs over at the tap. I shut the water off and pour off the excess. Placing the cup in the microwave, I pull down a green tea bag from the cabinet.

Once I finish making my tea, I move back to my desk, and pick up the journal. After reading for a bit, I make a decision. I'll do it. I'll use Jon as my hero. What do I have to lose at this point anyway? If it stinks I'll just toss it out. At least I'll be writing something.

My brow creases as ideas and scenarios start to form. I start to type. One in particular catches my imagination so completely, I'm soon wrapped up in it, living it vicariously in my mind and typing furiously to catch every detail of the experience.

My clock on the mantle chimes the hour. I look up, surprised to find it's after midnight.

Whew, what a run. Looks like my block has vanished. At least for now. Thank you, Jon.

I look at the page count. Wow, forty pages. In only three hours? A new record.

A huge grin splits my face, before a huge yawn catches me by surprise. I stretch and then reread the ending of the last scene I just wrote.

He opens the door to his suite and ushers me inside.

I close my eyes and savor the images I just entered. What would it be like to experience this for real? What would it be like to experience this with Jon in reality?

I cross my arms on the desk as a pillow for my head. My hand absently caresses the paw of my newest acquisition. Before I fall asleep, I vaguely reflect about Cheryl's comment earlier; King Henry really didn't like my new statue. How odd that no one else likes it but me, I ponder as I drift to sleep.

* * *

London, England. So many delicious possibilities come to mind.

Jon Tweets the message that he's at the same street corner as I in London.

I tweet back, "I'm here. Where are you?"

I look around the crowded street. Not expecting a reply, I start as my phone beeps. The text message reads, "Behind you."

I swing around quickly expecting to see Jon. But no, only crowds of people mill about. My action however, has given me away. When I turn back, he's there.

"Looking for me?" When I only stare, he gives me that sly grin, as if he thinks he knows me as the typical groupie just out for an autograph.

He takes out a pen from his pocket, then wrests the travel guide from my hand.

"Kimberly, isn't it?" he asks, as he puts pen to paper. His beautiful Irish accent makes me want to swoon. What is it about a European accent in an American ear?

Is this a dream? I finally find my tongue and wrest the guide from his hand. A brief but all too electrifying shock races up my arm where our hands have met. I stifle my gasp. "That's O.K. I don't want your signature."

He seems momentarily shocked before he recovers. He places the pen back in his pocket. He gazes into my eyes and says, in all seriousness, "Then, what do you want?"

"I think you know, Jon," I say, out of character. I suddenly possess the courage of a lioness. I pause. I'm in my forties now. Would that make me a cougar? Oh, well, this is a dream, after all, so I can do what I want.

Surprised again at my use of his name, and the shortening of it, he laughs, thinking it a joke. Then, as he catches my expression, he soberes.

"You don't even know me, lady. Why?" he asks, more curious than mad.

"I've never . . . you know," I take a deep breath for courage before saying, "I want it to be you."

Jon takes my hand and kisses it lingeringly while holding my gaze. He considers what I've said. I bite my lip as I feel his soft, cool lips caress the flesh of my hand. I imagine how those luscious lips would feel on my body and a shiver races through me. He winks at me before releasing my hand and turning away. I take that as a rejection, and turn in the opposite direction, only to find my hand once more caught in his.

"Don't go away," he murmurs, holding my gaze, then turning once more and releasing me.

I stand, mesmerized. His butt is a work of art. I watch as that perfect backside walks a few feet to where his friends stand, waiting for his return.

They glance at me briefly before turning knowing smiles back at Jon. What has he told them? A desperate fan needs him to make love to her? I turn bright red at the thought, the utter audacity of my request. He must get propositioned all the time by his bevy of groupies. How humiliating. Then again, how exhilarating.

I pause. Just how many of those fans has he accommodated? Then, my thoughts turn back to my own actions. Never in my life have I behaved so boldly. Well, O.K., I did

proposition my brief, one-hour, somewhat boyfriend in college. I only wanted a kiss, and he wouldn't even give me that.

Now, here I am asking a stranger. . .well not entirely a stranger, if all the tabloids are correct; I do know something about the man. I even felt a close tie to him when reading about his real life growing up, the loss of his mother, the same month as mine died. I may know a few facts about him; I've seen all his movies, and dreamt of him for years. But he doesn't know me. I'll just be another one-night stand to him.

His friends start off down the street and Jon heads back in my direction. Taking my hand again, he says, "Come with me." We start walking.

"So you came all the way to England to sleep with a stranger?"

Oh great! I didn't think my face could get any hotter. Now, it's on fire.

"Not exactly."

"Oh, so when you heard I was around you just decided, what the heck? He's here. I'm here. Why not?"

"Not exactly."

He raises an eyebrow. I drop my hand from his but continue walking. "I didn't think you would be here."

He raises his brow again when I don't continue.

"O.K. So I was shocked. I didn't really think you'd even respond when I found out you were in London, too." I look down at the street, not willing to meet his gaze any longer. "I thought you would be in Barcelona actually."

"What?" he barks a laugh. "Why would you think I'd be there?"

"It's nothing really."

"Oh no. This I've got to hear."

"Well, you see I was going to Barcelona with a writer's group. Then, I thought you'd be here. When this trip came up, I decided to come here." I shrug. "I just figured that if I was meant to come here, then that must mean you'd be there, where I was originally supposed to be." I glance his way. Not sure of his blank expression, I look down again and shrug once more, embarrassed.

"So, let me see if I've got this. You never expected me to be here or anywhere you might be?"

I nod, examining our surrounds so I don't have to look at him. "Silly, I know."

"No, but rather pessimistic of you, isn't it?" He hops in front of me, walking backwards, and endeavors to catch my eye. He succeeds. His youthful action surprises a smile out of me.

I can't help but stare at him. He's so handsome. When I don't answer he sighs, then stops. It catches me by surprise, and I stop to keep from plowing into him.

He places his hands in the back pockets of his jeans. "So, why the proposition?" he asks.

I glance around, anywhere but at him; I'm too embarrassed to answer.

"Have you changed your mind then?" he says quietly.

That gets my attention and my eyes snap to his. I bite my lip and shake my head hoping upon hope that he won't back out. I really meant what I said.

He looks into my wide blue eyes, trying to decide what to do. He points back over his shoulder and I realize we've arrived. "We're here," he points out, gesturing behind him.

So soon? My eyes get wider, if possible. I gulp visibly.

Then, grabbing my courage by the throat, I take his hand in mine and wait for him to make the decision.

Reading something in my expression, he nods, then leads me up the stairs, and into the main lobby of the most beautiful hotel I've ever seen. The decorative molding looks to be centuries old, all done in gold leaf. It almost looks like the lobby of an art museum.

We keep walking as my eyes swing back and forth, trying to catch every nuance. Then, we enter the elevator. He releases my hand; I wish he hadn't. My hands fidget; I'm so nervous. I place them behind my back.

The mirrored interior shows us side by side. How could I be so stupid? I don't belong with him. Look how gorgeous he is. He's a frickin' star. And I'm a nobody. A plain Jane next to his . . . Apollo, Hermes, Zeus? Maybe. Which god had that sinister, bad boy look? Hmmm.

I plunge back into reality as I realize he is staring back at me in the mirror. I drop my eyes quickly and blush again. Maybe he won't notice in the dim elevator.

"What were you thinking just now?" He asks quietly.

So much for hoping he wouldn't notice. When I won't look at him, he captures my chin with one finger. When our gazes lock for what seems like an eternity, the doors open with a ding. Saved by the bell. A little hysterical tickle grips my funny bone. I compress my lips to keep it from bursting forth from my mouth.

Before releasing my eyes, he gives me one of his bad boy, naughty looks and murmurs, "Hmmm, guess we'll work on that answer presently."

He winks before stepping out of the still open doors, then walks slowly, leisurely down the plush hallway. I follow, all mush inside from that mischievous wink. I've seen

it so often on screen. The one that makes me melt inside. *He opens the door to his suite and ushers me inside.*

* * *

She's asleep. It's interesting how my powers reappeared. Why is that? No matter, I'm just glad they're back. I wonder if I can contact my family now? No harm in giving it another try. Here goes.

Bali closes her eyes and allows herself to drift into the mist, another dimension where her spirit is able to connect with others of her kind. Her disembodied self opens her eyes to see white mists surrounding her. She turns, searching each direction for some sign of another presence.

“Hello? Helloooooo? Can anyone hear me?”

She hears a voice. “Bali? Bali, is that you?”

“Ishe?” From the mists appears the form of her childhood friend. “Ishe!”

She runs to him, throwing herself into his arms.

“I’m so glad I finally got through. I’ve been trying ever so long. Where is everyone? How’s my family? Tell me everything!”

“Slow down,” Ishe says with a laugh, returning her embrace.

“I’m sorry, I’ve just missed you all so much!” Bali starts to cry and hugs Ishe hard.

“Bali, Bali, don’t cry. It’s O.K.” Ishe hugs her back and strokes a comforting hand down her back. Once Bali calms, Ishe pulls back and asks, “Where are you? Where have you been? We’d almost given up all hope of finding you.”

Bali sniffs and tries to regain some control over her emotions. Of all the people she would want to speak to, it would be him.

“I’ve been trapped...in a golden statue.” She throws out a hand to one side. “It’s a long story.” She grabs Ishe’s shoulders with both hands. “Ishe, I’m not sure how much time I have to talk. I’ve been trying forever to speak to someone, and this is the first time it’s worked.”

“So what changed that you can speak now? What happened?”

“I met a woman, a human. It is because of her that I have regained my powers, but I don’t know how. There must be something special about her, maybe her ancestry is in some way connected to us. I don’t know.” Bali releases Ishe and rubs her forehead, thinking it through.

“So where are you?” Ishe says, bringing Bali back to the issue at hand.

“In a place called Oklahoma. It is in the middle of the Americas, a place called the United States. Do you know it?”

“Yes, it is very far from home.”

“This woman I met is going to London. Is it any closer to home?”

“Yes, somewhat. But...” Ishe hesitates and looks away from Bali, avoiding eye contact.

“But what?”

Finally, he looks her in the eye and says, “Bali, you must not come home right now. There is trouble, and your return would not be welcome.”

“What! What do you mean? Of course, I need to return home. If I return, I might be freed from this unjust imprisonment. Please, Ishe. I cannot stay in this cage any longer. I believe it will drive me mad.” Bali starts to cry again.

After a moment, Ishe says, “Bali, it will be O.K.” He takes her by the shoulders in a firm grip. “Hang on just a little longer. I will talk to you again once things settle down. In the meantime, get to London and contact me again when you get there. O.K.?”

Bali grips Ishe’s arms. “Ishe, I don’t understand, but I will do as you ask. Will you tell my family I love them and will see them as soon as possible?”

Ishe’s image starts to fade back into the mist. “Ishe?” She watches his mouth move, but cannot hear him any longer. His image disappears entirely just before she is slammed heavily back into her cell. “Ishe!

Chapter 3

I jerk awake. What woke me, and from such a delicious dream? My favorite dream man, Jon, was just about to make love to me.

A knock sounds again. Whoever interrupted the best part of my dream is in serious trouble.

"Just a minute," I croak from a parched throat. My computer screen is black; it must be in hibernation mode. I run my finger over the pad and sure enough, it comes back to life. Good, still there. I hit save just to make sure.

The knock sounds again. I clear my throat before yelling a tad more impatiently, "Just a minute." I open the door to see my best friend and critique partner, Cheryl, standing before me. We tell each other everything. Well, almost everything. For instance, I might not share what I just wrote, yet, or ever. We may be friends, but knowing Cheryl, she would blow things way out of proportion. I'd never hear the end of it. She is so outrageous sometimes, and I don't think I could handle what she might come up with this time if she knew.

"Where have you been?" She asks, hands on hips.

"What?" I step back, make a sweeping bow, bidding her to enter.

She accepts, entering like a queen. She saunters over to a kitchen barstool and takes a seat. I close the door, then head for the kitchen. She likes coffee. I prefer tea, but I keep a coffee maker handy since we spend a lot of time together discussing our stories. I open a cabinet to get the instant coffee, and start fixing her a cup. As usual, I grimace; I will never understand how she can drink this cheap stuff.

"So, what's up with you?"

"What do you mean?"

"I tried to call you last night, but you never answered."

"Sorry. I took the phone off the hook so I could concentrate. The phone!"

Snapping my fingers, I rush to place it back in its cradle.

"You never do that. Are you still having trouble coming up with a story?"

I shrug, not ready to reveal my ideas about my new story just yet. I get a coffee cup down, place a teaspoon of coffee grounds in it, then move to the sink to add hot water.

"Girl, don't you worry. Our trip to London will be just the thing to get rid of that writer's block."

"I don't know, Cheryl. It feels more like running away." I stir the strong concoction, then place it, along with a bowl of sugar cubes, and a jug of French Vanilla cream, her favorites, down in front of her.

"It's not. Believe me. When I get blocked, it really helps to move to a new location." She takes two sugar cubes and plops them into her cup, stirs, then takes a sip.

"Gives you a new perspective. Besides, you've never been abroad before. You need this."

I grab my cup and fix myself some tea before sitting down next to her. I dunk my tea bag a few more times before removing it with my spoon. I pinch a sugar cube from the bowl in front of her, adding it to my cup, then take a sip. "I don't see why I need to spend so much money, which I don't have by the way, just to get a new perspective. Can't I get one here and save the airfare?" I know this will irritate her, as we've had this conversation before. I take another sip, lingering with the rim against my lips, striving to hide my grin.

As expected, she huffs and takes the bait. "Girl, you can't write anything exciting that you haven't already experienced."

I choke on my tea. Oh, if she only knew what I experienced last night. I grab a napkin and mop up the spill and my chin.

"So, what time do you want me to pick you up tomorrow?"

"What! I thought we were going next Thursday."

"Kimberly, I told you a week ago," she says, exasperated. "It's tomorrow. We need to be at the airport by noon. Don't you ever listen, or write anything down?"

I glance at the pinup calendar on my fridge and grimace. I must have forgotten to write it down. Shit! I never remember anything unless I put it on paper. Cheryl has badgered me so much about this trip over the past few months; my not writing it down is probably a defense mechanism I've constructed in rebellion against the whole idea. I try one last time to argue my way out of it, even though I know it's a wasted effort. Arguing with Cheryl is like trying to move the Rock of Gibraltar—impossible. I give it another attempt just the same.

"I'm not even packed. How will I get ready in time?" I take my empty cup to the sink and rinse it out, then place it in the drainer. I turn back to Cheryl, hoping this might be the perfect excuse to get out of our trip. "I have too much to do to be ready that soon. Maybe we should just forget it, go another time."

"Oh no you don't. I know what you're trying to do, and it won't work." She moves to my desk and grabs a pad of paper and a pen. Then, she grabs my arm and makes me sit back down at the bar. "I'll dig out your suitcases while you make out a list of what you need to accomplish. Then, I'll help you pack."

I grin as she slams paper and pen down in front of me. That's my friend, powerhouse, and all around BFF. I'm very lucky to have such a caring friend. I watch as

she races off to find my suitcases. I shake my head and grin. Taking a deep breath I pick up my pen and get busy with my to-do list.

Chapter 4

Home - Next Day

I had that dream again. This time we went all the way. I smile as the images linger. Jon was everything I imagined. Strong, gentle, playful. My dream man.

Of course, I'd never do anything like that in real life. I'm just not the kind of girl who sleeps around, let alone with a complete stranger. I pause on my way to the bathroom. Is Jon a complete stranger? Of course he is! I slap my forehead, exasperated at myself as I head off to get dressed. Duh! Just because I know a few details about his life doesn't mean I really know him. Besides, there is the possibility that all those news articles are fabricated lies used drum up publicity. He could be an entirely different person from his public image.

After running some errands last night for our trip, I worked on my novel some more. I rummaged through my journalized daydreams of Jon, trying to find the ones I thought might be inspirational for my book. So far, my imagination seems to have plenty of fuel to keep going. I wrote at least twenty more pages, including the love scene I dreamed.

Picking up my journal now, a paper falls out onto the floor. Laying the book down, I bend to pick it up. I cringe as I read it. It's a fan letter I'd written Jon two months ago but never had the courage to mail. I don't do fan mail. I've never been the kind to act the groupie.

Reading it again, I'm glad I didn't send it to him after all. It asks if Jon wants to be my pen pal. How pathetic. He probably gets mail like this from thousands of desperate women asking for the same thing. Among other things, I'm sure.

Folding the note in half, I move to toss it in the waste basket, then hesitate briefly before placing it back in my journal. It may be silly, but for some reason I want to keep it.

Sitting down at my computer I boot it up, then reread my last chapter. I decided last night to recount the dream from the previous night, the deliciously naughty one interrupted by Cheryl.

As I read, I pick up my lucky statue. I rub its slick gold surface, and warmth seems to radiate from it with every stroke. I finish rereading the end of the chapter and sigh. "Too bad real life can't be what we imagine," I say out loud.

I put the cat back on the corner of my desk, and shut down my laptop. Cheryl will be here within the hour. My bags are in the bedroom. I just need to pack my laptop in my carry on and I'll be set. Cheryl doesn't know it yet, but I plan to get some work done on this vacation . . . if only to write down any ideas that come to mind.

My eyes are drawn to my golden cat. Can I take my statue with me? I hesitate, but in the end decide not to take it. It's just too heavy, and I don't want to cause any trouble at the airport security checkpoints. After all, a lead statue could be a lethal weapon. Heavens, I could hijack the plane. I'd only have to bash about a hundred people in the head to get control of it. Or, I could walk right into the cockpit and conk two people and save myself all the trouble. I grin to myself at this newest daydream.

I pick up the cat and take it into my bedroom. Putting it into my case, I close and lock it, then completely forget about what I just did.

So you want your dreams to come true? Your wish is my command, Bali answers herself with a chuckle.

* * *

I'm waiting for Cheryl to arrive. I go through my bag once more just to check and make sure I haven't forgotten anything, when I spot it. My statue is buried at the bottom of my bag. How did that get there? I take it out and study it. With a shake of my head I walk back into my living room and place it on my desk once more.

I rub one of its paws gently with my index finger. Then, I hear it. I glance to King Henry, my cat, sitting on the couch across the room. How strange. I can hear him purring all the way over here? But, no, that's not possible. He's too far away.

I snatch my hand away quickly when I hear a voice say, *Hello*.

"Who, who's there?" My head whips around the room searching for the voice, but I don't see anyone.

"Who's there?" I ask, louder this time. I pick up my statue, the only heavy object within reach, intending to bash whoever said that into oblivion. "Come out. I have a weapon."

I can't, the voice says.

"Why not?" I ask with caution.

I'm trapped.

"Trapped? Trapped where?"

In here.

"Where is here? I don't see you," I say, perplexed and getting a little irritated at this silly conversation.

Yes, you do. In fact, you are holding me at this very moment.

"What?" I whisper. I lower the statue and stare at it with wide eyes.

Yes, that's me.

The eyes of the cat glow. I scream and drop the statue. It lands on its side with a heavy thud, despite the plush beige carpeting.

“No. There has to be someone here. That’s crazy. Statues don’t talk.” I start to pace, occasionally eyeing the statue, then looking about expecting some stranger to pop out of the woodwork.

I stop and say to myself, “Well, I do talk to King Henry.” I spot my cat, who is contentedly licking his paw, then occasionally stops to look at me before continuing with his grooming. Then, reason returns. “But he never answers back.” I start to pace again, then stop just as quickly with another thought.

“Maybe I’m finally going insane? Cheryl said I might one day if I didn’t date more.”

I throw my arms out in exasperation at myself, and Cheryl. “Oh pooh, I’m overreacting here. And when do I ever listen to Cheryl’s crazy ideas?”

I chew on my thumbnail as I pace. “O.K. So, I’m not going crazy. I did hear a voice, but no one is here. Hmmm . . .”

I pick up the statue again and eye it. It’s heavy. The antique dealer assured me it was made of lead, not gold, only gold paint. Simply the figure of an Egyptian cat, sitting with its head held high. That’s the one thing I noticed in the shop about it. It seemed so noble and proud. However, what really drew me in was its emerald eyes. They seemed to twinkle with fire and life and . . . love?

“That must be it,” I whisper. “I rubbed the statue when I was thinking about . . . Oh no! No! That’s crazy!” I slowly place the statue back on my desk, and back away from it. My hand covers my mouth, horrified at the thoughts tumbling through my mind. I start to pace again, trying to figure this out.

"No, no, no. I don't believe in superstitious crap like that." A spotlight comes on in my head and I hear my friend Cheryl's voice, even though she isn't in the room. My subconscious just sounds like her these days.

"Don't you?" My imaginary Cheryl says. She continues, "Remember that rabbit's foot you bought on our trip to Yellowstone last year?"

"So, that's not the same," I argue, chewing on a fingernail.

"Isn't it? You rubbed the thing raw the entire time we were there. Kept chanting about volcanoes and eruptions under your breath."

"I just liked how soft it was. And, I wasn't chanting. I just talk to myself once in a while," I grumble, embarrassed that my friend knows me so well.

"Uh huh. And what about that time . . ."

"Never mind. I get the idea. O.K., so what do I do now?" When no answers present themselves, I throw my hands up in the air in defeat.

"My imagination is just working overtime here, right? Wouldn't be the first time," I answer myself. I decide a closer examination is in order. I tentatively pick up the statue and study it more closely.

Immediately a voice interrupts my examination with, *Purrrrhaps I should introduce myself?*

I jump but manage to hold onto the statue this time.

"What is this? Am I going crazy?" I whisper, half afraid of getting an affirmative reply.

Of course not.

"Isn't that what all people's brains tell them when, in fact, they are going crazy?"

I don't think so, but then I don't know any crazy people. Unless you count a few gods I've had the bad luck of being acquainted with. Like the bastard who put me in here for instance. Or, those sadistic bitches, the fates. They love to mess with everyone's destinies. Guess they have nothing better to do.

“Huh?”

Never mind. That is not important. My name is Bali. I am a great love goddess like my mother, Bastet, before me. When Kim says nothing, just continues to stare, Bali says, *So I take it you have never heard of me or my mother?*

I shake my head no, dumbfounded.

I figured that. I really am in an uncivilized land.

“Hey, I resent that,” I say, coming out of my frozen stupor. “Oklahoma is not uncivilized.” I backpedal a little, “Well, maybe a little rough around the edges. But, we have the arts, sophisticated theatre, and then, we have a pro basketball team.”

Sorry, but I am not impressed. And a sports team doesn't define civilization.

“What about the Romans then? They had sporting events all the time and they were civilized.”

I hear a sniff then, *The games they played weren't civilized, believe me. Besides, they fell eventually, didn't they?*

I sit down at my desk. I know by her tone of voice that that wasn't a question. I sigh, not wanting to debate ancient history with a love goddess. The odds of my winning the argument weren't very high. Conceding the point for now, I say, “Whatever.”

I rest my case, Bali says in a smug tone.

I place the statue on my desk and start to release it.

No! Bali screams inside my mind, just before I jerk my hand away in surprise.

“Ow! What? What’s wrong?”

Silence reigns. “Why aren’t you saying anything? What happened?” After a few moments I touch the statue again and hear Bali again.

You can’t stop touching me.

“Sorry. I’m not usually the touchy feely type.” I remove my hand quickly, and pace across the room, before returning to stand before the statue again.

After a moment I say, “I’m sorry I offended you.” When Bali doesn’t respond, I continue, “Gees, you don’t have to pout about it. I apologized, didn’t I? No need to hold a grudge.” I continue to lecture the statue for a few minutes, then pat its head and hear, *Shut up!* shouted at top volume.

“Hey!” I jerk my hand away again, coving my ears with both hands for a moment, even though the voice resounded in my head, not my ears. “What is wrong with you? You may be a goddess, but you don’t have to be rude.” I sit and lean back in my chair, fold my arms across my chest, and glare at it. Then, I soften when Bali remains quiet.

“So, I guess goddesses don’t apologize, huh?” Nothing.

“Bali?” I hesitate, then touch the statue again on one golden paw.

Kim, is it?

“Yes,” I say cautiously, ready to pull away quickly if she decides to shout again.

You didn't let me finish. You can't stop touching me, if you want to hear me, Bali explains in slow, measured tones.

“Oh.” Then, what she said clicks. “Ohhhhhh. Sorry. I thought you meant . . .”

Yeah, I know. I didn't really understand the connection until you took your hand off me earlier when you were sleeping and I lost contact with my friend Ishe.

“Ishe, who’s Ishe? How many of you are in there anyway?”

Before Bali can answer, a knock at the door makes me start. "Who's there?" I call out warily.

"It's me, Kim," Cheryl answers. She pounds again. "Let me in."

I open the door to find Cheryl dressed in one of her easy-breezy dresses in a mint-green chiffon fabric on my doorstep. I continue to hold the door open, blocking the entry, and stare at her. Doesn't she know, or even care about airplane safety? Everyone knows you wear slacks or jeans, and sneakers in case the plane goes down somewhere, and you need to escape quickly from the burning wreckage. Unless you land in the ocean. But then, who'd want to be thrashing around in shark infested waters in a dress?

"So, are you ready?" Cheryl's question snaps me back to reality. "We need to leave now if we're to make it to the airport on time."

I swallow. "Yeah, sure." I look behind me, wondering what I should do about my uninvited guest. "I'll be right down." I begin to close the door.

"You don't need any help with your bags?" She makes a move to enter but I block her, not wanting her to see Bali. Then, I remember, Cheryl has seen Bali. But what if she touches Bali and hears her speak too? Hey, that might not be such a bad idea. If Cheryl can hear her as well, maybe that will prove I'm not crazy and hearing voices, right?

Cheryl eyes me critically. "Are you O.K. sweetie? You look a little pale. Aren't you feeling well?" She raises a hand to feel my forehead. I jerk away before she makes contact.

"Huh? Oh, yeah. I'm fine. I'm fine." I give her a small smile, sure it's showing more as a pea-green sick kind of smile. "I don't need any help." Yeah, sure, my conscious replies with a hysterical laugh thrown in. "You go on to the car. I'll be right down. Just give me a few minutes and I'll go get my bags."

I quickly close the door in her face, then lean back against it as I stare at the statue. I don't think my idea of letting Cheryl touch my statue would be a good idea. It gives me a bad feeling. I'm not sure I want to know if I'm crazy or not. I walk slowly toward it, then touch it's head lightly. "So, what now?"

Put me in your carry-on, and I'll explain on the plane.

"Great. My carry-on." I can't wait to haul this heavy hunk of metal through a crowded airport. Guess I can skip my workouts this trip. I pick up the talking statue and carry it with me into the bedroom. "Security should be fun," I add.

Don't worry about security. Just keep a hand on me, and let me do the rest.

"Great," I say, not sure I believe Bali, or that some other freaky thing might not occur on this trip. I place her in my bag just as Cheryl pounds my door again and yells for me to hurry up.

Chapter 5

I sit next to Cheryl on the plane, my carry-on at my feet. I got the window seat, which really annoyed Cheryl, but she gave in graciously in order to make my trip the best one of my life. She's such a great friend.

I glance at my bag, then glance at Cheryl. She's got a sleep mask over her eyes, breathing softly as she snoozes. If I sleep I'd probably shake the plane apart with my snoring. I grimace at the thought.

I eye my bag again. Is it O.K. to place it in my lap now? When we first boarded the stewardess told me I needed to stow it under the seat in front of me until we were in the air. Well, now we're in the air, so I guess it would be O.K. I need to make sure I don't wake up Cheryl, though.

With that goal in mind, I slowly lean forward and grab my purple, oversized bag by its cheap plastic handles, lifting it gingerly and placing it in my lap. I glance at Cheryl. She's still asleep. Good.

I open my bag and reach my hand inside. I feel the smooth, warm surface of the cat. I lean forward and whisper into my bag, "So talk." I glance sideways and find my gaze locked with that of the passenger sitting on the other side of Cheryl. I offer him a grin. He raises a big bushy eyebrow before shaking his head and going back to reading his magazine. I bite my lip and lean back in my seat, keeping my hand on the statue in my purse. I close my eyes and listen.

So, where were we? Oh, yes. Well, I was trapped in this statue by Apollo.

My eyes snap open at that. "What?" I exclaim out loud, drawing several people's attention.

Cheryl snorts awake, raises her mask and asks, "What? What's wrong?"

The forty-something bald man next to her eyes me suspiciously.

“Uh, nothing. I’m O.K. I just need to go to the bathroom.” I get up, holding my bag close to my chest, and ease out into the aisle. “I’ll be right back.” I offer Mr. Baldie an apology as I inch past him, almost stepping on his foot in the process.

As I make my way to the back of the plane, I hear the man say to Cheryl, “Is your friend O.K.? She seems a little strange.”

I hear Cheryl say, “She is not. You’re the strange one, buddy.”

I smile. My best friend, Cheryl. She’s always got my back.

“Listen lady, I’m not the one talking to my travel bag.”

I hurry down the aisle to the bathrooms at the back of the plane, but not before I hear Cheryl reply, “Look here mister . . .” I’m sure she’s giving him an earful. That’s one thing about Cheryl, she’s not afraid to speak her mind. No matter the situation, she’ll go all out.

I reach the bathroom but the ‘occupied’ sign is on. I stand there and wait, smiling as a stewardess passes back and forth a few times delivering drinks.

“Still in there?” One of the stewardesses asks after about five minutes pass.

“Yeah.” I shrug my shoulders, and offer a small smile in answer to her frowning annoyance on my behalf. She knocks on the door. “Hello?” she says through it. “Others are waiting, sir. Will you be much longer?”

“Oh, no, please don’t. It’s O.K., really. I don’t mind waiting,” I tell her, embarrassed.

Let her. I’m tired of being in this dark bag. I can’t see a thing in here. Bali’s muffled voice startles me. I jump and reply without thinking, “Don’t be rude. He’ll be out of there soon enough.”

The stewardess replies, “It’s not rude for me to remind him there are others waiting. Believe me honey, some people take their own sweet time. If you don’t hurry them along, you might never get your turn.”

She’s right you know. Give people an inch, they take a mile.

“Quiet, she might hear you.”

“It’s O.K., I’m sure whoever it is needs to hear what I just said. Don’t you worry, I’m sure they’ll be out more quickly now. I’ll check back with you in a few.” The stewardess gives me a smile and moves away to her drink duties.

She can’t hear me.

“How do you know?” I whisper.

Because, only you heard me in the antique store, remember? Your friend and Mr. Jeffers didn’t even bat an eyelash.

“Oh, that’s right. I remember now.”

The door to the bathroom finally opens and out steps a sex-god right out of my most torrid dreams. Dark blond hair, dark eyes, buff, and pumped full of testosterone. He looks me up and down, smirks, then gives me a quick wink while flipping the zipper on his jeans up with a quick snap. With one more glance up and down at my grey sweatshirt and baggy, faded denims, he dismisses me, and moves away up the aisle toward the front of the plane. I take a deep breath and hold it as I watch a very firm backside cupped by tight-fitting jeans move with precision up the aisle in a slow masculine saunter.

It’s then I go into dream mode, my favorite state of mind. In my mind’s eye I see Mr. Buff naked, his golden skin perfectly contrasted with pure white Egyptian cotton sheets, 700-count threads. I can feel the softness of the sheets and the hardness of his muscles as they both caress my body. Such a delicious sensation. I can see us rolling

around, kissing, and caressing each other. Or, my dream could go like this, he comes out of the bathroom and grabs me into his arms, dragging me back into the tight-fitting cubicle where we get all black-and-blue, hitting the walls of the tight confines while attempting to make passionate love. Then . . .

The plane hits an air pocket which makes the plane jolt, pulling me out of my sinfully satisfying daydream. I fan my flushed face with my hand. Mr. Buff is probably in first class. I sniff and enter the bathroom, shutting the door. Suddenly, I feel a little guilty for daydreaming about anyone. Makes me feel like I cheated on Jon, which is ridiculous considering we've never even met. I shake off the unwanted feelings, rationalizing that Jon sees other women all the time and probably daydreams about the rest, too.

I raise my chin. I'm a healthy adult female. As my grandmother would say, "I may be old, but I'm not dead yet." Well, I'm not old, but the last part still applies.

I'm in full justification mode now. I'm an artist after all. Artists are supposed to appreciate the human form. It's only natural. I take a deep breath and spot my flushed face in the mirror.

Why are you breathing funny?

"What? Oh, Mr. Buff and Stuck-up just came out the bathroom, then gave me the haughtiest and most dismissive look you can imagine.

What? Oh, man, I wish I'd seen him. Not many good looking men come into the antique store. Mostly old geezers looking for farm implements and antique trains. Bali sighs, I remember a time when I was surrounded by good looking gods. I could look at them for decades, even millennia on end. She sighs again.

"Well, I suppose this one would have fit right in to your circle. I certainly got the impression that he thought of himself as a god." I sit my bag on the counter and remove

the statue, placing it on the remaining counter space next to the child size sink. There's only enough room to stand, let alone squat. How did Mr. Buff manage with all that muscle? "So, tell me your story. You said Apollo put you in there?"

Yes, he did.

"Apollo, like Greek god Apollo?"

Yes, one in the same.

"So, why did he do that, and why a cat? Are you some type of criminal or something?"

He certainly thinks so, but no. I'm not a criminal. He unjustly imprisoned me in here. The cat is my mother's symbol. Bastet is symbolized by an Egyptian cat, a Mau cat to be exact. Anyway, Apollo was involved with a human female named, Shatiri. Well, I didn't know he was involved with her, so you see it was entirely innocent on my part.

"Uh, huh. What? What did you do?"

Well, you see, as a love goddess, it is my job to bring lovers together.

"And who decides who's in love?"

Well, I do.

When I don't say anything, stunned that this goddess is serious, Bali says, *Well, I do. That's my job you see. I just know when two people are supposed to be together. It's in my blood. My mother was the great love goddess, Bastet.*

"Uh, yes, yes, yes, you already told me that. Great, that's all I need."

What's wrong, don't you believe in love? I know that some humans don't, but I've never met one yet.

"Well, you have now."

But, I thought you wrote romance novels.

“I do, but that doesn’t mean I believe true love exists in reality.”

You don’t? Bali says, shocked. *Well, Why ever not?*

“I haven’t exactly seen any real-life examples showing me it exists. In fact, just the opposite seems to be true. I believe that people might be in lust, but rarely love.”

Then, why do you write romances?

I take a deep breath and let it out, staring at my image in the reflective metal wall backing the small sink. I reply, “I guess because in my dreams, love does exist. Everyone wants to believe in love, but . . .” I snap out of my contemplative thoughts and say, “Anyway, in my dreams anything is possible.”

Well, I’ve seen true love in real life.

“Oh yeah? Well, congratulations,” I reply sarcastically. “Maybe back in the Middle Ages or whatever time you come from. But let me clue you in, today all anyone cares about is getting laid; no one stays together anymore.” I fluff my hair a bit and laugh, “heck, people don’t even bother getting married these days.”

They don’t? That’s so tragic. I hear the irony in her tone when she says next, *Boo Hoo You! I’ve watched what the world has become, but let me tell you. Things aren’t as different today as they were a thousand years ago. People are still the same. And just because you haven’t seen anyone in love doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist. The real tragedy is that you don’t believe love exists, not that people don’t fall in love anymore. What’s even more pathetic is that you’re the one person who should, a romance writer.*

“Maybe” I allow, not entirely convinced, yet, somehow feeling ashamed at the same time. “Anyway, we were talking about you, not me. So what did you do to this, what was her name?”

Shatiri.

“Yes, Shatiri. What happened?”

Well, she and this man, Ashran, another human, fell in love. I knew the moment they passed each other in the street that they belonged together. I simply changed circumstances so they would bump into each other. They did the rest. You see, sometimes people don't open their eyes to the possibilities until you provide them with the right opportunities. That's all I do really. I provide the chance for them to meet. They usually take it from there. It really is very innocent on my part.

“So you don't like, make them fall in love?”

Oh, no...well, not usually. If they are meant for each other, then love will happen on its own.

"What do you mean, not usually?"

Well, the fates hate it when we mess with people's futures. They are the ones who decide if two people belong together. Usually my job is to merely watch for couples, then give them a nudge to get them together.

"What do you mean by nudge?" I ask suspiciously.

Sometimes people will pass without really seeing the other. I just create a happenstance that causes them to be more aware of each other. Then, bam, they find one another.

“So, you just know who is meant for who?”

Yes, if the two people are in close proximity to one another, I know.

“So, if your bringing Shatiri and Ashran together was so innocent, why did Apollo punish you?”

Someone obviously told him, blaming the whole thing on me. Apollo, being Apollo, naturally overreacted.

“Uh, huh,” I say, not sure I believe what I’m hearing. Then, another question pops into my mind. “So, why have you not tried to free yourself?”

I haven’t been able to. No one could even hear me until you came into the store.

“I’ve been in that store dozens of times before. Why didn’t you talk to me . . . oh, yes, I forgot, I didn’t touch you before, so couldn’t hear you, right?”

That’s right.

“I seemed drawn to you this time though.” I eye the cat, suspicion entering my mind. “Why is that?”

Well . . .

“What did you do? You manipulated me somehow,” I accuse.

Yes, but I didn’t know I could. You see, Apollo had taken away all my powers, including the one that allowed me to manipulate . . . Bali coughs . . . I mean, influence humans. I don’t really even know if I did have an influence on you, since you can only hear me when we have physical contact. Who’s to say? Maybe it was fate trying to help me get out of this.

“So, you’ve not manipulated anyone since meeting me?”

Well, there was Mr. Jeffers at the store. You were holding me at the time. So, touching must have something to do with unlocking my powers.

A knock on the door startles me. “Just a minute,” I call out.

The knock sounds again, then I hear a man’s voice whine. “Hello? I need in there.” Next, I hear him mutter, “Some people are so rude, hogging the bathroom.”

Then, I hear the stewardess from earlier say, “Is there a problem, sir?”

He replies, “Yes, the person in there is hogging the bathroom.”

I open the door to two startled faces, one of them is the man who was seated next to Cheryl, Mr. Baldie. "I'm sorry. I'll be just one more moment." I slam the door shut and touch Bali again. "So, before we get kicked out, why do you think I have anything to do with your powers returning?"

I hear the stewardess apologize to the man, "I'll be back in two minutes, sir. If she still isn't out, I'll do something about it."

He replies, "Thank you, ma'am. I really appreciate that. Just so you know, there's something really strange about her. Is there an air marshal on board?"

"Oh?" the stewardess questions. "Yes, sir, we have one on all international flights."

Oh, great. Just what I need, to create an international incident over a conversation in the john with a love goddess. "Talk fast. We don't have much time."

Well, there are those incidents in the store, then when you were asleep and touching my paw, I was able to talk to Ishe.

"Yes, you mentioned Ishe. Who is she?"

He.

"What?"

Ishe is a he. He's a friend of my family. We grew up together. I was able to talk to him on the ethereal plane.

"Wait a minute. The ethereal what?"

Ethereal plane. It's how we gods communicate with one another when not in each other's presence.

"Oh, O.K. So you spoke with Ishe. What did he say?"

He said to contact him again when I reach London.

“Did he tell you how to get out of there?”

Another pounding on the door. “Just a minute,” I yell.

No, only that. But, I’ve always believed that if I can make it back home, somehow I might be able to get free.

“You don’t sound too sure about that.”

No. But it’s a better plan than anything else I’ve been able to come up with.

“So, why all of a sudden can you talk to them? I mean, what's my connection?”

I don't know. Perhaps it has something to do with your past. Do you have any Greek blood?

“I don’t think so. I’ve never been really big on tracing my ancestry, but my Aunt Helena is.”

Or....

“Or?”

Perhaps you are so desperate for love that you have opened up a door for me to help you.

“Desperate? I’m not desperate,” I yelp.

Of course not, Bali says dryly. ‘Tis a pity though. I could make your dreams come true with Jon. He is handsome . . . for a human I mean. Bali sighs, The gods smiled on him when he was born.

“Did you hear that,” Mr. Baldie says on the other side of the door, “she’s talking to herself. I heard her say she’s desperate. Call the air marshal, quick. She could have a bomb in that bag she was talking to.”

“Shit.” I pick up the cat and hold it at eye level. “Listen, we’ll have to continue this conversation at the hotel. Until then, don’t try to talk to me, or we might end up spending the night in a jail cell, or even worse, the loony bin.”

I stick the cat back in my bag and open the door. Baldie, the stewardess, and another man I presume to be the air marshal, all stare at me in frozen silence. “Sorry. Guess the fish didn’t agree with me. It’s all yours,” I say, then saunter casually back to my seat.

Chapter 6

I breathe a sigh of relief when we make it to our hotel without incident. Cheryl is taking a long bubble bath, so I have the bedroom to myself. I lie back on the bed, my arms outstretched, and close my eyes.

Poor Bali, trapped for so long in that statue. In a way, I knew how that felt. I'd been trapped too for most of my life. Granted, it was a self-defense mechanism, but still a case of my own making. All my counseling after losing more than a hundred pounds assured me of the reason why. It was a perfectly normal reaction. However, Bali didn't have a choice. Her prison wasn't of her own making. She didn't have control over it either. Maybe that's why I feel such sympathy for her and want to help, whatever that might entail.

I glance over to the hotel dresser where I placed my purple tote.

I close my eyes, feeling guilty for not taking Bali out of it. I really should take her out. She doesn't like the dark. But I am hesitant to resume our conversation. I don't want to admit she was right, the things she said on the plane really hit home.

Maybe I'm wrong. Just because my family has never found true love doesn't mean it doesn't exist. Then again, maybe I'm just one of those people who, either through heredity or bad luck, will never find true love. My fate, perhaps? No matter. We're in London, and I need some inspiration for my novel. That's all I really care about. I need to get my book done. My editor will start hounding me soon if I don't start producing something for our next meeting.

With another sigh, I drag myself off the bed and approach the dresser. I take Bali out and take her with me to the eat in table in the corner of the bedroom and sit down.

What took you so long? Bali accuses.

I grimace, feeling a return of that guilt again. "Sorry."

I place her on the table in front of me, making sure to keep my hand in contact, and ignore the urge to explain myself. Instead, I change the subject. "So, Cheryl is taking a bath. Should take a while. She really loves those."

Bali doesn't comment, so I ask, "What do we do now?"

I have a proposition for you.

When she doesn't continue, I ask warily, "O.K., I'm listening."

I need your help finding my way back home.

"O.K., I'll try, I'm not sure how, but I'm willing to help you." I hesitate, then voice a sudden thought, "But, what's in it for me?"

I'm coming to that. I can get you and Jon together.

"Oh no! No, I don't need you making someone, especially a movie star, fall in love with me." Suddenly my sympathy for Bali vanishes. "If you make him love me, that's not a love worth having. It won't be real."

I thought you didn't believe in real love? Besides, I told you, I can't make someone fall in love. I just provide the opportunity.

"Right, you can manipulate people, you told me yourself. You did that in the shop with Mr. Jeffers and me," I remind not only her but myself, disgruntled at being influenced without my permission.

I can, but I promise I won't. I will only get you two together and if it is meant to be, it will happen.

"So, how will this benefit me? I don't want to fall in love."

Oh yes you do, you told me everyone wants to believe in love. So here's your chance, and with your dream man, too.

When I don't say anything, Bali continues, *Even if you two aren't meant for each other, you might find some inspiration in the encounter for your book.*

Suspecting Bali to be a sly fox for adding just the excuse I might be tempted to accept, I say, "That's an interesting thought. Let me think about it for a minute."

Take your time.

I walk across the room and sit on the bed. Mulling over the possibilities, I don't really consider that Jon and I would suit one another. That would be hoping for too much really. But I do need some inspiration and my dreams about Jon have provided the start for my next book. Maybe meeting the man in person would provide even more material for my imagination.

Then again, he might act like Mr. Buff on the plane and totally humiliate me, stomping my very fragile self-esteem into the dust.

On the other hand, it might be worth the risk. I have to do something to get my book done. I did want to find some inspiration on this trip. I'd hate to go home empty-handed. If things don't work out, I'm going home anyway. And nothing else seems to be presenting itself so far. What do I have to lose?

I get back up and cross to the table. Picking Bali up, I say, "It's a deal. Only no manipulation, not even a nudge. All you do is introduce us. O.K.? Those are my terms. I'll help you get home, and you help me find inspiration with Jon for my book. I have no expectations about love, particularly not with him."

I don't know why not with him.

"End of discussion. Those are my terms," I say firmly.

O.K. Don't worry. I accept. You won't regret it.

“Somehow, I doubt that. If you’re being trapped in that thing was the consequence of helping Shatiri, I’m not sure I want your help.”

I told you that wasn’t my fault. Apollo overreacted. I didn’t deserve to be put in here.

“Well, I guess since no gods are involved this time, not much could go wrong, right?”

Right.

“The worst that could happen is we meet and nothing happens, right?”

Right.

“Then that will be the end of it, right?”

Of course. I don’t see Bali’s expression, but I do hear her purr. It resembles the one I hear from King Henry on occasion; the one he produces when he’s had a particularly good day after leaving his kill at my doorstep and having a celebratory bowl of cream.

Chapter 7

“So, when do we start?” I ask, hoping for something quick and painless, like plucking out a particularly nasty thorn from ones hand.

Before Bali can answer, the bathroom door opens and Cheryl comes barreling through. “I can’t believe you let me stay in my bath so long. We need to get going if we’re to make the club in time.”

“Club? What club? You didn’t tell me anything about a club. I thought we would relax and order in room service.”

“Very funny, Kim. We need to get out there and mix, mingle, have fun.” Cheryl turns toward me and spots Bali. “What...is that thing doing here?” she says with as much disdain as I’ve ever heard from her. The last time she even came close was the time some jerk called me fat. Of course, I was at the time, but that didn’t stop Cheryl from defending me. He walked out of the bar with his hands cupped between his legs after she got through with him.

“Now Cheryl, it’s just my lucky cat. I didn’t want to leave it at home. I thought it might help me with my inspiration block.”

Cheryl belts her racy red silk robe and walks over to me, never taking her eyes from the statue. “How did you even get it through security? I’m surprised it didn’t set off any alarms.” She finally looks me in the eye. “Kim, please, try to have some fun tonight. We’re here to give you some new experiences. Leave home at home. Now put that thing away, get dressed, and let’s go.” Cheryl gives Bali one last glare before turning away to grab her makeup case, and enters the bathroom again.

I touch Bali and hear her say, *What a hard ass.*

I don't think she's talking about Cheryl's backside, so I change the subject. "So when do we start?" I inquire.

As soon as you get fixed up some. You know the first impression is the best impression. So you need to change a few things before meeting Mister Right.

I look down at myself. "Change what? I don't see anything wrong with what I'm wearing. It's clean, practical, most of all comfortable."

Exactly, you need to be more daring. Show off what you've got.

"Are you sure you and Cheryl aren't in cahoots? She's been trying to get me to change my style for years now."

So why don't you let her?

"Because I'm not a piece of prime rib in a meat market. If a guy doesn't like me for me, then he's not worth my time or trouble."

Oh brother. Do you know anything about men?

"Of course I do. Believe me, I know more than I want to."

Oh? Tell me about him.

"Him who?"

The one who broke your heart.

"I don't know what you're talking about. I need to get ready if I'm going out." I walk over to my suitcase and open it. I paw through, but know there is nothing there for a night out on the town. I pause and realize there isn't anything in the closet either. I walk back over to Bali, sit on the chair, and touch her paw. I sigh.

Fine. Don't tell me, but please take some advice?

"What?"

Let Cheryl help you get ready. Please?

I catch my reflection in the full-length mirror attached to the wall next to the closet and study myself objectively. I keep my hand on Bali's paw, twisting this way and that, studying myself. I guess my outfit is a little plain. And my hair could use a little work too. I make my decision before I have a chance to change my mind. Without a word, I cross to the bathroom door and knock. It opens almost immediately.

I place my hands in my pockets and ask sheepishly, "Could you help me?"

Cheryl squeals. "I thought this day would never come." She grabs me by the arm and drags me inside. "You come right in and we'll fix you up. Then I'll find you something absolutely breathtaking. The guys won't be able to take their eyes off you. You'll be gorgeous."

Cheryl slams the door and I'm lost in the tornado that is my best friend.

* * *

I stare at myself in the full-length mirror, not believing my eyes. My short blond hair has been curled into the most becoming style I've ever had. I look even more like my favorite female star, Meg Ryan. Now, why couldn't my hair stylist have made it look this way?

Then my eyes travel down my body not believing the curves revealed in the short red silk sheath Cheryl has squeezed me into, not to mention the cleavage the plunging neckline reveals. I cover that part with my hands, trying not to be embarrassed at the sight or even think about all those male eyes on that part of my anatomy. I feel exposed and vulnerable already just thinking about it.

Then there are my legs. I've always had nice legs, I admit to myself, feeling rather proud of the fact. However, I'm amazed at how much better they look in high heels and fishnet stockings. How did Cheryl get that seam so straight in the back? I'm convinced it

won't be for long. Nothing ever seems to stay in place on me. That's one reason I never bother to dress up.

Cheryl comes up behind me to place a diamond choker around my neck. I have to lower my hands from my boobs for her to do so. "There. That should do it."

She looks at me over my shoulder into the mirror and nods with approval and a huge smile. "Now, that's more like it," she says in a self-satisfied tone.

I cover my breasts again and blush. "Now, girl," Cheryl says, "Don't you go covering that gorgeous body of yours. You need to flaunt it girl. Use what God gave you."

I turn around and throw my arms out to my sides. "Cheryl, I look like a high-priced hooker," I complain in a high-pitched whine.

Cheryl purses her lips in a hard line and turns me back around to view myself in the mirror again. "Now you listen to me. You do not look like a hooker, high-priced or otherwise. What you look like is a beautiful woman, end of story."

Seeing her determined expression reflected in the mirror, I decide to concede the point for now. I don't know what to say anyway. I've seen other women dress like this. In fact, probably in less than this. I've just never thought of myself as beautiful or heaven forbid, sexy. I've hidden myself away for my entire life, and now I need to see myself from a total one-eighty point of view. It's hard to change when you've believed something about yourself your whole life.

I know I have lost enough to reach my healthy weight goal, but I still feel fat. I accept that I'll feel that way, possibly forever. Even the counselor said I might always feel twenty pounds overweight. She also warned that I could become anorexic if I wasn't

careful; some people did when they achieved their goal weight. They simply never believed they were thin enough.

So far that hasn't happened to me. But I also haven't acknowledged that I'm thin now either. I pull at the hem again, trying to get it to move down a little more.

I'm startled when Cheryl hands me my clutch purse. It matches my dress, or what little there is of it.

I need some support tonight, and I'm not sure Cheryl will be it. Cheryl is sweet but she has a truckload of confidence and sometimes forgets that others don't. "Cheryl, I need those earrings that match this choker. Could you get them for me? They're still in the bathroom."

"Sure honey. Be right back." She turns at the bathroom door and smiles encouragingly. "You just relax. We're going to have a blast tonight. You'll see." She disappears into the bathroom in search of the earrings. I move as quickly as I safely can, in three-inch heels, over to Bali and touch her head. "Bali, I wish you could come with us tonight." I glance at the bathroom door.

I can. Bali instantly shrinks into a miniature knickknack. I pick her up. She weighs next to nothing in my palm.

"Wow. That's a neat trick. Why couldn't you do that on the plane?" I ask, not really caring all that much about the answer. I pick her up, not waiting for a reply, and place her in my purse.

I close my purse and hold it in both hands in front of me. Since I'm not directly touching her I decide to do a little experiment. "Bali, can you hear me?"

Yes. As long as you are touching something that is touching me, we can hear each other.

“I was hoping that was the case.”

I turn at the sound of Cheryl’s voice. “What did you say honey?”

“I was just saying I hope this evening goes well.”

Cheryl barks a short laugh and holds out the diamond earrings. “Well, I should think it would. Two hot chicks, new to London, out on the town. Honey we are going to set this place on fire.” Cheryl grabs her clutch and heads for the door. “Hurry up with those earrings so we can get this party started.”

With one last look in the mirror, I race after her as I put my studs in place. As I close the door, a thought occurs to me. “Bali,” I whisper, “are you planning to get Jon and me together tonight?”

Bali remains quiet. “Bali?” I whisper more forcefully.

Bali’s voice is contemplative when she responds, “No. No, you need some confidence boosting before you meet Jon. Besides I don’t think he’s in town right now. But don’t worry. I’m working on just the right timing.”

I release a breath I didn’t know I was holding. Good, that’s good. Jon isn’t in town. At first I’m relieved, then I find I’m just as equally disappointed.

Chapter 8

The discotheque is loud and crowded. People are everywhere. I've hated crowds as long as I can remember. I like my quiet solitude, and wish, not for the first time in the last ten minutes, that I were safely tucked away at home in front of my computer, or watching a funny movie.

It is so crowded, in fact, that it takes us several minutes to find a table. We finally do at the back of the room near the dance floor, a cozy little four seat booth along the back wall.

"I'll be right back," Cheryl announces.

"Where are you going," I say, in a panic at being left alone for even a second.

"Relax. I'm going to get us some drinks." Cheryl eyes me critically. She turns to leave, but not before I hear her mumble. "Maybe it will help you loosen up a little." I'm amazed I can hear her over the throbbing beat of the music. I watch her as she melts into the crowd, headed for the bar on the far wall, across from the dance floor.

Feeling even more uncomfortable now without Cheryl to run interference, I try to tug my hem down again without drawing anyone's attention. I check my purse. Taking a chance, I take Bali out and place her on the table in front of me.

Suddenly I feel a presence beside me, and snatch Bali back up, tucking her into my purse again. I look up into a familiar face. It's Mr. Buff from the plane. Oh, great.

Mr. Buff smirks at me as he leans one hand on the table, then leans over and into my personal space. I frown at the move. "Hello, gorgeous. Come here often?"

Really? Even I know a cheesy line when I hear it. Mr. Buff is not only stuck up, he's obviously missing a few brain cells as well. I grimace and lean back away from the

smell of his overwhelming cologne. “No. I just got into London this afternoon. It’s my first time...to London I mean.” I blush as I stutter my way through my response.

Mr. Buff looks confused, then he straightens as a light seems to go off in his empty head. “Oh, right, I knew I’d seen you somewhere. You were on my flight today, right?”

I fix a plastic smile on my lips, and nod as I say, “right.”

Just then, Cheryl reappears with our drinks order. Cheryl sets the drinks on the table and sidles up to Mr. Dense. It’s embarrassing to watch, so I take a quick sip of my drink and immediately wheeze. I don’t drink, ever, so the vodka-laced fruit drink doesn’t go down well.

In his favor, Mr. Buff slaps my back lightly instead of with a heavy hand. Once I’m under control, he returns his attention to Cheryl, but not before losing points by caressing my bare back. Cheryl sees I’m back to normal, so fawns all over Mr. Buff again. “So what do we have here?” Cheryl almost purrs the question.

“Oh, brother,” I say under my breath. I reach for my drink again, then put it back down when I remember what just happened.

You can say that again.

“Shhhhh,” I tell Bali, sure she can hear me where the two next to me can’t. I raise my voice to be heard, “Cheryl, this is Mr. Bu...I mean, what was your name again?” I recover just in time.

“My name is Gregory Hamilton, but my friends call me Greggy,” Mr. Buff replies, now looping an arm around Cheryl’s waist.

“I’m sure they do,” I respond with a false smile and slight disdain. “Cheryl, Gregory,” I refused to call him Greggy, talk about juvenile, “was on the plane with us yesterday.” I waggle my eyebrows trying to signal my meaning.

When Cheryl responds positively, I’m quite sure she didn’t get my meaning. “That’s wonderful. How did I miss a handsome specimen such as yourself during that long flight?”

Mr. Buff just grins and shrugs his shoulders, not giving the slightest hint of humility at the compliment. In fact, I can see his ego inflating the more Cheryl gushes.

I need to take matters in hand when I hear Cheryl say, “Why don’t you join us? That is, if you aren’t here with anyone else?” She bats her eyelashes at him in hope.

“I did come with some friends.” Cheryl pouts at that, then Mr. Buff looks around and continues, “But, they seem to have disappeared.”

Cheryl immediately smiles, then claps her hands in glee. “Wonderful.” Cheryl slides into the booth opposite me. When Mr. Buff moves to follow her, I’m surprised when she pushes him toward my side. “Why don’t you sit next to Kimberly. This is her first night out and she really needs to get . . .” I quickly kick her under the table to stop her from finishing what I suspect will be a very embarrassing comment. Sometimes, Cheryl doesn’t think before she speaks.

“Ow,” Cheryl cries.

While she rubs her shin, I jump in before she can recover. “Really, if you need to go find your friends, we’d totally understand.”

When he hesitates, I’m hoping he’s changed his mind. My hopes fall when he holds my gaze and says, “Baby, my friends can take care of themselves. I’m just going to fetch my drink. I’ll be right back.” He leans into my space again. “Then we can get to

know each other better.” He gives me a look up and down. “Much better.” He straightens, and manages to puff out his chest like a bantam rooster in a room full of adoring hens.

I watch that firm backside saunter out of sight, when Cheryl squeals, “Girl, this is your lucky day!”

I stop her before she gets too excited. “Cheryl, that’s the jerk on the plane who insulted me.”

“What? That’s him?”

I nod.

Cheryl sighs, “Too bad. I can see why you called him Mr. Buff though. What a beefcake. You know, you could . . .”

“No, I couldn’t,” I interrupt, knowing what she’s going to say. “You know I don’t want a one-night stand, and you know why.”

Another sigh, then she says, “Oh well.” Sitting straighter in her seat, she urgently says, “He’s coming back. What do you want to do?”

“Let me handle it.”

Cheryl sits back, less gushy when Mr. Buff returns. Before he has a chance to scooch in next to me, I stand up as quickly as I can without showing too much skin and ask, “Would you like to dance?”

He looks momentarily surprised, as does Cheryl, then his smug full-of-himself look reappears. “Sure doll. Let’s bust a move.” Mr. Buff grabs my hand. I’m dragged quickly to the dance floor, but not before I catch a glimpse of the shocked look on Cheryl’s face.

Once we're on the dance floor, I realize my mistake. I have no clue how to dance. People are gyrating to the deafening beat. Colored lights flash, enough to induce a massive seizure in an epileptic, or at the very least a raging migraine.

One lady next to me is doing some kind of exotic, sexy move for her man. Jeez, get a room, I think. If I did that in this dress, I'm sure my boobs would pop out. Mr. Buff would just love that.

I turn my attention to Greg and watch as he grooves by shifting his hips in a very suggestive motion guaranteed to get him arrested if he did it anywhere else in public.

I try to move to the beat, but my muscles just won't relax enough to look natural. I'm sure I look as stiff as a board. My tight dress doesn't help any. It's not only hard to breath in, it doesn't allow much freedom of movement either.

This has to be the most embarrassing moment of my life. I try to recall a time that was more so, but just can't come up with anything.

The song changes, and I breathe a sigh of relief when it's a slow song. Until Mr. Buff draws me flush with his hard body. For a moment I melt, then regain my senses and push him back a few inches. I can't help but notice how solid his chest feels beneath my hands. He takes my hands and places them around his neck again. Our bodies can't help but come into intimate contact once more. "Haven't you ever slow danced before? It requires us to be this close."

I blush and look around. He's right. The other dancers are plastered to their partners.

I try to relax and enjoy the soothing rhythm, the hypnotic beat. We sway back and forth, our bodies brushing seductively. I feel my muscles unclench and start to relax more and more. I place my head on his shoulder and blank my mind on all else. I inhale Greg's

cologne and sigh again. He smells of some woody scent, all spicy and masculine, and something else, a musky scent I realize is him, sexy as hell. I inhale once more, enjoying the smell. So this is what I've been missing all these years, I think, wishing this moment would last forever.

I caress the back of his neck where his short, blond hair brushes against his collar. It's soft to the touch. He must have taken that caress for an invitation, because before I know it, his hands are caress my back. Then, they start to descend to my behind. I stiffen. If there is one thing I swore I would never allow, it is to let any man to make me feel uncomfortable or out of control.

Before his hands reach his intended destination, I put my months of self-defense training to work. I grab the hair at the back of his head and yank. His head snaps back. "Hey!" He yelps.

"Uh, that's far enough big boy. Take your hands off my ass, now."

He raises his hands in surrender. I release my grip on his hair and move my hands back to encircle his neck.

When he sees me relax again, he puts his hands back on my waist, not attempting to move them into forbidden territory again. "What's wrong? I thought your friend said you needed to get laid."

Damn, guess I didn't kick Cheryl fast enough. I smirk up at him and say, "Buddy, don't get your hopes up, or anything else for that matter. I don't do one-night stands. Besides I'm involved . . ." Or soon to be, I correct myself, but he doesn't need to know that, "with someone."

He doesn't respond to that. After a few minutes, I relax as we sway to the music, figuring that little piece of information has put him off. Then, he pulls back to look me in the eye and says, "Listen, you might be a little mad at how I treated you on the plane."

I blush and give him some points for figuring that out at least.

"But you can't blame a guy. I mean, you didn't exactly look like a supermodel back on the plane." He looks me up and down, still caressing my bare back. He tries to bring me closer. I'm tempted by his Adonis good looks, but resist, not trusting this guy. "Man, if you had looked this hot on the plane, I probably would have dragged you into the bathroom with me."

I grimace, remembering my idea of just such a fantasy. I look away. "How romantic," I quip.

"It is, isn't it? I'm just that kind of guy."

I look back at him in disbelief. He really believes what I just said? Oh, brother, indeed. I shake my head, and look over his shoulder, not saying another word. The dance finally ends. We agree to sit out the next song and head for the table. Cheryl is still there nursing her drink. She considers us speculatively as we approach.

"So, how did you all get along? You looked like you were really getting to know each other well out there."

I slide into the booth, and say with dripping sarcasm, "Oh, we were. I know all I need to know about Gregory here." I take a sip of my drink and manage not to choke on it this time.

We sit in uncomfortable silence. A few minutes pass before Gregory excuses himself from the table. "Nature calls." The moment his back is turned, I look at Cheryl and make gagging gestures in response to his less than subtle excuse.

“That bad, huh?”

“Really, Cheryl, really?” I ask in disbelief. “The guy’s a moron.”

“Oh come on. He’s not that bad...is he?”

I nod my head slowly and hold her eyes with my most serious, I-mean-business gaze.

“So, what do you want to do?” she asks.

“I want to go home, now.” I grab my purse.

“But we just got here,” Cheryl whines. “Can’t we just have a little more fun? The night is young.”

“Fun? I can think of a million ways to have fun. This isn’t one of them, Cheryl.” I’m starting to get miffed. Before Cheryl can say anything more, Mr. Buff, I mean, Gregory is back.

Before he can sit down next to me again, I stand and say, “Our turn.” I turn to Cheryl who is pouting again, and say, “Isn’t it, Cheryl?”

Cheryl nods reluctantly, but follows after me as I head for the bathroom.

* * *

I don’t know why you’re so mad.” Cheryl says before touching up her lipstick in the mirror.

I’m pacing back and forth. No one else is here, which seems odd since the place is so crowded outside. “I don’t know how I let you talk me into these things, Cheryl.”

My arms are crossed, my clutch firm in my hand.

“Honey, I just wanted you to have a little fun. To see the possibilities in life.”

I stop, shocked, and stare at Cheryl. Bali said the same thing to me not long ago. Does Cheryl know about Bali? Then, I realize . . . I haven’t heard anything from Bali all

night. I stare at my bag. How can I get rid of Cheryl, so I can try to communicate with Bali? I decide to change tactics.

Turning, I give Cheryl my most apologetic, self-deprecating, pleading face, and say, “I know. And I am having a good time, despite Mr . . . Gregory, O.K.? I guess I’m just not used to all this attention from the opposite sex. Especially one as gorgeous as him.”

Taking her by the shoulders I steer her toward the door. “Why don’t you go entertain Gregory for a few minutes, while I gather myself? I need to pee anyway. I’ll be right out and we can have more laughs. Get us some more drinks, O.K.?” I practically push her out the door.

“Oh, thank you, sweetie. That’s the spirit. You’ll see. You’ll look back on this night and thank me for dragging you kicking and screaming out of that cubby hole you call an apartment.” Convinced for now, Cheryl twirls around and heads off to find Gregory.

I immediately slam the door closed and lock it. Opening my purse quickly, I whisper, “Bali, are you there?” I search my small purse but, no Bali. She’s gone. “Oh, my, god. Oh, my god. What am I going to do?”

I pace, biting my thumbnail. I left my purse on the table when I went to dance with Gregory. Where was it when I returned? On the seat next to me. Wait a minute, it was sitting in between Gregory and myself. Could he have taken it? No, that doesn’t make sense. Where would he have hidden it? In fact, why would he even take it in the first place?

Could Bali move herself some place? Or was she stolen? Not coming up with any answers, I unlock the door and step out. I can see Gregory and Cheryl conversing quietly,

nursing their drinks, waiting for me. I study Gregory more closely. Is he really a dumb guy? Or is he acting the part? Hmmm.

Cheryl wouldn't take Bali; I'm sure of it. Cheryl could have another reason to take Bali. Maybe I should check just to make sure. All I need to do is get Cheryl to dance with Gregory, then touch her purse to see if Bali is in there. And if she isn't in there?

I take a deep breath and move forward, not coming up with any other answers at the moment. If not, maybe something will occur to me.

* * *

It works. Cheryl and Greg are on the dance floor. I nonchalantly stretch and lean over slightly, touching Cheryl's bag. I yawn and say quietly, "Bali? Are you in there?"

Nothing. I guess Bali isn't in Cheryl's bag after all. I straighten. Where else could she be?

I take off my shoes and rub my sore toes. Women have to put up with so much. Men don't have to wear shoes that pinch. So, why do women?

Reaching to massage my other foot, my bare toes comes into contact with something hard and cold. Bali! I look down and sure enough, there's Bali sitting underneath the table. Relief floods me as I bend to pick her up. As I do, I ask, "What happened? How did you fall out of my bag? I thought I had closed it."

You did. I didn't fall out.

"What? What do you mean you didn't fall out? How else could you have gotten out of my bag?" I place Bali in my bag, looking around to see whether anyone is watching me. Hopefully, they'll think I'm talking to myself.

While you were dancing, a guy came over to hit on Cheryl. He sat down in your seat. I could hear them talking, then Cheryl said she wanted to get more drinks for

everyone, but didn't want to lose the table. The guy offered to stay and hold the table for her.

No, Cheryl wouldn't be that trusting with our belongings and a stranger. Wait, maybe she would. She knows I don't have anything but makeup in my bag tonight. We agreed, she would handle the money tonight.

That must be it. Once she was gone, the guy started to paw through your bag, like he was looking for something.

"Maybe he was just looking for money."

Then why, when he touched me, did he stop and clutch me in his hand?

"What?" I say, shocked.

Yeah, he was looking for me.

"Why would he be looking for you? Nobody even knows about you, right?"

Well, except for Apollo, no one I know does. Maybe Apollo sent this guy to check on me. Make sure I don't escape somehow.

"Maybe," I say, not convinced. "What happened next? How did you end up under the table?"

Your friend returned with the drinks and startled him a bit. He dropped me under the table. When he saw you returning, he decided to leave. He made some excuse and bolted. There's something else...

"What?" I ask, not sure I'm going to like what I hear.

Your Mr. Buff?

"He's not mine, but go on."

When you and Cheryl went to the bathroom, the guy came back and spoke with him.

“What?” My shock turns to anger when I think of what that might mean. “I knew there was something phony about that guy. No one could be that dumb. Go on. What did they say?”

Well, the music was kind of loud, but I think they were discussing the best way to get me out of here. Mr. Buff asked first if he had gotten you and if he did where I was stashed. He called me Bali, so they know who I am. The guy admitted he dropped me under the table. Mr. Buff was pretty mad at that. He looked under the table to find me. He spotted me and straightened immediately. That's when Cheryl came back to the table. The guy made another excuse to leave, and Cheryl and Mr. Buff sat down to talk.

“And that’s when I came back to the table.”

Yes, but Kim, that’s not the worst of it.

“What do you mean?”

I recognize Mr. Buff.

“You do?”

Yes.

“Well, who is he?” I ask a little impatiently when Bali doesn’t give up the information fast enough. The suspense is killing me even though I dread the answer.

Before Bali can give me an answer, Cheryl and Mr. Buff return. It is another hour before I can drag Cheryl away. All the while I study Mr. Buff. Who is this guy? If Bali knows him, that means he has to be a god. Maybe he's Apollo. But if he is, then why all the secrecy? Why not just take Bali away from me. Why all the cloak and dagger stuff?

No, it has to be someone else. But who?

I keep a hand on my bag the whole evening. Bali doesn't make a peep the whole evening. It isn't until we are leaving that Mr. Buff tries to convince us to go back to his hotel room or get us to take him home with us.

It is a relief when Cheryl doesn't accept either offer. Mr. Buff finally gives up and wanders off into the club. Hopefully, to find a more willing target for the night.

Although, I now know his target all night hadn't been me or Cheryl. It had been Bali.

How does he know about her? Who is he?

I wish I'd hurt him more, maybe followed through with my threat to knee him where it would hurt most.

It is almost dawn when we return to the hotel. I fall asleep with Bali tucked safely under my pillow. The same questions repeat in my head until a vision of the delicious Mr. Buff at my feet, begging me for mercy, lulls me to sleep with a smile.

Chapter 9

The phone rings, waking me up before my nightmare can get too scary. I was dreaming that Mr. Buff was chasing Bali and me through dark London allies. We had just come to a dead end when I woke up. Talk about saved by the bell.

I hear Cheryl answer, then she squeals with glee.

I sit up. What's going on?

She hands me the phone, smiling like a loon. "You will never guess."

"Hello?" I ask tentatively.

"Kim, you need to get back here ASAP." It's Melody, my editor at the *Oklahoma Entertainment* magazine where I work part-time as a freelance writer. I may be a good romance novelist, but being a new author I still need to bring in some money. Besides, I love to interview people. Being a novelist can be a lonely job. Journalism keeps me from getting lonely, but it also keeps me in the loop with local theatre and entertainment industry, my personal passion.

"Hi Melody. What's up? Why do I need to come back? I just got here." If I return now all my money will have been wasted on this trip. I'd love any excuse to return. However, wasted money trumped, well, anything else.

"I know. I know. But you are going to freak when I tell you who is coming to town."

"Who?"

"And he wants to be interviewed by us, um, you, I mean. I can't believe it. He asked for you, personally."

"Who, Melody." I try to stay calm.

“Jonny Mayer. Can you believe it? Of course, you can’t. I didn’t believe it either at first.”

Melody chatters on. I look toward my pillow, knowing this has to be Bali’s doing. This is it. This is how Bali is going to get Jon and I together. Oh, my, god.

When Melody takes a breath, I cut in. “Melody, when is he going to be there?”

“He said he would arrive tomorrow morning. He’s coming in by private jet. How cool is that?”

She chatters on again, prompting me to interrupt her. It takes several tries, “Melody. Melody.”

“What?”

“What time tomorrow?” I ask.

“Oh, he said early, around 6 a.m.” I’m flabbergasted. Is she serious? There is no way we can get back in time. That’s when he’s arriving though. Maybe Melody scheduled the interview for later in the day. “Yeah, he said he’d be here for the interview by 8 a.m.”

“What!” I glance at my watch. “We’ll have to fly back now in order to be there in time.”

“I know. Sorry, I’ll make it up to you. But then he is your favorite star, so maybe that’s enough to make up for the short va-ca, huh? I’ll let you go so you can pack and get to the airport. See you tomorrow. Bye.”

I stare at the phone in my hand. “She hung up,” I announce in a dull voice.

“What did she say?” I look at Cheryl, having momentarily forgotten she was even in the room. She has her hands clasped under her chin, as if praying.

“He’s going to be there tomorrow morning, 8 a.m.”

“What!”

“Yeah, that was my response. Cheryl, I’m going to interview him. Him. Jon Mayer.” I place the receiver back in its cradle and stare at Cheryl in shock. Then I start to grin until it turns into a full blown smile that matches Cheryl’s. We both squeal, hug, and jump up and down.

“I can’t believe it.” We repeat interspersed with a singsong version of, “Jonny Mayer.”

We both stop jumping at the same time. “We need to get going. We can’t keep a famous movie star waiting. We’ll be lucky to make it back in time to get dressed. Then I have to come up with questions. Oh my god Cheryl, what am I going to do. I’ll faint, I just know I’ll faint.”

“Take a deep breath,” Cheryl says. “You’ll be fine. You can come up with questions on our flight back. You’ll have plenty of time there. I’m sure we can get a flight that gets back in at least an hour before the interview. When we get in, you can catch a taxi immediately, get to your apartment, and still have enough time to shower and change. I’ll get the car and follow with the baggage. The magazine is only ten minutes from your apartment.”

Cheryl, grabs the phone and dials the concierge desk. “Yes, this is room 415. Yes, we need a porter right away. Yes, we have an emergency and need to check out as soon as possible. Yes, we’ll need transportation to the airport as well. Great, thank you.”

“Get dressed and pack. I’ll gather up all the toiletries from the bathroom.” Cheryl grabs a few clothes and heads for the bathroom.

I scoop up a few comfortable items from my bag and quickly dress. I look around the room to make sure I got everything, then remember Bali. I snatch her up from under my pillow and look at her.

You can thank me later, she says in my head.

I shake my head at her then quickly hide her behind my back when the bathroom door opens. “Did you get everything packed?” Cheryl asks heading for her suitcase to stow her cosmetic bag.

I nod. The porter arrives. “Let’s go.” I place Bali in my carry-on, while Cheryl lets the porter in to take our bags. Things are moving so quickly it makes my head spin. I can’t believe what is happening.

Chapter 10

I make it to the office with a scant five minutes to spare. Jon has already arrived. I marvel, my mouth agape, as my friend Cheryl presents a heretofore unseen display of gushing adoration as she fawns all over him. Cheryl is at least ten years older than I, and I'm about eight years older than Jon. She's old enough to be his mother!

Is this what he has to put up with from all his fans? It makes me feel sorry for the guy and embarrassed for Cheryl.

Of course, I am having my own unique tongue-tied moment. My favorite movie star is standing two feet away from me. Is it possible? I feel the world tilt.

Then, he opens his mouth. "Please, ladies, there's more 'nough o' me to go . . ." he burps "'round." He slurs his words in that sexy Irish accent that pops up in unguarded moments. It seems this is one of them. It's also one indicator that my interviewee and longtime dream man is totally plastered.

Unbelievable. How insensitive of him to show up to my interview in this condition. I don't know why I'm surprised after reading about the many public displays he has made in the past, most of them at airports before being dragged off to jail. One airline, American Airlines, has banned him from ever flying with them again. The sheer number of times he's been in rehab, at least three I know of, should have been a clue. So much for falsified publicity. Guess he really did do rehab and all the rest.

Not saying a word I watch as he swings his left arm in an exaggerated arc up and over Cheryl's shoulders, then does the same wild move with his right arm on a leggy blonde from the advertising department.

As my irritation rises I notice that holding his arms in this stretched out position leaves him entirely vulnerable. I imagine giving him a wake-up call with a swift kick

straight to his . . . ego. Apparently all superstar megalomaniacs are in a constant state of drunkenness.

I purse my lips as he flaunts his good looks and overbearing charm for his slavering public. My earlier sympathy vanishes as I note he seems to enjoy the attention. I roll my eyes and clear my voice to get their attention, but am summarily ignored. How annoying. “Hello? Hello. We have an interview we need to start, Mr. Mayer. Hello?”

He finally fixes his bloodshot eyes on me and cries, “Meg! Is that you? I didn’t know you were going to be in . . .” he turns to his agent, Kevin Andrews, and asks, “Where are we?”

“Oklahoma City,” Kevin replies, looking tired and defeated. He turns an apologetic look in my direction, but I ignore him as I watch Jon, Mr. Mayer to me now, sniff the neck of the blonde, which elicits a giggle from her. He whispers something else that I can only guess is a proposition, as the blonde giggles some more and blushes.

I clear my throat again. He finally focuses on me once more.

Not sure what the perplexed look on his face means, I feel the urge to step back when he suddenly releases the women and steps toward me with a very serious look. “Wait a minute. You’re not Meg Ryan. You’re hair’s the same, but you’re at least a few inches taller, and you’re face is fatter.”

I gasp, shocked and embarrassed in front of my co-workers. Trying not to look at anyone, I turn my gaze to Kevin and in a loud voice say, “You’re client is intoxicated. I suggest you sober him up before we do this interview, Mr. Andrews.”

With that I turn on my heels and march back into my office, closing the door softly behind me.

Chapter 11

How humiliating. How am I ever going to face my co-workers or my editor again? I cover my face and groan at the prospect.

In a flash, my anguish turns to anger. How dare he? That, that, that lush! I stand and start to pace the confines of my small office, which is only about eight feet wide.

Being a freelance writer on a part-time basis, I share a temporary office with other freelance staff. The magazine provides the space so we'll have someplace to hold interviews or have quiet space in which to write.

Usually, there'd be three other reporters in this small space. However, it seems Melody had it booked it for my sole use this morning. Thank goodness for small favors.

If I'd known what awaited me, I'm not sure I'd even have shown up this morning. Bad enough I flew round trip from Europe, didn't catch a wink of sleep thinking about all the strange events of the last forty-eight hours, including this interview, but then, I've had to deal with this insult.

I knew I wasn't a morning person. I usually work late into the evenings and sleep until noon. In my estimation, mornings suck. And this one isn't exactly turning out to be the exception.

I stop pacing and sit on the edge of the desk. A knock sounds. Not sure I'm ready to face whomever might be on the other side, but it seems I don't have much choice when the doorknob turns, the door cracks open, and my friend Cheryl peeks in. "Are you O.K.?"

I wave her in, then cross my arms, and hang my head. Cheryl comes in, closing the door behind her. "Oh, sweetie. I'm so sorry. What an ass! I can't believe he did that to you."

When I don't say anything, just continue to brood, Cheryl says, "Want me to deck him for you?"

Her comment brings a small smile to my lips. She knows I can take care of myself. Cheryl took the self-defense course with me at the Y last year. She said it was good to learn that kind of stuff, even at her age, so she wouldn't be raped when she entered the nursing home.

I shake my head, and looked up at her. "No, that's O.K. I appreciate the thought, though." I get up, walk behind the desk, and sit down. Cheryl sits in the single chair reserved for visitors. I look to the ceiling for divine intervention. When no answer comes, I lay my head down on the desk and groan. "Ugh, how could I have thought . . ." I stop myself from continuing.

"Thought what, Kim?" Cheryl asks when I don't continue.

I sit in silence, castigating myself for a fool. I know better. I've allowed Bali to convince me, to bring to life that small, infinitesimal speck of hope, that maybe, just maybe, love at first sight might not only exist, but that it might just happen with me and Jon. How stupid can I be? How could I let Bali influence me like that? Then again, influence seems to be Bali's forte.

With that thought, I look up and give Cheryl a small smile. "Never mind. I'll be fine. Would you do me a favor?"

"Sure honey, anything."

"Would you check on Jon, Mr. Mayer, and see when he might be ready to interview?"

"Sure. I'll do that right now sweetie."

"Thanks," I say quietly as Cheryl sidles out the door.

As I wait for her return, I realize I have no reason to be embarrassed. I'm not that same fat girl who endured cat calls and whistles, knowing they were meant to demean and taunt, not meant as acts of appreciation they way they were when directed at other, thin and pretty girls.

No, I recognized them for what they were, messages that said, "Hey, fat girl, go on a diet, or hey, fat girl, stop eating like a pig."

What most people never understood was I had gone on diets, most diets known to mankind. Whenever a new diet came out, I'd try it. But they never worked. I'd tried liquid diets, pills, even starvation diets, nothing worked. Until I found the only thing that did work, exercise and eating right. Who knew?

Simple really, but emotionally the hardest thing I'd ever tried. I had simply reached the point to where I couldn't stand to be fat anymore. I needed help. I'd always been the one to help others. I got so desperate that I finally asked someone to help me for a change.

I went into counseling, one that coupled a diet and exercise program with weekly counseling and medical checks. And it had worked. I wasn't that fat girl anymore. I didn't have anything to be embarrassed about now.

Jon had lied. Anyone could see I wasn't fat anymore. The counselor told me I would still feel fat, still have low self-esteem issues, and she'd been right. That's all this is. I am still dealing with a lot of baggage, obviously. I grimace. Probably always will, the voice of my counselor echoes in my head.

A knock at the door again, brings my contemplation to a halt. "Come in."

Expecting Cheryl, I'm surprised to see my editor, Melody, in the doorway. "Kim, Mr. Mayer is going to need more time. In the meantime, I thought I would introduce our

new freelance photographer you'll be working with." She steps inside and holds the door open for the last person on earth I ever thought I would see again.

"Mr. Greg Hamilton, meet Ms. Kimberly Peterson." I can't move. My mouth opens but nothing comes out. My thoughts race. Somehow I manage, "What are you doing here?"

"Oh, do you two know each other?" Melody asks, looking back and forth between us.

"Uh . . ."

"Yes," Greg says before I can say anything more. "Yes, we met only recently and quite briefly, as well."

"Oh, well, that's great. Why don't I leave you two to discuss the photos we'll need for Mr. Mayer's interview piece." Melody makes a swift exit.

"Stop," I cry when Greg takes a step toward me. I scramble to my feet and try to put more distance between us.

Greg raises his hands in a placating gesture. "It's O.K. I'm not going to hurt you. I'm not a stalker. I'm a photojournalist."

"Like hell you are," I exclaim. How am I going to get away from him? Then, it dawns on me that it doesn't matter if I run; he would find me. If Bali knows this guy, that means he's a god. He's at least a thousand years old. He can do whatever he wants.

"Really, I am." He puts his hands down and sticks them in his back pockets. How does he have room to do that in those tight jeans?

I sit back down. "What do you want?" As if I don't already know.

He slowly approaches the desk and sits down in the chair. "I'm just here to do a job."

Yeah, and I know exactly which job he's referring to.

"I was on vacation in Europe, just like you. Some coincidence, huh?"

"Yeah, coincidence," I say deadpan.

We sit quietly for a few minutes. It seems like hours. Greg breaks the silence first, "I've been thinking about you. I really enjoyed our dance at the club," he admits in a soft, seductive baritone. He smiles, then amends, "Well, except for that defensive move you pulled on me." He rubs the back of his head and grimaces. The memory gives me a twinge of regret and pride at the same time.

I try to relax. I know why he's really here, but then I realize he doesn't know that I know. Fine, if that's how he wants to play it, I'll go along with his lie. I smile and say, "You know you deserved it."

He smiles in return. "Yeah, I know . . . but it was worth it."

I blush, then clear my throat. "So, you're a photographer?"

"Yep." He doesn't say anything more.

"Well, I guess we'd better discuss the photo shoot."

He nods. "What did you have in mind?"

We spend the next ten minutes discussing the best settings and possible poses. He seems to know exactly what he's doing. But then, he's a god. Aren't gods omniscient or something?

I feel some relief that he's decided to drop the dumb blond act. If he had continued the act, it would only have irritated me more than it had at the club.

He continues to throw out ideas. I nod occasionally.

Should I call him on his bluff? What would be the point, when I don't really know who he is? Why does he want Bali? I don't know anything about him, nothing to use

against him. No, best to play it cool, go along with the ruse, and try to get more information about him from Bali later. That way I'll have the upper hand when it comes time to deal with him.

A knock on the door startles me out of my thoughts. "Come in," I call.

I'm relieved to find it's Cheryl. Oh, won't she be surprised. "Cheryl, come in. I want you to see who is working here now." Cheryl walks in, then stops dead in her tracks when Greg gets up to face her. "What are you doing here?" Cheryl finally exclaims.

"That was my reaction, too," I say quietly. Cheryl tears her gaze away from Greg to me, silently asking for an explanation. "Yes, well, it seems, Greg is a photojournalist. He just started today."

"Oh, oh, well that's wonderful," Cheryl says, moving to shake Greg's hand. Her former frown turns into an ingratiating smile. She eyes us both with a speculation that leaves me feeling very uncomfortable. I can see the wheels turning, like a hamster on wheel who doesn't know when to quit.

I need to move quickly if I stand any chance of avoiding further humiliation for the day. "Yes, well, we have a lot to discuss before the interview with Mr. Mayer." I take her arm to usher her out of the room.

"Oh, oh, yes, that reminds me. Your editor, Melody?"

"Yes," I confirm.

"Yes, she wants me to let you know that you'll have to reschedule the interview. Jon fell asleep on the couch in her office. His manager doesn't think he'll be up to an interview until later this evening."

"Oh, O.K. Thanks." With a little more encouragement, I finally get her out the door. Before I step through myself, I turn and say, "I'll be right back."

As soon as I shut the door, Cheryl is on me. “That’s him! It has to be . . .”

“A coincidence?” I interrupt.

“I was going to say providence. It’s fate. He must be meant for you.”

“Please,” I say with as much disdain as I can muster.

“Really,” Cheryl says placing her hands on her hips. “I know he’s been a jerk . . .”

“In more than one way,” I remind her.

“True, but most guys are jerks. They can't help it." I laugh. "It's in their genes, so you can't very well hold it against them."

She grips my arm with both hands. "Please, Kim. Please. Just consider that he might be meant for you. Don't dismiss this, Kim. I know you. Give it a chance before you let your cynicism ruin it."

I bite my lip. She doesn't know what I know.

He is a fake, a phony. The guy he introduced at the club isn't the real him. But Cheryl doesn't know that.

I can't tell her the truth. She'll never believe it. She'll just think I'm making up ridiculous excuses to get out of a potential relationship.

When Cheryl continues to rant and complain, I decide to grant her wish. I grimace. Me, grant a wish? Ha! When pigs fly. “O.K.” I have to repeat myself before I get her attention.

“O.K.? You sure? You’re not just humoring me are you?” she asks, suspiciously.

“No. I’m serious. Like you said, it could be fate. I’m willing to give it a try, but only if you lay off, O.K.?”

“O.K.,” she agrees quickly, and backs away as if afraid I might change my mind.

“I’ll see you later, O.K.? And you better be prepared to tell me all the juicy details.”

I roll my eyes at her. She turns and rushes down the hall to the elevators. I give her a final wave before the elevator doors close. How easy was that? All I had to do is agree to see Greg, which wouldn't be hard since we will be working together on this project. My smile fades. What am I going to do? I bite my nail contemplating my options. It really boils down to talking to Bali first.

My eyes widen. I left Bali in my purse. And my purse is in the office . . . alone . . . with Greg! I bolt for the office door. Greg is now sitting in my office chair riffling through my desk.

“What are you doing?” I shout.

He doesn't jump or act guilty in any way. What a cool character. He opens the middle drawer and pulls out a pencil. He holds it up in answer to my question. “Now, I just need some paper. I want to write down some of the things we talked about before I forget them.”

Before he can move, I grab a sheet of paper from the filing cabinet and hand it to him. “Thanks,” he says. Our eyes meet. Something electric arcs between us.

I clear my throat and try to come up with something to say. “Uh, while you're doing that, I'll go and check what my editor, our editor, wants us to do tonight.” Damn, that didn't come out right. I quickly amend, “I mean what we should do tonight together.” I blink. That isn't much better. “Together with Jon, I mean.” I shake my head again. That still doesn't sound right, but decide to give up. Besides, he doesn't look like he's paying attention anyway.

I pause. That gorgeous head is bent over the paper, writing. I notice he needs a haircut. How I'd love to run my hands through that luxurious mane. I try not to notice the play of muscle beneath his white dress shirt. His navy jacket hangs over the back of my

chair. He loosens his tie and undoes the top button, letting a little tawny chest hair show. I gulp.

“Yes, well,” My mouth is dry. I swallow. “I’ll be right back.”

He doesn’t look up, just keeps writing. I continue to watch his hands. The pencil moves with subtle grace for a man with such large hands. I’m mesmerized. Goosebumps rise on my skin. I remember how those hands felt on the skin of my bare back, large, strong, and gentle. I touch my neck. How would those hands feel on the rest of me? He looks up, snapping me back to reality.

I blink. “I’ll be right back.” I turn to go, but then remember my purse. “Uh, I think I’ll hit the ladies room before finding out about our date . . . I mean, our meeting.” I open the bottom drawer of the desk and pull out my purse. Nothing seems to have been disturbed. Maybe he hadn’t been searching for Bali as I’d first thought when entering the office to find him searching my desk.

I need to talk to Bali, now. I head for the bathroom. It's time to get some answers.

Chapter 12

I enter the company bathroom and quickly search the stalls to make sure I'm alone. Finding the coast clear, I dart to the door and turn the lock.

Not sure I'm ready for the answers Bali might impart, I splash some water on my face before staring at myself in the mirror. I'm flushed. I grab some paper towels and pat my face dry.

I take a deep breath, then open my purse. Bali isn't there . . . again! No, no, no, this can't be happening again. Did Greg find Bali after all? He could be bolting out the door right now with her in hand. Damn!

I head for the door and unlock it. Before I can open it, a knock sounds. I jerk it open to find one of the office girls. In her hand is my miniature Bali. "Is this yours? You dropped it when you raced out your office."

I take it from her hands with relief. "Yes, thanks . . ."

"Shelly."

"Yes, thanks Shelly. I appreciate it."

"No problem. I like cats too." She gives a brief smile as she turns to head back to work.

I close the door again and lock it. Turning my back I lean against the door and sigh. So, he didn't find it. Thank goodness. I hold it up to my face and say, "Bali, it's time you tell me who that guy is. I don't know if you heard or not, but he's here, and we both know it's not for a job at my company."

When she doesn't say anything, I prod, "Bali? Come on, spill it. I need to know who he is, and I need to know right now."

O.K. She pauses. I'm about to spur her on when she continues, *His name isn't Greg Hamilton. I had guessed that much, so I didn't interrupt. His real name is Gregorian Hewitt Laydon.*

Gees, if I had a name like Gregorian, I'd shorten it to Greg too. Knowing that makes me like him a little better.

He's my half brother.

"What!" I hadn't expected that one. Bali's brother?

Yes, well, I haven't seen him for a while, but I'm pretty sure it's him.

"You said half?"

Yes, we have the same mother, but different fathers. You see, Gregorian's father is from the Greek House, so he is considered something of a half-breed to my people, and to the Greeks for that matter. I remember us playing together as kids, but he was so quiet, thoughtful. He knew even then, he wasn't accepted by either House.

How sad. It isn't his fault. I could never understand how people, even gods in this case, could treat people that way.

He lived for a time at our Summer Palace. When he turned twelve, he went to live with his father to start his training.

"Training? What training?" I ask, not sure I want to know.

All males when they turn twelve are sent away to train as warriors. This is so with both Houses. It is unusual for a boy to train under his father's roof. However, in this case, that was the point his father wanted to make, that he didn't consider Gregorian his son. At least, not a legitimate son.

I place Bali on the counter and pace. I don't want to hear anymore just yet. Poor Greg. At least I know my parents loved me. What must it have been like for him to not be

wanted by his mother or father? It is especially critical for a son to know his father, and to have that father's love. What I've learned so far makes me feel sorry for Greg.

Sympathy Greg would not welcome if he knew, I'm sure.

However, knowing his background and relationship to Bali doesn't really help the current situation.

I move back to Bali and place my hand on her. "So, why is he here?"

That I'm not sure of. Since he is of the Greek House, he could have been sent by Apollo to find me and take me away. Maybe he heard you had unlocked my powers and wants to prevent me from escaping. Who knows?

"That makes sense. Do you think Greg would do that? I mean, work for Apollo?"

Yes. I have not seen my brother since he left to train. Last I'd heard, he was a soldier in his father's palace guard. So, it only stands to reason he may have been recruited by Apollo to keep tabs on me all these years. He could have reported back to Apollo about your taking me home. I'm not sure how much he might know about us.

That certainly put things in a different light, but it didn't explain why he didn't just take Bali from me by force.

"So, why hasn't he just taken you from me? Why all the cloak and dagger?"

I'm not sure. I wondered that myself. I have some theories, but . . .

"But?"

I'd like to try and contact Ishe again. I didn't get a chance in London, and he might have some more information on Gregorian.

"O.K., so go ahead."

Would you come with me this time?

"What? You can do that? I can go with you?" I ask, amazed at the possibility.

Sure. Just make sure you keep touching me . . . and, you might want to be sitting down when we do this. You might get a little dizzy if you're standing.

"Oh, O.K." I take Bali in hand, move to a stall and sit. I take a deep breath. With Bali in one hand I grip the toilet paper dispenser with the other. "O.K., I'm ready."

Close your eyes and concentrate.

How does this work? I concentrate on the darkness behind my closed eyes. After a moment, I feel a strange sensation, almost like floating. The darkness starts to lighten into a white mist that swirls around in my mind. Then, I see her.

"Bali?" I ask, as she approaches, smiling at me.

When she stands in front of me, she nods. "So, what do you think?"

"This is awesome. Where are we?"

"On the ethereal plain. I told you about it before."

"Not much here, is there?" I look around, but all I see is rolling white mist.

She laughs. "No. Why should there be? It's just a place where we can talk to each other."

"So where is this Ishe?"

"Right here." Bali and I turn in surprise at the masculine voice behind us.

Bali squeals and rushes into his arms. Looks to me like they're more than friends.

It gives me the opportunity to study them more closely. Bali is a beautiful brunette. Her hair is piled high on her head with a single ponytail hanging loose down her back. She is dressed in light-blue diaphanous robes that drape her voluptuous body to perfection. She reminds me of I-Dream-of-Jeanie. Only the outfit is more classic and less revealing. She looks more like one of those Roman sculptures in a museum. In a word, lovely.

Ishe is a perfect foil for her classic perfection. He is broad of shoulder and narrow in the waist. I can see in his profile, a chiseled jawline, full lips, and Roman nose. He kisses Bali's hair with obvious affection that makes me blush and turn away to give them more privacy. Their beauty draws my attention back several times, before I am compelled to get the ball rolling. I clear my throat to get their attention.

Bali releases Ishe and turns her head toward me. "Sorry. Ishe, this is my new friend . . ."

"Kimberly," he finishes before Bali can say my name.

It surprises me, as well as Bali. "How do you know me?" I ask.

"Bali told me last time we talked."

"No, I didn't."

"Yes you did, love. Don't you remember?"

Bali shakes her head, a look of confusion gracing her features, before she shrugs.

"I guess I forgot," she says, laughing a little. But I can tell, she isn't convinced.

She moves to me and takes my arm, then draws me toward Ishe. "Nice to meet you," I say once we stand in front of him.

He's taller than I thought he'd be, at least 6'5". But then Bali is taller than I thought she'd be, too. An average 5'6" myself, Bali stands at least three inches taller than me.

"So," I say. "Bali has something to ask you."

"Yes. Ishe, do you know why Gregorian is here?"

"No, no. Why? What's happened?"

"He tried to steal me away from Kimberly in London."

"So you're not in London anymore?" he asks. There is something off about the way he says that and about the way he tries to act surprised about Greg being in Oklahoma. It makes me suspicious. Bali's open expression tells me she doesn't catch on to anything amiss.

"No, sorry. I tried to call you there, but you didn't respond."

"Yes, sorry about that. I had some business to take care of. You must have tried to contact me during that time."

Uh, huh. "So, you don't know anything about Greg . . . uh, Gregorian?"

"Not really. I haven't seen him since he went away for training."

"That's what I said too," Bali asserts. "I figured he must have been sent by Apollo to watch me or maybe find me again. I don't know. Do you think that might be the case, Ishe?"

"Could be," he says slowly. I can see him working it out in his mind. The creases in his forehead, the twist to his lips, the way his eyes dart from me to Bali and back again. Cowboys in the west call those shifty eyes.

He looks nervous and antsy. I narrow my eyes. Is he sweating? He massages the back of his neck before quickly saying, "Listen, I have to go. I'll look into it and let you know what I find out, O.K.?" He gives Bali a brief hug. "Nice meeting you Kimberly." He walks away into the mist as if he can't move fast enough.

Bali's arms are still stretched toward him as she yells, "Ishe? Ishe, what about my coming home?" Ishe keeps walking and ignores her question. Her arms fall to her sides. Then, her head drops to her chest as he disappears from view.

I'm not sure how to comfort her. For some reason, I don't trust Ishe. It's the nervous way his eyes darted around. Something is wrong. I awkwardly pat her back in sympathy.

She sighs. "Maybe we should go back now."

I nod. We aren't getting anywhere here. Before I can blink again, we're back. I grip the toilet roll holder more firmly as a wave of dizziness assails me. The next moment, the world rights itself. Whew! The ascent is easy but the landing is a bit disorienting.

I stare at Bali's statue. "So what now?" It turns into a rhetorical question since Bali doesn't have a clue and neither do I.

I put Bali back in my purse. Heading back to my office, I hope some answers may magically appear.

Chapter 13

No answers appear. That evening, Greg and Jon sit at my small eat in kitchen table, barely big enough for the two large men and myself to sit without bumping knees.

I try to relax, but it is an impossible feat with two virile men so close. Their presence makes my small apartment feel claustrophobic.

As I move around preparing our meal, spaghetti, garlic bread, and salad, I keep dropping things. I'm sure it makes me look like a world-class klutz.

I glance over to Jon and, sure enough, he's staring at me while he takes the occasional sip of coffee, black, no sugar or cream. A girl needs to remember how her man takes his coffee.

Then again, he isn't my man, yet. He'd apologized profusely for his behavior at the office. I finally decide to forgive him graciously, figuring I can't hold it against him. He was inebriated, after all. When someone is under the influence, one can't hold them accountable for their actions.

I take the bowl of salad to the table. "Here we go. The spaghetti should be done soon. What kind of dressing do you like, Jon?"

I ignore Greg, but it's no use, he pipes up before Jon can respond.

"I like Thousand Island, thank you."

Well, at least he said thank you. "And you?" I ask Jon again.

"I'd like ranch, if you have it."

"Sure." I head to the fridge and retrieve the dressings. I place the ranch in front of Jon and say, "I like ranch too."

We smile at each other for a moment, then I hear Greg clear his throat. My smile fades as I meet his eyes. He smiles despite my frown and pursed lips. He knows exactly

what he's doing. I slam the Thousand Island down on the table in front of him. "Here's yours."

He grins and says, "Guess you like Thousand Island, too, huh?"

The little devil. He knows exactly what he's doing, needling me every step of the way.

I retrieve the spaghetti and bread from the oven. I don't usually eat like this. Pasta is very fattening, not to mention the bread slathered with garlic butter. But that smell, heaven. I'd forgotten how good this stuff smelled. I inhale deeply and sigh. Just this once won't hurt, will it? My subconscious shakes it's head at me. You know this stuff is a trigger for you, why did you make it?

I'm not sure of the answer to that. Maybe I should schedule a session to discuss it with my weight management counselor. I haven't seen her for a month now. Maybe it's time. For now, I need to make it through this dinner without pigging out.

After placing the dinner on the table, I say, "Help yourselves. I hope you like Italian, Jon."

"Love it," he says, ladling a large portion of spaghetti onto his plate. I'm surprised he's hungry. He must be feeling better.

I grab the spoon before Greg has a chance to serve himself. He ignores my bad manners and takes an extra piece of bread from the bread basket.

Watching Jon, I realize I'm not as hungry as I thought. My stomach seems to be doing summersaults. Either that or a mariachi band just awoke from their siesta. I take a small portion of the spaghetti and place it on my plate.

As soon as I put the spoon down, Greg grabs it and helps himself to a supersized portion. I frown as he takes practically half the nine-by-six-inch dish, and piles it on his

plate. No wonder the man is so big. I'm surprised it's mostly muscle. If I ate that way, I'd be fat again.

Greg ignores my look and digs in. Silence reigns as we eat. After a time, I realize Jon is staring at me. I wipe my mouth and ask, "Do I have something on my face?"

"Huh?" he says.

"You were staring."

"Was I? Sorry. I was just trying to figure out if we've met before. I could swear I've seen you somewhere. It's like a dream you can't quite remember." He shakes his head, then continues to eat.

I look at Greg in time to catch him rolling his eyes, then shoveling down what's left on his plate. I shake my head at him. I clear my throat. "No, I don't think we've met before." Not unless that really was you in my London hallucination. The thought pops into my head and takes root. Bali assured me it wasn't the real Jon I met there.

Suspicion enters my mind. Did she tell me the truth? "So you live in London these days, right?"

"Yes, yes, I do. I understand you were there recently on vacation."

"Yes," I smile and eat a small bite of salad.

"Sorry, you had to hurry back so soon. Maybe once I'm done with this movie, you can visit me at my home there."

I nearly choke on my salad. I take a sip of water to get it down, then dab at my mouth with my napkin. "Uh, that's very nice of you Jon to offer, but I wouldn't want to impose." That sounded good. I don't want to come off as some kind of insane groupie stalker.

He smiles at me. "No imposition. It'd be a pleasure to have you." He takes my hand and caresses it briefly. Greg snorts. Amazing feat considering how he's shoveling the food down his throat as if he hasn't eaten in over a week. I notice he's stopped eating, frowning at our still joined hands. Jon releases it before I'm ready. I wish, not for the first time tonight, that Greg would disappear and leave Jon and me alone to get to know each other better, much better.

It's my turn to clear my throat when I realize the direction of my thoughts. Maybe it is better to have Greg here to chaperone.

I notice the spaghetti is almost gone. I'm not used to cooking for more than one or two people. What little is left, I offer to Jon. He declines, leaving Greg to take the rest. Where does he put it?

"Why don't I clear the table while you guys finish? Then we can move to the living room and get started."

"Sounds great," Jon replies. "I'm done. You want some help?"

"No, no. You're my guest. I'll take care of it. Why don't you go into the living room and make yourself comfortable?"

"If you're sure," he offers.

"Yep, no problem," I answer.

Jon gets up and moves past the swinging door into the living room. I can see him through the bar opening, moving around looking at pictures, fingering knickknacks, studying my DVD collection. I still can't get over it, Jon Mayer, in my apartment. I shake my head and gather the dishes, putting them in the sink to soak.

"Do you believe that guy?"

I frown, having briefly forgotten about Greg. "What's wrong with you?" I ask, turning at the sink to confront him.

"You do believe him. Incredible." He throws his hands up in frustration. "The guy insulted you this afternoon."

I blush. I had no clue Greg had witnessed my humiliation firsthand. "Thanks for reminding me," I sneer. "He apologized already, O.K.?"

I turn to the sink and start washing the dishes, placing them in the drainer after rinsing. I can hear Greg pacing behind me.

"Then, he claims to know you," he says in disgust. Of course, Greg doesn't realize the possible truth of that statement; that is, if Bali has indeed lied to me. I'm not sure how to go about proving that one though, or even whether it's significant enough to pursue.

"Next, he invites you to his place for another scoring opportunity."

"What?" I exclaim. What an absurd accusation. "Please. Jon is a movie star. He isn't interested in me." I turn back to the sink, wishing that weren't the truth. "He was just being polite. People do that . . ."

My breath catches when Greg's arms snake around my waist from behind, trapping me between the cool porcelain and his hard, hot body. I take short, stuttering breaths.

There is a sudden lack of oxygen in the room as his breath tickles me behind my ear. "Not that I blame him," he whispers seductively, before placing a tender, if all too brief, kiss on the sensitive spot behind my earlobe.

I close my eyes as passion rises hot like lava in my veins. Then, I remember who he is and what magic he is capable of. The spell is broken; I slam my elbow backward into his ribs.

"Hey!" he shouts, rubbing his bruised side. "You get off on hurting guys like that?" He looks wounded, like a puppy who's just been kicked. It makes me start to apologize, until I remember our situation. He's the one who should apologize. He's the one lying here, and he accuses Jon of lying? Ha!

Unfortunately, I can't call him on it. It makes me mad. Madder still because I can't do anything about the delicious messages my traitorous body is sending me. I should be attracted to Jon, not Greg. I dry my hands on a towel and march out into the living room, determined to set my mind in the right direction.

Chapter 14

"So, where do you want me?" Jon asks.

In my bedroom. Confusion enters my mind as the image instantly turns from Jon in my bed to Greg. I lick my lips, then shake my head to dispel the vision. I glance at Greg but he doesn't seem to be the wiser about my vision. I clear my throat, then motion to Greg to supply the answer to Jon's question. My stance and raised eyebrows dare him to make a pithy comment about the way Jon has phrased his question.

I have one window and several bookcases lining one wall in my place. The only suitable spot seems to be the fireplace where my antique book collection is neatly arranged.

Greg points to the fireplace. There really isn't any other suitable spot in my small place.

Once he finishes with the photo session, I say, "Thanks, Greg. Why don't you take off? You don't have to stick around. I'm sure you have a lot to do."

He plops himself down on my couch and settles in, obviously not going anywhere. "No, I'm free."

I doubt that. I'm sure if you win, it will cost me something. Probably Bali.

"Fine." Obviously, I'm getting rid of Greg that easily. I motion Jon to sit on the couch next to Greg. He takes my recliner instead, leaving the only seat available located next to Greg. I scowl at Greg as I sit down, then determine to ignore him as much as possible.

"O.K., if I tape record?" I ask Jon.

"Sure."

I push record and place the recorder on the corner of the coffee table between us. I pick up my note pad, sure this is going to be a long evening. I need to get this over with quickly. There is no point in lingering. Greg obviously wants to drive a wedge between Jon and me.

It's Greg I want to get rid of, permanently. I resent his assumptions about Jon, and his assumption that I, a grown woman, can't handle myself.

Jon looks so gorgeous leaning back with one leg crossed over the other, very sophisticated and European in his blue blazer. I decide to slow down and enjoy the view. However, I need to appear as professional as possible while doing it. I clear my throat, smile, and start with my first question.

* * *

An hour later, I have what I need. "Thanks, Jon. It was a pleasure talking to you tonight. I really enjoyed your company."

I stand when Jon does. He takes my hands in his and rubs them. "The pleasure was all mine." He bows, then kisses each hand in turn. A rude sound interrupts our interlude. It's time to get rid of my third wheel.

"So, Jon, why don't I give you a ride to your hotel," I offer, hoping to spend a little time alone with him this evening.

It isn't to be, of course. Mister "I'm here to guard your virginity," pipes up. "That's O.K. I can take Mr. Mayer home. It's on my way."

There is no way I'm going to let those two spend any time together. Who knows what Greg might do to him. I'll probably wind up writing Jon's obit the next day.

Before I can contradict Greg, Jon says, "That's O.K. It's covered. I have a limo waiting outside." He heads for the door.

Now, I'm panicking at the thought of being left alone with Greg. I'm not afraid of him so much as myself. "That's great. Greg, why don't you follow him and make sure he gets there O.K. Downtown can be a little scary so late at night."

Greg smirks, knowing exactly what I'm doing. He grabs his jacket from the pegs on the wall next to the door and shrugs it on. "O.K.," he says. "I'll see you tomorrow to go over the photos?"

"Oh, they'll be done by then?"

"Yes, I'll go in early and get them developed." Sure. I'll bet you just snap your fingers and make them appear. "What time will you be in?" he asks.

"I like to work from home. I'll have to let you know," I say evasively.

Jon is ready to go. He takes my hands and leans forward to kiss my cheek. It's a sweet gesture. I catch Greg behind him roll his eyes, before heading for the door and opening it. It's summer, but the evenings are getting cooler as we head into fall. A brisk wind blows into the apartment.

Jon looks into my eyes, and says, "I really enjoyed this evening, too. I hope we get to spend more time together soon."

"I'd like that too, Jon."

Jon moves past Greg. Greg looks me up and down in a wolfish manner, waggles his eyebrows, and says, "Later, baby." He winks then closes the door. How did he know about that reference to *Fifty Shades*? No, maybe I just misheard him. I shrug and open the door to make sure the guys make it to their respective cars without coming to blows.

I grin. What a nice thought. Two gorgeous guys fighting over me. Before that daydream can take root, I see Jon pull away.

Greg starts his engine. Hmmm, if only he weren't the enemy. I wouldn't mind starting his engine. I grimace.

Goosebumps rise on my arms, either from the cold wind or my imaginings. I don't want to examine that thought too closely. I rub my arms, then step back and close the door.

I can't sleep. I keep picturing Greg's handsome face, then daydreaming about him and I doing things. Things that involve a lot of kissing and. . . I throw the covers off my hot body with a huff of exasperation. I decide I'm not going to get any sleep; my thoughts are making me too restless. So, I throw my robe on, slip into my pink bunny slippers, and pad into the kitchen. I fix myself a cup of tea, then move to my desk. May as well start on the article. That should distract me from Greg for a time.

Once I finish, I note the hour. It's four a.m. I need to get some sleep. I can't believe I'm not tired. Yesterday, in fact the last few days have been long. I didn't get any sleep on the plane. I never have been able to sleep sitting up.

I lie down, fluffing my pillow a bit. I can feel the lump that is Bali under my head. I take her out, and study the symbols on her.

Are you O.K., Kim? Why aren't you sleeping?

"I don't know. I can't turn my mind off."

About Greg?

"Yeah, and Jon." I sigh. "So you really got him to ask for me by name to do this interview, huh?"

When Bali doesn't say anything, I ask, "Bali?"

No, I didn't. She admits.

"What? I thought you were fulfilling your part of the bargain." I sit up. "What do you mean, you didn't do it? I don't understand. How did he get here then?"

I don't know. Maybe it's destiny.

I roll my eyes. "Don't give me that destiny crap." Yeah, right, destiny. Then what she says sinks in. I whisper, "So, you think he's my destiny?"

That's the way it looks.

I see Greg in my imagination. For some reason, her words make me uncomfortable. There has to be another reason he came all this way; something other than research for his film. I lie back down, contemplating destiny. Greg's image remains fixed in my mind. I rest Bali on my chest, placing one arm behind my head.

Staring at the ceiling, I ask, "So, what are we going to do about Greg? Have you come up with any ideas yet? Or, better yet, have you heard anything more from Ishe?"

"No, nothing from Ishe. I'm not sure what's going on back home. It sounds serious, though. I wish I were there to help."

"Don't worry, Bali. I'll help you get home. There has to be a way to get you released. If there's a way, we'll find it, together."

Thanks, Kim. I hope you're right.

Me too. I'm not sure how I'm going to accomplish these promises. But, I'm determined to try.

"Bali?"

Yes?

"Do you think if we can get you out of there, Greg could detect it?"

What do you mean?

"I mean, if you weren't in the statue, would he know?"

I'm not sure. I don't think so, but I could be wrong. If he is here on Apollo's behalf, he may have been given the ability to know. I'm not sure.

"It might be worth the risk," I say, thinking through the possibilities. If nothing else, it might be a defensive card I can play.

Does it matter? I'm still in here. If nothing else, he'll know if you hand him the right statue or not.

"You know, maybe it's time to confront Greg."

I'm not sure that would be wise.

"Why not? What do we have to lose? Maybe he could give us some answers. We're not getting anywhere with anyone else."

True, Bali concedes.

"I mean, what is he going to do? He obviously can't force me to give you over. At least, I don't think he can, or he would have by now, don't you think?"

Maybe no one can take me from you, Kim.

"Why do you think that?"

Well, it makes sense. I remember a doll I had as a child. My sister tried to take it from me once. It would always return to me. I asked my mother once about it. She told me when we own an item, it is ours, until we give it up, willingly. Maybe it's the same with me and you.

"So because I own you, no one can take you without my permission?"

Yes.

"But you're not entirely sure, are you?"

No.

"I'll confront him tomorrow in the office. He can't do anything with people around. It would draw unwanted attention to himself." I smile at Bali before placing her back under my pillow for safekeeping.

"Night, Bali."

I turn on my side.

Night, Kim.

Content with my decision, I soon fall asleep and dream of a blond god with sexy, piercing green eyes.

Chapter 15

Next day, I enter the lab to find Greg there examining several eight-by-tens as they circle around in the swirling waters of the large, round rinse tub. I pause to study him a moment. I'm surprised. He seems to know what he's doing.

Not wanting to be caught spying, I ask, "So, when will they be ready?"

He turns and smiles at me. "Good morning," he says, before answering my question. "Not long. Most of these just need to be run through the dryer. Maybe another hour." He points to the few photos floating in the rinse tub. "These still need to rinse for another ten minutes, then the dryer for about thirty." He holds up a smaller four-by-six photo with plastic tongs. "This is the last one." He places it in the rinse tub to swirl with the others.

I check my watch. It's almost noon. "Want to go out for some lunch? Or we could order in," I suggest.

"Is it really that late?" He looks at his watch. "Sorry. I tend to lose track of time when I'm in the lab."

He stands and grabs a nearby rag to dry his hands. "No wonder I'm so hungry. Sure. Either would be great. I'm starved."

When aren't you? I think. Instead, I say, "Then we should probably order in. I can have it here in about an hour. Why don't we have lunch and discuss the photos in the conference room?" That should be public enough. The conference room has glass walls, giving the office staff a clear view of the occupants.

"Sounds good."

"Any preferences?"

"You can decide. I'll eat just about anything."

I grimace. I can believe that. "Good." I turn and head for the revolving door to order delivery.

* * *

I start when Greg comes up behind me, reaches over my shoulder and plucks a grape off the veggie and fruit tray in front of me.

"Damn, Greg, I didn't even hear you come in."

"Soft close door hinges," he says around the grape in his mouth. "Most glass doors have that to prevent them from slamming and shattering." He breaks off a bunch before taking a seat at the long mahogany conference table.

He takes a few napkins, spreads them out, then starts to heap the deli sandwiches onto it.

"You know we have paper plates." I hold one up for him to see. "You don't have to use napkins." I hold it out to him.

He nods his thanks and places the plate beside his mountain of sandwiches. I roll my eyes and start to serve myself some vegetables and a little fruit.

"I didn't know what you'd like, so I got a variety. I see I should have taken you at your word and not worried about it."

The sarcasm in my voice makes him stop grazing and look up at me. In a defensive voice he says, "I skipped breakfast."

Yeah, right. I'd seen the remains of the bagel wrapper in the trash bin just outside the lab. I decide it isn't worth my breath to call him on it. We eat in silence.

He swallows before asking, "Is that all you're having?"

"Yes," I say, trying to ignore his sexual magnetism. I'm sure it's just a side effect of being a god. I take another bite of my sandwich.

"You're too skinny. You need to eat more," he says before taking a huge bite of his last remaining ham and cheese on rye.

I nearly drop my carrot stick. I've never been accused of being too thin. If I hadn't already swallowed, I'd probably be choking right now. I blush not know whether to thank him for the compliment or not. "I'm fine," I reply, before changing the subject. "So, did you get the shots we talked about?"

He cleans up his space, gathering napkins and plate, and places them in the trash bin by the door. He sits again and pulls out a file folder from the leather briefcase I hadn't seen him put on the chair when he came in earlier. "See for yourself," he says, handing me the folder.

As I take it, our fingers brush, sending a delicious tingle up my arm. Our eyes meet. My breath catches. I clear my throat and fumble opening the folder. I try to concentrate on work instead of him.

I'm soon engrossed in the beauty of Jon's image. Greg has captured him perfectly. Realizing my mouth is hanging open, I close it and look up at Greg. "Wow," is all I can say.

Greg pulls out another item from his briefcase that looks like an art pad with white tracing paper inserted between the pages. He hands it to me with a warning, "careful with these, they're still a little damp."

So, that's what it's for, to soak up the water from the photos. I carefully turn the pages. They're all so good. How are we going to choose? "We may need Melody in here to decide on the right ones."

"We can do it. I already know which ones I prefer. Do you want to just choose from my favorites? If you're still having trouble deciding, then we can pull Melody in."

Feeling like my professional abilities are being challenged, I reply, "I can choose. Why don't you pull your favorites, while I look through these?"

He nods and starts to sort through the loose photos. "The pages are numbered if you want to note which of those you like," he suggests.

I take out a note pad to keep track. We work for a time. Is now the best time to bring up his deception? I worry my lip.

Out of the corner of my eye I see Greg stop. I look up and freeze. I gasp. Flames of desire leap in his eyes; they seem entranced by my lips. I swallow trying to regain some moisture in a mouth gone dry. He finally raises those burning eyes to mine. With a gravelly voice he says, "Don't do that."

"Do what," I whisper.

"Bite your lip," he answers.

Out of habit, I bite my lip again. He growls and moves quickly. I don't have time to react before his lips are devouring mine.

He pulls me out of my chair and into his arms to claim me in a clinch so bold it leaves me breathless. I didn't know passion like this existed outside of romance novels. I'm drawn in despite myself, and reach up to caress his neck at the hairline. His hair is so soft. His lips firm, demanding, yet gentle as they alternate between small nips, and ravaging forays that claim me as his.

We break apart when we hear a throat being cleared at the door. Melody purses her lips and says, "I see you're both hard at work. Much more of that, though, and we'll have to upgrade our fire insurance."

I blush, and glance up at Greg. The bastard has the most smug expression on his face, it makes me want to kick him. "Oh, hi Melody." I brush my hands through my hair,

attempting to return it to order. "We're almost done here. Do you want a look, or wait for our choices?" My hands shuffle through the papers on the table to distract me from my racing thoughts.

"I'll wait. Come see me when you're done." Melody turns away swiftly, but not before I see a semblance of a grin.

"O.K.," I reply, as the door closes softly behind her.

He remains by my side, not moving, which frees me finally to look at him. He no longer has a smug expression on his lips. It's hard to know what he's thinking really. I don't know him well enough to read him yet.

Yet? I don't want to know him that well at all. I want him out of my life. Don't I? He's the enemy. Why do I keep having to remind myself of that?

He's a god, for heaven's sake. We don't have anything in common. We could never be together, as a couple or anything else. I can't trust him anyway. He's already lied to me about Bali. Who knows what else he's lied about?

Greg reaches for me, but I back away, moving around the chair I occupied a moment ago, and place it between us. I decide now is as good a time as any to confront him. "That will be enough, Greg. Or should I say, Gregorian?"

He freezes, then silently studies me with narrowed eyes. Glancing to the wall of glass we both note the audience we have inadvertently attracted. Lunch time is over. Now, we're the afternoon entertainment. After glancing at me, he moves to the blinds and draws them, slowly, cutting us off from the people outside. Uh, oh. There goes my public protection.

I move further away from him, down the row of chairs, almost to the end of the long table. The distance gives me a false sense of security, but it's the only thing I've got.

"So, you know my real name," he says, moving with lazy steps toward me, like a predator, and I know who's the prey. I mirror his movements, retreating as he advances.

"Yes," I reply.

"What else do you know?" he says quietly.

"I know what you're after. I know you tried to steal something from me at the club." I try to keep it vague, wanting to hear from his own lips that he's a thief.

"How did you find out? Did she tell you?"

"She?"

"Bali," he confesses. That's all I need to hear.

"Yes, she saw you at the club. Why did you try to steal her?"

"She doesn't belong to you. I'm simply trying to return her to her rightful owner."

So, he is working for Apollo.

"I am her rightful owner. I found her. Possession is nine-tenths of the law," I say, hoping that law applies in his world as well as mine.

"I don't think so. You need to give her to me, now."

"If I say, no?"

"Then I'll take her from you."

"If you could you would have done so already."

He stops his advance and grimaces, confirming my suspicions. "I need that statue." He starts toward me again.

"Why?"

"Listen, I don't have much time to explain, and even if I did you wouldn't understand."

"Try me."

He stops, then runs a hand through his hair, clearly frustrated. "Where is she?"

"Safe."

"Where is she?" he says more forcefully. My eyes dart to my purse not two chairs down from where I stand. His eyes follow mine. We both lunge for the purse, Greg diving across the table for it. I grab it just before he can reach it. I hold it to my chest as I back away, rounding the table, placing it between us once more.

"I don't have time for this." One minute he's across the table from me, the next he's in front of me, a firm grip on my shoulders. "Kim, please, this is important. You don't want to get involved."

"I'm already involved."

"Shit," he swears. Before I can blink, we're standing in my apartment.

* * *

"Give me the purse," he demands.

Since it appears I don't have much choice, I hand it over.

He opens it and finds the miniature statue.

"What is Apollo going to do with her?" I ask.

"Apollo?" he says, surprised.

"Wait a minute. Isn't that who you're doing this for?"

"No, someone else sent me."

"Who?"

"You wouldn't know him." I can see him thinking as things click into place. "Or maybe you do. You can hear her, can't you? What did she tell you?"

"Everything," I boast.

"Everything that she knows, I'm sure." He paces, staring at the statue. "So what is she saying now?"

"I can't hear her unless we're touching somehow."

"On the plane, you had her in your bag?"

"Yes," I say surprised he knew about that. "How did you find me anyway?" There is only one person who knew where we were located. "Ishe," I say, sure I'm right.

He nods. "He gave me your general area. I had to hire a private investigator to track down your exact location. Once I did, I simply followed you to London, then back here."

"Who was the guy in the bar? Was that the P.I.?"

"No, just some guy I persuaded to help me out. I was the distraction while he tried to lift the statue from your purse."

"Why did Ishe send you?"

"It's a long story, and as I said, you don't want to get involved." He paces away from me staring at the statue. "I need to talk to Bali. Why can't I hear her? Bali, if you're in there, I need to talk to you."

"She's not in there," I confess, deciding he's not going to reveal anything else, unless I reveal my deception.

"Damn." He throws the statue down on the floor. He advances toward me and shouts, "where is she?" He grabs my shoulders again.

"Stop shouting, and I might tell you," I yell back at him. I shrug, breaking his hold on me, and move to sit down on the couch. "I'll tell you if you tell me what you know. Have a seat," I add, crossing my legs and arms in a stubborn pose.

He takes the single chair. I can tell he knows I have him by short-and-curlies. If he wants Bali, he'll have to go through me. "Now, tell me why Ishe sent you."

"Like I said, he sent me to fetch her."

I lift my eyebrows. "O.K., he wants me to take her away and hide her so she can't return to Egypt."

"Why doesn't he want her there?"

"Because she would be in danger."

"From whom?" I ask.

"Her sister."

"Her sister?" He nods. Now, I'm baffled, and realize this is more complicated than I thought. I hold up a finger. "Promise you won't take her from me?"

With a self-deprecating grin, he admits, "No problems there, honey. I can't take her from you by force. Your powers prevent me from doing that. You have to give me permission to take her from you."

"My powers?" I ask in surprise. "I don't have any powers."

He shrugs, "Guess you don't know it all then, huh?"

"Promise anyway."

He holds up his right hand, and rolls his eyes as he says, "I promise."

Hoping his word is good enough, I get up to retrieve Bali from my private safe.

I sit back down. I stare at him, then Bali, back and forth for a solid minute.

"So?" he says.

I take a deep breath. "Bali, we need some answers here."

I see your switch didn't work. Why did you reveal where I was? And why isn't he taking me from you?

"It appears he can't. He said something about my powers preventing it, whatever that means. Listen, we'll get to that in a minute, we need some answers."

What answers? What's going on, Kim?

Instead of answering her, I ask Greg, "Can you hear her?"

He shakes his head no. Knowing I'm taking a chance here, I place Bali on the coffee table in front of us and say, "I give you permission to touch her, but that's it, only touch, not take."

He nods, agreeing. He slowly reaches his hand out, and touches Bali's head.

"Now talk, Bali. Ask him your questions." I keep my hand on her so I can not only hear her too, but so I can grab her if he tries anything funny.

What are you doing here Gregorian? Are you working for Apollo?

He repeats what he's told me.

Ishe sent you to fetch me home? Why didn't he come himself?

"Tell her," I insist when he doesn't answer.

"No, he wants me to take you away and hide you."

What? she whispers, hurt clear in her voice.

"It's not what you think. You can't return home right now. Your sister would bury you where no one would ever find you. Any chance of escape would be taken away forever."

My sister? Banti? What does she have to do with this?

"Your mother has appointed her high priestess of her temple in Egypt."

That's impossible. Mother would never do that. That's my right, not hers!

"When you disappeared, Banti said you had run away; that you didn't want your birthright anymore. Your mother thought you had abdicated your position."

Mother wouldn't believe that.

"She would if Banti had proof."

What proof?

"Banti has your gift," he said with a grim expression.

What! The one Mother gave me on my thirteen birthday?

"Yes," he confirms.

But that's impossible. Apollo took all my powers before he put me in here.

"Apollo? Oh gees, it's worse than I thought. Now you really can't return. If your mother ever found out, it would mean the end of our truce with the Greeks. It'd start a war. Shit. Ishe thought Banti might have tricked you into giving up your gift, then somehow put you in there."

Apollo must have given my gift to Banti. I don't know how else she could have it.

It was her? I thought someone was behind that pillar in the courtyard. I was right. It was Banti. She was the shadow I saw. But why would she do this to me?

"I don't know. Power. You know she's always been selfish. Even as a child she was mean-spirited."

I'd wondered how Apollo knew what I'd done. In fact, now that I think about it, Banti is the one who pointed out Shatiri and Ashran to me in the square that day. She probably told Apollo where to find me in the garden as well. She set me up!

"When you contacted Ishe, he confronted Banti about her original story. She tried to prevaricate, saying you just wanted your place back and would say anything to get it. When Ishe didn't buy it, she used your gift to influence him into believing her story."

"Then how did he send you?" I jump into the conversation.

"Ishe suspected Banti was lying even before you contacted him. That's why he continued to listen for you. When you contacted him, he wrote a note to me explaining everything you'd said. He asked that if for some reason he didn't remember, I would promise to fetch you and hide you away from Banti. He knew what she was capable of, and that she wouldn't give up her position easily if you returned."

"O.K., so that explains how you were imprisoned, Bali. So, do you know how to release her?" I ask.

"Only the one who put her in there can release her."

And that is one thing Apollo assured me would never happen.

"Isn't there any way we can get Apollo to release her?" I ask.

"Not that I know of."

"Bali, what exactly did Apollo say when he put you in there?" There might be a clue in what he said that might help.

We talked about how I'd interfered with Shatiri, and how he was going to get rid of me once and for all.

"Anything else?" I ask hopefully.

Yes, he said, 'I sentence you to eternity inside this golden statue. Your punishment shall be to watch as the world passes by, without your intervention, without your interference. Your powers will be taken from you, and given into the hands of my House.'

"That's it!" Greg cries, startling me. "If he used those exact words, then you might have a chance. And it explains why you don't have your powers back."

"What? What are you talking about?" I say, confused.

Before he can explain, Bali says, *If Banti has my gift of influence then how was I able to influence Kim in the antique store to take me home?*

"What? You said you didn't manipulate me," I accuse.

"Well, it looks like she wasn't lying," he interrupts.

So, I didn't get Kim to pick me up and take me home? If not, then it must have been fate.

I snort, not believing it for a minute. "So, what about that time jumping thing you pulled on me, and that thing you did to make Jon setup the interview? If she doesn't have her powers back, explain how those things happened?" I challenge.

"As I said before, your powers could have done all that."

"Like hell! I don't have any powers!" This is crazy. He doesn't know what he's talking about. I'm human, not a god. What game is he playing at now?

"Yes, you do. You have Bali's powers. Apollo said it himself. He bequeathed Bali's powers into the hands of his House. You must be related to him somehow."

It would make sense, Bali says thoughtfully. I had wondered how you could hear me, and Apollo did fool around with a lot of women over the years, human women. He's probably contributed more to the population explosion than half the worldwide membership of the Catholic church.

"Yes, being able to hear you would be the first clue," he says.

I can't believe my ears. I try to remember what Aunt Helena told me about my ancestry. I grab the phone to call her.

"Who are you calling?" Greg asks.

"Aunt Helena. She's the expert on my family history."

After dialing her number, I listen as it connects. Next, I hear my aunt's greeting on the line. "Aunt Helena? Hi, this is Kimberly. Hi, yeah, I know, it's been a while." I glance to Greg, uneasy that he's listening in. I turn away and continue, "Listen, Aunt Helena,

do you know if there are any ancestors in our direct line," I pause, not sure how to ask about being related to a god, when an idea hits me, "who was illegitimate or an orphan? Maybe missing a father on the birth certificate?"

"There was? Uh, huh? Uh, huh? Thanks, Aunt Helena. Yeah, I miss you too. I'll call you soon, O.K.? O.K. Bye."

"Well?" he asks.

"Well, you could be right. My great-great-grandmother on my mother's side listed an unknown father on my great-grandmother's birth certificate. It's possible that unknown father could have been Apollo. But it could just as well have been anyone. How can we know for sure?"

"Do you have any birthmarks?" he asks.

I freeze. "Yes," I say weakly, knowing this might be it, the proof I'm related to a god. What would that make me? A goddess, a demi-god? That's absurd.

"Does it resemble anything in particular? Like maybe a sun?"

I pale. Why didn't I think of that? Apollo is a sun god. The sun would be his symbol. I nod my head slowly in affirmation.

"Then that's proof. You are of Apollo's House. It's the reason why you can hear Bali. Why you can use her powers as your own."

I rub my forehead. I might just faint. Things like this don't happen to ordinary people like me. If this is all true, and I'm not convinced it is, then I'm not ordinary at all.

It would explain why my family is so long-lived. All my family has passed, except Aunt Helena, but not usually until they were about a hundred. Or, in the case of my parents, from an accident. Even Aunt Helena is close to ninety.

Aunt Helena. Why wouldn't she tell me? It didn't make sense. Maybe my birthmark is really just a tat my parents liked and gave me when I was still a baby. That would be a more rational explanation than that I'm related to Apollo.

I pinch the bridge of my nose. A dull ache starts to blossom behind my eyes. The last explanation has to be it. There has to be another reason why I can hear Bali. I'm not convinced she didn't do all those things either.

I lean back on the couch and close my eyes, trying to convince myself this is all just a dream . . . no, more like a nightmare.

My eyes pop back open with inspiration. "Wait a minute. You're related to Apollo, right? I mean, you're half Greek, too."

He shakes his head side to side slowly. "I'm not a direct descendent of Apollo. My father is a distant cousin to him. Apollo said his House. That doesn't necessarily mean the entire Greek House."

"Oh." I'm not sure what else to say. Then another question comes to mind. "So, why can you hear Bali, too?"

"I believe that's because you are allowing it. We are both touching her," he says.

I release Bali then say, "Bali, say something." Since I can't hear her without touching, I ask him, "Did you hear her?"

He shakes his head no again. "See? It is you Kim. You own Bali, therefore you possess her powers and can hear her as well. You can grant access to her."

I remember all the times I thought Bali had used her powers: when she spoke with Ishe that first time, when she took me with her the second. It was because I'd allowed it. I must have influenced poor Mr. Jeffers into giving Bali to me for free also.

That last thought makes me feel guilty, like I'd stolen her myself. I've never stolen anything in my life. Well, except that candy bar when I was six. Mom had made me take it back and confess all to the manager. He'd been firm, but very kind about the whole thing, and I'd learned a valuable lesson about not stealing.

Greg interrupts my thoughts, "We need to get Bali out of here."

"Why the rush?" I ask, suspicious.

"Ishe may have convinced Banti to use me to bring Bali to her, but she isn't the most patient of people. If I don't return soon, she'll send her Maus after Bali. Ishe told her where you are. In fact, now that I think about it, Kim is probably in as much danger as you, Bali. You'll both have to hide."

"I wouldn't abandon Bali anyway. Where she goes I go, at least until she can get free."

Thanks, Kim. I appreciate your help, but I don't want you to get hurt. Maybe you should just let me go with Greg, then you can go somewhere for the remainder of your vacation. That would get you out-of-town for a time. Maybe long enough for Banti to give up the search.

"Believe me, she won't give up quickly. I suspect she's been searching for you for the last thousand years," Greg reveals.

"Great," I say. "Just great." Understanding the gravity of the situation, I ask Greg, "So, where do you suggest we go?" I figure wherever he has in mind would probably be safer than anywhere I could think of. Once there, maybe we could figure out how to get Bali released.

A smug smile pops onto his face, one that makes me suspect I won't like the answer. He replies, "I know just the place."

Chapter 16

Greg wants to use his abracadabra to pop us to wherever he has in mind. But I convince him to let me pack a bag first and drop King Henry off with Mrs. Lacey next door. I tell her I'm going on vacation again, but don't say where, not that I know. Even if I did, I wouldn't want Banti's Mau to torture my kind, little old lady of a neighbor into finding out where I'd gone.

"Have fun, dear," she says, waving me out the door. "You deserve it," she calls down the hallway, as I step back into my apartment, where Greg and Bali wait.

I lean back against the door, and ask what is uppermost in my mind. "So, if Bali's great gift is influence, and that gift is now Banti's, how is it that I can influence anyone?"

"That's what worries me and why we need to leave as soon as possible. If it's true and you can influence people, then Banti is probably feeling that gift being drained from her whenever you use it."

"So, I'm kind of like syphoning it from her? Can I do that so far away?"

"It's possible. Apollo gave his House the power to use all of Bali's powers. That might trump anything he did with her one gift afterward. This is new territory. Especially since no one from Apollo's line has ever taken possession of Bali and used her powers before."

I can't believe this is happening. I shake my head, then push off from the door to go pack. I hesitate halfway across the room, another thought occurring to me. "What about Jon?" I say out loud.

"What about him?" Greg replies.

"Well, we haven't exactly finished our assignment. We have to go back to the office and finish the story. Then, we can leave."

"No, we can't do that. We need to get out of here, now," Greg insists.

I turn back to face Greg and plant my hands on my hips. "Listen, I've worked too hard and too long to let my position at the magazine go. I have to do this assignment. If I don't, Melody will fire me. She'll have no choice. If you aren't dependable, you're expendable."

"What about your books? I thought the job at the magazine was just a hobby or something."

"No, my books don't bring in enough money yet. I only have a few in print. It takes more than that to make a living as an author, a lot more. Freelancing is fun, but if I had my way I'd quit to write books full-time."

Greg looks put out. He finally throws his hands in the air, and says, "O.K., O.K. But we need to make it quick. Pack, then we'll pop back to the conference room, give Melody the pictures and your article . . . you do have it written, right?"

I nod. "Good. Then you tell Melody you're finishing your vacation and say good-bye, right?" he says, eyeing me critically.

I nod again. "O.K." He waves his hands outward, shooing me away. "Hurry up."

"O.K., O.K.," I say, using his words back at him. I hurry off to the bedroom before he changes his mind.

Chapter 17

I can't believe this is happening to me. Yesterday, my life made some rational sense. Today, nothing makes sense. I mutter to myself as I pull down a backpack from the closet and start to throw a few items I'll need into it: a few t-shirts, a pair of jeans, underwear. I'm just stuffing my toiletries bag into the pack when I hear a crash from the living room.

Greg must have knocked something over. I grimace. I hope he didn't break one of my antique treasures. Then, I hear, is he's talking to someone? Wait a minute, that sounds like more than a few.

I tiptoe to the door and press my ear to it. I can hear voices, but not what they are saying. I take a chance and crack open the door, slowly.

What I see makes my breath catch. There are four women wearing white robes with gold trim. Symbols similar to the ones on Bali's statue line their collars, hems, and sleeves.

These must be the Mau priestesses Greg said would be coming for us. Guess I should have listened to him. What are we going to do now? I wait to see what Greg has in mind.

"Where is she, slave," one of the Maus say.

My mouth drops open. Slave? Did she just call Greg, a slave?

I look to Greg and notice his stance, once relaxed, is now stiff, as if he has taken offense at the label. He compresses his lips before answering. "I have her. I was about to bring her to Banti before you arrived. You may leave and tell Banti I will be along shortly."

Now I'm mad. I knew I couldn't trust him. He'd planned on stealing Bali from me all along, and for that backstabbing bitch sister of Bali's. Damn. He sure had me fooled.

"Since we're already here, you can just hand the statue over now. Oh, and by the way, Banti wants the woman too."

"Why? What does she need her for? She's just a pathetic human, of no value." He shrugs his broad shoulders.

"It is not your place to question her Highness, slave. It is only for you to obey."

"Why don't you take Bali, and I'll bring the woman along shortly?"

"Where is she?" the priestess asks again.

Greg picks up Bali from the coffee table and hands her over to the Mau who seems to be the leader of this group. I'm livid. He's giving Bali to them. He lied to me! He's been able to take Bali away from me this whole time.

Before I can charge into the room to save Bali, the head Mau holds a wicked looking staff with a sharp point to Greg's neck and warns, "Don't keep Banti waiting. She won't be pleased with you if you take much longer, slave."

"Understood," Greg says, tightly. The Mau group disappears.

I blink. They disappeared so quickly. I charge into the room and march right up to Greg, demanding, "How could you! I knew you were lying to me, you bastard!" He ducks the swing I take at his head.

He grabs me by the shoulders and drags me up, bringing me nose to nose with him. I can see the anger in his eyes and hear it in his voice as he says through gritted teeth, "Don't you ever call me that again. I've heard that my whole life. I won't tolerate being called a bastard ever again, from anyone." He gives me a small shake. "Do you understand me?"

Eyes wide, I nod faintly and gulp. Just as quickly as he grabbed me, he shoves me away, turns and paces, running his hand through his hair. “Listen, we don’t have much time. Are you packed?”

My mouth drops open. What does he mean we don't have much time? He turns back to me impatiently, “Well?”

“What just happened here?” I ask.

He picks up a Bali statue off the floor, the fake one he threw down earlier. A thought invades my mind and a faint hope flickers. “That’s the fake Bali, right?”

He shakes his head slowly, that sly grin blossoms on his handsome face. My own grin grows as it dawn on me what he has done. I laugh out loud. I shake my head in wonder. He pulled the same switcheroo I did on him at the office.

But then, I realize just how much more danger this may generate for us, and my smile disappears. His own smile fades at the same time into a serious mask and he nods once, knowing I’ve understood the gravity of the situation. We need to get out of here, now.

I rush to the bedroom and grab my bag. I run back into the living room and stop. Wait a minute. He may be telling the truth, but I need to know for sure.

I hold out my hand and he places Bali in my palm. Immediately, I hear her voice yell, *What are you waiting for? Take his hand and get us the hell out of here.*

That’s good enough for me. I grab his outstretched hand and we vanish.

The next thing I know, we’re standing in the conference room at the magazine. I’m surprised he’s going to let me do my job before we leave. After our visitors, I thought he would just take me somewhere safe and unknown, not keep to the originally agreed upon plan.

“Do what you need to, as fast as you can.”

I nod and go into action. I grab the stack of photos we'd left on the table and head out the door to see Melody. As long as Melody isn't busy, it should take maybe ten minutes tops to get the article settled and out the door.

Luckily Melody is in her office, but on the phone. She waves me inside and I close the door behind me. I have the photos in one hand, then realize I have Bali still in the other.

I place the photos on Melody's desk, at the same time I tuck Bali into my rear jeans pocket. I hope Melody doesn't ask me to sit down.

Of course, she does just that, waving me into a chair while still talking. I think fast, pointing to my watch to indicate I'm in a hurry, and shake my head.

She nods and holds up her finger. “Jack, I'll need to call you back. Yeah, just need a few minutes to wrap something up, then I'll call you right back. Yeah, bye.”

Melody hangs up and grabs the photos. As she sorts through them, she asks, “What's the hurry?”

“I've rescheduled my vacation, and the only flight I could get heads out at seven tonight.”

I can see she's surprised, as she stops looking at the photos and stares at me. “Kind of short notice, isn't it?”

“Well, I did break off my vacation to come back and do the interview. I didn't think you'd mind if I took the rest of it.”

“No, I don't mind. I'm just surprised you're heading out so quickly, considering Jonathan Mayer is still in town. The guy was a wussy insulting you like that, but he was drunk after all. You usually don't hold grudges against people.”

“I don’t. I’m not. It’s really my friend, Cheryl,” I prevaricate. “I’m doing it for her. It ruined her plans too, you know?”

“Oh, well. O.K. I guess you need to get out of here then, huh?” she says, glancing at her watch. I smile and nod. “O.K. The photos look great, and I’ve already reviewed your article. We’re good to go. Have a great time.”

“Thanks, Melody. See you in a week.”

Melody's phone rings. Just before I can exit, I hear Melody say, "Hello Mr. Mayer. Yes, she's right here. One moment please." I freeze with my hand on the door knob. I close my eyes then take a deep breath and turn around. "He wants to talk to you," Melody says, holding the headset out to me.

I walk slowly over to her desk and take the phone, ignoring her wagging eyebrows. "Hello?"

Chapter 18

"What do you mean you have to stay in town?" Greg exclaims.

I thought Melody had cornered the market on conniptions. Hers were nothing compared to Gregorian's tantrum.

"Just what I said." I pace the conference room, chewing on my thumb nail, trying to figure this out. "Jon needs someone to escort him about town while he does his research for his movie. That was part of why he chose Oklahoma to visit. He interviewed with us as a courtesy, and I suspect to drum up some publicity for the new movie, too. He's gearing up to star in a new Western and needs to get into character mode."

"I don't care why he's in town. Why didn't you just say, no? Damn it, Kim, don't you get how much danger we're in here?" Greg paces away and back, rubbing the tension from his neck with one hand.

I grimace at his tone, it reminds me of my grade school teacher when I was bad and had to stand in the corner. "I couldn't say no. He's a freakin' movie star, and an key client for our magazine. Melody would have gone ballistic and had me committed if I'd said no. I mean, vacations are important but not as imperative as this." I cross my arms and wait for him to stop pacing before saying, "I couldn't say no," I repeat in case he missed it the first time.

He huffs and runs his hands through his golden mane again. "Shit," I hear him breathe. "I didn't expect Banti to want you both."

"Why does she want me, anyway?" I ask.

"I suspect it's that power syphoning thing we talked about at your place. I think she senses you might be a threat to her."

"Me?" I ask in astonishment. "What threat could I, a weak and pathetic human, be to a goddess?" I throw Greg's words back at him, then laugh in disbelief.

He ignores my taunt. "More than you might suspect, and I only said that to throw them off the trail. If your possession of Bali allows you to wield her powers, believe me, you could do her great harm."

"I don't see how. Those powers didn't do much good for Bali against Apollo."

"That's Apollo. He's eons older than Bali and Banti. He didn't have any trouble taking Bali's powers because he's so old. Therefore, his powers are stronger."

"Oh," I say, still pacing the room, not willing to think about supernatural powers and how to use them. I switch my focus to our more immediate problem. How can I stay in town and still avoid being captured by Banti's priestesses?

I try not to glance at Greg. With his hands on his narrow hips and that wide chest with his shirt half undone, he's a major distraction I don't need right now. He's right, we are in danger. But what am I supposed to do? Mr. Mayer is a celebrity that anyone would kill to interview let alone spend time with for a few days. If I refuse, Melody will be all kinds of suspicious, not to mention probably fire my butt on the spot.

I grimace again at that thought. It doesn't help, and neither does seeing Greg's ripped body right now. I head for the door.

"Where are you going?" Greg exclaims.

"The bathroom. I'll be back in a moment."

I step through the door and head for the bathroom. I need a second opinion on the situation. But first I need to splash my face with some cold water. The headache behind my eyes increases. I'm not used to all this adrenaline rushing through my veins; it's stressing me out.

I hear the door open and close. As I reach for a paper towel to wipe my face, I spot Greg in the mirror behind me. I yelp and spin around. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" I yell. "Don't ever do that again."

I see red when he just stands there smirking. It's the last straw. I put all my weight behind a push to his chest that should have moved him across the room. The fact that he only moves about an inch makes me even more pissed off.

He is too close, invading my space, as usual. Between my attraction for him and my fear for our safety, I start to cry out of frustration, which just makes me even more angry. I'm frustrated at the situation, at my attraction to a man I can't have, two men I correct, and the loss of my long overdue vacation. It all just seems so out of control. The one thing I hold close at all times; I take pride in myself for staying in control. I start pounding his chest and yelling nonsensically. He just stands there, letting me.

All at once the energy drains from my limbs, and I collapse against him. He finally moves, hugging me close, kissing my hair, making soothing sounds as he rubs his large hands in circles on my back. I'd never been touched like this by a man. It's nice. I never want it to end.

Once I calm down and take a few gulping breaths, he says quietly, "Better?"

I look up at him, embarrassed at my loss of control. However, I manage a small nod and smile. He smiles back at me and gently caresses my cheek with his thumb, wiping away my tears. My breath catches at the touch and the realization that our lips are just a breath away from touching. I can feel his breath on my face.

I hold my breath as he takes my chin and lifts my face to his for a sweet gentle kiss. He plays a bit before deepening the contact. Before I can go up in flames once more,

he breaks contact, leaving me panting, weak and wanting more. I grab the sink behind me with both hands to keep from falling.

Greg runs a hand through his hair as he backs up. I console myself that I wasn't the only one out of breath. "I'll be right outside. Try to hurry."

I watch as he retreats outside. I stare at the door, willing him to return, then start when a single bang issues against the wall from the hallway. I smile, knowing that bang came from him. An indication that he is just as frustrated and horny as I am.

My smile fades. He's right. This is no time to be doing this. We need to focus. Any distraction, especially one as delicious and all consuming as Greg, could be fatal. In more ways than one, I think.

I turn and look at myself in the mirror. My lips are red and swollen. I touch them briefly, remembering the feel of his kiss. I've never been kissed like that in all my life. I want more. But what would be the point. With Greg, a relationship would be totally impossible. He's a god for heaven's sake. I'm a mortal.

Do gods and mortals ever have anything more than one-night stands? I've always known that nothing less than a committed relationship will ever be enough for me. I'm just not wired to have sex outside of marriage. Sometimes I wish I were. Sex is too intimate to have with anyone you aren't completely in love with. And, I have too much respect for myself to do it with anyone who doesn't feel the same way about me.

I sigh. Thoughts about Greg will need to wait. First things first. I open my bag and draw Bali out. "Bali? I need your help." I pause, waiting for a response. "Bali?" I begin to get suspicious. After a few minutes, I roar and head for the door. That Bastard! I'll get him for this.

Chapter 19

I spot Greg across the newsroom floor speaking to Cheryl. What's she doing here?

All my angry thoughts return to my target. As I march across the room, I devise a plan to get rid of Cheryl, so I can blast Greg for his deceit.

Before I can say a word, Cheryl gushes, "Greg was just telling me about your plans to resume your vacation, Kim. That's a wonderful idea."

"Yes, well, it may be postponed again. Jon wants to discuss plans for my chaperoning him about town."

"What? Why would he need a chaperone?" Cheryl asks. I notice she has both arms laced around Greg's arm. Greg doesn't seem to mind, or maybe he just doesn't notice.

"Exactly what I said," Greg says, crossing his arms and effectively causing Cheryl to release him. For some reason, this pleases me. Then reason returns and with it my anger.

I glare at him. He's already in enough trouble. Doesn't he realize he's only adding to his bill?

I decide to ignore him for the moment and answer Cheryl. "He's doing research for his new movie and wants someone local who can escort him to a few places where he can learn about western history."

"That sounds like fun," Cheryl says. "People never explore the wonders sitting right in their own backyards. I know I don't take enough time to see the sights around here."

"That's true. I don't either. I've heard of a few places like that nightclub bar called *Cowboys* on the west side of town. They have a Bull Riding machine and everything.

That would be a good place for him to experience, but I've never been myself. It would be fun to see something new though."

"And it would give you a chance to get to know him better." Cheryl raises her eyebrows. "If you know what I mean."

I ignore that comment. Unfortunately, Greg decides to respond, "We most certainly do, and Kim most certainly won't."

Cheryl studies the two of us. A sudden look of understanding crosses her features.

I frown at Greg, who is returning my stare with pursed lips. He's definitely not happy, but then neither am I, if I'm correct in my assumptions about him deceiving me.

"Well honey, you know I'd be more than happy to babysit your delicious movie star," Cheryl chirps. "Why, that would free you up to spend more time with this yummy male hunk."

I close my eyes. Cheryl can be so embarrassing sometimes. "Cheryl, the yummy male hunk is standing right here listening."

"Oh, I know," she says unrepentantly, eyeing Greg up and down. Greg has that infuriating look of smug male pride on his face again.

"So you agree I'm yummy, huh?" Greg asks me.

I roll my eyes at the ceiling. "You know," I look around the large room for emphasis, "I don't think this room is big enough for your ego. I think we need to move this conversation to the nearest stadium. Preferably one that seats more than . . ." I cross my arms and place my finger on my chin thinking, "ten-thousand?" I uncross my arms and place my hands on my hips and glare at him. "Maybe more."

He eyes me for a moment, grinning. He's obviously amused by my sarcasm. Not the reaction I was hoping for, but then he is a man. What did I expect? I roll my eyes

again and turn my attention back to Cheryl, who is looking at me with her mouth agape, as though she doesn't know who I am.

"What?" I ask her a little roughly, irked at her as well for stroking Greg's ego.

She finally recovers and says, "Nothing, nothing at all."

I take a cleansing breath and return to the subject. "Cheryl, thanks for offering, but Jon, Mr. Mayer, asked for me."

"That doesn't mean he wouldn't agree to let Cheryl take him around," Greg pipes up.

"No," I say slowly thinking it over, "but it doesn't mean he will either."

Cheryl and Greg stare at me, not saying a word. "Alright," I say, exasperated again. "I'll just . . ." Greg clears his throat meaningfully. I get the hint but ignore it. "I'll ask him tonight."

"Tonight?" Greg and Cheryl exclaim at the same time.

"Yes. He said we should meet for dinner tonight."

"Where?" Greg says, suspicious, "Not your place."

"No," I say, exasperated that he thinks I would be so dumb as to return where the Mau were the most likely to show up. "We're meeting at the Devon Tower restaurant, Vast."

"Did you tell him to make reservations for three?" he asks.

"No. I didn't. Because you're, not, going," I say each word with emphasis.

"Wanna bet?" he says, crossing his arms over his chest.

I cross my arms as well and stare him down, knowing I can be just as stubborn as anyone else. I'm used to getting my own way, and this would be no different in my mind.

"Children, children, please." Cheryl says, trying to placate us. "Listen, I think I have a solution. Greg, you can take me to the restaurant. That way, when Kim asks Jonathan to let me escort him, we'll be right there to discuss the matter. O.K.?"

Greg smiles at Cheryl, "Great idea." He turns back to me, daring me to refuse.

"O.K.," I respond reluctantly. "I guess I can signal you once I broach the subject and you can come over briefly . . . *briefly*," I warn, "to discuss the matter."

"Sounds like a plan," Greg says, rubbing his hands together.

Cheryl claps her hands together and says, "Wonderful. What time did Jonathan have in mind?"

"Seven-thirty," I say.

Cheryl looks at her watch and gasps, "That only gives us a few hours to get ready. Vast is nothing but formal attire. We'll need to stop by your place to get your things."

Before Greg can object, I cut him off. "Uh, why don't we go shopping instead?" I suggest.

"Oh, honey, you don't know how much I'd love to take you up on that offer," she says with dripping sarcasm. She turns to Greg and confides, "I've been trying to get her to go shopping with me forever."

Will the embarrassment never end? "We've been shopping before," I grumble.

She continues, "But I don't think we have time in this case. I have another idea. We'll drop by my place and get gussied up. It'll be faster. I'm sure I have something that will look absolutely breathtaking on you. Something that will make Jonathan swallow his tongue."

Momentary panic assails me. I can just imagine the getup she has in mind. I'll deal with it later, I decide. For now, I smile at her offer. She means well. I look at Greg to get

his take on the situation. He's rubbing his chin in contemplation. "And what about you?" I ask.

He sighs and grimaces. "O.K., I'll get ready at my place and pick you both up at Cheryl's."

Cheryl gives him the address. Before he can leave, I remember what I wanted to talk to him about before Cheryl showed up. "Cheryl, could you give us a few minutes?"

"Sure, honey. But make it quick. We don't have much time. I'll meet you downstairs in the lobby." She heads off.

I peak around Greg to see the conference room is empty. I take his hand and steer him in that direction. Once the door is shut, I confront him about Bali. "So why did you do it?"

"Do what?" he asks.

"You know what. Why did you take Bali from me? In fact, I thought you said you couldn't take Bali from me. You lied."

"I didn't lie. I don't know what you're talking about." He looks confused and a little hurt, which makes me confused.

"I don't understand. In the bathroom, I tried to talk to Bali, but she wouldn't say anything."

"So you thought . . . that I." I feel guilty, he looks disappointed in me. "No, Kim. I told you. I can't take Bali from you. I wasn't lying."

"Oh. Then, why didn't Bali say anything?" Did he give the wrong fake Bali to the Mau? But then I remember Bali telling us to get the hell out of dodge after they left. This didn't make sense.

I take the statue out of my bag again and stare. It looks like the original, but then so did the other one. "Bali?"

Yes?

"Why didn't you answer in the bathroom?" I'm a little mad now. What could Bali possibly be thinking, worrying me that way?

I was busy.

I stare at her, nonplussed. "Busy? What could you possibly be doing that you couldn't acknowledge me?"

I was talking to Ishe and . . .

"What did she say?" Greg asks. I hold the statue out so he can touch it.

"She said she was talking to Ishe," I say, filling him in.

"What!" Greg yells. "Bali, you can't do that. You can tell me what he said later, but you can't contact him again. Promise me."

"What? Why?" I ask.

He ignores me. "Bali, promise."

I promise. But I don't understand why.

"Neither do I," I assert.

"Because I think that is one way that Banti can track us."

You don't know that.

"No I don't, but I don't want to take the chance. Do you?"

No.

"So what did Ishe say, Bali?" I ask.

"Not now." Greg runs a hand through his hair. "We'll discuss that later. Right now we need to get out of here before the Mau show up. Or worse, Banti shows up in person."

"You think she'd do that?" I look around the main room through the clear class wall of the conference room.

"It's a possibility."

"Do you realize, you say that a lot?" I say absently, worried about the Mau and Banti.

"Come on," he urges, grabbing my arm and leading me out of the conference room in a hurry.

Halfway across the room, the doors to the elevator open. Banti's Mau step out, dressed in business attire. To blend in better, I suppose.

"Ah, shit," Greg says. Before I can react, Greg jerks my arm, pulling me down and into one of the office cubicles. He holds his finger up to his lips. I nod, acknowledging his unspoken message to keep quiet.

At this time of the evening, the office is at its low point of the day. A few people loiter in conversation with fellow co-workers, but most have headed home or are about to do so. We wait and listen.

"Hello, can you tell me where I can find Kimberly Peterson?"

"I think she left for the day." I recognize Peter St. James' voice.

"I really need to find her. Do you know how I might get in contact with her?"

"You can try her editor, Melody Rider. Her office is back there along the far wall," Peter replies.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome." Peter moves toward the elevators to leave for the night. The Mau proceed down the aisle to the back of the room.

Damn. If they head to Melody's office, they'll pass right by us.

I turn my head and give Greg a look of panic, mouthing the words, "Shit. What do we do?"

Greg looks around the cubicle. All of the offices are partitioned off into small, half wall workspaces, most with only one desk. This one, though, is more spacious, mostly because it is also the main hub for the shared office printer and copier.

The office gofer usually gets this cubicle in order to do not only copying duties, but filing, proofreading, and other chores. He's usually the go-to guy when you need something menial done.

Luckily, I fit under the desk, while Greg hides behind the filing cabinet which sits along the cubicle's half wall in front of the entryway.

Not the best place for either of us, but our luck holds as they pass by without spotting us. I breathe a silent sigh of relief once they disappear from sight. I can hear one of them knock on Melody's door, followed shortly by the door opening and closing behind them.

Greg peeks over the half wall to make sure the coast is clear. He nods and holds out his hand to me. I don't hesitate.

We sprint for the elevators. I don't even breath again until the doors close. I notice Greg is still holding my hand. He has simply forgotten he's holding it, I tell myself. I wiggle my hand and he drops it.

"So what do we do now?" I ask, try to catch my breath.

"Nothing. We continue with our plans I guess. Are you sure you want to stick around any longer? It's only a matter of time before they catch up to us." Greg looks worried which makes me worry. Usually so cocky and sure of himself, it brings home the precarious position we're in.

It's reckless, but I stubbornly hold that no one will interfere with my career, and that includes four Mau Priestesses out to kidnap me. But then, what about Greg? What danger could I be putting Greg in by being so stubborn?

"Greg, what will they do when . . . if they find us?"

"I'm not sure," he says, watching the floor numbers changes as we descend to the lobby.

"But you have an idea, don't you?" I ask, suspiciously.

I have my answer when he won't meet my eyes and refuses to answer.

Damn, my overactive imagination starts to run wild with every horror film scenario I've ever seen. Not sure I want to know, but needing to know nonetheless, I ask, "Will they kill us?"

He turns to confront me with the truth. "It's possible."

"But, then, you're a god. Gods can't be killed, right?"

"No, but I can be sent to the underworld. And believe me baby, that is one place you don't want to end up in, ever."

"Oh." I remain silent, going back over our near miss upstairs, when a thought pops into my head. "Why didn't you just pop us out of there?"

"Out of where?"

"Upstairs."

"Oh. Well. You want to know how they found us so soon?"

I nod.

"They can track my vapor trail, so to speak."

"Vapor trail?" I ask.

"When we popped out of your place and into the conference room?"

"Oh. Well, that's just great. No wonder you didn't just pop us out of there. I wondered about that."

"Yeah, I thought about making us invisible too."

"You can do that?" He nods. "Cool."

"Yeah, but they would have picked up on that too. They can sense when I use my powers nearby, or if they pass a point where I've used my powers recently."

"Figures. Can they do that with anyone?"

"No."

I sigh then ask, "Is it because you're a slave?"

His head jerks hard in my direction. "Where . . . how do you know that?"

"I overheard the Mau in my apartment. They called you a slave."

Greg looks at the ground not saying a word. I give him a moment to explain, but we've passed the fifth floor already. We don't have much time left, so I ask, "How did that happen? Aren't you like, a god? I thought, you were Bastet's son. How can you be a slave?"

Greg sighs, "It's a long story. For now, just know that I may pose more of a danger to you than Bali, because they can track me."

"Why are you still with me?" I ask. "You promised Ishe to find Bali and protect her. Is it just that I haven't given her over to you that you're stuck with me?"

"No. I want to protect Bali, true. But I don't want you to be harmed either. You never asked for any of this. You shouldn't have to pay for something that wasn't your fault." Greg runs his hand through his hair again.

"I don't think we have any choice now. They want Bali and me. I guess you're stuck with me until we resolve this mess."

Greg takes me by the shoulders, holding my gaze with serious eyes. "I don't see it as being stuck with you. I'm glad we're in this together. It gives me a chance to get to know you. But I'm also sorry you're in danger because of me."

I can feel the heat of his touch through my blouse. "I don't think that's your fault either. They obviously want me because of Bali, not you."

"No, but they could find you more easily being with me." He looks up at the floor numbers, making me do the same. We've just passed the second floor. He removes his hands. I feel a momentary loss.

In the same moment, I discount it and say, "They could find me without you too. Don't you think we are better off dealing with them together than apart?"

"Perhaps. I suppose they might have tracked us as a result of Bali talking to Ishe, too," he allows, turning to the doors and placing his hands in the back pockets of his jeans. "For now we should be O.K., as long as I go to my place on foot. I don't think Banti knows about my apartment yet. And, as long as Bali doesn't contact Ishe again, it's a long shot they'll find you either."

"Great." The doors open and there stands Cheryl across the lobby, talking to a blond guy in a very distinguished looking business suit. His back is to me so I can't see his face. Cheryl is such a guy magnet.

When she spots us, she excuses herself from him and heads our direction. We meet her half way.

"We don't have much time, honey. Let's catch a cab and head to my place. We don't have much time to get ready. We don't want to keep Jonathan waiting, do we?"

"You ladies head out. I'll be there in about half an hour."

I give him a worried look as Cheryl drags me out the front doors. I'm not sure separating for even a half hour is wise. What if something happened to Greg? How would I ever know what happened to him? Or what if the Mau find me, or him? What then?

Greg nods and gives me a halfhearted look of encouragement. "I'll be along soon."

What could happen in a half hour?

Chapter 20

Luckily I didn't find out. Greg arrives in a cab to pick us up, and we are off to the restaurant.

Once the cab arrives, I decide to fill Cheryl in on a few things. If anything happens to Cheryl because of me, I'd never forgive myself.

"Cheryl, I need to tell you something."

"What, sweetie?"

"The reason we, Greg and I, need to leave town . . ."

"Yes," she encourages when I hesitate.

"Well, you see, we have some people after us."

"What? Who?"

"It's a cult of women who want my statue."

Cheryl looks surprised. "You mean that ugly cat statue?"

I'm offended on Bali's behalf, but decide to let it pass. I nod instead.

"Why would anyone want that old thing?"

"Well, that's the reason really. It turns out it's really unique, one of a kind."

Cheryl huffs in disbelief. "You've got to be kidding honey. I thought that guy in the antique store . . ."

"Mr. Peters."

"Yes, Mr. Peters. I thought he said it was made of lead?"

"Well, he was wrong."

"How do you know that?"

"Greg here is a collector of Egyptian artifacts. He knows someone who might want to buy it from me too."

Cheryl looks at Greg mouth agape. After a moment her mouth snaps shut and turns back to me, saying, "Isn't that convenient?" I can tell she doesn't believe a word of it.

"Cheryl, it's true. Greg saw Bali, I mean my statue in my apartment and knew right away what it was. He contacted his buyer, and this cult group found out about it. They tracked me down and tried to steal it from me. They'll do anything to get it."

Cheryl looks unsure now whether to believe me or not. "O.K., let's say I believe this. Why do you need to leave town? Can't you just go to the police?"

"I don't think the police can do anything about this group. They're pretty slippery."

"O.K., so why go out of town. What good is that going to do?"

"My buyer is located in Phoenix." Greg explains. "If we can get there and get rid of it, this cult should leave us alone. My friend should be O.K. He has a great security system. I doubt he'd have a problem with them."

"So you're going to take your Aunt up on her offer while there too?" Cheryl asks.

"What offer?" Greg asks.

"My Aunt Helena has been offering the use of her cabin near Phoenix to me for the last two years. She called Cheryl this morning to find out where I was and offered me her cabin again." I grimace and say, "In fact, it would be a good idea. I haven't seen Aunt Helena in a while, too long. Maybe she'll join us if I ask. It would be nice to see her again."

"Do you really want to involve your Aunt in this?" Greg asks.

For Cheryl's benefit I say, "Well, by then we'd have sold the statue. So I don't see why not." I see we've arrived at our destination. "We can talk about that on the way down to Phoenix," I say as we glide up to the curb in front of the restaurant, and stop.

Greg gets out first. He holds out his hand to help Cheryl exit, then does the same for me. He squeezes my hand briefly. I look up to see appreciation shining in his eyes before he tucks my arm through his. We follow Cheryl through the doors. There are people waiting who probably didn't call ahead for reservations. I worry, Greg and Cheryl might not get seated for a while.

"Did you make reservations?" I whisper to Greg.

"No worries."

Before I can question him, he releases my arm and walks up to the host. I see him point my direction. The host bows and motions for me to follow him. I look back at Greg to find him and Cheryl following as well.

We wind our way through the tables of people to a door at the back of the room. The host opens it and then spots Greg and Cheryl. "I'm sorry sir, but Mr. Mayer has reserved a private dining room for two only."

I can tell Greg is not happy with this news.

I step through the door quickly. The host closes it behind me. I wait, wondering whether Greg might break it down.

Jon and I sit at the small round table for two sipping our wine. We placed our orders with the waiter about twenty minutes ago.

Greg was not happy, to say the least. I grin briefly, remembering. Man was he angry, and suspicious, of course. I don't know why he was so upset. Jon is harmless. In

fact, I know more about Jon than I do about Greg, if only through secondhand news articles and such.

"You seem distracted tonight," Jon says, pulling me out of my thoughts.

"Sorry, I do have some problems going on right now. But I don't want to talk about them. I'd rather talk about you."

Jon blushes and swirls his wine. I've embarrassed him. Most men like to talk about themselves, so I'm a little surprised at his reaction. "I mean, tell me about your new movie. What kind of research are you trying to do while you're here? You were a little vague about it on the phone."

Jon visibly relaxes and takes a sip of wine before placing his glass on the table. He keeps one well manicured hand on the stem as he gathers his thoughts. "Well, you know it's a Western?"

I nod.

"When I start a new movie, and need to gain some perspective on my character, I either read or go where I can get what I need, or both. Since my character is a cowboy, I thought Oklahoma would be a good place to get an authentic perspective on the subject."

"Well, it's true Oklahoma has some extensive history that is immersed in cowboy lore. For instance, there is the Cowboy Hall of Fame, several rodeo-themed attractions, and Oklahoma City hosts the National Cowboy Rodeo event annually. Your options are many, more than you could see in only two days."

"That's O.K. I don't need to see everything, just certain aspects will do. That Cowboy Hall of Fame certainly seems the place to start. What time do you want to go tomorrow? I was thinking we could go somewhere for breakfast and get an early start."

"Oh, well, that's another thing I need to talk to you about."

Just then the door opens, our meals have arrived. I don't say anything more while our plates are placed in front of us and the silver covers removed. My steak and asparagus tips look and smell divine. I take an appreciative sniff. Jon has ordered swordfish with rice pilaf and broccoli spears.

The waiter departs, leaving us to our meals. I smile at Jon, and he waves to indicate we should go ahead and eat while it's hot.

After a few bites, Jon asks, "So what were you going to say before our meals arrived?"

I swallow a bite of steak and place my silverware beside my plate. "Well, I was just wondering if you would mind if my friend, Cheryl, escorted you around, instead of me."

Jon frowns. After a moment, he asks, "May I ask why?"

"Those problems I mentioned?" Jon nods. "Well, I need to go out of town for a few days to figure out how to deal with them."

"Oh, you can't stay here and figure it out?"

"No. I don't think that would be a good idea."

"Oh. Well," Jon takes a deep breath, "I thought it would be nice to spend some time together while I'm in town, get to know each other." Jon takes my hand and caresses it.

I blush at the complement. "Oh." I don't know what to say. I feel flustered at Jon's touch. For some reason I find myself feeling uncomfortable with the caress, as though I'm cheating on Greg or something, which is ridiculous.

Bali said Jon is my match, but it seems like a strange idea tonight. He feels more like a friend than a potential lover. Not like . . . I cut that thought off quickly, not wanting to go there right now, but it persists anyway. Not like Greg.

I can see Greg and me together, but not Jon. This is ridiculous, of course. Greg is a god. I'm only a human, of no worth in his eyes. It would make more sense to be with Jon. A few days ago I wouldn't have thought so, but now, being with a movie star seems more believable than being with a god. Amazing how your perspective can change in just a few short days.

Jon kisses the back of my hand and releases it. My hand feels suddenly cold. How strange. Whenever Greg touches me, I feel like I'm about to go up in flames.

To keep from fidgeting, I pick up my knife and fork and cut another bite of steak. I dip it into my puddle of steak sauce before popping it into my mouth. I chew deliberately, hoping I can swallow, but my throat suddenly seems tight. I manage to swallow the steak, then garner the courage to say, "I would have liked that too, Jon. I mean, I would like to get to know you better too."

"Even after I insulted you in front of your colleagues?" he says, smiling with self-deprecation.

I huff a laugh and nod. "Even after that." A few moments of silence pass. I don't like to pry into other people's business, but my curiosity gets the better of me. He did say he wanted us to get to know each other better.

I take a sip of wine for courage and ask, "So, what was that all about, Jon? Why were you drunk?" He doesn't say anything at first. Did I insult him? "I'm sorry. It's none of my business."

"No, no. That's O.K. I guess you've read some of the stories about me, and my aversion to flying?"

I nod.

"Well, the reason I was drunk. It's the only way to fly," he quips, then laughs briefly before taking another sip of wine. I notice the bottle by his elbow is already half empty. How long has he been here drinking?

He looks at my serious expression and says, "Sorry. Bad joke, huh? Well, it's mostly true, at least for me. I'm so terrified of flying, it's the only way I can manage to get myself on a plane."

I place my hand on his in sympathy. "I'm sorry, Jon. That must be hard, what with all the traveling your job requires."

He turns his hand over in mine. He starts to play with my fingers, even runs his thumb up and down the back of my hand. "It is. I can't remember a time when I wasn't afraid of flying. I've tried everything anyone can think of to overcome it. Nothing's worked so far." A brief curl of his lips shows just how much pain he is in over the subject.

I look at myself in the mirror on the wall across from our table. My penchant for antiques would be enough to draw my attention to it, but what I see in the reflection entrances me more. I see a beautiful woman sitting with a handsome man holding her hand. She looks so confident, as though she could take on the world and win time after time. All at once I feel equal parts humble and powerful. Something I'd never felt in my life. Usually, my instinct is to avoid touching anyone. It was too risky.

At that moment I realize I have the ability to help this beautiful man who is in pain.

Why not? Without releasing Jon's hand, I place my other hand over my clutch purse lying next to my plate. Bali is there. I close my eyes and whisper what I want, low enough that Jon can't hear me.

When I'm done, I look up to see Jon's face. A single tear rolls down his cheek. I'm speechless for a moment. He squeezes my hand, and says, "Thank you. No one has ever prayed for me before. Maybe that will work where nothing else has, huh?" He squeezes my hand again, then releases it.

I hope so. If I get my wish, he'll never have a problem flying again. I feel a little guilty using Bali's powers, but then I reason, why have powers if you can't help a fellow human being? Heaven knows, my other gift never has.

He dabs at his eyes and laughs, "Sorry. I guess you think I'm a wimp, crying like this."

I grab his hand again, and hang on until he looks at me. "Not at all. I think it takes a really strong man to show his feelings, especially to a stranger." He raises my hand to his lips for a lingering kiss while he holds my gaze with his.

"I wish you could stay," he whispers fervently.

I smile at him and respond truthfully, "Me too." It would be nice to get to know Jon. He'd be a great friend. It hits me at that moment. That's all he could ever be to me, a friend.

After a few very intense, and for me uncomfortable, moments, Jon breaks eye contact. "We'd better finish this delicious meal before it gets cold." I laugh and just like that the tension evaporates.

"So when are you leaving?" I ask, picking up my fork and spearing a bit of asparagus, dipping it into the hollandaise.

"I only have a few days before I have to leave for Arizona."

"Really? Is that where they're filming?"

"Yes." He picks up his lemon wedge to squeeze it onto his fish.

Knowing the Mau wouldn't think to interrogate Jon about our whereabouts, I feel safe enough to tell him our plans.

I put my fork down and lean toward Jon. What great news. "That's where I'm going. My aunt has a cottage in Arizona. Where exactly are you filming? Maybe it's close by and we could get together while we're there."

Before I have time to move, Jon squeezes the lemon. It squirts onto his fish, but a few drops also splash into my right eye. "Ahhh," I shout, and cover my stinging eyeball.

Jon jumps up, apologizing profusely, grabs his water goblet, and scoops out the ice, which falls to the floor. "Lean back in your chair. I'll rinse it out."

I lean back in my chair as he suggests, going so far as to balance on the back legs for a better angle.

Jon moves quickly towards me to pour the water into my eye, when he slips on the ice and careens into me. Water flies in every direction. I cry out again as we go down.

Before we can right ourselves, the door flies open and there's Greg.

He takes one look at our bodies entangled on the floor, and shouts, "I knew it."

Like an enraged bull he heads for Jon, grabs him by the scruff of the neck, drags him up, and belts him. Jon sails a few feet away, slamming against the wall.

"Greg! Stop! It's not what you think." In fact, I'm not sure what Greg thinks he saw, but I'm not waiting to find out. If I do, there will be nothing left of Jon.

"Greg," I try again. Grabbing his arm, I hang on for dear life. Man, his biceps are strong; he nearly lifts me off my feet.

"I knew I couldn't trust this bastard."

He must really be mad to call Jon a bastard. Greg hates to be called that, so to use it in reference to anyone else must mean he really hates Jon.

I grab his arms and try to turn his attention away from Jon, who is sitting on the floor nursing a bruised jaw. "Greg, it was an accident. It's not what you think."

Greg finally looks at me. "O.K. Explain why you two were rolling around on the ground. It looked like he was mauling you."

I laugh.

"You think this is funny?" Greg asks in disbelief.

I laugh again and nod, "Actually, I do." I hold my stomach and laugh harder, imagining what Jon and I must have looked like. I look at the overturned chair, the messed up table setting. Somehow we'd managed to drag most of the contents of the meal off the table. Jon must have tried to break his fall by grabbing the table cloth.

There is ice and water all over the floor, everything. Then there is Jon still sitting on the floor. He looks at once amused by my laughter, and uncertain whether or not it is safe to rise.

My laughter dies abruptly and regret rises for Jon. He's been through so much. He doesn't deserve this treatment.

I let go of Greg and move to help Jon up. "Thanks," he says briefly, eyeing Greg warily.

I ignore Greg for the moment and help Jon to a chair by the fireplace.

The maître-d' enters with a towel and hands it to Jon. "Mr. Mayer, is there anything else I can get you?"

"No. Thank you, Phillip."

"No trouble at all. I'll get someone in here right away to clean up this mess. There will be no charge for the meal, sir."

"That's O.K., Phillip. It was my fault."

Phillip exits, closing the door behind him.

Greg just stands in the center of the room with his arms crossed. I can feel his eyes boring into my back, waiting for an explanation no doubt. Well, he can just wait.

"Are you O.K., Jon?" I ask, sitting beside him on the couch.

He mops his face then gives me a self-deprecating look before his look turns serious and asks, "How's your eye?"

"It's fine."

I don't hear Greg move. Suddenly he's next to me. "What did he do to your eye?" he accuses.

"It's nothing."

Greg grabs my chin and turns my face this way and that, looking for signs that Jon hit me. I want to be mad at Greg, but in the light of his concern, I can't bring myself to be angry at him.

"Jon, accidentally squirted some lemon in my eye then tripped while trying to help me flush it out. It's that simple." And that complicated.

"The right one?" he asks.

"Yeah, how did you know?" I suspect it shows, but ask anyway.

"It's a little red and swollen."

"I think we got more water on ourselves than in my eye. It does still sting a little."

"I'm sorry, Kim," Jon says.

"Jon, it wasn't your fault. These things happen," I say, letting him off the hook. Yeah, these things happen . . . especially to me.

There's a pitcher of water on the sideboard. Greg grabs an empty glass beside it, fills it, and hands it to me. "Do you need help or can you do it yourself?" he asks.

"I can do it, thanks." I get up and head for the door. Greg grabs my arm to halt me.

"Where are you going?"

"To the bathroom. There's no sink in here."

"The room's already a mess. I don't think a little more water will do much harm, do you?"

"Guess not." I walk back over to the table, but I'm not sure how to proceed.

Greg takes the goblet from my hand and rights the chair I'd used previously. "Sit," is all he says.

I consider defying him, but my eye is really hurting. I decide I'd only be hurting myself, so I comply. I lean my head back and Greg gently pours the water into my eye. It's cold and makes my eye sting even more. "Ouch. That's cold," I complain.

"Almost done," he says patiently.

He hands me another towel from one of the servers, who have returned to right the room. I hold it to my eye, hoping some warmth will return. Greg eyes me with thin lips. "Maybe we should take you to the emergency room."

"What!" I exclaim. "Oh, no. I don't need to go to the emergency room. Besides, we need to leave town tonight."

Greg is silent, but I can tell he's trying to decide whether to argue the matter or let it go.

Before he can decide, Cheryl bursts into the room. "Greg, Kim, I think we have company."

I jump to my feet, only a step behind Greg, as we move to the open door. There in the entryway to the main dining room are the same Mau Priestesses that were in my apartment. No one but Greg and I would know that since they are dressed like normal human beings out on the town for an evening.

"How did you know, Cheryl?" I ask, suspicious.

"Pah-lease. Four women dressed to the hilt and wearing white? You can tell they're a group. Dressed like that, it screams "Team" or at the very least "Gay." Besides, they appear to be looking for someone, and you did describe them to a tee. It has to be them."

"Right." I often forget that Cheryl is a writer also, and therefore very observant.

Greg closes the door before we're spotted.

"What are we going to do?" I ask, hoping Greg has a plan. I know he can't use his powers. That would give us away for sure. "How did they find us?"

Greg shakes his head. "Let's worry about that later. Right now, we need to find a way out of here." Greg looks around for another entrance. He grabs a passing waiter and asks, "Is there another way out of this room?"

"No. This is the only door. Excuse me sir, I need to get a mop." He tries to sidle past Greg, but Greg blocks the door. "Sir, is there a problem?"

Greg cracks the door again and peaks out. He closes the door quickly and motions for Cheryl and I to move away from the door behind him. He then opens the door so the waiter can exit. "It won't be long before they head this way," Greg says.

"Is there a problem?" Jon asks.

Greg scowls at the interruption. "Nothing we can't handle, thanks pal."

I roll my eyes upward. It's just like a man to think he's Superman. I grab Jon by the arm and drag him into our little circle behind the doorframe. I explain the problem briefly as I did with Cheryl in the car.

Jon rubs his chin contemplating the situation, then snaps his fingers with an idea. "I've got it. You need a distraction. I'll gladly throw myself into the line of fire so you can get away."

"Brilliant!" I say, impressed, but concerned this could ruin Jon's plans. "But I don't want your plans ruined because of us." I turn to Greg. "Can't we come up with something else?"

"What are you talking about? What plan?" Greg asks.

I huff, exasperated. "Jon is going to announce his presence, generate a buzz, be swamped by fans, just so we can get away without notice."

"Oh." Greg shrugs, "It's the only plan we've got so far. Why not let Jon distract them?" He turns to Jon, crosses his arms, and challenges, "Do you think you can pull it off?"

Jon takes the same stubborn male stance and smirks with pride, "My rep can distract any female, no matter her age or orientation."

"O.K., you two. Knock it off. We need to get out of here," I say, breaking up the cockfight unfolding before my eyes.

Jon takes my hand and kisses it. "For you I'd do anything, Cheri."

Greg takes my hand away from Jon and says, "Her name is Kim, not Sherry."

I roll my eyes again. Greg is so suave. "Oh, brother," I say to Cheryl.

"Oh, before you two bolt, what did Jon say about, you know?" Cheryl changes the subject.

"Oh, I don't know." I turn to Jon and ask, "Jon?"

Catching my meaning immediately he says, "I said I'd do anything for you, didn't I?" He turns to Cheryl and kisses her hand, "Of course, it would be no hardship to escort one as beautiful as yourself around for a few days, Miss . . ."

Cheryl looks like she's my King Henry who just got the cream. "Cheryl Ramsey. You can call me Cheryl, Mr. Mayer."

He places her hands between both of his and rubs. "You can call me Jonny. All my friends call me Jonny."

I clear my throat to get Cheryl's attention; she seems mesmerized by Jon's attention. "Cheryl. Cheryl. Don't you think you should head home?"

"What? Oh, oh, yes. I should probably leave before you all do."

"Yes, I don't want them to link you or Jon to Greg and me."

"O.K." Cheryl gives me a hug, then looks at my right eye and tutts, before saying to Greg, "You take care of her, you hear? Or you'll have me to answer to, mister."

Greg holds his hands up in surrender. "Don't worry. I'd give my life for her."

That admission sets me back. Does he mean me or Bali? Did he really mean that or is he just humoring Cheryl? I decide the latter and shoo Cheryl from the room. "Don't worry. We'll be fine. We'll be back in a few days once this blows over."

I turn back to Greg and Jon. "O.K. So what do we do now?"

Chapter 21

It's around midnight. Greg and I are on the road, heading for my Aunt's cabin near Phoenix. There's a full moon tonight. I put my head back against the headrest, take a deep breath and try to relax. I'm exhausted. A huge yawn catches me by surprise.

"Why don't you try to sleep for a while?" Greg says.

"Maybe for an hour or two, then I can drive."

"That's O.K. I don't need any help driving. You can sleep the whole way."

"What? Don't gods get tired?" I ask, irritated, not expecting affirmation to my satirical question.

"Sure we get tired. We just don't require as much sleep as a mortal."

"Oh? Why is that?"

Greg shrugs his shoulders. "I don't know. I've never really thought about it."

"Oh. I'm not too tired to talk about our situation. Or maybe this would be a good time to ask Bali what Ishe had to say." I reach for my bag, but Greg stops me.

"That can wait until you've had some sleep."

I hate to admit he's right. My eyes feel heavy. I place my bag back at my feet then lean back trying to get comfortable. Nothing I try helps though.

Greg finally says, "Here," patting his thigh. "Place your head on my lap and stretch out."

I hesitate, not sure I'm comfortable with the offer. "Come on. I won't bite," he smirks. "Not yet anyway."

That's not what I'm afraid of. I'm not sure what I'm afraid of. It seems a rather intimate position to take with someone I hardly know. In the end, weariness wins out.

"Thanks," I say briefly before I stretch out and place my head on his muscular thigh.

His strength is a comfort. I feel safe. I fall asleep immediately.

"Kim. Kim. We're coming into Amarillo," I hear Greg say.

I sit up rubbing my eyes. "Already?" I say, still half asleep. I check the clock.

Sure enough I slept four hours. It's still dark out.

"I thought you might need a pit stop," Greg says. He turns the wheel, pulling into a gas station.

For a god, he sure is considerate. I nod and say, "Thanks."

"We need to fill up anyway." Maybe I'll take back my nice thoughts about him after all. I decide it's too early to quibble about it and give him the benefit of the doubt.

"There's a diner across the street. Why don't you head over and get us some coffee and donuts?"

"Sure." I figure I can also use the facilities before I order. Then we can get back on the road. It'll take another ten hours to get to Phoenix. Might be a good idea to stop at a motel and get some rest. I doubt Greg will want to drive straight through, despite his claim to not need as much sleep as a mortal.

"I'll pick you up over there," he points to the restaurant across the road.

"O.K." I make my way across the two lane road. There's only a few cars out this early, so I have no problem crossing. The diner is nearly empty as well. It doesn't take long to do my business, then order our coffee and donuts.

Once back in the car, I hand Greg his coffee. "I don't know how you like it. I've got some creamer and sugar packets if you want." I rustle around in the bag gathering the packets, expecting Greg to want some.

"Black. I take my coffee strong and black." I watch him take a sip then eye the bag in my hands. "Did you get the donuts?"

I smile and hand him one glazed. He places his coffee in the drink holder, then puts the car in gear. Before we even get back on the highway, he has inhaled the donut I gave him.

"Do you want another one? I got several kinds."

"I like them all. You choose."

"O.K. How about a jelly donut?" I ask. I got several chocolate covered cakes, but am reluctant to share them since they're my favorite, which makes me feel guilty for only a split second.

"Great." He takes a big bite. A small dollop of red jelly lands on his chin. I laugh and grab a napkin to wipe it off. As I wipe the last drop off, our eyes meet. Our lips are only an inch apart. The car seems very small all of a sudden. My eyes drop to his lips. Greg starts to lean toward me when we hear a horn blare. He jerks the steering wheel just in time to keep from sideswiping another car on our left trying to pass.

I clear my throat and sit back. My trembling hands dig for the cream and sugar packets in the bag. I concentrate on fixing my own coffee, but my throat feels too tight to enjoy my donuts. I sit and stare out the side window, sipping my coffee. I wonder what Greg's kiss would have felt like. Will I get another chance? I hope so.

I place my coffee in the cup holder, then lean back against the passenger door. "So, do you want to talk now?"

"You still tired? We have plenty of time between here and Phoenix to talk."

"No. The coffee will keep me awake for a while."

"O.K. What do you want to talk about?"

"Well, I was wondering . . . how did the Mau find us at the restaurant? I'm sure Bali didn't contact Ishe again. She promised she wouldn't."

"Yeah. I was wondering the same thing."

"Any ideas?"

"None. It doesn't make sense. There's no way they could have traced us without one of us using our powers."

"One of us?" I ask, suspecting and dreading the answer at the same time.

"Yeah. Like what we talked about before. You know, Banti being able to feel you siphoning off her powers? She could have a tie to all of Bali's powers, not just the one Apollo gave her."

"Oh." I remain quiet, not wanting to admit what I'd done at the restaurant.

"You didn't use Bali's powers, did you?" Greg guesses anyway.

I glance his way briefly, grimace at his suspicious look, but remain silent.

"You did, didn't you? Oh, man. I can't believe you would be so . . ."

"Dumb?" I interrupt. "I'm not dumb. I just forgot, O.K. I didn't think about it. Jon needed my help. That's all I was thinking about, O.K.?" I cross my arms, irritated at his poor view of me and kicking myself for my stupidity at the same time.

"What? What did that guy need from you? He looked like he was getting plenty of what any healthy male would want."

I gasp. "How dare you? Jon is more of a gentleman than you are. You may have sex on the brain like any other Neanderthal, but Jon would never think that about me."

Wait a minute, did I get that right, or did I just insult myself? I dismiss the latter and maintain my stubborn, and outraged pose.

After a lengthy silence, Greg says, "I'm sorry. O.K.? I just don't see why you like that guy so much as to put us in danger for him."

"I didn't think, O.K.? Jon and I were talking about his flying problem."

Greg snorts derisively, then says, "What a wussy."

"He is not. Most people are afraid of something. What are you afraid of?"

"Nothing I'd tell anyone about. It's not a good idea to show any weakness that can be used against you. You learn that real quick as a warrior."

"Even me?" I ask. "I'm not your enemy."

"No, you're not. But there are reasons I wouldn't tell you. Especially you," he says.

"Why especially me?"

I can tell by the way he's squeezing the wheel, he's debating whether to answer honestly or not. I wait to see what he decides.

He glances my way then says, "I guess because I value your opinion of me. That gives you a power over me that could be dangerous."

Wow. What an admission. My jaw drops. I'm at once in shock and honored. "Why would you care what I think?"

"I like you. I'd like to get to know you better."

"You mentioned that before. How much better?"

"You know how much," he says, glancing my way again long enough to make his point before returning his eyes to the road.

I swallow. I do know, because it's the same way I feel. Not sure whether I should pursue this further or change the subject, Greg interrupts my thoughts and says, "Look, I'll admit, I'm jealous of him. It drove me crazy imagining the two of you alone in that room. When I heard you scream . . ."

I stare at Greg, watching his jaw bunch. I place my hand on his jaw hoping to alleviate his anxiety. He places his large hand over my smaller one, holding it to his face for a moment. He kisses my hand, squeezes then let's go.

I grip my hands in my lap and lean my head against the head rest, my eyes glued to his face. "I'd like that too, Greg," I say quietly.

He jerks his head my direction, then watches the road again. He blows out a breath before a smile blooms on his chiseled lips.

I could look at him all day, but we still have crucial matters to discuss. Now seems like as good a time as any. Besides, this doesn't seem like the right place to discuss such intimate matters. I briefly worry about tonight and what impression I might have just given Greg. I decide I'll deal with that when the time comes. Right now I need to think about our situation.

"O.K., so when I used Bali's powers, the Mau were able to find us, right?"

He nods his head. "That's the theory."

"So, we can assume they found us at the office because of you, right?"

He grimaces then nods again. "Yeah, but I didn't think we would be sticking around long enough for them to find us, or that they would figure out the switch so soon."

"Yeah, I wonder how they figured out they had a fake Bali."

"I suspect Banti could have someone in her Temple who could feel Bali's presence or her absence. I suspect she could have someone of Apollo's house in her

service. It sounds like something she would think of just to cover her bases. She's very paranoid that way."

"Great. So much for buying us some time."

"Yeah. You weren't serious about involving your Aunt in this, were you?"

"No. I just said that for Cheryl's benefit. I didn't want her to worry. As far as she knows, we'll be safe once we sell Bali."

"That makes sense."

"So what are we going to do about the Mau? We can't run forever."

"No. I'm sure we'll figure something out. We have a little time to think of a solution."

I nod absently. I bite my nails as I contemplate our options, but nothing presents itself.

"So what did you do for Mr. Mayer?"

"What?" I jerk out of my contemplation abruptly.

"Mr. Mayer, Jonathan? What did you do for him?"

"Oh. Well, he was telling me about his drinking problem and his fear of flying. It's why he drinks so heavily when he travels."

"And?"

"Well, I simply made a wish that he wouldn't be afraid to fly anymore."

"You think it worked?"

"Guess we'll find out in a few days."

"A few days? What happens in a few days?"

"Oh. Jon said he's flying down to Phoenix to start production on his new film."

"What does that have to do with you?" he asks suspiciously.

I study Greg. Will what I say next get him all riled up again? I decide that is just something he'll have to deal with. It might as well be now rather than later. I jump in with both feet and say, "Jon wants us to meet and spend some time together on set."

"Why would he want that?"

I sigh. Greg isn't going to like this. "He wants us to get to know each other better."

I'm right. Greg compresses his lips, not saying a word.

"Greg, he just wants to be friends."

"Is that what you want, to just be friends with him?"

"Yes."

"Well, I doubt that's all he wants." The jealousy rings loud and clear in his tone.

"Maybe," I concede, "but it doesn't change how I feel about him."

"How do you feel?"

"I decided at dinner . . . he's just a friend."

"Good." I watch as Greg's entire demeanor relaxes at my admission. "That's good."

He takes my hand and holds it possessively. I face front again, let my head fall back and close my eyes. I can feel myself starting to doze off again. Guess I didn't get enough sleep after all. For the first time in a long while, I feel safe and secure. I sigh and drift off into a dreamless sleep.

Chapter 22

I wake up four hours later when we reach Albuquerque. The sun has risen, but at least it's at our backs as we drive West.

"Want me to take over yet?"

He grunts. "I told you, I'm good." He studies me briefly. "You hungry again? We could stop this time for a real breakfast if you want."

I notice he looks hopeful, although he'd probably deny wanting to eat again. The warrior in him doesn't want to show any weakness, including the need for food. I suspect that's the real reason he boasted about not needing sleep, too. Men have some silly notions.

Guess it was up to the women to make sure the men didn't implode with their self-defeating notions. "I'm hungry. Stop at the next diner you see?"

"Sure. Don't want you getting sick. That would really slow us down."

I roll my eyes as I look out my side window. In my mind, I can see Greg in a Tarzan suit beating on his chest while I'm the weak woman kneeling at his feet, looking up at him with adoration. Oh, brother. I grin at my own imagination. I bite my lip to keep from laughing. If I did, I'd have to explain myself to Greg. I doubt he'd find it very funny. Probably wouldn't even understand it if I did try to explain. Oh well.

I spot a place and point it out to Greg, who pulls into the restaurant's parking lot.

Greg gets out while I look for my purse. I spot it on the floor and pick it up. I'm startled when Greg opens my door and offers to help me out. It feels at once nice and foreign.

"Thanks," I say.

Greg grunts and leads the way to the door of the restaurant. I bite my lip again, that grunt reminds me of my Tarzan daydream a minute ago. I swallow and follow him inside.

We wait to be seated, which doesn't take long. Must be a good place to eat considering the crowd. After we order I excuse myself. I head for the ladies' room.

I look at myself in the mirror and cringe. My hair is messy and sticking up in a few places. Damn, why didn't Greg say anything? I dig a comb out of my bag and straighten my hair out. There, it will have to do until I can get to a motel and take a shower.

I head back to the table. Our meals arrive. Greg is digging into his huge mountain of hash brown potatoes. Greg has enough food in front of him to feed an army. This could be interesting or totally disgusting. I'm not sure which yet as I sit down to my own meal, two eggs, over easy, bacon, and toast. All my food fits on a single plate. Greg's fills several plates that cover the entire surface of our table.

He has a stack of pancakes, scrambled eggs, a double order of bacon, toast, a bowl of oatmeal, another with fresh fruit, not to mention the single plate that holds his hill of hash browns that he is steadily plowing his way through.

"Are you really going to eat all that?"

He pauses to look up at me, a fork full of potatoes at the ready. He pauses with the food halfway to his mouth. He swallows his current mouth full before saying, "What? Yeah, why not?"

"Never mind." I don't want to insult him or interrupt his obvious enjoyment of his meal. Besides, he'd probably just grunt at me again. I dig into my own meal and try to ignore him.

We eat in silence for a while.

I'm full halfway through my meal. Greg is still shoveling it in. Where does his put it all? He must burn it off quickly. They say muscle helps you burn energy. If that's true, I can see why Greg would need to eat so much. He has enough muscle to burn off a cow. Instead of watching him pig out, I decide we need to start discussing our predicament. I open my bag and pull out a pad of paper and a pen.

Greg pauses and asks with his mouth still full, "What's up?" indicating his meaning with a jerk of his chin in the direction of my pad.

"I find it helps me to concentrate if I write things down," I explain.

Greg swallows. "Concentrate on what?" he says, before stuffing an entire piece of bacon into his mouth.

I shake my head at the action, but keep my thoughts to myself. Instead, I say, "Duh, our situation? Whenever I have a problem in my novel I need to solve, it helps me to write down what I know about it first. Then I can analyze how to resolve it."

Greg grunts without slowing his eating.

I write the word 'List' across the top then 'Known' below it and underline it. "Now that I've had enough sleep, it's time to start figuring out what to do next. I don't like to just leave things up to chance."

"Yeah, they're bitches." Greg says around a mouthful of hash browns.

I glance up with a knowing smirk. "Yeah, so Bali's told me. Three of them, right?"

He nods then looks at my paper.

"So what do we know so far?" I ask.

Before he can say anything I write down what comes to my mind and repeat it for his benefit. "First, Bali is trapped."

"Why are you writing that down. That's not important."

"Even things that may seem trivial can turn out to be the most significant information later on. You never know."

"O.K., so what else?" he asks.

"Number two, I have Bali's powers."

I bite the end of my pen before writing "which include . . ."

"I know Bali's powers include things like influence, and she can see when two people are meant for each other. By the way, how does she see that?"

Greg wipes his mouth before answering. "When two people are in close proximity with each other, a rose colored aura seems to surround them. You've heard of seeing life through rose colored glasses?"

I nod.

"It's like that."

"Oh." Which means neither Jonathan or Greg are meant for me. How depressing.

"What's wrong?"

"Oh! Nothing. I was just thinking." I doodle on my paper, hearts and flowers. I start to turn the hearts into broken ones. I sink into a funk.

I thought for sure Greg might be in the running. At the very least, Bali assured me Jon would be the one for me. But then, how could she when we'd never been together for her to see our auras?

Had she ever seen us together? I don't think she has. Wait a minute, in my apartment! That night I interviewed Jon, Bali would have been on my bookcase. She would have seen me with both Jon and Greg. I bite my lip.

Now I'm dying to know what she saw. But then, wouldn't I have seen that rosy hue too?

I ask as nonchalantly as possible, "So, this aura, you say you can see it when they are in the same room?"

Greg nods. He's gone back to eating, but not as quickly, I note. He must be getting full. About time. I don't know where he puts it. He must have a fast metabolism. Lucky duck.

"Do you have the same power?" I ask.

"Yeah, sure. I'm my mother's son. All Bastet's children have that power. She is a love goddess after all. Why?"

"Oh, well, I just wondered if you'd ever met your true love."

Greg laughs. "I wouldn't know if I had. It only works on other people. Unfortunately, we don't see that glow when we meet our own mate."

"Oh." I perk up, there's hope after all. I've never seen that glow, but then maybe Bali has. I can't wait to interrogate her.

"So, what's next?" Greg asks, pulling me from my thoughts. I decide talking to Bali can wait for now.

"O.K., third power would be changing circumstances?" I look to Greg for confirmation.

"To a point," he qualifies.

"Understood. That's really the only things I know about what she can do. Can she do that invisibility thing you can?"

"Yes, we used to play hide-and-seek as kids. It's more challenging when the players can make themselves invisible. More fun too." He laughs, remembering.

I laugh too. "I'll bet. So, fourth is invisibility. What else?"

"All gods, and goddesses, can "pop" around, as you put it."

"Cool," I comment as I write that one down as "Physical Transport. Any others?" Before he can say anything I remember another. "Wait a minute! I forgot about the communication thing."

"Communication thing?" Greg asks.

"Yeah, you know that Ethereal place."

"Oh, you mean the Ethereal plain."

"That's it." I write it down. We now have six powers. "Anything else?"

Greg hesitates then shakes his head no.

"What?" I ask.

"What?"

"You looked like you were going to say something, then changed your mind."

"It's nothing. I was just thinking about something else. It's not important."

"O.K." I decide Greg isn't going to tell me about it, so let it go. "Let's move on. We know that Banti can track you, and apparently me when we use our powers." That felt so strange to say. Me with powers. Huh. Who'd have guessed?

"I know you've explained why that's so with you, but I don't understand why she can do that with me."

"It's not you. It's Bali. They're Bali's powers, remember. It's probably a twin thing," Greg says before popping the last fork full of eggs into his mouth.

"What? They're twins?" This is news.

"Uh huh."

"Wow, Bali didn't mention that. Identical?" I ask.

Greg nods this time.

I've heard twins have a special connection. Maybe it's the same with their powers.

"Wow. Bet it was hard to tell them apart as kids then, huh?"

Greg shakes his head. "Not really. They looked the same, but you could tell each time by their expressions who was who."

"What do you mean?"

Greg shrugs his shoulders. "Bali was outgoing and fun to be with, quick to laugh, and friendly. Banti, well, she was the introvert, never without a frown. I don't think I ever heard her laugh, not once."

"She sounds sad, unhappy." Empathy wells up in me for her. I remember myself as a kid, how unhappy I was after my parents died. My Aunt Helena tried her best to care for me after they were gone, but I remember still feeling lonely much of the time. I wish I'd had a twin or just another sibling to share the pain with.

Even though I hated how my parents fought, I missed the good times when we did things together. We had fun, frequently laughing together. They made sure never to fight in my presence. What circumstances had made Banti so miserable? At least she had a sister. But then just because they were twins didn't guarantee they got along either.

"She wasn't just sad. She was mean too."

"I'm not making excuses for her, but sometimes unhappy people can take out their anger on others."

"You don't know her. She was . . . is just plain mean. Trust me."

It's true, I didn't know her. I deferred to Greg's perspective. I had to, he grew up with her. I didn't.

"O.K., so we think Bali's powers can be tracked because they are twins." I put a question mark beside that one since it remains a theory so far.

"We have four Mau Priestesses after us." I stop as another question pops to mind. "Why only four?"

"They're trackers," Greg says.

"I don't understand."

"If they need to split up, there are four to go in four different directions."

When I raise my eyebrows in question, Greg elaborates, "You know, North, South, East, and West?"

"Oh. I get it." I write that down too. "O.K., another is that Banti wants both me and Bali." I write down what I know about why that is the case as well.

The last item I can think of is, "If the Mau catch us it's possible they might kill us. But it's more probable that they'll just deliver us to Banti, right?"

"Who will probably be the one to kill us," he replies caustically.

I grimace as I write that down too. I look over our list. I don't see anything I've missed. I hand the paper to Greg. "Have we missed anything?" I ask.

He perses his lips as he scans it. He takes a few sips of his coffee. After a moment he shakes his head. "I don't think so." He hands the pad back to me. "So what next?"

"Well, I guess we write down our options next."

"Which are?"

"I won't know until I write them down, now will I?" I ask pointedly.

Greg rolls his eyes and says, "Whatever. This is pointless you know."

"No, I don't know, and neither do you."

"What makes you think this is going to help? I should just take us to my safe place for a while."

I jerk my head up at that. "Don't you dare," I warn.

"Why not?" he challenges.

"There's the fact the Mau can track us that way."

Greg sits back on the red padded bench and stretches his arm across the back. "I figure we're far enough away from Oklahoma City now. It's unlikely they'd come across us this far out. Just to be sure we could take a detour off the main road for a few miles. That'd make the chances of them finding our point of departure even harder, if not impossible."

When I don't say anything more, he leans toward me and says, "There's nothing wrong with hiding for a while, Kim."

I sit back and cross my arms defiantly. "Yes there is. Whether we hide out at your place or go to my Aunt's cabin, it feels too much like running away."

"We're not running away. We're regrouping."

I lean toward him, placing both hands on the table. "I need to do something, not just wait for them to catch up to us. I need to get back to my life. My safe and predictable life," I qualify.

That wasn't really true. The last week had been anything but predictable. Despite the danger, I was enjoying the break from my usual routine. I had to admit, it was

exciting. On the other hand, there was something to be said for predictability. It was safe, secure, a known element. Predictability also gave me something else I needed, control.

Wanting to be a little more honest with Greg, I say, "Well, not exactly predictable."

I lean back again as the waitress interrupts our conversation, asking if we'd like anything else. We both say no, so she leaves the bill between us. I smile and thank her.

I take up my bag and start fishing inside for my wallet. I continue to explain, "I do need to get back into some semblance of a routine. I'd like to feel safe and resolve this in the next two days."

"What happens in two days?" Greg asks, leaning back again.

"I told you. Jonathan wants me in Phoenix." I know that didn't come out exactly right.

Greg slams his hand down on the table, making all the plates rattle. Startled, I look up, directly into the stormy eyes of a thunder cloud.

My breathe hitches. I hate confrontations. I inhale and hold it, waiting to see what he'll do next. I never could deal with angry men. My guess is it's linked to the time before my parents died. I remember them fighting all the time. I would cover my eyes and hide in my closet to get away from the noise. Father always struck something, the table, the wall, whatever was closest. Probably to keep from hitting Mother.

I know Greg doesn't mean to frighten me, but he's done just that. I sit perfectly still.

Greg says in a low, menacing voice, "Yeah, I know he wants you. That's the problem." He grabs the bill off the table and heads to the cashier to pay for our meal. I start to protest but stop, too unsure of his mood to argue about who will pay.

I relax and exhale. I decide I'll pick up the tab for dinner instead. A fair trade-off, I figure. He doesn't even look my way as he heads out the door.

I thought we'd settled this. I sigh. Will he give me the silent treatment all the way to Phoenix? Or will I be trapped in the car with a tiger instead? Knots form in my stomach. I decide I can't eat another bite. I place my pen and paper in my bag and follow Greg out to the car.

Either way, the next six hours will probably feel like an eternity.

Chapter 23

Greg decides to give me the silent treatment. I'm relieved. Getting into a shouting match with an angry Gregorian is not a pleasant thought.

Besides I look on the bright side, his silence gives me the quiet I need to work on my list.

I write down a few items, none of them very helpful. After about an hour of racking my brain, I give up and lean my aching head back with an aggravated sigh.

Greg decides to break his sulk by asking, "What do you have?"

"Hmmm? Oh, not much," I admit. I read him what I have so far. "We can let the Mau find us and deliver us to Banti."

Greg grunts.

"The second one isn't much different. We can bypass being caught and go straight to confronting Banti ourselves."

"You're right, not the two choices I'd choose either."

"I know," I say dejectedly. "Maybe we need more information."

"Information? Like what?"

"Well, we still don't know what Ishe and Bali discussed. Maybe there's something there we can use."

"And if there isn't?"

"Well, maybe there's a way for us to gather some information directly from the source."

"What are you talking about?"

"We could contact Banti on the Ethereal Plain. We wouldn't be in her presence physically, so we could talk to her, find out what she wants, what she might do to us."

"I know what she'd do to us. She'd send her Mau after us, like when you keep a criminal hanging on the line so you can trace them? She'd do the same to us."

"I know that's true, but there are ways around that. There's a limit to how long the police need to keep them on the line in order to trace them. Surely, it's the same here too?" I ask.

Greg shakes his head. "Remember, we can pop around instantly. As soon as we made contact, they'd be on us like fleas on a dog."

"Oh. O.K., maybe that's not an option. But talking to Bali might give us what we need. Do you want to ask her now or wait 'til we get to the cabin?"

"Let's wait. If she has any surprises in store for us, it'd be best if I'm not driving in heavy traffic."

I smile. It's true, the traffic has picked up. Greg needs to concentrate, so I agree.

Greg and I keep silent for most of the trip, only exchanging comments as we pass the occasional tourist attraction along the highway.

This time of year, Phoenix seldom sees temperatures below a hundred. My aunt's cabin lies in the hills near a town called Carefree, about thirty miles from Phoenix. Up here, the temperatures are cooler. Our car's outdoor temperature gauge reads a cool ninety-five.

I grin, it's better than a hundred or more in the valley. Thank goodness for air-conditioning. Aunt Helena's cabin can't really be called a cabin. It's more of a house than what a person would normally consider a cabin or cottage. She's forever been a person who enjoys her comforts.

I smile fondly, wishing I could see her.

I notice we are fast approaching the turn off. "Greg, there's the turn off," I point out.

"Where?" he says, stretching his head this way and that, searching.

"Right there," I shout. "You passed it."

"I didn't see it. There was nothing but scrub brush. I didn't see a driveway."

I gape at him. What, was he blind? "Turn around. It's right there. You were just going too fast."

He turns around and slows down when I tell him. "I still don't see it."

"You don't see that? It's right there."

"No, there's nothing but brush."

"Stop the car."

"What? What for? There's nothing there Kim."

"Stop the car anyway," I say more stringently.

Greg stops then looks at me waiting for instructions. "Look to your left," I direct.

Greg turns his head to look left.

"What do you see?" I ask.

Greg huffs. "Just what I told you, nothing."

I don't believe this. He can't see the driveway. What is going on here? "Switch with me."

"What?"

"You heard me. Switch." I unbuckle my belt.

Greg puts the car in park then slides across the seat while I take the high road and climb over his lap.

I put the car into gear and turn left, right into our driveway. "What are you doing?" Greg exclaims. "You're going to get us stuck."

"What do you care? You could just use your powers to get us out, right? Granted, it might tip off our trackers, but not out of the question."

When Greg doesn't answer, I say, "Trust me, O.K.?"

Once we're a few yards down the drive, Greg looks behind us and grunts, "Huh."

I smile smugly and take great pleasure in saying, "See? I told you so."

"How? Why didn't I see the drive?" he asks facing forward again.

Since I can't answer that, I remain silent. That question troubles me, too.

The house sits about a quarter mile back from the roadway. The drive winds back and forth a few times with dense trees lining both sides.

The house is Grecian in style, a striking contrast to other houses usually found in Arizona, which often have red clay roofs and white stucco exteriors. In fact, white is the only similarity.

Our house has white clapboard siding with two story round columns supporting the wraparound porch.

The whimsical thought that repeats in my head each time I see it is that we are in Georgia or on some southern plantation. There's even a vineyard at the side of the house and olive trees out back.

Ceiling fans twirl in the breeze over white wicker chairs and tables scattered about the porch. If the heat weren't so oppressive, it would be a nice place to lounge or catch an afternoon nap. There's even a porch swing at one end where I spent hours upon hours as a child reading in the cool of the evening.

As we come around the circular drive to park in front of the house, I spot my aunt's Pontiac parked in the open attached garage. She constantly seems to have more than enough money, and usually acts flamboyantly. But when it comes to her classic Pontiac, she'd never think about driving anything else.

Seeing it now reminds me of how she'd say, "Sugar, cars are like men, when you find a good one, hang on to it no matter what."

I eye Greg briefly. Is Greg a good man? He seems to be so far. Except for that outburst in the restaurant, he seems nice enough. I guess only time will tell.

Before I can contemplate that thought any further, I see my Aunt step out the front door onto the porch to greet us.

"You grew up here?" he asks, staring up at the beautiful old house.

"Yes, I was home schooled, so I spent a lot of time in this house."

We get out and walk up the short sidewalk to greet her. She frowns at Greg, but then gives me a big smile and a hug before saying, "Surprise!"

"It sure is, Aunt Helena. I'm so glad to see you. How did you know I was coming?"

She studies Greg briefly before answering, "Your friend, Cheryl, called to let me know you were on your way, and under what circumstances. I thought you might need my help, so I dropped everything and came a runnin'."

"Aunt Helena lives in Phoenix most of the year. She has her own business there, real estate." I explain to Greg.

I introduce them, then ask, "I hope you didn't get pulled away from anything important."

"Don't worry, sweetie. It was a slow week. Besides, you're more valuable to me than a million dollar deal any day of the week. But enough of that, let's get inside where it's cooler. I just made us some snacks in case you were hungry."

"That sounds great. We haven't stopped since Albuquerque."

"In that case, let's get you two settled." She leads the way inside.

Over tea and scones, I explain as much as I can of our situation, and try to convince her to go back to Phoenix, but she won't have any of it.

"So where is this statue Cheryl mentioned is causing all the fuss?"

I take Bali out of my purse and place her on the table.

Her hand reaches out then hesitates. She looks to me for permission to touch it. I nod my approval. As she picks it up, she says, "It's a beautiful piece, isn't it?" She turns it this way and that a few times before she places it back on the table in front of me. "Are you sure you don't want to keep it?" she asks.

"Oh, well, that's why we stopped here first. You see, I'm having second thoughts about selling her . . . it. I've really become attached to it and I'm not sure if I want to give it up yet."

When no one said anything, I continue to fill the silence, "Yes, well, I thought if we spent some time here thinking about it some more, we might come up with a solution to the Mau, I mean, the cult following us, so I could keep it."

Aunt Helena looks like she wants to say something, but in the end keeps silent. But not before studying Greg, Bali, and me in turn. "Well, sweetie, you know you're welcome anytime. You can stay here as long as you like."

"We only need the place for a few days," I say, then remember Greg is listening and turn to see how he responds to my reminder about meeting Jon in Phoenix. He doesn't seem offended this time, but it's hard to read his expression.

"Well, like I said, you stay as long as you need to."

I get up and give her a hug. "Thanks, Aunt Helena."

She hugs me back. "Are you done?" I ask, indicating her tea cup.

She nods.

I take our cups to the sink, rinse them, and place them in the drainer.

Aunt Helena stands and says, "I'm tired. I think I'll turn in early."

I'm disappointed, but I have to admit I'm tired too.

Aunt Helena says, "Greg, you can sleep in the guest room. It's at the top of the stairs and to the right." She hugs me again, and says, "Your room is still across from mine sweetie. It's all ready for you."

I'm sure she's said this for Greg's benefit. I'm sure of it when she catches Greg's eyes and says, "On such a hot night, I like to sleep with my door open."

She gives me a wink and heads to the stairs. I grin then grimace at Greg. "Sorry, she means well, but sometimes she forgets how old I am."

"Don't apologize. It's nice to have someone care about you."

Does Greg have someone who cares about him? Bali made it sound like he and his father were at odds. What about his mother? According to Bali, he never visited his mother again after going to live with his father. Has he ever had someone who cares? I decide not to ask, not wanting to pry. "Yes. I'll see you in the morning?"

"Yeah, sleep well." He waits and watches as I ascend the stairs.

I stop at the top and look back down at him. "Let me know if you need anything.
Anything at all."

"I'll be fine. I'll just put this away," indicating his cup and saucer, "then head up.
Good night."

"Night."

Chapter 24

The next morning I dress and head out to find my Aunt. It's just like old times as I find her working in her garden. Early morning hours are the coolest and make it easier to work outside.

My aunt's green thumb has continually amazed me. We never run out of fresh produce, only needing to visit the grocery a few times a week for milk and such.

As a child, I would watch Aunt Helena work her garden magic each morning. The plants seemed to follow her smallest move, leaning toward her as she passed.

It never ceases to amaze me how the garden, small olive grove, and house all seem to replicate a soothing atmosphere reminiscent of a Grecian chateau and vineyard. Strange, because I've never been there, but somehow the feeling persists, permeating my very pores.

I look around now and see how well tended everything appears. The garden, the trees, it all looks so well tended. Does Aunt Helena have someone taking care of the place in her absence?

Every year, for as long as I can remember, the garden has resisted the drought conditions that normally plague surrounding farms. The land miraculously thrives, no matter how hot it gets.

"The place looks great, Aunt Helena. Do you have someone tending it when you're not here?"

"No, dear. To tell the truth, I've been coming up several times each week on my days off."

"Oh, that's nice. It's a lovely place for a getaway."

Aunt Helena is on her knees digging at the soil to pull up some turnips, presumably for lunch or dinner. She looks up at me and smiles, squinting since the sun is just coming up behind me.

"Yes, I know." Reading her accusing expression, I voice what she's thinking. "You've been trying to get me to visit for years." I feel guilty at the admission. "I've been busy," I explain with what I know to be a lame excuse.

I bite my lip at her knowing look and peer around the place briefly. I try again with an argument I hope will be a little more believable. "If I lived closer, I'd visit all the time. You wouldn't be able to get rid of me."

"Why would I want to do that, dear?" She says, pulling up another turnip, rubbing off most of the dirt with her glove, and placing it in her brown wicker basket.

"No reason. I was just kidding." I cross my arms. The morning air seems a little more chilly than usual. Aunt Helena never got my dry humor. I often had to explain my jokes. Finally, I just stopped trying to be funny. But, every now and then, my humor can't help but spill out, causing me to have to explain myself. I sigh. Some things never change.

"So, Greg, how did you meet him?"

Another thing that never changes. Aunt Helena constantly protects the ones she loves. Of course, she'd want to know every detail about Greg. Guess her conversation was a quick one or I'm sure Cheryl would have been more than happy to fill her in for me.

I take a deep breath and plunge in, "Well, we first met in London."

"Really? What do you know about him?"

"We've gotten to know each other a little. I don't know much, but what I do know, I like."

When she didn't say anything else, I ask, "Why do you want to know? Do you know him?" I ask suspiciously.

She looks up at me again and answers, "Now, why would I know him?" She places her trowel in the basket and rises, pulling off her gloves. "I was just curious, dear."

She places her gloves in the basket, picks it up and heads for the house. I fall into step beside her. I study her profile as we walk. The back porch is screened in. It leads to a mudroom where my Aunt keeps her gardening supplies and a few canning jars.

When she doesn't ask any more pointed questions about Greg, I know something is up. She's hiding something, I can feel it. Even as a child, I could read people enough to know when they were lying to me.

"You know auntie, we were trying to find your driveway yesterday."

"Uh Huh?" The short answer heightens my suspicions.

"Greg had some trouble seeing it."

"Well, it is a small drive. Maybe he was driving too fast."

"That's what I thought, at first. But then we stopped right in front of it?"

"Uh huh?"

"He still couldn't see it," I persist.

"Hmmm. That is strange."

"That's what I thought."

We enter the back porch and move into the mudroom. She starts to place her work gloves and trowel on a shelf. I hear her murmur, "I was hoping you would be driving."

"What was that?" I ask, even though I heard her clearly.

She turns to me and says, "Typically, you like being in control, Kim. In this instance, I just didn't think it'd be otherwise."

"What do you mean? What's going on Aunt Helena?"

She looks at her hands, then picks up the basket and walks into the adjoining kitchen. She sets the basket on the counter. I know she's made her decision when she takes my hand and looks me in the eye before saying, "I have something to show you. It's probably long overdue." With a decisive nod, she says, "It's time you knew."

I gulp. I have no clue what she's talking about, but follow her willingly.

She leads me up to the attic. It's dusty. We stir the dust bunnies with each step. It makes me sneeze.

Leaving me standing in the middle of the room, Aunt Helena moves to a large, old-fashioned trunk, located against the outer wall, under a single round window placed high up on the wall. It's the only light in the room, but it's enough to see clearly at this time of day. I can see the dust motes dancing in the sunbeams streaming through the window. I sneeze again from my allergies. I hope this won't take long. I don't want to get sick.

She opens the trunk and pulls out several papers. Closing the lid, she turns and hands them to me.

"What is this, auntie? You've shown me the family ancestry charts before, you know."

"These are different. The ones you've seen, well, they didn't have all the information on them that these do. Humor me, and take a closer look."

I comply, although I doubt what could possibly be so significant or different from what I already knew about my family. I study the ancestry chart. I blink then blink again at what I see.

An extra generation has been added, as well as some additional dates. Dates that couldn't possibly be correct. No one lived that long. So few generations stretching back so far in time? That's impossible.

"That's impossible," I whisper out loud.

"No dear. It's the truth."

"What is this? A joke?"

"Maybe we should take these down stairs to the kitchen and discuss it."

I nod. My gaze is drawn back to the ancestry chart in my hands. I start to follow my aunt when I see something else that stops me in my tracks. "What?" I blink, but the print remains the same. "Now I know this is a joke. Apollo is my great-great-grandfather?" I laugh.

"Aunt Helena, you really need to work on your jokes. This one is cute, but just doesn't cut it as a full on joke. Sorry." I laugh again, expecting her to join me.

I stop smiling when I see her serious expression. Without another word, she heads down the stairs. I look back at the page and shake my head. It had to be a joke. Kind of a strange joke. Since when did Aunt Helena have an interest in Greek mythology?

A chill races up my spine at the coincidence of it all. I follow her to the kitchen on shaky legs. I practically fall into a chair at the table and lay the pages down in front of me.

I grip my hands together, hoping to calm their trembling. I watch Aunt Helena as she fixes us both a cup of tea. Once she is done and sitting in the opposite chair, I gulp and say, "Explain, please."

After taking a sip of tea, she places the cup in her saucer and begins, "First, I should explain something."

Here it comes. What else could there be?

"I'm not really your Aunt, Kim."

"What?" I whisper. A million memories flash through my mind. All the good times we'd spent together, and all the times we clashed.

My voice gains strength when I ask, "If you aren't my aunt, then who are you?"

She looks over my shoulder and says, "Gregorian, how nice of you to join us. Why don't you sit down. Would you like some tea?"

"You called him Gregorian. How did you know his name?"

"Because I've seen him before. A long, long time ago."

I look back at Greg, frozen in the doorway. He studies Aunt Helena for a few seconds before a look of surprise and recognition crosses his face.

"In my father's house," he whispers. "I remember now. You and another woman were visiting."

"Yes. I was assigned as midwife to Shatiri. Apollo needed someplace safe where she could give birth. He asked your father to shelter her as a favor to him."

Greg snorts. "I'll bet it didn't take him long to cash in on that favor."

Greg walks to my side and sits down. He eyes my aunt then studies my face. He places a hand on mine and asks with concern, "Are you O.K.?"

I nod. I appreciate the strength Greg is trying to impart, but the information I've been given so far is too overwhelming. I lean my elbow on the table and rub my eyes, trying to get a grip on my thoughts.

My throat is tight. This couldn't be happening. So many questions race through my mind, too many to keep up with at once. I take a sip of tea, trying to ease my dry throat.

Before I can ask anything, Aunt Helena, or Helena now, places Greg's tea in front of him and takes her seat again.

"I was captain of my father's palace guard at the time," he fills in for me. "My father never did anything without there being something in it for himself." Greg directs his attention to Helena and says, "I'm surprised Apollo asked him."

"He didn't have much choice. No one else would do it." She looks to me and says, "No one liked Apollo very much. He had many enemies, especially within his own Pantheon." She shrugs, then says to Greg, "Your father was the lesser of two evils, as it were."

She pauses to take another sip of her tea. "Dear, I know this is a shock."

"No, no, funny thing is, it's not," I say, meeting her eyes. In some strange way, I'd known, by and large. At least, that we weren't related. I don't know how. I just knew.

She nods understanding. "I knew one day I'd need to show you your heritage." She waves her hand to the documents still on the table in front of me.

"What heritage?" Greg asks.

I pick up the top page and hand it to him.

He studies it for a moment then whistles and places it back down in front of me.
"Well, it confirms what we suspected all along. That's why you can hear Bali and use her powers. You're a direct descendant of Apollo."

I look at the page again, only now seeing the name of the woman who would have been my great-great-grandmother. "Shatiri?"

"Yes, she's your . . ."

I hold up my hand to stop her. "I know." Only question is, is she the same Shatiri that Bali told me about? Is Shatiri a common name?

I bolt out of my chair and race up the stairs to my room. Bali is sitting on my dresser. I walk right up to her and touch her paw. "Bali?"

Kim, you look pale. Has something happened?

I snort. "Yes, I guess you could say that." I pick her up and sit on the edge of my bed, holding her in front of me.

What is it? You look like the world just came to an end.

The understatement of the year. I swallow hard and tell her what I just learned.
"Bali, is it possible. Could that Shatiri be the same one you told me about?"

Yes, it's possible. In fact, it's more than possible.

"How do you know for sure?"

The first clue is the fact that Apollo is listed as the husband, and she the wife.

"But I thought you said she wouldn't have anything of him after you joined her to Ashran?"

Apollo is nothing if not cunning. I'm sure he got rid of Ashran. If Ashran died, it would have freed Shatiri to return to him. She wouldn't have had anything keeping her

from doing so. Especially, if she didn't know about Apollo's involvement. He probably comforted her in her grief.

"O.K., that makes sense, I guess. And the second?"

Shatiri is a unique name. I didn't know everyone who came to our city, but I remember thinking her name beautiful and special since I'd never heard it before. It would be very unlikely there would be two people with the same name who also had a child with Apollo.

I close my eyes. I know this is just speculation on Bali's part. She hadn't been there after Apollo banished her, so she can't know for sure now what had happened afterwards. But her speculation is pretty convincing, nonetheless.

I open my eyes to see Greg and Helena standing in the doorway. I sigh. I can feel my blood sugar dropping. The stress must be using up all my energy.

I get up, taking Bali with me and walk out the door. Greg and Helena part to let me through, then follow me downstairs.

I decide if there are any other surprises in store for me today, and if I am to think clearly enough to ask questions, I'll need food to deal with it all.

Chapter 25

Greg and Helena take their cue from me, not speaking as Helena and I fix breakfast. It seems so strange now, knowing she isn't my aunt, to be fixing breakfast together, like we'd done hundreds of times before.

As we eat in silence, I decide, she might not be related, but for all intents and purposes, she'd taken care of me like a true aunt. I can't bring myself to think of her as anything other than family. But knowing she isn't who I'd always thought her to be makes my usual curiosity sit up and beg for answers.

I wipe my mouth and take a sip of tea before starting with my first of many questions. "I know you say you aren't my aunt, but I want you to know something. I still consider you to be my aunt."

She smiles at me fondly and says to Greg, "See what a special woman she is? I've never been more proud of her than at this very moment."

She reaches across the table and pats my hand briefly. She'd never been an overly demonstrative person, but typically kind. The compliment is also rare. In this instance, it makes me smile at her in awe.

I glance at Greg, who is also smiling at me. I blush, embarrassed that he has witnessed such a sappy moment. He must think we're nitwits. I clear my throat and ask my first question, "So care to fill me in on what I don't know about you?"

"With pleasure dear. There's really not much to tell. I guess the main thing you should know is that Apollo himself assigned me to look after your family. I've been watching over your family since Shatiri gave birth."

Wow, that's old. "But you don't look . . ."

"I know," she interrupts. "The perks of being immortal, dear. We can change our appearance to suit the situation."

I guess that makes sense. I turn to look at Greg. He's immortal too. Are his blond good looks his natural appearance or has he changed anything over the years? I know he's over a thousand years old too. But Aunt Helena looks several decades older.

I look back, stunned to see a younger version of her. "This is what I really look like."

"Wow, that's amazing." I shake my head. We're pressed for time. I'd love to ask more questions about this, but we need to focus on more weighty questions. "So what does this all mean?" I wave the ancestry page through the air. "So are you saying I'm a goddess?" I laugh.

"A demi-goddess actually. You aren't immortal. You're only one-eighth goddess. Each of your female ancestors married human males. With each generation, the bloodlines were further diluted. But no matter how little immortal blood you have flowing through your veins, even a drop is enough for you to be considered a demi-god."

A demi-goddess. My thoughts race. "And powers?" I ask, already thinking back to my childhood, suspecting at least one that may have manifested itself.

We share a look of mutual understanding. Helena nods. An image of the last night my parents were alive plays itself out in my mind.

My parents were fighting as usual. I was supposed to be asleep. Instead, I watched from behind the banister spokes as my mother and father systematically tore each other apart.

Mother accused Father of infidelity, which he denied, saying she was controlling and paranoid, even crazy.

Father reminded her they were already late for dinner at the club with friends. My eyes widened as a flash of lightening lit up the window behind them. In a split second, my vision blurred, another sight taking hold.

My parents were screaming. Their car had swerved off the road. They were going over a cliff. Rain coming down in sheets. My father had missed a hairpin curve, distracted by their verbal abuse of each other.

I screamed too, then I was sobbing as Mother held me close, trying to calm me. "See Alfred, we woke her with our shouting." She pushed my hair back from my face, drying a few tears from my cheek in the process. "It's all right darling. Everything will be O.K."

"Helena, why don't you take Kim back to bed."

"No! Please don't go mother, please!" I screamed the same plea repeatedly as Helena dragged me up the stairs and back to bed. But no one would listen to me. I heard the front door slam then silence. I knew they were gone. They hadn't listened to me. They never listened.

I fell asleep sobbing into my pillow. The next morning, Aunt Helena took me to live with her in Arizona. She didn't bother explaining what had happened to my parents.

She had guessed I already knew, because I had seen it happen, before it had happened.

Coming back to the present, I say, "So that's my power." It's not a question, and I see in her eyes she knows what I'm talking about without my having to say a word. "Is there anything else?"

"There could be other gifts you have, but I'm not sure. Gifts are usually developed during childhood. I've never seen anything other than the one present itself."

Gift, I think in disgust. Some gift. Something that I can't even utilize to help people. Just a nightmare I have to live each time I get close to someone. It's why I chose to isolate myself, why I gained so much weight, to keep people at a distance. Why I don't have many friends. But no one can live without relationships. It's only human to need connections with others.

Back then, I rationalized that if I kept myself apart from the world, I wouldn't see those nightmares. I wouldn't lose anyone else I cared about.

I grimace. I guess that explains too, why I haven't been to see my Aunt for a while either. With her advancing age, I've lived in constant fear that I might see her death too. Guess that's not really a worry anymore since goddesses can't die. What a relief.

It also explains why I am so determined to help Bali. I've known what it's like to be isolated. True, it was of my own making, but isolation is lonely no matter how it happens.

Just as I lost weight, trying to break out of my self-imposed jail, so too I want to help Bali find her own freedom.

Greg interrupts my thoughts by asking, "What power? What am I missing here?"

"I can see when something bad is going to happen to someone."

"What? Like you can see the future?"

"Not exactly. I have visions. But they only happen when the person is about to die."

"It's one reason why I kept you home from school. I wanted you to have a normal life, but I tried to protect you too. I didn't know what else to do."

"It's O.K., Aunt Helena. Really. I know you did your best." I reach out and place my hand on hers.

"So that's why you placed the spell on the driveway entrance as well, huh?" Greg says.

She confirms it with a nod.

"So who *can* see the driveway then?" Greg asks.

"Only Kim and I. Oh, and the mail man of course." She gets up and places her cup in the sink. "I set it up as a deflection spell. If we have company . . ."

"Which is rare," I fill in.

She nods and continues, "which is rare, I simply modify the spell to allow them to see the driveway."

"O.K. So what other powers do you have Auntie?"

"Not many. I come from a lesser house. It's why I was placed in service to your family. But not to worry. I have just enough to make sure you stay safe." She takes my cup to the sink then sits down across from me again.

"Well, I know you have a green thumb," I say, smiling fondly at her.

"O.K., so I don't see how that could help us with our current problem though, do you?" Greg interrupts.

I release her hand and lean back in my chair. "No." After a moment, I say, "I still think we need to know what Bali and Ishe discussed. It might hold a clue to how we can resolve this."

I place my hand on Bali's paw. Greg places his hand on her other paw. "Helena, if you place your hand on Bali, you can listen in on the conversation."

"So I was right. Bali is a goddess and is trapped in that statue?"

"Yes. I found her in an antique market near where I live. As a matter of fact, she's the daughter of . . ."

"Bastet," Helena says before I can finish my sentence.

"Yes. How'd you know?"

"I heard rumors that Apollo had punished an Egyptian goddess. She disappeared and everyone speculated about what he had done to her."

Helena gingerly places a hand on Bali's head. "Guess I know now."

Here goes nothing. "Bali?"

What am I, a Ouija board?

Greg and I laugh. Helena jerks her hand back. "I heard her. She's really in there."

I laugh at Helena's expression and nod. She places her hand back on Bali. "Very funny," I say to Bali. "It's time to fill us in on your last conversation with Ishe, Bali."

Greg and I stop laughing when Bali says, *you mean Ishe and Banti.*

"What!" Greg and I exclaim.

That's what I was trying to tell you, but I got interrupted. Banti was there too.

Oh, great. This couldn't be good. "So what happened?" I ask, then listen as Bali fills us in.

Chapter 26

“I wonder why Banti explained her part in Bali’s imprisonment? I mean why would she volunteer anything?” Aunt Helena had shooed us from the kitchen to fix dinner, so Greg and I decided to take a walk and discuss what we’d learned.

I grab the flower basket and clippers from mudroom shelf on our way out the back door.

“I’m not surprised,” Greg offers.

“You’re not?” I ask, curious.

“No. Whenever she gets nervous or thinks she’s unbeatable, she gets very smug and can’t help but run off at the mouth, telling anyone within hearing range about her exploits.” Greg puts his hands in his jeans pockets and scuffs his tennis shoes on the white marble path as we walk.

“So you think she’s confident she’ll win, or is she bluffing?” I ask, adjusting the basket on my arm. Twilight is falling but I’ve walked to my favorite spot so many times, the fading light doesn’t hinder my steps at all.

“I’ve never known her to bluff. She’s too much of a coward to leave things to chance. It’s more likely she was rubbing it in. You have to admit, it was a clever scheme, using the fates to make Shatiri and Ashran lovers, then guiding Bali to the market that day. Bali didn’t have a chance.”

“A cruel scheme,” I amend, secretly agreeing about her ingenuity. Creativity, even devious creativity, is impressive.

Greg nods in agreement but remains silent. We walk a few more feet. The path winds around the garden and the olive grove. We reach the bend to where the gazebo and flower garden surrounding it become visible. Greg’s step falters when he sees it.

“So this is your favorite place, huh?”

I nod. “Yes. It’s where I spent most days as a child. There’s a padded swing in the gazebo where I spent hours and hours reading and writing.”

“What did you write about?” He asks, smiling. “Damsels in distress?” He chuckles.

I grimace. “No. Well, not always,” I correct. “I wrote some romances, like I do now. But I also wrote about werewolves and vampires . . . including a romantic twist, of course.”

“Of course,” he says gravely.

We pass the garden, which is in the last stages of bloom. The foundation of the gazebo is lined with pink and white hydrangeas, deep green hosta, and every shade of rose you can imagine.

Not much has changed in the last five years since I’d seen it last. The trellis columns are still hung with fragrant honeysuckle, as well as purple-striped morning glories and varying shades of clematis. I sigh. This place soothes my nerves every time, and makes me feel sheltered, safe, and secure.

“Pretty,” Greg comments as we near the shallow steps leading inside. It is darker here. The light from the setting sun gilds the interior a rich gold. It would be darker inside soon, but for now, it is a golden bower.

“I thought we’d sit and talk about our next move.”

He gestures for me to enter first then follows me to the swing. There’s no other place to sit, unless you count the floor.

I take one corner, while Greg sits down in the other. He’s so big our thighs touch. I didn’t realize how small the swing would be. As a kid, I could stretch out and sleep

without having to bend my knees. But that was then. Now, two adults fit comfortably, but just so.

Greg leans back and starts to swing a bit, looking up at the supports. "Are you sure this thing will hold our weight?"

"I think so," I say, but not entirely sure.

Greg grunts, and I grin slightly at the sound.

We sit for a while the gentle glide and squeak of the chains, lull us. I sigh and lean my head on his shoulder.

Never in my life would I have imagined the pleasure in sharing my secret place with the man I love. My breath catches, my head jerking upright. I love him. The realization makes me bolt from my seat. I stop in the gazebo's entry and cross my arms, rubbing my forearms to ward off the chill of the evening and the goose bumps produced by my thoughts.

I lean against the pillar and study the garden as the shadows grow long, casting the bushes in shadow.

Am I in love? I never did ask Bali about that glow.

But then I decide, I don't need Bali to confirm what I already know to be true in my heart. I sigh.

"Is everything O.K.?" Greg asks softly.

I turn and try for a reassuring smile. But inside I'm scared to death. "I'm fine," I lie.

He pats the padded seat next to him in invitation.

I give a halfhearted laugh and walk slowly back to him, rubbing my neck to relieve the tension there.

“So,” he says, once we settle the swing into a comfortable rhythm again.

“So,” I repeat, squeezing my palms between my thighs. I cross my arms and lean back like Greg, trying to relax with his body so close to mine.

“So, any ideas yet?” he asks.

“Maybe one,” I answer.

“Oh yeah?” he says, piqued. He places his arm along the back of the swing behind me. It’s hard to concentrate with the gentle sway of the swing. My imagination goes into full tilt as I imagine him making a pass, pulling me into his arms and kissing my socks off.

But I’m wearing flip-flops. I snap back to reality. “Yes.” I sit up straight effectively stopping the swing. “I was thinking about Apollo.”

“What about Apollo?” he says, frowning.

“Well, if you’d been played like him, wouldn’t you want to know about it?”

Greg snorts. “You’re thinking like a human, Kim. No offense,” he adds quickly.

I narrow my eyes at him. “None taken,” I lie.

“Apollo is a god, and a rather conceited one at that.”

“Sounds human to me,” I say.

“Maybe, but even though he made a mistake, he’d never admit it, or that anyone got the best of him. Believe me.”

“Oh, I do, but it couldn’t hurt to tell him could it? I mean, you might be right, but what if you’re wrong?”

Greg shrugs. “Just don’t be surprised if he brushes it off as nothing. We should have backup plan, maybe two backup plans.”

“I was thinking of asking Aunt Helena to talk to him, since she knows him. We can tell her over dinner. She might know what his reaction might be as well.”

Greg nods. He’s so close to me. “Why don’t you sit back and relax?”

I comply, but remain stiff as a rod, board, plank. Wait a minute, isn’t a board and plank the same thing? A dozen words race through my mind, all conjuring up images of...damn my imagination. I rein it in with a jerk and abruptly ask, “So how did you become a slave?”

It’s Greg’s turn to go stiff. He removes his arm from the back of the swing and crosses his arms. I study his face, noticing his hard expression. Will he answer? Just when I’m about to apologize for my rude question, he says, “It’s a long story.”

I shrug. “We have the time,” I encourage.

He sighs, then starts, “I assume Bali told you about our childhood together?”

I nod, not wanting to interrupt him in any way.

“Well, when I was twelve, I was sent away, to live with my father.”

When I remain silent he continues, “My mother didn’t want me anymore. I looked too much like my father I suppose.”

I have to interrupt. “What? No. That’s not what Bali said. She said it was the usual course for boys to be sent away to train.”

“That’s true, but not in my case. It may be the excuse they used, but in reality, it was to get rid of me. Only, my father couldn’t get rid of me. So, he did the next best thing.”

“Which was?” I ask when he doesn’t continue.

“My father called me a bastard.” Greg laughs without humor. “If that’s true, then I’m a chip off the old block, because he’s just as much if not more of one than I am.”

“I don’t understand?” I don’t mean to be naïve, but I’m missing something here.

Greg sighs again before continuing, “When I went to live with my father, he made me bunk with the meanest sons-of-bitches you’d ever want to meet. Instead of training me like the other boys, he made me do every lowlife job imaginable, catering to every miscreant around me. Guess he figured he was training me for my future role. To be a slave. Ironic really, since that's what I am now.”

I take his hand in mine, intending to show my sympathy, but he turns it over and studies it instead. He raises it to his lips for a soft kiss of gratitude for my gesture of comfort.

I swallow, not sure I want to know the answer to my next question. “Did they abuse you?”

Greg laughs. “That was the great thing about playing hide-n-seek with Bali and Ishe as a kid. I got to be really fast when it came to evading someone, and really clever at hiding. Those bastards couldn’t touch me. Well, at least, not all the time. I got my share of slaps when I didn’t move fast enough or didn't see them coming.”

“That’s awful. I’m so sorry Greg,” I say, wishing there was something more I could do to comfort him. No child should be abused in any way.

“Well, don’t feel too bad for me. It toughened me up. And it did one thing for me they didn’t expect.”

“What?” I ask.

“Despite the paltry scraps they threw my way, I managed to grow quite large by the time I reached sixteen years of age. I got that from my father’s side,” Greg admits reluctantly.

“What happened when you turned sixteen? Did you beat someone up or something?”

He grins, “Not someone. Everyone. Anyone who tried to hit, or backhand me.” Greg stares off to the side as if remembering, then huffs a laugh. “You’d be surprised how quickly a bully will back down when you stand up to them. Those guys were all bullies. I started to train with them. Didn’t take me long to become unbeatable.”

I return his grin. “Good for you,” I praise, then remember my original question. “So, how did you become a slave?”

“I’m getting to that,” he reprimands. He starts the swing in motion again. “When I turned eighteen, I earned a spot in my father’s guard. By twenty-one I was captain in charge of the whole squad.”

“Wow, you must be a good soldier,” I say impressed.

“I had to be really. The abuse and rubbing my father’s nose in my successes were great motivators.” Greg leans back, relaxes and places his arm around my shoulder this time. I welcome the warmth, as the sun has set and the air has cooled a bit.

“So when you became captain, did he congratulate you?”

Greg laughs so hard I worry the swing might break after all. “Are you kidding? That bastard had the gall to smirk at me and say, ‘don’t get too comfortable with the position boy, you won’t hold it for very long.’”

“He said that?”

“Yep.”

“So, what happened next?”

“He was right, the bastard. It wasn’t a week later, he offered me an assignment. Dared me really.”

“An assignment? Like a battle?”

“No, like a spy.”

“Spy?” I say surprised. “What would he need a spy for?”

“He and my mother hate each other. I never knew why exactly. I just figured it was because of me, you know, her having a half-breed and all.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I’m half Egyptian and half Greek. The houses have a very clear view of mixing the bloodlines.”

“But that’s not your fault. Why did your father get involved with your mother in the first place, if they feel that way?”

“Like I said, my father’s a bastard. He’s a lot like Apollo, messing around where he shouldn’t. My mother is very beautiful. He thought she would be an easy conquest. When she turned him down repeatedly, she became a challenge...and an obsession. My father doesn’t like to lose.”

“Sounds like a nice guy,” I say, infusing my voice with as much sarcasm as possible. I feel a little bit of guilt seep into my consciousness, because I thought that of Greg when I first met him. Of course, now that I know him better, I know it was all an act. Seems he had a great example.

Greg grunts. “That’s an understatement.”

“So what happened next?”

“What you’d expect. He can be quite charming when he wants to. He seduced her. Told her he loved her and didn’t care about rules or anything else. That he just wanted to be with her forever.” Greg pauses. “Liar. When he found out she was pregnant, he dumped her.”

“What did she do?”

“My mother decided that a man so vile that he would lie to get what he wanted, didn’t deserve to have a truth medallion.”

“Truth medallion? What’s that?”

“It’s a special stone, that when used, can detect when someone is telling a lie or the truth.”

“How does it do that?”

“The wearer asks a question. If the one asked tells the truth, it turns warm to the touch.”

“What if they tell a lie?”

“The stone turns ice cold and glows red.”

“So, Bastet took this medallion from your father?”

“Yes. When she got pregnant and he didn’t return, she decided to go to his house to tell him about me. He laughed at her. Called her all kinds of vile names I’m sure. I know what he thinks of most women. Before she left, she went into his temple and stole it from the altar.”

“So, what does this have to do with you?”

“Since I had lived with Bastet, I knew the place, and they knew me. I could move freely around the place with no one the wiser and try to recover the amulet.”

“Why would you do that for a man who obviously didn’t want you in the first place?”

“For the one thing I’d always wanted...respect. If the bastard wasn’t capable of giving me love, I figured the least he could do was give me some respect. He knew it too, of course. He offered to make me a legitimate heir if I did what he wanted.”

I don't know what to say next, so I stay silent, suspecting the tragic consequences that are coming...slavery.

"Since I was now the captain of my father's guard, it would be hard to explain why I was returning to my mother's house. But, if my father sold me to Banti, who had become Bastet's high priestess in Bali's absence, then I'd have pretty much free reign to find the stone and steal it back."

"But wouldn't they be suspicious of him, selling not only his son but the captain of his personal guard?"

"My father's mean reputation was well known. It didn't really surprise anyone."

"And you went along with it?" I say skeptically. Greg seemed so smart. It was hard to believe he could be so trusting, but then most people risked it all for the tiniest chance to get what they wanted most.

He shrugs. "Of course. At first I suspected it was a trick. My father forever tried to get rid of me, get me out of his sight. But I wouldn't give the bastard the satisfaction. He had me, he was damn well going to remember me whether he liked it or not."

"Was it a trick?" I ask, hoping I am wrong.

"I still don't know. Maybe. I didn't count on how hard it would be to steal the amulet."

"Why?"

"Banti never takes the amulet out, never wears it. I suspect she has it well hidden, where no one but she knows. It makes it hard to steal something you can't find. Who knows? Maybe my father knew that would happen, maybe not. I don't know. I'm still waiting for her to reveal its hiding place."

"How long have you been her slave?"

“Well, I was thirty when I took the assignment. So, little more than a millennium?”

I gasp, not expecting it to be so long. What a waste, all that skill and talent, only to wind up a slave. “So what did you do...as Banti’s slave?” I imagine Greg tied to her bed or something just as disgusting. Hoping upon hope I’m wrong, I hold my breath.

“Since she knew I’d been my father’s best warrior, she made me head of her own guard. It brought me a lot of perks.” With a sly grin my way, he adds, “Too bad I had to trade a bastard for a bitch.”

I laugh. “So how long are you going to keep trying to get that amulet, then?”

“I would have fled long ago to my father's house, but I don't really have any other incentive to return, especially without that stone. I don't know. Maybe I'll never be free.”

“If there were a way to get Banti to reveal the stone to you. Do you think it would be enough to get you free?”

“Yes. I’m pretty good at lifting stuff off people. Until I hit sixteen, it’s pretty much all I did to survive.”

A lump forms in my throat as I imagine Greg as a blond, dirty little boy, surviving on scraps and longing for the love of his father.

“Doesn’t really help our situation now though,” he points out.

“No,” I say, contemplating all he’s told me. Then a thought pops into my head.

“Wait a minute. Maybe it does.” I bite my finger nail.

“What? How?” We both put our feet down to stop the swing.

“If you could get that stone, you could use it to get Banti to tell Apollo the truth, right?”

“Maybe. What are you saying?”

“If we could trick her into using that stone to get the truth out of me about Bali...”

“What truth about Bali? What are you talking about?”

“She won’t know which statue is which. She won’t know which one is the true Bali and which is the fake. I could taunt her with that fact. She’d have no choice but to use that stone.”

“I don’t know. She could just as well torture the truth out of you, too.”

“Not with you there, and Aunt Helena. She’s been sworn to protect me. I’m sure with the two of you backing me, Banti wouldn’t stand a chance of harming me.”

I quickly stand and move to the entrance of the gazebo. Dusk has settled in, fireflies dance in the garden and along the path like small twinkle lights. When I notice Greg isn’t right behind me, but still seated inside, I return to him and grab his hand.

“Come on. I want to talk to Aunt Helena about this.”

He allows me to pull him to his feet. He pulls me to a stop in the entryway.

“Kim,” he says. His tone arresting my attention. I turn to him impatiently.

He raises a hand to caress my cheek, his palm slides along my cheekbone. He takes my other hand and draws me close. My breath catches as he lowers his head toward mine.

Just before his lips meet mine, he whispers, “I think you’re the most crazy, beautiful woman I’ve ever known.”

“Crazy?” I whisper, still wanting his kiss despite the possible insult.

“Beautiful,” he replies softly, before claiming my lips. I moan. Tingles race up and down my spine. I hold him close, both arms around his shoulders. He draws me flush with his body. I revel in his strength, solid yet oddly tender.

We explore each other's mouths, nipping, lips rubbing, tongues meeting and caressing.

When the kiss ends, I'm breathless. All thought has fled. I look into his beautiful eyes, not wanting this moment to end.

He studies my face as I study his. It seems our thoughts connect when he frowns. I know what he's thinking. "Kim," he starts, but I forestall him with a finger to his lips.

He isn't free to love, not while he's a slave. I want to cry at the thought. Then my sorrow turns to determination. "Don't," I say. I release him, take his hand again, and lead him back to the house.

As I enter the kitchen, I determine that one way or another, I'll set him free. Once and for all.

Chapter 27

Not sure whether Greg wants anyone else to know about his status, I decide to wait to fill Aunt Helena in until after our meal.

As we sit with our coffees, me with my tea, I broach the subject. "Aunt Helena."

"Yes, dear?" she takes a sip and grimaces, then adds another teaspoon of sugar to her coffee.

I glance to Greg who nods his consent. "I think we have a plan to fix all this."

"Yes?"

"First off, we were thinking, if Apollo knew Banti set him up, do you think he would agree to free Bali and punish Banti instead?"

That would be the easiest course all around. Bali would surely give Greg the amulet for his father for helping to free her. Banti would get what she deserves and stop chasing us. Greg would be free to choose his own future. Hopefully, that future would be with me. If not, then at least I would know he was free and happy.

"Hmmm. Well, I'm not sure he would care. It's hard to read him."

"That's what Greg said, that he was conceited and wouldn't want anyone to know he'd been used."

"I have to agree, dear. If Apollo is anything, it's proud."

I sigh. I knew this wouldn't be easy. "O.K. The second idea is to get Apollo to listen while we get Banti to admit her guilt again. That way, Apollo couldn't ignore the slight. He'd have to do something about it."

"And how would you do that dear? Surely Banti is too smart to just offer up the information, especially in front of Apollo."

"That's true. But you see, Banti has a truth stone. If we could get her to wear it . . ."

"No she doesn't. Not anymore," she interrupts.

"What? What do you mean Aunt Helena?" I say. Greg has gone deathly still beside me.

"Are you talking about the truth stone Bastet stole from Greg's father?"

"Yes," Greg says menacingly. "What do you know about it?"

"Well, that was the deal your father made with Apollo in exchange for letting Shatiri give birth in his house."

"What?" Greg thundered. "My father sold me into slavery in order to get that stone back? He couldn't have that stone, Banti is supposed to have it."

"I saw it myself. Apollo went and asked Banti for the stone. She gave it up to him without a word of protest. I thought it strange at first, but then figured Apollo scared her because of his stronger powers. She didn't have any choice in the matter. It was a simple enough task for him to retrieve it and give it over to your father."

Greg's face was a mask of fury. "Greg," I say, placing a hand on his arm to try and calm him. I wince, as he jerks away from my touch. I'm a little hurt by the gesture.

"That bastard. All this time . . ." I can see him swallow convulsively as his anger rises.

I try again. "Greg, calm down."

"I'm going to kill him." I know he means business when his voice goes whisper-fierce. I can barely hear his words.

My vision dims and dread fills my soul. Oh no! Not now. Not him. But the vision has its hold on me. There's no denying it. Then, I see it . . .

Greg stands before his father. There are men on either side of him holding his arms. His father punches him in the stomach, making him double over in pain. As Greg straightens, his father backhands him across the face, over and over again.

Greg's beloved face is covered in cuts and bruises.

His father is laughing, enjoying each painful blow. I can see the resemblance between them. Yet, I have never seen on Greg's beloved face, any of the cruelty displayed on his father's face.

How could two men be related and yet so different? I can only assume and credit Bastet for the goodness and decency I've seen in Greg.

His father speaks, so close to Greg's ear no one else seems to hear. However, I hear every word.

"You know the penalty for running away . . . slave." The word is like a slap, just as Greg must feel it.

Then it comes, the death blow. Greg's father pulls a wicked curved knife and plunges into Greg's stomach. It twists as he pulls it out, then plunges it once more into his heart. Blood gushes. What looks like surprise seizes Greg's features, just before he collapses.

I scream, "No!" just as I'm pulled back into the present.

Greg pulls me into his arms. I'm crying so hard I can't speak. I clutch him to me, desperate to impart how vital it is for him to stay with me. But he misinterprets my hold and pulls away. "It's O.K. I won't be long. I just need to talk to my father." He turns to Helena and says, "If what you say is true, then his deal with Banti is null and void." He takes my cold hands in his and kisses them. "I'll be free, Kim."

He gets up to leave, but I cling to his arm, halting him. "Don't go, please." The tears clog my throat. All I can do is plead, "Don't go."

"Stay here with Helena. You'll be safe. When I return we'll figure out a way to set Bali free. Don't worry."

When I won't release him, he pries my hands from his arm. "It's O.K. I'll be back." Then he's gone.

"No, you won't," I whisper, but he can't hear me. Then I remember, he's a god, right? He can't die . . . can he?

The next twenty-four hours are torture. I hope my vision won't come true, but I know better. He's probably already dead. I don't want to admit it to myself, but I know it's true. Gods die too, don't they? Maybe not like humans, but they are sent to hell, never to return. One or the other, it doesn't matter, Greg will be lost to me forever.

I busy myself thinking of what to do about our . . . my situation now. I can still try to get Banti to admit her part in framing Bali and Apollo, even without the truth amulet.

Maybe Banti will boast and admit her plans to me and somehow Apollo will hear her.

I cry myself to sleep that night, my vision playing over and over in my mind, until exhaustion claims me for a few fitful hours.

The next morning I set my plan into motion. There's no use waiting for Greg to return. He's gone. The knowledge feels hollow in my heart. When did he become my world?

I set my determination in motion through sheer rage at the loss of the only man I've ever loved.

"Are you sure you want to do this dear? I'm not even sure I can get him there."

"Yes. I'm sure. We can only try."

"O.K. I'll do my best."

"I know you will. Aunt Helena?"

"Yes, dear?"

"I love you."

"I love you too, sweetheart. I always have, and I always will," she assures with a heartfelt hug.

We share a smile, before she disappears. I promise to give her about an hour to find Apollo and get him to the Ethereal Plain where he can listen to Banti's confession first hand.

Hopefully, I can get her to do that. I take a deep breath for courage, and sit, watching the clock.

Bali sits in front of me at the kitchen table. I touch her paw and hear . . .

Don't worry, Kim. I'm sure all will work out for the best.

I produce the ghost of a smile, but my gaze never leaves the clock.

Kim?

"Hmmm?" I answer absently.

Did I ever thank you?

"Thank me for what?"

For helping me, but most of all for caring. I've never known a human . . . anyone, who ever cared what happened to me. Thank you.

I smile at her briefly, not saying a word, then return my eyes to the clock. I'll give her ten more minutes. Then, show time.

The mists to me seem heavier than last time. They swirl about. I can hardly see Bali walking next to me. As we walk a little farther, the mists part, then retreat. In front of us stand two figures. I recognize Bali's twin, and the man standing next to her is Ishe, whom I've seen before.

We stop a few yards from them. I notice a strange rose-colored glow surrounding them. Does that mean they are lovers then? I thought Bali loved Ishe?

I look to Bali and notice her longing gaze fixed on Ishe, but he seems to have eyes only for Banti. In fact, the more I study his face, the more I'm sure Banti must have some kind of spell on him. His face seems frozen, as if entranced.

Banti speaks first. Her lips twist as she studies me. "What is the meaning of this? Why have you summoned me? How dare you speak to me here. A lowborn human. How dare you."

Her words and tone anger me into saying, "How dare I? How dare I? How dare you!"

She moves to me and slaps me across the face. I'm amazed at the pain considering we must be in non-corporal form to even be in this place.

"How dare you speak to me in that tone," she shrieks. "I should kill you where you stand, human." She says the word with such scorn I'm surprised I don't go up in flames.

I slap her in the face and she backs up in shock, holding her stinging cheek. Greg was right. Stand up to a bully and they back down. She is a coward at heart.

I raise my chin, daring her to retaliate. But she returns to Ishe's side. She snaps her fingers and two of her priestesses appear by her side.

With what I now know to be false bravado, she says, "I am far too superior even to touch your filthy hide. You will be dealt with soon enough. But out of curiosity, what did you wish to speak with me about. No doubt to discuss your surrender. Am I right?"

She crosses her arms and smirks, but I have her number now. Her highhandedness doesn't scare me anymore. After all, curiosity killed the cat. How appropriate here. I smirk and answer, "You wish. But you got one thing wrong, we do have something in common."

"Oh?" she replies with a disdainful sniff. "And what would that be?"

"We are both curious people. That is what I came here for, to hear it from your own lips."

"I don't know what you're talking about?" She says with a slight yawn, covering her mouth daintily with the back of her hand.

"Why, what you told Bali. I was curious. And it's not that I don't believe her, but something so devious, so clever, a plan so creative, I had to hear about it from you myself."

"What plan?" she says nonchalantly, blowing on her nails as if to dry them after a polish.

"Why the ingenious plan you used to entrap Bali, of course. I came to ask, if you wouldn't mind repeating to me what you told Bali?"

She skewers me with a petulant pout. "Why should I?"

"Well, if you are so high and mighty, you can prove it by telling me," I challenge.

"How would that prove anything? And I don't see why I should tell you anything, anything at all . . . human," she taunts, as if throwing a dart at a board.

I let the slight slide. I hope my next dig might be the fire that will get her talking. I place my hands behind my back, and hope Apollo and Helena are listening nearby in the mists. "Well, I just figured that anyone who could best an almighty, all powerful god such as Apollo, had to be the greatest god, or goddess, alive. But if you don't wish to prove that's the case, then I guess I win the bet and we'll just go home."

I turn and take one step, before she clears her throat and says, "What bet?"

I look at Bali who grins, and return it with a wink. I know I've got her now. Her ego must be the size of the grand canyon. That was far too easy.

I turn with a raised brow and say, "Why, the bet I made with Bali. You see I'm rather tired of being chased this way. I want to get back to my simple, humdrum, *human* life. So I made her a bet. If what you say is true, then Bali deserved to be imprisoned in her statue. Anyone that naive deserves what she gets, right? Well, if that's the case I would hand her over willingly to you. If you want her, that is."

I can see I have her full attention. "But if Apollo put her in there without a fair trial, then she should be set free. After all, she was only doing her job."

"Yes, she deserved to be put in there. I'll tell you what's not fair. Her, getting, everything, just because she was born first. She gets it all, while I get nothing." She stomps her foot like a spoiled child as she says, "It's not fair!"

I try not to laugh before I cross my arms and challenge, "Prove it."

And out it came. All the details of how she'd gone to the fates and told them they could get back at Apollo's continual blasphemy of them by binding Shatiri to Ashran. Then, she took Bali to the marketplace, pointing out the couple to her. Banti even assured

Bali she was doing the right thing . . . after all, look at the rosy glow surrounding the couple; it was a clear sign they were meant for each other. Apollo would have no choice but to give up Shatiri."

And on it went. Even scorning Apollo by saying how easy it was to fool and manipulate him.

Once she was finished, I nod. "Thank you, Banti. I see the truth, now. May you and Bali get everything you two deserve."

I turn away and take only a few steps before I hear Banti say, "So, you'll hand her over to me . . . willingly?"

I ignore her and keep walking, Bali by my side. Banti continues to rant, making all kinds of threats if I don't come back.

You didn't answer her. She'll be sending her Mau after us. I'm sure she sent a message to them the moment we made contact with her as to our location.

"I'm sure she did. But I'm counting on Aunt Helena and Apollo getting back before then."

I hope you're right.

"Me too," I yawn. I'm exhausted.

I decide to lay down on the living room couch to wait for Helena to return. I yawn again, positioning a pillow under my head.

I close my eyes. I hope they were listening. What's taking them so long? I drift off into an uneasy sleep.

Chapter 28

The mantle clock chimes midnight. I open my eyes slowly. I go rigid when I hear glass breaking at the back door. It must be what woke me. My breath catches. Someone's breaking in.

Damn. Where is Aunt Helena? I roll off onto the floor, Bali in my grasp, and scramble on all fours to the living room entry, which provides a clear view into the kitchen at the back. Whoever enters from the back door will have to come through the kitchen.

I spot the four Mau, just as I suspected, enter the kitchen. They have full swords at the ready. My heart skips a beat. What am I going to do? Where to hide?

Suddenly a hand covers my mouth from behind. I panic thinking I'm caught.

Then I hear Helena's gentle whisper in my ear. "It's me. Come," she commands, holding her finger to her lips, encouraging me to be as quiet as possible.

I nod and follow her. We ascend the stairs from the front entry to the second floor as quickly and quietly as possible. Then make our way to the back stairs at the far end of the hallway.

We quickly descend, stopping cautiously at the bottom to check and make sure the kitchen is clear. It is. The Mau must be in the front part of the house, searching for us.

I follow Helena to the mudroom. The Mau demolished the back door. It will have to be completely replaced. Maybe Aunt Helena knows a spell that will work on that. I vaguely wonder why we're running. Didn't Apollo hear Banti's confession? Maybe Greg and Helena were right, maybe he didn't care. Maybe Aunt Helena couldn't even get him to go.

Before we can exit the back door, she takes my hand. Oh, no, not again. I plunge into the darkness of another vision.

We're running, Helena and I. We just pass the olive grove when they catch up to us. Aunt Helena is barely a step ahead and to my right when it happens.

I know it occurs in a flash, but in my vision, time seems to slow down, like slow motion in a movie.

A knife is thrown. It lands directly in the center of Helena's back. The force of the impact pitches her forward, her back arching as she goes down.

I stop and throw myself down by her side, sobbing. I look up as booted feet come into view on the other side of Helena's still form.

The Mau I saw in my apartment, the one who seemed to be in charge, smirks, then kicks Helena in the side, hard. Helena doesn't respond. She's dead.

The Mau confirms it. She pulls the blade from Helena's back. As she wipes the bloody residue on her sleeve, she looks into my eyes and explains, "I love this blade. It's a godkiller. Works better on immortals than humans though. Pity."

"But I thought gods couldn't die?" I'd seen a blade similar to the one the Mau held in her hand. Greg's father used it to kill Greg in my vision. Maybe I can find out what happened to Greg. I hold my breath and wait.

She smirks, then shrugs. "They can't, but they can be condemned to Hades for eternity. Same thing as dead since they rarely, if ever, return." She places the knife back into its scabbard before looking down at Helena's still form. "Greek Bitch. That'll teach her to come between the Mau and their prey." She kicks her, then does it again.

I see red and lunge for her, but don't make it before two of her Mau pull me back by my arms. She laughs before sheathing her blade. "Bring her," she commands.

I catch my breath as I plunge back into reality. I grab Aunt Helena's arm and shake my head no, but she won't listen.

Why am I not surprised. I hate this gift, this curse. Why do I even have it if I can't change what happens? What's the purpose in it?

The same question I've asked my entire life. No answer then, none now. Maybe there is no answer. Maybe it exists, just to torture me.

Everyone I love dies. Why is that? What's wrong with me? Is this a punishment of some kind? All the questions I've ever asked myself, return to haunt me.

I have no time to explain my vision to Helena. She may not die in the usual sense, but she'll be lost to me forever if that blade hits her. The Mau was right about that. It might as well be the same as dying. Which means Greg is lost to me as well. I'm determined I won't lose another person I love.

We can hear the Mau behind us. I know any moment my dream will come true, then all will be lost. We round the grove and a thought occurs to me. Maybe I can change something. Maybe this time I can keep my vision from coming true. Maybe.

At the exact time I saw the blade hit Helena, I jump to my right. I feel the blade hit my back, dead center. As I jerk forward away from the pain, I hear Helena scream. As I go down, I think, it worked. Such a strange thought considering the moment. In that instant, I'm happy. Helena's alive. I saved her.

The momentum sends me to the ground with a hard thud. Then all goes dark.

I drift in and out of consciousness as the pain from my body, my back, ebbs and flows. I hear voices raised in anger.

"You were supposed to bring her to me alive." Was that Bali's voice? I've never heard such anger in her voice before.

I hear, "You fool!" Then what might be a sound slap across someone's face.

But the pain is too much for me to resist. I'm pulled down into the darkness and temporary relief.

The next time I surface, I hear another voice, this one soothing yet implacable when she says, "I will care for her."

Then Bali's voice, "Heal her quickly. I want her on her feet as quickly as possible." Footsteps sound on stone. A door opens then she says, "You have one week."

The darkness crowds in, once more plunging me into sweet oblivion.

I groan as I come awake. I'm on a feather mattress in a dark room. I can hear water dripping somewhere. The room is cold, but a soft, warm woolen blanket covers me. A dim light, candles I think, illuminate black granite walls. "Where am I?" I whisper.

Not expecting an answer, I start when a voice next to me says, "Shhh, little one. Don't worry. You're safe . . . for now."

I don't recognize the voice. "Who are you? Where's Aunt Helena?"

"Lie still. You'll heal faster if you remain still."

Lying on my stomach, I start to raise my torso and find she's right. Excruciating pain radiates out from my back. I collapse onto the bed. Then I remember, the blade, Aunt Helena. But if I saved her, then where is she?

"Where's Helena?" I ask, sure the voice knows.

"I'm sorry, little one. She is gone."

"Gone? Gone? No, no, I saved her. How could she be gone? You're lying!" I accuse.

"Shhh. I'm sorry, little one. I'm sorry. It is true. The Mau killed her after you passed out."

"No, no," I sob. I realize, it didn't work. Nothing I ever try works. My visions never fail to win out. I can't change them, ever. Everyone I love, dies.

I feel a cool hand stroke my forehead. I want to pull away, but I'm too weak to do so. Instead, I escape the only way I can, in sleep.

When I come to next, light is streaming through a window cut high into the gray granite wall. I lift my head and see a wooden table with a single silver candlestick sitting on it, melted wax testifying to its use last night. I groan, remembering what I learned in the night, and bury my head in the pillow under my face.

I hear the door open and close and dishes rattle as they are placed on the table. I risk a peek and see a woman there. She glances over at me and smiles. "I see you're awake. I hope you're hungry."

I turn my head away and reply, "No."

"Oh, come on. The cook's broth is just what you need to recover your strength."

I hear her fiddle with what I assume is a bowl of soup. Then a chair scrap on the flagstone floor as she sits to offer up the concoction. No telling what's in it. If I'm where I think I am, then that soup is probably poisoned.

"Come on. Before it gets cold. Nothing worse than cook's soup when it's cold. Barely edible when it's hot." She chuckles at her own joke.

When I don't respond, I hear her set the bowl down on the side table and sigh.

"Kim."

The sound of my name startles me into turning my head her way.

She smiles a sad smile and says, "Yes, I know you're name. I know a lot more than that."

"Who are you?" I say, not sure I want to know, or if I really care.

"My name is Shatiri."

Nothing she could have said would have surprised me more.

"No," I whisper. "That's not possible."

"It is possible, sweeting." She smiles warmly at me and continues, "I am your great-great-grandmother." She looks down at herself and laughs briefly. "I know I don't look like a grandmother. I started out human, but Apollo? You're great-great-grandfather?"

I nod, not trusting my voice to respond.

She continues, "He gave me immortality."

"He can do that? I mean, why would he? All the gods I've met so far, except for Greg and Helena, seem to think so little of human beings."

Shatiri grimaces. "Unfortunately, true. After I had your great-grandmother, I couldn't stand the sight of Apollo. I knew if I stayed with him, I would bear him more children. You see I found out he sent Ashran to his death. I couldn't forgive him for that deception and betrayal."

She rose, taking the bowl to the tray and setting it down before looking up at the window and continuing with her story. "I thought at the time that Ashran was my one true

love. All I wanted was to bear his children, and grow old with him at my side. But I belonged to Apollo, and he wouldn't give me up."

Shatiri turned and leaned back against the table. "So he sent Ashran into battle with his army and made sure he was in the front lines. Ashran didn't have a chance."

She sat by my side again and picked up the bowl again.

"I heard all this, from Helena. But she didn't tell me you were still alive."

"Yes, well. That's because she didn't know, sweeting."

"So how did you come to be here?"

"When Apollo saw I wouldn't change my mind, he sent me to Banti."

"In exchange for the amulet," I guess.

She nods. "Yes. I gave your great-grandmother to Helena with the promise that she would keep my baby, and her babies after that, safe, to love them as her own. She didn't know where Apollo was taking me. We never talked again."

"So, you're immortal?" I don't know why I have trouble believing that. Gods can do anything they wanted apparently.

She sets down the bowl again, and says, "Apollo may have given me to Banti, but he couldn't bear to see me die. He hoped with time I'd change my mind and accept him again." She holds up a simple gold medallion. "He gave me this medallion. As long as I wear it, I am immortal."

I'm surprised. I know if it were me, I'd want to die if my true love were to die. I think of Greg and swallow, feeling the truth of that thought stab me to the very center of my being. "Why would you want to be immortal?" I whisper past the lump in my throat. "If Ashran died, wouldn't you want to be with him?"

Shatiri chuckles as she gazes at the keepsake. "Where there is life, there is hope." She catches my eye and says, "Remember that little one. If one lives, there is always hope."

Her words encourage me somewhat. The Mau Priestess never said no one ever returns from Hades, which means there is a chance, if only a slim one. Any chance is better than nothing. Maybe there is hope that Aunt Helena and Greg are not lost forever.

Kissing the amulet Shatiri rises and asks, "Are you sure you don't want any soup? I was only teasing before, it is very good, and very nutritious. It will help you heal faster."

I shake my head no. "Thank you," I offer. I need more sleep, not soup. "Maybe later."

She picks up the bowl again and places it on the tray. "You need to get strong quickly. Banti will not allow you to lie about for long. I can keep her at bay for only a short while."

"Banti, Banti is here?"

"Yes. She intends to fight you for Bali, if you will not give her up willingly." She touches my shoulder and leans close, whispering, "But you must not give Bali over to her. You must wait as long as you possibly can."

"Why? Wait for what?"

"I cannot say. But you will know. When the time is right, you will know." She holds my gaze for an intense moment before quickly taking the tray and leaving. I hear a key turn in the lock before I'm left to my thoughts.

What the hell is going on? This is so strange. Aunt Helena is dead, correction, in Hades. Now a woman I don't know is telling me she's Shatiri? And where is Bali? I look

around and spot her on the table beside my bed. I reach out to grasp her. My hand shakes as I draw her to me.

"Bali?" I whisper. "Bali, are you there?"

Yes, Kim. I'm here. I'm so sorry I got you into this. I heard what Shatiri said. You should just give me over to Banti when she asks you to. I don't want you to get hurt. She'll let you go home. You'll be safe again.

"Maybe I don't want to be safe, Bali."

You don't mean that, Kim.

"Yes, I do. Bali, I knew from the start that there might be danger. I mean, you told me from the beginning that a god named Apollo put you in there. So I knew if there were trouble it would be from people who were stronger and capable of things far beyond my imagination . . . and I have a big imagination, you know."

I hear Bali laugh at that. *I know, you're a romance writer.*

"Yes, but I also knew that I had to do something to make things right for you. If I didn't, I'd be no better than anyone else who only thinks of herself first and others second. I just can't be that way. Especially since I've come to know you, I care about you Bali. No one deserves to be imprisoned, particularly for a crime they never committed."

Thanks, Kim. That means so much to me.

"We're in this together Bali. I'll figure something out . . . somehow."

Chapter 29

Two days later, I still didn't have any ideas. Mostly I slept and ate, regaining my strength. I can't believe how quickly I recovered from that knife wound.

Bali and I did a few brainstorming sessions, but no solutions to our situation miraculously appeared.

I knew time was running out. Banti wouldn't wait much longer. And I was right.

"I don't care whether she is ready or not. She will hand over Bali to me now or else." Banti's voice rang loud and clear through the closed door. My time was up.

"She has not regained full strength," I hear Shatiri say.

"I don't care. I'm tired of waiting. Bring her to my training room now or you'll be sorry Apollo ever dropped you on my doorstep, Shatiri."

After a moment the door opens and there is Shatiri. She closes it behind her and leans against it. "I'm sorry little one. I cannot keep her at bay any longer."

Pushing off from the door she comes to me and stands beside my bed. "It's O.K. Shatiri. I knew it was coming sooner rather than later."

"Remember, do not give her Bali."

"I will do my best. That's all I can do at this point."

Shatiri draws near and whispers in my ear, "She prefers to fight with broadswords, but she is not very strong. If you move quickly, you can avoid her blows and keep her off balance. It might give you some time."

"Time for what? You never did explain what is going to happen."

"Come, I will help you dress."

Although I feel much better, the soreness in my back persists, making my movements slow. Move quickly? I'd be lucky she didn't cleave me in two. Broadswords? Who fights with broadswords these days?

Now, dueling pistols at twenty paces. Or knives maybe. Knives. That only reminds me of Helena.

I grab Shatiri's arm when I'm ready to go. "Shatiri, do you have a knife? Anything I might use as a surprise defense?"

"No. She watches me too closely while I attend you. She does not know our connection, but she has never fully trusted me in her house. I have defended you too well I fear. It has made her suspicious of me."

"That's O.K. Thank you for your care. I'm glad I met you. I wish we had more time to get to know each other."

"I know little one. If all works out, we will have plenty of time."

She walks to the door and opens it. I follow with stiff shuffling steps. My muscles have stiffened being in bed so long. Hopefully, they will loosen up enough for me to evade Banti's strokes.

"I hope so. I hope so."

I follow Shatiri down several long and winding corridors. We pass a large entry, big enough to be part of a castle in a fairytale. I peek over the railing and see several people milling about. Who are they and what business do they have here?

Maybe we are in a castle. It certainly looks and feels, and is big enough to be one. Could this be the castle Bali mentioned growing up in as a child, the Summer Palace in Egypt?

After several more turns, we come to a door. Shatiri knocks and the doors open to admit us.

Directly opposite the entry a wall of windows allow light to illuminate the entire room. Guess they'd need plenty of light to fight. Candles just wouldn't cut it. I grimace at the unintended pun. Haven't these people ever heard of electricity?

We take a few steps inside, and the doors close. I look behind me to see two servants attending the door on either side.

I look to my left and see a wall filled with weapons. There are also several mats on the floor to designate fighting rings or boundaries.

"Take a good look human. You'll be fighting me there in a moment." I jerk my head to the right to see the owner of that voice, Banti.

Above her head on the wall, an exquisite tapestry of rich gold, red, and sapphire threads depict a battle scene in which the victor stands proudly in the midst of slain bodies. The conqueror wears a helmet in the shape of a cat, a lion in fact.

"That is my mother, Bastet. Impressive, yes?"

I nod, not sure what to say. The scene is extremely intimidating. How could such a strong woman bear such a coward as Banti? It's hard to believe Banti and Bali are twins.

"Make no mistake human. I'm more like my mother than you realize," Banti says. Did she read my mind or could she simply read faces? I'd have to be careful to guard my expression.

I move to stand before her. Shatiri moves to the side with the other servants lined up along the wall to my right and Banti's left.

She sits on a red velvet throne that occupies a raised dais, tapping her long, blood red nails on the wooden surface of the armrest. They remind me of claws. Claws of a cat. I purse my lips. I narrow my eyes and study my opponent.

I can't bluff my way out of this one, but I'm also not a trained warrior as she must be. And with a thousand years experience under her belt, she has to be good, unbeatable.

Shatiri's warning and advice comes to mind. I know evasive maneuvers will only last me so long and only prolong the inevitable. What can I do? I have nothing.

"So what will it be human? Are you ready to hand over Bali to me now? Or do you prefer to die?"

Buy time. That's all I can do for right now. "My name is Kim, Kimberly Peterson." I step forward and offer my hand. "I don't think we ever formally introduced ourselves. How do you do?"

She doesn't reciprocate, simply stares with disdain at my hand as if it were a dead rat the cat had dragged in. "Oh, sorry. I forgot." I pull my hand back and put it in my pocket.

At first, I'm startled to feel Bali there. I thought she hung from my neck by a chain Aunt Helena had given me years ago. Did Bali move herself there? She must have. But for what purpose? Probably to stay out of Banti's sight.

"I'm running out of patience. I want your answer now or we fight to the death."

"Now, now, what's your hurry? Shouldn't we discuss terms first?"

"No discussion," she shouts, slapping the arm of her chair with her palm. "I want Bali and I want her now!"

Kim, persuade her.

"I'm trying," I whisper, trying not to move my lips.

No. Use my power of influence to keep her talking. Maybe if you keep her talking long enough a solution will present itself. Maybe that's what Shatiri meant.

It made sense. But influence Banti? If what we suspected before is true, she'll know if I use that particular power. There is only one way to find out for sure. I can only hope the consequences would fall in my favor.

"What do you want with Bali? If I give her to you, her powers are of no use to you. True, you will still have her power of influence to wield as before. But what about her other powers? Wouldn't you like to have those as well?"

I know I have her interest when she asks, "And you know how I might acquire those powers?"

"I might."

"And what do you want in return for this information, human?"

"Well, calling me by my real name would be a good start. After all, we're partners at this point, don't you think?"

She frowns but doesn't immediately refute the claim.

"You see, I think we need to get to know each other first. Last we met I learned a little bit about you, but you didn't really get to know me, now did you? Aren't you the least bit curious about me?"

"Huh, why would I be interested in you?"

"Why do you think I'm able to use Bali's powers? Aren't you the least bit curious to know that?"

I can see her thinking about that, reevaluating a key piece of information she might have missed before. Banti is no dummy, but she is greedy, and that can make a person sloppy.

She rises and walks down the steps to face me. She stops a few feet from me, never breaking eye contact, raises her nose, and commands, "Tell me. Who are you that you are able to use a god's powers? Maybe you are not what you at first appear?"

I make her wait for the answer, holding her gaze, staring her down.

I wait until the moment I see the knowledge enter her eyes that I intend to withhold that information from her. The angry fire ignites in her eyes and tightens her features.

I grin and open my mouth. She slaps me hard across my face, making my head jerk to the side. Damn, guess I waited a heartbeat too long.

I rub my stinging cheek and turn back to face her. "Insolent bitch," she hisses. "You think you can play games with me?" She laughs and returns to her throne. She motions for two of her Mau to hold me in place.

"Where is Bali?"

When I say nothing more, she motions with her hand to another guard. She approaches and starts to search me. When she touches my pocket I know they've got what they want.

All I can do is hope upon hope that Greg was telling the truth, that they can't simply take Bali from me.

I hide my dismay as the guard holds up the two inch high statue for all to see. "Bring it to me," Banti commands. I present a relaxed demeanor I don't feel, and try to look unconcerned.

The guard obeys placing the statue in her palm. Banti turns her this way and that studying it minutely. She turns her attention back to me. "How do I know this is Bali? You tried to fool me once before with a fake."

"How do you know the last one *was* a fake?" I ask, coming up with a plan to confuse her.

Banti smiles, then replies, "I knew the moment you used her powers that you still had her in your possession and that the one I held was fake. Just as I know this one is the real Bali, because I felt the influence you tried to use flow out of me."

So much for my plan to confuse her. Damn.

"So you see, that trick will not work on me a second time."

"So you have her now. Let me go home," I say.

"Not so fast. This may be the real Bali, but I cannot just take her from you, as you well know. You must give her to me of your own free will."

I smirk. "I could, but as I said, that won't get you her other powers. You know, the ones Apollo gave into the hands of his own house?"

"Ahhh, I see." I watch as understanding dawns on her face. Then a little consternation as she realizes the fine line she is walking. "So you are Apollo's descendent. How interesting . . . and unexpected. But then Apollo has sired many demi-gods and goddesses in his time. Why be surprised? I'm surprised only that I didn't think of it before." She laughs at her own mistake.

She rises again and approaches me. "So you want to give me Bali's powers, eh? You can do that?"

I nod.

She walks around me, looking me up and down, studying me in light of this new information about my pedigree. "Hmmm. Interesting. And what do you wish in return?"

Not the turn I expect, but an opportunity nonetheless. Only, my mind goes blank. What can I ask for that would make any difference here? I bite my lip and study the ceiling.

"Come, come. You must have something in mind," she encourages. She stops in front of me and crosses her arms. I can hear her impatience in the tapping of her shoe on the polished oak floor.

What can I ask for that will cause Banti to have to wait the longest to get for me? Then it hits me.

"I want the truth stone."

"What? What truth stone?"

"The one you gave Apollo to give to Gregorian's father."

Banti laughs. "What would you do with a truth stone? That's ridiculous. Besides I no longer have it."

"I'm sure you could get one though, right? I mean, there have to be other truth stones in existence, aren't there?" I shrug my shoulders. "I'm not picky. Any truth stone will do." I study my finger nails in nonchalance.

She reacts just as I expect. She screams and returns to her throne. "This is ridiculous."

"Yes, you said that. So, is it a deal?"

"I could just kill you. Then Bali would be mine. I'm not sure I even need her powers anyway." Did I just push too hard? I hide the fear her words inspire.

I decide I can't stop now. "But you'd like them just the same, wouldn't you? I'm sure you've never forgiven Apollo for not giving them to you in the first place. Am I right?"

When she purses her lips and remains quiet, I'm sure I have her.

I continue, "I'm only trying to right a wrong done to you. You proved Bali deserved her fate," I lie. "It's only fair you get her powers as well. And, I feel it's only fair I get what I want in return. Wouldn't you agree?"

"Take her back to her cell. I need to think on this a bit. A little more time won't matter. One way or another, I'll get what I want."

"What about Bali?" I ask, hoping she might return her to me.

Bali suddenly appears around my neck once more. "Seems I can't keep you two apart . . . for now anyway." She doesn't look happy. She doesn't have control over Bali yet. She motions to the guards, who take me by my arms and steer me toward the door.

Mission accomplished. I bought a little more time. Thank goodness, Shatiri and Bali were right. I breathe a sigh of relief. Of course, I have no intention of giving her Bali. Even if she does manage to obtain another stone.

The guards push me into my room and slam the door. How much time did I buy before the next showdown?

Chapter 30

A few hours later the guards return. Damn, that was too fast.

They hurry me back to the training room and push me to my knees before Banti's throne. I see the amulet around her neck. I didn't expect her to get a stone so quickly.

She fingers the stone and says, "Before I give it to you, answer me this. Can you really give me Bali's powers?"

"Of course," I answer, knowing if that is a real truth stone I'll be found out quickly enough.

"Liar!" she screams, as the stone glows a deep, rich red. Guess the cold bitch can feel the coldness of the stone. Too bad. Time for Plan B.

"But I know who can," I say quickly.

"Who?" she says.

"Apollo."

She laughs without humor. "Why would he do that, when he didn't do it from the first?"

"Because I'm his descendent. If I ask him, I'm sure he will honor my request."

When the pendant around Banti's neck remains neutral, I know I have her. "At the very least, I can try. What do you have to lose?" I challenge.

"I don't know. Apollo is tricky to deal with. You never know how he might react. He's unpredictable."

"If he says no, I'll give you Bali."

She appears to think it over, then answers, "Agreed." She snaps her fingers and a guard appears at her side. She whispers in her ear then waves her away. The guard disappears out the door.

I grin to myself. Banti is so obsessed with getting Bali to herself, she doesn't think straight. Banti didn't specify that I give her Bali of my own free will, so I didn't exactly lie. I can hand over Bali. I just would never give her to Banti permanently.

We don't wait long before Apollo is announced. No wonder people fear him. He stands six-feet-four-inches in his golden sandals. The only thing he's wearing that hints at his heritage. Guess old habits die hard.

His suit is modern, although he has foregone wearing a tie. His white silk shirt is unbuttoned to display his impressive chest. You can almost hear each female heart in the room speed up.

His muscles appear rock hard and bulge with power. He looks like he could crush a bolder with one hand tied behind his back.

He stops in the doorway as he's announced, letting each person study his intimidating form before moving to the dais. Banti descends to greet him and offer a bow of obeisance.

"Apollo, thank you for coming on such short notice. I know how busy you are."

Banti stops talking when Apollo brushes past her and continues to the top of the dais, turns, and looks down on her. Banti appears angry, but she bows her head anyway.

Apollo looks about the room. All eyes are bowed. "Shatiri," he intones, holding out his hand to her.

She moves to him, taking his hand in hers. Their eyes met and she nods almost imperceptibly. He smiles then turns to acknowledge Banti. When he does, his smile turns almost menacing.

"Banti. I received your message. However, it was rather vague. Why have you called me here?"

"It is rather a long story."

I grin when Apollo takes a seat on Banti's throne and draws Shatiri down to sit in his lap. "Then by all means, start to explain. As you say, I am a busy man."

You can hear a pin drop in the room, or at the very least, Banti's teeth grinding together as she tries to hold her tongue behind her teeth. I decide I like this guy. After all, he is my great-great-grandfather.

I cross my arms and wait for the show to begin. This must be what Shatiri hinted at earlier. If so, then what took Apollo so long to get here? What could have kept him? I decide my questions can wait. I hold my breath and watch in anticipation.

"Well, I should start with this girl I suppose." She motions and the guards behind me push me forward to stand next to Banti.

"Hello," I say. Would be rude to address him as grandfather? I decide to wait and see how he responds to me first. Wouldn't do to be cheeky off the bat, then hear "off with her head" in response.

He studies me for a moment, then turns to Shatiri. She nods again. "Come here child," he says, motioning me forward. I ascend the steps then hesitate before taking his hand. He smiles before saying, "I understand you are my grandchild, yes?"

"Great-great-grandchild to be exact."

He smiles at my reply then winks before drawing me to stand beside him. "I can see you in her, my love. Most beautiful," He whispers to Shatiri. She blushes and bows her head.

He clears his throat then turns his gaze back to Banti. "You were saying?"

"Uh, uh, yes. Anyway," I smile as Banti stutters, obviously disconcerted by Apollo's actions. "I was saying that this woman found Bali's statue."

"Really?" He turns his focus back to me and asks, "How did that happen?"

When I start to answer, he says, "No, no. You can tell me later. Let's speed this along, shall we? I want to get this over with."

His abruptness startles Banti into more stutters, which end with her first coherent sentence to be heard. "She won't give Bali to me."

"Well, is that what this is all about? I would think she wouldn't give Bali to you. She found her after all, didn't she? Bali belongs to her. There, case over." Apollo and Shatiri rise. He takes both of us by the hands and starts to guide us down the steps.

"What? No, no. Wait," Banti yells.

"What? There's more?"

"Yes, there's more. You don't understand. She promised you would give me Bali's powers."

He looks at me briefly before returning his attention back to Banti. "The answer is no."

Banti laughs. "I knew that would be your answer." She turns to me and says, "now give Bali to me."

I answer simply, "No."

I watch as her face turns red. I never knew anyone's face could turn that shade. It can't be good for her blood pressure. Hope she doesn't blow a gasket.

"No! You promised!" she screeches. She moves to grab my arm, but one word from Apollo stops her in her tracks.

"Don't you dare," his whispered words send even my blood plummeting into a deep freeze. "Did you promise, child?"

"I promised to give Bali to her, yes."

"See?" Banti challenges.

"But not of my own free will," I add.

"What?"

"Ah, well, that makes sense then. She didn't promise to give you Bali permanently. Therefore, you misinterpreted her promise. We'll be on our way then."

I can see the hatred in Banti's eyes as we move past her. She knows she's lost.

When we reach the door, Apollo turns to face Banti once more. "Oh, I almost forgot." He holds out his hand to me and says, "I believe you have something that belongs to me."

When I hesitate, he says, "Trust me."

For some reason, I do. I release the clasp at my neck and draw Bali from the chain. Then place her in his outstretched palm. I say the words I thought never to say, especially to him. "Bali is yours."

I look into his eyes and see respect. I know I've made the right choice.

He closes his hand around the statue and turns back to address Banti. "I've heard some very interesting information about . . . a past event. I believe some facts in the case were omitted. Justice," I see him grimace at the term. "seems to be lacking in this case. I intend to set the record straight."

He places Bali down on the floor. The statue immediately returns to its original one foot height.

"Bali, I release you, and grant you a complete pardon including the return of your powers." Instantly Bali appears beside the statue.

"Thank you, Apollo," she says with a bow.

"What! No! That's not fair! She deserved what she got. You can't do that!" Banti screams and moves toward us.

His next words stop her in her tracks. "I can and I will. You deceived me, Banti. I know what you did. As I told Bali so long ago, I will not tolerate any interference in my affairs. I believe you have done more than enough damage. One more word and you will take Bali's place. It would be the least you deserve for your treachery."

"I don't know what you've been told. But I'm sure they're all lies. How do you know they are truth? Who told you?"

Holding Banti's gaze, he raises Shatiri's hand to his lips and kisses it.

"Her? What did she tell you? She doesn't know anything. How could she?"

"Exactly what she heard you tell Kimberly, and Bali, and Ishe. I may not have heard it first hand, but I've always suspected something foul when I sentenced Bali. I should have investigated before passing judgment."

"She lies. How could she know what I did or didn't tell them?"

"I was there. Hiding in the mists. I heard you. Once I knew the truth, how Ashran was never meant to be my true love, I knew I had to return to Apollo, and tell him what I knew."

"You did the right thing, my love." He kisses her hand again. "Now, we can be together as we were meant to be."

He gives Banti a warning. "I thought it was Bali who took Shatiri from me, but I was wrong. It was you all along. Be glad I'm in a forgiving mood. Test me further and you'll find yourself quickly constrained." He eyes the statue to make his meaning clear.

Apollo turns to Bali and bows. "All things have been fixed." I look between them. Was there's a hidden meaning behind his simple words? Before I can figure it out or question him about it, he and Shatiri exit the room. I move to follow them when Bali takes my arm to detain me.

"Kim, wait." She takes both my hands in hers. "How can I ever repay you?"

Tears prick my eyes and I shake my head. "I didn't do much. It was Shatiri who told Apollo and got you free."

"No. Without you and your courage, none of this would have happened."

I huff a denial, then decide a simple "You're welcome" will suffice.

"Would you consider staying?"

"What? Here?" I ask, surprised at the offer.

"You could be part of my Mau. I would make you the leader. I need someone I can trust."

I'm at a loss. I never expected such an offer. But that's not how I want to live my life, however interesting the position might prove. I shake my head no. "Thank you for the offer Bali, but I couldn't. I have other things I want to do with my life."

"I understand." She releases my hands, then holds her palm out. A golden medallion appears in the center. "Please accept this with my deepest gratitude."

I take it from her and turn it over. There's writing on the back. "What is it?"

"Whenever you wish to return, even if for only a visit, all you have to do is hold it in your palm and think of me." She takes it from me and places it around my neck.

I clutch it to my heart. "Thank you, Bali. Whenever I feel a need for a vacation, you'll be the first one I contact."

"Good." We both laugh. "Promise me you'll never take it off?"

"I won't. I promise."

I look beyond her and spot Banti with her Mau priestess. They're talking quietly and eyeing Bali. "I do have one request though," I say.

"Name it."

"Aunt Helena never deserved to die. I want revenge . . ." I point to the head Mau next to Banti "on her."

Bali turns to see the one I mean. She turns back to me and says, "Granted. I'll take care of it myself. Do you want to stay and watch?"

Killing isn't something I'm comfortable with. I may want retribution for Helena, but I don't have the stomach to watch. I shake my head no.

Bali smiles in understanding.

"What will you do with Banti?" I ask. Can Bali can handle her on her own now?

"I'm not sure. I'll leave that up to mother, once I tell her the whole story."

"May I make a suggestion?"

Bali nods. "Of course."

"You might want to put her into that statue until you determine what to do with her. That way she can't skip out on her punishment."

Bali smiles and nods again. "Oh, Banti, dear. Please come here."

I watch as Banti's comes toward us bearing a haughty demeanor.

Before she can reach us, Ishe enters the room and strides directly for Bali. My breath catches when I see that soft rosy glow surround them. It's instantly clear what Apollo meant by everything being fixed.

I smile as they embrace. All is as it was meant to be, indeed.

Then, I see Banti behind her sister. She raises what I recognize as the "god killer" knife high, ready to plunge it into her back. She lets out a bloodcurdling scream as she brings it down.

But I'm faster. I kick out with my foot and connect with her wrist just before it can reach Bali. The knife clatters to the floor and skids several yards away.

Banti and her priestess reach for me when Bali intones the word, "Freeze." Both Banti and the Mau Priestess freeze instantly in place.

It's clear Banti can no longer be trusted. I smile as Bali cleans house, so to speak. First caging Banti as I suggested, then quickly placing the head Mau in chains.

Bali gives me a final hug before sending me back home.

"You are eternally welcome here. Thank you . . ." she takes Ishe's hand in hers, "for everything."

I smile at them, glad that someone has their true love. It eases the sting of my own loss a little. "You're welcome. Bye."

She winks, I blink, and I'm home, standing in the middle of my tiny, dreary apartment.

Chapter 31

I come awake slowly. Someone is banging on my door. Hopefully, it's not another immortal who wants me dead.

I move slowly, grabbing my robe from the foot of my bed. I'm so stiff and sore. Oh yeah. I forgot. My back is still healing. Good thing I didn't have to fight Banti. I'm sure I'd be dead now.

"Just a minute," I shout before looking out my peephole to see my friend Cheryl.

I quickly unlock my door and pull it open. Cheryl barrels past me, talking nonstop.

"Kim, you won't believe what's happened to me this last week. Go ahead, guess. You won't be able to guess. I'll just tell you."

"Cheryl, slow down. I've already got a blazing headache." That thought sends me into the bathroom to retrieve an aspirin. Thank god for modern miracles. I down an extra, the pain is so bad.

I turn and find Cheryl standing by my bed staring at my sheets. She turns to me and orders, "turn around."

"What?" I say.

"Just turn around and take off that robe."

I humor her and take my robe off. I turn my back to her facing my bed. I look down and grimace seeing some blood stains on my sheets. How am I going to explain that? Great. My headache jumps into overdrive.

She tries to lift my flannel top but the fabric has stuck to the wound on my back.

"Kim," she whispers. "What happened?"

"It's a long story." I head to the bathroom to get a washcloth. "It's a good thing you're here. I don't think I could reach it myself." I hand her the dampened cloth and turn my back to her.

"My top is stuck to the wound. I'll need you to loosen the dried blood then help me dress it."

She works in silence for a moment. "Looks like someone already dressed this once. The top of the bandage came loose. That's the part that stuck."

"Good," I comment.

Once she gets the shirt unstuck, I pull it over my head and toss it into the hamper. I head to my dresser and pull out a fresh one from my top drawer. I pull it to my front for modesty, turn, and walk to my bed and sit down.

Cheryl comes out of the bathroom carrying a new bandage and some ointment.

I turn sideways so she can reach the wound. As she dresses it, she asks, "Are you going to tell me what happened?"

"It's nothing. I ran into a mugger." I figure that would be the easiest explanation. The truth is just too complicated, and unbelievable. She would never believe me.

"A mugger, huh? What happened to Greg?" she asks. I can hear the suspicion in her voice. "And Aunt Helena . . . and the Mau. Did they do this?"

"It's complicated, O.K.?"

"There, it's done."

I get up, pulling the top over my head. I sit back down and take her hands in mine. "It's O.K., really."

"Oh, Kim. I'm so sorry. I should have been there. But Helena told me you were safe. I should have been there."

My suspicious mind kicks in. Does she mean what I think I'm hearing? I'm not real clear. Does she know the truth about Aunt Helena . . . and Greg?

"Why are you sorry Cheryl? You might have been hurt too if you'd been there. The muggers could have gotten you too," I say cautiously, testing my theory.

Tears stream down her face. "You don't have to pretend Kim. I know everything. About Helena, Greg, Bali and Banti, the Mau. I know it all."

"How do you know, what do you know?" I ask.

"Because Helena requested Apollo hire me to guard you when you left home."

So long ago and I never guessed. I figure I really didn't have any clues to give them away, so I couldn't fault myself. I sigh. "That long, huh?"

She nods. "You couldn't take your Aunt with you everywhere. So Apollo gave me the assignment. At first I just followed you around campus. Then when you left school to write, I had to figure out the best way into your life. You didn't make it easy."

"Because I didn't want to get close to anyone." I eye her, "Did Helena tell you why?"

She nods again.

Great. Just great. Who doesn't know? O.K. I continue, remembering how we met, "So you decided to pose as a writer when I joined the local Romance Writers of America chapter."

"Uh, huh. Even then you didn't want to get too chummy, even with them."

"I know. I tried to keep a friendly distance, while I learned the ropes."

"But I charmed you into it," she laughs and sniffs while drying her tears.

"Yes, your humor is exactly what I needed to cheer up my gloomy self-imposed isolation."

I remember how we conveniently bumped into each other whenever I went shopping or to the library to do research. It seems Cheryl never left my side. After a while, it was just easier to let her in than try to keep her out.

"So, what happened?" she asks.

I tell her every detail. "So you see, everything is O.K. now."

"I almost lost you. I'm so sorry Kim. I should have been there to back you up. I feel so guilty for my own news."

"Yes, you came in here all bubbly, just bursting with something. What happened with Jon while I was gone?"

She holds up her left hand to show me a huge diamond ring on her ring finger.

My eyes widen. "No," I whisper. "You didn't?"

She beam and nods enthusiastically. "Yes." Her smile fades briefly to ask, "You don't mind, do you? I mean, I saw the sparks flying between you and Greg and just assumed you were no longer interested in Jonathan. Was I wrong?"

I beam at her. "No, you weren't wrong. Greg and I, well . . ." I break down and sob out the whole story, how I saw him die.

By the end, we're both sobbing and holding onto each other, rocking back and forth.

We finally compose ourselves. "So," I sniff, "how did you wind up getting married?"

Cheryl fishes a Kleenex out of her purse and dabs at her eyes before blowing her nose. "He invited me to fly down to Phoenix to be with him on set. I figured we'd meet up with you there, but you never showed. When I called the cottage, Helena assured me everything was fine and that I wasn't to worry."

She laughs, covering her mouth briefly with the napkin before saying, "It's silly really. Jonathan didn't have a bit of trouble flying. He called me his good luck charm, thinking I had something to do with it. We hung around the set and talked. Then one evening, he asked me. We eloped the next day after the shooting wrapped up and headed for Las Vegas."

I hug her hard. "I'm so happy for you Cheryl. For both of you." I lean back and ask in all seriousness, "Does he know about you?"

"No. Not yet. I'm not sure I want to tell him. His life seems so complicated already. What good would it do to tell him anyway?"

"Isn't he going to wonder after a time?"

"I can appear to grow old with him. That won't be a problem."

"So where is he now?"

"I left him at my place. He's making some phone calls to his secretary and agent. It seems they need him back on set for a few days. Some of the shots didn't turn out the way the producer wanted them."

"So you're going back to Phoenix?"

"Yes. Want to come?"

"I'd love to. Thank you Cheryl," relieved I won't be left to my own thoughts. I welcome the opportunity to be distracted.

I accept Cheryl's invitation only because I don't want to stay in my apartment thinking about Greg. I need something to divert my attention, if only for a little while.

There is only one problem. Cheryl and Jon are all over each other, laughing, snuggling. I'm happy for them, but it only reminds me of what I've lost with Greg.

I decide I need to get away for a while and think. Think about what to do next with my life. What to change, if anything. I'm not sure I can go back to my life as it was at this point. Too much has happened. I'm different now.

Maybe I should have accepted Bali's offer. No, I can't see myself in that role. Besides, the castle would just remind me of Greg as well. Maybe I can never escape my memories of him. But then, I'm not sure I want to. There are good memories there too. Losing those memories would be like losing Greg all over again.

I just wish I could forget the bad stuff, like the vision of Greg being killed by his father.

Since I'm so near the cottage, I decide to go there and think how and or if there is any way to punish Greg's father for what he's done.

Cheryl and I traverse the curving road up to the cottage in a sassy red sports job Jon rented for us. Jon is staying behind to finish up with the movie shots.

The plan is for Cheryl to drop me off and head back to meet Jon and fly home with him tomorrow. I'll miss her terribly. She's been trying to talk me into going with them.

But I'd only be a third wheel and told her so. Despite her protestations, I know I'm right.

Now with the cool wind whipping through my hair and the fresh air filling my lungs, I know I've made the right decision. It will be hard to part with Cheryl, but I know we'll stay in contact.

"Cheryl, should I expect a replacement from Apollo now that you and Helena are no longer my protectors?"

"Yes. I spoke with Apollo last night. He assured me my replacement would be there when we arrive at the cottage."

I grimace. Great. Just what I need. What I really need is some solitude to figure out my life. I hope this new person doesn't get under foot. It just might drive me crazy. What is she like? I hope she's nice. I hope she likes me.

I sigh. It doesn't really matter. I have the option of sending her back, I guess. Maybe I can convince Apollo I don't need a keeper? Maybe.

I put those questions aside, when I notice we are approaching the driveway. Can Cheryl see it? I don't say anything, testing her.

She doesn't hesitate, turning directly onto the drive. Is the shield still in place? Or did it simply allow her access?

Cheryl answers my unspoken question, "A spell fades with the passing of the one who cast it."

"Oh," I acknowledge. "Can you read minds?" I ask.

She laughs. "No. I just figured you knew about the shield and would wonder about it."

I cross my arms. "Well, you were right."

I notice the ease with which she traverses the winding drive. She's been here before, many times it would seem. She parks in the circular drive and cuts the engine.

I stare up at the beautiful house. It will be different now that Helena is gone. But it's home just the same.

I have to ask. "Cheryl, did Helena own this house?"

"No. Apollo. He provided it for you and Helena."

"Oh." I get out and pull my carry-on bag from the backseat. Cheryl gets out and follows me up the steps, crossing the porch to the front door. Has the back door been fixed? If not, that's something I'll need to do. Hopefully, no wild animals have camped out while I was gone.

I drop my bag inside the door and look around. Nothing seems out of place. Luckily the Mau didn't do any damage while searching for us, except the back door of course.

"I think I'll fix some tea. Want some?" I ask, before heading for the kitchen.

"Sure. I need to head back before dark though," Cheryl reminds me.

"No problem. It won't be dark for several hours yet. Only takes about an hour to get back down to Phoenix."

Before fixing the tea, I head for the mudroom to check out the backdoor. It appears to have been fixed, which doesn't surprise me. Guess Apollo sent someone to take care of it. How strange to think that my great-great-grandfather is the famous Greek god, Apollo.

Maybe I'll get used to it eventually. Yeah, right. Try, never. A grin lifts the corners of my lips before I turn back to the kitchen to make us some tea.

I'm standing at the sink filling the tea kettle when Cheryl comes in and sits down. "Kim?"

"Hmmm?" I answer concentrating on getting the cups and saucers down. Helena. We'll never do this together again. The loss brings tears to my eyes. I blink them back. I'm going to have to deal with her death eventually, but not now.

I look around the room. So many hours spent in this kitchen. I love this old house. She'd want me to be happy here. As with the loss of my parents, eventually the pain will

fade and be replaced by a sweet melancholy. I'll be able to think of Helena and Greg and not see how they were killed, rather the good times and the laughter we shared. The memories will make me happy again, instead of cutting like a dull knife through my heart.

"I think you're replacement has arrived."

I turn to the door. The cup I'm holding slips from my suddenly cold fingers and crashes to the floor.

Chapter 32

I blink, not believing my eyes. Greg stands before me smiling. But how could this be? I saw him die, stabbed through the chest by his own father.

"How?" I whisper.

He takes me into his arms then showers my face with kisses so light, so gentle, I imagine they are the delicate wings of a butterfly caressing my skin. First, on my forehead, then each eyelid. I breathe in his scent and savor it like a fine wine. His body is so close to mine. I can feel his warmth, so welcome.

He continues to rain soft kisses on my cheeks, teasing each corner of my mouth before he claims my lips with his own. His passion is barely controlled, as is mine.

When we break apart, we're both breathless.

"How? How?" I repeat, stroking his beloved face with my hands. "I saw you . . . your father . . ." tears start to stream down my face. Greg brushes them away as they fall.

"Shh. It's O.K. Everything is fine now." He hugs me again and I hang on for dear life. I can hear the beat of his heart beneath my ear. I take several breaths and try to gain some control over my emotions.

"Thanks, Cheryl. I'll take it from here," he tells her.

"Good to see you, Greg. Kim, call me tomorrow. Or maybe in a week, when the shock wears off and you two come up for air." She chuckles as she heads out the door.

I hear the front door slam, then her car roar up the driveway before I can move. Then all I can do is go off into another round of crying and clutching him to me, as if afraid he'll either be taken from me again or evaporate like a ghost.

When I'm calmer, he pulls back, takes my hands in his and kisses them both. "I went to hell, but you saved me."

Confused, I ask, "How could I save you? I wasn't even there."

He smiles lovingly down at me. "Yes, you were." He places my hand on his chest, directly over his heart. "In here."

My mouth works but nothing comes out. I shake my head, speechless.

"The pantheon you were born into determines which hell you go to if and when you die. Since I'm from two pantheons, I went to the Greek underworld first."

"First?" I ask, my eyes wide with fright.

"Let's sit down, and I'll explain."

Instead of sitting at the kitchen table, I urge him to the living room where we can sit close together on the couch.

Once seated he puts his arms around me and draws me into his side.

"In the Greek underworld you have to pay the ferryman to cross the river Styx in order to get to the Elysian Fields. It's where souls find eternal rest. But the ferryman wouldn't allow me to cross. He kept pointing to a door in the distance. I hesitated to pass through it, because I didn't know if it might lead to a dungeon or somewhere worse."

I finally, decided to enter. To my surprise I found myself before the forty-two judges."

"The forty-two judges?" I ask.

"When a soul goes to the Egyptian version of hell," he starts, "it must pass two tests in order to pass into Heaven. The forty-two judges comprise the first test. Their questions are easily answered if you know the answers from the Book of the Dead, which most Egyptian children are taught from birth."

"What's the second?" I ask.

"Your heart is ripped from your chest." I gasp, the thought of this being done to him makes me want to cry and kill someone at the same time.

Greg kisses my hand before continuing, "Your heart is then weighed against a feather. If it is lighter, you go to Heaven. If heavier, it is eaten and you go to Hell."

"But you're here. How is that possible?" I still can't believe my eyes, but treasure his presence and touch.

"When a soul, specifically the soul of a god, is in love, it is neither light, nor heavy. It balances the feather. Therefore, Heaven nor Hell have a hold over it. Probably why I was directed by the Ferryman to leave the Greek underworld. My soul had to return; to be with you. The one I love."

I start to cry again, touched beyond measure because I love him too. I hug him tight, knowing at last I have found my true love. "I love you too, Greg. I wish we could be together forever."

He releases me, leans back a little, and picks up the amulet lying on my chest, the one Bali gave me. He studies it before smiling and meeting my eyes. "We can be."

I'm stunned. "Huh?"

"Bali gave you this?" he asks.

"Yes. It allows me to visit her in Egypt whenever I want."

"That's not all it can do."

I take it from his hand and study it myself. It doesn't seem to be anything that special. A simple gold medallion. I turn it over and study the inscription on the back. Although it's in Egyptian, hieroglyphs I think they call it, the symbols look familiar.

Bali didn't explain what it meant and I didn't think to ask. Does it have to do with whatever Greg is talking about? I hold it up to him and ask, "What else does it do? Does this writing have some special meaning?"

"It grants the wearer immortality. As long as you wear it, you will live."

My breath catches. I'm going to faint. Then I remember the pendant Shatiri wore, the one Apollo gave her granting her immortality. That's where I'd seen it. But why didn't Bali tell me so herself?

"So we can be together, forever?"

He nods, caressing my cheek. "Forever," he assures before placing a tender kiss on my lips. I sigh. He picks me up and carries me upstairs. "I think we need to get started right away. We don't want to waste eternity. Do we?"

I smile and shake my head. He can be so cute. And to think, he's mine . . . for eternity. I savor the word, and laugh out loud. I never believed in true love. I gladly admit I was wrong. It does exist, and it's mine forever. Forever, I wouldn't expect anything less for true love.

THE END.