



The Midas Bride

Adrianna Dane

THE MIDAS BRIDE

...It was as though her body were a tuning fork as she felt the rolling thunder of his pleasure rip through her breast and feather out to every corner of her flesh. She brushed her thumb over the wide tip of his penis, spreading the moisture of his pre-cum across the circumference of his cock. She felt her own liquid desire drip onto her thighs.

His mouth trailed kisses down her body, his tongue skating figure-eights over her flesh, delving into her navel, circling again and again, until she was arching and shuddering against him, pulling him deeper into her body. She needed to feel him inside her.

She felt him shift in the darkness, his weight moving off the bed and towering over her. She felt his hair sift along her thighs and held her breath, exhaling quickly as his mouth fastened onto her sensitive labia lips.

She was surprised at the needy sound that erupted from her throat. It was so primal, so earthy. And his mouth was so possessive. His tongue delved deeply, withdrew and circled her clitoris, driving her higher and higher with each touch.

His hands lifted her, cupped her bare buttocks, kneading rhythmically as he pursued her with his mouth, fastening and sucking.

Too much. She was overwhelmed with sensations, of dark lust consuming her, and she couldn't catch her breath. Primal need erupted inside her to the point she dug her nails into his

scalp, pressing him closer. His hands dug into the flesh of her cheeks, separating the soft mounds, a finger tracing the crack, circling her anus, sliding from behind to her slick opening, then sweeping back up to that small puckered entrance...

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Fairytales never lose their magic.

*A mystical coin dictates the erotic
currency of desire and a smoldering change of fate.
Magical temptation erupts into fiery,
intimate seduction. Fate. Destiny. Chance. All
demand the passionate fee of surrender.
Temptation's Price leads unsuspecting lovers down
the path to sensual, irresistible adventure.*

CHAPTER 1

The slender, silvery wisps of dawn threaded across the horizon as he loped through the tall, lush grasses of the island, away from the pride, and back to humanity. The coalition of his predatory brethren called to him more and more, and he stayed longer and longer each time.

Slowing his gait, he padded to the hidden entrance of the palace and forced the shift. It took all his willpower, his demand for human form. He fell to the ground onto his side as the contortions gripped him and the pain ran rampant. His lips drew back, fangs bared, as bone altered and facial reformation took over. The thick, black mane, threaded with pale blond strands lengthened and reconstructed. The long, spiny, tufted

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tail retracted, the defined, strong, feline muzzle altered to that of a human male with a firm, square jaw, nostrils flaring, even white teeth clenched. The pale, ivory fur disappeared to be replaced by smooth, peltless, vulnerable, tanned skin.

Once the shift was complete, he lay back for long moments, squinting up at the sky, trying to re-acclimatize himself to his human form. Slowly, he drew himself up, and, straightening his spine, he rose to his human bare feet. He turned to gaze out over the silent land, heard the rush of wind through the trees and grass. From a distance, the echo of a fierce roar struck his soul. He wondered how long it had been this time. The shifts to his beast form lengthened each time lately and it was becoming harder and harder to return to his human form.

His brethren were the other white lions who called this island home. His brother and cousins who had been unable to locate their mates, and now were no longer able to shift to human form, the beast having overtaken them completely.

He felt the call of the wild blood and fought it. He was the last of his family left of this generation who ruled the island to retain the ability to re-form. If he didn't perform the scrying ritual soon, one day he would no longer be able to resist the primal call of his animal nature.

But what if he put out the call and the woman who completed him failed to answer?

It had happened to his brother, to the others, who now lived in their lion skin on the island. He would be like the rest, and the island would no longer have the protection required.

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He was the last of the DeJons, the line chosen to act as protector to those who fell under the curse of the witch. He couldn't fail in his duty to his ancestors. He had to at least try to find his destined bride.

The others depended on him to protect them. There were those throughout the world who came to the island once they were past hope of locating their mate. He ran with them when the change inside him could not be denied.

He padded down the corridor and entered a room at the end. Fresh clothing awaited him here. He walked toward the small pool on the other side of the room and stepped into it, washing away the stench of the hunt.

What would she be like?

He found it difficult to believe she might really exist and that he would find her using the old ways. His father, up until the day of his death, had been hopeful of a miracle. The curse had not touched him and he had been devastated that Lyon had received its full impact.

This was one instance in which his father had been powerless to help. One never knew who it might affect, there seemed to be no rhyme or reason to the ones it chose. He only knew it was the DeJon's responsibility to protect those who came to them.

And to keep out those who sought to claim the wealth of the King Croesus descendants who resided on the island.

The Croesus lions never harmed those with good hearts. They knew the difference, with an ingrained extrasensory understanding that seemed to tell them who belonged on the

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island and who didn't.

If the beasts didn't stop the intruders, the hunger for the Midas gold did.

Lyon dressed and then returned to the palace. It was time to seek his bride, he could wait no longer. Already he felt the shadow of the beast inside him beginning to rise to the surface again. Soon he would be unable to contain it any longer.

When he found her, he must be careful. He didn't want her to fear him. She was not a lioness, like those in the pride. She would be civilized and not understand the fierce mating practices of the feline bred into him. Nor the polyamorous aspects of the lion's pride and their way of life.

He would miss the coalition with the pride, the exhilaration of the hunt, the sexual drive of the matings. But a human mate could never understand the nature of the beast that lurked inside him. Yet he must make the sacrifice for the protection of the island.

He must find his Midas bride. She was the only one who could ease the savage calling building inside him.

CHAPTER 2

A beam of bright light had Tira squinting and covering her watering eyes at the gold flash that almost blinded her.

“Damn that’s bright.”

“What’s the matter?” Sandy, her friend and a co-worker at the insurance company they both worked for, sat next to her on the park bench, munching on a carrot stick and staring at a bunch of college students playing Frisbee down near the river.

Tira set her tuna fish sandwich aside and leaned down to pick up the object that had caught her eye lying in the thick carpet of manicured lawn next to her side of the wooden bench.

“I found something.” She turned it over in her hands.

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She'd expected it to feel cool, but it radiated a warmth that seemed almost alive and an odd tingling sensation began to spread through her body. She clenched her thighs against the sudden arousal that seemed to overcome her. "This is strange." She held it up to show Sandy and determined to ignore the unexpected sexual desire that was beginning to grip her.

Her friend reached over to take it. "Ouch," she yelled as she yanked back quickly and sucked on the tips of her fingers.

"What happened?"

"It gave me a shock. Damn, that hurt." She leaned in to get a better look at it without touching it again. "It looks like a coin of some sort."

Tira turned it over in her hand and peered closer. She felt her juices coating her thighs as some sort of primal urge seemed to descend over her. She looked up and around, her gaze lingering here and there on the businessmen and college students. None of them interested her, yet she was so very aware of their maleness.

The sexual heat remained at a slow, steady burn, just below boiling point. Enough to make her aware of it, needy, yet the look of the men around her did not call to that need. She was looking for something, she just didn't know what it was, and it was the oddest sensation. She'd never been so aware of her sex as she was right now, and she had the overwhelming urge to press the palm of her hand against her mound to help ease the sensation.

She looked down at the coin, trying to distract her attention. It looked like a lion's head was engraved on one

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side and the image of the sun on the other. It was well rubbed and seemed to be quite old.

“I’ve never seen anything like it before. I wonder if someone dropped it without realizing they’d lost it?”

“I don’t know,” Sandy said. “You might try taking it to a coin shop and seeing if they have information on it. If it’s really rare, they might have the name of an owner and you can find out who it belongs to. That’s really strange that you found it just lying there like that.”

The coin stayed warm in the palm of her hand. It had an oddly pleasurable feel to it and she couldn’t help constantly rubbing her fingers over the rippling surface. Every time she rubbed her thumb over the surface a ripple of pleasure passed through her, and she wanted to keep doing it, an instinct as old as time pulling at her. There was something about it and she felt herself drifting inside, a part of herself drifting away from the park, toward...something.

Sandy looked at her watch. “Oh, crap. We need to hurry if we want to make it back to work on time.”

Tira snapped out of the odd trance and shivered. Quickly she placed the coin into a small, zippered compartment of her purse and then picked up her sandwich and took a last bite before tossing it into the garbage container next to the bench. It was late spring and the weather was particularly warm today, which was why she and Sandy decided to have lunch in the park. Again, she attempted to ignore the yearnings of her body that still lingered. As she sat there, she found herself studying the people around her, surveying and dismissing each

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one. It was getting harder to focus on her conversation with Sandy, but she forced her attention, hoping these sexual urges would dissipate.

"I'm glad we decided to come out today. That lunch room gets so stuffy and the gossip is aggravating and boring. I don't really want to know who might be having an affair with whom in this town."

"Oh, it's not so bad," Sandy said as she picked up her container of cottage cheese and grimaced. "You know, I'll really be glad once this wedding is over. This dieting is for the birds."

"But just think, you might meet the man of your dreams." She shuddered as her attention again strayed to the other people in the park. She studied each one, and dismissed them just as quickly.

Sandy rolled her eyes. "You've got to be kidding."

"You're the maid of honor, the best man could just be the prince charming you're looking for." She could really use a prince charming right now. She pressed her thighs closer together, a ripple of desire passed through her, and the urgent need to touch that damned coin again.

Sandy snorted. "You're joking, right? I very much doubt I'm going to find the man of my dreams here in little old Northport, Iowa. That's not going to be happening." She closed her eyes and sighed. "I know he's out there somewhere, but I just haven't met him yet."

"You're such a dreamer." Tira laughed, finishing off the chocolate cookie she'd gotten for her dessert. Hadn't she read

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somewhere that chocolate was a substitute for sex? She wadded up the papers and threw them into the trash bin. Well, the chocolate wasn't working, her stomach somersaulted and tightened.

Sandy turned to look at her. "And you're not?" She nodded wisely. "I've seen you looking. And I've seen that far away look in your eyes. You've got your dream man, too, and you can't convince me otherwise."

Tira laughed and shook her head. Her life was very routine and normal. She knew better than to think there was some marvelous, dreamboat, perfect man out there waiting to sweep her off her feet. That was pure fantasy and it paid to keep one's feet flat on the ground.

Her thoughts turned inward. She'd tried that once and knew it wasn't for her. Now she stayed firmly focused and didn't try to reach for a star. That wasn't for her at all. Which is why she couldn't understand the signals her body was giving her right now. It had been a long time since she'd craved sex. Maybe that was the problem and not anything to do with the coin. Maybe she'd just abstained too long. Well, forget it. She turned her attention back to Sandy.

"So where are you going on vacation this year?"

"Italy, I'm going to Tuscany. You remember that movie about the woman who moved there? The scenery was gorgeous. And the men were dreamy. You know what they say about those Italian men." She laughed, and Tira saw her eyes sparkle with a devilish glint.

What was it like to still have dreams of happily ever after

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and live for adventure? She couldn't remember. But she knew it wasn't for her, that was for sure. Not any more. She sighed and rose from the bench. Maybe the walk back to work would ease some of this hot tension spiraling through her body.

"I guess we had better get back." They both worked for a small insurance agency answering questions, preparing policies, and doing general office work. Not the most exciting job in a small town like Northport, but it paid the bills.

When she returned to her office, she sat down at her desk and stared at the computer screen, not really focusing on what was in front of her. The heat in her pussy had not abated. She forced her attention away, remembering a time when she'd had dreams and stars in her eyes. A time when she'd thought the man of her dreams was out there waiting for her. Yes, remembering that might bring her body back in line, back to reality.

Right after graduating from the Northport Community College she left for the Big Apple, certain she'd find the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. What she'd discovered was disillusionment and heartache, and that the black pot was empty. She wasn't outgoing and beautiful like the other girls she shared the apartment with and she'd been easy prey. She'd turned tail and run back to what was safe, back to Northport. And here she'd stayed for the last five years. No excitement, no surprises, no heartbreak. And that was the way it was going to stay. She hadn't even taken a vacation since she'd been back here. Unless you could call taking a weekend to go shopping in the city with Sandy as vacation.

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She never talked about her time in New York City. It wasn't something she enjoyed talking about, or remembering. Sandy was often curious about what she'd done there. She thought Tira was very brave and adventurous for moving away to such a large city. Tira called it foolhardy and stupid. James had been so right.

James, the man she'd dated for a year had called her stupid a lot. And when he broke it off with her, he said it was because she was so boring and bland, the most unexciting person he'd ever met.

She never wanted to go through that again. Handsome, intelligent James. She'd felt so lucky when he'd asked her out. So special. But she hadn't been special, just a placeholder, keeping the spot in his bed warm until he found the beautiful woman he really wanted there. She should have known. But it did teach her a lesson. It only took getting burned once for her to learn not to reach for the stars because she wasn't star material.

She had been so humiliated by what he'd done—what she had allowed him to do to her. Every day she looked in the mirror and wondered how she could have possibly thought he would ever be interested in her for more than a temporary fling. Foolish to the extreme.

He'd been an up-and-coming stockbroker and she'd been one of the secretaries. A group of the employees had gone out on a Friday night, and for once she'd agreed to tag along. That was when he had introduced himself. She'd felt so flattered by the attention. When the relationship was over, she couldn't

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bear to stay there, knowing what they were saying behind her back. She couldn't get out of the city fast enough. For her, the apple had turned rotten to the core.

She'd used the excuse that her father was ill and she had to return home to help care for him. There was some truth to what she told them. She did go home to care for him—the lung cancer took him about three months after her return. It was one of the most difficult times of her life.

She still lived with her mother, unable to leave her alone. She and her father had been married for thirty years when he passed on and her mother had been so sad and begged her to stay. That was five years ago and she was still here.

Her mother was doing better. She'd taken a part-time job and had started seeing someone. She was actually doing much better than what Tira was doing. Tira had dated a couple of the men in town, but nothing serious. She just couldn't bring herself to commit to a serious relationship, too afraid to get burned again.

She turned to a folder on her desk and opened it. She needed to get back to work and stop daydreaming—if that's what you could call it. She had several policies to put in order. It was Friday and she was hoping to leave early. It was going to be a quiet weekend, her mom was going to be away and she'd have the house to herself.

She was going to plant some iris bulbs and do some gardening in the small herb garden near the back door, and maybe paint the kitchen. She'd promised her mother she would get to that. This would be a good weekend for it.

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Did she say her life was boring? That would be an understatement. But it suited her. At least for now. Routine had a way of settling in and getting comfortable. At least she always knew what to expect. No surprises, no pain. Just a nice, ordinary life.

It was several hours later before she looked up at the clock. Wow, it was already three o'clock. Where had the time flown? She began to straighten her desk.

"Did you find out anything?"

She turned to squint up at Sandy who already had her coat on. "About what?"

Sandy groaned. "The coin, silly. Remember?"

Tira had completely forgotten about it. She had managed to ignore the tingling of her body which had subsided slightly to the level of gentle, insistent waves eating away at the sands of a sandy shore. "Shoot. No, I haven't done anything about it yet. I completely forgot." Which wasn't exactly the truth, but close enough.

"You might need to go into the city to find someone who knows anything. Did you check the phone book?"

Tira shook her head. "Not yet, but I will. Thanks for reminding me. It totally slipped my mind." She really didn't think she wanted to touch that coin again. It did something strange to her.

Sandy rolled her eyes. "There's a big surprise. What are you doing this weekend? Got a hot date?"

"No, hardly. What about you?"

"Yep," she responded smugly. "Eddie Morgan is taking

SEDUCING BO

me dancing.”

Tira smiled. “That should be fun. Eddie’s a good guy.”

Sandy shrugged. “Yes, he’s nice enough. If he could get rid of that goofy friend of his, it would be even better.”

“Mortie’s not a bad guy.”

“I guess. I have to go, need to get ready for my hot date you know.” She giggled. “Let me know what you find out about that coin. It looks kinda interesting.”

Tira pulled out the phone book and slapped it onto her desk. “I’ll let you know. Have a good weekend.” She might as well get it over with.

“You, too,” Sandy called as she headed out the door, the small bell over the door dinging as it closed behind her.

Tira opened the phone book and looked for the listing of coin shops. She guessed she could make a trip in tomorrow if they were open.

She turned and reached down for her purse and pulled out the coin. When she reached in and grasped it with her fingers, that odd tingling spread through her and the coin still retained that weird warmth. It wasn’t like other coins; there really seemed something special about it. How odd. She closed her eyes and rubbed it rhythmically, pleasure rippling through her, the waves of desire becoming more insistent. Shuddering, she opened her eyes.

Peering down at it, she tried to make out the detail of the picture so she could describe it to the person at the coin shop. She forced her emotions under control. Something strange was happening to the coin and her heart pumped harder in her

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chest. The picture seemed to be changing. Earlier it had looked like the profile of a lion, but now—she could swear it had altered—because now it looked like the profile of a man with a thick head of hair and aquiline nose. Defined cheekbones, and an intent, predatory look to his expression. Something flared to life inside her, as though in recognition. Her hand gripped tighter on the coin and she gasped and stiffened as she came with the force of a tidal wave. Unable to stop herself, she reached down and gripped her mound as the orgasm gripped her. When it was over, she unfurled her fingers and tentatively focused, afraid of what she would see.

Tira caught her breath at the attractive countenance. He must be a king or ruler of some kind from a period of history long ago. He was certainly intriguing, and it made her curious about who he was. Her body hummed as she stared at the image. It was the oddest sense of being drawn like a magnet.

Dropping the coin onto the desk, she turned to the phone book and scanned down the listing of coin shops that specialized in antiquities. The sooner she got rid of the thing, the better off she would be. Her index finger halted as though on its own at one listing. Hewitt Coin Exchange.

She suddenly found herself dialing the number, glancing up at the clock. It was four o'clock, still a chance they might be open.

“Hewitt Coin Exchange,” a male voice answered.

“Hello, I’ve found a coin and I’d like to see if I can find out a little more information about it.” She had no idea exactly what she should be asking.

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"We might be able to help you out," he responded in a noncommittal tone of voice.

"Are you open tomorrow?"

"Yes, we are. Ten o'clock until two."

"That's great. I'll stop by tomorrow, if that's all right." She picked up a pen and quickly jotted down the address and phone number on a slip of paper.

"Why don't you tell me a little bit about what you have?" he asked.

Hesitantly she picked up the coin again and then gasped when she saw the lion's head rather than the man's profile. This was all so very odd. Something was happening here that she did not understand at all.

"Hello?" the voice at the other end interrupted her reverie.

"Yes, I'm here," she responded, trying to calm her nerves. She'd never quite had an experience like this one before.

"Can you describe it for me?"

"Oh, yes. It looks sort of oval, a bit beaten, and its gold, I think, sort of a tarnished gold, pretty well worn."

"Can you make out the images on it?" he asked.

"Oh, yes. On one side there's the profile of a lion and on the other there's a sun."

There was a long pause on the line. She thought he might have hung up. "Hello?"

"The sun. How many points are there? Can you make that out?" He asked the questions in quick succession.

Tira peered closer at the coin. "It looks like, ummm, four points?"

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She thought she heard him swear on the other end. “What was that?”

“Oh, nothing. The coin sounds interesting. I’ll look forward to seeing it tomorrow. By the way, my name is Darth Hewitt. Be sure to ask for me when you come in. I’m going to do a bit of research and I’ll be the one you need to speak with. If you don’t mind, can I ask how you came to acquire the coin?”

“I was eating lunch in the park today and I found it lying in the grass. I’m hoping you might be able to help me track its owner.”

“Well, we’ll see what we can do for you. See you tomorrow.”

She hung up the phone and pressed the coin into the palm of her hand, feeling the warmth spread through her. She found herself smoothing her thumb over the surface and feeling the soft, insistent waves of desire stroke at her. This already seemed to be developing into some kind of habit and a part of her resisted separation from the object.

Mr. Hewitt’s voice held a thread of excitement by the end of the conversation. She wondered if he knew more about the coin than he had shared with her. Tira hoped this was a reputable place. Not all dealers were exactly honest.

She shrugged. He might just be waiting to verify exactly what she had. For someone who didn’t want adventure in her life, it seemed like she might be about to embark on a little one of her own. Carefully, she inserted the coin back into the zippered compartment of her purse. The undulating desire

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lessened, but didn't dissipate completely, but at least it was more manageable. She looked up and around the office, noting, as usual, she was the last one to leave. Even on a Friday. It figured. Which wasn't necessarily a bad thing considering the unexpected, powerful orgasm she'd just experienced. How embarrassing that could have been if someone had come upon her just at that moment.

She locked everything up and then left the office. A quiet dinner at home and then she'd get an early start tomorrow. It hadn't exactly been in her plans, but the coin really did intrigue her. Maybe it was part of a pirate's booty, or the ransom of a princess. Her slick thighs rubbed against each other as she walked toward her car. Maybe a session with a woman's best friend might be in order tonight. Hopefully that might help take the edge off this needy feeling that just wouldn't go away. Why the heck her hormones would be acting up just now, she couldn't imagine. She guessed that's what happened when you ignored the need for intimacy a bit too long.

Get a grip, Tira. Fantasy was not her thing. She'd just find out who the owner was, if that was possible, and return it to him. She didn't need any adventure in her life right now. She liked her quiet, little corner of the world just the way it was. Once she got rid of the coin, everything would get back to normal.

CHAPTER 3

Tira rose early the next morning. She might as well head to the coin shop and finish that deed, then she could get on with her weekend. After dinner last night she'd queried the location on her computer and mapped out the address. The date with her vibrator had hardly taken the edge off her sexual need. The sooner she got rid of the coin, the better. Why it seemed to be having this effect on her, she couldn't fathom. Maybe it was simply all tied up with her lengthy abstinence from sex and the fantasy of a perfect prince charming. You'd think she'd have gotten over that by now.

It was a cool, misty morning, quiet and solitary, as she walked out to her car. Once seated behind the wheel, she

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checked her purse to make certain the coin was still safely tucked inside. She refused to touch it again because when she did, her sexual need only seemed to get worse. But she had to check because it wouldn't do much good to go into the city if it had fallen out and disappeared somehow.

She pulled out the coin and looked at it again. Her fingers surrounded it and it ended nestled in the palm of her hand, her thumb rubbing over the surface. She stiffened as she fought the pull, but then everything fell away, she was spinning, dizzy and unable to grasp onto anything to anchor her, to stop the sensation that descended on her. What was happening?

Opening her eyes, she found herself in a clearing of some sort. There was a man bent over a work bench, a pair of tongs in his hand. She looked around but couldn't make out where she was, and she certainly didn't know how she had gotten there.

A woman walked toward the man. She wore a long tan linen dress, a chain wrapped around her waist. Tira was shocked to see that hanging from it were what looked like gold coins and tiny bones. Her eyes were black as coal, her hair in two long braids, a circlet of gold draped across her forehead holding a long pale veil in place.

The man looked up at her. Then Tira could see what was on the table. There was a bowl filled with some liquid, boiling over a small fire.

“Do you have it?”

The woman handed him a small cup. “Water from the river.”

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He nodded. "Then it is time. You must now make the cut."

The woman turned away and walked to the other side of the clearing, pulling out a dangerous-looking knife from the leather sheath at her waist. That's when Tira saw the cage and she gasped. From what she could see there was a lion inside. What was she going to do? Kill it?

She moved closer, intent on stopping the woman. Yet when she touched her, her hand went right through the woman. Tira had no substance!

"Ah, my beautiful king. It is time," the woman said as she unlocked the cage. "You refused to share the secret and now you must pay the price."

The cat roared and bared his fangs, but the woman didn't seem to be at all afraid. Her intent, narrowed focus seemed to lock with the lion's glittering, hungry look. Her stare held that of the cat's and, surprisingly, he didn't attack her.

The woman lifted the front paw of the lion and drew her blade across the surface of his leg, drawing blood. Quickly, she pulled a container from her pocket and caught the streams of blood as they dripped from the wound on his leg.

He continued to growl, but he didn't attack her. Tira was mesmerized by the actions taking place. Was she some kind of gypsy or maybe a witch of some sort?

When she was done, the woman wrapped a cloth around the wound. "Your greed will bind your ancestors through eternity my king. My daughter's life could have been saved. She need not have died. And now you and your ancestors will bear the burden of your selfishness. You shall have your gold,

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but never love or companionship without sacrifice. You and those that come after shall prowl the earth until a woman with the heart of a lion reaches out to embrace your true nature. Her life for yours. Only then will the curse be broken in each generation.”

Tira could hear her cackle as she stepped out of the cage, the lion’s roar echoing throughout the grounds. What in the world was happening here?

Suddenly, she felt light-headed once again and it was as though she was being drawn through a vortex, spinning and twirling. She screamed and her eyes shot open.

She found herself back inside her car, her fingers clutching the coin. This was bizarre. What in the world was happening to her? Was the coin cursed? Is that why someone had thrown it away? She stuffed the coin back in her purse.

Quickly starting the engine, she pulled out of the driveway. The sooner she got rid of the coin, the better it would be. She did not need episodes like this. There was no room in her life for this kind of oddity. Once she got rid of it her life could go back to normal. At least, her normal.

It was an hour and a half drive to the city and it left her too much time to think. About the coin, the woman, and the lion. Who were they? And what kind of curse had she laid upon an unsuspecting ruler?

She remembered when the coin had seemed to alter and the profile of a man had appeared. Was that the ruler the woman had wanted to curse? And why?

Most importantly, why had she been drawn into it. If she’d

SEDUCING BO

just left the coin where it was, she probably would have been better off. And she wouldn't be needing to make this trip into the coin shop. She should have made Sandy go with her.

Tira was definitely getting the feeling that she shouldn't be doing this alone. That this was a huge mistake on her part. But wasn't that the story of her life? Making snap decisions that usually ended up screwing up her life?

She found herself wanting to know the outcome of the scene she had witnessed. As much as her common sense told her to run the other way, she was intrigued. Who was the woman? She didn't even know what time period the vision had taken place in. There were no landmarks to indicate a location. A need to know started to burn inside her—along with the urgent demand for sexual release. In some way everything that was happening to her seemed linked together—to the coin.

With any luck the man at the coin shop would be able to provide her some historical information regarding the coin. And maybe help her to find its rightful owner. As quickly as possible. Some inner excitement started to grow inside her. It had been a long time since she'd been this intrigued about anything.

She turned onto the interstate and traveled east. Traffic was light at this time of the morning. She was actually glad she was an early morning riser. Especially on a Saturday.

The drive in was uneventful. As she turned onto the ramp to enter the downtown district, she glanced at the directions to the shop. It didn't look like it would be too difficult to find. It

SEDUCING BO

appeared to be situated in the newly renovated historical district. She turned onto the street indicated and then saw the red and white sign that advertised she had found the right place.

Even at ten o'clock in the morning it was still quiet. Probably too much partying on Friday night. That was something she no longer took pleasure in. She easily found a parking spot, got out and locked her car, and then shoved some change into the parking meter. An hour should give her enough time to handle whatever needed to be done.

The air was still cool and the sidewalks damp, probably having just recently been sprayed down, still drying beneath the spring, early morning light.

She hesitated before the door of the Hewitt Coin Exchange. It was one of the older buildings, green paint chipping away, gold lettering on the windows which needed to be touched up. A sign in the window, "we buy coins."

She turned the knob and, as she entered, the tinkling of a bell announced her arrival. The interior smelled of metal, must, and new paint. Unlike the exterior, it appeared the inside had been recently painted. A woman with long, straight dark hair walked out into the main part of the store from a back room. She smiled a welcome at Tira.

"Come in. How can we help you?"

Tira strode toward the counter. "Hi, my name is Tira Barron. I called yesterday."

An expression of interest and understanding crossed the woman's face. "Ah, yes. Darth told me to expect you. May I

SEDUCING BO

see the coin in question?”

Tira hesitated. “Ummm, I don’t know...Mr. Hewitt said to ask for him specifically.”

“Of course,” the woman nodded in understanding. “My name is Moreen Marsh. I’m Darth’s partner. It’s good to always be cautious when you have something that could be as valuable as what you’ve indicated.”

Tira felt foolish for hesitating about showing the woman the coin. After all, she was here to get information. She placed her purse on the counter, and pulled out the coin. Immediately, the feelings of arousal magnified. She ignored them and gingerly placed it on the counter.

There was an odd, hungry look in Moreen’s eyes as she stared down at it. Then she pulled out a small magnifier and looked closer. Yet she didn’t try to touch it.

“Ah, yes,” she breathed out and set down the magnifier. She smiled at Tira. “I definitely think Darth will want to get a closer look at this.”

“Is he here?” She picked up the coin and slipped it back into her purse, something about the woman made her uncomfortable. Tira looked around the shop, but it appeared as though she and Moreen were the only ones there.

“Darth is running just a little late. It’s a bit early yet. Why don’t you come around and share a nice cup of tea with me? I already have it brewing on the stove in the back.”

Tira hesitated. Was this usual? To invite a customer into the back like this?

“Ah, you’re concerned. Saturday mornings tend to be quiet

SEDUCING BO

and I really do hate my own company. And you look like someone who wouldn't try to take advantage of a woman alone in a shop filled with priceless merchandise."

Somehow the woman had turned the tables on Tira and she found herself nodding and circling around the counter to follow the woman to the back, much against her better judgment. But she didn't want to appear rude.

Once she'd passed the beaded, multicolored curtain separating the front of the store from the back room, she was surprised to find it was a quaint sort of sitting room, not the office or storage room she had expected to see.

Moreen laughed when she saw her expression. "I know. It's the price Darth pays for having a female partner who likes to bring a touch of home to the place."

Tira laughed as well, and it eased her mind just a bit.

"Have a seat and I'll bring the tea." She turned away and headed toward a small kitchenette. "You know it really isn't that often that I invite a customer back here. But you seem like a nice woman. And trustworthy. I couldn't help myself." She turned back with a tray in her hands, containing a teapot and two china cups and saucers.

She walked over to the oval cherry table covered in a crocheted lace-edged tablecloth and set it down, handing Tira one of the cups. Then she took a seat across from her.

Tira sipped at the fragrant tea. It had a bit of an odd, yet intriguing flavor. "This is very good," she said as she took another sip.

Moreen smiled. "I'm glad you like it—it's my own brew."

SEDUCING BO

“When do you think Mr. Hewitt will get here?”

Moreen looked down at her watch and then glanced at Tira. “I’m sure he’ll be here shortly. He really isn’t a morning person at all.” She took a sip from her own cup. “How far did you have to come? I take it you don’t live in the city?”

Tira shook her head and then stopped herself as the room seemed to start to spin and her head felt like it had been filled with cotton wool. “I-I, no. I don’t.” Even to her, it sounded like her voice came from far away. What was happening to her? She set the cup and saucer onto the table, afraid she would drop it, as her fingers began to grow numb.

Moreen leaned toward her, a concerned expression on her face. “Are you all right, Ms. Barron?”

Tira couldn’t seem to answer her. She looked up at Moreen and a breath caught in her chest at the large coal-black eyes that stared down at her questioningly. She’d seen them before. But where? Her mind was growing decidedly more fuzzy.

Moreen had her by the arm, and was pushing her down onto the small settee. “It looks like you aren’t feeling very well. Why don’t you lie down for a moment.”

Tira couldn’t fight her. She was so sleepy and couldn’t seem to protest. Darkness was settling over her.

Blery consciousness returned, but she still couldn’t move. Voices faded in and out.

“...do you think he’ll come?” It was a female voice.

“Oh, he’ll come all right. He’ll have no choice. You know as well as I do what the coin means.”

Someone lifted Tira and she wanted to protest, to ask what

SEDUCING BO

was happening to her.

“Do you have the letter?” the man asked.

“Yes, I wrote it while I was waiting for you.”

“Call that messenger service so it can be delivered. I can’t believe we’ve lucked out this way. She walked right into our hands.”

“I’ll attend to the delivery as soon as we have the photograph. That will get him to agree more quickly than anything else. It was the coin that led her here. To you. It was the spell I cast. I told you my magick was powerful. You know its properties, what it was made to do. You spent enough time at that palace. It led her to us and we will lead him to her. If he wants to complete the prophecy for himself, he’ll pay us whatever we want. Or she dies and he’ll go on as he is forever and they’ll all be destroyed.”

Tira didn’t understand. She tried to struggle, but it cost too much effort with little result. What had she gotten herself into?

“The old king found a witch to alter the curse. But not enough. The coin is still drawn to the creator’s blood in some elemental way. I can still command the properties it invokes by controlling the woman.”

“And if he comes after us instead?”

“He won’t.” Her voice was filled with assurance. “He’ll want her too badly. He needs her. The call of the coin is still strong after all these thousands of years. She is his chosen bride. If she dies, he is lost. Nothing can alter that.”

Tira felt herself being carried, but where were they taking her? Who was the man they were talking about? What were

SEDUCING BO

they going to do to her?

Her mind kept slipping in and out of consciousness. She was settled onto a seat—the smell was leather. Her eyes slitted open and she saw the blue sky through the windows of the vehicle. She heard a jingle.

“Take these keys and get rid of her car. It’s probably parked out front on the street.”

Oh, God, they had to be talking about her car. What were they going to do with her? She tried to struggle, to sit up, but it was no use.

With her blurry vision, she saw Moreen accept the keys. “I’ll meet you at the house.”

“Don’t be too long. We have to get her ready for him. And get the letter delivered with her scent on it.”

A blanket was thrown over her and then she felt the car moving. What was going to happen to her? That was her last thought before she blacked out once more.

She dreamed she was running across an open field toward a ragged jut of rocks in the distance. A naked man, golden skinned, with long hair flying in the wind raced beside her. She looked down and realized she was naked as well, but it didn’t seem wrong. She was aroused by the sensations of the wild, hot wind stroking across her body.

She tried to keep up with him and lengthened her stride, her muscles stretched, her breasts unconstricted, dipped and swayed with her gait. Nipples tight with desire. A primal growl erupted from her throat.

The man turned his tawny gaze on her, taunting her,

SEDUCING BO

challenging her. She pushed harder to reach his side. He slowed and allowed her to take the lead and she raced onward. As they reached the outcropping of rocks, she felt a hand reach for her and nails dug into her flesh, halting her flight.

He forced her to the ground, on her hands and knees, spreading her thighs wide. There, in the sunlight, he mounted her and pressed his hard cock deep into her channel. His hand wound into her long hair, forcing her head back, exposing her throat, as he hammered inside her.

Some instinct had her folding, pressing her breasts to the ground, offering her silent submission.

Arching her back, she pushed upward with her hips, the primal need spurring her to thrust her ass against him, cries of deep pleasure emitting from her throat. Opening her eyes, her wide, stunned gaze encountered lions—a large pride—ivory white with black manes surrounding them, watching hungrily as the man fucked her fiercely.

Surprisingly, she was aroused by the sight, not frightened in the least. An orgasm shot through her. Her lover kept his hand anchored in her hair and as she watched, the lions shifted into humans—beautiful naked men and women. Each turning to another, some were women who dropped to their knees, like her and the dominant males mounted; some men were mounted by other men, some women, dropped to the ground embracing and cuddling each other, naked bodies pressed against others.

All around her the sounds of sex washed over her as she watched, as she felt, as she listened. She felt the golden man's

SEDUCING BO

cock erupt inside her, filling her channel with his cum, yet she didn't want it to end. He slid in and out, her juices bathing him and she shuddered with the pleasure that bled deep into her bones.

For the first time in her life she felt a part of something—something important, real. And she didn't want to leave. She wanted to stay here forever with these strange creatures.

Something pulled her from her dream, and she awoke to darkness. She tried to move her hands, her feet, but for some reason they were bound. A moment of panic overcame her as she struggled to free herself. Then the drug reasserted itself and her eyelids fluttered closed, sending her back into the arms of oblivion and of her primitive, possessive lover. The others were now focused on them, moving closer and closer. She could smell their sex and welcomed their embrace.

CHAPTER 4

The first scrying had led Lyon here, to this city. The ritual he had undertaken before leaving the island had directed him here. The next part of the ritual, the second scrying, would lead him directly to the coin and to her location. Yesterday, as he was about to begin his meditation, a knock sounded at the door. His assistant answered it and then walked back to Lyon, a large white envelope in his hand.

Lyon knew it was trouble the minute he touched the envelope. The coin had drawn him to this city because his bride was here. She was the one woman who could still the beast within.

The roar of rage erupted and echoed through the whole

SEDUCING BO

room, bouncing back and filling his ears when he saw what was inside the envelope. He would not lose her.

It was the lot of his kind, of his ancestors. He'd fought it for as long as he could, unwilling to draw a woman to his side to be the bride of the beast. It was only when he felt the beast consuming his humanity beyond his control that he'd finally given in.

"Damn you, Darth Hewitt, for betraying your clan. For being so greedy you would sell my bride for the sake of the witch."

Moreen Marsh, descendant of the first witch who had laid the curse on the Lydian king by forging the coin of destruction binding them all. She had gotten her claws into Darth. Lyon should have realized when Darth disappeared what they were up to.

Lyon had performed the bride ritual, much against his better judgment. He'd stood at the tower window of the homeland of his ancestors and invoked the magic.

*Woman's magick weave your spell.
Draw to me the mate who will bind
the Lydian beast that lies within this soul.
Guide me to her and let her desire reveal
the man inside who awaits her freeing fire.*

He had said the words, burned the candle, and tossed the coin to the winds. And this is where he had been led. So close and there was too much at stake. He could not lose her now.

SEDUCING BO

He lifted the photo and inhaled her scent. His cock grew thick with instant recognition, the animal instinct flooding him to mate with her.

The witch Moreen had somehow wooed Darth from his side with the promise of riches. The Midas gold. Now they wanted the map to Midas's river. Little did they realize the danger the river held. Or they didn't care.

It was said that to bathe in the river would lend the touch of gold. The first witch who had invoked the curse on King Croesus's ancestors had done so because of her rage at him for not providing her with the map to the golden river. The secret that would save her daughter. It was said she never forgave him for refusing her, and thus she had placed the curse and irrevocably bound his line to the beast.

The reason he hadn't done so was because of the danger. Croesus and his descendants had grown rich not because of the magic of a river, but because of intelligence and foresight. Unfortunately, through the centuries it was the secret of the Midas touch that seemed to provide the DeJon family with their wealth. But the curse could not be broken and they bore the mark of the beast.

Another had come to them, a witch who fell in love with one of Lyon's ancestors, and she had sacrificed her life in order to alter the curse. Each descendant of the witch's curse had one chance for love, one chance to avert the curse of the beast. She had died that the others who followed her might live. Lyon looked down at the photo, and then at the coin now resting on the desk, and he felt the anger burn inside him once

SEDUCING BO

again.

This was the first he had seen his bride—a photo of her naked and bound to a bed.

Anger burned inside him. Had it been Darth who touched his bride, or the witch? A red haze blurred his vision. He wanted to rip out their hearts for doing this to her. It was not the way it should have been. He had meant to woo his bride, to show her the human side of himself before unveiling the secrets. He wanted her to love him before he revealed his true self. It was not fair to have brought her to this. She would be frightened when she discovered the truth. She would be angry.

It should have been different and he would make them pay for what they had done to her. The photograph showed her bound and spread out on a bed. They'd undressed her and she lay there naked and exposed. He felt the rage building like a tornado, gathering speed as it gripped him. The beast would overtake him if he wasn't careful.

Maybe that's what they wanted.

This was his woman they had misused. And they would pay dearly for having dared to touch her. He picked up the scrap of blouse that had also been enclosed in the envelope from the desk and lifted it to his face, inhaling her scent. His cock thickened, needy to claim her, to mark her as his.

They would have their map, damn them, though it would do them no good. Having the touch was not something these greedy kidnappers would be prepared for. Maybe it's exactly what they deserved.

He walked to the other side of the room and opened the

SEDUCING BO

ornate box, removing an ancient rolled-up map tied with a strip of rawhide. He had sent for it yesterday, as soon as he received the envelope. Their possession of the map would not bring them what they expected. By the time he returned to his home with his bride, Darth and Moreen would have met their fate. They would get everything they deserved for eternity. If they wanted the location of the river they would have it and everything it entailed.

He inserted the map into the inside pocket of his tan suede jacket. He turned back to the desk and picked up the photograph, gazing down at it. Her long hair lay in disarray trailing over the pillow. Her body was lush and ripe, not thin and gaunt as was the fashion. Her mouth, even in repose was sensuously inviting. Her long legs looked silky and he ached to stroke them, to be certain she was real.

He crumpled the picture in his fist. They had touched her, violated his woman, his bride. He felt the change beginning to assert itself. If he allowed it to consume him now, he would never regain control in time to make the exchange. His need for her was too great. If he allowed anything to happen to her, there would never be another to take her place.

He flung the crumpled photograph across the room, whirled around and stalked out the doorway, hurrying toward the elevator and down to the car waiting in front of the hotel. The chauffeur quickly came around to open the door of the sleek car for him. Lyon shook his head.

“No, I’m driving myself.”

“But, Your Highness,” the shocked driver stared at him,

SEDUCING BO

obviously unable to believe what he had just heard, “it’s not safe for you to go out alone in a strange city. I would be remiss in my duties if I allowed you to do that.”

Lyon was a prince of a small municipality, the ruler of his land. The tiny island kingdom was all that was left of a once powerful monarchy. It was the curse that had stripped his ancestors of all but the tiny island that was left.

Lyon drew himself up and stared down at the quaking man. Silently, he held out his hand. “The keys.”

“Y-yes, Your Highness.” He dropped them into his outstretched hand and then stepped back.

There were few in the kingdom that did not fear the arousal of the beast.

Lyon strode around the car and got behind the wheel of the silver Mercedes. He started the car and spun out of the driveway. The address had already been entered into the GPS system and he found his way to the abandoned building in the industrial section of the city without difficulty.

The building was dark and the smell of neglect and vagrant occupation surrounded him as he entered. His primal senses were on high alert, his hearing acute. He stopped and cocked his head, listening. The place spoke of danger, but then he’d known that before he started. There was someone else here, he could smell them, and it was not the clean scent of his bride. It was the smell of greed and evil.

There was a flicker of movement from a doorway. He narrowed his gaze.

“You might as well come out, Darth, I know you’re

SEDUCING BO

skulking behind the doorway.”

There was a crunch of sound, a shuffling of footsteps and then Darth showed himself.

“Did you bring it?” he asked. Lyon was pleased to hear the ripple of fear behind his words.

Slowly he pulled the map from his inside pocket. “I have it.” He looked around. “Where’s Moreen? I thought she’d be here to gloat.”

Darth stepped forward tentatively. “She’s guarding your bride. We wouldn’t want there to be any accidents.” He held out his hand. “The map, please, and then we’ll be finished with this nasty business.”

“You’re certain you want this? It can be a double-edged sword.”

“If it’s real, it will be worth it. Moreen’s magick will control it. I’ve always wanted to be rich.”

“You never wanted for anything while you were in my household, Darth. Why have you done this?”

Darth snatched the map from him and then stepped back. “There’s always a need for more. Do you think I enjoyed being your underling? Moreen was so right. There’s no reason I should be serving a beast like you when I can have everything I want without begging you for a bone.”

Lyon saw the glimmer of malicious light in his eyes. He should have seen it before. Should have been wary. Possibly it was because the mating was upon him and his total focus was in locating his bride.

“Where is she? You have what you want.”

SEDUCING BO

Darth pulled a cell phone from his pocket and punched in a number. He looked at Lyon as he waited for the call to go through. "I'm checking with Moreen now. Just to be certain everything is the way it should be."

Lyon waited impatiently for Darth to complete his call. The beast inside hovered close, wanting to rip his throat out, but the intelligence of the human side of him, knew he must bide his time. His bride's life was at stake and he could not take the chance on losing her.

Lyon's attention turned back to Darth as he flipped the phone closed. Darth looked at him, a smug expression on his face, and Lyon felt the anger of the beast begin to emerge.

"Moreen says we're all set."

"If you have hurt her—" He took a warning step toward Darth.

Darth pulled out a gun and pointed it at Lyon. "Hold it right there. I don't want to shoot you, but I will if you come any closer. We're almost done here. I don't want you dead, even if Moreen does. I like you, Lyon, but I like being rich more. Don't make me regret convincing Moreen to let you and the woman live."

Lyon tried to contain the beast. He had to bide his time. "Where is she?" he growled.

Darth stepped back. "She's all right. She's just drugged. She's in a small house outside of town. You wait here until I'm gone, and I'll call you with the location."

"Do you really think I'll let you leave without telling me where she is? You have what you want." And he had no way

SEDUCING BO

of locating her now that she was no longer in possession of the coin. It now resided in the pocket of his coat.

“Lyon, don’t push me. If you want her alive, you’ll let me walk out of here and do what I say.”

Lyon could feel it, the change was imminent, the anger too fierce.

Darth wheeled around and ran out of the building.

Lyon felt his body changing, painfully reforming. He dropped to his hands and knees, arched his back, tried to fight it. He needed to take that call before he was unable to. He rose to his knees ripping at his clothes, shredding them.

In the distance, he heard the phone ringing and he grabbed for it. He roared with frustration as he tried to open it, finally succeeding.

“Take the cross town and follow it across the river. Follow it along the river until you come to the first left turn. That will be River Road. You’ll be looking for a blue house on the left hand side of the road right next to the river.”

Lyon dropped the phone as his hands started to shift into paws and he let out a roar of frustration. There was no time to effect a change back to his human form. He couldn’t wait. Once the conversion was complete, he vaulted out of the building and loped through the back alleys of the city. He’d send someone to retrieve the car later. There was a small chip embedded beneath his skin that would allow his servants to locate him. They would track him once he didn’t return immediately. His complete focus had to be on finding his bride.

SEDUCING BO

His primal instincts for survival took over as he loped through the city. The freedom he felt when he was in his animal form was exhilarating. The lion wanted to hunt, but he exerted as much self-control as he could. He had to get to the house on River Road as quickly as possible. And then he'd need to shift. What he was going to do about clothes at that point, he had no idea. His bride might be in for the shock of her life in more ways than one.

The only thing that helped to get him through the back alleys of the city streets was the fact that night had fallen and he was able to remain hidden much easier than if it had been daylight. His enhanced eyesight assisted in getting him quickly to his destination. Crossing the river was not an easy feat, considering the bridge was a main thoroughfare. But he located a narrow, more secluded spot on the river, and a smaller bridge that was not as well traveled.

It was a long time later that he located the blue house. Trotting around to the back, he effected the shift into human form. The long, hard run had helped to rein in the anger and calm him. Finally, straightening to stand on his two human feet, he surveyed the area. There were no lights on in the house and he quietly made his way to the back door.

Trying the door handle, he found it was open and he pushed the door inward. Sniffing the air, he followed her scent. Even in his human form, his eyesight was keen. His search brought him to the doorway of a bedroom and he saw her lying on the bed.

He wanted to rip someone apart when he saw her like that.

SEDUCING BO

Quickly he went to her and carefully untied the binding, rubbing her arms and legs to bring back circulation. He looked at her and then lifted her into his arms. Her skin was warm and silky. He brushed a lock of her hair away from her face. It felt like strands of cornsilk as it threaded through his fingers. She was even more beautiful up close than in the photograph.

He heard her utter a soft moan and he knew she was coming around. Her eyelids fluttered. What would she think when she awoke? He had to calm her fears immediately. He watched closely and her lids lifted. Her brow wrinkled and then smoothed. Her gaze searched the darkness.

“W-where am I?” She turned her head and he saw an expression of shock, followed by curiosity settle on her face as she tried to pull out of his arms. “Who are you?”

“You’re safe.” He leaned forward and pressed his lips to hers, effectively altering her focus. Her lips were soft and warm, already parted on an exclamation of surprise and he breached them easily, piercing deeply with his tongue.

He tasted her surprise, her shock. And finally her acquiescence. Her stiff limbs softened and he pressed her closer. Her arms rose to surround his neck and he heard another soft moan as she pressed her breasts to his chest. The moan turned to a sleek purr of sound erupting from her throat. Her hands shifted and flattened against his back pressing him closer.

Sometimes the best advantage was one of surprise. There was no opportunity for her to deny him. He must bind her to him and now before she had a chance to leave him. He must

SEDUCING BO

possess her. It wasn't the way he had wanted it to be, but circumstances had taken it out of his hands. She wanted him, he could smell her arousal, and he was going to make her his before they left this room. There was no other choice.

CHAPTER 5

Tira slowly awoke to a sense of firm, warm hands exploring her body. She tried to get her brain to focus, but it just wouldn't listen. Yet her body responded with heated fervor as though the touch was familiar to her. That underlying sexual need that had been with her for the last twenty-four hours now seemed to blossom.

The room was dark and she realized she was naked. Then demanding lips descended to claim hers and she melted beneath their hot possession. This had to be a dream and she'd wake up in a minute. Every nerve in her body responded to the dominating, masculine presence. There was no way to think clearly right now.

SEDUCING BO

A hand cupped her soft breast, fingers teasing a nipple to a hard peak, grazing the surface. His tongue delved inside her mouth, exiting and tracing her lips before diving back inside again. So many sensations, she couldn't begin to process them. Only pleasure. Deep, mind-boggling pleasure shot through her. And the sense of coming home—that this was exactly where she was supposed to be.

She felt naked, hot flesh against her own as he shifted on the bed to stretch out beside her. A splayed hand branded her skin in the valley between her breasts, tracking a slow path downward, across her midriff, stopping and teasing at her navel. Shudders of pleasure rippled through her time and time again.

She lifted a hand to trap his head, felt the texture of thick, long, silky hair and her fingers tangled within the mass.

Her head dropped back and his mouth fastened on the pulse at her throat. A muscled leg wedged her thighs open, a knee pressed firmly against her mound and another shudder of pleasure raced through her body. She gasped at the sensation.

Her hand brailled its way along the mountains and valleys of his body. Hard, solid flesh, no give and take. She explored the crevice of his thigh and groin, dipping over the smooth, warm contours of his skin and encountering the jutting peak of his stiff erection.

It was as though she had reached a summit and she breathed a sigh of pleasure as she surrounded his firm, silky flesh with her hand, claiming his body by some right she didn't fully understand and didn't want to take the time to

SEDUCING BO

interpret. At least not right now.

His mouth trailed fire along her skin as he lowered his head and sucked a nipple into his mouth, almost sending her over the edge. She heard a low, primal growl, felt it vibrate through her grip on his cock and zing along her spine.

It was as though her body were a tuning fork as she felt the rolling thunder of his pleasure rip through her breast and feather out to every corner of her flesh. She brushed her thumb over the wide tip of his penis, spreading the moisture of his pre-cum across the circumference of his cock. She felt her own liquid desire drip onto her thighs.

His mouth trailed kisses down her body, his tongue skating figure-eights over her flesh, delving into her navel, circling again and again, until she was arching and shuddering against him, pulling him deeper into her body. She needed to feel him inside her.

She felt him shift in the darkness, his weight moving off the bed and towering over her. She felt his hair sift along her thighs and held her breath, exhaling quickly as his mouth fastened onto her sensitive labia lips.

She was surprised at the needy sound that erupted from her throat. It was so primal, so earthy. And his mouth was so possessive. His tongue delved deeply, withdrew and circled her clitoris, driving her higher and higher with each touch.

His hands lifted her, cupped her bare buttocks, kneading rhythmically as he pursued her with his mouth, fastening and sucking.

Too much. She was overwhelmed with sensations, of dark

SEDUCING BO

lust consuming her, and she couldn't catch her breath. Primal need erupted inside her to the point she dug her nails into his scalp, pressing him closer. His hands dug into the flesh of her cheeks, separating the soft mounds, a finger tracing the crack, circling her anus, sliding from behind to her slick opening, then sweeping back up to that small puckered entrance.

She gasped and stars burst behind her closed lids as she felt a finger breach past the muscle and bury itself inside just as his tongue drove deeply into her vagina.

And then she shattered more completely than she had ever done before as his tongue and his finger began to ride her, driving her higher and higher.

She screamed and flew up, bursting apart like an array of sparks from an explosion of fireworks lighting up the sky. Reds and greens and blues showering down on her.

His lips sucked at her, lapping up her juices, his thick finger driving in and out of her puckered channel and another orgasm ripped through her.

Suddenly, she couldn't feel the bed beneath her. All she was aware of was his hands and his mouth. A second finger joined the first, widening her, sending her spiraling into darkness, dizzy with pleasure.

"Oh, my God," she screamed, unable to return to earth as he forced her to hover at the peak of arousal. She couldn't stop shaking, couldn't travel back down. He wouldn't let her. He drove her instead into the primitive jungle of dark lust where she'd never ventured before and could only follow the unknown path where he led.

SEDUCING BO

Her breaths were now short pants, her voice a growl from deep in her chest, teeth bared, fingers wrapped around the locks of his hair. She saw the jungle before her, felt the steamy air wrap around her, clinging to her skin. She saw the lion turn its ivory white, dark-maned head and look at her with topaz, glittering eyes.

It beckoned her and she followed, her eyes on his majestic, bold body. He moved faster and she began to jog, then to run as its gait turned into a lope. Faster and faster she ran. She had to reach him, to stay with him, she couldn't be left behind.

Another orgasm exploded, sensations of molten lava seeping and spreading all over her body. His fingers and mouth left her.

"No, please don't leave me," she begged, desperation gripping her at the thought of his going.

But he was only re-situating himself above her. She opened her eyes and in the glow of the moonlight she saw the shadow of his face. Beautiful and primitive, just like the lion in her vision. Just like on the coin. She reached up to cup his face, staring deeply into his eyes. Falling into the golden, shimmering pools. Spinning out of control.

He pressed her thighs wider. Dragged a pillow from next to her and centered it beneath her hips, lifting her. There was not a shred of thought in her mind to deny him. The only knowledge in her thoughts was that she belonged to him and he could do anything to her he wished.

She couldn't stop trembling. It wasn't fear, but needy anticipation. His big hand stroked her damp flesh, soothing

SEDUCING BO

her. She could feel the tip of his broad cock pressing between her wet lips, stroking at the entrance to her vagina.

She wanted him there. Needed him inside her. She thought she would die if he didn't fuck her. The tears flooded her eyes. The scent of her need permeated the air around them. She had to feel him filling her.

He paused at her entrance, the tip of his cock breaching her channel. A finger brushed across her clit and a growl erupted from her throat.

Her hands clutched at his arms, her nails digging into his skin, like claws, deeply embedding themselves in her claim for possession.

"Say my name," he growled, his eyes glittering.

She tossed her head, trying to force him deeper, but he was stronger. Finally she looked up at him. "I don't know it. Please, I need you inside me."

"Lyon. My name is Lyon. I want to be sure you know the name of the man who claims you."

"Lyon," she repeated obediently. She felt him deepen the penetration only slightly. She undulated her hips. "More."

"What are you called?" he asked, sliding out and back in again as though encouraging her answer.

The tears of frustration dripped down along her face. "Tira. My name is Tira."

He slipped in a little farther, her sheath separating easily to welcome him. "You are mine, Tira. I am here to claim you as my bride. Say my name and that you accept my claim."

She didn't understand, but as he started to slide out, panic

SEDUCING BO

consumed her. “No. Oh, God, no, you can’t leave me.”

“Say it.”

“Lyon. I’m yours. I-I accept your claim. Please.”

They were the words he was apparently waiting for. Lifting her hips and folding her legs up, he rose above her and thrust deep. She felt him all the way to her soul, rising to her heart. Her body welcomed his possession, the tilt of her hips opened her to him and he claimed her without hesitation.

She felt him withdraw and then inexorably press inward. She gasped as he breached her so thoroughly the sweet ache drove like Cupid’s sharp arrow embedding into her heart as the head of his cock touched her cervix.

Again and again he claimed her, keeping her tottering at the edge of climax as she cried and pleaded for more and more and more. He gave her all that she asked, circled his cock at her entrance, along her sensitive lips, through her cream, over and around her clit, driving her higher and higher.

She no longer cared where she was as long as he was with her, pleasuring her, touching her, holding her.

Finally, he circled her stiff, sensitive clitoris with his thumb and just as she tumbled over the edge, he drove forward, wedging deep into her womb, spilling his seed inside her welcoming body. She held on to him tightly like a ship hugged at dock in a tempestuous hurricane, trying to maintain its mooring. She couldn’t let go because if she did, she’d be lost at sea.

Carefully, he straightened her legs, and their bodies melded together as his semen filled her.

SEDUCING BO

“Lyon,” she gasped.

He stroked her hair, soothing her. He turned onto his side and gripped her closely without exiting from her body. One hand splayed across her back, the other gripped her buttocks, keeping her locked to him.

It felt so right, too right. He filled her senses, her thoughts, every crevice of her body. Her body conformed to his as though made for him. He leaned down to kiss her cheek, he licked at the salty moisture of her tears, soothing her, comforting her. Yet never separating from her.

Her mind began to drift and she again saw the white lion with the black mane in the jungle. He sat at the end of a path waiting for her as she drifted closer to him. She was not afraid. She stopped in front of him. He was a huge animal, his topaz gaze watching her. She reached out to stroke his mane and he accepted her touch. She heard the deep purr of contentment.

The hand on her ass began to stroke and separate her cheeks. She didn't try to pull away. She wanted him filling her in every way conceivable. His finger slid through her juices and then breached the outer ring of tight muscle passing deep inside.

“I will not hurt you, Tira. You are precious to me.”

His words were a soft murmur in her ear as the finger sank deeper, filling her in a way she had never thought to be filled. She relaxed and dropped her head against his chest, submitting herself to him.

His cock had grown hard again, filling her and she felt the mounting tension of pleasure building once more. He lifted

SEDUCING BO

her leg and gently placed it over his own. She rubbed her face against the thick pelt of hair covering his chest. The musky scents of passion surrounded her as he began to move inside her.

She was afraid to move, that the feeling would disappear, that the ecstasy shooting through her wasn't real; it was all imagined, some dream that had come to her out of nowhere, or maybe her own unvoiced desire.

He lowered his head. "This is real, Tira. It is no dream. I have come to claim what is mine. You are more perfect than I could have imagined."

It dropped her over the edge into a whirlpool of sensation and she clung to him, her only anchor in the tumultuous storm. He locked inside her, pulsing with his own climax, filling her once again. And then he pulled from her greedy channel and she felt emptied and bereft.

She peered up at him, trying to see his expression in the darkness, but his face was shadowed. His scent surrounded her, now familiar and one she would never forget. Male and musk and wild jungle.

"Who are you?"

He pressed her head against his chest and stroked her hair. Her fingers tangled in the silky mane and she rubbed her cheek against his chest. His other hand tracked across her damp skin, swept along the curve of her hip and hunted down the length of her thigh. "I am your destiny and our futures are linked. From this point forward I will protect you much better. With my life."

SEDUCING BO

His words made her tremble, made her feel protected. She was so tired, so content, she couldn't think straight. She should ask him what he meant. Something wasn't right, but she just couldn't put it all together right now.

Something flittered through her mind. The sparkle of a gold coin, a cup of tea, and a woman with dark hair.

"Sleep, Tira. When you awaken you will be home and all your questions will be answered."

His voice soothed her, the warmth of his body comforted her. He made her feel safe. This shouldn't feel right, but it did. More right than anything in her life ever had. Her eyelids fluttered closed and she slept deeply, a dream of lions and jungles and mind-numbing passion filling her thoughts.

CHAPTER 6

Tira stretched and opened her eyes, squinting at the bright sunlight that filled the room. There was something she needed to remember, something that had happened.

Suddenly she sat straight up, realizing she was naked and this wasn't her bed. A gasp of shock escaped her lips as she looked around the ornate, sumptuous room. Oh, my God! Where was she? And how had she gotten here?

Wrapping the beige satin sheet around her, she slipped out of bed. Her whole body ached. She stopped and grabbed for the bed post as flashes of memory came back to her. Of a man, gorgeous and naked touching her intimately. Her body trembled at the hazy images that swept through her mind.

SEDUCING BO

She blinked and attempted to focus on her surroundings. Hand painted murals of ancient scenes covered the high-ceilinged walls. The bed she been lying in was larger than any she'd seen in her life and the posts—she stroked her hand over the tall spires at the four corners—looked like they were made of gold.

She looked up at the high, vaulted ceiling and found herself sitting back on the bed as she gazed upward. Lions in all manner of repose covered the ceiling. It sparked something in her memory. She had dreamed of a lion. Most assuredly a king of the jungle. She remembered walking.

She shook her head. This wasn't like her, not at all. She clutched the sheet closer and tried to focus, to remember what had happened.

The coin. That's what had started all of this. She looked around the room and spied her purse resting on what looked like a Louis XIV chair. Picking up the ends of the sheet so she wouldn't trip over it, she made her way across the room and snatched up her purse. Delving inside she pulled out the coin. It was still there, just where she'd put it when she'd driven to the coin shop.

Tira dropped into the chair and rubbed her temples. A headache was starting to build. She remembered going into the coin shop. She remembered the friendly woman behind the counter who had offered her a cup of tea. Beyond that there were only fragments of memory. What had happened to her?

Again she stood and walked over to the floor-to-ceiling window and looked out upon the expansive, well-manicured

SEDUCING BO

lawn. It looked like she was in a palace and the grounds were magnificent. But why? And who had brought her here? None of this made any sense to her. And where were her clothes? Had she been kidnapped? For what reason? She certainly wasn't worth a large sum of money.

She looked up as the door opened and a woman walked in carrying a tray laden with food. Another woman followed her with clothing draped over her arms. Tira rose and clutched the sheet closer. This was all just too fantastic.

The first woman looked at her and smiled as she set the tray down on a table. "Good morning, miss. I hope you're feeling well this morning."

"I-I'm fine. Where am I?"

"My name is Sophie and this is my sister, Martha, and we are here to attend you."

"Attend me? What is this place?"

"You are on the island of Midian. And this is the palace of the royal family. These are the apartments of His Royal Highness, Prince Lyon of Midian. And my sister and I are honored to have been chosen to serve his future princess."

"What?" Tira screeched. "I don't understand. What do you mean his princess? I'm not marrying anyone. You can't possibly mean me." Had she dropped down a rabbit hole or what?

"Thank you, Sophie. I'll explain the rest to Ms. Barron," a deep voice responded.

Tira shot her attention toward the door and the tall man standing there. She saw the two young women curtsy and

SEDUCING BO

quickly exit the room.

In a flash she remembered him.

And what they had done. “Oh, my God,” she mumbled and staggered over to a chair and plopped down on it. “This is all too much.”

He was dressed in black pants that molded to his thighs showing every bulge of muscle as he entered the room and closed the door. His shirt was cut in a deep vee showing a healthy expanse of broad chest covered in golden wisps of hair. She remembered the solid strength of that chest beneath her cheek. She also remembered the taste of him, the feel of him deep inside her. Her pussy throbbed with the memory.

“Why have you kidnapped me? And told people I’m going to marry you?”

“I didn’t kidnap you. I saved you, as a matter of fact. You don’t remember, do you?”

She shook her head. “I don’t remember much at all.” She watched him walk over to the chair where her purse lay. He leaned down and picked up the gold coin and then walked toward where she sat.

When he looked down at her with his molten topaz eyes, she wanted to melt into a puddle right there. He reached for one of her hands and placed the coin in the center of her palm, then folded her fingers around it.

“This belongs to you. It is your possession of the coin that has brought you to me.”

“I don’t understand. I found it.”

“No,” he corrected, “it found you.”

SEDUCING BO

She jumped up from her chair and stalked across the room. "This is nuts. Coins don't find people. That's just crazy thinking. I want to go home."

"You are home. This is your home. Somehow, some way, you are a descendant of Midas and therefore my rightful bride. The coin is special and meant for only one person. You are that person."

"You don't know what you're talking about. That can't be right. Things like this don't happen to me."

"I can see you will take some convincing. But rest assured, you are my bride. I am just sorry it has all been thrust upon you without warning. I had planned to court you in a more traditional manner, but circumstances have necessitated that I alter my plans."

"To court me? You don't even know me."

His glittering gaze raked over her. "Maybe not before last night, but now..." He left the sentence unfinished and she knew exactly the thoughts that were running through his mind. Her body heated at the memory.

"Ummm, we may have had some phenomenal sex last night, but that isn't what makes a marriage. I don't know anything about you. This is all too fast. What happened to me? How did I get here?"

He sighed and sat on the settee in front of the tray. He poured out a cup of coffee from the silver coffee pot and held it out to her. "Why don't you have some breakfast? It may help."

She was rather hungry and couldn't remember clearly the

SEDUCING BO

last time she had eaten. He patted the seat next to him on the sofa. “Well, I guess it wouldn’t hurt to have some breakfast.”

She sat next to him, felt lightheaded as his scent overwhelmed her. She remembered it—how it had surrounded her in the heat of passion. How he had possessed her. She caught her breath and gripped the edges of the silk cushions. “I don’t think this is a good idea after all.”

“Nonsense. Of course it is.” He reached for her hands and placed the saucer in them. “Drink, it will help to revive you.”

She looked at him warily. “The last time I accepted a cup from someone, I think they drugged me. I’m not sure I should drink this.” She looked up at him suspiciously. Had he been the one to instigate that scene at the coin shop? Was this all a ruse of some kind?

“It was not I who drugged you,” he stated. It was as though he could read her mind. “There were others, who wanted something from me and they used you.”

“But how did they know I’d go to that coin shop?”

He sighed. “The woman is a witch, descended from a long line of witches who would destroy my family if they still had that power. They do not, so greed drives them now. But it will in the end be their undoing. She seduced one of the servants in the palace—someone close to me—and discovered I had invoked the ancient magic of the Midian mating coin. She used her magic to draw you to her through the coin.”

Tira shook her head. “I still don’t understand and I’m getting a headache.”

Lyon reached over and picked up a croissant. He pulled a

SEDUCING BO

piece off and held it before her lips. "Eat. It may help. I know you did not have anything to eat last night; you must be very hungry."

She opened her mouth and accepted the fluffy pastry. "Oh," she sighed. "That tastes like heaven."

He offered another piece and continued until she had finished the pastry. She drank down her coffee and felt much better already.

She uttered a gasp of surprise as he stood, leaned down, and scooped her off the sofa. "What are you doing?"

"I think you would enjoy a bath. And then we will talk more. He dropped forward and pressed his lips to hers. She couldn't help but wind her arms around his neck. Touching him became vastly important just at that moment.

He carried her into a room that seemed to be as large as her whole living room. There wasn't a bathtub, but a small pool filled with bubbles. "Oh, my," she said as he lowered her so she could stand. He began to unwind the sheet from around her body. "Wait," she gasped, "what are you doing?"

"You can't take a bath covered in a sheet."

"Well, I know that." She tried to stop him. "I can do this myself. Just leave me alone."

He quirked an eyebrow at her. "Are you shy, Tira? After what we have shared?"

"Well, I don't think I need your help to undress."

"But I would enjoy assisting you. After all, I've sent your maids away. Someone must be here to attend you."

"Hardly. I'm used to taking care of myself."

SEDUCING BO

He reached around and pulled her flush with his hard body. "But I'm here to take care of you now. You will be pampered like the princess you shall soon be."

The sheet fell away and she was left bare and vulnerable to his any whim. "Please."

He cupped her jaw and stared into her eyes. "Please what, Tira? Say my name. I want to hear it on your lips."

His gaze was centered on her mouth. She licked her lips, her mouth suddenly gone dry. "Lyon," she whispered.

His eyes closed and a small smile crossed his sensual lips. "Yes, you remembered. I enjoy hearing you say my name."

"This is all wrong," she said, but she couldn't bring herself to pull away from him. It felt dangerously too right.

He lifted her and carried her up the gold-veined marble steps and gently settled her into the water. Why was she not surprised to find that it was a perfect temperature. She settled down into the water and closed her eyes. This was simply not the direction she could ever have envisioned her life taking. Just for the moment she was going to let herself enjoy being pampered.

She closed her eyes and leaned back. Soon. She'd require answers soon.

Her eyes shot open as the water shifted and a very naked Lyon joined her. "W-what are you doing?"

"Attending you. What else?" he said as he settled beside her. He picked up a sponge and a bar of fragrant soap and began to wash her body. His touch was just as exquisite as she remembered from the night before. She lay back and he

SEDUCING BO

washed her hair, his fingers kneading her scalp and she let him do as he wished.

They drifted across the length of the pool and settled on the other side. He sat and positioned her between his legs. And then she felt his hand at her mound and two fingers pressed inside her. She arched at his entrance and the pleasure that rushed through her.

“Lyon.” She ached to have him inside her again. It didn’t matter that they were virtually strangers, she needed him. His fingers thrust in and out, leisurely, seductively, sending her skimming high, soaring toward the clouds.

“Just relax and go with your feelings. Enjoy the sensations. You feel so good, so perfect. Like silk surrounding me.”

She should be questioning all of this, but the answers seemed unimportant right now. And then she shattered and forgot everything but him and his presence inside her body.

“Tell me what you want, Tira.”

“I want you inside me, Lyon. I need you there.”

He lifted and turned her. His strong arms holding her up as he looked at her, water spiraling down her body. She saw the dilated look of passion filling his expression, and then he slowly lowered her. She felt the tip of his erection pressing at her opening, separating her and filling her.

“Yes, Lyon, just like that. You fill me so wonderfully, so completely.”

“Ride me, Tira.”

Water splashed and rippled around them as she rode him for a long time, enjoying the feel of him. He planted his hands

SEDUCING BO

on her hips, driving her down, filling her and she felt him shudder, pouring his seed into her womb and she wrapped her arms around him, plastering herself to his chest.

“I don’t know what’s happening to me, but I don’t want to wake up,” she gasped.

His mouth possessed hers and his tongue pressed deeply inside. His hands were on her rounded cheeks, pressing and kneading, pulling her closer as his cock pulsed rhythmically inside her.

It shouldn’t feel so damned right. But it did, oh God, it did.

“You belong to me,” he growled. “I have waited too long for you and we are bound as one.” He tipped her back, supporting her with his strong arms as he supped at her breasts.

“Yes, Lyon, yes.”

CHAPTER 7

He awoke with a start and then relaxed. He smoothed a hand along the bare flesh of her stomach, dipping downward to the moist entrance of her pussy. She uttered a soft moan and then turned, opening herself to him.

He hadn't thought he would become so used to her presence in his life so quickly. He couldn't believe how mistaken he had been. Now if he could just convince her to stay.

She had been here for three days and still maintained a certain reserve. Yet in bed she allowed herself to submit to him completely without question. She kept talking about returning home and his time was growing short. He'd put her

SEDUCING BO

off thus far, but he would need to confide in her soon.

Already he felt the beast inside him receding and he was more in control of his predatory nature. Today he planned to explain her own history as a descendant of King Midas. Many knew the folktale of his ability to turn anything into gold, but there was so much more to the man who had allowed greed to rule his choice in the gift from the gods rather than ruling his people.

And then he would show her the truth of what he revealed—the reality of the Midas River, buried far beyond the forest. Would she then accept their relationship? His whole life lay in her soft, delicate hands. If she walked away, if she couldn't love him, he would one day be overcome by the beast lurking inside and what was left of his country would be lost as well.

There were others like him, who carried the mark of the lion, descended from the blood of Croesus, but it was the DeJon family who had stayed to rule and protect, conquering to some limited extent the call of their blood.

He sank a finger into her slick vagina and she moaned, unconsciously opening her legs to allow him access. One of her hands nestled beneath her cheek and there was a pink flush to her skin. Since he'd found her, he'd hardly been able to let her out of his bed. It seemed to be the one place she didn't question her responses to him, where her emotions ruled her body, rather than her mind.

And he loved her body, the lush, feminine curves, the taste of her skin, of her pleasure. If she left him he would be lost.

SEDUCING BO

He leaned forward to suckle her breast. Each of her breasts were deliciously full and round; each peak responded quickly to his touch. She arched and he drew her tight nipple into his mouth, circling his tongue, laving at her pink flesh. With one of his hands he tugged at her other nipple, drawing it tightly, rolling it between his thumb and index finger.

“Lyon.” He rose up to look down at her. Her husky voice was but a breath of needy passion, a soft smile curved her lips. She turned to him, the smile of contentment in full view. Lazily she reached up and twined a lock of his hair around her finger and pulled him toward her. His lips fastened over her mouth.

A second finger joined the first and he thrust inside her. He raised his head and looked down at her. “Good morning, Tira.”

“Good morning, Lyon.” She undulated her hips. “Are you never satisfied?” She chuckled. It was a purr of sound that rushed through him, stroking him.

He removed his hand, lifted up and settled between her legs, penetrating her swiftly. She arched up, her fingernails dug into his back as he began to slowly thrust. There was no urgent need to climax, he simply took pleasure in being inside her. And the beast resided quietly inside him.

“I have a strong hunger for you, Tira. I doubt it will be satisfied in the near future.”

He reached down between their bodies and rubbed across her stiff little clit. She came quickly without warning and she grabbed onto him. Only as she seemed to drift back did he

SEDUCING BO

thrust deeper and allow himself to climax. Long moments later he retreated from inside her and dropped next to her.

There was a knock at the door and Sophie entered carrying a tray with breakfast. He laughed when Tira slid down beneath the blankets. He rose from the bed and pulled on a robe, tying the belt as he walked to the other side of the room.

“Good morning, Sophie.” The fragrant scent of fresh coffee wafted across him and suddenly he was ravenous.

Sophie curtsied. “Good morning, Your Highness. Will there be anything else, sir?”

“No, thank you. That will be all for now.”

“The consultant for Ms. Barron’s new wardrobe will be here shortly.”

“What?” Tira surfaced just far enough to ask. “What consultant?”

Lyon turned to look at her. “Your clothes are ordered from the mainland. The consultant will assist in making certain you have everything you need.” He didn’t add that she would be taking measurements for her wedding gown as well. He didn’t think now was quite the right time to bring that up.

“Lyon, you and I have to talk.”

He turned back to Sophie. “Thank you. That will be all for now.”

She nodded, turned and left.

He walked back to the bed and held out a blue silk robe for Tira. “We will talk.” She slid from the bed and he helped her into the robe and, after fastening the belt, wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her back against him. “Do you

SEDUCING BO

really want to leave me,” he whispered into her ear.

He felt her soften and he pulled her closer. “No, but this is all too complicated. I have a life back on the mainland. Friends. People who will miss me.”

He released her and took her hand, leading her toward the sofa. “I realize that, Tira.” He hesitated before continuing. She probably wasn’t going to like what he said next. “I’ve taken measures so that no one will be concerned about your sudden disappearance.”

“You what? How?” Her expression became guarded. He had the greatest urge to take her back to bed, to make that expression vanish and replace it with the passion he so loved seeing in her eyes. The need for him.

“There’s no need to get upset. I just made certain that they knew you’d been called away and that you would be in touch soon.”

She jumped to her feet. “I have a job, Lyon. I can’t just stay away like this. I have to go back. I have to earn a living.”

Slowly he rose to his feet, towering over her. “You have no further need for the job, you know that. As my wife your every comfort will be attended to. As my princess you will be protected and cared for and will never want for anything again.”

Hands on hips she stalked across the room. “This is my life, Mr. Prince Charming. You can’t just carry me off and expect me to just...just accept it. This is feudal. It’s not real.”

She was beautiful when she was angry, so much fire. His perfect lioness. He stalked toward her, his possessive, primal

SEDUCING BO

nature rising to the surface.

“You are my bride, Tira. You are the only woman for me. Have I not shown you that?” He yanked her into his arms. “Have I not made you feel loved and needed? Protected? Do you think you will want for anything?”

Her hands were flattened against his chest, trying to ward him off, to distance herself and he couldn’t let that happen.

“That’s not the point. We’re good in bed, I’ll grant you that. You’ve certainly gone to great pains to make this all irresistible. But, for the rest...I just don’t know. Marriage is a huge commitment. I...like you a lot, but I just don’t know. This has all been too much, too fast.”

He lowered his head. “Am I not your prince charming, just like in the fairytales, Tira? Can’t you just let me sweep you off your feet and give you a happily ever after?”

“Those are just made up stories to entertain, Lyon. They aren’t real.”

He pulled her closer and looked deeply into her eyes. “Do you really think none of them are based on fact in some way? At some level?”

“I-I don’t know. I never really thought about it.”

He released her and stepped away, trying to gain control once again of his emotions. The one thing he didn’t want to do was drive her away from him.

“All right. Sit and eat your breakfast. We will discuss it later.”

Slowly she walked around to sit at the table. She looked up at him—there was such worry in her expression. The fates had

SEDUCING BO

certainly led him to the right woman. Tira Barron was special. Out of all the women in the world, she was the right one for him.

“Lyon, I’m sorry.” She bit her lip. “I’m just so confused by all of this.” She twirled the coffee cup on the saucer.

He walked over to her and lifted her chin so she was looking at him. “Tira, you have nothing to be sorry for. So much has occurred over the last couple of days. How could you not be wary?” He leaned down and pressed his lips lightly to hers, then straightened.

Dropping his hand, he walked away. The electrical current that seemed to run between them when he was close to her was too strong. He had to get some distance if he wasn’t going to scare her away. He sat in a chair on the other side of the room and watched her.

As he watched, she filled her plate. “Where are we exactly?”

He watched her lift a croissant and take a bite. “Midian is located off the coast of Greece.”

Her eyes snapped to him and widened. “So far?”

“Where did you think we were?”

She set the plate down and rubbed her palms across her thighs. “I don’t know. I guess I didn’t really think about it. How will I get home? I don’t have a passport.”

He sighed. “If you really want to go home, I will arrange it. You don’t need to worry about that.”

“I have to go home. I need to think about all of this. My mother will be worried.”

SEDUCING BO

He leaned forward. "Will you at least give me one more day? I'll cancel the fitting if that's what has you so concerned. Spend the day with me and let me show you the island."

She shook her head and laughed. He loved the sound of her laughter. It was warm and welcoming, like he was galloping in his animal form through a warm rain shower. He hadn't realized how alone he had been until she arrived. If she left him, the silence would be worse. She was the only thing that stood between him and being completely taken over by the beast. He had almost let it wait too long.

Finally, she nodded. "All right. One more day. I still don't know if I'll have a job when I get back, but I'll wait at least that long."

He stood up. "Then finish your breakfast and we shall go. There are many things to tell you, to show you. You must know them before you make your final decision."

She tilted her head and gazed up at him. "Are you angry with me?"

"No, Tira. If I cannot convince you, it is my fault, not yours. Everything has moved too quickly. But I cannot be certain Darth hasn't shared the information about you with anyone else. Your life could be in danger. If you leave, I cannot protect you adequately, and I don't want to take that chance."

"But I don't understand. I'm sure you can find another woman who would be more than willing to marry you. Or give me some time so we can get to know each other."

He wished there were more time to give her.

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Unfortunately, there was not.

“Don’t worry. Finish your breakfast and then I will return.”

He strode from the room. If he stayed one moment longer, he probably would have her back in bed. She was just too tempting.

There was something to be said for leaving his future in the hands of fate. The coin had led him to her and now he must convince her to stay. If she did not. The DeJon line of Croesus would end with him.

CHAPTER 8

Tira followed Sophie who led her to the garden where Prince Lyon awaited. She was nervous and she already felt her determination to leave waning. She didn't trust her feelings—not after her last fiasco of a relationship, and this was just moving too quickly. What was it she had said about not wanting an adventure? This was turning the tables on her with a vengeance.

He was a wonderful lover, so sensitive and caring. Everyone who served him seemed dedicated and loyal. She didn't sense undercurrents of unrest. And the palace itself was well run and not a hint of decay to be found. It was quite sumptuous. Maybe it was the fact that she felt totally out of

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place here. She certainly didn't feel like princess material. Not in the slightest.

She caught her breath as they walked into the garden. It was filled with roses, some white, others pink, another bush of red. But it was one particular bush that drew her across the lawn. It couldn't possibly be what it looked like.

"What are these?" she asked as she reached out to touch a golden, glittering petal. She couldn't believe it. She leaned forward to sniff and the aroma of roses teased her senses, yet it was a bit darker scent.

"You've never seen golden roses before?" a deep voice said from behind her.

Her fingertips stroked over one of the soft, delicate petals. Again, she inhaled the scent. There was a floral scent that was recognizable, but a hint of something more...earthy. Her stomach began to tighten. She wanted more and felt a primal urge grab hold of her.

Lyon's arm rested on her shoulder and he drew her away.

"Wait."

"No, Tira. This particular flower is extremely potent."

She tried to go back to the flowers, but he firmly led her in the opposite direction. The farther she walked away, the effect seemed to dissipate. "What was that?"

He seated her at a table and poured out a glass of iced tea. "That is the Midas Rose."

She paused in the act of raising the glass to her mouth. "The what?"

He poured himself a glass and then eased back in his chair.

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“The Midas bush was transplanted here centuries ago from King Midas’s garden. Only those with Midas blood are affected by the scent.”

“You’re kidding.” She tried to understand what he was saying. “Exactly what effect is it supposed to have?” she asked, but she had a feeling she knew what he was going to say.

“It acts like a mild kind of aphrodisiac. The desire for more of things is magnified.”

“So, you’re trying to say that I’m a descendant of King Midas?”

“In a sense. You must have the blood of a Midas somewhere in your background. The coin would not have appeared to you otherwise. Nor would you have been affected by the Midas rose so quickly.”

“Is that why I’m here? Because you think I have Midas blood running through my veins?” This was just all so bizarre. “And what about you? Are you descended from Midas?”

He nodded. “The blood of Midas and Croesus have been mixed for eons. Not every generation carries the Croesus curse, so with me it is rather diluted. My mother was not a Midas descendant.”

“Why me, Lyon? And what is this curse you speak of?”

“A long time ago the first King Croesus crossed a powerful witch. She laid a curse upon the generations to follow. As each child in the Croesus line grows to maturity, more of the predatory nature will reveal itself until eventually it takes over completely. She chose the beast as a joke on the

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king. What better animal to choose than the lion—aptly called the king of the jungle.”

“You can’t be serious. I certainly haven’t seen any sign of it in you.”

He nodded. “You’re the reason for that. Another witch—a good woman who deeply loved one of the descendants—placed a new curse and gave her life for its success. She couldn’t remove the old one, but she made it possible to lessen, and in some cases, even halt the call of the beast. A special coin was created using the blood of Midas and Croesus and the power of love. It was the blood of her and her lover—or so the story goes. The coin appears only when its power is summoned.”

“This sounds more like a fairytale rather than real life. You can’t be serious.”

“Oh, I’m very serious. I’ve waited almost too long before invoking the ritual.” He reached across the table and clasped her hand. “You are the only one to halt the curse for me, Tira. You are the woman I must marry. Haven’t you realized that yet?”

She yanked her hand from his and shot up from the chair. Panic began to overwhelm her. “This is not right. It can’t be.” She started to hyperventilate.

He came to her. “Breathe, Tira. Just breathe. In and out. It will be all right.”

She clutched at her chest. “How can it be? You’re saying I have to marry you to stop the curse. Can’t you find someone else?”

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“Tira, the fates have chosen you as my bride. If you are unable to agree, then the curse will follow its course.”

“Why me?” She tried to pull away but his arms tightened around her.

“Because you are my soul mate. In all the world, out of all the progeny that might carry Midas blood, you are my other half. Just like the two sides of a coin.”

“Oh, God. I don’t know what to do. What to believe.”

“Come with me,” he encouraged her along a path. “Let’s walk for a bit. We won’t talk, just enjoy the grounds.”

He led her around a circular path and across the lawn and then they entered what seemed like a maze of trails. She began to feel a little calmer as they drew farther and farther away from the palace, even though she had no idea where they were going. For some reason she trusted Lyon and felt safe with him.

“Where are we going?” Her breathing at least had resumed to normal.

“To a place where you may believe what I’m telling you.”

She had to wonder where that would be. They finally came out into a field that seemed to be filled with golden statues.

“What is this?” She stopped next to one of them—a couple kissing.

“This is a field of greed.” He stepped back and allowed her to investigate. She turned to look at him.

“A field of greed? I don’t understand.”

“You know the story of King Midas, I assume?”

“You mean the fable, where everything he touched turned

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to gold, including his daughter?”

“Yes, the time Bacchus bestowed a gift of the king’s choosing on him for a good deed he had done.”

“I remember it.”

Lyon reached for her hand and drew her across the field and down a small incline toward a river. It was, of course, a golden river. Why should she be surprised?

“This is the Midas River. It is rumored that after the incident with Bacchus he came to the island and bathed in the river. It turned the waters gold and has since become a magical river. You know it is also rumored that Midas was the son of the goddess Cybele and her consort King Gordias, so he already had his own set of powers he didn’t often use.”

“I didn’t realize that.”

“This river became a source of greed. King Croesus gave over the protection of the river and this land to my ancestors, one of them a cousin to Croesus by the name DeJon. Since that time we have ruled here to protect the legacy and the secrets.”

“And all of these...people?” Tira waved an arm in the direction of the statues.

“They were people who wanted the Midas touch for their own gain. They hurt people to get it, they lied and cheated. And they reaped the results of their greed.”

“But how?”

“They bathed in the River Midas and received the gift, just as he did. But unlike King Midas who was a good man and much loved by the gods, these people were not, and there was

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no one left to redeem them from their choices.”

“And if I were to bathe in it?”

He turned her toward him. “If you were to bathe in it, I would beseech the gods myself to redeem you.” He leaned down and kissed her, then lifted away. He threaded his fingers through hers and they walked on.

They came to another statue closer to the river. Tira reached down to pick up what looked like rolled parchment. “What is this?”

Lyon gently took it from her. “It’s a map to the river—the only one. It was drawn by one of my ancestors.”

“What’s it doing here?”

Lyon looked closer at the entwined golden figures. “So they came here after all, even knowing the consequences.”

“Who are they?”

“It is Darth and Moreen. The people who abducted you. A fitting punishment it would seem. Just as I expected.”

Tira peered closer and then gasped. “Oh, my God. Is there anything that can be done?”

“You want to see them freed? You’d forgive them?”

“No one deserves to die like this.” She thought for a moment then turned to him. “Are they dead?”

He steadily gazed back at her. “No. They’re in a limbo of their own choosing.”

“Oh no, Lyon. Is there really no way to help them? I’m sure they’re sorry for what they did.” No matter what they had done, no one deserved this.

He reached out to touch her face. “You are a beautiful

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person, Tira Barron. They don't deserve your kindness." He sighed and his hand fell away. "You really want to help them."

She nodded. "Yes, I can't imagine just leaving them like this."

He was silent for a long time as he studied the statues. "All you have to do is touch them and say, 'I forgive you,' and the spell will be dissolved."

"You're kidding." It couldn't be that simple.

"Few are as kind as you, Tira. But that's all you have to do. The forgiveness must come from your heart. It cannot merely be words spoken. Be certain you wish to do this."

"I'm not sure if I believe this, but what do I have to lose? I don't want revenge, Lyon." Taking a deep breath, she stepped forward and laid a hand on each of the figures. She closed her eyes and bowed her head. "I forgive you," she whispered. For long moments she stood there like that, then suddenly if felt like the gold liquefied and warmed beneath her touch. Quickly she jumped back.

Lyon reached for her and pulled her into his arms. They both stood back and watched as the gold spilled away like they had just walked out of the river, and the two figures came to life.

Darth whirled around and faced Lyon and Tira.

"You," he growled. "I should have known."

"You didn't believe the legend. You thought you were smarter, didn't you?" Lyon snarled back.

"Moreen invoked a spell. She said it would keep us safe. The first spell worked to get the woman to come to us."

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"I guess her magic isn't as strong as she thought."

"Damn you, Lyon," Darth spit out.

"Wait," Moreen said from behind him, her eyes narrowed on Tira. "There is another way."

Darth turned to look at her. "What do you mean? And why should I listen to you now?"

"I had forgotten. But, of course, that would be the answer."

Tira heard a low rumbling growl coming from next to her. She turned to look at Lyon. Her gaze widened. Something was happening to him, his image wavered before her. She turned to look at the pair in front of them, who now had a look of menace. Darth pulled a long, lethal-looking knife from his pocket and waved the blade in a threatening manner.

"I tried to help you," she said. "Why can't you just leave? I thought you deserved another chance."

"You can bathe in the river and we can use you to give us what we want. You have the Midas blood and the gods will look favorably on you. You have the natural magic to control the gift," Moreen said as she and Darth separated and moved toward them. Darth with an obvious eye toward stopping Lyon from interfering, and Moreen intent on reaching Tira.

"No," Tira screamed as she saw Darth lunge.

She jumped in front of Lyon, but within seconds she fell as an animal roared and leaped past her, tackling Darth to the ground. The knife sank into the lion's haunches and the roar of pain filled the air. Lyon's fangs buried into Darth's flesh, just as the knife again drove deep into the tawny lion's shoulder.

"No," she screamed again, intent on getting to them.

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A hand gripped Tira's arm, throwing her off balance and she toppled to the earth.

"You're coming with me," Moreen screamed. She tried to pull her up, but Tira fought with everything she had. The two women grappled, rolling over and over. She needed to get to Lyon, but Moreen's grip was too strong.

And then the grip was gone as the lion again interceded and leaped at the witch, sending her careening away from Tira.

Tira turned her head, unable to watch as a bloodcurdling scream rent the air. She struggled to her feet, the stench and sight of blood filling her senses. She turned and met the topaz eyes of the lion. He was wounded, blood seeping from the slashes in his flesh that Darth had made. She took a step toward him, then dropped to her knees. A wave of dizziness overcame her.

"Lyon," she cried out helplessly as darkness descended.

CHAPTER 9

Tira slowly opened her eyes to find Lyon hovering above her, worry etched in the lines of his face, his eyes dark pools of concern.

“How do you feel? Did she hurt you?” he asked.

She was afraid to look around, to see what had happened to them. She tried to sit up, but Lyon pressed a hand against her shoulder forcing her to stay still.

“I’m all right. Really. You can let me up now. This saving me thing seems to be getting to be a habit of yours.”

With reluctance, he finally leaned back, releasing her. Slowly she rose to a sitting position and looked around. They were no longer near the river. He’d apparently carried her

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away from the violent scene.

Then she remembered and she snapped her gaze back to him, saw the wounds in his shoulder and his thigh. "Oh, God. What about you? You're hurt." He had wrapped pieces of his shirt around the wounds, but blood still seeped from beneath them.

"It's nothing. When we get back to the palace, they'll be taken care of."

"Nothing? I saw him stab—" How did she finished that statement? She looked up into his face and swallowed. "You," she finally finished. "It's all real, isn't it?" she whispered. "Everything you told me."

"Yes." He looked away from her and squinted toward the setting sun. "If you wish to leave, I'll see to your transportation." He rose to his feet and it was only then that she realized he was totally naked.

"Oh, my," she gasped. "What happened to your clothes? Goodness, you can't walk around like that."

"It's a state of affairs that occurs often," he said. "There's a private entrance into the palace and a room where I keep extra clothing."

He helped her to her feet and plastered her up close to his body. Her hands came up to steady herself against his hard chest. She looked up at him. "You really do need me."

He cupped her face. "I love you, Tira. I won't force you to stay. If you find me and what I am repulsive, you must leave. I couldn't bear for you to be unhappy."

"Unhappy? I don't think that's possible. I'm sorry you

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were forced to kill them. It's my fault you were hurt. I should have listened to you."

"It most certainly wasn't your fault. They were the ones with greed in their hearts, not you."

"But—"

"No more regrets. What is it you want, Tira? Do you wish to stay or go?"

"Do you really want me? Or is it just because I can halt the progression of the curse?"

He drew her closer. "You could not halt it if I didn't love you. The gods have worked their magic once again."

She reached up to cup his face. "I love you, too, Lyon. And I'm ready to chance that this is all real. Let's go home, Prince Charming."

He scooped her up into his arms. "Lyon, your wounds," she protested. "You'll make them worse."

He totally ignored her as he carried her toward the palace. "I feel no pain as long as I have you in my arms, Tira."

What could she say to that? She wrapped her arms around his neck and let him have his way. As had been destined all along.

* * *

The wedding was magnificent, and Lyon had even flown in her friend, Sandy, and her mother, from back home. Sandy had been speechless.

The gown was an amazing confection of gold silk, lace, and seeded pearls. And a glittering tiara for the princess. It

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was going to take some getting used to hearing herself addressed as Princess Tira DeJon. Who would have ever guessed?

She turned her head as Lyon strode into the bedroom. He had looked magnificent in a white uniform and gold sash. In his arms he carried a bouquet of gold roses. He laid the roses on the bed and walked to her, circling an arm around her, and drawing her against his chest. "Are you happy, Princess?"

She smiled and nuzzled against him. "I don't think I've ever been happier, Prince Lyon. But I'm not sure I'll ever get used to being called Princess."

She turned to him and began undoing the sash around his waist.

"What are you doing now?"

"The formalities are over, right?"

"Yes."

She began to unbutton his formal jacket. She took one of the roses from the bouquet and inhaled deeply. The desire began to bloom inside her enhanced by the fragrance of the petals.

"Make love to me, husband." She tossed the rose over her shoulder. He drew her to him once again, then settled her onto the bed and leaned down to remove her shoes.

As he was just about to set them aside she stopped him. "Wait. Let me see the left shoe."

He looked up at her quizzically. "Why?" He handed her the shoe.

She took it from him. "Because I put the coin in it for

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luck.” She checked the toe and beneath the insole. “It’s not there.”

He carefully removed the shoe from her hand and rose to push her gently back onto the bed. A smile played around his lips. “Of course not.”

“What do you mean?” He dropped his head to feather kisses along her neck as he pushed the bodice of her dress down, baring her breasts. “When the coin has completed its task, it moves on until it is called again.”

She tipped her head, arching her back. His mouth fastened over one nipple. “So the gods are pleased?”

He sucked her nipple into his mouth, then he raised up to look at her, his eyes dark with desire. “The gods are very pleased. And so am I.”

“I love you, Lyon.”

“Beast and all?”

She reached up to twine her fingers in his hair, drawing his head back to her breast.

“Especially the beast,” she gasped as his hand latched onto her other breast and he tugged at the stiffened nipple. “Oh, yes, especially the beast.”

Tira always had been a sucker for a story with a happily ever after at the end. She’d just never thought it would be her story.

ADRIANNA DANE

Theresa Gallup uses the pen names of Tess Maynard and Adrianna Dane. Theresa has been writing since the age of 10. A legal secretary for 30 years, she is currently working on another erotic romance, as well as a full-length romantic mystery/suspense. She has been married for 30 years and has three grown children (a daughter and twin sons), and is a new grandmother.

Writing as Tess Maynard, her first published short story appeared in the ezine, *The Whispering Forest*, in January of 2004. Writing as Adrianna Dane, where adding sensual heat to romance is her motto, *Esmerelda's Secret* was her first foray into the erotic romance genre.

Having traveled and lived from the East Coast to the West Coast, Theresa receives inspiration for her stories from a variety of sources, including music and poetry, and her tastes are eclectic.

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* * *

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