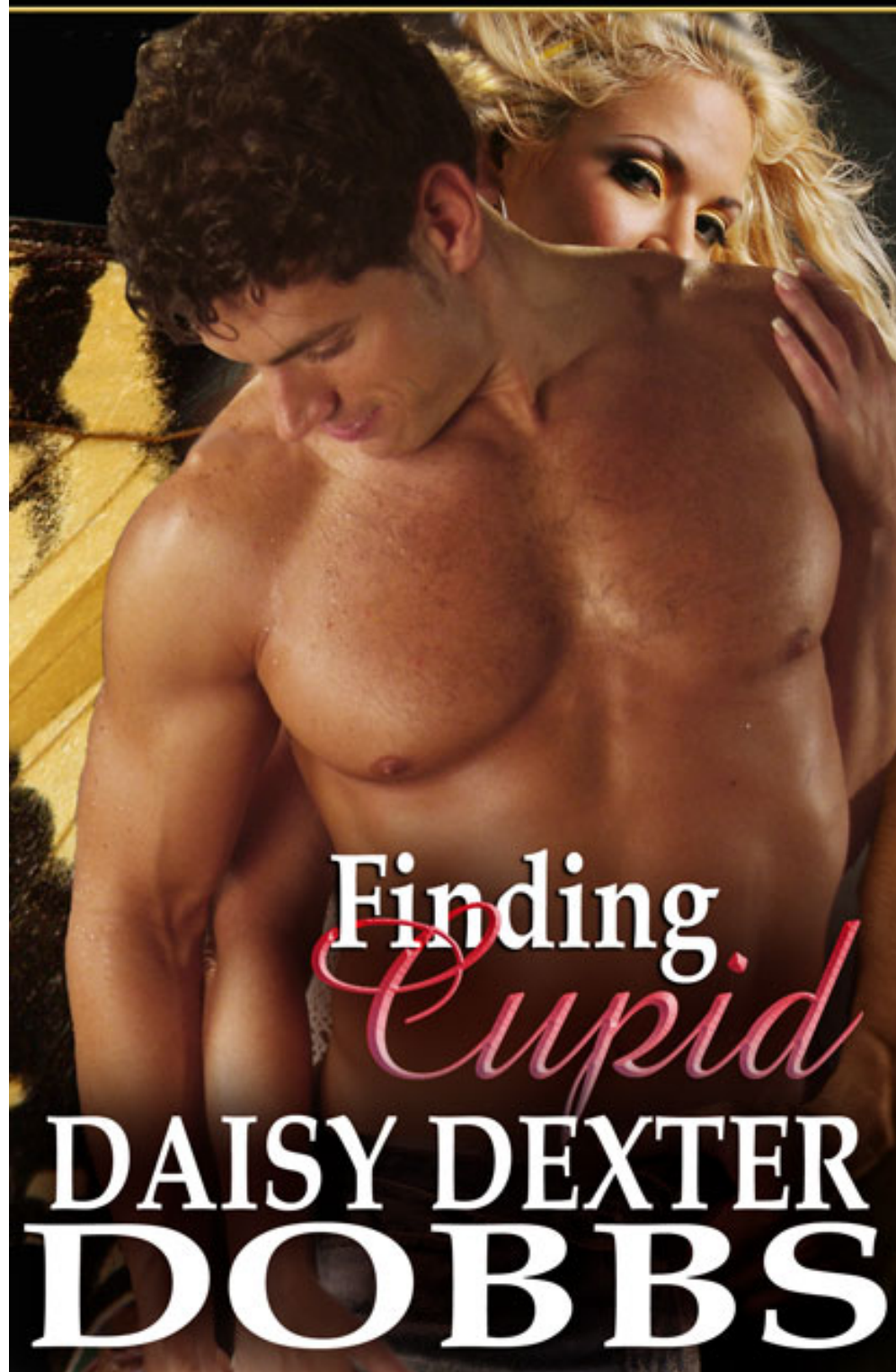


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



Finding.
Cupid

DAISY DEXTER
DOBBS

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Finding Cupid

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FINDING CUPID

Daisy Dexter Dobbs

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Chapter One

At the sound of jangling, clanking, rapid footsteps and labored breathing, Cinnamus crossed his arms over his chest and sent up a silent prayer to Jupiter. "You're late, Lula. Again."

"I know. I'm sorry, Cinnamus. I had trouble finding my quiver full of arrows and then it took me awhile to locate —"

"The chariot has left without you."

"What? No!" Lula blanched as she gazed around the near empty chariot boarding area. There were only a few horses there, lazily munching on hay. "Oh no, Cinnamus. That can't be. It's my first trip to Earth with Cupid, I can't miss it."

"Too late." Cinnamus shrugged. "You already have." He looked the disheveled blonde nymph up and down and tsked. "And look at your uniform. You're a disgrace to the entire Cupid Academy, Lula." Why in the name of Pluto she always looked so tousled was beyond him. The young woman was an addictive confection of bouncy golden curls, wide blue eyes, kissable features and a full lush body made for squeezing.

Most of the female students were forever primping and fussing over themselves to make the best of their attributes and not a one of them was blessed with Lula's allure. And yet Lula seemed oblivious to her considerable charms, even to the point of disregard.

Lula glanced down at her semi-sheer, knee-length white garment, smoothing her hands over the wrinkled pleats and adjusting the knotted gold cord at her waist. "Oh, I try, Cinnamus, I really do. I don't know why I'm so graceless."

A cluster of golden curls, almost the same shade as Cinnamus' hair, sprang loose from its confines at one side of her head, tumbling to her shoulder. "Oh dear..." she mumbled, stuffing the locks back into place and reaffixing the gilt-edged combs. "Since I was running late, I didn't take as much time as usual for my hair."

"Obviously." Cinnamus struggled not to laugh. It wouldn't do at all for Lula to think he was amused.

"I lost track of time this morning because I was rereading the chapter on correct placement of arrows," Lula explained. "I mean, I couldn't possibly risk having one of my arrows strike the thymus gland when I was targeting the heart. Imagine the consequences, Cinnamus! The poor person might develop an unnatural affinity for domestic animals instead of their intended. Of course, it's wonderful to love cats and dogs because they certainly need care and attention from humans, but not in *that* way."

"And I know how careful I must be to avoid striking a male in his prostate when I'm aiming for his cock. The textbook devoted two entire pages to the possible

disagreeable outcomes that could cause. Or what if I struck a female's pancreas instead of an ovary? Oh dear Jupiter, instead of getting pregnant, any woman could conceivably –"

"Lula."

Stopping short, Lula looked up at Cinnamus with that naïve, trusting expression he'd come to adore.

"Yes?"

"You're babbling."

"Oh...sorry. I guess I have a habit of doing that, don't I?"

"Indubitably." Arching an eyebrow, Cinnamus smiled.

Lula pouted. It was a look few grown women could manage without looking foolish and contrived. On Lula's cherubic features it was most endearing and he felt the cockles of his heart warm.

"Isn't there some way I can go down to join the others, Cinnamus? Today's interactive love match exercise is part of our final exam. I can't afford to miss it."

He hardened his features, striking a no-nonsense posture for Lula's benefit. "You should have thought of that earlier, Lula. Everyone else in your class managed to get here on time this morning without any problem. Perhaps you'll learn a valuable lesson from this experience and won't be habitually late in the future."

Cinnamus turned away from Lula because she looked so forlorn, so miserable, he was tempted to scoop her into his arms and comfort her. Tempted to fly her down to the terra firma plane in his own chariot just to have her gift him with one of her dazzling smiles. But it would never do for the Perfect Love Matches 101 class instructor to act in such a biased manner, displaying distinct favoritism for one of his freshman students.

Ah, if he were but a mere six hundred years younger, he might consider courting the delightful little nymph after graduation. But at only three hundred fifty years old, she was far too young for him. Of course, besides that, the fact that Cinnamus was gay might also come into play. But if ever there was a woman capable of turning the sexual tide, it would most definitely be the sweet, charismatic Lula.

Cinnamus made the mistake of glancing back at Lula when he heard a snuffle, only to see her bottom lip tremble.

"I-I've been practicing so hard all year," she pleaded, "and I just know I would do a good job creating perfect love matches. Please, Cinnamus. *Please!*"

Uttering a cantankerous growl, Cinnamus just stared at her for a moment. He had to be firm, couldn't cave in simply because he favored the girl. After all, he was her teacher. It was his appointed duty, his responsibility to see she learned a lesson from her mistakes. "I'm sorry, Lula..." He paused, watching her sweet features twitch and contort with distress. Frowning, Cinnamus motioned toward her with his hand. "Stop it. Don't do that."

"What?" Lula sniffed and blinked, sending a fat tear coursing down her cheek.

"That! I hate to see a woman cry." *Especially you, Lula.*

"I'm sorry." Lula's chin quivered and a new set of tears escaped from her watery blue eyes. "I can't help it. Oh Cinnamus, I'm such a hopeless failure. Every course of instruction I've taken at the academy has proved to be a disaster. No," she corrected herself, "*I've* proven to be a disaster." She broke into little hiccupping sobs. "I was so hoping Perfect Love Matches 101 would be different. I just want to help people find love, that's all. I want to make their lives richer, happier. But all I can seem to do is wreak havoc."

Lula's shoulders shook as she cried. Dropping all her Cupid Academy paraphernalia to the marble floor, she covered her face and wept so hard Cinnamus thought his heart would break watching her. "You...you may as well just go ahead and fail me, Cinnamus. I deserve it."

"There, there, Lula. Don't cry." He drew her into a loose hug, patting her back in a chaste, teacherly manner as she sobbed against his chest. Poor thing. She really did try hard. While she may be cursed with absentmindedness, a lack of organizational skills and an innate naiveté, Lula was always attentive in class, did all her homework and scored near perfect grades on every test.

In Cinnamus' long career as a Cupid Academy instructor, he'd known few students as earnest, hardworking and devoted as Lula. Blessed with a good heart, the nymph was bright, willing and highly intelligent. Book smart. But when it came to applying what she'd learned to real-life circumstances, she inevitably fell flat on her face, unintentionally yanking others down with her.

"Gather your gear, Lula. I'll take you down to Earth in my personal chariot," Cinnamus heard himself say and then groaned in frustration at his apparent lack of restraint.

Lula drew back, holding Cinnamus at arm's length. He immediately missed her soft warmth snuggled close to his body.

Wide-eyed, she gasped as she stared up at him. "Oh Cinnamus, really? You would do that for me?"

He nodded with a sigh. "I'm making an exception to the rules. Just this one time, you understand." He wagged a chastising finger. "And you mustn't let any of the other students know either. I don't want them thinking I'm showing favoritism. If they wonder how you arrived to join them, simply tell them one of the minor gods gave you a lift."

"Absolutely. I understand." Lula's head bobbed up and down with enthusiasm. "I promise to be careful and I'll do my very best to make you proud of me. You'll see, Cinnamus. I won't let you down."

Cinnamus winced. He didn't really want to think of what sort of mayhem she might cause on this trip. Once she found Cupid, he'd no doubt be able to guide her, to keep her from inflicting any serious disasters on the poor unsuspecting mortals. "I

won't be able to stay to help you, Lula. I need to get back right away for my next class. That means you'll have to find Cupid's headquarters on your own. Do you think you can manage that?"

Hiking a shoulder in a nonchalant shrug, Lula huffed. "Well of course I can, Cinnamus. I may be a bit absentminded but I do know how to read a map."

Cinnamus gave her a patient smile as he glanced at the endless array of pouches, bags and books she'd brought along. "Yes, but did you remember to bring the map with you?"

Smiling, Lula began retrieving her gear from the floor. "Yes." She gave one suede satchel a firm pat. "Along with the forgetfulness serum, the invisibility powder, the—"

Cinnamus groaned. "It's the other way around. Forgetfulness powder and invisibility serum. The forgetfulness powder simply needs to be inhaled to work, remember?"

"Mmm-hmm." Lula nodded. "That's what I meant. And don't worry, Cinnamus, I brought along the full list of precautions you gave us in class—all the things we're supposed to avoid. I even brought my textbook, just in case." She beamed a bright smile.

Cinnamus frowned. "I'm not sure that's such a good idea, Lula. If you recall, the last time you went to Earth you left behind your class notes. Remember what happened when that unprincipled politician found your notebook?"

Lula bit her bottom lip and her cheeks flushed pink. "Yes. But at least we found it before he was able to cause too much harm, right?" She looked up at him hopefully.

"But if we hadn't, he could have gained political control over the world because the public suddenly found him to be entirely irresistible." Remembering some of Lula's other past escapades, Cinnamus ground out a monumental sigh, wondering if he might be mad for loosing the well-meaning nymph on the unsuspecting world.

"I was much younger and far more foolish back then," Lula assured him.

"It was only two years ago, Lula."

"Oh but I've learned so much since then," she guaranteed, offering a most persuasive expression of assurance. "Because you've been such a wise and *wonderful* teacher," she added with a smile.

"Indeed..." Cinnamus watched her juggling her various belongings. "Perhaps it would be better if you had one large satchel so you could keep everything together in one place," he suggested. "What happened to the schoolbag you were issued? It's big enough to hold all that you're carrying."

Lula's gaze dropped to her toes. "Um...I couldn't find it. That's another one of the reasons I was running late this morning." Cinnamus moaned and she raised her eyes to his again.

"And you certainly can't flit around the Earth wearing your academy uniform. You need to change your clothing into the traveling outfit you were issued."

"I didn't have time to change but I did bring the garment with me." Glancing down at her filmy tunic, Lula frowned. "I know wearing the travel outfit is part of the academy's rules because it renders us invisible but I never understood why it was necessary, Cinnamus. After all, the invisibility serum already makes us invisible to humans on the Earth plane. Besides, I'm so much more comfortable wearing my light and airy uniform."

"The change of clothes is a necessary precaution," Cinnamus stated simply.

A frown line creased the area between Lula's expressive eyebrows. "But why, exactly?"

Cinnamus' gaze flew to Lula's large succulent breasts and then to the cluster of golden curls at her pussy, clearly evident beneath the voile-like material. He cleared his throat. "In case you forget to ingest the serum."

"But I wouldn't—" Lula started again, only to be cut off by Cinnamus.

"The dual protection of the traveling garment as well as the serum doubly guarantees that your power of invisibility will not fail for any reason," Cinnamus explained, not wanting to think of the chaos Lula would cause if she were visibly prancing about Earth practically in the buff.

"Maintaining invisibility while on Earth is crucial because it allows you to carry out your matchmaking tasks without any unneeded distractions. You see...it's not your school uniform that's the problem, Lula, it's...what's underneath."

"Oh? Is there something wrong with my body?" she asked in all innocence, glancing down at her bountiful physical attributes. "I've always thought my shape was quite pleasing, Cinnamus. Are you saying that humans wouldn't find me appealing?"

"On the contrary..." Realizing the rest of that sentence was better left unsaid, Cinnamus averted his eyes from her ample curves and took in a fortifying breath. "It's all in chapter eleven, Lula. Remember? Full or partial nudity isn't the norm for Earth's inhabitants. In fact, they have laws against it for the most part."

"How peculiar," Lula mused. "Why would it be considered wrong to show off the beauty of the naked form?"

Cinnamus slanted her a dubious look. "Are you *sure* you read chapter eleven?" he asked, feeling just a bit prickly discussing the subject with Lula one on one.

"Yes." Lula nodded. "Well...I think so. I'll reread it in the chariot, just in case. It sounds like a fascinating topic."

"The important thing to remember, Lula, is that the people of Earth are not as advanced, sophisticated or mature as we are here on Olympus. As a rule, human females don't dress in sheer garments exposing their naked forms, unless they're...uh...unless they're engaged in a profession wherein they seek financial compensation for providing sexual favors."

"Payment?" Lula laughed. "Don't be silly, Cinnamus. I would never dream of asking for gold coins if I found a love match. I would give of myself freely. That's what sexual pleasure is all about, isn't it?"

"Well, yes, but..." Letting his words trail off, Cinnamus just looked at her for a long moment, unsure of how to answer the too-trusting nymph's question in such a short span of time. "On second thought, maybe you're not ready for this trip after all, Lula."

Her eyes brimmed with tears again and Cinnamus cursed beneath his breath. "Oh very well, you can go. But please, Lula, make sure you study chapter eleven. It's also probably a wise idea to study the following chapter regarding Earth vernacular, including the current slang, so you fully understand what's being said. And whatever you do, just don't leave any of your class materials behind this time."

"Check." Lula nodded, smiling as she sniffed.

"And be careful where you aim those arrows and at whom."

"Check."

And if you somehow do become visible, make sure not to let your wings show. And if —

"That's not a problem." Lula grinned. "The only time my wings become visible is when I —"

"Yes, yes, I remember now," Cinnamus jumped in, purposely interrupting before she could remind him. "You told me about that particular peculiarity before. And don't forget to find Cupid. I don't want you doing *anything* until you find him, understand?"

Lula gave a half-hearted nod. "Unless I come across some poor lonely, lovelorn mortals desperately in need of my matchmaking services on my way to finding Cupid, right?"

Hands braced on hips, Cinnamus glared at her. "Lula," he warned, drawing her name out slowly.

"But if I can formulate a love match for them, then surely —" She stopped when she saw Cinnamus' eyes narrow. "Okay, I'll wait." Cinnamus arched an eyebrow at her. "I promise," she added quickly.

"Don't forget, Cupid will be incognito. You may not recognize him right away," he reminded her, wiping the sweat from his brow and giving a tired chuckle. "Honestly, I'm getting too old to deal with the stress of fixing another Lula-initiated calamity."

Lula stood on her tiptoes and kissed his jaw. "You'll never be old to me, Cinnamus. Ever. And when the time comes for me to find a love match, I hope I find a man half as good, kind and handsome as you."

The look of admiration in Lula's eyes warmed his soul, just as her words puffed up his male pride. Shoulders back and chin elevated, Cinnamus escorted Lula to his chariot.

* * * * *

No surprise to Lula, the chariot ride to Earth was magical. She never tired of soaring through the clouds, anticipating the exhilarating adventure she knew awaited her once she reached her destination.

Interacting with humans was such great fun, especially because so many of them seemed as ungainly and capricious as she was, which was a nice change from the diligence and seeming faultlessness of her fellow students. While she still didn't understand many of Earth's strange customs, views and policies, Lula felt quite at home there.

Skimming through chapter eleven of her *Perfect Love Matches 101* textbook, Lula found little to help her comprehend Earth's backward stance on nudity and sexuality in general. The joy of nakedness should be embraced and appreciated rather than be a source of fodder for juvenile snickering and titillation.

Lula used the long suede shoulder strap of the pouch containing her traveling garment as well as the vials holding the forgetfulness and invisibility concoctions as a bookmark. She glanced up frequently from her reading to watch the changing skyscape. As Cinnamus' team of magnificent obsidian-black stallions galloped through the air, their jeweled harnesses glinting in the sun's light, Olympus soon became dwarfed in the distance, fueling Lula's excitement. Before long, she'd be able to glimpse Earth.

While studying the chapter, she diligently made notes. Her thoughts were happily interrupted when Cinnamus called out, "Look, Lula, the Earth is coming into view." The chariot bumped and Lula bounced. "Looks like we may be encountering a bit of turbulence as we descend," Cinnamus told her with a quick glance over his shoulder. "Make sure to secure yourself well."

"I will, Cinnamus." Mashing her back against the curved sidewall, Lula threaded her arms through two of the leather loops and held tight. It was at precarious times like this she wished the chariots had backs and roofs. At least the newer models like Cinnamus' came equipped with safety loops.

She was determined to make Cinnamus proud of her—to repay his kindness for taking her down to Earth after she'd disappointed him yet again. Yes, on this trip Lula would restore his confidence in her by being a conscientious model student and following his and Cupid's every instruction to the letter.

Every arrow she shot would be perfectly aimed, striking its target at the exact point of intent. She would wear her invisibility garment so as not to stand out among Earth's more modest inhabitants and she would remember to use her forgetfulness powder and the invisibility serum...or was it the other way around...as needed. She'd keep her textbook as well as her notebook with all the notes she'd jotted with her at all times so there'd be absolutely no fear of leaving them behind.

And, as difficult as it may be, she would refrain from practicing her matchmaking skills on any humans, regardless of how lovelorn they may be, before she connected with Cupid and the other students at his Earthly headquarters.

With those righteous, honorable oaths firmly in mind, Lula yelped when she felt the chariot dip. Both she and her possessions bounced about. Freeing one arm from a leather loop, she scrambled to secure all her scattered belongings. And then, to her abject horror, with the chariot's next sizeable dip Lula watched her notebook, textbook and suede pouch spring up and out of the chariot's confines, plummeting down through the air behind them.

All this before she'd even had a chance to study chapter twelve detailing Earth vernacular!

"Are you all right, Lula?"

Gasping as she endeavored to swallow a lump in her throat that refused to dislodge, Lula felt the heat of a crimson blush blast her cheeks. By the gods, she hadn't even reached Earth yet and already she was wreaking havoc. Jupiter only knew where her belongings would end up or who would find them—or what they would do with them!

If Cinnamus found out what had happened, he'd be beyond disillusioned with her for failing to keep her materials safe. But it had all happened so quickly. One minute she was making silent pledges to improve and the next—

"Lula?" Cinnamus called again with a quick glance in her direction as he tightened his grip on the reins and deftly directed his team of horses through the rough air pockets.

Lula clutched the rest of her belongings to her breast, swallowing back a tortured sob. Her heart beating a rapid tattoo, she said, "Yes. Yes, Cinnamus, I'm fine."

Lula wasn't sure how long after that the chariot touched ground. Cinnamus had initiated the veiling device before the chariot descended through the clouds to ensure their invisibility.

"We're in North America," Cinnamus explained. "In the state of Oregon and the city of Portland, at the city center. You'll see this waterfront park marked on your map. Cupid's headquarters is within walking distance from here," he gestured across the large park with an outstretched finger.

"Make sure to return to this precise spot when it's time for the academy's chariot to bring you and the other students back home in three days. Today is Saturday. That means you must be back here on Tuesday morning. Understand?"

"Three days. Tuesday. Yes, Cinnamus." Lula felt so ashamed, so bungling, she could barely make eye contact with him. She could feel his gaze on her and for a moment, just for the merest whisper of time, she contemplated telling him about her lost belongings. But now wasn't the time. No, first she'd redeem herself by being the star student on this trip, and then, when Cinnamus was thoroughly pleased and satisfied with her amazing progress, she'd alert him about the unintentional slight midair mishap.

Once the academy dispatched a team of investigators to search out and retrieve the items, all would be well again. The thought brought a touch of a smile to her lips.

The smile faded again when she thought about what might happen to her here on Earth, all alone and without her protective gear to keep her safe from harm until she found Cupid. Chapter eleven had outlined some of the nasty, frightening things that could occur to innocent, unsuspecting women at the hands of unscrupulous humans. Of course, she'd made notes about how to best protect herself should the need arise...but the notes were gone.

"You've been uncharacteristically quiet, Lula," Cinnamus said, a concerned look in his eyes. "And you look...a bit green. Did the chariot ride not sit well with you? I regret that it became rather bumpy toward the end and you were jostled."

"I'm fine. And your chariot driving was excellent." Gently resting her hand on his forearm, Lula broke into a full smile. "My mind was just focused on what I'll be doing here on Earth, that's all."

The genuine smile Cinnamus gave her in return warmed her to her soul. "I haven't told you this before because I didn't want you to think I was trying to butter you up for a better grade," she told him, "but you're a fine, dedicated teacher, Cinnamus. And a truly good man. I'm so very lucky to have you in my life. Your support and belief in me has meant more than you can possibly imagine. It's important that you remember that, Cinnamus...no matter what happens."

"Thank you." Cinnamus tousled her curls and grinned. "That's very nice to hear but you make it sound as though we'll never see each other again." He chuckled. "I'm quite sure you don't have a thing to worry about, Lula. You're a very good student and the only thing I can foresee happening because of this trip is that I'll be getting a stellar report from Cupid detailing your excellent matchmaking tasks."

"Oh Cinnamus...from your lips to Jupiter's ears," Lula muttered.

Chapter Two

"Sir, I must insist that you unhand me at once," Lula fumed as the repugnant stranger pawed at her. "As I've already explained, I have no intention of accompanying you to a dark alley or anywhere else to engage in sexual union."

"You got some mighty uppity talk for a street hooker," the man said, his words oozing like thick oil as he leered at her semi-nude form and tightened his grip on her wrist. "Now quit your griping, Cinderella, and let's go."

"I am not a hooker. And you've obviously mistaken me for this Cinderella person. I've already told you, my name is Lula and I'm on a mission to find Cupid."

He sneered at her, or perhaps he was attempting to grin. "Yeah, sure, we can play that game if you want. C'mon, let's go find him."

"You mean you know where he is? You'll take me to Cupid's headquarters?" Even though she was elated at the prospect, it was all Lula could do to look at the seedy individual's face for he seemed to be salivating as if she were a juicy slab of prime venison.

"Yeah, that's where I'm taking you. It'll just be you and me and Cupid and all them little angel things flying around."

"Cherubs," Lula offered helpfully.

"Whatever." He yanked her hard, pulling her as he walked through the park toward the street.

"Ow, you're hurting me." Lula struggled to pull away but she wasn't strong enough, so she tripped along, fighting to keep up with his long strides.

He made a sharp turn, heading into a long, dark corridor between two buildings. The bleak area smelled of rotten food and urine. Lula couldn't imagine Cupid selecting a fetid location such as this for his Earthly headquarters and that's exactly what she suggested to the sordid man.

He clearly didn't appreciate her astute observation, because before Lula knew what was happening, he'd thrown her against the cold brick wall, pinning her there as he undid his trousers.

"My dick is itching to fuck you good," he breathed in her face. His breath smelled just as pungent as the alley. "And don't try no funny business neither 'cause I got a knife in my pocket." To prove his point, he stuffed his hand in his jacket pocket, jabbing a sharp object into Lula's belly.

She gasped. "You were lying! You never had any intention of taking me to Cupid," she accused, irate at him as well as at her own naiveté. "That's not right. I trusted you to keep your word and —"

"Jesus fucking Christ, keep your trap shut, will ya? I don't got all day. Keep still or I'll have to really get rough with you." Then he began to lift her garment.

Good gods...she was about to be compromised!

Lula felt herself flush cold with fear. She'd never been in such a precarious situation before, although she'd read about them. Most recently in chapter eleven of her textbook.

"I must warn you that I'm fully prepared to take appropriate action," Lula boasted through fear-spiked breaths as she pressed her thighs together. "I am well versed on self-defense tactics," she went on, wishing she still had her book or notes available for reference. Her mind raced as she fought to recall some of the maneuvers and detailed illustrations she'd studied during the chariot ride. Yes...yes, she remembered now...

"Unless you unhand me," she cautioned with an air of emboldened self-confidence she didn't really feel, "I shall be forced to inflict bodily harm. It is not my desire to mete out damage to any mortal being, so I beseech you to reconsider your dishonorable plan."

"Fuck!" the man said as he grabbed her neck, pressing so hard Lula almost blacked out for lack of air. "I thought I told you to shut up, you stupid cunt." The next instant, she experienced the distinct feel of his penis trying to zero in on her nether regions.

Expelling something akin to a tribal yell, Lula whacked the palm of her hand hard just under his nose, and as he staggered back a bit, she grabbed his shirt to hold him steady while she thrust her knee up between his legs, connecting with his groin. Just for good measure, she kicked him hard on one knee with the golden-tipped toe of her sandal.

Collapsing to the filth-strewn pavement, the foul man shrieked like a little girl, one hand at his face and the other cradling his injured manhood.

Lula straightened her academy uniform and tucked stray locks of her hair back into place. "Now, sir, if you'll excuse me, I must be off to continue my search." She stepped over the intended rapist, only to stop after taking a few steps.

Turning back to him, she added, "Should you be foolish enough to impose yourself on any other unwilling female in the future, I shall personally seek you out and slice the offending, dangling bits of manflesh off your body. Is that understood?"

Satisfied with his voluminous wail of a response, Lula continued on her quest to find Cupid.

* * * * *

"At least another hour? What the hell are you talking about, Zeb?" Dakin Dronyer bellowed into the telephone. "I'm in over my head here. I don't know what the fuck I'm doing."

"Look, I'm sorry, Dakin," Zeb told his brother. "It's not like I planned to have my car give up the ghost while I was at the supply store out here in the sticks, you know?"

"Yeah but —"

Zeb's tuneful, voluminous sigh interrupted Dake's protest. "If you have to leave and lock up the shop," Zeb said haltingly, "just go ahead. I'll understand. Even if..." He paused and Dake knew damn well it was for dramatic effect. "Even if it means I'll be losing an entire day's revenue. On a Saturday. The biggest, most important income day of my week."

"Look, Zeb, I just can't –"

"And even if means that it will probably piss off all my loyal, paying customers who are depending on me for the delivery of their promised floral arrangements today," Zeb went on. "Like the Wentworths. It's their fiftieth anniversary. If that pricey floral delivery doesn't make it to Mrs. Wentworth today, it means big moolah down the drain."

"And remember Mom and Dad's neighbor, Mrs. Jorgenson? It's her first birthday since she lost her beloved Pete. She's been grieving for nearly a year and those flowers would really help cheer her up, Dakin. Remember how sweet and attentive she was to all of us after Mom died – and then how she kept us supplied in brownies and cookies and mystery casseroles after Dad died?"

"Yeah," Dake admitted, recalling how the frail old woman had fussed over them, intent on easing their grief. "She's a sweet old lady."

"An angel. The very least we can do is send her a really nice arrangement."

"Sticking a flower in a pot looks nice to me," Dake grumbled.

"I bookmarked a page in the catalog," Zeb offered. "Just copy what you see there. It'll be a snap."

"I thought Mrs. Jorgenson's husband died a decade ago."

"He did. Pete was her cockatoo."

Dake barked a laugh. "She's been in mourning for a year over a fucking bird?"

"Honestly, Dakin..." Zeb sighed. "Sometimes you can be so unsympathetic. Pete was more than just a bird. He was her companion and friend."

"Oh right, I understand," Dake lied. He knew better than to take a ridiculous discussion about some stupid dead bird any further with his brother. It would just lead to another argument where he'd be accused of being mean, cold and heartless while Zeb came off as the kind, caring and sensitive one. Which was true but Dake didn't want to waste time in another endless sensitivity discussion with Zeb.

"Look, Zeb, it's not that I mind watching your business for a little while but the stench in here is pretty hard to take, you know? It's making me nauseous."

"What stench?" Zeb bristled. "The flowers at Cupid's Headquarters are always fresh and in perfect condition, Dakin."

"Well, fresh or not, they still stink to high heaven. Jesus, Zeb, I feel like I'm a stiff in a goddamned funeral parlor, for chrissakes. I don't know how you can take that sickly sweet smell all day, every day."

"Unlike the manly smell of grease and burning rubber or wire or whatever the heck it is that you're always fiddling with, you mean?" Zeb sniffed.

"That comes along with the territory of being an electrical contractor," Dake explained. "Look, Zeb, even if I *wanted* to be here I don't have the faintest idea how to put all this flower crap together to look like the stuff in these pictures."

Dake groaned as he looked at the floral arrangement catalog and all the frilly related shit around him. There were all sorts of flowers inside and outside of refrigerated glass front cases, containers of all shapes, materials and sizes and all the mysterious-looking stuff that he supposed went into the containers to hold the flowers in place. "This is your area of expertise, Zebulon, not mine."

"Trust me, Dakin, if there was anyone else available, *anyone*, I would have called them instead. It's just you and the delivery driver for now. Poor Edwina's sick as a dog with a vicious head cold and Alfred's got classes in the morning. In the meantime, just let your inner woman come out, Dakin, and you'll be fine."

Dake rolled his eyes and tsked. "For the umpteenth time, I don't have an inner woman."

"Of course you do. All men do."

"Uh-huh, maybe all *gay* men do, Zeb, but your big brother is straight, in case you've forgotten."

"You sound positively green with envy, Dakin."

"Hey, knock it off. I am *not* envious that you're gay. How many times do I have to tell you that?"

"Sorry." Zeb laughed. "I can't help it. You're so damned easy."

"Ha-ha, very funny. Can't you tell those lazy sons of bitches it's an emergency and that you need your car fixed right now, pronto?"

"Well," Zeb said in muffled confidential tones, "there are two lovely, muscular young men working on it right now. I'm sure they're doing their brawny best. Alfred will be there in another hour or so, maybe less. Besides, Dakin, I thought you told me you had a day off today and you didn't have any pressing plans."

Dake cursed under his breath. Partially because he'd been stupid enough to open his big mouth and let Zeb know he was free today and, dammit, partially because his brother was always there for him whenever Dake needed him. The least he could do was to man Zeb's froufrou flower shop for a couple of lousy hours without pissing and moaning about it.

"Yeah, all right, Zeb, I'll—" When the bell for the front door jingled, Dake glanced up. "Fuck," he said.

"What's wrong?" After a moment of silence, Zeb said again, "Dakin, what's wrong?"

"You got a customer," Dake said, doing his best to keep his eyeballs from bugging while he scraped his jaw up from the floor. "She's gorgeous...and she's practically naked." He felt his cock jerk hard in his jeans.

"Probably not Mrs. Jorgenson," Zeb offered.

"Definitely not. Gotta go. Talk to you later. And take your time, Zeb." Dake hung up the phone and locked eyes with the dazzling vision walking toward him.

* * * * *

"At last! Cupid's Headquarters! I'm sorry I'm so late," Lula said, practically breathless as she scurried to the front of the large flower-strewn room to meet with the head of the academy. "Are you all right, Cupid?" she went on. "You look ill or something." When he didn't answer, Lula snapped her fingers, bringing his gaze up from her breasts to her eyes.

"Sonuvabitch," Cupid whispered as he gawked at her.

"Son of who?" She slanted him a curious look, her ego deflating a few notches upon the realization he'd evidently mistaken her for one of the other students—a male of all things!

"No, Cupid, it's me, Lula. Daughter of Arrius and Venuvia. I'm a woman." She straightened her shoulders, thrusting out her breasts so he'd be sure to recognize her womanly attributes. She watched his gaze slide to her breasts again, lingering there as if he'd never seen them before.

"No shit," Cupid responded in a most uncharacteristic tongue-lolling fashion.

"Oh, you're displeased that I'm not wearing my traveling garment, is that it? I can explain. You see, while I was in the chariot, one of my bags accidentally flew off before I could catch it. It was the one with my traveling clothes, which is why I'm still dressed like this."

She motioned to her sheer outfit and Cupid followed her gesture with his eyes, this time landing his gaze at her pussy as he leaned over the counter to get a better look.

She paused for a moment, finding herself quite taken with Cupid's Earthly disguise. The youthful mortal form he'd assumed had inky-black hair, chocolate-brown eyes, a tall, lean, yet muscular, build. And his golden tan was enhanced by the open-necked pale blue denim shirt he wore. Of course, Cupid was always a breathtakingly beautiful man, no matter what his chosen disguise. But Lula thought she liked this one most of all. He looked rough and manly and strong and...famished.

"You seem to be drooling, Cupid. Are you hungry?"

"Hungry?" His eyes roved over her from top to bottom and back up again. "Oh yeah, I'm suddenly starving, all right," he finally replied.

"Really? With all these lovely flowers to munch on?" Lula said. "I'm surprised, Cupid. Have you tasted them yet?" He shook his head to say no. She snagged a blood-red rose from just inside one of the cool cases and munched on the petals. "Mmm, very

tasty. Almost as good as the ones we have up on Olympus. Here, try it." Lula held the rose out to him.

"Olympus?" She nodded and he gave her a curious look. "I think I'll take a pass," he said. "But, uh, you just go right ahead and chow down on the flowers to your heart's content, honey."

"Thanks, I'm hungry from the journey. My lunch must have been in the same bag as my traveling clothes. And what's even worse, my invisibility powder...or liquid," she shrugged, "or whatever it is, was in the pouch too. Along with..." Her teeth sank into her bottom lip and she hesitated. Trilling a deep sigh, she plunged ahead. "Along with my textbook and notes. I'm so sorry, Cupid, truly I am. Please don't tell Cinnamus, he'll be so terribly disappointed in me. You won't say anything, will you?"

Offering a rather peculiar smile, Cupid shook his head back and forth slowly. "Not a word, honey. Not a single word."

"Oh good. Thank you." She felt her posture relax at that assurance. "You have no idea how much better that makes me feel. Especially after the remarkably difficult time I've had since Cinnamus dropped me off at the park. As I searched for you, women actually growled at me, voicing their displeasure at my appearance. Can you imagine?"

His elbows propped on the counter, Cupid broke into a slow smile. "Yup. I don't doubt it for a minute."

"And strange grimy men proposed the most intimate acts." Lula rolled her eyes in disbelief as she recalled the unprovoked incidents. "A couple of them even tried to force me to accompany them against my consent."

Cupid stood straight again, looking at her with concern. "Some jerk-offs tried to hurt you? Where, outside the store?"

He came around the counter, looking for all the world like a warrior ready to do battle for his lady fair. The fierce look in his eyes sent a bold ripple of pleasure to her clit, which made it an excellent time for her to remember that Cupid was a married man. Yes, Psyche was indeed a lucky woman to have a man as brave and fearless and yet as loving, caring and sexually adept as Cupid for her husband.

"It's all right now. I met with no real harm." Lula stilled him from action by taking hold of his arm, which felt strong, hard and sinewy. She noticed he was quite tall as he stood near her now. And altogether far too sexy. "Fortunately, I remembered the lesson in chapter eleven on disengaging a male during aggressive behavior by causing intense, throbbing discomfort to his testicles with a firm, swift jab of the knee."

Now Cupid's mouth quirked into a wider smile. "You kneed some guy in the balls?"

"Two men, actually. I'm sorry. I didn't want to cause harm to anyone while on Earth but I'm afraid I had no choice but to incapacitate them." She shrugged. "It wouldn't have been so bad if I'd been able to find your headquarters right away after we landed but..." She tugged a crinkled piece of paper from one of her pouches.

"Honestly, Cupid, I want you to know it's not that I forgot to bring a map," she explained. "It's, well, it's just that I brought the wrong one. See?" She turned the paper toward him. "This map is for the New Year's party Saturn hosted back in December on the planet Skrodoe. So, naturally, I had to stop and ask people for directions to your headquarters after I disembarked and the chariot took to the air again."

"Naturally," Cupid agreed. "After the chariot flew away, right? Back to the planet Skrodoe."

"No, back to Olympus."

"Oh yeah...right."

Lula squinted her eyes, studying the man closely. He wore faded blue jeans and she couldn't help herself from relishing a lingering gaze at the sizeable bulge at his crotch. Interesting. Like most every female, she'd always found Cupid to be attractive and desirable, but she'd never before experienced the intensity of lustful feelings that she was at this moment. And that thought suddenly made her uneasy. What if he wasn't really...

"You...you *are* Cupid, aren't you?" she whispered, leaning close.

"Is that who you want me to be, honey?" The man smiled at her. It was a full, bright, dazzling white-toothed smile that set her insides on fire. "'Cause if that's what you want then, yeah, I can be Cupid."

Breathing a sigh of relief, Lula smiled. "Good. I was worried there for a moment because you've been looking at me so strangely. Cinnamus warned me you might be..." She looked left, then right, before whispering, "*Incognito*." Lula winked and then he winked back at her. "At least now I understand Cinnamus' concern over my academy uniform. He was right. By the looks and comments, I do believe people thought I was seeking payment for sex."

Cupid arched an eyebrow. "And are you?"

Lula laughed. "Well, of course not, Cupid. I give of myself freely, just the way all of us nymphs do."

"Ah, so you're not a hooker, you're a nymph, huh?"

"Of course. You know I am."

"Right." Cupid appraised her. "So how come I don't see any wings?"

Clearly she was being tested, but what a strange set of questions Cupid had employed. "In the first place, Cupid, you know that not all nymphs have wings."

"Uh-huh. And you're one of the wingless variety, I assume."

"No. Mine only come out when—um, at certain times," Lula explained.

"And this isn't one of those times?" the too handsome Cupid continued, snickering a bit.

Along with struggling to keep her libido under control because of the raw sexual magnetism Cupid exuded, now Lula found herself even more uncomfortable because he seemed to be teasing her or, worse yet, flirting with her. And that wouldn't do at all.

Why, if Psyche ever suspected that Lula had been flirting with her husband, Lula would be expelled from Cupid Academy. And that would only be the beginning. She shivered at the thought of the fearsome vengeance Psyche might exact.

Lula narrowed her gaze. "Why are you asking me all of these questions, Cupid, when you already know the answers? Is this part of my final exam?"

"Look, babe, I don't know what exam you're talking about and I don't care if you have wings or not. It's been a hell of a long time since I've seen a working girl that looked like you—or who had such a great line. Cupid, nymphs, chariots, Olympus. It's all very cute. But you don't have to keep it up, honey, because I'm already hard just looking at those big gorgeous tits of yours. And look at those curls covering your pussy. Mmm-mmm, I don't remember when I've been with a natural blonde, if ever."

Lula's jaw dropped. Cupid was looking at her as if she were a multi-course banquet again and he was clearly engaging in barefaced sexual banter with her. Much to her chagrin it made her feel all hot and twittery between her thighs, causing rivulets of her juices to dribble down her legs.

While he was beautiful beyond words, Lula would never for even one moment entertain thoughts of coupling with Cupid because he and Psyche were joined for eternity. Woe be unto anyone who angered the major gods on Olympus.

But this was simply so unfair! Not only was Cupid looking particularly lickable in his latest Earthly guise, but he was clearly and purposely tempting her as well. It was a cruel test to be sure, but one she imagined the other female students must have endured too. As hot, wet and needy as she felt, Lula most certainly would not jeopardize her entire future by succumbing to Cupid's leering suggestions.

"I think I understand," she said. "You're speaking in some sort of coded Earth vernacular while you're incognito, right, Cupid? No doubt I would understand your meanings better if I'd had an opportunity to study chapter twelve before my textbook flew out of the chariot. It appears that you are testing my ability to be clearheaded and exercise restraint even when exceedingly sexually aroused. Am I correct? Because this is certainly not the way you usually talk to me."

She narrowed her gaze at him again and took a deep sniff. "Have you been partaking of the fruit of the vine?"

Cupid laughed, clapping his hand against his chest—his big, broad, solid-looking chest. "If I'm drunk it's only with desire for you, and maybe from the scent of all these flowers." He gestured around him. "What did you say your name was?"

"Don't you recognize me, Cupid? It's me, Lula." She wondered if perhaps he might be suffering from some form of travel sickness from his chariot ride earlier. It had been known to happen to others, causing a temporary state somewhat mimicking inebriation. "Remember? I'm in Perfect Love Matches 101 at the academy this year. A freshman. Cinnamus is my instructor."

"Yeah, sure, I recognize you. The name's Dake." He extended his hand. "Glad to meet you, Lula."

"Dake? You mean that's your Earthly name for this trip?"

"Yup, short for Dakin. It's the only name I've got, sweetheart, on Earth or the planet Skrodoo or anywhere else as far as I know."

"I don't understand. You told me you were Cupid."

"Eh...no, not technically, I didn't." He chuckled. "You just assumed I was Cupid because of the sign." He gestured to the large three-dimensional pink block lettering high on the wall behind them, in back of the counter. "It's a natural mistake."

She gazed at the gilt-edged words, reading them aloud. "*Cupid's Headquarters*. It's right there in plain lettering."

Scanning her surroundings, Lula felt certain this was the right place. There were pedestals topped with miniature statues of the gods and a lovely border around all the walls depicting the Roman deities, not to mention the generous representation of Cupid's form and likeness almost everywhere she looked.

"I must have the right place," she muttered. "This place most certainly has Cupid's personal touch."

"Yeah, that's 'cause Zeb's really into mythology."

A distinct feeling of apprehension zigzagged up Lula's spine. "Where are all the other students? Are they already out on assignment?"

"I usually don't go in for hookers," the man called Dake said, failing to address her inquiry, "even high-priced ones—don't have to—but damn if you're not about the sweetest little thing to come my way since...well, since I can remember. And I don't even mind if you're nutty as a fruitcake."

He chuckled. *Chuckled!* This man was laughing at her!

"Listen, honey, I'm on duty now. There's a shitload of flower crap I have to put together for...Cupid...but I'll be free in a couple hours. You want to come back here to meet me or should I pick you up someplace?"

Mustering all her bravado, Lula stood her ground, refusing to break eye contact with this Dake. "What have you done with him?"

"Who?"

"Cupid, of course. Where is he? If you've harmed him in any way, I'll—"

"Whoa! Whoa, take it easy, sweetheart," Dake said, stepping back, his hands raised in a gesture of surrender. "Zeb is fine, okay? He's just waiting for his car to get repaired, that's all. He should be back sometime within the hour."

"You mean his chariot is broken?" Lula was thoroughly confused. Nothing and no one had been making any sense since she disembarked from Cinnamus' chariot earlier. "Who is this Zeb you speak of?"

"Zebulon." Dake shrugged his big meaty shoulders. "A-K-A Cupid. He's the one who runs this place. I'm just filling in for him until he gets back."

"So Cupid is using the name of Zebulon while on the Earthly plane for this trip?"

Dake gave her another of those strange looks. "All I can tell you is he's been Zeb for as long as I've known him."

"Are the other students with him?" Lula asked.

"Students? Well, he mentioned that Alfred had classes this morning. Is that what you mean? Say," Dake went on without waiting for her to answer, "are you here to fill in for Edwina? 'Cause I could sure use someone who knows what the hell they're doing here until Zeb gets back."

"If you're asking me if I'm prepared to work, the answer is yes. That's what I'm here for, of course. I have my bow and quiver of arrows with me, so just point me in the right direction and I'll get started." Lula saw Dake's jaw drop just a bit.

"You've got a bow and arrows?"

Lula nodded. "Secured to my shoulder."

Dake craned his neck. "Don't tell me...they're invisible, right? Just like your wings." He had the audacity to smirk at her then.

"Well of course they are. You know the standard student issue is designed to be invisible to the eyes of mortals—" Lula gasped. "You're mortal!"

Dake clapped his hands to his chest and abdomen, as if checking himself out. "Yup, last time I looked."

"Ahhh, so that explains why my body is preparing itself for sexual union," Lula said matter-of-factly. Dake's jaw seemed to drop again. "Naturally, I got worried when I thought you were Cupid because I'm not supposed to be sexually attracted to Cupid to the point of feeling feverish."

"Naturally," Dake responded. "So are, uh, are you saying you want to fuck me?"

"Fuck you? You mean have sexual intercourse with you?" Dake nodded and Lula did in return. "Oh yes. Absolutely. I think that would be very exciting. A multi-orgasmic experience. Shall we do it now?" She looked at his mouth and frowned. "Is there something wrong with your jaw, Dake? It seems to hang open whenever I speak to you."

Dake snapped his mouth shut. "This whole thing is crazy," he mumbled. "I'm so fucking hard I could—"

"Are you making reference to your cock? Because I noticed that it seems to be straining at the seams of your blue jeans. It must be quite large." She licked her lips. "I can't wait to see it and touch it."

"Holy fucking shit," Dake growled. "Stop it right there or I swear to God I'm going to come all over myself right here in my pants and that would definitely *not* be a good thing."

"Of course not. I want you to come inside my pussy. It's all ready for you too. All hot and wet and slick." Lula smiled as Dake's eyes grew wide and sweat beaded above his upper lip. Clearly, he was just as ready as she was to sample the immense joys of sexual union. "We just need to find a place to—"

The bell jangled as the door to the shop opened and several people filed in. Lula watched as Dake scooted back behind the counter, grabbed a peppermint pink smock from a hook behind him and tossed it to Lula. The words *Cupid's Headquarters* were embroidered over a chest pocket embellished with little hearts.

"Put this on. *Now!*" Dake commanded, and Lula complied as soon as she shrugged out of the shoulder strap that held her bow and quiver of arrows against her back. Dake looked at her with a baffled expression. "What the hell are you doing?" he asked.

"It's my invisible bow and arrows," Lula told him. "I can't get into the garment until I remove them from my back, otherwise they'll stick out and I'll look like a hunchback."

Mumbling some sort of oath, Dake rolled his eyes skyward. Once Lula had finally slipped into the smock, she stood there looking around. "Now what?" Dake grumbled. "What are you looking for?"

"A safe place to store my bow and arrows. I can't afford to have them get into the wrong hands. Especially after I've already lost the other things I told you about."

She wondered why Dake gave her that really strange look again. After all, it was a reasonable request. Since he didn't seem to want to assist her, Lula searched a bit more until she discovered the deep shelves beneath the counter.

"Can I put them down here?" she asked. "Do you think they'll be safe there?"

"Oh absolutely," Dake said through a choked laugh. "I guarantee it."

The weighty bow and arrow set clanked with a distinct thud, followed by a scraping sound as Lula shoved them to the back of the bottom shelf.

Dake whipped his head down toward where Lula knelt. "What was that?" he asked, looking stunned.

Lula gazed up at him, doing her best not to utter an impatient tsk. "I already told you. My bow and arrows."

Dake's jaw dropped.

Such a pity. Sometimes the sexiest looking specimens of manhood turned out to be the ones most lacking in the intelligence department.

Chapter Three

Dakin Dronyer felt as though he'd fallen down the rabbit hole or entered The Twilight Zone or something equally farfetched and preposterous. From the moment the luscious, nearly naked Lula had walked into his brother's flower shop, Dake's life was turned upside down, inside out and scrambled beyond recognition.

When the screwy little dame knelt down, supposedly depositing her invisible archery set on the shelf, and Dake heard that unmistakable clunk, he worried that maybe *he* might be the one who'd lost his marbles and not the little blonde doll with the body made for sin.

If he wasn't bonkers, then there had to be a logical, feasible explanation for the clunking noise. Dake got down on all fours, wincing as his full-blown erection lodged uncomfortably against his leg. He peeked into the bottom shelf, expecting to find something else there that might account for the thud and the scraping he'd heard.

Nothing. The shelf was empty. Maybe she was some sort of a ventriloquist who could throw sound.

He glanced back up at her, not realizing what a spectacular view his position afforded until he noted the moisture-kissed golden curls at her pussy. It was all he could do not to meet that glistening sweet spot with his mouth, sucking and nibbling until he'd had his fill of her intoxicating juices. He knew they'd be intoxicating because everything else about her made him feel like a drunken man.

Finally tearing his eyes from the enticing vision, he adjusted his gaze, focusing on her appealing face instead. She eyed him curiously as he reached deep into the shelf. When his fingers connected with something and it shifted beneath his touch, he yelped, yanking his hand out as if he'd been burned.

Shit. He could swear he'd felt leather and cylindrical rods like...like arrows... No. It wasn't possible. He was going nuts. That's all there was to it. Somewhere along the line, he'd had a complete mental breakdown without even being aware of it.

And if Lula was nothing but a hallucination, then Dake never wanted to get cured.

His sense of adventure quickly abandoning him, Dake decided he really didn't want to explore the shelf any further. Nope. What he *thought* he felt was simply an illusion brought on because...because his mind was probably just playing tricks on him because he was so goddamned horny. Yeah, that was it.

Or maybe it had something to do with the oppressive hangover he was nursing after all that beer at the new microbrew pub last night. Definitely. It was probably a combination of the two. No need for further investigation, he convinced himself.

"What do I need to do?" Lula asked, smiling up at him once Dake got to his feet again.

Oh baby, take my cock in your pretty little mouth and suck it until I shoot my load down the back of your throat, Dake longed to suggest as he looked into her big baby blues. "These are the orders we have to get ready and here's Zeb's book with all the photos showing how to put the stuff together," Dake wisely said instead.

She was driving him crazy. It didn't matter that she was wearing that big-ass smock because Dake already knew damned well what was beneath all that material, waiting for him. All that plump, pink soft flesh in need of his attention.

Without a doubt, the woman was a walking wet dream. Everything about her was sweet, juicy perfection. He felt his cock grow harder at that thought, which seemed impossible. It was getting to the point where it was almost scary, because he sure as hell couldn't recall his cock ever being this hard or this impatient for detonation before.

The problem, of course, was the fact that Lula was certifiably loony. A real wacko. At least that's what Dake thought until the whole invisible bow and arrow thing came up.

Aside from the incredibly weird—not to mention utterly impossible—arrow thing, there was the fact that this woman was walking around the streets of Portland just about as close to nude as you could get. Not that that in itself was really all that strange. Portland was known for its eccentric street characters.

But Lula was different. She was beautiful enough to start a riot in the streets for one thing. And, aside from her crazy talk about Cupid and being a student at his school on Olympus, she seemed to be pretty intelligent. Her mind just seemed sort of...tousled. Like her curly blonde hair.

And then there was that business about her being convinced she was a nymph. With invisible wings, no less.

"Would it be all right if I substituted some amaryllis, hydrangeas, tulips and ranunculus in this arrangement?" Lula asked him. "I just think the colors and shapes would blend together so beautifully, Dake, don't you?"

"Hey, knock your socks off, cutie." He winked.

"I'm barefoot today," she answered seriously. "But I can knock off my sandals if it pleases you."

"Uh, no...that's okay." Dake drew in a deep breath, expelling it slowly. "What I meant," he clarified, "is go ahead and make up the flower arrangements any way you like, as long as they look good, because we have to please Zeb's customers."

"Absolutely. I shall make each arrangement as splendid as possible. Zeb won't be able to keep himself from giving me a high grade on this floral task. I'll make Cinnamus proud of me yet."

"Right," Dake offered, watching her bustle around, humming some haunting melody as she got to work. "If you say so."

The most uncanny thing of all was that Lula was just as hot to fuck Dake as he was to fuck her. He had no doubt about that because she certainly made no bones about it. Oh yeah, she wanted him all right.

Not that he didn't have plenty of hot babes proposing the same sort of thing to him on a fairly regular basis. In fact, he usually had more women than he could handle and juggling them all could sometimes be a problem. It really wasn't all that surprising. After all, he was a good-looking guy and he kept himself buff. But this was...different. *Lula* was different

She had an extraordinary way about her that made Dake feel like he was a prepubescent kid back in school again, ogling some gorgeous unattainable chick or curvy off-limits teacher and getting all tongue-tied and dry in the mouth at the very idea of talking to her.

He'd never had a woman so openly and plainly express an interest in enjoying a bout of sizzling hot sex while somehow managing to come across like a sweet, wide-eyed virgin. What a turn-on. Lula brought out his protective instincts. Made him feel like a caveman. Made him want to beat his chest and howl.

He watched and listened as Lula flitted about, waiting on customers and making the shop feel alive with her dazzling smile and vibrant personality. The flowers didn't seem so smelly or bad to be around anymore. In fact, Dake could imagine forking over a tidy sum to his younger brother for a truckload of blooms just so he could toss Lula in the middle of all that soft, fragrant color and fuck her brains out.

"Do you know that man?" Lula asked as one of the customers left the shop. "His name is Mr. Winshaw."

"No, why?"

"He has a mistress," Lula informed Dake indignantly. "He actually bragged to me about it. Can you imagine? And I do believe from the conversation that, if I would have encouraged him, he would have asked me to become a second mistress."

"He got fresh with you?" Dake said, feeling that unfamiliar protective thing kick in again and prepared to duke it out with the short, paunchy bald guy who just left.

"No, not really. I started asking questions about his wife and that slowed him down a bit," Lula explained. "I convinced him that whatever he bought his mistress should be dwarfed by the arrangement he chose for his wife. And then I signed him up for the flower of the month delivery program—for his wife only. It's the least he can do for her, considering his philandering ways, don't you think?"

"You're pretty amazing," Dake told her. "You know that?"

"I can be at times," Lula answered matter-of-factly. "Especially when I'm paying attention and don't let my thoughts drift. Do you think Cupid will be pleased with the way I handled Mr. Winshaw?"

"By selling him a subscription to the flower of the month club?" Dake chuckled as he thought of the euphoric whoop of joy Zeb would give when he found out about the pricey transaction. "Trust me, he'll be thrilled."

Lula was an anomaly, an enigma, and Dake couldn't fucking wait to learn everything about her, from the tips of her phenomenal tits to the secrets within that golden-topped pussy to...yeah, even to her screwy mind and how it worked. If he believed in such things Dake could almost imagine that Lula really was from another planet, or Olympus, or wherever – somewhere other than Portland, Oregon, USA.

Suddenly he couldn't wait for Zeb to return because Dake's whole body was itching to get Lula naked and do all sorts of carnal things to her. Yup, as soon as Zebulon got back to the shop, Dake would be able to do a lusty in-depth exploration of the intriguing Lula, but first they had to scramble to finish up all the flower shit that had to get done.

It was miraculous that his dick hadn't already burst out of his jeans and somehow soared into her pussy like a heat-seeking missile while he'd been working alongside Lula for the past hour. Dake swore to God he'd never been so damn hard and geared up for fucking in all his goddamn life.

But first things first, he reminded himself for the umpteenth time. And that would be Zeb's damned flower orders.

If it weren't for Lula's amazing speed and creativity when it came to the construction of detailed, striking floral arrangements, Dake would have screwed things up for Zeb big time. And the customers loved her...especially the male customers.

Dake actually found himself getting jealous when she received too much attention, which was weird because he hadn't been jealous over a girl since he was a kid in school and Janie Swanson broke his heart when she left him for some freckle-faced punk.

Lula seemed to be a natural at all the flower stuff, right down to which blooms were edible and which, like the azaleas and hyacinth, weren't. She happily furnished customers with the occasional demonstration, encouraging them to take a nibble on the gardenias, lavender and honeysuckle, while cautioning them not to ingest the honeysuckle berries because they were poisonous.

She could make the most boring topic or discussion interesting because of the way she bubbled with enthusiasm.

Hell, if Dake had walked into Cupid's Headquarters looking to pick up a bouquet of flowers, he would have walked out buying all sorts of stuff he hadn't intended on too, just the way it was happening with most of the customers Lula helped. Dake was so busy ringing up sales on the register and writing up orders because of Lula's suggestions that he almost didn't have time to turn around. Or think about his aching cock.

Okay, that was a lie. Appeasing his cock was definitely the number one thought occupying space in his mind.

"You have an amazing knowledge about flowers," he told her, hoping to distract his lusty thoughts. "Have you worked for a florist?"

"No, I just love flowers. I took a course in botany one year. That's where I learned so much."

"Where, at the university?"

Lula shook her head back and forth. "At the academy, on Olympus."

"So..." Dake started, not quite sure how to proceed, "just to make sure I have this straight, when you say *Olympus*, you're referring to some little town outside Portland. Or maybe in some other state...here in the USA, I mean, right?"

Lula laughed. She had a clear, tinkling, beautiful laugh that made her eyes sparkle. "Oh Dake, you have such a wonderful sense of humor," was her response.

"Which means you're talking about the mythical place with all the gods and goddesses and Hercules and —"

"And Cupid and Apollo and Jupiter and Minerva and all the rest. Yes, exactly, that's what I mean. You may know it better as *Mount Olympus*." She smiled up at him as she finished placing a full sprig of baby's breath in the floral arrangement.

Just as Dake was about to pursue a line of questioning relating to the fact that Lula thought she was a nymph with invisible wings, the door to the shop jangled and Zebulon Dronyer crossed the threshold.

"Tada! Cupid has returned!" Zeb announced with a grand flourish as he traipsed toward the front of the shop, arms loaded with bags and boxes.

"Cupid!" Lula shouted, bouncing in place, making Dake sorry she wore the blousy smock because he could just imagine those big breasts of hers springing along in time to her exuberant movements. "Oh I'm so glad you're finally here. I thought I might never meet up with you."

Divesting himself of packages, Zeb eyed Lula over his shoulder. "Well, aren't you the little darling," he said, donning a pink smock, turning up the collar and zhuzhing the sleeves to mid forearm. "Dakin, wherever did you ever find this adorable little breath of fresh air? She's so unlike your other...*friends*." Zeb engaged in a snarky laugh.

"Well, I —"

"It's me, Lula!" she burst in, as if that would explain everything.

"Lula, hmm?" Zeb said, walking toward her. "Well, it's a pleasure to meet you, sweetie pie, I'm Zebulon Dronyer, otherwise known as Cupid."

He offered her a long-fingered bejeweled hand, which she clasped and shook with enthusiasm.

"And this," he made a broad gesture, "as I'm sure Dakin has already informed you, is Cupid's Headquarters, my humble little spot of floral heaven here in Portland. Oh good gawd, Dakin!" he gasped, catching a glimpse of the striking, colorful arrangements lined up on the counter. "These are sensational. Exquisite. I'm amazed. Speechless! You really learn fast, brother. See, I told you that you have an inner woman." He winked.

"It's Lula's handiwork," Dake said. "Every bit of it. Except for this." He reached beneath the counter and plopped a sorry-looking vase with an even sorrier-looking bunch of droopy flowers and leaves in front of Zeb, who recoiled in horror.

"Thank the Lord for Lula. Why didn't you tell me your new girlfriend is a floral arranger?" Zeb gave Lula another admiring appraisal. "Now that's what I call convenient."

"She's not my girlfriend," Dake told him. "She's —"

"Pity," Zeb said.

"She's a nymph...from Mount Olympus," Dake finished, twirling his index finger at his temple indicating Lula's lack of mental stability while she focused her attention on Zeb.

"I'm in the Perfect Love Matches 101 course," Lula offered. "Cinnamus is my instructor."

"He's the guy who flew her here...*in his chariot*," Dake further edified.

"Is that so?" Zeb said, taking Lula's hands in his and giving her a warm smile. "Well, darling, you can just consider yourself hired until your chariot comes dashing back to get you. Your artistry is simply extraordinary." He fingered one of her floral arrangements, clearly marveling at Lula's creative skills.

"You mean I can work here?" Zeb nodded. "Wonderful! I do so enjoy working with flowers, Cupid. Oh!" Lula's hand flew to her mouth as she scanned the area. "I'm sorry," she continued in hushed tones. "I forgot. I should be calling you *Zebulon* while you're in your Earthly guise as a flamboyant gay florist, shouldn't I?"

Zeb laughed out loud at her judicious observation. "It doesn't matter at all, my lovely little nymph," he said. "You may call me whatever you like, as long as you promise to stay and work for me." Claspng Lula's hand in his, he leaned over and kissed it. "Mmm, you are simply delectable."

"The chariot won't return for three whole days, so I'll be able to get plenty accomplished," Lula assured him.

"Please don't encourage her, Zeb," Dake warned. "She honestly believes all that fairytale stuff."

"So what? A little fantasy never hurt anyone, I always say," Zeb replied with an elegant shrug. "Besides, she doesn't seem depressed or suicidal or harmful to others. You're not any of those things," he asked Lula, "are you, darling?"

"Oh no." Lula shook her head negatively. "Aside from being somewhat absentminded and maybe a little forgetful and...well, just a bit disorganized, I'm quite normal."

"See, Dakin?" Zeb said. "She's just as normal as you or me."

"Yeah, I'd say she's just about on your level of normalcy," Dake retorted. "But don't toss me in the mix, okay?"

"Will any of the other students be working with me here?"

"Alfred is the only other student currently in my employ. He'll think you're just yummy." Zeb winked. "Oh for heaven's sake," he said to Dake. "Get that vicious attack

dog look out of your eye. Alfred is gay. My, my, I don't think I've ever seen you get jealous before."

Dake blew out a stream of air. "I am *not* jealous," he lied.

"Mmm-hmm." Zeb turned his attention to Lula. "So just how old are you, darling? Twenty-five? Certainly no more than thirty at most."

Lula giggled. "Oh Cupid, you flatter me. I'm three hundred fifty." She beamed a proud smile that telegraphed utter disregard for her supposedly advanced age.

"Three hundred and—" Dake choked out, unable to finish because a sane, rational response simply escaped him.

"I see," Zeb said, as if Lula's absurd answer was the most ordinary response he'd ever heard when asking a woman her age—which was never a wise thing to do as far as Dake was concerned. "Well, perhaps it's time my brother spent some quality time with an older woman. I've heard they can do wonders, Dakin." Zeb gave a devilish smile.

"Brother?" Lula turned to Dake. "I don't understand. I thought you said you were mortal. How can you be one of Cupid's brothers if you're mortal?"

Frowning, Dake crossed his arms over his chest. "Yeah, gee, Zeb, what's your answer for that?"

"It seems I've finally met someone who shares my enthusiasm for Roman mythology," Zeb told Lula. "We'll definitely have to do lunch so we can talk more about it."

"Why, thank you, Cupid. I would be most honored to have lunch with you whenever you please." After a little curtsy, Lula squinted at Zeb and then Dake. "I must admit there is a strong resemblance. You're both exceedingly beautiful men with your raven-black hair, deep brown eyes and lean, muscular bodies. And you certainly do look enough alike to be brothers, except for—"

"Except for poor Dakin's utter lack of flamboyance? His scarcity of charm? His sheer absence of style, perhaps?" Zeb offered helpfully, ignoring Dake's grumble.

Before Lula could respond, he cupped his hand at the side of his mouth, whispering to Lula in a conspiratorial whisper, "You see, Dakin is my *Earthly* brother. Perhaps one day, with my guidance, he'll achieve godly status." Primping, Zeb looked over at Dake. "But I doubt that will happen until he learns to embrace his inner woman."

"Bullshit," Dake griped.

"I understand," Lula said with a nod, as if she actually did. "Well, in the meantime, perhaps I can embrace Dake from the outside. Will that help?"

The corner of Zeb's mouth quirked up. "Well, Dakin? What do you think? Would it help to have this luscious little beauty wrap you up in her arms?"

Before he could open his mouth, Dake's cock rocketed back to its fire-ready stance, rendering him speechless for the moment.

"Because I do believe," Lula went on, "that Dake and I would make a perfect love match. Well, close to perfect, anyway. I've been paying attention to our attraction

chemistry while we've been working together. For one thing, just looking at Dake's strapping body makes me prickle with desire. And when he's close, there's almost an electrical charge that passes between us and I can feel the most delicious little sensations fluttering between my thighs.

"The only thing I'm uncertain of, Cupid, is Dake's mental acumen. He seems to have a difficult time understanding or accepting the simple truth about me. You should have seen him jump when he felt my quiver."

"He felt your quiver? Right here in the store?" Zeb teased in mock horror. "Why, Dakin, you're no gentleman."

"She's talking about her quiver of arrows, smart ass," Dake explained. "The ones she's supposedly got stowed under the counter. But don't bother looking for them 'cause they're invisible." He snickered.

"You can't see them because you're mortal," Lula corrected. "But since he's a god, Cupid can see them with no problem."

"Thank you for the compliment, darling," Zeb said, smoothing his hair.

Focusing her attention on Zeb, Lula said, "I had to take them off my shoulder when customers arrived because Dake says I need to keep myself covered up in this smock while customers are present."

"Yeah," Dake said to Zeb as he motioned toward Lula, "because she's practically naked under—"

"Which reminds me," Zeb cut him off, looking at his brother's jeans and rolled-sleeve shirt. "Why aren't you wearing one of the smocks like I asked you to? You look like you're getting ready to solder something in all that denim."

With a blank expression, Dake growled a sigh. "I told you before, Zeb...I don't do pink."

"You see, Cupid..." With a quick glance around, Lula positioned her back to the storefront, away from the eyes of curious customers. Then she unfastened the buttons and held her smock open, just like a flasher. "I'm still wearing my academy uniform," she explained. "That's why Dake made me wear the smock. I'm afraid my invisibility traveling garment was lost during the chariot ride."

Eyeballing her delicious-looking body again, Dake felt even more drunk with desire than before, if that was possible. He averted his gaze long enough to watch Zeb take in Lula's form beneath the barely there tunic she wore.

"What, no wings?" Zeb asked, arching an eyebrow.

"That's exactly what I asked her," Dake piped up.

"I have them, they're just invisible most of the time."

Nodding, Dake gestured toward Lula, as if to say to his brother, *See, I told you she was nuts.*

"Well, of course they are, sweetie," Zeb responded to Lula, shooting a meaningful why-don't-you-go-soak-your-head look at his brother. A broad smile took hold as he

watched Dake squirm. Jesus, if Dake didn't get some relief, fast, his cock was going to blow. And by the look Zeb gave him, his brother had already surmised that.

"Darling Lula," Zeb said, returning his gaze to her abundant attributes, "you are magnificent. Succulent. Believe me, if I were so inclined, right now I'd be busy plucking and pinching and rubbing and licking and thrusting into that delightfully ripe little body of yours."

"And it gives me the greatest pleasure to know that my dear brother has been alone with you during my absence, working alongside you all the while and unable to have his way with you, knowing what a lush bounty awaits beneath your peppermint pink smock."

"Prick," Dake mumbled to his brother, who simply smirked in return.

"Yes," Lula said, buttoning her smock again much to Dake's dismay. "I've felt Dake's sexual interest mounting since I first walked in the door, but he's been very honorable, a perfect gentleman, refusing to bed me until you returned from your broken chariot task. Perhaps now might be a good time?" she said, turning a hopeful gaze on Dake.

"I'm so hot and wet and ready, Dake. And I've been so patient. Is there someplace where we might join together now so I could feel you inside me?"

"Jesus," was all Dake managed to get out because every cell in his whole fucking body was tense and poised to crack into a million jagged bits.

"Sugar, are you sure you want to do this now?" Zeb asked Lula. "With that behemoth brother of mine?"

"Oh yes." Lula grinned, and then her face fell and she looked down at her gold-tipped sandals. "That is...if it's all right with you, Cupid. After all, I'm here on this trip to do your bidding as part of my class studies and final exam. I wouldn't want to jeopardize that."

Patting Lula's butt, which immediately snagged Dake's gaze and had him salivating at the thought of squeezing Lula's luscious ass, Zeb said, "All I have to do is take a look around at these floral arrangements and this fat stack of receipts to see how hard you've been working, sweetie. If this was a test and I was in charge of grading it, you'd get an A-plus and go to the head of the class. So you just run along and enjoy yourself, darling."

Lula pulled Zeb into a quick hug. "Thank you. I can hardly wait. And Dake's cock looks as though it's about to tear right through his jeans so I think he's ready too."

Reaching into his pocket, Zeb looked at his brother and chuckled. "I do believe you're right, Lula. He looks positively purple." He handed Dake his keys. "You'll find condoms in the nightstand drawer upstairs in my bedroom, Dakin. Take your time. I see Alfred coming up the walk, so I'll be fine without you."

Dake nodded mutely. If he tried to speak now, he'd just babble or squeak or otherwise make a damned fool of himself, because he sure as hell wasn't in his right

mind at the moment. Uh-uh. He was no longer in charge of his actions...his dick was doing all the thinking now.

"If things work out as well as I think they will," Lula whispered to Dake as she grasped his hand, "maybe you'll get to see my wings." Her smile lit up her whole face.

And Dake couldn't get her up those stairs fast enough.

Chapter Four

The light clean scent of fresh-cut flowers perfumed the air as Dake and Lula crossed the threshold into Zeb's apartment. Dake's cock was hotheaded and raring to go. He reminded himself it wouldn't be gentlemanly to slam Lula up against the wall and hammer into her juicy little pussy the minute they walked through the door, but it was hard. So damned hard he could barely think straight.

"Oh," Lula breathed as she did a pirouette, taking in her colorful surroundings. "What a beautiful, vibrant place this is. It greatly reminds me of Cinnamus' dwelling on Olympus."

Dake almost groaned when he realized Lula wanted to take in the sights before they could get down to the business of fucking. Half-crazed with longing, he managed to glance around, greeted, as usual, by the explosion of color from the profusion of Zeb's artwork lining the walls. Bright, sunshiny, spirited paintings of flowers, otherworldly beings and mystical realms.

"Yeah, Zeb's pretty artsy-fartsy," Dake agreed, determined to act like a gentleman instead of a wild animal—at least until he got Lula into bed.

"He's always been real interested in decorating and stuff like that. Me?" Dake shrugged. "I don't have a creative bone in my body, but I've grown to appreciate my brother's artistic flair. As for the Olympus mention, let's just say that for a minimalist guy like me whose place is pretty much bare bones, stepping into Zeb's apartment has always seemed like being zapped away to some distant galaxy."

Lula traipsed into the living room, which boasted a vivid hodgepodge of handcrafts. Dake thought there was no reason the glut of assorted arts and crafts should go together, but somehow it did. Zebulon's apartment was just as stimulating, full of life and flamboyant as he was.

Each chair and the sofa held an abundance of ornate pillows in various shapes and designs. Hand-woven rugs were scattered about and all sorts of crafty doodads and knickknacks lined shelves and windowsills and topped tables. Lula paused to finger nearly everything and Dake thought he'd go fucking insane waiting.

"What are all these charming objects?" Lula hugged herself. "Mmmm. Everything here gives me a warm and happy feeling deep inside."

"Handmade stuff given to Zeb by artist friends or traded in exchange for his paintings," Dake explained, tempted to add that he sure as hell knew an even better way to make her feel all warm and happy deep inside.

"If you think this is nice, you should see Zeb's bedroom," Dake said instead, motioning to the first door down the short hallway. "It's full of all sorts of stuff you'd probably like." *Like a nice big king-sized bed where we can fuck like happy little jackrabbits.*

"I need to have sex with you now, Dake," Lula said without a backward glance, as she headed for Zeb's bedroom, unbuttoning her oversized pink smock as she walked and letting it fall to the floor. Before it hit the floorboards, Dake was at her heels, leaving a trail of drool behind him.

"I don't think I've ever wanted anything this bad in all my life," Dake muttered as he tore off his shirt and fumbled with the clasp and zipper of his jeans until he'd shucked everything off and stood there wearing only his shorts.

"Me too," Lula agreed, divesting herself of her tunic, fully baring her succulent curves. "And you were right about this room," she added, taking in the splashes of soft pastel accoutrements around her, including the sky-blue quilted satin bedspread, sheer pink and blue voile bed curtains and profusion of lace and bead-trimmed satin pillows on the bed. "It's almost magical."

Her gaze traveled to the mirrored ceiling and her features took on an air of surprised delight. "Oh Dake, we'll be able to see ourselves as we pleasure each other. What a perfect place for our first sexual union."

"Right...perfect," Dake said, watching Lula turn back the bedspread to reveal pink satin sheets, smiling as she smoothed her hand across the shimmering surface. "That's what I thought too," he lied. Until that moment, Dake had always thought his brother's utterly froufrou, over the top bedroom was about the last place on Earth he'd ever want to bring a woman to have sex. Huh. Showed what he knew.

Turning her gaze on him fully, Lula's eyes grew wide as she appraised his body. "Oh by gods, Dake, look at you. You have the fine-honed physique of an Olympian athlete." A distinct look of awe crossed her features as she studied him.

"Thanks." Puffing out his chest with pride, Dake was glad all those tedious hours of pumping iron had paid off. "I work out a lot." He shrugged. "It helps reduce stress."

"Never have I joined with a being as handsomely put together as you," Lula said in a voice so soft it was almost a whisper.

Dake thought it was about the damned best thing anyone had ever said to him. He watched a shaft of sunlight illuminating her cheek, diffusing as it traveled down, imparting a soft glow from one rosy nipple to the golden curls at her pussy.

"And you look just like you stepped out of some famous museum painting," he told Lula. "All full and curvy and delicious-looking in all the right places."

Merrily diving onto the bed in the midst of the wealth of pillows, Lula leaned back on her elbows and patted the mattress next to her. "Please, Dake. Bring your beautiful cock over here so I can see it and touch it."

Please, she said. Damn. Dake approached the bed, thumbing the elastic of his shorts to slide them off.

"Would you let me do that?" Lula asked, shifting to the edge of the bed.

"Oh hell yeah," Dake responded, thinking he'd died and gone to heaven and they hadn't even made flesh-to-flesh contact yet.

"I'm seeing the loveliest erotic images," Lula said, closing her eyes as she clasped his cock through his shorts. Dake could feel the coolness of her skin through the material, but it didn't even come close to putting out the fire in his dick. "Of you and me," she continued.

"You mean like slick, sweaty, naked bodies...lots of moaning...and a hot and spicy joint climax?" Dake urged.

"Mmmm...yes." Lula's voice was thick and husky. "Very much like that." She opened her eyes and smiled up at Dake. "And the images are making me hotter and more desirous than you can possibly imagine." She tugged his shorts down over his cock, letting out a little gasp when it sprang free. Then Lula whimpered and moaned, a sound that Dake felt from his ears clear down to his balls.

"That's good," he said, projecting a lustful smile and swallowing hard as Lula fisted his cock. "Because I'm going to make that vision become a reality and absorb all that heat of yours as soon as I get my hands on your juicy little body."

His exuberant hop onto the bed made Lula spring off the mattress and rebound. He watched in fascination as her full breasts jiggled like Jell-O. He almost chuckled at the comparison. One of the first porn magazines he'd seen as a teenager had a line about *titties jiggling like a bowlful of Jell-O* and Dake remembered being eager to witness that particular phenomenon himself. It had never happened until this very moment—with the beautiful, bountiful-breasted Lula.

Of course, she was nothing like those broads in the crude porn photo layouts. No, Lula was classy, special, unique. She was an anomaly. Like a tantalizing mixture of sweet, innocent virgin and high-class, wet-and-ready call girl.

Unable to keep his hands off her succulent flesh another moment, Dake groaned, covering her with his length and pressing her into the mattress until she made an adorable purring sound.

"I love the feel of your skin on mine, Dake—your strong, hard body crushing against me." Lula snaked her hand between their bodies and clasped his rigid cock, wrapping her fingers around its girth and kneading gently. "And I can barely wait to discover what you can do with this wonderfully generous appendage." She gave a singsong moan. "I just know it will be like magic."

"I'll do my damndest to make you see stars, Lula." Lifting himself from her, Dake looked down into Lula's dreamy expression. He threaded his fingers through her spun-gold locks and felt his cock twitch in her hand.

"Oh Dake, to think none of this would be happening if Cinna had taken pity on me and given me a ride to Earth," Lula panted, her hands roaming his body, fingers squeezing, digging, raking his flesh. Her voice caught on a cry as Dake's mouth came

down on her breast, licking and nibbling at one nipple while he rolled the other between his thumb and finger.

Her nipples fascinated him. He tugged them both with his fingers, causing Lula to arch her back in response. He watched as they changed color from pale pink to a deeper hue and went from being all soft and puffy to hard and crinkled. He plucked the tips again, studying the dusky pink flesh as it puckered. "I could play with these all day."

"That would indeed be too much pleasure," Lula breathed. "I'm quite certain I'd go mad." She engaged in a wistful smile. "But I'd be most willing to take the risk."

Dake slid his hands from her breasts over her rib cage, resting one hand on her belly, fingers spread, and the other hand on the padded flesh over her hipbone. She was all soft, supple and satiny. Nothing hard, sharp or angular sticking out anywhere. "You feel like a woman."

"I'm a —"

"A very womanly nymph," Dake corrected with a raspy chuckle. Hell, if it made her happy to play the role of a nymph, then far be it from him to burst her happy little fantasy bubble. Lowering his head, he licked a damp trail from her navel to her pussy, where he inhaled her musky scent. "And you smell like one too."

Lula breathed a contented sigh. "I hope so."

Dake gazed up into her big blue eyes and smiled. "When I look at you, I see an amazingly sensuous woman, full and ripe and just begging to be pleased." He inhaled at the vee between her thighs again. "Utterly intoxicating."

Indulging in another melodic sigh, Lula stretched. "You make me feel so beautiful, Dake."

"That's only because you are, honey." And that was no lie. His hand slipped from her belly to her pussy. He spread her lips and slicked a finger across her clit, thoroughly enjoying the look of rapture that crossed her features as her body tensed. "More beautiful than a goddess."

Lula gasped, a look of alarm across her features. "Oh no, you mustn't say that, Dake. I'm just a lowly nymph."

Dake couldn't help chuckling. "My very own lowly, but remarkably sexy, little nymph. How did I ever get so lucky?" He shoved two fingers inside her, drew them out and forced them in again as Lula writhed, chorusing her delight with a series of tuneful little moans.

"I'm the lucky one, Dake," she whispered, stroking her hand through his hair.

Her sweet words jetted straight to his gut, settling with the heat of a potent shot of whiskey. Reaching into the drawer of the nightstand, Dake pulled out a condom, unwrapped it and sheathed himself, somewhat amazed at the size and solidity of his cock. He never remembered it growing quite so big with any other woman. Lula definitely had a way of bringing out the best in him in more ways than one.

Nudging her knees wide apart, Dake positioned himself between her thighs, a shuddering breath of anticipation escaping his throat. He'd been with plenty of other women, but the excitement and expectancy of fucking Lula made him feel like it was the first time he'd ever had sex. Only better, because he wasn't a nervous, gangly kid who didn't know shit about pleasing a woman.

"Hurry, Dake. My whole body is trembling with need for you."

Anticipation surged through him, tightening his balls and making his cock jerk. Forget Lula's crazy delusions about Cupid and nymphs and Mount Olympus, *this* was the stuff real fairy tales were made of.

With one long, swift stroke, Dake thrust into her depths. Lula's fingers dug into his flesh and he watched her throat constrict as she swallowed hard. Her long, elated groan was like music to his ears. Damn, it would be murder making himself last longer than sixty seconds buried into the sweetest, softest, curviest little bundle of hot silk and satin he ever could have imagined.

"Mmmm...I knew it would be like this," Lula whispered, tightening her inner muscles around him, driving him even wilder than he already was. "I knew it the first time I gazed upon you, Dakin."

"I feel like I'm fucking a dream," Dake said, his voice weighted with passion. "An angel."

"Nymph," Lula reminded him. He watched her gaze shift, a wicked smile teasing at her lips as she looked up at the mirrored ceiling. "Too bad you can't see what I'm seeing right now." She smoothed her hands over his shoulders, down his back and across his ass, where she clutched onto his cheeks and grinned up at him.

"What a wonderful posterior you have. Hard, firm and tight, with just the right amount of suppleness when I give it a squeeze. Oh Dake, I feel so happy being with you I could burst into song."

Dake's laugh came out sounding strangled. "I'm glad you like my ass, Lula. Let's see what else I can do to make you happy."

He wasn't used to talking all that much during sex or having his partner talk but, oddly enough, their verbal exchange only seemed to intensify the pleasure. Besides, their carnal conversation was the only damn thing keeping him from ejaculating at lightning speed. And he wanted to prolong this erotic occasion with the sexy would-be nymph as long as possible.

Dake plunged into Lula again. Her soft thighs trembled against him and he watched the essence of rapture bloom on her cheeks as he swirled his hips. He enjoyed giving her pleasure almost as much as he enjoyed getting it, which was a whole new ballgame for him.

"You are a true master. A wizard of passion, Dake," Lula panted. "My every cell feels as though it's about to fracture into a million fragments of supreme bliss."

With a bit of repositioning, Lula reached down and scissored her fingers at the base of Dake's cock, which was still happily lodged in her heated depths. She squeezed and

rubbed as she spoke. "This manner of sexual union you call fucking is magnificent. I like it when you fuck me, Dake."

"I've never liked it nearly as much as I do right now," Dake replied, driving himself as deep as possible and loving the way it made Lula writhe beneath him.

"Oh how entirely splendid," Lula said, her features becoming the perfect picture of ecstasy as she squirmed, slipping and sliding on the slippery satin sheets. "Please keep fucking me, Dake...good and hard and fast."

Dake grinned. Oh yeah, he could do that. No problem.

"Can we change places so I can be on top?" she asked. "It will be easier for me when my orgasm comes."

"Easier? Okay, sure. Your wish is my command, my adorable little nymph." Before Lula could blink, he'd shifted their positions so that she was atop him, still gloving his cock.

Dake didn't mind a bit having all that round, supple flesh springing up and down as he watched. In fact, he couldn't imagine a more delectable view – until he glanced up and saw the mesmerizing vision of Lula riding him. He had no doubt he'd remember that exciting picture for a long time to come.

Filling his hands with her luscious breasts, Dake squeezed and kneaded as he screwed his cock up into her, high and hard. Lula tossed her head back as he pinched her nipples, tugging them hard enough to draw her breasts close to his chest.

"Such glorious torture," she breathed, pulling back to increase the tugging sensation on her nipples as Dake held firm.

The disappointment evident in her eyes and on her pouty lips as he released one of her breasts quickly developed into an expression of pure delight when he slid his finger over the swollen nub between her slick folds. Dake watched her eyes widen as he swirled torturously slow circles around her clit while still pinching one of her firm, puckered nipples.

Shivering, she murmured something unintelligible, along with something that sounded like *Oh my Jupiter!* and her passion-fogged gaze told him exactly what he was doing to her.

As he drove into Lula's soft depths again, Dake took her clitoris between his thumb and finger and pinched. She expelled a soft, jagged moan and her eyelids fluttered shut.

"Keep your eyes open, Lula," he said. As her lids drifted open, Dake could have sworn he was gazing into twin blue flames. "I want you to look at me as I make you come. I want to see you shatter for me, baby."

Lula's body tensed. "Oh...oh...oh Dake!"

Dake strained to hold on to his control long enough to witness the stars in her eyes as her senses fled and soared up high somewhere to a special place where he'd soon join her. As he felt the first spasms of Lula's release milking his cock, he roared out his

own satisfaction. Digging his fingers into Lula's supple flesh, he felt his cum spurt hot and fast deep inside her.

In that very same instant, before their last tremors ceased, Lula threw her head back, singing out a sweet, high-pitched, jubilant note as a great, broad pair of butterfly-like wings seemed to sprout from her back.

"Holy fucking shit!" Dake shouted in what sounded way too much like the voice of some guy who'd just had the almighty shit scared out of him. Scrambling off the bed, he backed away from Lula faster than he'd ever moved before in his entire life. "What the..." he muttered, ridding his cock of the condom and disposing of it before fully backing up against the wall.

Hands splayed out at his sides, he blinked a few times, praying to God that what he thought he saw would be gone the next time he looked. No such luck. There they were. A big-ass pair of iridescent champagne-colored semi-sheer wings, as plain as day, fluttering just like...like *wings* for chrissakes!

Finally gathering the courage to detach one hand from the wall, Dake pointed accusingly at Lula, who just knelt there on the bed looking all calm and blissful.

"What the hell's going on?" he sort of screeched, which wasn't helping his male ego any. Damn, he was really no good at this being scared shitless stuff. "What's going on?" he said again, moderating his tone and bringing his voice back down an octave hoping to do his macho reputation justice.

Lula's wings flapped and fluttered gracefully until she lifted off the bed.

She fucking lifted off the bed!

As she started fluttering her way over to Dake, he moved to the opposite wall. "Don't come any closer," he warned, waving a finger toward her. "I mean it."

Lula laughed as she changed direction and flew closer. "Oh Dake, you're so funny."

"I hate to burst your bubble, honey," he managed to say as she approached him, "but what you see here isn't me trying to be funny. This is the real deal, okay?" He expelled a deep breath and inhaled another.

"I'm not certain I understand what your strange words mean, Dake, but I sense that you're somehow discontented with me all of a sudden. Why? What have I done?"

"Those!" he said, gesturing to her wings. "Those things growing out of your back."

Lula looked at her wings as if they were something normal and mundane, like an everyday pair of arms or something. "Oh these?" she tossed off. "Why, they're just my wings, Dake, that's all. I told you just before we came upstairs that if everything worked out you might get to see them, remember?"

"Yeah, but Jesus, Lula, they're *wings*. I mean, you've got wings! And you're...you're flying around." Dake slapped his hand over his face, shaking his head. "No. Uh-uh. This can't be happening. This can *not* be happening."

There had to be some plausible explanation. Maybe the sex with Lula had been so incredibly good, so mind-blowing, so staggering that Dake was still in the throes of his

climax and hallucinating. Yeah, that had to be it. This was all some sort of weird waking orgasmic dream, that's all.

Sliding his fingers from his eyes, he looked up at Lula again. She was still hovering, smiling at him. *Shit.*

"Dake, there's nothing for you to worry about," Lula said calmly. "After all, I did tell you I was a nymph, didn't I?" She landed on the floor in front of Dake, gathering him into an embrace.

His stupid dick jerked as soon as Lula crushed her lush body against him. How the hell it could start to swell right after he'd just come and while he was standing there freaking out because the woman he'd just fucked grew a pair of wings all of a sudden and was flying around the room was beyond him.

Dake groaned as he melted into Lula's embrace. It's funny, he wasn't even scared anymore. He figured it must be because he'd come to the realization that it wasn't Lula who was crazy, it was him. First the whole invisible arrow thing, and now this. Yup. He'd lost his marbles. Maybe he'd inhaled too much of those damned flowers in Zeb's shop. Some toxic flower pollen was eating away at his brain.

"Dake?"

"What?"

"Look at me."

He did. Goddamn, but she was beautiful. Warm and soft and sweet and luscious... To his amazement, his dim-witted, traitorous cock was really coming around now.

"Please don't be upset with me," Lula pleaded. "I can't help it that my wings only sprout when I have an orgasm. It's genetic. It happened to my mother and grandmother too. My wings will retract again soon and then you won't have to look at them anymore until the next time they appear."

Dake's head snapped up. "Next time?"

"Mmm-hmm." Lula nuzzled his neck before brushing her lips across his. "The next time we engage in sex and I orgasm again," she breathed against his mouth. "You...you do want to fuck me again, don't you, Dake?"

Dake groaned a monumental sigh. "God in heaven help me, but yes." He captured her lips in a kiss, sweet, soft and tender. "Yes, I most certainly do, Lula," he whispered at her ear.

"Even though you think my wings are ugly?"

Dake spotted the single tear trailing down her cheek and felt something inside his gut snap. No, maybe it wasn't his gut...maybe it was his heart.

"I don't think they're ugly, Lula." He brushed the tear away with his thumb. "I think they're beautiful. Just like you."

"Really?" She planted her hands on his chest, kneading his pecs, curling her fingers through the dusting of dark hair there.

"Really," Dake answered gently. "Can I...can I touch them? I don't want to do anything to hurt you."

Lula's whole demeanor brightened. "Oh yes, please touch them. They're not as fragile as they look."

Jamming any notion of how impossibly weird and incredible all of this was to the recesses of his mind, Dake smoothed his fingers across one of her wings, enjoying the blissful look in Lula's eyes as he did. Subtle shades of pink, blue, lavender and green mixed with the shimmery champagne color. It felt like, well, kind of like a butterfly's wings. Soft and silky. When the wing fluttered beneath his touch, Dake smiled.

"I can't believe this. It's like we're in some sort of fairy tale," he said. "So you really and honestly are a nymph after all, huh?"

"I truly am." Lula nodded. "Do you know what I've always wanted to do?" she whispered against Dake's cheek.

"What's that, sweetheart?" Grabbing onto her full, round ass cheeks, he hauled her close, grinding himself against her.

"Have sex while my wings were still in place. Do you think we can do that, Dake?"

Dake chuckled as he felt his cock answering for him. "Oh yeah, I think we can do that, honey. In fact, I'd love to."

"Good." Lula took Dake by the hand. "Come with me," she said, leading him to the center of the room, half walking and half flying. "Just stand there with your legs apart, okay?"

Dake gave an affirmative nod. Lula smoothed her fingers down his chest, his abs and down to his groin, where she wove her fingers through the curls framing his cock. Dake groaned as her hand slipped between his thighs and cupped his balls, squeezing gently.

"I want to taste you," she said, and Dake watched his cock salute the ceiling. "May I do that?" Lula lifted a few inches from the floor, fluttering around him in a slow circle.

Dake swallowed hard. Seriously, how much pleasure could one man take in the course of an afternoon? "Absolutely," he said, turning around to follow her moves. "And then it's my turn. I want to suck that pretty little nymph pussy of yours until you scream out, begging for mercy."

"Wonderful. Then I think we'll both be very happy," Lula said, flying almost to the ceiling before she did a graceful somersault that ended with her hovering upside down, her mouth even with Dake's fully recovered cock.

Son of a bitch, when she took him in her mouth he almost spurted his cum right then and there. As her wings fluttered against Dake's legs, he clasped her thighs, parting them and sinking his head down far enough to drag his tongue across the slick pink flesh between Lula's folds.

"God, you're delicious, Lula," he said, loving the way she trembled at his touch.

His cock popped out of her mouth as she answered, "Mmm, and so are you," before going back to her task. A task she did exceedingly well.

Dake took a moment to kiss her inner thighs before nipping them with his teeth and then licking her from her knee to her pussy, where he proceeded to swirl his tongue and nibble.

What they were doing was flat-out inconceivable. Impossible. Period. The sensation of standing there in the middle of the room with Lula floating in midair as they happily ate each other had to be about the most erotic damn thing Dake had ever experienced – and one he'd certainly never imagined doing.

Grabbing one of Dake's ass cheeks, Lula massaged it at the same time she swirled her tongue at the tip of his cock, pushing against the tiny hole there until Dake thought he'd lose his mind. At the same time, he'd taken Lula's clit between his teeth, scraping ever so gently. She clasped his head with her thighs as a quivering moan escaped her lips.

Continuing to pleasure each other, their legs trembled as the promise of a breathtaking climax had them teetering on the brink of ecstasy.

"I can't hold out, Lula," Dake said, trying to pull away from her before he came, but she locked on to his ass cheeks, holding him in place as she scraped her teeth from the base of his cock to the tip and then sucked him until he nearly saw stars.

He took Lula's sweet clit back into his mouth, sucking at it until the entire room shuddered. At least that's how it seemed. It was the two of them quaking together as wave after wave of orgasmic bliss captured them in its midst.

Dake's cum spurted hot against the back of Lula's throat and she drank from him, murmuring little sounds of satisfaction. An instant later she released his cock, singing out in that same high-pitched voice he'd heard before, sounding almost as if she were belting out a perfect operatic note, as the tiny swollen nub at her pussy pulsed against his lips with her orgasm.

Her wings expanded to full width with a bold flap and she held close to Dake as he carefully maneuvered them to the floor, where he quickly collapsed with Lula sprawled atop him.

Her head resting against Dake's chest, Lula kissed one of his flat brown nipples and sighed. "I don't even know what to say, Dake. That was so incredible it's actually left me at a loss for words."

Still fighting to gather his senses, Dake simply swallowed hard and nodded. Nymph sex. Damn. It was beyond incredible. The best sex he'd ever had, bar none.

Lula propped herself up on her elbows, grinning down at Dake.

He couldn't help chuckling at her devilish expression. "What?" he said.

"Again," Lula answered. "Please, Dake. Let's do it again."

"Lula, honey, that's impossible." He laughed again. "As much as I'd like to go nonstop, the human male anatomy's simply not built that way. I need a little recuperating time before we do another one of those flying things."

Lula's hand traveled to his groin, resting over his dead, depleted, wiped-out cock. And the damn thing actually had the nerve to twitch. Still grinning, Lula wagged her eyebrows at him in a wicked, tantalizing manner.

Dake rose up enough to prop himself on one elbow so he'd be eye-to-eye with Lula. "Hey, you never mentioned you were an *evil* nymph," he said, dragging her on top of him and capturing her teasing lips in a kiss.

Chapter Five

"How could I have lived three hundred fifty years without ever having experienced this thrilling sensation?" Lula asked, thoroughly licking her spoon. "This...what did you call it?"

"Hot fudge sundae," Zeb answered, clearly enjoying the sight of Lula relishing her ice cream.

"Yes...hot fudge sundae," she repeated with reverence. "It is...it is...by gods, it is quite near orgasmic."

"Uh-oh." Dake reached across the table, stilling her arm before she brought the next scoop of ice cream to her lips. "Please, Lula, whatever you do, don't let those wings of yours pop out here in the diner, okay?"

Lula looked from left to right at all the other diners in the small restaurant and smiled. "I promise to be very careful," she whispered. "Although," she paused to tongue a fluffy dollop of whipped cream from her spoon, "It won't be easy." Her delighted, closed-eye moan drew the attention of diners at the next table.

Dake thought Lula would have looked a bit more average, normal, less tempting wearing one of Zeb's big rainbow-striped T-shirts and a pair of his jeans—fuchsia with rhinestone studs—belted tight at her waist and rolled several times at her ankles. But no, Lula was just as luscious a confection whether she wore everyday clothes several sizes too big or her nifty little see-through nymph tunic.

"I still don't understand why you don't think I'm crazy," Dake told his brother. "Especially after what I told you about Lula flying around the room," he added in a cautious whisper.

Shrugging, Zeb tossed off Dake's concern with a dismissive wave. "A little lackluster, close-minded and conventional, yes. Crazy? No. The universe is full of seemingly inexplicable things, Dakin. It's all those curious and mysterious little moments along the way that make life so brilliant. Besides, you know I've always been particularly open-minded when it comes to the paranormal and supernatural."

"Is that what I am?" Lula asked, swiping the tip of her little pink tongue across a speck of fudge sauce on her lips. "Paranormal and supernatural?"

She was so damned appealing, Dake steeled himself not to lunge for Lula, throw her across the tabletop and have his way with her right then and there. The thought made him groan as his cock rammed against the interior of his fly. He sipped from his coffee, hoping to drown the lusty urges from his insides.

"Well, darling," Zeb said, patting Lula's hand, "as far as we've known until meeting you, nymphs and Cupid and all the other gods and goddesses of Olympus

were purely mythological. Like something out of a storybook. A fantasy, fairy tale. Something mystical." He tossed off each word with a dramatic flit of his hand. "In my book, Lula, that qualifies as paranormal and supernatural."

"What are we going to do with her?" Dake said, knowing damned well what he'd *like* to do to her, but shoving that idea to the back of his mind as they tried to figure out where Lula belonged.

"Help her find Cupid, of course," Zeb said matter-of-factly.

"Did you hear what you just said?" Dake asked. "That's nuts, Zeb."

"Why? It's what she wants, Dakin, now that we've explained that I'm not actually *the* Cupid."

"It's true, Dake," Lula said, swallowing another spoonful of her sundae and getting that faraway orgasmic look in her eyes again. "I must find Cupid and my classmates so I can join them. I really can't risk getting a failing grade on this assignment."

"But there's no such thing as Cupid," Dake whispered out of the side of his mouth to his brother in protest.

"Mmm-hmm. Just as there's no such thing as nymphs who sprout wings when they climax," Zeb offered with a smirk. "By the way, Lula, dear, has anyone ever mentioned that you have a simply marvelous singing voice? That crystal clear tone you sang out several times while you and Dakin were in my apartment earlier was just exquisite. It resonated through my entire shop. The flowers absolutely loved it. I could see them drinking it in like it was morning dew."

His elbows propped on the tabletop, Dake dropped his head into his hands and groaned. He was really having one hell of a time trying to accept all this otherworldly stuff—while it seemed to just roll right off Zeb as if it were a common, everyday occurrence. Of course, that's because Zeb had always been a bit off the beam anyway, what with his supposed personal communications with plants and flowers and all.

"Oh thank you, Zebulon. Like my wings, my song of elation only emerges in the midst of an orgasm." A dreamy sigh escaped her lips. "I don't think I ever remember it sounding so sweet as it did when Dake's tongue—"

"Lula, shhh," Dake cautioned, a finger to his lips. "Not so loud."

"Oh...sorry. It's the same for most nymphs, Zebulon," she went on more quietly. "It's the only time I seem to be able to reach that particular note, although I do love to sing other times as well. I find it refreshes my entire being."

"How fascinating," Zeb said, propping an elbow on the table and resting his chin on his fingers as he studied Lula. "Tell me more. I'm curious to know what sort of songs nymphs like to sing."

"Oh, there are many types, depending on the mood or occasion. Shall I sing one for you right now?" Lula asked, straightening in her chair and beaming a bright smile. "You won't understand the words because it will be in the language of nymphs, but I believe you would appreciate the song just the same."

"Yes, why don't you," Zeb said at the same time Dake blurted a solid, "No!"

Zeb rolled his eyes. "Don't pay any attention to him, darling. He's no fun at all. Go ahead and sing your little heart out."

Shielding his eyes with his hand, as if that would help to disguise his identity, Dake sank low in his chair as Lula opened her mouth to sing. He wasn't the kind of guy who liked being the center of attention and having a nymph belt out in song in the middle of the diner was definitely bound to attract attention.

If this were the kind of place that used bouncers, the three of them would probably be tossed out on their ears as soon as Lula broke into her near-glass-shattering shriek.

The sweet sound that came out of Lula's mouth was so beautiful, so angelic, so amazing that Dake almost forgot his discomfort as the eyes of every patron as well as the diner's staff were suddenly upon them. It was a short piece, about the length of the ABC song, Dake figured. But damn, what an impact!

By the time Lula had finished, the whole diner was cheering, with many of the patrons standing and applauding while others engaged in approving whistles.

"That was superb, Lula," Zeb said, taking her hand and squeezing. "Simply splendid."

Nodding in agreement and taking her other hand in his, Dake said, "Zeb's right. I'm no judge of music, but I know a good thing when I hear it and, sweetheart, that was about the sweetest, most beautiful thing I've ever heard." He leaned in close and whispered, "Almost as special as your song of elation." He waggled his eyebrows and Lula blushed.

"Thank you both," Lula said, her cheeks flushing a soft pink. "It was my pleasure to share that particular chant with you. I chose it because it is the nymph song of gratitude—most appropriate, because I am truly thankful to you for making me feel so welcome here on Earth."

"I've decided I'm going to make the supreme sacrifice," Zeb announced with thespian flair, his hand fluttering at his throat.

"Oh yeah, what's that?" Dake asked, doing his best not to roll his eyes.

"I'm going to stay at that bleak, sparse box you so glibly call an apartment so that you and Lula can stay at my place until she finds Cupid and the others in her group."

"Hell no," Dake said, shaking his head with conviction. "There's no way I'm staying in that splashy, gaudy place of yours, Zeb. I'd have nightmares being surrounded by all that glitter and color. Lula can stay at my place."

"But Dake...I thought you said you loved your brother's home," Lula offered.

"Well, I—"

"You told her that, did you, Dakin?" Zeb said, clearly amused as he sipped from his strawberry milkshake while Dake simply scowled.

"I adore your handsome home, Zebulon," Lula said. "It's so very generous of you to offer it, but I would not want to inconvenience you. And I would not want to make

Dake unhappy either. I would be honored to stay with you in your home instead, Dake." She smiled sweetly at Dake and his brother. "Even if it is a bleak, sparse box."

Zeb tsked. Several times.

"Now what?" Dake said, expelling a noisy sigh and telegraphing Zeb a distinct look of annoyance.

"Nothing. If you want to put your comfort above Lula's, that's fine. Except..." Zeb breathed a sigh and went back to nursing his milkshake, coming up for air a moment later to say, "Oh...never mind," as well as indulging in another series of tsks.

"I hate when you do this," Dake said. "You're making me crazy, Zeb. If you have something to say, then just spit it out, okay? Quit beating around the bush."

"I wish I had my textbook so I could have studied chapter twelve," Lula interjected, drawing the attention of both brothers.

"What's in chapter twelve, darling?" Zeb asked, blithely disregarding Dake's diatribe.

"It's the chapter detailing Earth vernacular," Lula explained. "Including the current slang so I could better understand most of what's being said." Having finished her sundae, Lula licked the spoon clean and then ran her index finger around the inside rim of the fluted ice cream dish, licking it off with relish. The simple, innocent act had Dake's cock throbbing. He was becoming a basket case, for chrissakes.

"The words and phrases you use are strange to my ears," Lula continued, "and it's sometimes hard to follow the conversation. But I do detect a sense of ill will and that does, indeed, makes me feel very sad. You are both dear, wonderful men and you've already come to mean a great deal to me. I don't wish to be the cause of disharmony between brothers."

"Nonsense, Lula. It's not your fault at all," Zeb said, taking her hand and patting it. "It's mine. I shouldn't egg Dakin on like that. I just can't help it sometimes. He's so easy." Zeb chuckled.

Surprised at his brother's admission, Dake realized he could have worked harder at being agreeable himself. "It's my fault too," he confessed, which wasn't easy. "And don't worry, Lula, brothers get on each other's backs all the time. It doesn't mean anything."

Lula slanted Dake a curious look. "You get on his back?"

"Figuratively speaking. He means we love each other," Zeb clarified. "Except that Dakin's far too macho to just come right out and admit it. Right, big brother?"

"Yeah." Dake closed his eyes with a sigh and nodded. "Right."

"I apologize for my theatrics a few minutes ago, Dakin. I simply wanted to point out that Lula would be far more comfortable at my place than yours. And I have a feeling you, dear brother, might benefit from the inviting atmosphere of my pastel pleasure palace, if you know what I mean." He winked.

"Of course, if you believe Lula would be more apt to spread her wings and sing out in elation in that bedroom of yours with the white walls, few necessary pieces of furniture and little else, then by all means, have her stay at your place instead. And of course..."

After waiting a small eternity, Dake, for whom patience had never been a virtue, said in the coolest, calmest, most patient voice possible, "Of course *what*, Zeb?"

"Well..." Shrugging, Zeb examined his fingernails, polishing them against his jeans and then buffing again.

While tempted to grab his brother by the shirt collar and shake him, telling him to get on with it, Dake knew it wouldn't make a damn bit of difference. There was no rushing him when he was determined to draw something out for effect.

"It's just that if I recall," Zeb finally continued, "there are people living upstairs, downstairs and on either side of you. And you've complained about the walls being thin. On the other hand, when Cupid's Headquarters is closed, the only other people in the building will be you and Lula." He glanced up at his brother with an impish smile. "It's just something I thought you might want to consider."

Dake fished his keys out of his pocket, working one of the keys off his ring and slapping it down in front of Zeb. "I accept," he said, unsuccessfully hiding a smile. "Here's the key to my place. I still have yours. And, uh...thanks, Zeb."

"I'm happy to make the sacrifice," Zeb replied. "As extreme as it is." Dake noticed Zeb had a hard time concealing his own smile as well.

"Thank you, Zebulon," Lula said with a bright smile. "There are so many things I love about your home. It's so full of life. Being there makes me vibrate deep inside." She pressed on the area of her solar plexus. "It's quite an agreeable, uplifting sensation."

The only vibration Dake ever felt in Zeb's place was when Lula's sweet little pussy quivered around his cock while they were busy seeing fireworks and stars. But, hey, if Zeb's apartment made Lula think her insides were vibrating, who the hell was he to be a wet blanket?

"I'm glad you feel it too," Zeb said, leaning forward, clearly enthralled to have someone to talk to who seemed to share his oddball, new-agey interests. "Somehow I knew you would, Lula. After studying feng shui, the Chinese art of placement," he explained, "I designed the interior to amplify and accentuate the importance of the mind-body-spirit connection, the yin and yang, the balanced fusion of health, happiness and prosperity."

"Yes," Lula said with a thoughtful nod, as if she actually understood Zeb's bizarre gibberish. "That explains why the sexual union Dake and I shared in your pastel pleasure palace was so ideal, so perfectly blissful."

"What?!" Dake nearly choked on the last of his coffee. "My brother slaps some pink paint on the walls, throws in a bunch of girly, rainbow-hued knickknacks and, *poof*, he's a fucking decorating genius. A vibration guru, no less." Even worse, although he wasn't

about to point it out and whine about it, now Dake's phenomenal performance in that garish bedroom was being credited to his brother's choice of paint.

"Well, shit," Dake mumbled, his monumental groan tinged with incredulous laughter.

"It appears we have a critic in our midst," Zeb said to Lula, slanting his hand at his mouth in a conspiratorial manner. "Poor boy's always been terribly green with envy when it comes to the connection I have with my —"

"Do *not*," Dake warned, "let me hear the words *inner woman* come out of your mouth, Zeb. I mean it."

"See what I mean?" Zeb muttered to Lula. "Poor Dakin is positively green."

"And you," Dake went on, waving an accusatory finger at Lula. "I'll have you know anything spectacular that happened between us in that bedroom had nothing whatsoever to do with my brother's silly decorating." As the din around them dropped off a good decibel, Dake groaned again. God damn. He hadn't meant to be so loud. A furtive glance here and there had him slinking down in chair again.

"You did tell me you really liked the big mirror on the ceiling," Lula offered helpfully, clearly without thought to moderating her voice.

At the sound of muffled giggles around him, Dake wanted to slide all the way off the chair and ooze right into a crack in the floor.

Zeb started chuckling. An instant later, he was capturing Dake's image with his cell phone camera.

"Just what the fuck do you think you're doing?" Dake asked, arms folded across his chest.

"Sorry," Zeb answered. "The dazed look on your face was just too priceless to pass up." He leaned over to show Lula the impromptu photo.

"How wondrous. Human technology has greatly advanced since my last visit to Earth," she said, studying Dake's picture. "Oh but Dake, you look so forlorn here." Her gaze left the phone's image display and locked on Dake's face.

"I think you misunderstand. I never meant to suggest that your sexual skills were anything other than extraordinary," Lula said, beaming the sweetest smile imaginable while Dake cringed, shushing her. "On the contrary, never before have I experienced such deeply vibrational —"

"Jesus!" Rendering Lula wide-eyed and speechless, Dake shot up from the table like a rocket, slapping one hand against the table as he fished his wallet out of his back pocket with the other. "Come on, let's go," he said, leaving enough cash to cover the tab and tip and hustling Lula out of the diner so fast she had to do double time to keep up with his long strides. Zeb's annoying chuckle brought up the rear.

As the trio stood just outside the popular eating spot, Dake's gaze roamed over Lula for the umpteenth time that evening. Two middle-aged guys walked past them,

doing classic double takes when they eyed the luscious nymph. Dake all but snarled at them.

A trio of buff young twenty-somethings on the other side of the street ogled Lula's considerable attributes and commenced in a chorus of low wolf whistles and howls. Dake met their unwanted interest with a scowl. When yet another man ushered his date into the diner, giving Lula a lingering, hungry look, Dake groaned. She was like a fucking stud magnet, for chrissakes.

"Where to, brother?" Zeb asked.

"The mall."

Zeb gasped.

"We need to get Lula some clothes," Dake explained.

Zeb huffed a disbelieving laugh. "Years, Lula," he said. "It's been *years* since I've been able to interest Dakin in going clothes shopping."

Dake scowled again. He hated shopping. Downright detested it. It was all he could do to drag himself to the grocery store, much less go shopping for clothes. When he needed something, he went online and ordered it, plain and simple. That's what he'd be doing right now if he could get overnight delivery. He groaned. The very thought of purposely placing himself in the midst of rabid shopping fanatics made his head ache.

"Well, she can't walk around Portland looking like that," he reasoned. "And she sure as hell can't flit about wearing that see-through dress of hers."

"What is clothes shopping?" Lula asked and Zeb gasped again.

"Oh dear God, don't tell me you're a shopping virgin," Zeb said in joyful disbelief. Lula simply shrugged in response. Zeb looked to the heavens, mouthing what seemed to be a silent prayer of thanks.

"Be still my heart. Trust me, darling, you're in for the time of your life." He looped his arm through Lula's and started walking. "We'll get you all dolled up, sweetie. We'll start with some lacy undies, a delicious little LBD, a few precious pairs of high-heeled shoes and —"

"What's an LBD?" Lula asked.

Zeb stopped in his tracks, a look of astonishment across his features as he gaped at Lula. "*Little black dress*," he explained, his expression full of sympathy and compassion. "Don't tell me you've never had one. Every girl needs at least one LBD in her closet."

"Don't get all starry-eyed, Zeb. This isn't going to be a shopping spree. And Lula doesn't need a little black dress," Dake spat. "She's only going to be here for as long as it takes her to find..." Dake just couldn't bring himself to say *Cupid*. It just sounded too damned insane. "To find her teacher," he said instead.

"All she needs is some plain, simple, conservative clothes that fit decent. Stuff that'll cover up all her..." Dake gestured toward Lula's luscious curves and she looked up at him with those big baby blues and that kissable mouth and damn if his cock didn't jerk in response.

"Just some inconspicuous stuff she can wear while she's out searching around," he added, struggling to drag his gaze from the pert set of nipples poking against Lula's T-shirt. "So she doesn't attract any more attention than she already does."

"Whatever you say, Dakin," Zeb agreed, far too quickly for Dake's comfort.

"I mean it, Zeb."

"Absolutely," Zeb said, flashing a broad smile. "A few drab pieces of utilitarian garb and we'll be on our way."

Chapter Six

"Oh, this feels just like the Feast of Lupercalia!" Lula announced, giddy as she knelt at the center of Zebulon's bed, whipping one article of clothing after another from the multitude of bags strewn on the bedspread. The shopping trip at the mall was an extraordinary experience and more fun than she'd had in the last century.

"The what?" Dake asked, propping on the edge of the mattress.

"My favorite holiday," Lula replied, holding a lacy baby-pink bra up to her breasts and molding it to her curves. "Ooh, isn't this striking, Dake?" She glanced up to see her reflection in the mirrored ceiling, smiling when she caught a look of longing in Dake's eyes. Her pussy trickled warm juices in anticipation of their next sexual joining. She could barely wait to feel his wonderful cock driving into her again.

With a lick of her lips, she explained, "The Feast of Lupercalia is the precursor to what you know here on Earth as Valentine's Day, only much more fun and far more erotic."

Dake lifted an eyebrow. "I like it already," he said, the tone of his voice growing husky. "So what kind of stuff goes on at this erotic feast? Is it like a Roman orgy?" His fingers walked from her knee to the notch between her thighs where he cupped her, rubbing gently. By gods, his hand felt so good nestled there. So right.

Feeling a bit dizzy, almost as if she'd overindulged in the fruit of the vine, Lula drew in a deep breath, expelling it on a contented sigh. "No, there's certainly plenty of sex but it's not lewd. There's no debauchery." Reaching in to another bag, Lula gathered the sheer black confection that Zebulon had called a *nightie* and smoothed her cheek across the soft-as-a-wing material.

"It's customary for young men to draw the name of a prospective lover from an urn," she told Dake, holding the garment up to admire it, then swinging it back and forth to watch the fringe at the nightie's bottom sway. "The matches last a year, until the next Lupercalia feast. Sometimes marriages result from the game."

"Have, uh...have you ever been matched up with a guy at one of these feasts?" Dake asked, and Lula noticed the muscle in his jaw twitch as his hand tightened almost imperceptibly at her crotch.

She shook her head. "No. I've never found anyone I wished to be united with for that long a period." And as the words spilled from her lips, Lula realized she wouldn't mind one little bit being Dake's lover for an entire year. In fact, a year probably wouldn't be nearly enough time to explore all the lovely, carnal possibilities with this beautiful man. Alas, it could never be, of course. In another two days, she'd be back on Olympus.

On a wistful sigh, Lula told him, "We begin the celebration on February fourteen, according to your Gregorian calendar system, to honor Juno, the goddess of fertility."

She examined a pair of pink crotchless panties, marveling at the construction. "What an interesting idea," she mused, spreading her hands through the opening and wiggling her fingers.

"Then the Feast of Lupercalia commences the following day, celebrating spring and Faunus, the god of nature and agriculture. So these are meant to be worn when we are fucking?" Lula asked, holding the panties aloft.

"That's the general idea," Dake said, giving her a strange ravenous look.

"But why not simply dispense with panties altogether?" she asked. "Wouldn't it be easier to access my pussy if it was unencumbered by clothing of any sort?"

Dake's lips lifted into a slow grin. "There are numerous ways to find enjoyment while we're fucking, Lula. And one of those includes looking at those pretty blonde curls between your thighs all framed in pink lace, ready and waiting—just for me."

"I see." Dake's desirous gaze and appealing smile shot tremors of anticipation to Lula's clit and she squirmed. "There are also fertility rituals at the feast," she continued her explanation, feeling the warmth spreading through her core. "But I like to attend mainly for the vast array of delicious foods, the games and to partake liberally in the fruit of the vine. It's such great fun."

"So you're a wine drinker, huh?"

Lula wrinkled her nose. "Only on rare occasions. I have learned that I must monitor my intake of the fermented grape drink because it greatly loosens my inhibitions. I also enjoy drinking brew made from fermented grains, but when I imbibe too much of any of these treats, I feel like a wild, wanton nymph." She giggled and Dake's eyes grew wide.

Leaping from the bed, he pointed at her. "Don't move. I'll be right back."

Lula could hear cupboards opening and slamming closed and Dake mumbling curious oaths to himself in the other room. Lula spent the time studying the rest of the clothing items in the bags.

This wondrous thing called clothes shopping was most pleasurable. At first, as she, Dake and Zebulon wandered through the vast, cavernous structure filled with vendors of all sorts of goods, Dake seemed grumpy and grouched a lot. Zebulon, on the other hand, was full of energy and seemed to be caught in a most euphoric humor as he flitted about, selecting item after item for Lula to try on.

After she'd modeled some of the garments for the brothers, Lula witnessed Dake's disposition change from gloomy to enthusiastic. Why, Dake actually became so spirited and animated that he even began picking out items of clothing for Lula himself. Before their shopping mission was over, he even insisted they find her a little black dress, as Zebulon had originally suggested.

And then Dake made her promise to give him a private garment showing once they arrived back in Zebulon's apartment. No...that wasn't what he'd called it. *Fashion show*. Yes, that was it! Dake told her he wanted to see her strut her stuff, whatever that meant.

"We've got vino, baby!" Dake said, returning to the bedroom with two bottles and a pair of drinking glasses. "I knew Zeb wouldn't let me down. He's got this place stocked so he can throw a bash at the drop of a hat."

Lula shook her head. Such odd speech. She wished she had longer than three days to become familiar with all of Dake's peculiar sayings. How wonderful it would be just to be able to spend more time getting to know him...to have more time to enjoy the wonders of his cock and how it made her feel.

"Why don't you try on some of those sexy undies for me while I pour us some wine, Lula?" He set the bottles on one of the nightstands, uncorking one and filling the stemmed glasses with the dark red liquid.

"Ah...the fashion show," she said. Dake gave her a wink and nodded.

Patting the pink bra resting in her lap atop its matching crotchless panties, garter belt and sheer stockings, Lula suggested, "I am happy to oblige, but are you certain you would rather see my body clothed than naked? I thought that perhaps we would divest ourselves of clothing and engage in another sequence of orgasmic pleasure." She smoothed the pale blue satin bedspread next to her knee.

Dake growled out a low chuckle as he passed one of the glasses to her. "What I want, sweetheart, is to see that gorgeous body of yours all gift wrapped in those fancy pink things you're holding. Then I want to watch you peel them off, nice and slow."

"Oh, I believe I understand. Titillation," Lula said with a bright smile, pleased when she saw Dake flash a devilish grin in response. "Yes, that will be fun. I can tease and tempt and titillate you until your beautiful cock grows bigger and bigger. Until it is ready to explode all over me."

Blissfully imagining the heady scenario, she hugged herself. "And once you break down my inhibitions with the...*vino*, I'll seduce you to keep you awake so you can fuck me all night, over and over again until it is time for me to go in search of Cupid in the morning."

She took a big sip of wine, murmuring her satisfaction as the liquid traveled in a warm stream down her insides, settling quite near the place where she felt the powerful stirrings of her sexual craving.

"Damn, Lula." Dake's hand covered his crotch and he closed his eyes for a moment. "I don't know how I'm going to make it through the night with you."

Lula drew a pair of stiletto heels from a box, marveling at the construction of the unusual footwear. "We will probably both be sore, but it will be a most pleasurable aftershock for your cock and my pussy, I am certain. Shall I commence with your private fashion show now?" She took another sip of wine, regarding Dake over the rim of her glass.

"I'd like that very much," Dake said after taking a sip from his own glass and setting it down on the nightstand. "Right after I do this." Claspings her arms just below her shoulders, Dake dragged the still-kneeling Lula across the satin spread to the edge of the bed, yanked her close and kissed her.

By gods, this mortal knew how to kiss! Never had she felt such passion, such powerful erotic sensations with any other man before. Just one glance at his strong body sent spikes of desire flying through her body faster than the most rapid team of horses coursing across the sky. The briefest touch of Dake's skin against hers sparked lively, spirited sensations between her thighs.

As their tongues danced to the timeless rhythm of lovers, every nerve ending in Lula's body hummed as if...as if Dake was *the one*. Her perfect love match. Gods, she could imagine herself remaining in his arms like this for all eternity.

"Leave the sexy pink stuff for last," Dake said, fingering the lingerie in Lula's lap once their kiss ended.

"Turn around," Lula ordered, twirling her finger at him. "No peeking until I'm ready." Dake obliged, sitting at the edge of the bed with his back facing her.

Rifling through the bags of clothing, Lula tried to remember what items were meant to be worn together. Most of the garments were quite unlike the short tunics and flowing gowns worn on Olympus. She did her best to select an alluring outfit by coordinating the colors and fabrics. After putting the items on, she gazed at her reflection in the full-length mirror on Zeb's bedroom door, fussing and adjusting until she was satisfied with her appearance.

"You're taking an awfully long time," Dake complained.

"I'm almost ready." Lula wobbled to the front of the room and struck a pose. She couldn't imagine why the women of Earth would want to wear foot gear with such high heels and pointy toes. Not only was it difficult to walk, but her toes felt pinched and her feet prickled as she were walking on a thousand tiny nails. Aside from all of that, she could barely maneuver on the oddly constructed contraptions.

"I'm ready. You can turn around now, Dake." The pleasant look of anticipation she first spotted on his face as he turned to look at her soon turned to an expression of shock. She couldn't tell if it was good or bad.

"Holy shit!" he said, not at all helping her quandary.

Dropping her pose to face him, hands fisted on hips, Lula frowned. "You say this *shit* word a great deal, Dake. From your usage, I cannot tell if the term is meant to be positive or negative. Are you displeased with my appearance?"

"Oh no, no...on the contrary, you look sensational. Beautiful." And then a smile quirked at Dake's lips. "Kind of like a...a gothic punk goddess." His smile grew wider. "Very sexy."

"I wish you would stop comparing me to a goddess, Dake," Lula said on a sigh. "I don't want to incur the wrath of the gods. What is this gothic punk you speak of?"

"Well, it's," scratching his head, Dake gestured to Lula's outfit, "it's all that black you're wearing. And," he started to chuckle, "the way you're wearing it. Maybe I should call you Mistress Nymph."

With a wobbly gait, Lula marched back to the mirror, taking in her appearance. She couldn't imagine what Dake apparently found so funny. After all, she'd selected the all-black ensemble because it went together so nicely.

First there were the tight black jeans. Over them she'd pulled on a pair of black satin panties. High heeled shiny black knee-high boots completed the lower portion of her outfit. For the top, she'd put on a black satin bra that barely contained her ample breasts and over that she wore the fringe-bottomed sheer black nightie that was slit open in front from the neckline on down.

Lula completed the look by releasing her hair from its clasps, fluffing it and allowing her voluminous just-below-the-shoulder curls to flow free.

"I believe I look quite nice," she said, studying her reflection.

"Deliciously fuckable," Dake said.

"Yes, that's what I thought too."

Dake laughed. "Oh Lula, if you only knew how incredibly refreshing you are." He got off the bed, bringing Lula's wineglass from the nightstand and handing it to her. She drained the rest of the liquid in the glass and Dake set it on Zeb's dresser.

"If that's so, then why do you laugh at me?"

"I'm sorry. I'm not laughing at you, sweetheart. It's just that I find the outfit you put together somewhat...amusing." Moving the hair at her neck aside, he brushed a soft kiss just beneath her ear and then trailed more kisses down to her shoulder.

"And yet thoroughly hot at the same time. Before you start your search for Cupid tomorrow morning, I'll have to give you a hand getting dressed. We'll make sure the panties," he snapped the elastic waistband, "go inside your jeans and that something that isn't see-through" he fingered the sheer nightie, "goes over your bra. As for the high-heeled boots...they're amazingly sexy, but I have a feeling you won't be able to walk more than a block or two with those on."

"I'm certain of that." Lula nodded. "Oh Dake, all of these clothes make dressing far too confusing. It's so much simpler on Olympus for both males and females." She let out a tuneful sigh. "I may as well not continue with the rest of the fashion show. My ineptness with the Earth clothing will only make you laugh even harder, I'm sure."

Dake hugged Lula against his chest, smoothing his hand across her back in slow circles. "As much as I want to rip what you're wearing right off and plunge myself inside you right now," he whispered against her ear, "I think it's more important that you finish your fashion show. And I promise not to laugh."

Dake made good on his vow, not laughing even once as Lula paraded across the bedroom in outfit after outfit, with Dake instructing her as to how the items were to

properly be worn. By the time she got to the last two outfits, she felt she had a much better idea of how to put together an acceptable Earth outfit.

The only item left besides the pink lingerie was the LBD. Remembering Dake's instructions, Lula put on the black bra, panties and garter belt along with sheer stockings.

She slipped the little black dress over her head, tugging it into place. The long sleeves hugged her arms while the deep vee-neck wraparound style of the dress showed her breasts to their full advantage. The knee-length skirt portion flowed from the cinched waist in soft, smooth folds.

Lula stepped into the pair of black pumps, again with the towering heels, and appraised herself in the mirror. She did, indeed, like the way she looked in this outfit.

"I've got to hand it to Zeb," Dake said, nodding and smiling as he walked around Lula slowly. "The man knows what he's talking about when it comes to fashion. I'm glad we got you this LBD, as my brother calls it, because you look incredibly beautiful, Lula. Stunning."

He yanked her hard into his arms, breathing hard and husky at her ear. Clutching her ass, he tugged her close, grinding himself against her. "I swear to God, my cock is so hard just from looking at you model all your pretty little outfits that it feels like I've got an iron rod pumping in my jeans."

"Then I had better hurry and put on my last outfit, Dake," Lula said, wrapping her arms around his neck and brushing her lips across his. "I wouldn't want to leave that big hunk of iron without someplace deep, warm and wet to pump." She loved the hungry growl rumbling up into Dake's throat as she pushed against his chest with outstretched fingers, releasing herself from their embrace.

"Don't make me wait too long, honey," Dake warned as Lula twirled her finger, signifying that Dake should turn around again. "I'm like a ticking time bomb here," he finished, facing away from her.

"And I can't wait for you to explode," Lula said, pulling the dress up over her head and tossing it on the overstuffed armchair along with the rest of the clothes. The black garter belt and panties were replaced with the pink crotchless panties and pink garter belt, while the lacy pink bra completed the outfit.

The final item in the last bag was a pink chiffon scarf, which Lula used as a headband, tying the ends at the top so they perched like a wispy little bow at her temple. She was going to slip the black heels on but decided at the last moment to hike on the knee-high boots instead.

A final mirror check had Lula smiling. "I think I look just like candy," she said. "Definitely good enough to eat." She giggled. "What do you think, Dake?"

"Holy shit!"

Lula laughed. "I can see by the look in your eyes that your favorite expression indicates not only your surprise, but your pleasure. So?" She stood arms akimbo. "Do I look lickable?"

"Better than cotton candy, bubble gum or peppermint ice cream. Baby, I could devour you in one bite." Dake gave her a wonderfully lustful look. "You look all sweet and girly on top, but the addition of those wicked boots catapults you right into that Mistress Nymph category again. Come here, Lula." He crooked his finger.

"Mistress..." Lula mused as she strolled toward Dake. "This is a woman who is dominant to a subservient male, is that correct?" Dake nodded. "And this is what you would prefer for our fucking?"

"Hell no. I mean, you can be on top and dress the part, but that's as far as it goes. I'm not into playing meek and submissive. If there's any dominating to be done, I'll be the one doing it." Lula caught a gleam in his eye as Dake thumbed his chest. "Now get your ass over here, woman," he commanded.

Lula halted in her tracks, smiled and shook her head. "I want to watch you strip off your clothes first."

"I told you," Dake said with a sexy grin, "I'm the one giving the orders here." He patted the mattress near his hip.

Resting her hands on her locked knees, Lula bent the top of her body toward him, projecting the most wide-eyed innocent smile she could. Then she wiggled her ass. "What if I said pretty please with cotton candy on top?" Lula asked.

One eyebrow arching, Dake crossed his arms over his chest. "You seem to be doing better with your Earth vernacular," he said.

"I managed to pick up quite a bit since my first visit to Earth about fifty years ago."

"Fifty..." Dake began, giving her the oddest look.

"Mmm-hmm." Lula nodded. "I had just entered my freshman term at Cupid Academy. I would have learned more, but I'm afraid I managed to create a bit of a ruckus during each of my visits."

"Oh Lula." Dake threw his head back in laughter. "Why don't I find that difficult to believe? So what did you do?"

"Well, the last time I left some of my confidential class materials behind and they fell into the wrong hands. A bad man, an unprincipled politician who wanted to rule your world. My teacher Cinnamus was not at all pleased and Cupid nearly expelled me from his academy. He called me a walking disaster."

Lula felt her chin tremble at the memory. "But everything eventually worked out after Cinnamus dispatched a team of investigators to recover the materials I accidentally left here. And now...and now I've done it again," Lula said, her chin quivering once more. "I've lost more of my class materials after I promised Cinnamus I'd be extra careful. Oh Dakin, he'll be so very disappointed in me."

Dake was at her side in an instant, scooping her into his arms and holding her close. The sound of his heartbeat made Lula feel better, safe and secure somehow. He sat her down on the edge of the bed, cupping her face in his hands.

"Everything's going to be all right, honey. This Cinnamus you keep talking about sounds like a good guy. Once you tell him what happened, he'll send out his crackerjack detective team again and everything will be a-okay. You'll see."

He kissed her nose, cheeks and forehead before kissing her lips. "Now tell you what, sweetheart, you just sit here and start sipping on another glass of vino, while I go ahead and do that striptease you wanted, okay?" Dake juggled his eyebrows and winked as he poured more wine into Lula's glass and then placed it in her hand.

"Thank you, Dake," Lula said after sipping from her wine. "For someone who is so hard, strong, masculine and occasionally obstinate—and who isn't gay, of course—you certainly can be soft and sweet and caring. You are a good man, Dake. Very kind and considerate." She smoothed her hand across his cheek, brushing her fingers over the dark whiskers sprouting at his jaw line.

Dake almost choked on the wine he drank. "Aw, jeez, Lula, you make me sound just like my brother, for chrissakes. Trust me, I'm not a hearts and flowers kind of guy. I'm hard as nails. I was just trying to make you feel better so you wouldn't cry, that's all."

"You and Zebulon are more alike than you realize."

Dake rolled his eyes and groaned. "Yeah, well how about we just sorta keep that to ourselves, okay? I wouldn't want anything to harm my macho image, you know? And I really don't want Zeb starting all that crap about me having an inner woman again."

"But you do have an inner woman, Dake. All men do."

"Lula."

"Yes?"

"Remember that iron rod in my pants I told you about?"

"Mmm-hmm." Lula licked her lips as her gaze flew to Dake's groin.

"Well, it just got a trace smaller. You don't really want to keep on the subject of my inner woman, do you? Because trust me when I tell you it's gonna put a damper on our lovemaking."

"Lovemaking?" Lula beamed a smile. "Is that what we are making together, Dake? Love?"

"Eh..." Dake gulped back more wine. "Listen, honey, you just sit there and relax while I peel my clothes off like you wanted, okay?"

Lula nodded enthusiastically. "And then we will make love to each other." Dake certainly did have an almost magical way of making her feel better.

"Why don't you pick out a CD from Zeb's collection over there." Dake pointed to the CD holder next to the nightstand. "Something to set the mood."

"What is a CD?"

"Oh...it's...it's like a record album. You know, music."

"I believe I heard this music you speak of when I was on my way here to Cupid's Headquarters. It came from little boxes people carried as they walked along the street. It was loud and harsh and very strange. I do not think I want to set that kind of mood for our lovemaking, Dake."

Dake chuckled. "Don't worry, that's not the kind of music my brother listens to. Whatever he's got here, I'm pretty sure you'll like. It's all new-agey stuff." He went to the CD holder and thumbed through the choices, scrunching his face with displeasure as he selected one of the flat containers and placed the disc into the small machine on the nightstand. Soon, sounds of zithers and ocean waves and heavenly chanting filled the room.

"Oh I like this, Dake. It reminds me of the compositions I listen to on Olympus."

"I figured as much." Dake took another sip of wine before turning out the overhead light, turning on one dim bedside light and striding to the front of the room. "Now, I'm not exactly the best dancer, so don't expect something you'd see in a male strip club or anything, but I do have some moves you might like."

"I'm sure I will like all of your moves, Dake," Lula said, not bothering to tell him she had no idea what a male strip club was – although it did sound intriguing.

As the tranquil sounds wafted through the room, Dake moved his hips to the music, pumping side to side and then back and forth slowly, mimicking the drive of his cock into her depths. All the while his fingers were busy at his shirt buttons, each movement revealing a little more of his beautiful, hard chest.

"I'm thinking about pounding my cock into you, Lula, right between that little lacey pink scrap of material that's framing your pussy," Dake said as he dragged the shirt tails from his jeans. "And I'm thinking about you wrapping those legs of yours around me as I do it." He unbuttoned each shirt cuff and whipped the garment off, flicking it aside.

"You have such a handsome chest, Dake. Sculpted like a fine statue." She couldn't take her eyes from him as his broad chest was bared, calling her to rake her fingers from his collarbone to the fine trail of dark hair that disappeared beneath the waistband of his jeans. A warm trickle of liquid gathered between her thighs, readying her for the magnificent invasion ahead.

"Statues can't do this," he said, posing to make his pectorals jump, one after the other and then both at the same time. "You like that?" he asked, giving a repeat performance.

"It makes me gush with cream in anticipation of feeling your cock driving deep into my pussy," Lula whispered.

"I'll take that as a yes," Dake said with a wink as he unbuckled his belt and slid it through the loops, waving through the air overhead. "You know what else I'm gonna do, baby?"

"What, Dake?"

"I'm going to torture those tiny pink buttons at the tips of your breasts." He kicked off his shoes and pulled off his socks, tossing them aside. "Pinching and twisting one succulent nipple while I suck and nibble the other until you beg for mercy."

"I can hardly wait," Lula breathed, loving the exquisite entertainment Dake provided for her pleasure and eagerly awaiting the unveiling of his cock. "I can feel my nipples getting hard this very minute. They ache for your attention, Dake."

The clasp and zipper of Dake's jeans came next. Prolonging the expectation, he did more of his erotic dance moves for her before finally shedding his jeans and kicking them aside. She loved to watch his body move, the muscles and tendons bunching and cording with each sensuous glide. His bronzed flesh glowed in the dim candle-like light.

"Most of all," Dake said, slipping his thumbs into the waistband of his shorts, "I want to see those wings of yours sprout up again as I feel you quake and quiver in my arms." In one sleek move, Dake divested himself of his shorts, standing before her completely naked.

Lula's eyes fell to his cock, which looked even bigger than the last time they had joined sexually. It stood out high and proud, away from the cluster of black curls between his thighs. Unable to stand the wait a moment longer, Lula rose from the bed, took another hearty sip of wine and drew a condom from the drawer in Zeb's nightstand. After tearing the foil packet with her teeth, she discarded it and strolled toward Dake.

"Oh, I can most definitely guarantee that you'll be seeing my wings this fine night, Dakin." Standing close enough for her nipples to make contact with the fine hair on his chest, Lula rolled the condom onto Dake's cock. Holding the firm rod down, she pressed herself against the tip, moistening it with her juices. "Are you ready, Dake?" She took a few steps back, licking her lips.

"Baby, I've never been more ready in my life," he said.

"Good." Not wasting another moment, Lula jumped up onto Dake, wrapping her legs around his waist and her arms around his neck. Momentarily taken aback, Dake stumbled backward a few steps before clutching Lula's ass in his hands and squeezing.

"Whoa. Damn, Lula." His voice was a raspy chuckle. "You weren't kidding about wine turning you into a wild, wanton nymph, were you?"

"It was a combination of the wine and your excellent erotic moves, Dake. Now fuck me. Make love to me. Let me feel your cock hit high and hard deep inside me." Lula squirmed against him.

"Oh hell yeah." Dake moved a few more feet until he was up against a wall. After a bit of fumbling and positioning, he drove his cock into her in one swift action, eliciting a cry of pleasure from Lula's lips.

A moment later, Dake had switched their positions so that Lula's back was against the wall. "Better leverage," he panted, screwing into her again. "Jesus, Lula, you feel so damn good." Bringing one hand up from her butt, Dake squeezed one of her breasts,

kneading the flesh and then locking his fingers onto the nipple, pinching and tugging until she cried out again. "Too hard?"

'No...no...I... Give me more, Dake. Harder.'

His fingers continued to pay homage to her breast, applying excruciatingly delicious pain along with the pleasure as he pummeled into her. The sensation was so intense, so passionate, Lula felt certain her wings were about to pop. And pop they did.

With a piercing cry of rapture, Lula's wings spread up and out against the wall.

"You're so fucking beautiful, Lula," Dake said, kissing her deeply with tongue strokes matching that of his cock. "I love to watch you come." His fingers slipped from her breast to her clit. "Come for me again, baby. Let me see that look of ecstasy in your eyes again."

"Oh great Jupiter!" While not yet recovered from her first orgasm, Lula felt her body tighten, knowing another climax was at hand. She'd never had orgasms so close together before. It felt wonderful at the same time it felt daunting. It was as if her body would splinter into millions of points of light.

"That's it, sweetheart, shatter for me."

Lula gazed into the depths of Dake's eyes. They looked like pools of the rich, dark brown hot fudge she'd enjoyed with her ice cream earlier. As she felt her body quake, Lula was aware of Dake holding her tighter, whispering sweet words to her as he watched her. The force of her orgasm was like nothing Lula had ever known before.

In fact, the orgasmic experience had been so perfect, so supreme, that Lula felt the full extent of her nymph powers coursing through her veins, through her entire being. Her wings flapped mightily and before Lula realized what she was doing, she had lifted them both from the floor.

"Holy shit," Dake yelled out, clutching Lula harder. "I'm...I'm up in the air. I didn't know you could lift me up and fly with me, Lula."

"I didn't either," she admitted dreamily. "I'd heard stories that it was possible under certain circumstances, but thought they were no more than boastful tales. Oh Dake, it's wonderful, isn't it?"

Sucking in a deep breath and expelling it, Dake finally nodded, smiling. "Yeah...yeah, I've got to admit it's pretty cool." He captured her lips in a sweet kiss. "You're just one delicious little bundle of surprises, my sexy little nymph."

"Surprises are no fun unless they're shared with someone very special." Lula returned his kiss. "So, Dake, have you ever experienced a climax while you were flying?"

Dake shook his head, his eyes locked on hers.

"Well, hang on tight, Dakin, because you're about to." With that, Lula lifted them toward the mirrored ceiling over the bed, twirling them in slow circles as she screwed herself tight against him. "Look up, Dake. See how beautiful we are together?" Lula

loved the image of the two of them naked and joined together in midair. And from the growl rumbling up from Dake's chest, he did too.

Lula slid off his cock just far enough so she could impale herself again, grinding tight against him. After another round of the same, Dake roared out his release, clutching her tight, digging his fingers into her back, her ass and, finally, capturing her lips with his as the last vestiges of his first in-flight climax surged through him.

Chapter Seven

A jangling, screeching noise ripped Dake out of a deep, dream-laced sleep. Forcing one eyelid open, he glanced at the luscious nymph beside him who was just beginning to stir. Hands down, she was the best damn thing he'd ever laid eyes on first thing in the morning. All pink and soft, with that halo of gold curls spread across her pillow. She woke up with a sweet, satisfied smile and he knew he was the one who put it there.

"Good morning, Dake," she said, snuggling closer. "You were wonderful last night." Lula draped her arm across his chest, smoothing her fingers back and forth across his nipple.

The harsh noise blared again. Once the realization sank in that it was the telephone on Zeb's nightstand making all the racket, Dake rolled over, picked up the receiver and dragged it to his ear.

"Yeah, hello," he mumbled, feeling foggy as hell. "Zeb? Why the hell are you calling so early? What? It can't be after nine, I never sleep that late." Dake tried to focus on the clock's digital display. Damn, his brother was right. Well, no wonder—he and Lula had been screwing each other's brains out all night.

With a lion-worthy yawn, he pulled himself up on his elbows until he was propped up against the pillows. "Yeah, okay, Zeb. See you downstairs in forty-five minutes."

Dake's gaze fell on Lula, who looked so perfect, so content, so kissable and so very fuckable that he would have driven into her right then and there if she hadn't killed his poor cock last night. Jesus, that woman was one hell of a voracious lover.

Before last night, if anyone would have told Dake a man could get it up and perform that many times in such quick succession, he would have said they were fucking crazy. But then...he'd never had nymph sex before yesterday.

"Hey, gorgeous," Dake said, sifting his fingers through her thick mass of curls. "We've got to get ready. Zeb will be here soon."

"Make love to me again, Dake," Lula urged.

Dake chuckled. "I can't, sweetheart. You annihilated my cock last night, remember?" He flipped his limp cock to illustrate the point. "See? Dead. Damn, it's the first time it's ever been sore like this."

"My pussy is sore too, but it's a good feeling. It reminds me of all the joy we shared together last night."

Lula's hand scooted down to his groin and she cupped his cock. Naturally, his traitorous cock resurrected, making a liar out of him. Hard as it was, Dake removed her hand.

"We've got to be downstairs in just over half an hour, honey. You need to be dressed and ready to go. That means no wings." Dake lifted an eyebrow. "Understand?"

"Oh...I forgot." Lula stretched and yawned, presenting her breasts for him in such a mouthwatering manner his cock shot up in eager response.

"Don't do that," he said.

"What?" Lula asked, her voice soft and dreamy.

"Stretch like that. You're so damned beautiful and tempting, you're going to drive me crazy."

"I'm sorry, Dake." Propping herself up on an elbow, Lula rested her head in her hand, looking up at him with those big blue eyes of hers. "I was just hoping that we could enjoy each other one last time so I could carry the memory with me forever."

"We'll have plenty of time together later, Lula," Dake said, scooting off the bed. "But now we've got to get ready. We'll stop at the coffee shop and grab some breakfast while we plan out our search."

"Then you will be coming with me?"

"Yeah. It's Sunday, so I'm off work. Zeb said Edwina's feeling better, so she and Alfred can hold down the shop while we're on our search mission."

Oh Dake, thank you, that's wonderful! I thought I would have to go alone." Lula sprang up into a sitting position, her breasts bouncing in the process, which didn't help Dake's attempts at getting his mind off the idea of pinning her against the mattress and pistoning into her. "Ooh, look how big you've grown," Lula said, pointing out the obvious. "It seems such a pity to let that big hard rod go to waste."

Groaning, Dake came to the other side of the bed. Claspig Lula's arms, he drew her up and on to her feet, holding her at arm's length.

"Please, Lula, please. If you care about me at all, in God's name, please don't make this any harder for me than it already is. Don't you understand, sweetheart? I want nothing more than to sink into your depths this morning. I can't imagine any way I'd rather start my day. But you have to go out to search for Cupid and you can't walk around the streets of Portland with your wings flapping around in all their glory. Now be a good little nymph and go get dressed so I don't have to look at your sweet naked body anymore, okay?"

Lula nodded. "Okay. I'll be good. I don't want to leave you with unpleasant memories of me after I've gone."

Dake stilled at Lula's words. He didn't want to think about her leaving. No more wings, no more flying... Yup, the amazing little nymph was definitely going to be a hard act to follow. He gazed into her eyes, feeling that strange connection he'd felt before. As if he'd known Lula forever.

Dropping his hands from her arms, he shook the ridiculous thought from his head. Hell, that was just his overly eager dick talking.

"I have an idea," Lula said, her voice slow and sultry as she drew invisible patterns on his chest with one finger.

When she sank to her knees before him, Dake felt his entire body shudder. Then her finger was drawing circles through the hair at his groin. Lord have mercy.

"Lula..."

"Sit here on the edge of the bed, Dake." She patted the mattress. "I want to give that big beautiful extended cock of yours a proper good morning greeting."

Like a mindless zombie, Dake followed her orders, only to feel every muscle and nerve ending constrict as she dragged her little pink tongue up and down the length of his dick, circling at the sensitive cap. Before he could string two words together in response, Lula captured his cock between her breasts and purred.

Dake looked down as she squeezed her beautiful tits against him. In and out...back and forth. The play of dark against light was mesmerizing as her pale flesh enveloped his darker, purple-crowned shaft.

"We won't have to worry about my wings this way," she cooed, swiping her tongue across her lips as she looked up into his eyes and smiled. "Oh Dake, my nipples ache so for your touch," she said and his gaze shot immediately to the rigid, crinkled peaks crowning her breasts, "but one firm tug from your fingers could so easily catapult me into orgasmic bliss that I dare not risk it."

Oh yeah, she was going to be a hard act to follow.

As Lula continued her mission Dake threaded his fingers through her hair, sifting through the strands. "You're fucking amazing, Lula, you know that?"

"Yes, I find that I can be quite amazing when I put my mind to it," she responded simply.

The laughter bubbling up from Dake's throat was cut off midstream as Lula gave his sandwiched cock a warm, wet lick and his balls tightened.

"Cover my breasts with your male essence, Dake."

And, God help him, he did just that before she'd even finished her sentence. A primal shout tore from Dake's throat as stream after stream of hot cum spurted against Lula's milky breasts. If his cock wasn't spent, hadn't been rendered lifeless, he would have climaxed again just from watching his sweet little nymph lift her generous breasts to her lips, lapping his fluid from her flesh as she made satisfied purring sounds.

When Lula was finished, she looked up at Dake, a wicked nymph grin firmly affixed. "Good morning, Dakin," she said, hopping to her feet and traipsing into the bathroom to get ready.

* * * * *

"I'll have a couple of eggs over easy, bacon, hash browns and rye toast," Dake said to the server after Zeb had placed his order when Lula wasn't ready to make a decision yet.

"Do you have hot fudge sundaes?" Lula asked, still perusing the menu.

"Sorry," the server answered. "Only what's on the menu."

"They make a fabulous Dutch Baby baked pancake," Zeb suggested. "Served with lots of butter, fresh lemon wedges and powdered sugar."

"Oh that sounds heavenly." Lula beamed a smile. "May I have that?" she asked the server, who smiled as he jotted her order.

"You're usually a coffee-only guy in the morning, Dakin," Zeb observed once the server had left. "Work up an appetite last night, did you?" He hid his smile with the steaming cup of coffee he raised to his lips.

"And this morning too," Lula cheerfully piped up before Dake had a chance to respond. "Although I was actually the one who did all the work this morning, right, Dake?" She leaned in close to Zeb and whispered, "We couldn't risk my wings popping out." She winked and Zeb winked back.

Dake choked, practically spewing his coffee across the table. Zeb gave him a hearty clap on the back while Dake coughed into his napkin.

"May I say you look positively lovely today?" Zeb said, ignoring his brother's obvious discomfort at her revelation. That drew Dake's attention to Lula's black silk tank top, black jeans and black flat-heeled shoes. "The contrast of the black against your fair skin is delicious," Zeb added, while Dake's gaze returned to Lula's top and the twin peaks at her breasts poking at the silk.

It's a damn good thing he was sitting down, otherwise he'd be giving everyone in the coffee shop an in-your-face view of his erection.

"Thank you, Zebulon. I wore the knee-high boots and sheer black nightie over my black bra last night and Dake said I looked like a gothic punk mistress or something like that." She waved her hand with a flit.

Dake groaned, remembering Lula in the hot, oddly sexy getup.

"I'm grateful Dake explained that my panties should be worn under my jeans rather than over them," she went on.

"Shhh," Dake cautioned. "Not so loud, Lula."

"Okay," she whispered. "Although I think it's a shame," she added in her regular speaking voice. "No one can see how pretty my panties are now unless I slip off my jeans."

"Jesus, don't even think about it, Lula," Dake warned, giving the too-interested guy at the next table the evil eye.

Lula just laughed. "Well, of course not. I'm not about to violate an Earth protocol." She sipped from her black coffee and frowned. "This liquid is harsh. I don't think I like it."

"Add some cream and sugar," Zeb said, gesturing to the items on the table, and Lula added both, sipping again and smiling this time. "So tell me, darling," Zeb asked,

"how do we go about finding Cupid? I don't suppose you have a map or a two-way radio or something like that."

Lula trilled a sigh. "There *was* a map, but I left it behind. And one of my satchels was equipped with a pair of communication devices but..." She dropped her gaze and sighed again.

"I'm just hopeless, Zebulon. As hard as I try, I just don't seem to fit in with the other students. They're all so organized, so studious and well-prepared. It's not that I don't make every effort, it's just that I...well, I keep making one foolish mistake after another because I'm so absentminded."

"There, there," Zeb soothed, patting Lula's hand. "You're only human." Slanting Zeb a forlorn look, Lula shook her head. "Ah yes," he nodded, "I'd almost forgotten. Well, I'm sure the nymph population makes its share of mistakes too. Don't be so hard on yourself. Dakin and I love you just the way you are, don't we, Dakin?" Zeb cornered Dake with a smile as Lula gazed at Dake with hopeful expectation.

No, uh-uh. Dake didn't just toss the L-word around like empty peanut shells at a pub. There was no way his buttinski brother was going to drag an undying pledge of love from his lips, and Dake knew damn well that's what Zeb was ultimately after.

Taking the cue from Zeb, Dake patted Lula's hand. "Lula's a peach. A real doll."

"A peach," Lula said thoughtfully. "I've never been compared to a piece of fruit before. Why am I like a peach, Dake?" She turned those big wide inquisitive eyes on him and his head felt as empty as a scarecrow's.

"Uh...because you're...I don't know, Lula, it's just an expression, that's all." He certainly couldn't tell her the first thing that popped into his head, like the fact that he loved the way her plump, ripe flesh had just the right amount of give under his fingers.

"It's because you're so soft, sweet, juicy and delicious, darling," Zeb said, giving Lula a peck on the cheek. "You'll have to forgive my brother, he's romantically challenged." Zeb arched an eyebrow at Dake.

Fortunately, the food was served before Dake could act on his initial impulse and flick a snap against his brother's thick skull.

"If I were to compare you to a fruit, Dake," Lula said, cutting into her pancake, "it would have to be a —"

Dake's hand shot up as he glanced at nearby diners. Why the hell did they have to cram the tables so damn close together in these places anyway? "Don't say it, okay, Lula? I get the idea."

"But..."

Zeb covered Lula's hand. "He can be such an inconsiderate beast sometimes. Just ignore him. Pretend he isn't even here."

"You're trying to manufacture trouble where there isn't any, Zeb," Dake accused, "and I don't appreciate it."

"You shouldn't have cut Lula off that way. She was trying to return the compliment, that's all."

"By comparing me to a banana?" Dake said, regretting it as soon as the words tumbled out of his mouth only to be met by polite giggles from the next table. "Aw shit," he mumbled, doing his best to hide behind his cup of coffee.

"Oh, I never thought of a banana," Lula said. "But I do suppose that would be suitable. I was thinking of a pomegranate, actually."

Dake screwed his features into an expression of bewilderment. "A what?"

"The red fruit with the juicy seeds inside. You know, tough, hard exterior that's difficult to penetrate," Lula explained, "but a nice sweet, tender surprise inside." She smiled before depositing a forkful of pancake on her tongue. "Mmmmm!" She nodded enthusiastically. "You were right, Zebulon. This is truly delicious."

"Good, sweetheart. I thought you'd like it." Zeb smiled at Lula. Turning a reproving look on his brother, he said, "Now don't you feel like a complete jackass, Dakin?"

"Well, how was I supposed to know?"

"By remembering what Mom always said," Zeb explained. "You have two ears and one mouth so that you can listen twice as much as you speak."

"Mmm-hmm." Lula nodded, swallowing another mouthful of pancake. "I remember that one. My parents would often quote Epictetus when I was a blossoming young nymphet."

Dake and Zeb exchanged surprised looks. "Who was this Epicure guy?" Dake asked. "Somebody on," he lowered his voice to a whisper, "Mount Olympus?"

"I must admit I've never heard of Epictetus either," Zeb said, digging into his vegetarian omelet.

"Epictetus lived in the first century," Lula said. "I learned all about him in my Stoicism philosophy class. He was born a Greek and later became a Roman slave. Eventually he was known as one of the Stoic philosophers. That was the school of philosophy founded in three-hundred-eight BC upon the teachings of Zeno of Citium. The Epictetus quote I've always liked the best is, *Bear in mind that you should conduct yourself in life as at a feast*. I do my best to heed those words."

She wasted no time stuffing another piece of the eggy pancake into her mouth, her eyelids drifting closed as tiny moans of satisfaction hummed in her throat. They were the same blissful sounds Dake loved to hear when they were making love.

"Wise words indeed," Zeb agreed. "You may be absentminded, Lula, my dear, but I'm betting you're every bit as sharp as your fellow classmates—probably even smarter."

"No shit," Dake added. "That's some brainy stuff, Lula."

She hiked one shoulder in an elegant shrug. "It's true, I'm very smart. Brilliant at times. But my daydreaming and problem with being too easily distracted often overshadow my intelligence."

"Your Exodus quote—" Dake began.

"Epictetus," Lula reminded him.

"Yeah, whatever. Anyway, it reminds me of one of my own personal favorites. *You only go around once in life, so you gotta grab all the gusto you can.* Schlitz, 1970s." Dake sat back and grinned.

"Yes, the idea is quite similar." Lula looked thoughtful. "However, I'm not familiar with that quotation or this Schlitz. Was he a philosopher?"

Zeb rolled his eyes and tsked. "It's from an old beer commercial," he said with distaste. "Beer trivia is about the extent of my brother's cultural aptitude."

Lula gazed at Dake, a sweet smile lighting her features. "I like beer. It has long been a favorite of the gods," she said, adding one more gold star to her already perfect list of attributes as far as Dake was concerned. What a woman!

"May I have some of your money?" Lula asked.

Reaching into his back pocket for his wallet, Dake shrugged. "Sure. How much do you need?"

"I don't really know. I'm not familiar with your currency. Enough to purchase a big bag full of those crusty bread rolls I saw in the glass case as we came in." Lula pointed to the front of the café. "And enough pats of this butter to go along with them." She fingered the gold foil-wrapped butter pats on the small plate at the center of the table.

"Are you sure that's enough to tide you over until dinner?" Dake teased.

"They're not for me," Lula said, clearly missing the humor.

"Uh...so, what—you're taking them to Cupid?"

"While I'm sure the rolls would be a welcome offering, I'm afraid Cupid would suspect I'm trying to gain his favor through devious means."

"She doesn't want him to think she's a suck-up," Zeb clarified, as if Dake was a dimwit.

"Thanks, Einstein, I know what she meant. You want to take them back to Olympus with you?"

Lula shook her head, swallowing a mouthful of her breakfast and making that purring noise again.

"No, I want to give them to the people who sit on the streets. The ones who look so lost and forlorn, as if they're about to weep. I saw so many of them when I went trying to find Cupid yesterday after Cinnamus dropped me off. It makes my heart sad to see them. And I feel guilty enjoying such a sumptuous feast as this while I suspect they are hungry."

"She must be talking about the homeless," Dake said to Zeb, who nodded in agreement. "That's really very sweet of you, Lula. Sure, we'll buy as many rolls as you like. But keep in mind that you still need to be cautious, okay? Just because somebody is homeless doesn't necessarily mean they're a nice or safe person."

"Dakin's right, Lula," Zeb said.

"You need not worry." She nodded confidently. "I read the section on *street smarts* in the last chapter of my textbook."

"That's good," Dake said, forking a hunk of golden hash browns and remembering Lula's reported encounter with a couple of scumbags she'd kneed in the groin before she found Zeb's shop. "So tell me, Lula, how do we go about finding Cupid?"

"When Cinnamus brought me to Earth in his chariot, he landed in the waterfront park. If I can't find Cupid, that's the place I must return to in two days to await the academy's chariot for the journey back to Olympus. Cinnamus told me Cupid's headquarters was within walking distance from the park, so it can't be very far. I thought perhaps we could traverse the surrounding area and ask if anyone might know of Cupid's whereabouts."

"I don't think so, Lula." Dake snickered. "People will think we're nuts."

"Nonsense. This is Portland, Dakin," Zeb pointed out. "Kooks abound."

"You should kn—"

"Really, Dakin," Zeb cut in, "this isn't the time for snide remarks. Let's focus on the issue at hand, okay?"

Dake gave a begrudging nod. He didn't know why in the hell he always seemed to resort to juvenile comebacks with Zeb. "Sorry. Just habit, I guess." Zeb nodded in acceptance of Dake's explanation. "I suppose you and Lula are right. After all, we don't seem to have much choice. Without a map or address to go on, we're pretty much clueless. Christ, I hate asking for directions."

"This will be a perfect chance for you to get in touch with your inner—" Zeb cringed when he glimpsed Dake's warning glare. "Sorry. Just habit, I guess." The brothers shared a smile.

Dake pulled the walking map of the city out of his pocket, opening it and slapping it on the tabletop. "We'll start from here," he tapped a fingertip against their present location on the map, "and work our way north for a few blocks. Then we'll scour the area street by street until we get back here to our starting point."

"I think we should separate to save time, Dake," Zeb suggested. "I'll go this way," he smoothed his fingertip along the map, "and you and Lula can go that way."

"If you let me have the map, we can split up three ways to save even more time," Lula said, tapping the map. "I'll go down this street by myself, while you —"

"No!" the brothers chorused.

Zeb patted her hand. "It's better that you stick with one of us, darling. They're having some big cycling event from downtown to the waterfront today, which means

there'll be throngs of people and you could easily get lost. Besides, you're far too delicious to let loose on the streets of Portland alone." He winked.

"Zeb's right, honey. You just stick with me." Dake drew his cell phone from his pocket, checking the time on the digital display. "We can check in every thirty minutes by phone to monitor our progress."

"Sounds good," Zeb agreed. "Just remember that if you find Cupid first, you need to call me immediately before you let Lula go to him so I can be there to give her a great big goodbye hug."

"Yeah...sure..." And Dake realized at that moment he hoped Lula would never find Cupid or her classmates.

Chapter Eight

"Cupid?" the spacey-looking guy with the pink-tipped purple hair said. "Oh yeah...like I think I just saw him a couple of minutes ago. Wow...he was like buzzing all around my head with his bow and arrow. Zip, zap, boing."

The young man of indeterminate age gestured dramatically with his hands, the row of silver studs or snaps or whatever the hell they were along his forearm catching Dake's attention as they glinted in the sunlight. "Like just zooming around, you know?"

Lula nodded. "Did he share the location of his headquarters with you?" she asked eagerly, obviously taking the guy seriously.

"Yeah...I think he did." He bent down, giving Dake far more of a bird's-eye view than he wanted as the guy's shimmery chartreuse skin-tight cropped pants molded his ass.

Pointing at a spot where the building's brick met the sidewalk, the guy said, "He was like staying in a little mousehole with tiny furniture somewhere in here. Whoa!" he slapped his head, a deep, ponderous look crossing his multi-pierced features. "Wait a minute...maybe that was just a dream. No, no, there he is. See him?" He grabbed at the air around his head. "He just flew by."

"Oh..." Realization finally setting in, Lula's shoulders sagged and Dake ached at her disappointed expression. "Thank you," she said, reaching into the paper bag and digging out the last bread roll and butter pat. "This is for you. Please take care of yourself."

"Cool. Thanks." He unwrapped the butter, popped it in his mouth and swallowed. Then he clamped his teeth on the roll, devouring it as if he hadn't eaten in a week.

"What a nice young man," Lula said as they headed down the street. "Perhaps a little bit addled," she tapped her temple, "but very personable."

"Right," Dake said just as his cell phone rang. "Nope, no luck," he reported at Zeb's inquiry. "You neither, huh?" He couldn't help feeling guilty being so glad Lula hadn't found Cupid yet. "Okay, how about dinner? I'm starving and poor little Lula's just dragging her feet. She must be beat after all the walking we did. Thai? Sure, sounds good to me." He turned to Lula. "Is Thai food okay with you?"

"It will be a new experience," she answered with an affirmative nod. "I have yet to find a cuisine I do not enjoy. I take pleasure in trying new foods much the same as I enjoy discovering new sexual positions with you, Dake."

Damn. There went his cock again. He was getting tired of walking around the city with an unrelenting hard-on. "Meet you at Bangkok Crossing, Zeb. We should be there

in about five minutes." He flipped the phone closed. "I'm sorry you didn't have any luck finding Cupid today, Lula," he lied. "Maybe you'll have better luck tomorrow."

"I do hope so, Dake. I'm missing out on all the valuable lessons Cupid is teaching. I'll never be able to catch up with the rest of the class now."

"Sure you will." Dake draped his arm around her shoulder, giving Lula a buddy hug. "But in the meantime, we'll do our best to discover as many new sexual positions as possible, okay?" He gave her his best devilish grin.

"Oh yes, Dake," she said, wrapping her hands around his biceps and leaning close as they walked. "That will make me feel much better indeed. Will you be accompanying me tomorrow again?"

An image of the wide-eyed innocent Lula, who thought she had street smarts, scampering about town with her perky little body and asking strange men if they knew where to find Cupid sent an alarming jolt through Dake's system.

"Yes," he told her, his mind racing as he mentally tried to sort out his appointments and responsibilities over the next couple of days. Dammit, he was the owner of the business, after all, so what better time to learn to let go and delegate? He had a good, dedicated crew of electricians working for him, each of them capable of handling the various jobs on the docket. All it would take is a few calls.

"What has made you laugh?" Lula said, smiling up at him.

"I was just thinking about the reaction of my crew when I tell them I'm taking a few days off." Dake chuckled again. "They'll never believe it."

"Why?"

"Because I'm sort of a workaholic," Dake explained. "No days off, no vacations. I just really get into my work, I guess."

"You enjoy your work then? That's a very good thing. What is it that you do?"

"Yeah, I like it." Dake shrugged. "I'm an electrical contractor. That means I provide customers with the electrical systems they need for their homes or businesses. It's a good way to make a living. Besides, there's never really been any reason to take time off."

"Until me," Lula noted, worrying her bottom lip.

Dake watched her nibble and then drag the pouty lip between her teeth. Why? Why the hell did such a simple, innocuous act make him so goddamned hot? So ready to slap her up against the brick wall, spread her legs and drive his cock into her? Even the most ordinary, mundane things about Lula were a turn-on, for chrissakes.

"I would feel bad taking you away from your important electrical work, Dake. And I don't want to take Zebulon away from his flower shop tomorrow either. You have both been so very good to me and I don't want to disrupt your lives any more than I already have."

"Too late. You've already turned my life upside down, Lula," Dake admitted with a chuckle. "But only in the best possible way." He bent to give her a quick kiss. "Believe

me, there's nothing I'd rather do than spend the day with you tomorrow and the day after."

"Will you be with me both nights too?" She leaned against him closer. "So we can wake up in each other's arms again?"

Dake felt her fingers sinking into his flesh as she leaned her head on his arm. Red flag. The chick was getting attached. Sure, he'd make it a point to get a couple of quickies in, but stay with her all night again? Uh-uh. No way. Not smart. That smacked too much of being a one-gal kind of guy, which he most certainly wasn't.

After all, what if Lula never found Cupid and got stuck here forever? He couldn't have her thinking they were a permanent item—that he had any intention of getting a ring stuck through his nose. No, after a quickie or two, he'd be on his way. She could stay by herself in Zeb's apartment overnight while Dake bunked with his brother or maybe at a hotel.

He opened his mouth to answer Lula, looking down at her at the same instant she gazed up into his eyes and smiled. "Yeah," he heard himself say, astounded he hadn't choked on the word. "Yes, we'll spend the next two nights together."

"Oh, you make me so happy, Dake."

Well, there you have it. He'd lost it. No doubt about it. His brain had taken a hike and his dick was doing all his thinking and talking for him. What the hell did he think he was doing, committing himself to Lula like that? It was like he had some torrid fever smoldering away at his insides—and Lula was it.

"I'm sorry, what was that?" Lula said, inclining her head toward the curb.

"I didn't say anything," Dake answered, hoping that reading minds wasn't among a nymph's skills.

"Not you," Lula told him, patting his arm. "I was talking to the flowers."

"To the..." Stuffing his hands in his jeans pockets, Dake shrugged. "Oh sure. Of course. I do it all the time myself." He watched Lula squat, addressing the colorful array of flowers planted in the grassy area between the sidewalk and curb.

"Really?" she said to the blossoms. "Oh you poor dears. Don't worry, I'll get you some right now." Getting to her feet again, Lula gazed at Dake, all pink-cheeked and clearly incensed. It was the first time he'd seen that particular look in her eyes.

"Oh, this makes me so angry," she whispered to him before peering at the storefront, cocking her head as she read the sign. "What is a sports bar?" she asked.

"It's like a tavern where they serve lots of beer and play sports on big TV screens. Something tells me you're not asking because you feel like a beer."

"No, but I believe they will have what is needed," Lula said, moving past Dake, opening the bar's door and entering the establishment with a purposeful strut that said she was ready to rumble.

Belting out a resigned sigh, Dake followed after her, only to hear the interior erupt in wolf whistles and animated conversation as the curvaceous nymph approached the bar.

"Well..." the bartender mused in a singsong voice, giving Lula the once-over and a slick smile. "What can I get for you, little lady?" The guy was buff and nice-looking and Dake wasn't too happy with the way he was ogling his nymph—especially the way the guy's eyes seemed to be glued to Lula's breasts.

"Water, please," Lula said. "Enough for thorough saturation."

"Spring or sparkling?" the bartender asked, plucking two clear plastic bottles from a refrigerated area and plopping them on the counter in front of her.

Lula touched each bottle and frowned. "Spring. But it must not be cold. Cold water shocks the system."

"Lemme see what I got." The bartender squatted down, looking through his behind-the-bar inventory and came up with two bottles of room temperature water. "One for each of you?" he said, acknowledging Dake's presence for the first time.

"This won't be enough," Lula said with assurance. "They'll need much more. At least a full pail. They're terribly thirsty. In fact, some of them are close to death."

"Death? What? Who?" the bartender asked, glancing around to see if he'd missed someone who came in with them. "Lady, what are you talking about?"

"The flowers."

The guy shifted his skewed glance to Dake who threw up his hands in a don't-ask-me gesture.

"What flowers?" the guy asked, looking totally perplexed.

Chin elevated, Lula asked, "Are you the owner of this sports bar?"

"Yeah, but—"

One fist balled against her hip while she pointed outside with her other hand, she went on, "And are those sweet, beautiful flowers out there not in your care?"

Damn, she looked good when she was righteous and fuming. Hot and sassy and sexy as hell.

"Yeah, but—"

"Can't you see they are in desperate need of water? They said it's been unseasonably dry of late. And they told me you never take care of them," Lula complained.

By this time, most eyes in the place were on the bartender, who looked none to happy about it. "*Told you?*" the guy said, slanting her a look that telegraphed he thought she was crazy. "Hey," he asked Dake, while making a swirly motion at his temple, "has your girlfriend got a few screws loose or something?"

"All of my screws are firmly in place," Lula bristled. Standing shoulders back and ramrod straight, her breasts strained against the black silk of her tank top, drawing the

attention of every damn guy in the place. The bra she wore did little to conceal the rigid little buttons of her nipples. "I am well versed in botany. I was schooled at the academy on Olympus and count many flowers among my friends."

Oh yeah, Dake knew damn well Lula sounded nutty all right, but all of a sudden he found himself caught up in an unfamiliar protective sort of mode. He didn't like the fact that this guy was insulting his nymph.

"I wouldn't mess with her," Dake warned just as the guy opened his mouth, no doubt to remark about Lula's Olympus comment—and just maybe the part about having flowers as part of her social circle. "She's the city's OFC."

The bartender scrunched his eyebrows in confusion. "Official Flower Caretaker," Dake explained, without a clue as to where in the hell that had come from. "She's been issuing citations all day," he continued. "At two hundred bucks a pop."

"For not watering flowers?" the bartender practically squeaked.

"Yup."

"No shit." The bartender glanced from Dake to Lula. "Hey, I was just about to go out and water them before you came in," he told her, filling a large pitcher with tap water.

"Is the water in the bottles of a better quality?" Lula asked. "Because if it is, then I want you to use that instead. It is the least you can do after neglecting and mistreating those blooms and their fragile root systems."

Holding his hands up in surrender, the bartender assured, "No problem." He called to his assistant, telling him to watch the bar while he watered the flowers. The assistant snickered and the bartender shot him a narrow-eyed look that squelched the snicker in midstream.

"See that you keep it up," Dake said, holding the door open for the guy whose arms were full of bottled water. "The OFC will be making regular rounds."

"Will do, buddy."

"You're very welcome," Lula said to the flowers after they'd been watered. "He promised to be much kinder to you from now on."

As they headed down the street, she wrapped her arms around Dake's midsection. "Thank you, Dake. I am so proud of the way you put that flower abuser in his place with your warning. Does Portland actually have an Official Flower Caretaker? If it doesn't, perhaps you should suggest the development of such an important position to the city's officials."

Dake swallowed a chuckle. He could just imagine the reception he'd get with that suggestion. Of course, in green-friendly Portland, it just might fly. "I'll certainly look into it," he told Lula, who gave him a bright, satisfied smile. "So you can really communicate with flowers, huh?"

"Of course, Dake. I'm a nymph," she said, as if that explained it all. And Dake guessed that it did, actually.

Not only was she sexy beyond words, she was also caring, bighearted and unafraid to stand up for her beliefs. With her environmentalist tree-hugger spirit, she'd fit right in with Portland's ecologically concerned population.

"So how do they feel about being picked?" Dake asked, imagining flowers with expressive horror-stricken cartoon-like faces screaming *Help me, help meeeee!* in itty-bitty voices as eager, plucking fingers approached them.

"They consider it an honor," Lula explained. "Providing pleasure and happiness through their beauty, fragrance and delicate taste is their primary purpose—their life's mission, so to speak. Unlike a withering death from lack of water or sunlight, being picked and admired at their peak brings flowers great joy and a sense of fulfillment."

"I'll never think of picking daisies in quite the same way again," Dake said, snaking his arm around her waist and slipping his hand into the back pocket of her jeans. She let out a delighted squeal when he grabbed a handful of plump ass and squeezed.

The fact that he'd never before found himself turned on by a flower activist didn't stop Dake's cock from swelling. She sure as hell didn't look like any Earth Mother types he'd ever encountered. Nope, his beautiful, sensuous nymph was a fascinating anomaly. Like no other woman he'd ever known.

Damn, he really had to stop from thinking of Lula as *his* nymph. That kind of foreign thinking had thoughts of commitment and relationships skittering across his mind, which would never do. Dake worked to force the alien ideas from his brain as they headed for the restaurant.

A moment later, he yanked open the door when they reached Bangkok Crossing, stepping aside for Lula to enter. She gave an enthusiastic wave when she spotted Zeb sitting at one of the tables, waiting for them. Yeah, maybe what Dake needed was to burn all those cloying commitment-related thoughts about Lula being so soft and sweet and juicy and sexy out of his brain with some spicy hot Thai food.

"That was an awfully long five minutes," Zeb complained. "Where were you—or shouldn't I ask?" He snickered.

"Get your mind out of the gutter, bro," Dake said. "It just so happens we got involved in a serious case of flower abuse along the way."

Zeb's eyebrows shot up with interest.

"Oh Zebulon, your heart would break if you could have seen those poor, neglected little posies." Lula's expression was full of compassion.

"Lula gave the owner of Packy's Sports Bar what for, didn't you, honey?"

Lula nodded. "Yes, with Dake's help, the situation has been rectified."

"With Dakin's help, hmm? Well, I *am* impressed. You're clearly a good influence on my brother, Lula."

Dake frowned. Yeah...too good.

Halfway through the meal, with frightening thoughts of rings through the nose prominent in his thoughts, Dake blotted the blinding sweat from his face for the

umpteenth time. He'd asked for the *Gaeng Ped Dang* hot and he sure as hell got it that way. His mouth was so on fire, he could barely distinguish between the sweet basil leaves, Thai eggplants, bamboo shoots, bell peppers or pork swimming in the red curry sauce.

Water only made it worse. Rice appeased the burn somewhat and the Thai beer felt like liquid fire going down his gullet.

"Since when did you become such a fan of hot and spicy, Dakin?" Zeb asked, swallowing a mouthful of *Pad Thai* noodles. Dake's glance slid over to Lula for just the briefest instant, but it was long enough for Zeb to figure out what was going on. Zeb held up his hand. "I withdraw the question," he said, snickering and clearly enjoying Dake's torment.

Lula murmured her pleasure at the peanuttty sweetness of her *Panang* curry with chicken. "Mmmm, such exquisite cuisine," she said, helping herself to another forkful of Zeb's noodles at his urging. "Both strong and delicate with floral undertones, a fine nuance of herbs and spices. I wish I could stay here in Portland long enough to try every dish on the menu."

"You have an educated palate," Zeb observed.

"I don't know about that," Lula said. "I just really love good food. It's one of life's greatest pleasures, along with sex."

"Indeed," Zeb agreed, as Dake blotted his forehead like a wild man.

"Do you have a lover, Zebulon?" Lula asked matter-of-factly.

"No one permanent. I'm still waiting for Mr. Right to come along and sweep me off my feet."

"It surprises me that you haven't found someone. You have so much to offer, Zebulon."

"Thank you. Hmmm, maybe you could arrange a little love match for me and some perfect hunk of man with your bow and arrow," Zeb suggested with a wink.

"I do believe Cinnamus would find you most appealing." Lula scooped some curry into her mouth and licked her lips. "Without needing any help from my bow and arrow."

Zeb's eyebrow lifted. "He's gay?"

"Yes. He reminds me very much of you and Dake, except that Cinnamus is blonde with blue eyes. Like you brothers, Cinnamus is incredibly handsome with a beautiful, muscular body."

Still struggling to take in a full breath because of the spicy food, Dake's eyes bugged at the nonchalant comparison to two gay men.

"Unlike Dake, of course," she went on, "you and Cinnamus share a wonderful flair for decorating, an interest in the arts and plenty of fashion sense."

"Of course," Zeb said.

Rolling his eyes, Dake grumbled something under his breath, swiping yet again at the perspiration on his face.

"It is a pity that you and Cinnamus are from different worlds. I can picture the two of you beautiful men walking arm in arm, and then sitting under a golden apple tree, with one of you reading poetry aloud as the other strums soft musical notes on a lyre."

"He sounds perfect," Zeb said. "Maybe you can let me stow away on the chariot." He deposited a forkful of noodles and a shrimp on his tongue and smiled.

"I doubt that would be possible," Lula answered, clearly not realizing Zeb was being humorous.

"So how old is Cinnamus? Older than me or younger? Older, I hope. It's getting harder and harder to attract the young ones now that I'm practically over the hill." Zeb leaned in close, cupping his hand at his mouth. "I'm thirty-seven," he whispered.

"You're just a boy," Lula said dabbing her mouth with the napkin as she chuckled. "I believe Cinnamus turned nine hundred seventy on his last birthday."

Both Zeb and Dake looked aghast.

"You're not serious," Dake said. "Nobody lives that long."

"I'm very serious. Unlike me, Cinnamus is immortal."

"What do you mean? I thought you said you were three-hundred something?" Dake asked just as if it was the everyday sort of question a guy asks a gal.

"I am. Three hundred fifty," she readily offered, exceedingly unlike the average age-phobic Earth woman.

"That sounds pretty immortal to me," Dake noted. It also sounded crazy. Insane. Loony.

"We nymphs have a long lifespan. A few thousand years and often much more."

Dake struggled to get this all clear in his head. It all sounded so preposterous—but then, so did the notion of wings sprouting out of a woman's back. "So Cinnamus isn't a nymph then?"

Lula giggled at his question. "No, he is a god."

"A god! That's it, Dakin. I'm packing my bags," Zeb said with a bright smile. "I'll send you a postcard from Olympus."

"If I were a man," Lula said, covering Zeb's hand with hers and gifting him with a tender smile, "or a god, I would surely court you, Zebulon. Aside from being physically beautiful, you are most endearing, with a very good heart."

"Well, thank you, Lula, darling. If you were a man, I would welcome the attention from someone as refreshing, adorable and forthright as you."

"Jeez, you two are making me gag," Dake offered with a huff.

"If anything's making you gag, dear brother, it's that mountain of assorted peppers in your curry. And there's no need for the envy monster to surface. Remember, I'm gay."

My only interest in your delightful little Lula is purely that of friendship and camaraderie."

"I'm not envious and she's not *my* Lula," Dake spat, immediately regretting it when he caught the look of pained surprise in Lula's eyes. "What I meant is, you're just here with us temporarily, Lula. Sorry, I didn't mean for that to come out sounding so harsh."

"It's all right, Dake. I understand." Heaving a sigh, Lula gave him a wistful smile. "Regardless of what you may think, I am indeed *your* Lula. However, I haven't been here long enough yet for you to realize that I am your perfect love match. Perhaps you will come to the realization before I depart for Olympus Tuesday morning."

Dake cocked his head, a prickly feeling that had nothing to do with the hot peppers jogging up his spine. "I don't understand. What do you mean, love match?"

"See? I wasn't kidding when I said Dakin was romantically challenged," Zeb told Lula after sending his brother a calculated sneer. "Very thick sometimes." He tapped his temple.

"Shut up, Zeb." Dake shot him a scorching look. "Tell me what you're talking about, Lula."

"Us, Dake. Being fated lovers," Lula explained, gesturing from Dake to herself. "Fate is sometimes cruel. Just because soul mates find each other doesn't necessarily mean the lovers are destined to spend their lives together. There are often extenuating circumstances. Such is the case with you and me, Dake. Through a twist of fate we have found each other, only to lose each other in a very short time."

She was talking about leaving again. And bringing up all the stuff Dake didn't want to hear, didn't want to think about, like love and spending lifetimes together. Why did women always feel the need to attach all their hopes and dreams to what should simply be a mutually satisfying sex romp? A casual fling?

And what the fuck could he possibly say to Lula now that she'd spilled out all that stuff about them supposedly being soul mates that wouldn't have him coming across like a selfish, coldhearted bastard? Shit.

"Lula," Dake began, taking her hands in his, "you're a very special woman. Nymph," he corrected when she opened her mouth to speak. "And we've shared some special times. The key to maximizing our remaining time together is to forget about goodbyes and enjoy each other fully while we can."

"I agree." Lula nodded. "Creating memories that will last for a lifetime," she added, lifting Dake's hand to her cheek and holding it there a moment. "That way, while it will be sad for us to part, we will always carry a part of each other in a special corner of our hearts."

"Exactly," Dake said, hoping the subject wouldn't come up again until Lula actually left. It's not that he wanted to see her go, but there just wasn't any place in his life for a nymph with wings and a fierce passion for botany, no matter how sweet and sexy.

Both Dake and Lula turned in surprise toward Zeb when they heard him blow his nose with a honk.

"I'm sorry," he said, wiping his nose and dabbing his eyes with a tissue. "It's just so tragic. Like Tristan and Isolde...without the king or the love triangle...and without the terrible deaths at the end...and without—"

"Zeb."

He looked up at Dake. "Hmmm?"

"We get the idea. Look, there's nothing tragic about me and Lula, okay? We're having some good times together, aren't we, honey?" he asked Lula.

"Yes, very much," she answered, quickly mopping a tear from her cheek and putting on a brave smile.

Dake groaned a sigh, happy that he hadn't added, *but all good things must come to an end.*

"Sorry," Lula sniffed, "I was just thinking about the opera Zebulon mentioned."

"I don't know anything about it," Dake said with a shrug. "They were famous ballet dancers or something, right?"

"No. The legend of Tristan and Isolde takes place during the Earth's Middle Ages," Lula explained, "when knighthood and the chivalric code prevailed. It made me weepy because I could so easily imagine you as a chivalrous knight, Dake."

"Hardly," Dake and Zeb chorused and Dake gave his brother a narrow-eyed glare.

"Let's change the subject, okay?" Dake suggested. "Let's talk about something happy like football or basketball or maybe video games."

Lula brightened. "Can we talk about hot fudge sundaes?"

"Sure," Dake said, ready to dive in to any subject other than soul mates and tragic love affairs. "That's a great idea. We'll talk about ice cream."

"I adore it," Zeb said. "As long as it's premium. I don't like the cheap stuff with all the air pumped into it."

"It doesn't make much difference to me," Dake said. "As long as it's cold and sweet. I guess I probably like those ice cream cones dipped in chocolate and nuts that I get from the freezer section at the grocery store best."

"Those will do in a pinch," Zeb agreed. "We consider ice cream comfort food here on Earth," he explained to Lula. "I read in the paper recently that scientific studies have proven eating ice cream releases positive chemicals in the brain. They create feelings of calm, happiness and sometimes even euphoria. That makes it a veritable health food."

"Oh yes, it definitely makes me euphoric," Lula said. "Especially the thick warm chocolate fudge sauce on top, oh, and the whipped cream too. I would like to have another of those delicious creations before I go back to Olympus so I can study the components and try committing it all to memory. Then perhaps I can manufacture them for myself."

"And each time I eat one," her voice caught and her eyes grew glassy with unshed tears, "I will think of you both and the wonderful time I had with you dear men here on Earth."

A muffled snort sounded in Zeb's throat. Dake looked over to see his brother's chin tremble as he started sniffing again.

Damn.

Heaving a resigned sigh, Dake rose from his seat. "Come on, let's go get that ice cream and stir up a little euphoria."

Chapter Nine

"It's too bad that Zebulon wasn't able to join us for ice cream," Lula said, looking around with wonder. She'd never been in what Dake called a supermarket before. So many foods readily available to the masses, without the need for hunting or gathering. It was most extraordinary.

"I gripe about him but he's a good guy," Dake said. "I think he made himself scarce to give us some extra time alone."

"He *is* a good guy. You are both good guys." Lula gave Dake a warm smile. Never had she spent so much time with one being before and felt so happy and at ease. "Oh!" she gasped. "What is that cold rush of air?"

Dake chuckled. He did that a lot and Lula liked it. The creases at the outside corners of his eyes showed that he was a man who laughed easily. She'd always thought of that as a very important component in finding her love match. The thought made her sigh. She certainly wasn't one to question the wisdom of the gods, but it seemed so unfair to finally connect with her soul mate, only to have to leave him so soon.

"It's the freezer section," Dake explained. "This is where they keep the ice cream and all the other frozen foods."

Lula leaned over the freezer case and giggled. "The icy cold makes my body alert all over. Look at the tiny goose bumps all over my arms." She rubbed her arms briskly. "And see how hard my nipples have become?" She thrust out her chest, only to have Dake shush her while giving a strange, strangled sort of look.

"Have I broken another Earthly rule?" Lula asked, aware of the look of disgust a female shopper tossed her way. "I'm sorry, Dake. There are just so many to learn."

Draping his arm over his shoulder, Dake tugged her close. "It's okay, don't worry about it. Just, uh...just try to reserve any future references to your juicy little body until we get back to the privacy of the apartment, okay?"

"Okay. I'll do my best to remember." She looked at the contents of the long freezer case. It was full of different shaped cartons all labeled ice cream. "Just look at this immense selection," she marveled. Vanilla, butter pecan, chocolate, chocolate chip. Mmmm... Even after the satisfying dinner of Thai food, Lula found herself salivating.

"Pick out whatever you like," Dake told her. "Then we'll get a jar of chocolate fudge, some whipped cream and a bottle of maraschino cherries."

"We will be making sundaes ourselves?" Lula asked, delight at the thought making her tingle.

Dake leaned in close. "With a few twists," he said with a wink. Lula winked back, although she wasn't sure why they were winking.

By the time they'd checked out, Lula had selected a pint of triple chocolate fudge chunk ice cream and Dake had added the items he'd mentioned as well as a plastic shower liner and a bag of something called mini chocolate morsels. He'd explained that they were little chocolate chips when she'd asked. Lula was pleased she'd have the opportunity to construct an ice cream sundae before going back to Olympus.

"I'm glad we'll be eating our ice cream sundaes in private, Dake," Lula said as they went through the checkout line where a nice freckle-faced young man was putting the foods they'd selected into bags. "Just in case the deeply orgasmic qualities of the chocolate have an unexpected sensual effect on my wing situation," she finished, mindful of the fact that the fair-skinned boy had just turned a deep shade of crimson.

"Oh I'm sorry...Dennie," she said, reading from the badge on his shirt. "I forgot that I'm not supposed to make any references to my body in front of others. Please excuse my error." She smiled at the apparently flustered young man and followed Dake out of the store.

Once back at Zeb's apartment, Dake acted in a most curious manner, clawing at her clothing as if he were a starving man and she were a banquet. He told her his fingers had been itching all day to feel her skin against his. She only hoped Dake had not developed an allergic reaction to her.

"Shall we make love first or build our sundaes and eat them before we get down to the business of fucking?" Lula chuckled at the sound of one of Dake's favorite phrases spilling from her own lips.

"We're going to kill two birds with one stone," Dake informed Lula, to her horror.

"Oh no, Dake. I could never throw stones at a bird. Please, we mustn't do such a terrible thing."

"Relax, sweetheart. It's just a saying. It means we're going to do both things at the same time."

"Won't that be very messy?" Lula asked, trying to imagine balancing her dish of ice cream as Dake drove hard into her.

"Very," Dake said with a wicked gleam in his eye. "God, if you only knew how anxious I am to screw myself into you tonight."

"And I'm just as anxious to be screwed," Lula responded. "Fucking has been on my mind for much of the day. Except when we were involved in the midst of the flower altercation, of course."

"Of course," Dake agreed. She'd noticed that, for the most part, he was certainly an agreeable man.

Whistling a happy tune, he tossed all the pillows from Zeb's bed, then stripped the satin spread off the top, replacing it with the clear plastic shower liner he'd purchased at the supermarket. Obviously he had already surmised that her balancing skills were probably not very astute and she'd only mess up poor Zebulon's bedding without the plastic covering.

"There," he said, examining his work. "That's perfect. Now," he gave Lula a playful slap on the behind, "why don't you go spread your beautiful naked self right in the middle of the plastic while I go get a few things ready."

She happily obliged, the passion and eagerness evident in Dake's eyes making her tremble with anticipation. The idea of eating ice cream and engaging in sexual union at the same time certainly seemed to be compatible because they were both such enjoyable pursuits, but did he honestly expect her to balance her food while trying to pleasure him? If this is what Earth women did, then Lula did, indeed, have much to learn.

Dake came back into the bedroom a few minutes later with a large tray full of the food items they'd brought home from the store. He placed it on the plastic near the foot of the bed and, propped up on her elbows, Lula noticed several spoons but the lack of ice cream dishes.

"You forgot the dishes," she said helpfully.

Dake just shook his head. "We don't need any dishes." His eyebrows jiggled playfully as he picked up a can of whipped cream and shook it.

And that's when Lula finally understood.

"Oh Dake, you are brilliant! A genius. You mean for us to build our ice cream creations on our bodies." In answer, he sprayed the whipped cream in ringlets around her nipples, topping each mound with a maraschino cherry.

"And here I thought—" Lula started, only to suck in a gasp as Dake plopped a spoonful of chocolate ice cream onto her warm belly. "Oh!" The icy sensation mixed with the heat of his tongue as Dake positioned himself between her spread thighs and licked her from her belly to her breasts. "Ohhhh..." she repeated, this time more softly and through a low moan.

She squirmed beneath him as he lapped leisurely at her breasts, licking away all the cream and crushing the cherries between his teeth, causing the scarlet juice to drizzle down her flesh. A thorough man, he trailed his tongue along the rivulets, tickling her in the most enjoyable manner. As if the taut peak of her nipple was another cherry, Dake drew it between his lips. Feeling the crush of his teeth, she moaned as he applied torturous pleasure.

After giving the other nipple equal treatment, Lula murmured in disappointment as his hot mouth left her flesh wet, cool and needy. "Mmmm...more, Dake. More," she pleaded, arching closer to his mouth.

Blatantly ignoring her entreaty, Dake simply gave a devilish smile as he scooped up a bit of ice cream on one of the small spoons. Placing the handle of the spoon between his teeth, he drew Lula's knees up, parting her thighs further. Sliding his hands beneath her ass he lifted her from the mattress and then nestled his fingers at her pussy. Her body stiffened and she gave a yip when Dake pressed the icy morsel of cream against her clitoris.

"Great Jupiter, what are you doing?" Fisting the plastic beneath her, Lula gasped, her thighs involuntarily closing like a vice against Dake's hand.

"Extracting the greatest amount of pleasure I possibly can from one small spoonful of chocolate ice cream," Dake informed her, his voice a hoarse whisper as he watched the play of emotions on Lula's face.

Amid her pleading gasps of pain and pleasure, he continued the frosty assault against her most sensitive flesh. It chilled her. It burned. Oh dear gods, it made her entire body thrum from the sheer tormenting bliss of it all! A scream of rapturous agony rose in her throat only to seep from her lips in a hushed moan as she watched Dake bring the spoon to his mouth, licking it clean.

"Mmmm, nymph juice is about the best damned ice cream topping I've ever had," he said, just before discarding the spoon. His eyes dark with passion, Dake's head descended until Lula felt the wet warmth of his tongue heating her ice-hot clit.

With swirl after agonizing swirl, his tongue assailed the tender nub in a curious mixture of gentle soothing and an itching pain so wild, it begged to be scratched. Dake captured her clitoris in his mouth, sucking and scraping it between his teeth. The strength of the magnificent sensation rising within her was so all encompassing, it frightened Lula to the point that she fisted hanks of Dake's hair to anchor herself as her body shook.

Like the ocean surf, rhythmic waves washed through her being until Lula burst forth with a joyous cry of exaltation. In that instant, Dake pulled her to a sitting position, cradling her head against his chest and allowing her wings to materialize in their full splendor.

"Gods, Dake, that was magical," Lula panted, hugging him tight and enjoying the last rolling vestiges of her potent orgasm. "I do believe the rapturous experience I've just had could be classified as supernatural."

"Thanks to the magical, mystical properties of chocolate ice cream," Dake said, his soft chuckle making his chest vibrate against her cheek.

"Can it be my turn to build a magical sundae now?" Lula asked, eager to construct a tantalizing trail of deliciousness across the muscular fleshscape of Dake's body.

"Knock yourself out, sweetheart," he answered, shifting places so he was on his back, hands propped behind his head in a casual position.

Lula slanted him a cautious look. "I'm sure your strange words are simply another of your Earthly sayings, which I am not to take literally."

Dake winked at her. "You're catching on fast. The phrase means *go ahead and do whatever your little heart desires*."

"I desire to make you writhe beneath me as I pleasure you beyond all reason," Lula informed him, dragging her fingers down his chest and abs until she reached his groin. There she slipped one hand under his heavy sac, cupping and kneading gently while grasping his cock firmly with her free hand.

She could look at Dake's naked form for hours on end. His physique rivaled those of the great Greek statues. But even more than looking, she enjoyed playing with his body, feeling the tensing and slacking of the muscles and tendons beneath her hands.

"Oh baby, you know how to make me happy."

"Just wait until we get to the eating part," she said, returning his earlier wink.

"You look beautiful that way, Lula."

"Thank you. What way?"

"Sitting there between my legs with your wings spread out in all their glory and the light filtering through them. You look just like something out of a storybook."

"What I plan to do to you has nothing at all to do with children's stories, Dake," she said in a sultry whisper. She smiled when she noticed her bold promise had Dake's cock twitching hard in her hand. His groan was tinged with disappointment as Lula slipped her hands from his shaft and balls so she could gather the tasty makings of a trail from the hollow at Dake's throat all the way down to his groin.

"This is just like my art class," Lula said, dabbing Dake with bits of chocolate fudge sauce and topping each speck with a mini-chocolate chip. "Except we use stretched canvas instead of warm, solid flesh."

Nibbling at the chocolate design trailing down his chest she purred, "Of course, we don't get to lick off all the paint in art class." She laved his abs with her tongue, murmuring her appreciation of the chocolaty path. "Mmm, I much prefer this method."

When her mouth reached his navel, she kissed it and then plopped a small spoonful of ice cream there. Dake sucked in a gasp at the cold against his flesh just as Lula topped it with a spritz of whipped cream. "Ooh, I love this," she gushed, spraying out more cream. "It's such fun." Giggling, she sprayed a ruffled dollop of cream on her nipples, bringing each breast to her mouth to lick it off.

"Oh yeah...yeah...that's it, baby. It's just like I died and went to heaven," Dake said.

Returning her attention to Dake's belly, Lula lapped up the cool treat ever so slowly, kneading his biceps as her mouth tended to the quickly melting ice cream at his navel. Positioned between his legs, she sat up on her knees and smiled as she took his broad, tall shaft in her hands. "It reminds me of a pillar of warm, pulsing marble. Do you like the feel of my hands on you, Dake?"

"Better than you can imagine."

Lula dipped her head and swirled her tongue at the tip of his cock. "And do you like the feel of my mouth on you?"

Dake chuckled, it was a low, rumble kind of sound. "Oh baby, that's the best feeling of all. Especially when it's amplified by watching you go down on me in the mirror."

Lula looked toward the ceiling and smiled. "I agree. It does intensify the lustful feelings." She took another lick of his cock. "I will never forget your taste, Dake. Tangy. Musky. Salty." Placing a gentle kiss at the crown, she added, "This is the unique taste of..."

Lula hesitated a moment. She wanted to say, *This is the unique taste of my soul mate, my perfect love match*, but decided against it because such talk of love seemed to make Dake uncomfortable.

"What, honey?" Dake urged.

"This is the unique taste of Dakin Dronyer," Lula finished with a tender smile. "And while it is perfect as is, let me see if I can embellish it for this special sundae-making occasion you have created for us. When I was but a nymphet," she said, scooping a finger full of fudge sauce from the jar and painting a stripe from the base of Dake's cock to the tip, "I enjoyed finger-painting. Is that something Earth children do as well?"

"Yeah, Zeb and I used to do it all the time. On paper, though," he added with a chuckle.

"I think it's much more fun to paint a cock than a piece of paper," Lula noted, slathering another stripe of fudge from bottom to top.

"Well, in this case, I certainly like substituting for the paper," Dake mused.

"I know it will taste far better than paper when I lick and suck and nibble all of this from your cock."

Dake belted out a groan. "Damn, Lula, you're killing me and your mouth's not even on me yet."

"It will be soon enough. Be patient while I adorn the rest of your beautiful cock. And please make sure to keep it standing upright to make the decorating easier." Lula glanced up from her artistic creation when Dake laughed.

"Trust me, you don't have to worry about that," he assured her.

One by one, careful spurts of whipped cream filled in the vertical areas between the fudge stripes. "Oh look, Dake." She sat straight and glanced at the overhead mirror. "This looks almost too beautiful to eat, doesn't it?" She couldn't help goading Dake just a bit. "Hmmm," she folded her hands in her lap, "perhaps I'll just sit here and admire my masterpiece for a while before indulging in its taste."

"I see that evil, wicked streak of yours is surfacing again," Dake retorted.

"I can't help it." Lula shrugged. "It is rumored that elf blood runs on my mother's side of the family."

"Oh brother."

"What's wrong?"

"Elves?" Dake said. "Now you're going to tell me elves are real too?"

Lula laughed. "Well, of course they are, silly. Honestly, Dake, you do make the funniest jokes sometimes." She spurted out more whipped cream on the crown of his cock. "But now isn't the time for jokes. Now is the time for eating your sweet striped cock."

Lula positioned a cherry carefully at the tip, holding it there. "Do you think you can keep that still enough to balance a cherry on top?" As soon as the words were out of her mouth, Dake's cock twitched, tossing the cherry onto the plastic.

"Hell no. Not if you keep saying provocative things like that," Dake told her.

"About elves?" Lula asked.

Dake tsked. "About my cherry-topped cock."

"Oh." Lula tried again with another cherry. "Okay...be still now." As soon as she leaned over, edging her lips toward Dake's cock, it jerked again. "Dakin! You're not cooperating."

"Lula."

"What?"

"Eat me."

And Lula did.

"Can you see my tongue trailing along the fudge striping your cock when you look in the mirror?" she asked, coming up for air.

"Why, Lula? Why are you trying to kill me?" Dake groaned a hoarse chuckle. "Don't worry about me. I can see all I need to see. Just get your mouth back where it belongs, okay?"

Lula happily went back to the task of licking, sucking and nibbling, murmuring little sounds of approval as she worked. This was by far the most enjoyable way to eat chocolate. But she couldn't imagine it being nearly as enjoyable with any other man. The taste, the sensations, the ambiance just wouldn't be the same without her soul mate.

Lula pushed the gloomy thought from her mind as she focused on enjoying her time with Dake, knowing she was giving him great pleasure.

Polishing his cock with her lips and tongue, Lula sucked, intent on milking the seed from him. Slipping one hand beneath his ass and kneading his cheek, she cupped his balls with the other, caressing gently. His body stiffening, Dake fisted her curls, pressing her head closer to his groin.

With a primal growl, he let loose his male essence in a series of vigorous spurts. His warm salty cream cascaded down the back of Lula's throat along with the last vestiges of chocolate and whipped cream. The mix of sweet and savory she swallowed was intoxicating, but the delicious sense of Dake's absolute satisfaction was the sweetest of all.

"Come here," Dake said, crooking his finger and motioning to her once his senses returned. "You've got chocolate all over your mouth."

Lula spread herself over Dake's belly, loving the feel of her flesh pressing into his from her breasts to her knees. She supported herself on her elbows as she brought her mouth close to his. Dake cupped her face, holding her there in place for a moment, looking into her eyes in such a way that Lula felt a mighty twinge at the seat of her soul.

She knew that look. It was a look of love. Seeing it on Dake's face when he gazed at her brought tears to her eyes.

After another moment, Dake licked the chocolate from Lula's lips, ending the undertaking by capturing her lips in a kiss so soft, so sweet and tender, it spoke of love without the need for mere words.

"Oh Lula, I—"

She smiled down at him, realizing that Dake couldn't yet bring himself to say the words. His heart and soul knew, but his conscious mind fought against the knowledge. And that was all right. Lula understood. Perhaps before it came time for her to leave, she might hear the words spill from his lips.

"You're wonderful, Lula," Dake said instead of telling her he loved her.

"As are you," Lula said. "I've never enjoyed myself to this extent before, Dake." It wasn't necessary for her to tell him she loved him because he already knew it deep inside. The words would only hang in the air as an awkward admission for someone who wasn't ready to hear them or say them in return.

"Whenever I think of you," he told her, hugging Lula to his chest and cradling her in his arms, "this is always the way I'm going to picture you. Naked, covered in chocolate and with your beautiful glistening wings spread."

"You will remember the nakedness and the chocolate, but not the wings," Lula murmured against his ear.

"Are you kidding? Honey, how could I ever forget those wings of yours and all the fun we've had flying around this room and fucking each other right side up, upside down and even sideways, for chrissakes."

She felt the rumble of his laughter vibrate through her body. "Once I find Cupid, whether it is tomorrow or the next morning when I rendezvous with the chariot that will take me back home, your memory of me will be altered. You will remember that we met and that we enjoyed each other's company, including the fact that we made love many times, but you will have no memory of my having wings or being a nymph and no memory of our conversations about Cupid, chariots or Olympus."

Dake rolled Lula from his chest, bringing them both to a sitting position. Clasping her arms, he looked deep into her eyes and frowned. "I don't understand. What are you talking about?"

"It's one of the first rules we are taught," Lula explained. "While many mortals have known gods and otherworldly beings like nymphs, elves and fairies, any recollection of what you refer to as *supernatural* is removed from the memory. It's necessary to avoid undue stress for the mortal once their time with the being has ended."

"You can't do that. I don't want you to do that, Lula. I don't want to forget anything about you."

"I'm sorry, Dake, but it must be done. It's true that I cannot do it myself. If I hadn't lost my vial of forgetfulness serum...or powder," she waved a hand through the air, "or whatever it is, then I could have performed the task myself. However, because of my irresponsibility, either Cupid or Cinnamus will have to apply a dab of the forgetfulness mixture to your skin instead."

Dake's expression grew steely. "What if I refuse?"

"It will still be done. Oh I remember now," Lula said, happy that she finally recalled Cinnamus' words about the vials.

"It is indeed a powder and not a liquid because simply inhaling the forgetfulness powder will work. Sometimes mortals retain a few wisps of memory because they cling to it so fiercely. But then others of your kind only believe them to be touched," Lula tapped her finger against Dake's temple, "because they insist they've seen aliens or UFOs or fairies or —"

The groan escaping Dake's throat was mighty. Letting go of Lula's arms, he closed his eyes and shook his head. "Jesus, now you're trying to tell me that there really are such things as aliens and UFOs." He opened his eyes, pinning her with a bewildered gaze. "I've never believed in any of that shit until I met you. I thought all those people who talked about seeing aliens were —"

"Crazy." Lula nodded. "Exactly. Once I leave, both you and Zebulon will go back to believing what you did before I ever appeared. Perhaps the only difference is that you may find yourself to be a bit more open-minded and less judgmental when you hear stories that sound unreal."

"So you guys will be zapping Zeb too, huh?"

"Yes."

"Whew." Dake dragged his fingers through his hair. "This is all pretty hard to take, you know? I mean, my life gets turned upside down—in a good way," he added quickly. "And I finally meet a woman I could actually —" He stopped short and just sat there, shaking his head back and forth slowly.

"I'm truly sorry, Dake." Lula smoothed her hand along his arm. "Perhaps I shouldn't have told you, but I felt it was only right to inform you myself after all that we have shared together." Dake seemed to snap out of a daze as Lula watched him.

His broad chest expanded as he took in a deep breath and expelled it with a whoosh. "No, it's okay. I'm glad you told me. Don't feel bad about it, Lula."

"Look what I've done to you," Lula said, lifting his almost limp cock. "I killed it again."

Dake looked down and smiled. "I like it a lot better when you kill it the other way," he said. "You know, genital death by extreme pleasure."

"We have all night left to devise numerous other ways to pleasurably kill your cock."

"And plenty of sundae fixings to use in a dastardly variety of ways," Dake added.

Lula plopped herself belly down on the plastic sheet, right in the midst of melted ice cream, dabs of fudge and other remains of their passionate creations. "Remember when you told me I had a sweet ass?"

"Aw, jeez, you're not going to wipe out that memory too, are you?"

Her chin propped on her hands, Lula giggled. "No, you'll get to keep that one. Why don't you paint my ass to make it even sweeter than it already is," she suggested. "Then after you lick everything off, you can take me from behind, caveman style."

"Sounds like a good plan to me. Caveman style...is that what you call it up there on Olympus? We usually call it doggie style here."

"When a male enters the female's vagina with an approach from the rear, it is referred to in my textbook as caveman style, citing the lusty, primitive, animalistic urges acted upon by the Neanderthals who once roamed your Earth. I believe this terminology and the imagery it creates would be more acceptable and appropriate than imparting broad mental images of canines copulating, would it not?"

Dake just looked down at Lula for a long moment before laughing, grabbing two handfuls of her ass and squeezing. "You are definitely the most interesting, amazing and oddly peculiar woman I've ever met." He pressed a finger to Lula's lips when she opened her mouth. "And don't give me any of that *I'm not a woman I'm a nymph* stuff, because after you leave, all I'm going to remember is that you were a woman anyway, right?"

"Right," she said around Dake's finger. "But I wasn't going to say anything about the woman part, I was going to ask about the oddly peculiar part."

"What I mean," Dake explained, "is that one minute you're all wide-eyed, innocent and helpless and the next you're sounding just like a professor giving a lecture."

"I'm sorry. I can't help it."

Laughing again, Dake began painting her butt with chocolate. "Sweetheart, there's not a damn thing for you to be sorry about. On the contrary, I find you to be the sweetest, sexiest, most intriguing female of any species I've ever encountered." He licked the chocolate from one of her ass cheeks.

"Hey, you haven't finished painting my ass," Lula objected.

"I'm a very impatient caveman," Dake answered.

Chapter Ten

"Why is he crying?" Lula whispered to Zeb.

"Alfred's always crying about something or other," Dake said through a sneer. "The sky is blue, Alfred. Boo-hoo-hoo." He gave a dismissive wave.

"Bad breakup," Zeb replied, ignoring his brother's snide remark. "Alfred and Leonard had been a couple for almost two years. Last night, Alfred got home to find Leonard had just left. No note, nothing. I'm sorry to let you down, darling, but I'm afraid I need to be here at the shop until Alfred can compose himself enough to handle customers."

"I understand perfectly," Lula said, smoothing her hand over Zeb's shoulder. "Dake will contact you on the phone if we find Cupid so you can come say goodbye."

"Yeah, and get your brain freeze," Dake added with a roll of the eyes. Drop-jawed, Lula gave him a wounded, surprised look. Damn. Dake had promised her he wouldn't tell Zeb about the memory zapping thing. He shrugged an apology.

"Dakin, you've been in a shitty mood all morning," Zeb said. "And now you're jabbering nonsense. If I didn't know better, I'd say you had PMS."

"Ha-ha, very funny."

Arms crossed over his chest, Zeb eyed him with that *I-can-see-right-through-you* look of his. Dake hated that look. It meant Zeb was getting ready to probe with a list of touchy-feely questions.

"You're suffering from pre-separation anxiety, aren't you?" Zeb asked.

"Pre what?" Dake coughed a laugh. "Zeb, that is such bullshit."

"You may as well admit it, Dakin. It's written all over you."

"Mind your own beeswax, bro," Dake warned. "I don't have time to play twenty questions with you. I've got to help Lula find Cu—" Dake hesitated, glancing first at Alfred who, although still sobbing, clearly had his ears perked, and then at the couple of customers in the shop. "To find her *teacher*," he finished. "Come on, Lula." Dake clasped her arm.

"I know he doesn't mean to be so harsh, Zebulon," Lula said, stroking Dake's hand and patting it. "He's having a hard time."

Dake hissed an exasperated sigh. "I am *not* having a hard time with anything," he protested, well aware that it was a lie. "I'm just tired, that's all."

"It's no wonder after all the amazing sex we had last night," Lula said matter-of-factly, only to have Dake shush her.

"Ahhh, I see," Zeb offered with a twinkle in his eye. "Well, in that case, make sure you stop and get yourself a strong cup of coffee, Dakin, so you're not being a bear to poor Lula on her last day here with us."

Last day here... The words grated on Dake's mind like fingernails on a chalkboard. Why the hell was he having such a hard time with the idea of Lula leaving? After all, he was the one who usually initiated the end of an affair, fully enjoying the return of his freedom and looking forward to the next sexual conquest. But Lula was different. She was special. She was –

Steeling his expression, he stiffened, shoving all such thoughts of Lula from his mind as he hauled her to the door of Zeb's shop. Dammit, he'd never been a sap over some woman before and he wasn't about to start now.

"Jesus, I thought we'd never get out of there," he said as soon as they exited the shop.

"It's okay, Dake. I understand," Lula said as they headed off in the opposite direction they'd taken yesterday.

"Understand what?" he said, setting a brisk pace.

Yanking on his shirt sleeve, Lula pulled him to a stop. She was so damn beautiful, it almost hurt to look at her as she smoothed her fingers across his jaw. Giving him a soft, sweet, angelic smile he probably didn't deserve, she said, "I understand that you're upset because I'll be leaving soon."

Shit. Was there some neon sign flashing *I'm a sap* over his head or something? "Look, I'm not upset, Lula. I mean, sure, it's too bad that our time together is coming to an end, but, hey, we had some great times together, right? It was a hell of a lot of fun. And the sex was hot. I mean *really* hot. What more could we ask for, huh?"

Winking, he chuckled her chin with his knuckle and started walking again. "Besides, we'll probably see each other again in the future."

"No." Keeping pace with him, Lula shook her head. "Once I leave Earth, I won't be permitted to interact with you again on future visits. It would be too painful for both of us. I must allow you to get on with your life and find someone else."

Damn. Dake didn't want to hear this. He was half tempted to slap his hands over his ears and go *la-la-la* the way kids do when they don't want to listen.

Last night, the sex was awesome. It couldn't have been better. Practically all night long they rolled around in that chocolate mess, enjoying the hell out of each other. The night was capped off with a perfect round of in-flight sex as Lula lifted them off the plastic sheet and up to the mirrored ceiling where they twirled around slowly. While Dake fucked her sweetly, they got a close-up, bird's-eye view of flesh meeting flesh.

And now she had to go spoil everything with talk about them never seeing each other again – and him finding somebody else.

"Hey, cheer up," he said with forced bravado. "We've got all night tonight, sweetheart. Me, you, those wings of yours...we'll have a great time."

"Not if I find Cupid and my classmates today," Lula said. "Once I find them, we must say goodbye, Dake. Forever."

Dake looked over and saw her chin tremble. It made him want to grab her close, whispering in her ear that everything would be all right, that they'd be together forever. *Forever?* Jesus, he was losing his mind. Just to be safe, he stuffed his hands in his pockets and kept walking.

A fat tear coursed down her cheek. "By gods, leaving you will be the hardest thing I've ever had to do. I have come to...to care deeply for you, Dake."

Whoa. Okay, it actually hurt to hear those words coming out of her mouth. Like a stomach punch where the aftereffects just kept on churning deep in the gut. Maybe it hurt so bad because she was voicing the same feelings he had going on inside. *Feelings*. Damn, there was that word again. Zeb's favorite word. Dake suddenly found himself crossing over into new territory and he didn't like it in Touchy-Feely Land one single bit.

Slowing his pace, he smoothed his thumb across Lula's cheek, wiping away her tear. Touching her was a big mistake. It opened the floodgates of his emotions. He might never see Lula again. Never hold her close. Never see that firestorm of ecstasy in her eyes at the moment he brought her to orgasm—at the moment her wings spread and she sang out in joy. The realization struck him deep in his gut like a hot knife twisting away at his insides.

Words escaped him as Lula took a deep breath and swiped the tears from her eyes.

"Sorry. I'm better now," she said with a bright smile—a counterfeit smile that didn't reach her eyes. "I didn't mean to get overemotional."

Dake knew he should have said something back to her, telling her he cared for her too, but he didn't say a word. No, he just kept walking alongside her like a big dumb cluck, because if he opened his mouth, he knew damn well he'd find himself saying something stupid. Something he'd be sorry for later. Like telling her he wanted her to stay with him. Always.

And that was just plain fucking nuts. Hell, he'd arranged his bachelor life just right. No ties, no sticky relationships. Just plenty of casual fun with lots of different women—none of whom he'd ever slept all night with, besides Lula.

He had a rule about sleepovers. No waking up in the morning with some babe at his side, no matter how hot she might be. It made things too messy. They started getting all needy and clingy then—getting ideas about love and marriage and babies and houses with white picket fences and all that crap.

Free and clear, that's the life Dake wanted. Hell, he was only thirty-eight—not even forty years old yet. Maybe he'd settle down when he was sixty, but now? Uh-uh. No way. No messy romantic entanglements for him.

Then why in the hell did his insides feel like they were being tortured with a red-hot poker right now?

He'd only known Lula for a couple of days. Okay, yeah, they were amazing days and the most astounding nights of his life. But aside from that, there was just something about her – apart from the wings and the flying orgasm thing they did together. He glanced over at her, walking alongside him with a bounce to her step as she scouted out the area, hoping to find Cupid.

Lula caught him gazing at her and held out her hand. Extracting his hand from his pocket, he took her hand and she smiled, gently swinging their arms as they walked. Why in the hell that simple act made his cock swell he had no idea, but it did.

"The weather couldn't be more perfect for our search today," Lula said. "The sky is blue, the sun is shining, the flowers are blooming and it seems everyone is outdoors enjoying it."

"Yeah, it's a nice day." Frankly, Dake hadn't even noticed. All he was interested in was Lula.

She was all in blue today. When they went shopping, Zeb had picked out a long-sleeved blue silk blouse that matched the deep blue of Lula's eyes. The jeans were a lighter blue and hugged her luscious curves to perfection. It was a regular, everyday kind of casual outfit, nothing particularly sexy or provocative about it – except on Lula.

She looked sexier in that getup than most women did nude, and Dake should know because he'd seen plenty of naked babes.

Lula was extraordinary. Unique. Fascinating. It was like she'd become a part of him somehow and if she disappeared from his life, a portion of his soul would be ripped out and the gaping hole would never heal.

Nah. That was just more crazy talk. Touchy-feely stuff. Dake decided it was due to the aftereffects of all that phenomenal sex they'd had, that's all. It simply wasn't possible to fall in love with someone you'd known for less than a week.

Love? Jesus, did that word really just flit across his mind as if it was something he tossed around every day? Whoa! He had to get a grip. A few bouts of in-flight sex and he was thinking like a guy who's ready to make a commitment.

He glanced at Lula again, zeroing in on her breasts straining against the silk and the way they jiggled a bit with each step. His cock throbbed hard against his fly as he watched her. He itched to drag her into an alley, slam her against a wall, rip that shirt off her and suck those jiggly tits as he fucked her senseless.

Christ, he was morphing into some kind of a testosterone-driven animal. A sex-crazed beast.

Nope, uh-uh. This was no good. The sooner they could locate Cupid and Lula's classmates, the better. A quick hug, a chaste goodbye peck on the lips, a smiley *adios* and he'd be outta there, on his way back to the perfect bachelor's existence he'd worked so hard to create for himself. Yeah, maybe that brain freeze forgetfulness thing they'd do to him was for the best after all.

"Oh dear gods, did you see that?"

Lula's voice snapped Dake back to the present. "What?" He looked around, not seeing anything special. "Did you see Cupid or one of your classmates?"

"No..." she said absently. "Excuse me for a moment, Dake."

Before he had a chance to say anything, Lula disengaged her hand from his and skipped over to the bus stop across the street. She stood there speaking to a guy in a suit who was too damned good-looking for Dake's comfort. *What the fuck?* was the first thing that crossed Dake's mind. And the second.

"What's going on?" Dake asked, with a territorial slip of his arm around Lula's waist when he reached her. As Lula continued to speak to the guy, she raised her hand like a crossing guard in answer to Dake's question. That, along with a shushing sound, was all she offered Dake. Well, *that* was real reassuring.

"Yes, right there," Lula said to the thirty-ish man. "The one dressed in red and black." Both Dake and the guy Lula was talking to followed her gesture until Dake spotted an attractive young woman across the street waiting for the bus going in the other direction. "Trust me," she told the guy. "She is your intended. Your soul mate."

"Come on, that's nuts," the guy said, appreciatively eyeing the shapely brunette at the bus stop. "Ridiculous. How would you possibly know something like that?"

"Because I'm a nym...um...because I'm psychic! Yes, that's it. I'm extremely psychic," Lula said and Dake groaned. Poor little thing was a terrible liar. "Now hurry, go to her before her bus comes. You must prevent her from getting on."

"What? I can't just walk up to a stranger and tell her not to get on the bus. She'll think I'm an idiot," the guy said, never taking his gaze from the brunette across the street. "Is this a joke or something? Like one of those hidden camera things you see on TV?" He gazed around him then.

"You must believe me," Lula said, gripping the man's arms and shaking him. "I tell you the truth. If you don't intervene," she warned, "she's going to meet another man on her bus this morning and end up marrying him."

"But—"

Lula sucked in a gasp. "The bus approaches! Go, quickly, before you lose your chance."

To Dake's astonishment, the guy didn't hesitate. He ran across the street, catching the brunette by the elbow just before she stepped aboard the bus.

Lula dragged Dake a few feet to the side to get a better look at the couple. The woman looked annoyed at first, whipping her elbow from the man's grasp, but as he spoke, her expression soon became relaxed, then pleasant and she finally smiled. The bus rolled by as he led her into the coffee shop at the corner.

"Well, I'll be damned," Dake said.

"Another perfect love match. Thank the gods." Breathing out a sigh of relief, Lula beamed a smile at Dake. "It would have been so much easier if I'd only had my bow and arrows with me," she told him.

"Of course, I made a pledge to Cinnamus that I would refrain from using them until I found Cupid. Besides, it would be difficult to shoot invisible arrows at people without being cloaked in my invisibility garment or using the invisibility serum. People would probably stare at my strange actions and could possibly take it upon themselves to interfere with my mission."

"You're probably right." Dake had visions of the Portland police cuffing Lula and hauling her away for psychiatric observation. "Are those two really soul mates? I mean, how could you know something like that for sure? What if you made a mistake?"

"Yes, they are indeed meant for each other. I'm certain of it," she said with conviction. "You must remember that I've been trained, Dake. Schooled in the fine art of detecting and promoting perfect love matches," she said, just the way a lawyer or doctor or other professional might talk about their schooling. But, of course, they wouldn't have received their diplomas from some academy in the clouds.

"In addition, as a nymph I am naturally inclined to detect certain pheromones." Dake gave her a clueless look. "Pheromones are chemicals secreted externally by an organism to send information to members of the same species," Lula clarified in the brainy professor-like voice he'd heard her use a few times before. She pointed toward the coffee shop. "Rest assured they are a perfect match."

"So you can sniff out soul mates, is that what you're saying?"

"In a sense, yes." Lula chuckled. "And then once I have the couple in sight, I'm able to tune in to get brief glimpses into their futures. That's how I knew she was about to meet another man who would become her husband."

"So you really are psychic, then?" Dake asked, praying to God she couldn't read the jumbled touchy-feely thoughts that had been swimming around inside his head all morning.

"Somewhat." Lula held her thumb and forefinger about an inch apart. "But only when I'm directly involved in a love match situation. In this case," she explained, "I could see flashes of a dull, unhappy life for the woman if she married the other man she was about to meet on the bus. It would be a relationship devoid of true love, friendship or a sense of satisfaction.

"But the stream of consciousness I tapped into—that's the unbroken flow of thought and awareness of the waking mind," she explained when Dake found himself giving her another clueless look, "showed that the couple I paired would have a rich, love-filled and very rewarding life together."

Dake nodded. "That's pretty cool."

"More warm than cool, actually," Lula said, interpreting his question literally. Dake stifled a rising chuckle as she went on. "I would liken the thought waves emanating from people as something akin to a warm, gentle summer breeze with a touch of electrical current."

"That's pretty amazing," Dake said, figuring it was a safer phrase with a clearer interpretation. "In fact, *you're* pretty amazing." He drew her close, planting a quick kiss on her lips.

"You are too," she said, returning the kiss. "I have not encountered many mortal men as flexible and tolerant as you, Dake."

"Me?" His voice came out almost in a squeak as he slapped a hand against his chest. "I think Zeb might have a thing or two to say about that." Dake laughed.

"Perhaps, but only in jest. He enjoys taking a ride on your back as much as you do riding on his. But, in truth, Zebulon loves you very much. And it's clear he respects you, Dake."

It took Dake a minute to figure out what Lula was talking about and then he remembered a previous conversation about him and Zeb getting on each other's backs. Instead of correcting her, he just tugged her close, nuzzling his chin in the sun-warmed curls at the top of her head. "Yeah," he said. "Zeb's okay."

Lula came to a stop. "Cupid's Love Shack," she read aloud from a bright pink sign splashed with black and silver lettering. She turned a hopeful smile on Dake. "Oh, perhaps we've finally found Cupid!" she said, all bouncy and excited.

Before Dake could even open his mouth to tell her the place was just a seedy dive where women danced topless on the bar, Lula had raced into the place.

"Aw, shit," Dake mumbled as he followed her inside.

He arrived just in time to hear the big burly tattooed bruiser inside the door ask her in a deep baritone, "Lookin' for some lovin', honey?" Dake stiffened as he saw the guy run a finger up Lula's arm. Double shit. The last thing he wanted was to get tangled with some horny meathead twice his size.

"Come on, Lula, this isn't the right place," Dake said loud enough for her to hear him over the booming base reverberating through the darkened room. Locking onto her arm, he tugged. Lula remained in place.

"No thank you," she answered the greasy-haired bruiser as if he were an upstanding member of society. "I have plenty of loving from Dake." She smiled up at Dake, patting his chest. "I'm here looking for Cupid. Is this his headquarters, perchance?"

"Just like the sign outside says, little lady. This here's Cupid's Love Shack. If you're lookin' for work," he added, giving Lula an appreciative once-over, "talk to the man himself."

"The man? You mean Cupid?" Lula asked.

Bruiser nodded. "He's right over there." He motioned toward a guy in a shiny blue suit with slicked back hair and plenty of gold around his neck, wrist and fingers. His stark blue-black hair was an obvious dye job, no doubt to make the guy appear younger than his fifty-something years.

"Thank you," Lula said. "And I think your flesh artwork is just lovely," she added, reaching up on her tiptoes to smooth her fingers along the tattoo of a bleeding skull at the top of his shaved head. "Very imaginative."

"Thanks." Bruiser cracked a gap-toothed smile. "If you like that, I got me some other even more imaginative tattoos elsewhere on my body that I can show you," he oozed with a snicker and devilish eyebrow jiggle.

"She's not interested," Dake said, swallowing hard when the bruiser looked down at him as if he relished the idea of squashing Dake like an ant. And the guy could probably do it too.

"Perhaps another time," Lula said, with a kind smile before turning back to Dake. "That was very rude, Dake," she whispered as Dake dragged her back toward the entrance. "I think you may have hurt his feelings."

"Are you kidding? There's no room under all that beef for feelings," Dake said at her ear, tugging her harder. "I'm telling you, Lula, this isn't the right place. Now let's get out of here before you get us in trouble."

"I must be sure, Dake." With that, Lula shook off Dake's hand and was on her way toward Mr. Slick and Shiny, AKA *Cupid*.

Damn, but she was a hardheaded, impulsive nymph. The man who ended up marrying her was going to have his hands full, that's for damn sure. With more time and practice, Dake figured he'd be just the man to tame Lula's tenacious ways. *Shit!* There were those crazy commitment thoughts floating around inside his head again. Shaking his head as if to dislodge the offending thoughts from his consciousness, Dake went after Lula.

"Hi, sugar," a female voice oozed. "How about a lap dance?"

Dake looked up to see a redhead pole-dancing on the bar. Wearing a g-string and silver star-shaped pasties with tassels over her nipples, her tits looked about the size of cantaloupes. Really, really big cantaloupes. While she certainly couldn't hold a candle to Lula's fresh, natural beauty or sensuousness, Dake's independent-minded cock gave a hearty *Well, helloooo there!* salute in response.

"Mmm, hey there, handsome," another dancer said. "Like what you see?"

This one was younger with bright pink hair, a matching g-string and pink-daisy embellished nipple clamps. One glance at the fine chain dangling between her too-big-to-be-real tits had Dake's cock ready to do the horizontal mambo. Damn, stupid, traitorous appendage. As if his beautiful, winged, stubborn nymph wasn't already enough to handle.

"I'm sorry," he heard Lula saying a few yards away, "but the chapter on street smarts suggested that disrobing in public here on Earth was strongly discouraged and could lead to unwieldy situations. Those are indeed your own rules, are they not, Cupid?"

Aw hell. “Thanks, ladies, but I’m going to have to take a pass,” Dake said to the dancers with a polite nod and wink before double-timing it over to Lula and the guy she hoped was Cupid.

“No problem. We’ve got a back room,” the guy coaxed. “Very private.”

“But, Cupid, I still don’t understand why you need to see my breasts and ass,” Lula said. “I can assure you they are still perfect and no worse for the journey from Olympus.”

“Jesus, Lula, what the hell’s the matter with you!” Dake grabbed her and turned her toward him, shaking her. If he hadn’t taken off work today, there’s no telling what kind of dangerous fixes she’d find herself in. “Are you so lamebrained that you can’t tell this scumbag isn’t Cupid?”

“I take exception to that,” the scumbag said, lifting his forefinger. “I mean, you can’t expect me to hire exotic dancers without eyeing the goods now, can you?” His lip curled into a half-smile.

“He...he told me he was Cupid, Dake. He even showed me his official chariot license to prove it.”

Dake screwed his features. “His what?”

The scumbag flipped out his wallet, giving Dake a gander at his driver’s license. It read *Cupid Bataggliia*. “See? I’m on the up and up, pal,” the scumbag said, as if he expected Dake to give him the seal of approval.

“Aw, shit, Lula. He’s not—”

“Besides,” she cut in, “Cupid’s supposed to be incognito, remember?” Lula’s chin trembled as she looked up at Dake with a wide, innocent, trusting gaze and he felt like a goddamned bully.

“Honey, do you really think Cupid is going to go running around Earth disguised as a pervert?”

“I take exception to that,” the scumbag said again, raising his forefinger as before.

“You got a problem here, Mr. Bataggliia?” the bald, tattooed bruiser piped up as he edged toward them. When he flexed his muscles in a show of strength, his biceps looked bigger than the dancers’ cantaloupes.

“I was conducting an employment interview with this lovely young thing when this sleazeball insulted me,” the scumbag accused.

“I’m a sleazeball?” Dake squeaked out in surprise, clapping a hand against his chest. “Oh that’s rich. Look, you oily son of a bitch—”

“I take exception to that,” the scumbag said with a nod to Bruiser who stepped in, grabbing Dake by the seat of the pants and shirt collar as if he weighed no more than a sack of flour.

“Hey. *Hey!* Put me down, you fucking meathead.”

Bruiser complied once he’d carted Dake to the entrance, kicked open the door and tossed him onto the sidewalk like yesterday’s garbage.

Soundly deposited on his ass in the midst of curious passersby, Dake scrambled to get to his feet to give Bruiser what for. But before he could act, he watched in astonishment as Lula's balled fist connected with Bruiser's nose with a resounding crunch.

"How dare you manhandle the man I love!" She waved her hand in the air as if it smarted. Dake wouldn't be surprised if she'd sprained it good punching the guy like that.

"Jesus fucking Christ!" Bruiser bellowed, his hand cupping his nose and blood seeping through his fingers. "You broke my fucking nose. You stupid cunt, you broke my fucking nose!" His expression turned murderous as he stepped toward Lula.

"Unless you cease and desist," she cautioned, bravely standing her ground, "I shall be forced to inflict further bodily harm. It is not my desire to mete out damage to any mortal being, so I beseech you to retreat now while you still have the opportunity."

Just as Bruiser pulled back his fist to sock Lula, Dake captured it in one hand while connecting his other fist with the guy's nose, resulting in another sickening crunch.

"Don't even think about messing with the woman I love," Dake growled. "Now go back to the hole you crawled out of, you piece of shit."

Lula gasped. "Oh Dake!" she shouted as she jumped up on him, wrapping her arms around his neck and planting kisses all over his face. "You love me! I knew it. I knew it!"

In all the commotion, Dake hadn't even realized he'd said the L word, but bursting out with it that way sort of felt good.

"Hell yeah, I love you," he admitted, locking his lips with hers. "What a woman," he added once their kiss had ended.

"God damn, God damn, God damn!" Bruiser yelled.

At the sound of Bruiser's roar, Dake dropped Lula, pushing her aside. She stumbled and fell on her ass, giving an *Oooph!* as she landed. Dake saw tears mixing with the blood on Bruiser's cheeks. He was pissed. Big time. This was clearly no time to be gentlemanly and help Lula up.

"You fucking assholes. I'm gonna kill the both of ya."

As Dake prepared to defend himself, Lula jumped up and hopped on Bruiser's back, beating on him with her fists and biting his ears. Damn, his little nymph was a firecracker!

That brief instant Dake took to admire Lula's foolish bravado cost him dearly. Before he even knew what was happening Dake saw Bruiser's ham hock of a fist just before it made contact with his nose. This time, the sickening crunching sound came from Dake. He clutched his nose in an attempt to stop the flow of blood. Fuck, that hurt.

Belting out a deafening cry, Lula jumped off Bruiser's back. She came around to the front of the guy, waving a chastising finger as she gave him a verbal what for.

"I warned you. I warned you!" she shouted. "But you didn't listen." Bruiser responded by swatting Lula in the face with the back of his hand. Tears sprouted, but still she stood her ground.

Before Dake could move in to push Lula aside and beat the living shit out of Bruiser, she grabbed the guy's shirt, fisting it in a bunch before thrusting her knee up between his legs, connecting with his groin. Then she kicked him on one knee. It all happened so fast, Dake almost missed it.

Big bald Bruiser collapsed to the sidewalk, squealing like a pig as he supported his balls with one hand while clutching his twice-broken nose with the other. Damn, the guy looked like he was in agony, but with the image of Bruiser swatting his sweet, brave Lula across the face, Dake gave in to his baser urges and kicked the guy in the gut just for the hell of it.

"Dake! Dake! Are you all right?" Lula cried, wrapping her arms around him amidst whooping shouts, applause and whistles from the crowd that had gathered.

"I think this is the part where I'm supposed to say *my hero* and give you a big kiss," Dake teased, laughter only increasing the blinding pain at the center of his face.

"You're the one who's the hero," Lula said adoringly. Dake liked the way it sounded, even though it was Lula who basically beat the crap out of the guy and not him.

"I'm okay," he told her. "Nothing to worry about, just a broken nose. What about you, sweetheart?" He winced as he saw the pink imprint of the guy's big hand across Lula's pale cheek. "God damn son of a bitch," Dake swore, smoothing his fingers over her hot cheek.

"I'm all right," Lula said.

Dake lifted her fierce punching hand to examine it. "Can you move your fingers, honey?" Lula wiggled them and nodded.

"It hurts, but there are no broken bones," she said.

His arm secured around Lula's waist, he kissed her cheek. "Let's get out of here," he said.

"Not so fast, buddy," a man's voice rang out just as the sound of sirens drew close.

Dake looked up at the uniformed guy whose hand rested on his holstered gun. Damn. The cops.

"Up against the wall," the cop said. "Both of you. Feet spread."

A squad car pulled up, lights flashing, siren winding down, and two more cops got out, inspecting the scene, talking among themselves and handling Bruiser.

Lula followed Dake's lead, positioning her hands high on the brick. "What's happening, Dake? This makes me feel frightened."

"Oh, so *now* you're frightened," Dake answered with ironic laughter as the first cop read them their rights. "It appears we're being arrested," he explained. "For disorderly

conduct. Don't worry, everything's going to be okay once we get down to the station and explain."

"We have been busted?" Lula sucked in a gasp. "Oh no. I have read about this and watched many films on the subject. What will Cinnamus and Cupid say when they return to Earth and discover I've become a convict in shackles? Oh Dake, I do not look good in horizontal stripes."

Dake chuckled. Like everything else since he'd met her, Lula was going to make his first arrest experience exceptionally memorable. He was just about to say something reassuring when Lula raised her voice.

"Police brutality! We want a lawyer! Attica! Attica!"

Holy shit! Dake's jaw dropped. "Jesus, Lula, what the hell do you think you're doing?"

"Demanding our rights," she explained with conviction. "The legal chapter of my *Everything You Need to Know About Earth* textbook covered the topic of prisoner rights and inhumane conditions and —"

"Lula."

"Yes?"

"Just shut up...please."

"But —"

"Ma'am, if I were you, I'd listen to your boyfriend," the cop advised.

"Remember the part where the nice police officer said we have the right to remain silent?" Dake asked Lula.

"Yes."

"This might be a good time to do just that."

"Okay. Dake?" Lula's voice was small and quiet now.

He let out noisy sigh of exasperation. "Yeah."

"I-I'm truly sorry I got us into trouble."

Resting his forehead against the brick, Dake mumbled, "Forget about it."

"Dake?"

"What."

"I love you," she whispered.

"Yeah," he sighed. "Me too."

Chapter Eleven

"It's not that funny, Zeb."

"I beg to differ. You look just like a thug, Dakin." Wiping tears of laughter from his eyes, Zeb caught Dake in the viewfinder of his cell phone's camera and took a picture as his brother fumed. "Mom was always worried you'd get into trouble one day. If she could only see you now."

"Where's that compassionate inner woman of yours when I need it?" Dake complained, fingering the thick gauze bandage over his nose. "I've got a broken nose, for chrissakes."

"Poor baby." Zeb patted his brother on the shoulder. "I'm sure the crooked line will give your face some much needed character." He dissolved into laughter again before turning to glance at Lula. "Ugh, your cheek looks nasty, darling. Didn't they put any ice on it?"

"Lula told the nurse that nymphs don't like ice," Dake said with a resigned roll of the eyes. "That, of course, is after she answered all the officer's questions. You know, like her full name being Lula, daughter of Arrius and Venuvia, her age being three hundred fifty, her address being Olympus and her race being nymph. When the cop asked for identification, she told him she failed the chariot test twice and doesn't have a license yet."

Zeb chuckled. "I'm surprised they didn't keep her for a psychiatric evaluation."

"They tested her for drugs," Dake said.

Lula nodded. "They made me urinate into a little plastic cup."

"She obviously passed the pee test," Zeb noted.

"I did indeed." Lula beamed a smile. "When they asked if I've taken any stimulants, depressants or drugs of any kind, I explained to them that the only mind-altering substances I've ingested while on Earth are wine and chocolate. I asked the police officer whether or not Dake's semen would also be considered mind-altering, but he just gave me a strange, rather bug-eyed look in response."

Zeb fell back into laughter. "I wish I could have seen his face."

"Oh it was very red," Lula offered. "Naturally, I expressed my concern for his wellbeing."

"Naturally," Dake chimed in, arms folded across his chest.

"And when I touched my lips to the policeman's forehead to check for the onset of fever the way my mother had taught me, his face grew redder yet."

Zeb exchanged looks with his brother. "It seems you two had quite an interesting experience."

"Yeah, you could say that. With all of Lula's *help*," clearing his throat, Dake hung invisible quotations around the word, "it's a miracle they didn't lock us up and throw away the key. Thank God several witnesses came down to the station and corroborated our story."

"Can we leave now?" Lula whispered. "I'm not particularly fond of this place. It makes me feel itchy all over." She shook her body, wiggling everything as she shuddered. In that instant, it seemed every male eye in the vicinity was on her.

"Of course, darling." Wrapping an arm around Lula's shoulder, Zeb led her to the police station's exit, leaving Dake to follow. "I hope you're not planning on resuming your search for Cupid at this late hour. I think you and my brother, *the thug*, have probably been through enough for one day."

"Gee, Zeb, you're a real comedian. You're so funny you should take your show on the road," Dake said, sarcasm dripping from each word. Zeb offered a saccharine smile in response.

Breathing a sigh, Lula shrugged. "No. No more searching. I think I would just like to rest for a while. If I haven't found Cupid by this time I doubt I will. His headquarters are well hidden indeed. Besides," she reached for Dake's hand, clasped it and smiled up at him when he squeezed back, "I'd like to spend the rest of my time here with Dake before I have to leave for Olympus in the morning."

Hearing her say the words again stabbed at Dake's gut.

"I think that's a wise idea. It's only a few blocks to the shop from here," Zeb said as they left the police station, skipping down the cement steps. "Feel like walking or should we take the bus?"

"I prefer walking, if that's okay with you and Dake." Both men nodded in agreement. "Is Alfred feeling better now?"

"Much," Zeb responded. "We shared some good conversation over shortbread cookies and chamomile tea this morning and he's even come to the realization that Leonard was a user, an opportunist. I think Alfred finally accepts the idea that he deserves better."

"Of course he does," Lula agreed. "I only wish I could be here long enough to help him find his soul mate."

Zeb kissed her forehead. "You're very sweet and caring."

"Thank you, Zebulon. And so are you." She planted a kiss on his jaw. "Well, at least one truly good thing came out of the trouble I caused today." When Zeb lifted an eyebrow in interest, Lula went on. "Dake admitted that he loves me." The way she bounced and bubbled with excitement as she said it warmed Dake's insides like a shot of single malt scotch.

"Indeed?" Zeb grinned at Dake, giving him a hearty pat on the back. "Well, it's about time. I've known it from the start, of course," he sniffed with a perceptive air. "From the moment I walked into Cupid's Headquarters and saw you two together."

"Me too," Lula said and then she trilled a voluminous sigh. "If only Dake and I could have had more time together, but the fates did not have that in store for us."

"You're not going anywhere. You're staying here with me," Dake announced and both Lula and Zeb shot him startled looks as they halted in their tracks.

"Oh but, Dakin, my love, I can't do that." Stroking Dake's jaw, Lula gazed up at him with an expression so sweet, tender and loving it nearly shattered his heart. "It's not permitted. I must return to Olympus. How I wish it could be different but, alas, it cannot."

"No." Dake shook his head back and forth as he grabbed Lula's upper arms and held tight. "No, I won't let you go. I'll...I'll tie you up and hide you in a closet or something until they leave."

Lula chuckled. It was a pained, forlorn kind of laugh. "They would find me, Dake. Their tracking methods are quite advanced. Believe me, if there were any way I could stay here on Earth with you, I would. Leaving you will be the most difficult thing I have ever had to do."

"But —"

"Remember," she kissed her fingertip and touched his broken nose, "unlike your broken nose, our parting will only be painful for a short while, Dake. Once your memory is cleansed, you will be left with just a slight almost imperceptible sensation of melancholy."

"I don't want to forget! I want to remember everything about you." For the only time in his adult life other than when his parents died, Dake felt the sting of tears prick his eyes. Blinking them back, he yanked Lula hard against him, holding her as if his life depended on it. And in a way it did.

He gazed at her angelic face, totally at a loss for words as he contemplated the bleakness of life without the infectious sound of her laughter, her sweet naiveté, the warm soft feel of her luscious curves, her unquenchable appetite for sex and, yes, even her penchant for inadvertently creating all manner of havoc.

Still bracing Lula's head against his chest, Dake looked at his brother with pleading eyes. "Zeb...help me. I can't lose her."

Quickly flicking the tears from his eyes, Zeb straightened, his chin elevated with an air of confidence. "I absolutely refuse to allow this to develop into another Tristan and Isolde tragedy," he announced. "Trust me, Dakin, we'll find a way to keep you and Lula together."

* * * * *

"Yup, here it is," Zeb said, tapping his finger against the page of one of the thick books strewn around the living room of his apartment. He sat cross-legged on a tasseled, oversized magenta pillow on the floor while Dake sat on the futon and Lula curled up in a chair. Each of them was surrounded by books from Zeb's extensive collection on mythology.

"The story of Cupid and Psyche?" Lula asked animatedly, clapping her book closed.

Zeb nodded, his features evidencing a sense of triumph. "Psyche was a mortal so beautiful that Venus, the goddess of love, became jealous," he read aloud. "She instructed her son Cupid to make Psyche fall in love with a hideous monster." Zeb looked up from the page and smiled. "Ah, but *au contraire*—instead, Cupid falls in love with Psyche himself."

"I love that part," Lula said, dreamy-eyed. "It's so romantic."

"And Cupid's a god, right?" Dake asked, suddenly finding mythology, a topic that once made him snore, intensely interesting.

"Yes." Zeb nodded.

"The god of love, sex and eroticism," Lula added.

"So if his mother was the goddess of love, who was Cupid's father?" Dake asked.

"Mars," Zeb answered. "The god of war. He was just one of Venus' many lovers. In fact, it seems there's an awful lot of promiscuity and inter-family relations weaving through the gods."

"Interesting. That makes Cupid a byproduct of love and war," Dake mused. "So his daddy was named after the planet?"

Lula laughed. "The celestial planet Mars was named after the god of war because it shines with a red color resembling blood."

Zeb went back to skimming his finger along the page. "Let's see...yada, yada, yada...okay, here it says that Cupid took Psyche as his wife, but as a mortal she was forbidden to look at him."

"Huh?" Dake said.

Holding up a finger, Zeb read on. "Psyche was happy until her sisters persuaded her to look at Cupid. As soon as she looked at him, Cupid punished her by leaving."

Dake screwed his features. "Sheesh. What a hard-ass."

Lula sighed. "The gods are known for being quick to temper and then meting out harsh punishment."

"As Psyche wandered, trying to find her love," Zeb continued, "she came upon the temple of Venus. Intent on destroying Psyche, Venus gave her a series of tasks, each harder and more dangerous than the last. Ooh...some of these were downright nasty."

A deliciously wicked grin broke out on Zeb's face as he read to himself. "Mmm-hmm, here's the clincher," he said. "Cupid could no longer bear to witness Psyche's suffering or to be apart from her. So he pleaded their case to the gods and, *voila!* Psyche

becomes an immortal—a minor goddess—and the lovers are united forever. Ta-da! The end.”

“Theirs is a most celebrated story,” Lula said. “Every child on Olympus learns it even before they begin school.”

“Zeb, I apologize,” Dake said, reaching down to give his brother a solid pat on the back.

“You what?!” Zeb’s hand flew to his chest and he gasped. “Dakin, are you trying to give me a heart attack?” he teased.

“No kidding. I mean it. I take back every mean, rotten thing I ever said about your obsession with Greek and Roman mythology. In the last two hours, we’ve come up with several different instances where residents of Olympus and Earth have managed to remain together, either up there or down here. Hell, if Cupid himself went through this with a mortal, then he’s *got* to be sympathetic.”

He glanced across the room at Lula. “We can do this, babe. I know we can.”

A wary look across her features, Lula shook her head. “I don’t know, Dake. I’m not important enough for the gods to consider. I mean, it’s not like I’ve accomplished some incredible feat or like I have any real stature. I’m not a goddess, I’m just a—”

“A nymph who fell in love with a mortal man,” Zeb interrupted. “Lula, my dear, these books are filled with stories of love matches like yours and Dakin’s. And you know all that hubbub you keep making about being nothing but a lowly nymph?” Lula gave a tentative nod and Zeb wagged a chastising finger. “It seems you’ve been telling little white lies.”

Dake frowned. “What do you mean?”

“According to what I’ve read,” Zeb explained, “nymphs are classified as minor female deities. That would make our little Lula a minor goddess. Just like Psyche.”

“What?” Dake looked agape at Lula. “But I thought you said—”

Huffing a sigh, Lula gave a dismissive wave. “It’s an age-old controversy. Some believe nymphs are minor deities, while others are certain we’re merely spirits of nature with extended life spans. I simply choose to think of myself as the latter.” She shrugged. “I’m far too absentminded and impish to be a minor deity. Besides, I’m of mixed heritage, which might make me ineligible for being a goddess.”

After skimming over Lula’s gold curls, blue eyes and milky complexion, Dake and Zeb exchanged glances. “Well, don’t leave us hanging,” Zeb said.

“Apparently it happened generations ago,” Lula sighed. “You see, I’m part Dryad and part Limoniad,” she finished, just as if it made perfect sense.

“Uh-huh. And that means...?” Dake asked.

“Each nymph subtype presides over a certain aspect of nature,” Lula explained. “The habitat of Dryads is the forest while the habitat of Limoniads is meadows. I’m happiest and most productive in either. That’s why I’m partial to flowers and foliage.

It's also why I enjoy your Earthly city of Portland so much. It's like a lush mix of forest and meadow here."

"That settles it," Zeb said, slamming his thick hardcover book shut with a loud thud, capturing Dake and Lula's full attention. "Dryad or Limoniad, Lula, there's no damn reason why you, a minor goddess, and my mortal brother can't plead your case before the gods. Period."

Lula sucked in a small gasp and nibbled her bottom lip. "The Council of Deities..." she said with reverence.

"How am I going to do that?" Dake asked. "That's on Olympus, right?"

Lula nodded silently in response.

Zeb shrugged, polishing his nails against his shirt and inspecting them. "If you truly love Lula, then I'm sure you'll find a way. Of course, maybe you don't care if you lose her forever. Or perhaps you don't have the stamina that a mortal woman like Psyche had." He indulged in a shrewd smile.

"Jeez, this is crazy." Dake stared at nothing, trying to piece all the bizarre stuff together. "I mean, Zeb, do you hear what we're talking about here? We're talking about me, Dake Dronyer," he rapped his fingers against his chest, "flying up into the clouds in some god's chariot, for chrissakes. Shit. It's insane." He dropped his head in his hands, massaging his temples and groaning.

"Would you really be willing to do that for me?" Lula asked hopefully. "Plead before the Council of Deities?"

Dake looked over at her. She looked so damned adorable he wanted to scoop her up, take her into Zeb's bedroom and fuck her until she was quaking and boneless with pleasure. He slapped his hands against his thighs. "Bring it on," he pronounced, getting to his feet. "I'll do whatever it takes for us to stay together."

Lula bolted upright in her chair. "Even if it means battling dragons or braving the fiery domain of Pluto?"

Bug-eyed, Dake swallowed hard. "The planet?" he asked, having a pretty good idea that wasn't what Lula meant. And as soon as she shook her head, he knew he was right.

"I believe she's referring to what we call Hell," Zeb offered, his complexion taking on a sickly pallor.

Lula nodded slowly. "In Greek mythology, it's known as the domain of Hades."

Dake just looked from Lula to Zeb and back again. "You're kidding, right? Fire-breathing dragons and the pits of Hell..." His laugh sounded like a sick hyena's. "Tell me you're not serious?"

Lula lowered her eyes, nibbling on her bottom lip again.

"Shit. You're not kidding." Dake took in a sharp breath, letting it out with a whoosh. His head pounded with the mind-boggling madness of it all. How the hell did he suddenly get stuck in the middle of some fucking fairy tale? He could be laying his

life on the line if he did this. Damn, if he got barbequed by some dragon he'd be dead before he was forty!

Yeah, but what kind of life would he have if he played it safe and lived to eighty – without ever seeing or holding Lula again? Ever. Whether they erased her from his memory or not, Dake knew damn well he'd go through life like a walking zombie without Lula at his side.

"See? This is why I never wanted to fall in love," he finally said, wagging an accusatory finger toward a wide-eyed Lula. "Because as soon as I do, look what happens. Dragons and Hell and..." He watched her chin tremble. "Aw shit, Lula..." Dake plucked her from her chair, squeezing her close, nestling his nose in her hair and breathing in the fragrance of sunshine, spring flowers and the sweet scent of the woman he loved.

"I love you," he told her, "and I don't ever want to be without you." He kissed her hard. "Bring on the dragons and Pluto and whatever else. Dake Dronyer, master electrician, will tackle them all!"

Chapter Twelve

"What's that?" Dake asked, eyeing Lula as she sat cross-legged on Zeb's futon.

"It's a list," she said, clearly in deep concentration, the tip of her tongue peeking out as she scrawled something on a pad of paper. "Of all the types of sex and sexual positions we haven't had an opportunity to try yet." She glanced up, a look of concern across her features. "We're going to be *very* busy tonight, Dake."

Chuckling to himself, Dake figured he was just about the luckiest man in the world. Lula was a walking wet dream and she was all his...at least for one last night of passion.

"So what's first on your agenda, sweetheart? Your wish is my command."

"Posterior sex," she announced matter-of-factly. "That's where you take my buttocks and your—"

Dake held up his hand, aware that his cock jerked at the same time. "Yup. I know. So, uh...you've had prior experience in that area?" It was crazy but somehow the thought of Lula engaging in anal sex with another man brought out Dake's primal, possessive, caveman persona. *My woman!* he was tempted to grunt while beating his chest. *My woman's ass!*

"No, I'm an anal virgin. But I've—"

She stopped abruptly when Dake started to laugh. He couldn't help it.

"Is there something humorous about my being an anal virgin?" she asked.

"No, sweetheart," Dake said, biting the inside of his cheek to keep from guffawing. There was something about Lula's straightforward, no-nonsense approach to the subject that thoroughly tickled him. "Go 'head, what were you saying?" He covered his mouth with his hand, stroking his jaw so she wouldn't see his lips twitch.

"I just wanted to let you know that I'm not completely ignorant about the act because I've read about it and have studied the diagrams."

Dake's eyes bugged. "They've got diagrams for that sort of thing?"

"Of course, along with detailed descriptions." Lula nodded. "We were issued separate manuals describing all known sexual positions and various methods of inducing orgasm."

"Hot damn, I'd love to get my hands on that book." Dake wagged his eyebrows.

"So would I," Lula sighed. "I only hope it hasn't fallen into the wrong hands."

"Well, whoever found it will be in for one hell of a good time," Dake assured her with a pat to the head. His brow furrowed when a disquieting thought flitted across his

mind. "You and your classmates didn't pair up like lab partners or anything, did you? I mean, to conduct sex experiments."

Images of scantily attired Olympians engaged in all manner of orgiastic pursuits in the name of higher education filled his head. His male, testosterone-driven brain was divided—half of it making his dick leap in his pants at the lusty idea and the other half raging with jealousy at the notion of Lula happily learning her sexual ABCs at the hands of a bunch of horny classmates.

"Dakin, Dakin, Dakin." Lula uttered a prolonged groan and tsked. "I can only imagine what's going through that twisted male brain of yours. But I can assure you, education on Olympus is a serious pursuit and classroom activity is not synonymous with debauchery."

"A guy can dream, can't he?" Dake winked. "Actually, I'm quite happy and honored," he made a courtly bow, "to be the first man to deflower your cute little butt."

"Just so you know, I'm afraid I didn't get very far in the book yet," Lula informed him. "But I do recall the graphics showing the cock entering the anus fairly well. Besides, whatever I don't know you can teach me from your own anal experience."

"Yeah, well..." Dake scratched his head, not quite sure how to tell her he was just as inexperienced in that area as she was, though not by choice. "I've never actually found a woman who wanted to do that," he finally admitted.

"Really?" Lula was clearly nonplussed. "How strange. I find the thought of engaging in a lusty bout of anal sex with you to be quite stimulating. So much so that it makes my pussy trickle warm juice just imagining it." She giggled as she squirmed in place.

Damn, she made him hot. Dake was ready to bend her over the coffee table, hike her ass into the air and, after beating his chest and grunting, plunge inside her tight, virgin territory, claiming it as his own.

"Don't worry about your inexperience, Dake. I can guide you," Lula told him confidently. "I received the highest grade in my class on the anal test." She beamed a proud smile in his direction.

After looking at Lula agape for a long moment, Dake couldn't hold back any longer. Not the part about claiming her virgin territory—the part about erupting with laughter.

"So you aced the ass test, huh?" he managed to get out.

"Honestly. Earth males are no different than Olympian males when it comes to juvenile humor," Lula noted, folding her arms beneath her breasts. She was obviously trying to look annoyed but the action thrust her breasts high and all Dake could think of for the moment was plucking at the stiff peaks with his lips and teeth before suckling her.

"I'm sorry...really," he said, trying to compose himself. "But the idea of actually studying diagrams and taking a test about ass sex is hilarious. I mean, come on, Lula, you've gotta see the humor in it."

"No. Not really. In fact, it was a very difficult test. For instance, did you know that using certain viscous items as lubricants can not only irritate the anus but cause the cock to become inflamed as well?"

Dake grabbed his crotch, telegraphing a devilish grin. "My cock's inflamed right now, baby."

With a resigned roll of her eyes, Lula sighed. "I never really liked the juvenile boys in class," she stated. "Why in Jupiter's name I'm so smitten with you, Dakin, is a mystery."

Dake saw the little smile she tried to hide as she went back to her list.

"It's my irresistible, magnetic charm," he offered. "So you and your classmates spend a lot of time studying sex, hmm?"

"Oh yes. If I'm to be a matchmaker, it's imperative that I have a comprehensive understanding and knowledge of both the physiological as well as the emotional aspects of love."

He loved the way Lula's brainy side surfaced every so often. His woman came packaged with a body made for sin and an IQ that would probably make his look anemic by comparison. "So what are we doing after I rob your pretty little ass of its virginity?"

Lula checked her list. "Amazingly, we've never had hydro-sex."

"Hyd—" Dake slanted her a dubious look. "You mean sex in the shower?"

Lula nodded. "Mmm-hmm. Or in a bathtub or a swimming pool or any body of water for that matter." Her eyes widened and she smiled. "Ooh, or maybe the kitchen sink!"

Dake gave Lula a thumbs-up sign. "Zeb just happens to have a bathtub, a shower *and* a kitchen sink. We can do all three if it makes you happy."

"I thought we could strike hydro-sex off the list immediately following our first foray into anal sex. What do you think?"

"Lula?"

"Yes?"

"If my cock gets any bigger it's going to slam up against my fly and try to fight its way out. That could get painful, honey." Dake slid a fingernail along his zipper and winced. "I think it's time to start working on that list of yours. Right now."

Lula watched Dake's hand intently, then bounced on the futon. His eyes naturally followed the movement, zeroing in on her bobbling tits.

"I have a wonderful idea," she said. "Let's start with voyeur sex!"

Dake frowned. "Let me see that list." He snatched it from Lula. "Whose keyhole were you planning for us to peep through?"

Lula laughed at that, then took Dake's breath away when she stripped out of her clothes and pinched her nipples until they tightened like little stones. "I'm not talking

about watching other people, silly. I'm talking about doing this." Her hands were on her breasts, touching them, extending the nipples in long, deliberate strokes.

"Watching each other," she clarified as she played with herself. "You observe me pleasuring myself and I watch you pleasure yourself. We haven't done that for each other yet."

Dake couldn't respond. Rational speech had deserted him—besides, if he opened his mouth there'd be a puddle of drool on the floor.

"I'll show you what I like to do to bring myself to orgasm and you show me what you like to do. What do you think, Dake? Would you like to watch me make myself come?" One of her hands snaked down from her breast, across her belly and inched toward her mons.

"Shit."

"Is that a yes?" Her fingers disappeared into her folds and she gave a little moan.

He nodded, offering a strangled noise of accord while blood screamed in his veins, through his cock. "Have you ever touched yourself in front of another man?" Dake asked, his gaze glued to her hands performing their delicious tasks.

"Only you, Dake. Only you. Take off your clothes so I can look at your beautiful naked body."

Dake never remembered moving so fast in all his life. In fact, he'd worked with such speed to comply, he didn't even remember shucking everything off. But there he stood before Lula, hot, naked, hard and ready. His eager cock jutted directly toward her in joyful salute.

"Stroke your cock for me, Dake. Let me see you touch yourself. I've never watched a man masturbate before."

"It looks like we're both in for another first, then," Dake said, making a tunnel of his hands with his thumbs on top. "Because I've never had a woman ask me to give myself a hand job in front of her before." He smoothed his cupped hands along his rigid length, from the root to the tip, dragging his cock out and down. Lula watched intently, licking her lips and murmuring little sounds of encouragement.

She stepped over to the tasseled, oversized floor pillow Zeb had sat on earlier. With a graceful series of movements, she positioned herself on her back, half on the floor and half on the pillow, a golden halo of wavy hair framing her face. Her lush breasts jiggled ever so slightly as she arched her spine and stretched with voluptuous delight.

Once she'd settled, affording Dake a luscious view, Lula rolled her nipples between her thumbs and forefingers. "It feels so good when I do this," she said, with a soft moan. "Like a jolt that starts here," she pulled her nipples, "and ends here." Bending her knees, she allowed her legs to slacken, opening her beautiful, shiny pink cunt to him.

Dake's body tightened. He'd never had a woman offer herself so freely, so fully. She was magnificent. Never taking his eyes from Lula, he changed his grip, cupping his sac with one hand and stroking his cock with the other.

"When I touch myself," Lula said, dragging one hand to her pussy, "here at my vulva, I'm thinking about you touching me, Dake." His gaze fastened on the dewy blonde curls as her fingers busied themselves.

"I think about your hard body with those beautiful muscles and that immense cock. And your eyes. I think about your eyes, Dake, and the way you look at me." She arched her back even more and moaned as she swirled her fingers. "I like to rub my clit from side to side and then, when I'm ready for it to burst, I pinch it. Do you like watching me do this for you, Dake?"

Was she kidding? Did he like Christmas? Did he like birthdays? Hell, watching Lula writhe on that pillow while she touched herself was better than anything he could think of—except fucking her himself. Dake moved closer to her, standing no more than a few feet away. He was close enough to smell her now, to inhale the musky scent of her sex.

"I only wish I was a poet, Lula. That way I could tell you just how beautiful you are to me. I could explain what you do to me when I watch you pleasure yourself. How you make me want to stop time and preserve this moment forever." Dake's grip tightened around his cock and he pumped it hard.

"Oh thank you, Dake..."

"With each stroke of my cock I think of thrusting into your warmth, your wetness and how your inner muscles squeeze me, milk my cock." Dake felt himself morphing from modern man to primal creature—a ferocious craving for sex and satisfaction primary in his thoughts. "Let me see you thrust your fingers into your pussy, sweetheart. Fuck yourself for me."

"Will that make you come, Dake? Will that make your seed race hot through your cock?"

His pulse rocketing at the thought, heat flashed through Dake. "Yes. Yes, baby." His voice sounded unrecognizable, more like a guttural growl than human communication.

He watched as Lula parted her labia, slipping her fingers inside her dripping pussy, drawing them in and out. Her eyelids fluttering closed, she treated him to a languishing moan and he thought sure he'd spew his cum at the divine sight.

"Paint my body with your seed, Dake," Lula ground out in a husky voice. "All over. My face, my neck, my breasts, my belly..." She took her saturated hand from her cunt and spread her juices from her throat to her thighs and back again.

"Oh sweet fuck," Dake groaned.

"I want to feel ribbons of your hot cream spurting on me as I come," Lula said, burrowing her fingers between her thighs again. "As I pinch my clit and—" She arched high and gasped.

Watching Lula's luxuriant body gripped in orgasm, undulating with hard throbs of sensation, was a breath-stealing experience. As her moans went straight through him, all coherent thought fled from Dake's senses. While Lula's wings spread beneath her, his thigh muscles grew taut and the pressure in his balls increased. A feral cry slashed the air as his cum gushed hot and potent.

He aimed his cock, searing her with his essence, painting her with the cream of his core. Before her convulsions stopped, her hands were spread, smoothing his semen all over herself as the word *yessss* escaped her throat in an almost inaudible whisper.

His cock depleted, Dake dropped to his knees before her. Lula smiled up at him, wiggling her fingers in invitation. He joined her on the large pillow, pulling her on top of his chest and cradling her moist, sticky body against him.

"I never imagined voyeur sex could be so hot," Lula said, once they gained enough energy to speak.

"Hell, sweetheart," Dake said with a lazy chuckle, "a magazine, bottle of lotion and box of tissues would just never cut it after this."

"I'm ready for anal, how about you?"

Dake laughed out loud at that. "You have to remember I'm a mere mortal, Lula. My cock simply doesn't snap to attention, ready for another go, so soon after becoming depleted. Have mercy on me, babe."

"I was thinking we'd use whipped cream," she said, propping her chin on his chest.

"For what?"

"Lubricant. I think that would be fun, don't you?"

Dake felt the first stirrings in his fatigued cock. "I'm sure Zeb has some actual lube we could use. Probably in the nightstand drawer with the condoms," he said, unable to shake the image of spurting whipped cream up Lula's ass and decorating her crack with white rosettes. Rosettes that he'd tongue off her silky smooth skin. Awakening from its brief slumber, his cock twitched.

"Oh Dake, that's so unimaginative. We need something more remarkable to commemorate our first posterior experience." Lula hopped up and padded to the kitchen, where she withdrew a can of whipped cream from the refrigerator. Then she lifted from the floor, gliding through the air back to Dake.

Hovering over him horizontally, she uncapped the can and fingered the nozzle, depositing a fluffy white dollop right on the tip of his cock. His damn, brainless dick took to the action like a thirsty weed to water. Once Lula's mouth was on him, sucking off the cream, Dake's cock was half erect. Jesus. Maybe he wasn't mortal after all.

"Okay," he said, holding up one hand. "Before we go any further, maybe we should talk about this." Lula gave him an impatient look. "Seriously. From everything I know I don't think you're ready to get butt-fucked, sweetheart. It's supposed to be a gradual process over time. Stretching, maybe some butt plugs, finger work...you know, that sort of thing. Otherwise you could be hurt. If we had more time, we could —"

"One, we don't have more time," Lula reminded him. "Two, I'm a nymph. Our physiology is different. We're extremely resilient. You don't have to worry about injuring me. My anus will accommodate you. The only pain I experience will be pleasurable, I assure you."

Dake gazed up at her in disbelief. "And just where did you read that, in the Nymph Ass Gazette?"

Lula's features formed an O of surprise. "I didn't know there was such a publication. I must see about a subscription."

With a bark of incredulous laughter, Dake said, "Lula, I'm joking. And would you please come down from there? It's weird looking up at you flying over me like that while we're trying to have a conversation."

Fluttering to the floor, she sat cross-legged next to Dake, giving him a devilish grin. "I knew you were kidding." Lula cupped his face and kissed him—a soft press of lips to lips that soon blossomed into a sultry, thought-scattering kiss.

She sprayed a small ringlet of cream on her breast, where it mingled with Dake's cum. Scooping the mixture up with her finger, she deposited it on her tongue, closed her eyes and gave a little purr of satisfaction. "Mmmm, good combination. Sweet and salty."

By this time Dake's cock was hard again and raring to go, which didn't escape Lula's notice.

She cupped her ear, cocking her head. "Do you hear that, Dake? The clock is ticking. It's time to get down to the business of backside fucking," she announced, getting to her feet and heading for Zeb's bedroom. "*Daakkkiiinnnn...*" she called to him a moment later.

He followed her summons like a playful puppy.

"How's this?" Lula asked. She was positioned at the center of the bed on her hands and knees, swaying her ass back and forth for him.

"That's one damn pretty picture," Dake said, knowing he'd never forget that inviting view. "But I think you'd be more comfortable with your chest low and supported by a couple of pillows." He helped position her so she was resting on her elbows instead of her hands.

"Oh yes, that's better. I remember this from one of the diagrams in my book. This is going to be such fun, Dake."

As he rolled on a condom, Dake's cock jerked in response to her words. He slid his hands along her cool calves and thighs until they came to rest on full, round hips. Lula had a beautiful ass. A luscious ass. From the gradual slope at the small of her back, it bloomed into a perfect, beckoning inverted heart.

He parted her cheeks, watching her pink rosebud constrict as he ringed it with his finger. Flicking the can's nozzle, Dake spurted a speck of whipped cream on his finger. A momentary gaze at the ruffled swirl of white had him chuckling to himself before

slipping his finger into her tightly puckered hole. He'd certainly never imagined this particular scenario when fantasizing about fucking a woman's ass.

Of course, with Lula, nothing was ever ordinary, mundane, boring. She had a way of turning any experience into an unforgettable event. And somehow sticking a standard lubed finger up her virginal bottom just wasn't deserving of his delightfully adventurous nymph. No, buttering Lula's lovely ass with whipped cream was definitely more fitting to the occasion.

With the first tentative probe of his fingertip, Lula's anus clenched, squeezing the digit. He loved the needy, shuddering little moan of pleasure that she gave and nudged deeper, until the second knuckle disappeared into her depths. He treated her to a gingerly twist and wiggle of his finger.

As he was about to spray whipped cream rosettes on either side of her crack and lick them off, he paused. She was so appealing, so tempting, there really wasn't any need to embellish the already delectable offering. He planted a series of damp kisses up and down the vertical split, sliding his tongue inside and teasing the opening that hugged his finger.

"This is so different, Dake."

"Do you like the way it feels, sweetheart?" He hoped to hell she did because he couldn't wait to wedge himself inside that taut channel.

"I do...very much."

"Are you ready for my cock, Lula?"

"Mmmm...more than ready." She wiggled her butt. "I can't wait to feel you filling me, Dake. I have a feeling your cock's going to love it in there."

As if it had a mind of its own, his dick bobbed in agreement. Dake didn't need any additional incentive to slip his finger out and stroke the hard length of his cock between the cheeks of her ass. Christ, that felt good.

Her ass swayed from left to right. "Do me, Dake. Come on, do me now."

The high-spirited grin of a lucky-beyond-reason man spread across his features. In his eagerness, Dake's fingers fumbled as they tried to work the can's nozzle, causing the whipped cream to spit and gurgle before he could finally paint her rosebud opening as well as his cock.

Simply nudging the muscular ring around her anus with the head of his cock was exciting—a promise of the tight clasp to come. He inched himself in. Lula let out a cry and arched upward.

"You're so incredibly tight," Dake growled.

"And you feel so good pushing your way in. Don't stop," Lula urged through a ragged moan. "I need you deep inside, Dake."

With probably less than two inches of his cock swallowed by Lula's sweet, virgin ass, Dake wondered how long he'd be able to hold out. The sensation was so potent, so

amazing, it all but made his entire body vibrate with pleasure. He pushed deeper, harder, encouraged by Lula's entreating coos. He felt her body shaking then too.

"All of it," she pleaded on a tattered whisper, panting now. "Every delicious fraction of an inch."

Wild with lust, Dake thrust into her, balls deep. Incredible sensations assailed him as they both erupted in pleased howls. Instinct led his hand to Lula's pussy. He shoved three fingers inside, spreading them wide.

"Good jumping Jupiter," she cried out. "More, give me more. Crawl inside me, Dake!"

Replacing his fingers with his entire hand, Dake plunged deep into her soaking pussy. At the same time, he eased his cock back and pushed into her again. Slowly, relentlessly, he fucked her, back and front, absorbing every impassioned little moan she gave him.

"You're amazing, Lula," he grunted, slipping his thumb from her pussy and stroking her engorged clit. "I swear to God, I'm the luckiest guy on the planet." He didn't know where he found the wherewithal to speak, because he was just about insane with carnal delight.

Feeling Lula's body tense, he slid his drenched hand from her cunt. Somehow, through his feral haze of passion, he remembered what she told him about how she liked to pinch her clit. She was so wet, so slick, it was difficult to grasp the tiny nub. When he did, he pinched it once, twice, three times and Lula bucked hard, screaming out her rapture.

Fucking her through her orgasm, Dake felt her ass convulse from the tip of his cock to the root. His last thread of control decimated, powerful waves of cum blasted up from his balls and surged down the length of his cock. Erupting with a roar so euphoric and thunderous Dake could swear the windows rattled, his body shuddered until he was thoroughly spent. Boneless, his weight collapsed over Lula.

"I love you, Dake," she murmured a minute or two later. "That was remarkable. Extraordinary." She lifted her head, propping her chin on Dake's biceps.

He looked down to see a smile so perfectly satisfied, so utterly beautiful and serene, it touched his soul. "I love you too, sweetheart. Everything about you, inside and out."

"Thank you for taking my anal virginity in such a magnificent way, Dake. It's something I will never, ever forget."

"Me neither. What an experience. I'm totally whipped. Completely spent. Entirely worn out." Somehow he found just enough energy to plant a kiss on Lula's nose.

"Good." She patted his chest. "As long as you're not too tired for hydro-sex," she purred.

Dake was so exhausted he couldn't even find enough get-up-and-go to groan, much less laugh. All he could think of was how thankful he was that Zeb's apartment didn't

come equipped with chandeliers. He knew damned well Lula would have the act of sex while swinging from them written on her carnal to-do list too.

Chapter Thirteen

Last night had been the most wonderful and yet the saddest in Lula's life. Knowing full well the turmoil the morning would bring, she and Dake avoided the topic of her rendezvousing with the chariot, Cupid and her classmates. Throughout the night, Dake pleased her over and over again until she thought she'd surely expire from an overdose of bliss.

The sex they shared was more passionate, filled with more intensity and meaning, than any of their previous joinings. Whispering sweet, tender words of love at her ear after doing their best to complete her sexual wish list, Dake became endearingly gentle. To her delight, he held her close, caressing her as if she were a fragile porcelain doll he was afraid of breaking.

The man she loved had succeeded in making her feel treasured, cherished and beloved in such a way that made her weep with joy. And then he kissed away her tears as he lovingly drove into her, creating a soul connection that had them ascending to astounding new heights.

And now it was the morning of her scheduled departure.

"I never did get a chance to wear my LBD," Lula said, fondly fingering the black wraparound dress Zeb had selected for her. Her gaze rose to meet Dake's solemn expression. "Except for the one night I modeled it for you."

With a sigh, she smoothed the fabric. "The tags are still on the dress as well as most of the other beautiful outfits you and Zebulon purchased for me on our exciting shopping trip to the mall. I'm sure you'll have no trouble returning them for a refund."

"The clothes are staying right here," Dake announced, avoiding eye contact with Lula as he grabbed his keys from the dresser and shoved them into his jeans pocket. "You'll need them after we get everything settled and this is all over," he added with a quick glance.

Lula's heart went out to Dake just then. Her dearest love, her soul mate, her perfect love match... Indeed, he was a most worthy mortal, blessed with a bold spirit, a strong fusion of positive qualities and scintillating sexual appeal. Oh, how she feared losing him forever, whether to a proclamation of the gods or to a fearsome test to which they might assign him.

"If the Council of Deities grants our request, we might have to live on Olympus," Lula pointed out. "I wouldn't need any of these clothes then."

Dake gave her a curious look. "Funny, I never thought of that—me living up there in some mythical place in the clouds. Wearing a toga." His lip hiking into a smirk, he shook his head briskly. "Somehow I doubt I'd fit in."

"No, I'm sure you wouldn't," Lula readily agreed. "You'd stick out like a sick thumb."

"Sore thumb," Dake corrected with a laugh.

Lula smiled at the sound of his laughter. He'd seemed so gloomy and tense since they awoken earlier. "I'd rather remain here on Earth myself," she said. "I've always felt more comfortable and at home here somehow."

Dake took her in his arms, embracing her gently. "You know, sweetheart, I don't care if they send us to the moon. As long as we're together, everything's going to be okay."

And Lula believed that with all of her heart.

There came a knock at the door and Dake glanced at the clock, blowing out a gust of breath when he saw the digital readout. "It's time," he said, the muscle in his jaw clenching. "That must be Zeb."

"Lula, darling, you look radiant," Zeb said once Dake opened the door. Taking her hands and stepping back a bit, he gifted her with a smiling appraisal.

Zeb had suggested she wear the lightweight, silky champagne-colored dress this morning because he thought she looked especially sweet and innocent in it. That alone sold Lula on the idea. She needed all the help she could get to make her look as engaging and guiltless as possible when she faced Cupid.

Besides, it wouldn't do at all for her to show up at the appointed meeting place wearing her semi-sheer academy uniform, displaying her nakedness. She was also partial to the dress because Dake said it was almost the same color as her wings and reminded him of their sexual escapades together.

"Thank you, Zebulon. You selected the perfect garment for me to wear this morning. And, as you said, it goes perfectly with my gold-tipped sandals," she added looking down at her feet and wiggling her toes. It was the first time she'd worn her sandals since they'd all gone shopping together.

"Got the, um, you know?" Dake asked Zeb in a half-whisper. Zeb nodded as he extracted a small hinged box from the back waistband of his jeans and handed it to Lula.

"This is just a small token of affection from Dakin and me," Zeb said softly. "Just in case..." He glanced at Dake, whose expression was somber. Clearing his throat, Zeb continued, "In case something unforeseen happens and our memories get wiped and you have to leave." He and Dake both heaved weighty sighs once Zeb finished.

Lula just stared at the closed black velvet-covered box until Dake urged, "Go ahead, honey, open it."

As soon as the lid opened and Lula caught a glimpse of the gold, heart-shaped locket with a small diamond chip at the center her eyes filled with tears. She smoothed her fingers over the heart and its fine chain and smiled. Never before had anyone given her such a lovely, delicate gift.

"Oh, this is so...so precious. So beautiful." She looked up at the brothers, each doing his best to smile through their vexed expressions. "Thank you so very much."

"Take a look inside," Zeb said. "And on the back."

She opened the tiny clasp on the locket, made a little gasp and immediately began to weep. There on the left was a tiny photo of Zeb and on the right a photo of Dake. "This is so wonderful. So very perfect." Swiping at her tears, Lula turned the locket over and read the inscription aloud. "*Forever in our hearts. Love, Dake and Zeb.*"

"That way you'll..." Dake's voice caught and he paused. "You'll never forget us," he finished.

Clasping the locket to her breast, Lula gathered the brothers into a three-way hug. "I shall treasure this heartfelt gift forever," she said. "This is indeed the finest, most valuable possession I have ever owned. And it will always be worn next to my heart." She handed the locket to Dake, turning her back to him and lifting the curls at her neck to give him access.

Dake fumbled with the clasp on the tiny chain until, with a frustrated sigh, he turned it over to Zeb who managed the clasp and locked the chain around her neck.

She turned back to them, giving each a kiss on the cheek. "I want you to know that I love you both. Truly and dearly, with all of my heart."

"The feeling's mutual, darling," Zeb said. "You've been like a breath of fresh air in our lives, Lula." He glanced at the clock and then at his brother. "Time to go," he advised softly. "We don't want to risk making Cupid angry by you holding things up."

"You're right. He is quick to anger." Lula nodded, taking in a deep breath. "Cupid is also notorious for being quite mischievous, as well as exceptionally arrogant," she cautioned, "so take care not to rile him."

"She means don't piss Cupid off," Zeb explained, elbowing his brother.

"I know what she means," Dake said, whapping Zeb's arm with his hand.

Lula gathered her *Welcome to Portland, Oregon!* canvas tote bag containing her uniform, a few personal items and a small cookbook filled with recipes for ice cream creations. With an intake of breath, she smiled and announced, "I'm ready. Let's go."

Zeb opened the door, ushering Lula out into the hall. "Alfred's already downstairs tending things, so we don't have to worry about me having to get back to the shop for a few hours."

"Lula," Dake said, drawing her into his arms and crushing her against his chest. There was a sense of desperation in his voice that nearly broke Lula's heart. "Lula," he whispered again as he kissed her with such love, such concentration it made her knees go weak.

The waterfront park was only a few blocks away, a walk made even shorter as they sped up their gait.

Lula gasped, murmuring, "Oh gods, oh gods," as they crossed the grass, nearing the spot where Cinnamus' chariot had landed three days earlier. "There he is. There's Cupid."

"The guy with the reddish-brown hair in the jeans and white shirt?" Dake asked, clearly surprised.

Lula nodded. "Cupid usually adopts the local garb when he travels. Togas tend to attract too much attention."

As they neared the spot, the three clasped hands. Lula didn't have the heart to tell Dake his grasp was crushing her fingers.

"Good timing," Dake noted. "Looks like you're the first one here. No other classmates yet."

"They're here. They're just wearing their invisibility traveling garments," Lula explained, groaning as she remembered she'd have to confess losing hers to Cinnamus sooner or later. "If you listen carefully, you can hear the sounds of their chatter in the distance."

"Yeah, right. How silly of me," Dake said, his usual levity sounding a bit forced.

Cupid, dashing and amazingly handsome as always, planted his fists at his hips, glowering at Lula. "So there you are, my errant little nymph. Where have you been? Cinnamus told me he deposited you here three days ago."

Lula swallowed hard and nodded. "I am sincerely sorry, Cupid." She lowered her gaze. "I...well, you see, I encountered a few tiny problems and I—" She stopped abruptly when she heard laughter coming from her left. Lula looked up to see a nearby cluster of trees and bushes rustle.

"What did I tell you, Cupid? Jupiter only knows what sort of mayhem Lula's wreaked this time."

Lula immediately recognized the jovial voice.

"Who the hell is talking?" Dake whispered to Lula out of the side of his mouth. Poor Dake looked mightily stressed.

"That's Cinnamus," she whispered. "He's invisible right now."

"Jesus," Dake said, swallowing hard. Lula thought she detected a slight shudder coming from him and she squeezed his hand for support. "Hey," Dake said, cocking his ear, "I hear horses." He glanced around, sniffing the air. "I smell them too." Before Lula could say anything, he held his hand aloft and nodded. "I know, I know. They're invisible, right?"

"As is the chariot," Lula confirmed.

Dake sighed. "That's just dandy."

"Who are these lowly, mangy mortals you've brought to our rendezvous?" Cupid stormed, motioning to Zeb and Dake.

"Mangy?" Zeb gasped. "Why, I'll have you know this is silk shantung," he said, fingering his pink shirt.

Dismissing Zeb with a surly scowl, Cupid addressed Lula again. "Why haven't you administered the forgetfulness powder to these Earth dwellers yet? The more they see, the more memories we have to deal with."

"Oh...well, there's a very good reason for that," Lula began. "Oh no, Cupid, please wait!" she pleaded, raising her hand as he opened a small leather pouch hanging from his waistband. "Please don't use the powder yet. I have a...a favor to ask of you."

"A favor?" Narrowing his gaze at her, Cupid grumbled. "We're on a time schedule, Lula. What's this all about?"

"I'm Cinnamus," her teacher broke in before Lula could answer. Lula looked up to find that her handsome blond, blue-eyed teacher had shed his invisibility garment and was standing directly in front of Zeb, extending his hand. "And you are?"

As soon as Zeb caught sight of Cinnamus in his short, gold-embellished off-white toga, his jaw dropped. "Zebulon," he breathed, taking Cinnamus' hand in both of his and clasping it. "Zebulon Dronyer. Lowly, mangy mortal," he added, eyeing Cinnamus as if he were a hot fudge sundae. Cinnamus laughed at his quip.

"Just as I thought," Lula said proudly. At least she could do *something* right. "I told Zebulon I believed you would find each other most appealing, Cinnamus. Even without the need for intervention from Cupid's arrows." She noticed that Cupid frowned at that.

"As always, you were most perceptive, Lula. Remind me to give you a big, shiny gold star on your chart when you return to class," Cinnamus answered her, never taking his gaze from Zeb, their hands still clasped.

"I've never doubted anything Lula has told me," Zeb said. "And this only proves the little darling's spot-on acumen."

"Nice shirt," Cinnamus said with a devilish smile, sampling the pink silk fabric against Zeb's biceps with his fingers. "Very nice. That particular shade of pink complements your onyx-black hair and dark eyes. Cerise, isn't it?"

Zeb arched an eyebrow, clearly impressed. "Thanks, it is. I see you're a man who knows his colors." Zeb smoothed his hand along the fabric covering Cinnamus' chest. "Nice toga. That particular shade of ecru complements all those well-defined muscle groups of yours."

As Zeb and Cinnamus exchanged lusty grins, Cupid engaged in a gargantuan yawn. "Honestly, this is all terribly sweet and charming, fellas, but I'm really getting bored. Can we please get going? Psyche will have my head if I'm late for dinner again."

"Lula and I want to stay together," Dake blurted at the same moment Lula cried, "I want to stay with Dake."

"Uh-oh," Cinnamus said, giving a low whistle. A muffled din arose from the cloaked chariot. "Lula's classmates," he said in explanation to Zeb and Dake's inquisitive looks. "Mind your own business back there," Cinnamus called to them. "Start reading chapter fifteen on Earthly etiquette and proper decorum. There's going to be a test." The sound of grouching was followed by the sound of pages being flipped.

"Dakin and Lula truly are a perfect love match," Zeb chimed in. "I'm sure of it. Go ahead, Cupid, test it for yourself."

Cupid looked at Zeb as if he had three eyes. "I am not in the habit of taking orders from mortals," he huffed. Arms folded across his chest, he shifted his stormy gaze from Lula to Dake and back again.

Lula felt a twinge of hope because, with that brief glimpse, she saw the recognition of true love in Cupid's eyes. He *was* the god of love, after all. How could he deny it?

"Okay, so it appears that you're right in your assessment," Cupid admitted. "These unfortunate mistakes do sometimes occur. Look, I'm sorry," he said, addressing Lula, "but you know the rules. No extended hanky-panky allowed between nymphs of Olympus and Earthly mortals. Now will you use your forgetfulness powder on these two or should I use mine?" Cupid's hand rested at his small leather pouch again.

"Cupid, please!" Lula pleaded, clutching his arm and holding it in place. "Please allow us to plead our case. It's not merely hanky-panky, as you call it. While Dake is highly skilled in carnal pleasures and the sexual unions we shared were indeed spectacular," she paused as Dake groaned, "it is true love that prompts my plea, Cupid."

"You wish to plead before the Council of Deities?" Cupid spat. "Impossible. Preposterous." He shook off Lula's hands. "Now why don't you stop all this lovesick nonsense and be a good little nymph. Find yourself a nice satyr to settle down with and make baby nymphs. There's one in your class, Vibius, I believe, who's got a major crush on you, you know," Cupid said with a conspiratorial wink.

"Vibius? Ugh!" Lula ground out. "I barely escaped intact from that one dreadful date we had. He simply wouldn't take no for an answer. Really, Cupid, how can you think to pair me with a hard-drinking, wild, carousing satyr when the mortal I love is a fine, decent, upstanding example of manhood?" She gestured toward Dake, splaying her hand on his chest.

"What's a satyr?" Dake asked Lula.

Lula breathed a monumental sigh. "The male equivalent of a nymph," she explained with a roll of her eyes. "Half human and half beast. While the upper part of the body is that of a human, except, of course, for the horns of a goat on their head," she illustrated her point by wiggling two fingers atop her curls, "they usually have a goat's tail, flanks and hooves."

Dake looked at her like she was crazy, then he turned the same expression on Cupid. "You can't be serious," Dake said. "You want Lula to get hitched to a goat-man? That's sick. I mean, come on, that's really disgusting."

"You're being both insolent and insulting, mortal," Cupid warned.

"Insulting?" Bristling, Dake's chin elevated a notch and he stood toe to toe with Cupid. "I don't think so. I never implied that *you* looked like a goat, did I?"

Lula shushed Dake, pulling him back and smoothing her hand along his shoulder, fully aware of the tenseness in his muscles. "Remember, you're addressing a powerful

god," she whispered. "When I told you about the Feast of Lupercalia, I explained how it celebrates spring and Faunus, the god of nature and agriculture, remember?"

"Yeah, so?"

"You may know Faunus better as Pan," she clarified.

"The demonic-looking goat-guy with the flute?"

Lula nodded. "He closely resembles a satyr. He and Cupid are good friends and chair the planning committee for the Feast of Lupercalia each year."

"Oh," Dake said quietly. He glanced back up at Cupid and shrugged. "Sorry, didn't mean to insult your buddy. I'm sure he's a fine-looking...uh..."

"God," Cupid said with a smug air. "Is that the word you're looking for, mortal?"

"Yeah...yeah, that was it," Dake answered.

"You said it was an unfortunate mistake that Dakin and Lula are in love," Zeb braved. "Tell me, is that how you felt when you and Psyche fell in love?" Cupid pinned Zeb with a furious glare as a chorus of hushed *oooohs* emanated from the classmates in the chariot. "Is that what you thought when you appealed to the Council of Deities, asking them to allow you and Psyche, a mortal woman, to marry?"

"Why you-you impudent son of a belching boar," Cupid sputtered, getting right in Zeb's face. "Do you realize that with a mere snap of my fingers I could have you —"

"Zeb's my brother," Dake cut in, wedging himself between them and standing in front of Zeb to shield him from Cupid's hair-trigger wrath. "He's only trying to help me, so please don't zap him or anything, okay? I'm the one you want to deal with, not Zeb. I love Lula, Cupid. With everything I've got inside me, I love her. And she feels the same about me."

He tugged Lula close to his side. "I heard the story about you and your wife and all the shit you two went through to be together, so I know somewhere deep inside you have to understand. You *must* still remember what it feels like to love someone so much it hurts. To care about a woman so deeply it's like a part of your soul is missing when you're not together. All I'm asking here is for a chance, that's all. Just a chance to have our case heard before you go and freeze our brains."

"Oh Dake," Lula sighed, burying her head in the crook of his arm. "That was wonderful."

"Granted, I'll admit the mortal sounds sincere. And he made a few good points," Cupid said grudgingly, but Lula noted that his expression had softened. "But that still doesn't mean —"

"Cupid," Cinnamus said gently, resting his hand on Cupid's arm. "When's the last time we had a request like this from a student?"

Cupid rubbed his jaw. "Not that long ago. About fifty years, I'd say." He studied Cinnamus. "Oh brother," he groaned. "How well I know that look. You're going to ask me to take them, aren't you? Dammit, Cinnamus." Hands on hips, Cupid lowered his

head, shaking it slowly from left to right. When he looked up again, he was grinning, much to Lula's astonishment.

"You old dog," he chuckled, giving Cinnamus a playful punch. "You've always been the levelheaded one. Besides, it looks like you may have your own reasons for my being soft on these mortals, hmm?"

"Indeed," Cinnamus answered, claspings Zeb's hand and gazing at him with a warm smile. "I've been waiting several centuries for an opportunity like this." He waved a chastising finger at Cupid. "And you owe me, Cupid. Remember the time we—"

Cupid bellowed an exasperated groan. "Oh all right, all right. Don't hound me to death just because I've lost a few bets with you." He glanced at Lula, lifting his eyebrow and then gesturing toward her with his thumb. "The latest being your nymph's reason for not making it to my class here on Earth."

"Good. Fortunately, we have room for two more in the chariot," Cinnamus announced.

"Two?" Cupid barked. And then his glower softened as he gazed at Cinnamus who looked fondly toward Zeb. Throwing his hands up in the air and letting his arms fall, slapping his sides, Cupid laughed. "Okay, you win. We'll take them both."

Zeb started at that. "Well, this is something I never expected."

"That makes two of us," Cinnamus said, patting his hand. "But now that I've found you, I'm not about to let you go before I've even had a chance to get to know you."

Zeb sucked in a deep breath. "Look, as much as I long to come with you, Cinnamus—and God knows I do—I have responsibilities here. I own a flower shop and—"

"Really? I'm passionate about flowers. Just wait until you glimpse my vibrant, colorful gardens, Zebulon. True floral splendor at its best. And you needn't worry. Even if we're gone for days, we can arrange to return you here to Earth just a moment later than we left. It will be as if you'd never been gone."

Zeb arched an eyebrow. "Time travel?"

Cinnamus shrugged. "Of course."

Zeb and Dake exchanged glances, shrugged and chorused, "Of course."

"You may as well come along for the journey," Cupid said to Zeb with a yawn. "After all, you and Cinnamus are, as Lula suspected, a perfect love match. It's all but glowing out of your pores."

"Oh Cupid," Lula gushed, taking his hand and kissing it several times. "You are every bit as wonderful and magnificent and superb and brilliant and wonderful as all the legends claim."

"You said wonderful twice," Cupid said. "Is she always such a suck-up?" he asked Cinnamus.

“Not usually. I think she’s just blinded by your glorious radiance, oh magnificent one,” Cinnamus teased.

Roaring out in laughter, Cupid led them all to the invisible chariot.

“You have all your school materials, don’t you, Lula?” Cinnamus asked as they neared the vehicle.

Her heart thumping madly, Lula swallowed hard. Flashing her most engaging grin, she patted her canvas tote. “Of course, Cinnamus,” she lied.

Chapter Fourteen

"What do you mean, *Step on up?*?" Dake grouched. "How can I step on something I can't see?" The distinct sound of giggling distracted him. "They're all watching me, aren't they?" he whispered to Lula with a groan.

"Yes, Dake." She patted his butt. "Now go ahead and show my classmates what a brave, wonderful mortal I've chosen by lifting your foot and finding the chariot's platform. We need to hurry so no one in the park spots us. Do you want me to give you a push?" She pressed her hands against his ass.

"No! I can do it," Dake said, noticing Lula couldn't help chuckling. Oh yeah, easy for her, she was in her own element now. Trying hard not to make any more of an ass of himself than necessary, Dake sucked in a breath, grasped the invisible rail Lula guided him to and planted his foot on a solid surface, hiking himself up onto the floor of the chariot. The invisible chariot tethered to a team of invisible whinnying horses and loaded with a bunch of invisible nymphs and goat-men and God only knew what else.

"Damn," he said, looking down at the ground a good twenty-some inches beneath his feet as Lula's invisible classmates applauded. It was hard to look cool when your gut was doing a three-sixty inside.

He stuck out his hand for Zeb who, looking as eager and gleeful as a kid at a carnival, hopped onboard with little effort.

"This is marvelous, isn't it, Dakin?" Zeb said. "Wondrous."

"Yeah. Yippee." Dake didn't agree at all with his brother's assessment. There's nothing he hated more than not feeling in control of a situation. And this was definitely one of those times.

"Dakin and Zebulon," Cinnamus said as he and Cupid boarded, "we'll be lifting into the air in a moment so I'll need both of you to sit on the floor toward the center of the chariot, clutching a leather loop for safety. Lula, why don't you slip your invisibility garment on while I hide the brothers beneath the invisibility shield for take-off."

"Oh...um, I think I'll just huddle under the shield with Dake and Zebulon to keep them company and keep them calm until we get in the air," Lula said, hunching down beside the brothers and flashing them a guilty smile.

Dake gave her a reassuring wink. He hoped her teacher didn't find out about Lula's missing class materials until after they had a chance to plead their case to the Council.

"Do your best, mortals, not to shriek out like frightened, shivering puppies when we leave the terra firma," Cupid said helpfully as he walked to what Dake supposed was the head of the chariot. The next instant he was invisible too, just like Cinnamus a moment later.

"Can you see me, Zeb?" Dake asked, noticing that under cover of the shield all he saw was the waterfront park and people milling around as usual. Jeez, he couldn't even see his own feet or hands. It was like he was suddenly a ghost. It wasn't a sensation he'd ever wanted to experience until he was...well...a ghost.

"No," Zeb gushed. "Isn't this thrilling?"

"I can barely contain my excitement," Dake answered. And then he clamped down on the inside of his cheeks with his teeth to keep from shrieking out like a frightened, shivering puppy when the chariot soared into the air. He'd never been particularly afraid of heights but when he glanced down and saw miles of nothingness between him and the ground he squeezed his eyes shut.

The next time he took a peek, he was able to breathe in a sigh of relief when he saw the wooden floorboards of the chariot beneath him.

"We're clear now," Cinnamus said, lifting the invisibility shield from the brothers and Lula. "You won't need this anymore until we return you to Earth." He smoothed Zeb's dark hair. "Doing all right?"

"Are you kidding?" Zeb answered. "This is better than...than...well, it's simply the most fabulous experience I've ever had." Zeb glanced around at the now visible means of transportation. "I had no idea chariots could be so immense."

"Having just two wheels, personal vehicles are usually much smaller," Cinnamus explained. "The more generous, four-wheel models like this one are utilized for transporting groups, such as students from the academy."

"Fascinating," Zeb said, clearly doing his best to take it all in.

"Would you like to come to the front with me and watch as I govern the horses and pilot the craft?"

Grinning up at Cinnamus, Zeb gave an affirmative nod. "Very much."

"Here," Cinnamus presented his bare forearm, hand fisted, "hold onto me for support."

"'O Captain! My Captain'," Zeb breathed, clasping Cinnamus' arm and rising to his feet.

"Walt Whitman," Cinnamus noted. "A favorite of mine. Arguably one of America's most influential and innovative poets."

"An admirer of Earth's poets, hmm?" Zeb arched an eyebrow. "I'm surprised. And impressed," he said, smoothing his fingers along Cinnamus' muscled arm.

"I am well versed in Earth's culture and literary heritage," Cinnamus said. "A favorite passage from Shakespeare comes to mind at the moment. 'Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?' he spoke softly as he leaned close to Zeb's ear, covering his hand on his arm. "'Thou art more lovely and more temperate'."

"A striking man who pilots a chariot and quotes Shakespeare too," Zeb said on a sigh, looping his arm through Cinnamus'. "Be still my heart."

"He's got it bad," Dake whispered, watching as his brother gazed adoringly at Lula's teacher.

"Which one?" Lula asked.

Studying Zeb and Cinnamus as they headed, arm in arm, to the front of the chariot, Dake laughed. "Both of them, I guess."

"Indeed." Lula nodded. "They seem truly captivated with each other. It appears we are not the only ones to have found romance, Dake." She snuggled up to him.

Dake's eyes widened and he gulped air as the other occupants of the chariot became visible. As his gaze leapt from one creature to another, it was as if he were smack dab in the middle of some fantastical Tolkien tale. Or hallucinating after eating magic mushrooms or something.

"Who...I mean *what* are all those?" he whispered to Lula as he observed a quirky mix of beings with wings, scales, blue flesh, green flesh, horns and more than one head.

"Oh them?" Lula gave a nonchalant shrug. "They're just my classmates. Let's see...we have two nixies, one banshee—"

"As in screaming, wild?" Dake interrupted, taking in the thin, ashen female dressed in yards of drab gray veiling.

"Mmm-hmm. But Maureen is only a wailing harbinger of death when absolutely necessary," Lula explained. "Otherwise, she's really great fun to be with." Smiling, Lula greeted the banshee with a finger wave, which the banshee returned.

"Yeah, I can just imagine," Dake offered, not meaning a word of it.

She nodded toward the rest of the creatures and went on. "Liliphant is a sprite, sweet but terribly mischievous. And then—" Lula frowned. "Don't even think about it, Seraletta," she suddenly called out.

Dake followed Lula's wagging finger to a sexy, pale blue woman with snow-white hair, startling sea-blue eyes and one generous breast bared. Well, at least she looked like a woman. Damn, she was hot. And whatever the creature was, she was giving Dake an unmistakable come-hither look.

"Oh but, Lula, he's mouthwatering," Seraletta protested, licking her full lips as she gazed at Dake. "He looks so meaty and delicious. Perhaps you'll consider a trade of some sort."

"Jesus, she wants to eat me?" Dake asked, incredulous.

"Don't be silly," Lula whispered to him before addressing the blue female again. "Sorry, Seraletta. This human is mine and I'm keeping him all to myself," she warned, looping her arm through Dake's in a plainly possessive gesture. Leaning close, she whispered in his ear, "Steer clear of her, Dake. Seraletta's an undine, a type of water sprite. The only way undines can acquire a soul is by marrying a human being."

"No shit," Dake said, fascinated by the absurdity of it all.

"Going down the line from Seraletta," Lula pointed out, "there's a brownie, a fairy, a sylph and a dwarf. Oh...and that's Vibius, the satyr who fervently desires to mate with me. Ugh." She shuddered.

Dake gaze flew to the horned half man, half animal with the evil grin who was playing some weird tune on his flute. Well muscled, with his dark curly hair, bronzed skin and green eyes, he wasn't really all that bad-looking. For a goat.

Vibius eyeballed Lula as if she was a juicy, rare steak he couldn't wait to sink his teeth—and other parts—into. Narrowing his gaze at goat boy, Dake wrapped his arm around Lula, tugging her close. Goat boy sneered.

"Don't bruise her, Neanderthal," Vibius said. "Lula's mine."

A gasp of outrage flew out of Lula's lips. "Hah! In your dreams, Vibius."

"Indeed...you are always in my dreams, Lula." Vibius grinned. "On your knees with your plump, ripe ass in the air, begging me to fuck you."

"Hey, pal," Dake warned, "watch your mouth. There are ladies present. Besides, Lula's my woman, got it? That means hands off."

A muffled din rolled through the chariot as all eyes were on Dake and Vibius.

"We'll see about that." Vibius narrowed his gaze. "You may have wormed your way into her heart, interloper, but the nymph is mine."

"Look, goat boy—" Dake began.

"I most certainly am not!" Lula cut in, her cheeks pink with indignation. "The mortal and I are soul mates. I love him." She clung to Dake and he could feel her trembling with fury. He held her closer, soothing her arm with his hand.

"Don't be selfish, Lula," Seraletta the undine said. "Why don't you take Vibius and let me have the mortal man?" she offered helpfully, blowing a kiss to Dake.

Vibius rose from his seat, a fierce scowl across his face. He stood a good seven feet tall and looked ready to rumble. "What absurd folderol you speak, nymph. We are of the same kind, Lula. We are destined to mate. The gods will never agree to—"

"Enough, Vibius!" Cupid's voice bellowed. He strode toward Vibius from the front of the chariot and stood before him, hands fisted on hips. "Since when do you dare presume to speak for the gods?"

Vibius straightened, chin elevated as he looked Cupid in the eye. "But, Cupid, I—"

"Would you truly chance quarrelling with me, satyr?" Cupid spat. "Knowing full well I could turn you into a horned toad with the snap of my fingers?" Cupid held up his hand, fingers poised to snap.

Eyes flashing with alarm, Vibius immediately took his seat. "My humble apologies, Cupid. I meant no disrespect."

With a quick glance and wink toward Dake and Lula, Cupid returned to the front of the chariot where Cinnamus tended the reins.

Lula heaved a shuddering sigh. "Thank Jupiter for Cupid's interference," she said. "I don't know what would have happened if he hadn't stepped in to put Vibius in his place."

"I would have punched his lights out if he laid a hand on you," Dake assured her as he and Vibius exchanged sneering glances.

"I would fear for you greatly," Lula said, snuggling close. "Satyrs are far stronger than mortal men."

Dake studied goat boy, the horns, the hoofs, the powerful-looking goat flanks. "I could take him," he lied with false bravado. "Why don't you finish telling me about all the other people...uh, I mean creatures, here in the chariot."

"Okay." Lula nodded, taking a deep breath and expelling it. "There, on the other side of the chariot," she said, "starting closest to us there are two elves, two nymphs, a gnome, a troll, two pixies, a goblin and a kobold."

"What, no ogres or leprechauns?" Dake teased, thoroughly awestruck by the curious beings, most of whom were at least partially nude.

"The Cupid Academy teachers have had many headaches trying to tame and educate ogres over the centuries," Lula answered in all seriousness. "Why, just last year during the Feast of Lupercalia, Bubbadoofik was expelled for conduct unbecoming a student."

"Bubba who?"

"Bubbadoofik. The ogre."

"Uh-huh." Dake nodded, just as if this was a normal, everyday sort of conversation. "So what did old Bubba do, swipe a leg of lamb or something?" He chuckled as he formed a mental image.

"No, he tried to eat Liliphant." Lula gestured toward the pretty, youthful-looking sprite.

Dake's mouth gaped open. "You're kidding, right?" He didn't even know why he bothered to ask because, of course, she wasn't.

Lula shook her head and tsked. "And Cinnamus had such high hopes for Bubbadoofik too. As for leprechauns, Clarence is the only one in our class, but he's on holiday right now. He's a master shoemaker and a really nice guy. In fact, Clarence made these sandals for me." Lula shifted her position to display her gold-tipped shoe. "He's visiting his kinfolk in Ireland because they're having a big family reunion."

"So...uh..." Dake gave a surreptitious glance to the chariots occupants. "Besides Seraletta, who's in search of a soul, and Vibius, who's itching to buck my ass with those goat hooves of his, is there anyone else here I need to be wary of? I mean, human flesh isn't considered a delicacy or anything, is it?"

The way some of Lula's classmates were sniffing the air and eyeing him, as if picturing him trussed on a platter, nestled between a mound of gravy-topped mashed potatoes and buttered ears of corn, he couldn't help but wonder.

"Naturally, Bubbadoofik would have been in ecstasy, had he been here," Lula noted. "As for the others, most are just impish. Well, except for Edgar the goblin. You really should avoid getting on his bad side, because he can be downright mean."

She tapped her chin while scanning the other students. "That's Ofradurn, the troll," she said, nodding in the direction of a burly, ugly-as-sin, wild-haired little creature. "Trolls have an aversion to loud noises, so it's best to keep that in mind. I felt so sorry for poor Maureen the last time she let out an earsplitting wail. Ofradurn actually taped the poor banshee's mouth shut. Can you imagine?"

Dake was silent a moment. "Give me a minute...I'm trying."

"Oh dear, I almost forgot about Dunniger," Lula said thoughtfully. "He's the charming, dashing one there in the corner. The one who looks like a finely honed Greek god. While he claims to have given up the consumption of human flesh over a century ago, one can never be too sure, so I'd keep my distance if I were you."

"What is he?" Dake asked, thinking he just looked like an attractive guy until he caught sight of the way his skin shone faintly with iridescent green scales that were almost imperceptible unless caught by the sun's rays. He bore an air of sophistication and confidence.

"A dragon," Lula answered, and you could have knocked Dake over with a feather.

"Get the fuck out of here," he said.

"While we're in midair?" Lula gasped.

Dake laughed. "No, sweetheart, that's just an expression like...like, well, signifying that I found what you said hard to believe."

"Oh, I see."

"I always thought dragons were huge reptilian creatures with claws who breathed fire. This guy looks all suave, like a male model. Well," Dake amended with a shrug, "except for the greenish scales."

"Dunniger is able to change his form just like that," Lula said with a snap of her fingers. "The brownies and sprites find his natural size and appearance too menacing, so he usually maintains a human shape when they're around. In general, he's quite the ladies' man and has many female admirers."

"But you're telling me he's an actual dragon though, right? Like the ones out of the medieval stories."

"Indeed. A fierce and mighty one." Lula nodded. "Who could roast and consume you before you've even blinked an eye. So try not to do anything to rile him, Dake."

Dake stared at the debonair dragon a moment before shifting his gaze back to Lula. "Right," he said. Really, what else *could* he say?

"And as long as Mookie doesn't sense you're after his treasure, you should be okay," Lula told Dake, motioning to a cute, pudgy little guy who looked utterly harmless.

"Who's he?"

"Mookie's a gnome. To be on the safe side," Lula added, "just avoid the topic of finances with him. He looks sweet and innocent enough, but if he feels threatened he bares his sharpened teeth and it's a fairly daunting sight."

"The little guy's rich, huh?"

"He probably has more gold than your government's treasury," Lula answered. "His hoard is hidden away near his permanent home underground."

"On Olympus?"

"I can't say for sure." Lula shrugged. "Mookie's very secretive. No one knows exactly where he lives." Lula squeezed Dake's hand. "Would you like to move to the side of the chariot so you can take a look down?" She smiled when he hesitated. "It's quite a splendiferous panorama, I assure you."

Dake looked into Lula's eyes. Usually a deep blue, they were lighter now—clear and bright as he and Lula soared through the clouds. Her pouty pink lips were curved into a smile and her gold curls glinted in the sunlight. God, she was beautiful.

He realized that as long as she was in his life, all his worries and concerns were trivial. Well, except for the concern of having his thigh bones sucked clean of flesh by some ogre, or getting char-grilled by a dragon, of course.

"Yeah, sure. Why not?" He got to his feet and helped Lula up. A quick glance at the back of the chariot had him swallowing hard. "Gee, you'd think they'd put backs on these things. Doesn't anyone ever fall out?" Just as he asked the question, the chariot dipped, jostling everyone, and Dake yelped as he fought to keep his balance.

"Quiet!" Ofradurn the troll warned, and Dake noticed the guy patting a roll of what looked like duct tape looped at the belt of his grungy tan suede tunic.

"Yes, there have been cases of passengers falling out, but they're usually rescued by one of the flying patrols before plummeting to their deaths," Lula said.

"Flying patrols...you mean like air police?"

"Something like that." Lula nodded. "I'd liken them more to the coast guards who monitor your beaches and keep swimmers safe. The patrols are dispatched from Olympus to keep passengers of the skies safe. Winged horses, lesser gods and even some of the stronger nymphs and fairies are employed. But I'd recommend that you try to avoid spilling out of the chariot if possible, Dake. It's a terrible, ghastly fright before you get scooped up and carried back to safety."

Dake eyed her and smiled as he caught Lula nibbling her bottom lip. "It sounds like you're speaking from firsthand experience." He chuckled her chin with his knuckle.

"I'm afraid so," Lula said just above a whisper. "Twice so far."

"Well, that just makes me feel so much safer standing here in the middle of a backless flying chariot with you, sweetheart," Dake said, tongue firmly planted in cheek.

"Why, thank you, Dake." Lula beamed a smile at him. "That's nice of you to say."

Chuckling, Dake wrapped his arm around Lula's waist and guided her to the side rail where they looked out at the passing vistas. Damn. She was right. The view was magnificent. Breathtaking. Mountains and canyons and winding bodies of water. Clouds and mystical winged creatures soaring by... And every so often, he witnessed a strange sort of hazy flash. Like an image trying to come into focus, but just missing.

"What are those weird cloudy flashes?"

"Those are brief glimpses into different time periods," Lula answered. "Due to the speed, location and magical properties of the chariot."

By this time, Dake was getting used to hearing bizarre answers to his questions, so he pretty much took her explanation in stride. Why not? Hell, if there were ogres and leprechauns and dragons and screaming wild banshees, then why not buy into the notion of time travel as well?

"What's that in the distance?" Dake asked, eyeing something that resembled a city, glinting like gold, high atop a mountain beneath the cover of fluffy white clouds.

"Olympus." Taking his hands in hers, Lula turned to face him. "Oh, wait until you see it, Dake. It's the most wondrous, magical place. Quite unlike Earth. We'll have such fun together there."

At the mention of Olympus, thoughts of meeting with the ominous Council of Deities surged through Dake's mind. Oh yeah, that would be fun. He wondered for a split second if he might be better off just diving off the chariot now.

Chapter Fifteen

"It's utterly exquisite," Zeb said, trailing his fingers along the soft, petal-pink marble column. He stopped to study the glow of the fine polished stone, which was also beneath his feet and along the walls. "The dappled variations of white against the delicate pink and the silver-gray veining... Cinnamus, I've never seen anything quite like it."

"I'm glad you like it. I felt sure you would, Zebulon."

Zeb felt the rich low rumble of Cinnamus' voice deep in his groin. The man, no, the *god* was, without doubt, the most superb specimen of masculinity Zeb had ever encountered. From his golden curls to his sun-kissed flesh to his dazzling blue eyes, Cinnamus was living, breathing perfection.

Unable to keep himself from glancing at the skirt of his toga, Zeb smiled, somehow certain the perfection extended to the prize concealed between his thighs.

"You must be weary from the trip," Cinnamus said. "Come," he took Zeb by the hand, "we'll partake of some refreshments and then relax in a warm, lavender-scented bath."

"Sounds heavenly." Rarely finding himself at a loss for words, Zeb followed silently as Cinnamus led him through his magnificent, art-filled home. He was far too busy taking in his splendid surroundings to make small talk.

In each room, glorious blooms flourished in planters, bursting with vibrant color and gentle fragrance. Some of the flowers were completely foreign to Zeb. Chiseled busts of renowned men and women rested on marble pillars throughout the vast residence. Cinnamus demonstrated how, with the mere wave of his hand, the heads came to life as they made eye contact, smiled and spoke of their deeds, accomplishments and history.

Upon entering each room, soft, airy music played, some instrumental and some vocal. As they stepped from one room to the next, the music in the room they departed stopped while a different tune played in the newly entered area. Zeb couldn't help doing a quick little step back and forth over one of the thresholds and smiling when the magical music phenomenon continued to perform seamlessly.

A moment later, he gasped when something nudged his thigh. He looked down to see what appeared to be a unicorn, no bigger than a collie, gazing up at him. When it playfully prodded his leg again, Zeb laughed, reaching out to pet the beautiful ivory-colored animal.

"Is it all right to pet him?" he asked, wanting to make sure he didn't frighten the creature or that the creature, who might not like to be touched, didn't do more than just poke him gently with that long spiraled horn.

"Absolutely," Cinnamus said, patting the unicorn's flanks. "Sabellius is quite sociable, aren't you, Sabby?" The small horse nodded, clacking a front hoof against the marble floor. "Unicorns make ideal, loving house pets. They're quite intelligent too."

"What an amazing little creature," Zeb said, getting down on one knee and smoothing his fingers through the animal's silky mane. Sabellius immediately took to Zeb, cozing up to him as he showed his gratification at the attention. "Are unicorns all this small?"

"No, Sabby is a miniature variety. He's at his full height now. He's quite taken with you, Zebulon."

"The feeling's mutual." Zeb fingered the animal's graceful horn, aware that the creature could easily make shish kabob out of him if so inclined. "I take it you don't have to worry about being skewered."

Cinnamus chuckled. "No, unicorns are very gentle creatures by nature. The only time he might use his horn in an aggressive manner is to protect his master. In that case, he could easily inflict severe damage."

The unicorn trotted to a broad, floor-to-ceiling expanse of glass, softly tapping his horn against the sparkling surface and then looking back at Cinnamus.

"As you can see, he's house-trained too." As if conducting an orchestra's violin section, Cinnamus stroked the air with his hand in a figure-eight motion. The glass dissolved, simply dissolved into nothingness right before Zeb's eyes. They walked through where it once stood to the outside.

"This is the west wing garden," Cinnamus said as Zeb gaped at the wondrous array of blossoms, sculpted greenery and a lush carpet of grass. "There's a similar one in the east wing where Dakin and Lula are staying."

"I hope they know how to do that little flourish you did to get to the outside," Zeb said, waving his hand as Cinnamus had done.

"Don't worry, Hercules will take good care of them."

"Hercules..." Zeb lifted an eyebrow. Of course, nothing should surprise him by now. "You mean...?"

Cinnamus laughed. "No, not *that* one. This Hercules is my manservant. I dispatched him to cater to your brother and Lula while you and I get to know each other better."

Zeb's heart leapt at the promise in Cinnamus' eyes.

Motioning to the left, Cinnamus led Zeb around a corner to an immense stone patio that looked out onto an Olympic-sized swimming pool and two in-ground spa tubs. Zeb caught a whiff of lavender from one of the spas as they headed toward the broadest area of the patio, graced with several large tables with chairs and a number of smaller tables.

They sat at one of the more intimate tables, set with fragrant foodstuffs, gleaming crystal, china and precious metals. The gold bands girdling the linen napkins glinted in the fading sunlight. A lighted pillar candle sat nestled amidst a colorful, sparkling collection of colored glass and opaque stones in a crystal bowl.

"I've never seen glass twinkle with such depth and intensity," he told Cinnamus.

"The *glass*," Cinnamus explained with a warm smile, "is actually a mix of diamonds, rubies, sapphires, emeralds and amethyst. The solid stones are pearls, opals, turquoise, hematite and lapis lazuli."

"Good God," Zeb breathed.

"Thanks," Cinnamus quipped. "I think I am too." His laughter was infectious and soon Zeb had joined in. "Here on Olympus," Cinnamus went on, "everyone has access to all the precious and semi-precious gems they desire. They're plentiful here. The same for precious metals like gold, silver and platinum."

He tinked the silver-colored base of the crystal bowl with a fingernail. "It's always been that way here. It eliminates the need for envy and jealousy, two of the most heinous evils affecting Earth. Of course, Olympus still has its foolish and its somewhat less than honorable inhabitants, but the problem of iniquity here pales in comparison to Earth's." He scooped several stones from the bowl and rolled them around in his palm.

"It sounds like paradise." He studied the stones, shaking his head in wonder at the fortune Cinnamus held in his hand, not to mention the mind-boggling wealth contained in the bowl.

"Not quite," Cinnamus dropped the gems into Zeb's hands, "but it is, indeed, an exceptional place to live. And, believe me, I've seen countless different locations in my nine hundred seventy years. The stones are yours to keep," Cinnamus told Zeb.

Allowing the gems to roll around in his palm, catching the sun's rays, Zeb shook his head. "No thanks. I'm already a wealthy man. I work all day at a job I adore, I have a darling apartment decorated exactly to my liking, I surround myself with good friends and a pain in the ass brother whom I love more than words can express. Honestly, what more could a man ask for? The only thing missing from my life, the only thing I need to make me a truly happy and fulfilled man—"

He stopped short, glancing up from the gems he let fall back into the bowl to the stars in Cinnamus' eyes.

"Is your soul mate," Cinnamus finished for him, nodding. "Yes. That's something I fully understand."

Zeb shrugged. "And the last time I looked, soul mates weren't something money could buy." They exchanged smiles. "But thank you. I do appreciate your kind gesture of generosity, Cinnamus."

"Even a wealthy man has to eat," Cinnamus teased, passing a bowl to Zeb. "Fig? They've been poached in spiced red wine with honey."

Plucking a wine-glazed fig from the bowl with his fork and depositing it on his plate, Zeb indulged in a deep, soulful breath. He felt as if he'd died and gone to heaven. Only heaven never even came close to this idyllic place in his imagination—and it certainly didn't come equipped with a breathtaking, sexy, toga-clad god either.

The little unicorn trotted to the table, checking out the goodies much the same way a dog or cat would. Zeb chuckled as Cinnamus removed the cover from a rectangular container, passing a small bunch of carrots to Sabellius. "There you go, Sabby." He smoothed his hand over the creature's back, patting it. "Now be a good boy and go to your quarters while I visit with Zebulon."

With a nod and a whinny, the unicorn trotted off.

"I'm smitten," Zeb said, watching Sabby's full tail swish left and right as he retreated. "He's just too cute for words."

"I don't know what I'd do without him. I rescued him from an ogre who'd planned to make Sabby his dessert one afternoon about fifty years ago," Cinnamus said with a faraway look in his eyes. "He's been devoted to me ever since."

"Well, it's no wonder," Zeb said. "You're the little guy's hero." He watched as Cinnamus shrugged off the compliment.

"That's raw goat milk cheese," Cinnamus pointed out, changing the subject as he gestured to a stack of creamy chunks on a bountiful cheese platter.

"It's rich and buttery and delicious on these crusty baguette slices, especially when paired with a slice of the marinated roast lamb or grilled pork. The wine," Cinnamus held his glass aloft and Zeb clinked it with his own before sipping, "is from last year's pear harvest. It's mixed with honeysuckle and crushed rose petals. Mildly effervescent and slightly sweet, but not cloying."

Awash in thought as he caught the first color change of what promised to be a miraculous sunset, Zeb studied Cinnamus' handsome, strong but kind features and smiled. "I feel just like Cinderella," he finally said, and after taking it in, Cinnamus burst forth with laughter.

"With those swarthy, dark good looks of yours, Zebulon, I tend to think of you more as Prince Charming myself," Cinnamus said with a wink.

Opening his mouth to accept a small slice of crusty, cheese-topped bread, Zeb gazed at Cinnamus as he chewed and swallowed. There was no doubt in his mind that Cinnamus wanted him as much as Zeb wanted Cinnamus. No doubt that, before the evening was over, they'd come to know each other *much* better.

"I can be Prince Charming if that's what makes you happy," he said softly, smiling at Cinnamus' sharp intake of breath.

A moan inched from Zeb's throat. The current of passion arcing between them was riveting, undeniable. He knew their coming together would be natural, intoxicating. That when his mouth descended on Cinnamus' cock, taking its length to the root, Zeb would suck every precious pearl of his lover's cum with elation.

"What would make me happiest," Cinnamus said in a husky rumble, leaning closer and cupping Zeb's chin with his hand, "is knowing that I've succeeded in making our time together as memorable and meaningful for you as possible." His lips found Zeb's, brushing across them as light as a feather before licking them and, finally, capturing Zeb's mouth in a long, slow, deep and deliberate kiss.

Increasing the intensity, Cinnamus' tongue danced and teased, purposely fucking Zeb's mouth and promising of the erotic plunder yet to come. Before Cinnamus was finished, his tongue skated down to the hollow of Zeb's throat, swirling at his pulse point. At the same time, his fingers closed over the stalk of Zeb's denim-covered erect cock and squeezed.

Once Zeb caught his breath, he said, "You've already succeeded, Cinnamus. Anything more is just the icing on the cake." He swallowed, rubbing provocatively against Cinnamus' hand while savoring the taste of honeyed wine mixed with the sweet essence of Cinnamus.

"In that case, let's finish dining on our repast so we can get to the cake," Cinnamus suggested with a charming smile as he offered his wineglass, entwining his arm with Zeb's as they sipped continental style.

Need and desire tore through Zeb, causing his balls to heat and tighten, zinging a rush of pure lust down his spine in delicious anticipation of their first encounter.

Twenty minutes later, after good food and wine and even better conversation, Cinnamus stood up, coming around to Zeb's side of the table and ushering him from his seat.

"This area is completely private, Zebulon," he said, removing his sandals. Stripping off his toga and the matching silk shorts beneath it, he tossed them aside. "You don't have to worry about prying eyes or surprise guests."

Zeb drank in his beauty as Cinnamus stood confident before him in his full masculine glory. He was a glorious picture of symmetry and strength united in masculine perfection. Even the blond ringlets of his pubic hair were beautiful. If there'd been any doubt whatsoever that Cinnamus desired him, the size of his commanding erection rendered the uncertainty false.

Every breath Cinnamus took, each expansion of his chest, made an impact on Zeb's senses. With skin the color of a man who loved the outdoors, a fine-muscled physique that would make a Greek god weep with envy and a face more beautiful than he'd ever seen on a man, Cinnamus was, indeed, the epitome of an Olympian god.

"I thought perhaps you might enjoy a brisk swim," Cinnamus said, unfastening the clasp of Zeb's jeans, "after which we can retreat to the small spa where the warm churning water and essential lavender oil will render our muscles and tendons relaxed."

Zeb started in on his shirt buttons as Cinnamus unzipped the fly of Zeb's jeans. "You're the most delicious, sublime, scrumptious nearly thousand-year-old hunk of manhood I've ever set eyes on," Zeb whispered, giving Cinnamus a slow appraisal.

"I value your words. Thank you, Zebulon. Now hurry. I find myself growing impatient to gaze upon your nakedness."

Zeb shed his clothing with a swiftness he didn't realize he was capable of. Cinnamus' audible intake of breath told him he needn't have worried about disappointing the Roman god.

"Look at you," Cinnamus said, strolling in a slow circle around Zeb. "Zebulon, you're so stunning it robs me of breath just to gaze at you. If I didn't know better, I'd swear you were an Olympian god yourself."

"I owe it all to Dakin." Zeb smiled. "He forces me to work out with him."

Cinnamus stroked his fingers from Zeb's collarbone down to his navel, making Zeb shiver with delight. The feel of his touch soon had Zeb's cock jerking in anticipation.

"We contrast beautifully," Cinnamus noted. "My chest is hairless, while yours is sprinkled with crisp dark curls that extend," he trailed his fingers from Zeb's navel on down, "to your bold, handsome cock." He wrapped his hand around Zeb's girth and squeezed, giving a devilish chuckle.

"You may owe the honing of your muscled physique to your brother, Zebulon, but he had nothing to do with this considerable, bulging attribute." He indulged in a long, lusty look at his hand slowly pumping Zeb's erection. "Gods, how I long to take your magnificent cock into my mouth, relishing in the salt of your skin and the tang of your seed." His words came out no more than a gravelly whisper.

As Cinnamus toyed with his cock, Zeb played with one of Cinnamus' flat nipples, flicking it into a hardened nub. "And I, my dear Cinnamus, long to slide my cock past your tight muscles and into your slick heat. To feel your anus tightening around me like a fist."

Wrapping his hand around Cinnamus' big cock, Zeb locked gazes with him. In that precise instant, he felt a jolt so powerful, so grand, it reached his very soul. He suddenly felt more bold and alive than he ever had before. Struck and almost dazed by the extraordinary sensation, he felt his eyes widen as he continued looking into the depths of Cinnamus' blue eyes.

Cinnamus nodded. "I felt it too," he said, never taking his gaze from Zeb's. "We are destined for each other, Zebulon. True soul mates. In all my days, I've never experienced what I have with you—the soul connection, the elation, the all-consuming desire—and we haven't even fucked each other yet."

"When two people share feelings of this magnitude," Zeb offered, "before they've even joined physically, it can only mean one thing." His hand still on Cinnamus' cock, Zeb drew him closer until their chests grazed each other's. He used his other hand to embrace Cinnamus' neck, cradling it in the crook of his elbow as he kissed him soundly.

Once their kiss ended, Zeb whispered, "Love, Cinnamus. Don't ask me how or why, because until I met you, I never really believed in love at first sight, but...there's just no other explanation. I love you, Cinnamus."

"And I you, Zebulon. After decades of teaching the Perfect Love Matches 101 class, including the fact that love at first sight is, indeed, a genuine actuality, I know without a doubt that this is what's happening. What I find most astonishing is that it took me nearly a thousand years to finally experience the phenomenon for myself, firsthand."

"So what are we going to do?" Zeb asked, already aching at the prospect of losing Cinnamus, of never seeing him again or, worse yet, having all memory of him erased from his thoughts once he was returned to Earth.

They stood nose to nose, cock to cock, another moment until Cinnamus breathed a sigh. "Come on, my love, into the pool. We have much to think about and discuss after we take a dip in the cool waters."

They plunged into the water, swimming a few laps across the long stretch of the pool before getting out and shivering in the cool night air as they moved to the warm, bubbling spa.

"Champagne," Cinnamus said, making a small flourish with his hand. Two stemmed crystal glasses and a golden bucket appeared, filled with ice and a bottle of champagne.

Zeb had to keep reminding himself that Cinnamus was a bona fide god with magical powers. He couldn't help but think at that moment that sex with a god could possibly have distinct advantages.

"I think you'll really like this, Zebulon," Cinnamus said, pouring them each a glass of the pale gold liquid. "See how tiny the bubbles are? Smooth as velvet. It's truly nectar of the gods and far more exquisite than any champagne you'll find on Earth. To you," he said, holding his glass aloft as Zeb did the same. "My soul mate. My dear, darling, mortal love – and soon to be lover."

"And to you, my blond, bronzed god – the living embodiment of my dreams." They clinked glasses and drank. Cinnamus was right, this was the finest liquid Zeb had ever ingested. After the second glass, combined with the wine they'd had earlier, he felt it going to his head. Aware that he was fast becoming inebriated, Zeb let out a chuckle.

"What makes you laugh?" Cinnamus asked, nudging close to Zeb.

"I was just thinking how quickly my decorous mores fly right out the window when I'm under the influence of nectar of the gods."

"How so?" Cinnamus urged, weaving his fingers through Zeb's hair.

"Because I'm simply dying to scream out *fuck me*, and that's not like me at all." He chuckled again. "Whatever would your godly neighbors think?"

"That old Cinnamus is finally getting it on," he answered, using Earth slang. With another wave of Cinnamus' hand, Zeb sensed some sort of force field around them.

"Soundproof barrier," Cinnamus said in response to Zeb's inquisitive look. "Go ahead and scream it. At the top of your lungs. Let me hear how much you want me to fuck you, Zebulon. How much you long for me to make you mine in body as well as soul."

"Fuck me," Zeb said, clasping his cock and presenting it to Cinnamus. "Fuck me!" He shouted it, half pleading, half demanding, over and over again until Cinnamus shut him up with a kiss so scorching Zeb felt it soul deep.

"Stand up," Cinnamus ordered as he got to his own feet. "I want your cock. Now."

"Your wish is my command, darling," Zeb said, wasting no time in complying. He watched Cinnamus trace his finger along Zeb's cock in one long swoop until a clear substance closely gloved the entire length and girth of his cock. Like a see-through condom except it hugged Zeb's cock tighter, like a second skin. "What is that?"

"It's what we use in place of the antiquated condoms you use on Earth," he explained. "The tear-proof, no-fail shield allows full sensation while providing the ultimate in protection. Doesn't need any lubrication either." He fondled Zeb's cock. "See what I mean?"

"Amazing," Zeb said, stroking himself now as Cinnamus watched. "My hand just glides as if nothing's there. Hmm...no hand cream needed either." He smiled.

Cinnamus repeated the shielding procedure on his own cock as well as on one finger before looking back up at Zeb and indulging in a wicked smile. "Are you ready to be ravaged, my delicious little mortal?"

"My darling Cinnamus, I've never been more ready for anything in my entire life. Come on. Fuck me so I know I've been fucked by a god," Zeb boldly challenged. Positioning himself for easy entry, Zeb felt Cinnamus' cloaked finger searching for the tightly puckered hole and pressing against it. Zeb's own cock twitched with the glorious throb of anticipation.

"Trust me, my love," Cinnamus replied, cupping the cheek of Zeb's ass and squeezing, "there won't be any doubt about it."

Pushing into his touch, Zeb let out a cry as Cinnamus sank his finger knuckle deep into him. His hole spasmed while, with agonizing slowness, Cinnamus twisted and turned his finger, carefully stretching Zeb's passage, opening him wide enough to accept his cock.

He added a second finger and when Cinnamus stroked Zeb's prostate, gliding back and forth over the gland, the sensation was electric.

"I'm lining the head of my cock up to that tight little rosebud hole of yours," Cinnamus announced and Zeb felt the insistent nudging at his anus. "When I fuck you," Cinnamus went on, his voice hoarse with desire, "I want to hear you howl out your pleasure."

"Do it," Zeb urged, staggered at the intensity of the feral desires coursing through his usually cultivated demeanor. "Come on, Cinnamus, give it to me," he heard himself growl in a voice he almost didn't recognize.

"I want to feel you writhe and grip and clutch as I bring you to a screaming orgasm."

Before Zeb had a chance to respond, he gasped, gripping the support bars in the spa as Cinnamus drove into him, pushing past the tight ring of muscle.

"Yes...yes, that's it," Zeb breathed, feeling the heated thickness of Cinnamus' cock stretching him, so pleasurably tormenting him. "Give me all you've got, you great big glorious Olympian hunk." As Cinnamus sank deeper, Zeb grabbed for his own cock, slicking his hand back and forth as his heart raced.

"Allow me," Cinnamus offered, reaching around and grasping Zeb's cock, applying just the right amount of pressure as he pumped his hand up and down in rhythm with the movement of his cock inside Zeb's ass.

Faster and faster still, Cinnamus moved, until a blissful cry caught in Zeb's throat. Slowly, tattered breaths calmed into a ragged rhythm as Zeb controlled his breathing,

As fierce trembles shook his body, Zeb felt the burn, the molten fire exploding deep inside his ass at the same time it gripped his balls and cock. Clutching Cinnamus' arm with one hand, Zeb did his best to grab one of Cinnamus' ass cheeks with the other.

"Tell me you're mine, Zebulon. Let me hear the words spill from your lips as I take you over the edge." He drove harder into Zeb's depths, wrenching a soulful wail from Zeb's throat as Cinnamus lavished attention on both his ass and his cock.

"I'm yours, Cinnamus," he panted, a soulful moan wrenching from his gut. "Body...mind...and spirit, I'm yours forever," he screamed out as the gushing force of his climax nearly knocked him off his feet. As he roared out his satisfaction, he felt Cinnamus' cock pulsing hard inside him and dimly heard him howl out his own release.

"Oh good gracious, yes," Zeb managed to murmur just as his scattered senses returned. "No doubt about it. Zebulon Dronyer, lowly, mangy mortal, has most definitely been fucked by a god."

Chapter Sixteen

After Cinnamus had taken him with such fabulous fury in the spa, Zeb's muscles quivered from so much pleasure that he all but wobbled back to the house. Trembling or not, he boasted the lazy, sated smile of a man who had been thoroughly and most magnificently fucked.

"Now I *know* I've died and gone to heaven," Zeb said, his voice vibrating as the masseur applied more oil and pummeled his back. "This is the ultimate. What kind of oil is this? The fragrance is familiar, but I can't place it."

"*Pistacia vera*," Cinnamus said with a pleased groan as his masseur dug an elbow into the soft tissue next to his shoulder blade. "The tree from which pistachios are harvested. The oil is from the seed itself and is known for its soothing, sedative qualities."

"Mmm, I love pistachios," Zeb noted, thinking that, as yet, there wasn't anything he didn't love about Cinnamus and Olympus. Even under the blissful torment of his masseur's hands, Zeb felt his cock stir as he anticipated taking Cinnamus later. Sweet expectancy manifested in a tightening in his balls and lower belly.

"Then I'm sure you'll be fond of the sweet repast I've arranged for us to enjoy in my bed chamber after our massage. Pistachio baklava with a dollop of ice cream flavored with rose water and sugared rose petals from my garden. We'll offset the sweet with a pungent, earthy cup of thick Turkish coffee. And as we sup, we'll listen to the lovely, mysterious grace of Pachelbel's Canon in D, interpreted by harp and dine lyre."

Zeb lifted his head and turned to look at Cinnamus on the table next to him, his oiled body glistening and inviting. Blissful memories of Cinnamus' thick rod reaming his hole, driving him to the edge of sanity just a short while before, filled his thoughts. At that moment, Cinnamus gifted Zeb with a private smile so full of charm and lusty promise, Zeb sucked in a sharp breath.

"It sounds sublime, Cinnamus," he said, all but itching with the expectation of their next joining. "The food, the drink, the music selection...and the delicious sense of anticipation." Zeb breathed out a melodious sigh as sensuous images flitted across his mind. "The mention of ice cream reminds me of Lula's newest passion, hot fudge sundaes."

"The term's not familiar to me."

"It's basically vanilla ice cream enveloped in warm chocolate fudge sauce and topped with whipped cream, a maraschino cherry and chopped, salted nuts."

Cinnamus chuckled. "Lula's a true chocolate devotee. I can see why this sundae, as you call it, captured her attention."

"If Lula has her way, all of Olympus will be waxing poetic over the sinfully good merits of the dessert." Zeb laughed. "She fell in love with them and brought back a recipe book so she could make hot fudge sundaes here. *Oogh!*"

His head fell back to the padded headrest and he pounded the side of the table as the masseur tortured his calves.

A knock came at the open doorway to Cinnamus' massage retreat room. "Enter," Cinnamus called out. Both he and Zeb turned to look as a young toga-clad man walked toward them.

"I beg your pardon for the interruption, Cinnamus, but I have been charged with delivering this communiqué directly into your hands." Placing the scroll into Cinnamus' hand, the messenger nodded in reverence and departed.

"It's from the Council of Deities," Cinnamus stated solemnly a moment later. "They've agreed to sit in judgment as Lula and Dakin present their plea." Cinnamus stilled the hand of his masseur. "That will be enough, thank you, Dymitr." With a compliant nod, Dymitr and Zeb's masseur swiftly left the room.

Zeb managed to gather his liquid bones into a sitting position as Cinnamus did the same. "When will it take place?"

"Tomorrow at sunset."

"Oh dear, somehow that makes it sound like an old western. At least you didn't say high noon," Zeb noted with a chuckle.

Cinnamus gave him a blank look.

"*High Noon*. Gary Cooper and Grace Kelly," Zeb said in way of clarification. When Cinnamus still looked clueless, Zeb added, "He's a marshal who's just retired. It's his wedding day and he finds himself duty-bound to face an old, deadly enemy. His own town refuses to help him. It's a classic. Cooper won for best actor that year."

"Ahhh," Cinnamus nodded, "a western is a motion picture, a movie."

A little gasp escaped Zeb's lips. "Don't tell me you've never seen a western, Cinnamus." Cinnamus shook his head back and forth. "In all your nine hundred some years? I don't believe it. No John Wayne? No Lone Ranger and Tonto?" Cinnamus offered an oblivious shrug. "I wonder what else you've been missing all this time."

"I'd love for you to show me," Cinnamus said with a smile as he towed off some of the oil. "It's clear that we each have much to teach and share with the other. Introducing one's love to new ideas and experiences is one of the greatest joys of a relationship."

Relationship. Zeb smiled at the mention of the word. He was in a relationship! He'd been looking, searching, yearning for years for the right man to complete his life. Who would have thought the right man would turn out to be a god? Complete with carnal skills so splendid they were mind-boggling, no less.

How cruel, how unfair and bone-chilling, to think he would lose his love so soon after finding him.

"You're right." Zeb sighed. "But I doubt we'll have enough time to familiarize each other with our likes, dislikes and customs before I return home."

"What if you didn't have to return to Earth?" Cinnamus said softly, catching Zeb's attention just as he swabbed his face with his towel.

Zeb's every nerve ending prickled at the delicious, yet implausible, possibility of Cinnamus' words.

"You told me earlier how greatly you loved your life on Earth. Would it pain you greatly to leave it behind if it meant we could be together?"

In a mixture of dubious astonishment, Zeb gaped at Cinnamus, drop-jawed. "I'm tempted to say *you're kidding*, but I know damn well you wouldn't joke about something like this," he said. His heart raced at the prospect of remaining with Cinnamus.

"I've never been more serious. The agonizing thought of losing my true love after waiting nearly a thousand years for you, Zebulon, is one I can hardly bear."

"Oh Cinnamus..."

"While it's difficult to imagine leaving my existence here on Olympus for life on Earth, I would gladly do so if it meant I would have you at my side, Zebulon. But I must confess that I would feel most fortunate if you believed you could be comfortable living here instead."

Laughter bubbled up from Zeb's throat. "Cinnamus, I was born to live on Olympus," he said with assurance. "I mean, I fit in here. With my passion for Greek and Roman mythology, it's like I've been training my entire life to be an Olympian. Everything, the inhabitants, the architecture, the artwork, the food, the clothing, the culture, *everything* feels like home to me here."

He leapt down from the high massage table, taking Cinnamus' hand in his and stroking it with his thumb. "I love you, Cinnamus. That means I'll live on Olympus, on Earth, in outer space or in a cardboard box in the gutter if it means sharing my life with you."

Cinnamus breathed an audible sigh of relief. "I can't tell you how pleased I am to hear you say that. I-I'm afraid I boldly took it upon myself to anticipate your positive response and act accordingly."

Zeb cocked his head. "What do you mean?"

"Here, let me show you," Cinnamus said, unrolling the scroll and presenting it to Zeb.

"Council of Deities..." Zeb read aloud as he skimmed along the parchment document with his finger. "The plea of Lula, daughter of Arrius and Venuvia, and Dakin Dronyer, mortal, and the plea of —"

And then Zeb gasped.

"Cinnamus, Olympian god, and Zebulon Dronyer, mortal..." His gaze shot up to Cinnamus. "You put our case on the docket?" he asked incredulously. "We're going to court too?"

"If that means I've entered our request to plead before the council, then the answer is yes." Cinnamus clasped Zeb's arms, locking gazes with him. "I hope you don't mind and that I haven't overstepped my bounds by acting so rashly, but there was little time, Zebulon. If you didn't agree, then I would simply have asked the council to cancel the request."

"You hope I don't mind?" Zeb covered his mouth as an excited giggle threatened to burst forth. "Good God, Cinnamus, my head is spinning," he said, unable to prevent a gush of joyous laughter. "You've made me the happiest man on Earth—well, I guess I should amend that to Olympus." He grinned.

"Remember, there are no guarantees," Cinnamus cautioned. "The gods are an unpredictable lot, so be careful not to get too hopeful or excited yet."

"Easier said than done," Zeb informed him. "I'm thrilled, excited and so nervous I could positively swoon at your feet in a dead faint."

Cinnamus hopped off his table and began smoothing the thick, velvety terrycloth towel along Zeb's body. "If you're in danger of swooning, my handsome Prince Charming, then might I suggest we retire to my bed chamber after we towel each other off?" Cinnamus gazed at Zeb, a steamy, confident look that spoke volumes about his libidinous intentions.

"How can I be sure I'm not dreaming?" Zeb asked, his mind whirling as he glided the towel over Cinnamus' broad chest. "Ouch!" he yelped as Cinnamus grabbed his ass and gave it a pinch.

"That's how you can be sure." Cinnamus erupted with laughter, offering his arm once they'd finished wiping the excess oil from each other's bodies.

Halfway to Cinnamus' bed chamber, Zeb stopped in his tracks, yanking Cinnamus to a halt. "Wait a minute. What about age?" he asked.

"I mean, if this works and we're allowed to stay together, in another fifty years I'll be old and decrepit," Zeb said. "While you still look like, well," he gestured over the length of Cinnamus body with his hand, "like a Roman god. While I'm sure I won't mind having a hunky young lover tending to my shrunken, out of commission parts, I can't imagine you'd find fawning over my wrinkled old cock all that much fun."

"You'll always be beautiful to me," Cinnamus said, brushing a tender kiss across Zeb's lips. "If our plea is granted and you remain here on Olympus, gods willing, there will probably be some special dispensation made regarding your aging process." He resumed his former pace and Zeb fell in step.

"You mean they actually have the power to prevent me from aging?"

"Zebulon, my love," Cinnamus patted his back, "the council has the power to do whatever they damn well please, be it negative or positive. As far as that goes, if they're in a particularly good mood, they could even decide to decree that you become a minor

god." He lifted an eyebrow and gave Zeb a pointed look. "Or they could turn you into a donkey."

"Really? Huh." Nodding thoughtfully, Zeb smiled. "I could definitely see me as a god." And then he laughed. "And I can just imagine my brother's reaction. I don't think he'd take too kindly to my commanding him to bend down and kiss my ring." He splayed his fingers, wiggling them.

"Fortunately for us," Cinnamus said, "the gods look favorably upon me because I've taught most of their children well in my classes over the centuries. I believe we have a fair chance of having our plea granted in such a way that we are both quite satisfied with the results."

Zeb stopped again, one hand fisted at his side while he stroked his chin with the other hand. "What about my brother and Lula? How do you think the gods will rule in their case?"

Cinnamus hiked one shoulder in an elegant shrug. "I really can't say. I will act as a character witness for Lula and, if they allow it, you can support Dakin. However, I must warn you that the gods are known to be cantankerous at times. Some of them find humans to be not only boring but bothersome. For seemingly no reason whatsoever, the tide could turn and both your brother's plea as well as ours could be denied."

Zeb pondered the possible consequences, some too distressing to imagine. "Then what?"

"If that happens, then you and your Dakin will immediately find yourselves back on Earth without any memory of anything having to do with me or Lula or anything connected to us."

"You mean they'd just snap their fingers and zap us back to Earth without so much as a fare thee well?"

"Just like that." Cinnamus snapped his fingers and Zeb shuddered. "Upon a negative verdict, you and Dakin would be whisked back to Earth on the next chariot, already under the influence of the forgetfulness powder."

Zeb started down the hallway again, shaken. As they entered Cinnamus' opulent bed chamber, he slanted him a troubled look. "And if they grant our plea, Cinnamus, but deny my brother's? What happens then?"

Cinnamus led Zeb to the small round café-style table near the window of the large suite and gestured for him to take a seat in one of the two chairs. He poured them each a cup of the Turkish coffee and then took a seat, sipping slowly and encouraging Zeb to sample his brew as well. By the look on Cinnamus' face and the amount of time it took him to address Zeb's question, Zeb already knew he wouldn't like the answer.

"It's possible," Cinnamus began in a slow, hushed tone, "that you might never see your brother again."

"Oh my God..." The small cup trembled in his fingers and the already strong coffee now felt acrid as it slid down his throat. "They wouldn't really let something like that happen, would they, Cinnamus? I mean, Dakin and I are really close. We're the only

family each other has since Mom and Dad died. They'd...they'd take that into consideration, wouldn't they?"

"Eat some baklava," Cinnamus urged, ignoring Zeb's questions. "And try the ice cream before it melts. Rose petals are good for you."

"You sound just like a Jewish mother, for heaven's sake," Zeb noted with a strained chuckle. "Come on, Cinnamus, give it to me straight. I need to know."

"And I wish I could provide all the answers, Zebulon, but I can't. I honestly don't know what the council might do. They've been unpredictable at best in the past. Since Cupid and I are old friends, I know we already have his vote. As for the rest, I couldn't begin to predict how they'll vote or how they might decide to handle your fates should one verdict be positive and the other negative."

Cinnamus sucked in a deep breath and gazed into Zeb's eyes. "If staying here with me meant that you'd never see Dakin again, what would you do?"

Zeb sat straight in his chair, expelling a sigh of his own. "I don't know, Cinnamus. I really and truly don't know. It would be like asking which side of my heart I wanted to rip out and cast off forever, you know?"

"I do know," Cinnamus said softly, covering Zeb's hand with his. "And whatever happens, no matter the outcome tomorrow, I'll respect and support your decision. Even," he paused to compose himself, "even if it means I have to lose you. I love you enough to let you go if it has to be, my dearest love." He leaned over to stroke his fingers across Zeb's jaw.

Zeb leaned his face into Cinnamus' hand, closing his eyes and treasuring the affectionate caress. The last thing he wanted to think about now was losing him. The attraction, the love, the soul-deep caring he felt for this man was potent, undeniable...profound. He opened his eyes and smiled.

"How is it that I feel I've known you forever, Cinnamus? We have so much in common, share so many interests...I've never felt more comfortable, more at ease. It's as if we're two halves of a whole, miraculously connected."

"Love is strange, elusive and powerful," Cinnamus replied, threading his fingers through Zeb's hair. "When two souls destined to be together find each other, it's like the creation of new life. The bursting, blossoming birth of recognition upon that fated coupling is like no other."

Zeb knew that they shared was special. Rare. He knew he was blessed. "I-I'm afraid, Cinnamus. What if tomorrow —"

"Tomorrow is another day, love," Cinnamus said. "We have this one night for certain. And we can make the most of this most precious gift of time together. Treat it as if it is our one single opportunity to enjoy each other."

Zeb took in a deep breath and nodded. "You're right," he agreed. "I don't want to waste another moment of our time together stressing over what may or may not happen in the future."

He looked down at his plate and lifted the wedge of baklava, studying it. "Look how sticky it is from all that honey," Zeb noted, licking his lips. "Mmm...all of a sudden my appetite has returned." He sank his teeth into the flaky, nut-filled confection and rolled his eyes in bliss as flavors of pistachio, rose water, honey and cinnamon exploded in his mouth.

After swallowing, Zeb added, "And when I say appetite, I'm not just talking baklava, darling." He gave a devilish wag of his eyebrows and Cinnamus laughed.

"Have I told you how much I love your wonderful sense of humor?" Cinnamus asked, following Zeb's lead and taking a bite of baklava dipped into the melting ice cream.

Resting one elbow on the table and his chin on his hand, Zeb batted his eyelashes at Cinnamus. "As much as you love my cock?" he asked, bringing a spoonful of ice cream to his lips and depositing its contents on his tongue. He polished the spoon clean with long, languishing licks as Cinnamus' lips curved into a knowing smile.

"Why don't you give me a demonstration to help me decide?" Cinnamus suggested playfully.

Zeb sucked his sticky fingers clean and then reached for Cinnamus' hand, doing the same to his fingers as he gazed into his lover's eyes. "I hope your bedroom is soundproof," he said, licking his lips. "Because I want to hear what it sounds like when a god screams out my name in the throes of passion."

"Fully soundproofed," Cinnamus assured. "Although I've never yet screamed out during sex. And I can't imagine ever doing so." He arched an eyebrow in challenge.

"Maybe that's because you've never been fucked by a lowly, mangy mortal before. Cinnamus, darling, I'll have you whimpering one minute and shrieking to the high heavens the next," Zeb promised. "Now wave your hand and do that magic voodoo thing you do to cover our cocks so we can get down to the serious business of fucking...and screaming."

Cocks shielded with the simple, fluid gesture of Cinnamus' hand, the pair headed for the bed. Having been preoccupied when they'd first entered the room, Zeb hadn't noticed the grand scale of the platform bed, which was longer and wider than a king-size mattress. The walls and floor were the same soft, petal-pink marble with silver-gray veining and white mottling.

The bed linens, including yards of lush, sheer veiling draped over the black wrought iron four-poster canopy, matched the same delicate shade of pink. Pillows of shimmering silver fabric with pale pink tassels rested in cushy, inviting mounds.

The exquisite, aesthetic effect was yet another confirmation of their shared interests and tastes. Zeb thought it was a perfect, utterly romantic setting for what could be his final tryst with the beloved man who was his soul mate.

"So do we tear everything off or do you have a special hand wave for that too?" Zeb asked.

Laughing, Cinnamus began tossing the pillows from the bed and Zeb joined in. "That's still done the old-fashioned way," he answered. "Of course, if you'll be here beyond tomorrow, then I'll definitely have to work on that because this takes too much time." Once the plethora of pillows was removed, they pulled back the spread and top sheet and leapt onto the mattress.

"I want you beneath me," Zeb ordered and Cinnamus complied, his belly to the mattress. "Uh-uh. On your back first. Spread-eagle. I want to explore that godly fleshscape of yours."

Cinnamus shifted his position until he was on his back, gazing up into Zeb's eyes with chest-heaving expectation. Straddling one of Cinnamus' thighs, Zeb began his exploration with his tongue, licking his way from the underside of his lover's chin and journeying down across the finely sculpted planes and valleys of his chest and belly.

Pressing warm, damp lips along the center line of his abdomen, Zeb marveled at the boundless pleasure it brought him to think of thoroughly satisfying Cinnamus. As he neared his groin, Cinnamus fisted Zeb's hair, urging his head to his cock.

"Touch me with that talented tongue of yours, Zebulon. Set me afire. Make me burn."

Zeb nestled his face into the pale golden nest of pubic hair, breathing in the musky, masculine scent. A heady surge of heated desire settled in, turning to molten liquid deep in his belly.

"Since your magic cock wrapper allows full sensation," Zeb said in a husky timbre, "then I know you can feel this." Holding Cinnamus rigid shaft firm, Zeb pressed the tip of his tongue hard against the tiny hole on the crown of his cock. Digging, digging, as if he could fuck that miniscule opening with his tongue.

"Yesss..." Cinnamus groaned, a deep guttural sound that felt like it went on for ages.

With each of Cinnamus' moans, Zeb's own cock grew harder, longer. He took it in one hand and stroked it as he continued to pleasure his lover's cock.

As Cinnamus' hips rocked, Zeb stopped his probing, lavishing a long swooping lick from the base of Cinnamus' cock to the tip and down the other side. When he slid his mouth up and down the length of the swollen rod, Cinnamus' cock jerked. Zeb methodically worked his tongue along the veins, loving the soft growl that rolled out of Cinnamus' throat.

"You'd like for me to finish you off now, wouldn't you, darling?" Zeb trailed one finger in a feather-like tease around Cinnamus' cock. "You'd like to feel that orgasm surge through your balls until your cum explodes in a thunderous climax."

"Yes," Cinnamus ground out, his hoarse voice sending ripples of excitement through Zeb's cock. "Do it. Fuck me with your mouth, Zebulon."

"Not yet, my eager little god," Zeb teased. "Get up on your knees and hold onto the bars on the headboard. I want to see that sun-kissed ass of yours presented to me just as pretty and inviting as you can make it. And then I'm going to fuck you senseless."

Zeb watched the muscles bunch and cord as Cinnamus changed positions, getting to his knees. The man's body was so beautiful, so exquisite, Zeb could be happy simply gazing on it and stroking it with his fingers, his tongue, his cock...luxuriating in the feel of sleek satin flesh sheathing firm, hard muscle. But time and circumstance didn't allow him such lingering indulgence.

No, that would come later if everything worked out tomorrow. But now...right now was meant for creating a memory so potent, so compelling and so long lasting it couldn't possibly be fully erased.

With loving strokes, Zeb smoothed his hands along Cinnamus' stretched arms, over his bulging biceps and across his broad shoulders. He pressed his thumbs on either side of Cinnamus' spine as he raked his fingers down his back, feeling his lover shudder beneath his touch.

When Zeb's hands reached Cinnamus firm cheeks, Zeb paused, squeezing handfuls of flesh and then massaging the area. Nudging Cinnamus' thighs farther apart, Zeb continued his brief, quick massage, caressing Cinnamus' thighs and calves before scooting his hands to his lover's groin and cupping his sac.

"You're driving me crazy," Cinnamus complained. "I want to feel you inside."

"Ask me nice, darling, and maybe I'll comply."

"Please, Zebulon. Please let me feel your beautiful cock invading my ass."

"Mmm, yes, that was very nice." With a kiss to each cheek, Zeb spread Cinnamus, skimming the inner length from above the small hole down to his balls with his wrapped finger. "Let me see you squeeze that little rosebud hole," he urged. "I want to see how tight you can make it for me." Zeb watched as Cinnamus' ass cheeks constricted and the puckered hole grew smaller yet. He ringed the hole several times, teasing the pucker before sliding his finger, knuckle-deep, inside.

Cinnamus bucked and growled. "More. Give me more."

"Patience, my love. Squeeze against my finger," Zeb instructed. "Give me a preview of what you'll do to my cock once it's inside."

With a shuddering groan, Cinnamus did as Zeb asked. Zeb's cock jerked in anticipation as Cinnamus' tight channel clenched his finger. Probing deeper now, Zeb moved his finger left and right, in and out. When he added a second finger and massaged the area of Cinnamus' prostate gland, Cinnamus gasped with pleasure.

"Are you ready for me?" Zeb asked, kissing Cinnamus' cheeks again, already certain he was clearly hot, eager and entirely ready to be fucked. "Are you ready to have me take you on a journey like no other you've had before?" He thrust a third finger deep into his hole and Cinnamus growled.

"Gods, Zebulon, yes! Yes!"

Zebulon positioned himself so the blunt head of his cock nudged Cinnamus' opening. Guiding himself with his hand, he poked and prodded, increasing the intensity until he finally slipped past the tight inner muscle. Dear God, it felt good to

have his cock squeezed so tight. It would be damned hard not to come before he fulfilled his promise to make Cinnamus scream.

With a deep breath, he pushed harder and Cinnamus gasped, arching his back and gripping the headboard so hard his knuckles grew white.

"You're so amazingly tight," Zeb said. "It's hard to hold back...I just want to drive myself into you, Cinnamus, so hard we both see stars."

"Do it," Cinnamus panted. "Do it! I'm immortal, I can take whatever you can give," he added with a grunt.

"Is that so?" That was all the encouragement Zeb needed. With one swift plunge, he was fully seated, balls-deep and filling Cinnamus utterly. After a wicked twist of his hips, he drew almost all the way out and drove in even harder than before.

"Great horned son of a mountain goat!" Cinnamus growled through ragged breaths.

"Perhaps you can come up with a better term of endearment," Zeb teased, "because that one just won't cut it." He thrust hard into Cinnamus' anus again, twisting and turning.

"Zebulon!" He let out a long, heartfelt wail of tortured appreciation.

"I can't hear you, Cinnamus." He reached forward and grabbed Cinnamus' jutting cock, wrapping his fingers around its impressive girth and pumping it hard, fast, mercilessly.

"By gods, Zebulon! *Zebulon!*" Cinnamus screamed so loud Zeb feared the marble walls would crack.

"Now *that's* what I'm talking about," Zeb said a moment before he cried out Cinnamus' name and they collapsed together into a limp, sated, boneless pile.

"Great Jupiter, man, you almost killed me," Cinnamus muttered, his arm slumped across Zeb.

Zeb chuckled. "That's not possible. You're immortal, remember?" He kissed Cinnamus' fingertips. Sex had never been so much fun before, so rousing, so immensely satisfying. Fucking Cinnamus was more than just mindless mechanics as a means to orgasm, it was an experience, an event of cosmic proportions.

"At least I thought I was until I tangled with you, my bold, spirited lover. Never have I been taken to such grand heights. Never have I experienced such strength of emotion. Such a fine mix of physical pain and pleasure. As my seed coursed hot through my cock while your hand pumped, I thought surely my soul would fly right up and out of my body."

"Are you saying that you'll never, ever forget what we shared tonight, Cinnamus?"

"Never," he breathed. "It was the best night of my life."

"Good," Zeb said. "Because I swear to you, Cinnamus, I'll never forget it either. Ever. No matter what." He hated that his chin trembled just then.

“Oh my love,” Cinnamus said, capturing his soul mate’s lips in a kiss and cradling him in his arms as Pachelbel’s Canon in D wafted around them. “My sweet, sweet love.”

Chapter Seventeen

"I feel like I'm in a museum," Dake said, with a new understanding of feeling like a fish out of water.

"Habitats here do differ greatly from those on Earth," Lula said, nodding thoughtfully. "But why a museum?"

"I don't know." Stuffing his hands in his pockets, Dake gave an uneasy shrug. "There's expensive-looking stuff all over the place. Everything's marble, silver, gold...and, Jesus, there's glass everywhere. I'm afraid to breathe too hard 'cause I might break something."

Lula laughed. "I don't think you have to worry about that. I'm the clumsy one, not you."

Forgetting his discomfort with the posh surroundings, Dake turned to look at Lula, drawing her into a hug and scraping his chin through the curls on top of her head. "Honey, you are not clumsy. Maybe a little absentminded. A tad impulsive. And just a smidgen reckless." He chuckled as Lula's mouth gaped. "But I'd never call you clumsy." He captured her lips in a soft kiss.

"Do you truly think I'm reckless?" Lula asked, gazing up at him all wide-eyed and innocent-looking.

"Oh yeah," Dake assured her. "Definitely. But," he added when she opened her pretty mouth to protest, "I wouldn't want you any other way. I love you for who you are, Lula. All of it. The whole tamale."

"Tamale..." Lula frowned. "I fear it will take a lifetime for me to learn the curious meanings of all your favorite expressions, Dake."

"Well, if everything works out the way we hope, we'll have that lifetime, sweetheart."

"From your lips to Jupiter's ears," Lula whispered, clapping her hands against her belly and chuckling when her stomach growled. "It appears I'm quite famished. Cinnamus said there would be a palatable repast awaiting us in the garden. Would you like to partake?"

"Uh..." Scratching his head, Dake grinned. "Looks like you're not the only one who's got to learn about foreign expressions. If you're asking me if I'm hungry and want to eat, the answer is yes." He followed along as Lula led him through Cinnamus' gargantuan house. "This place is so big, you could get lost just getting to the bathroom and back."

"It is immense," Lula agreed. "And this is only the east wing. There are three others. Cinnamus and Zebulon are at the other end of the house in the west wing. I'm

somewhat familiar with the design plan because Cinnamus has graciously hosted brunches and dinners here for all of the students on several occasions. He loves to entertain and is a marvelous cook."

"Looks to me like he can afford to hire a whole five-star restaurant staff to do his cooking for him," Dake said with a low whistle as they walked through the huge, elaborate kitchen. He paused, studying the hardware on the kitchen cabinets and drawers, which in itself was really weird because he couldn't ever remember finding *anything* in a kitchen even the least bit interesting before, except for the food that came out of them.

The ornate hinges, door pulls and knobs were brass, or maybe they were gold. Each was carved into the shape of a different mythical creature. Damn.

The only other time he'd seen anything so lavish was when his parents took him and Zeb to Newport, Rhode Island, years ago to see a bunch of amazing waterfront mansions that the rich people called their *summer cottages*. He'd seen fancy hinges in one of the houses there too, maybe one of the Vanderbilt places, but nothing that could compare to what Cinnamus had.

"He does have a full staff, but he still enjoys preparing gourmet meals on his own," Lula said. "It's one of his...what would you call it?" Lula nibbled her bottom lip as she thought. "A hobby," she said with a bright smile. "He also enjoys painting and working in the garden."

"I'm guessing you don't mean house painting with a gallon bucket, a roller and a ladder."

"I do believe he said he used a ladder to create the mural on the opposite wall." Lula gestured to a striking, museum-quality painting of a picnic under a bank of lush trees that spanned one entire wall.

"Whoa...Cinnamus painted that?" Dake asked incredulously.

"He painted half of it. Cinnamus likes to provide visuals for his students, believing that a picture is worth a thousand words. The portion from the left corner to the center of the room is solely by Cinnamus' hand. His art students painted the portion from the right corner to the center. Cinnamus taught them so well, it's a seamless meeting of paint and styles, don't you agree?"

Filled with a whole new respect for Lula's teacher, Dake nodded and walked closer to the mural. "I'm not an art lover. Hell, I don't even claim to understand it. But even I can tell a work of pure genius when I see it. It looks like da Vinci or Michelangelo could have painted this."

"If you look close, there in the middle of the right portion, you can make out their signatures."

"Fuck." Dake gasped, leaning close and spotting the signatures. "Are you shitting me?" he said, staggered by Lula's revelation. One quick glimpse at Lula's red-cheeked, bewildered expression had him backtracking. "Oh jeez. Sorry, Lula, that just slipped

out. I just meant to ask if you were serious. I mean, you're talking about the guy who painted the Mona Lisa and the guy who did the Sistine Chapel, right?"

"None other. They were students of Cinnamus during the Renaissance. Oh, the tales Cinnamus has told of those days!" Lula laughed. "You see, Leonardo and his younger rival, Michelangelo, did not get along very well. One was always trying to sabotage the other."

Dake plowed a hand through his hair and swore beneath his breath. "Cinnamus taught them how to paint?"

"Mmm-hmm. And how to sculpt and cast and understand perspective and, well, basically everything else necessary for the success of an artist and craftsperson."

Lula's stomach growled again. She took Dake's hand and tugged. "We can come back and look again later. Let's go eat."

She led him toward a colossal wall of glass, showcasing the magnificent garden beyond. It was so clean and clear it was barely visible. While Dake watched, she did some sort of waving motion with her hand and then Lula proceeded to walk right smack dab into the glass with a loud thud.

"Ouch!"

"Lula!"

She reeled back, rubbing her forehead with the heel of her hand as Dake put his arm around her. "I wasn't expecting that."

"Glass will do that," Dake offered helpfully, determined not to bust a gut laughing at the ridiculous sight of Lula meeting the huge panel of glass head on. "Mind telling me what you thought you were doing?"

"Walking through the glass partition to the garden," Lula explained matter-of-factly as she massaged her nose with her fingers.

"Um..." Dake was quickly losing the battle not to guffaw. "Maybe if we opened the patio door instead..." he suggested through his laughter.

Lula shot him a heated glare but after a moment she joined him in laughter. "Oh dear, I do suppose that did look rather curious. You see, Cinnamus has glass panels throughout the house set up to dissolve with a particular hand command. And I, well, I..." She nibbled her bottom lip.

"Let me take a wild guess. You forgot the special abracadabra hand signal, right?"

"Let me try another," Lula said with determination, clearly concentrating as she made another grand flourish with her hand. This time she reached out for the glass instead of walking into it. "Ouch," she complained, nursing her hand after banging it on the solid partition.

"Maybe Cinnamus has some leftovers or something in the fridge," Dake said, looking around. "Where is it?"

"Behind the unicorn," Lula said absently as she fluttered and waved and brandished her hand to no avail.

Dake rummaged around the kitchen, coming up empty handed. "What unicorn?"

Lula turned and pointed to the small stone unicorn perched atop a waist-high marble column. "Tug on its horn."

Dake did and the wall opened, revealing a huge walk-in refrigerator. "Son of a bitch," he breathed as he spied a roasted hog's head, two deep shelves of what appeared to be prime fillets of beef, three separate cases containing wines and cheese, four full suckling pigs, trussed and ready for roasting, and endless other edibles.

"And a partridge in a pear tree," Dake muttered. A sheet of paper taped to one of the shelves caught his eye. As soon as Dake read it, he laughed. Whisking it from the shelf, he brought it to Lula.

"Master Cinnamus asked me to place this here for you, Lula," she read aloud. "Regards, Hercules." Beneath the note was a sketched diagram outlining the proper hand gesture to dissolve the glass panels. Lula gave forth with a small, embarrassed laugh. "Cinnamus knows me too well."

"So Hercules..." Dake began. "Is he..."

"No," Lula smiled, patting Dake's arm, "he's not *that* Hercules. This one is Cinnamus' manservant. He's a lovely and very efficient older man who's been with Cinnamus for years."

"Centuries, probably," Dake mused, surprised at how quickly he'd come to accept all this mystical, magical fairytale stuff.

"Most likely," Lula agreed, studying the paper and practicing. "Okay, Dake. I have it now. Take my hand and we'll walk through the glass together." She beamed a smile up at him, only to pout when Dake hesitated. "Dakin, don't you trust me?"

Aw, damn. She looked so cute and sweet and determined that Dake figured it was worth a good bang on the noggin to show her he believed in her. "Yeah, of course I do, honey. Let's go."

Bracing himself for a clunk as Lula gestured, Dake mumbled, "Well, I'll be damned," as they walked right through the glass. Or the glass dissolved. Or...well, whatever the hell just happened.

As soon as they stepped outside, the sweet floral fragrance assaulted his senses. "Reminds me of Zeb's shop," Dake noted. "Hey, look," he added as they turned the corner, "there's a swimming pool too."

"And a hidden waterfall just over there." Touching her temple to Dake's, Lula pointed a short distance away.

"Oh man, I can think of lots of squeaky-clean fun we can have in there, babe."

"Me too," Lula gushed. "But that comes after we eat." She skipped to a table and chairs positioned on the stone patio near one vine-covered wall. Lula sniffed the air. "Mmmm! I smell coda alla vaccinara!"

"Coda whoda?" Whatever it was, it did smell mighty good.

"Roman oxtail stew," Lula clarified and Dake couldn't help sneering. "Oh it's delicious, Dake. It's made from true oxen meat, not beef. The tails are combined with pine nuts, cinnamon, cloves, nutmeg, raisins and other wonderful ingredients, all simmered together for hours in red wine with plum tomatoes. Cinnamus is so sweet. He knows this is one of my favorite dishes."

Dake lifted the linen napkin from a basket and licked his lips. "Crusty bread."

"Perfect for dipping into the coda alla vaccinara," Lula said, plunking down into a chair and setting a napkin in her lap.

His smile grew wider when he spied a small plate stacked with pale yellow pats. "And butter! Cinnamus didn't let me down, either." He took a seat, realizing he was hungrier than he'd thought.

"You'll praise his name when you have your first sip of the wine." Lula held up her glass, tilting it this way and that as she admired the deep red liquid. "It's from Cinnamus' own vineyards. Shall we make a toast?"

Dake wasn't all that eloquent, but he could tell by the expectant look on Lula's face that it would mean a lot to her if he tried stringing a few romantic-type words together. "To the only woman who's ever heard me use the L word directed at her," he began. "My Lula, the sweetest, most incredibly beautiful nymph I ever laid eyes on." And then he figured it wouldn't hurt to add, "May we live long and prosper."

"Oh Dakin," Lula trilled the words out on a sigh. She was all dreamy-eyed, so Dake knew he'd scored. "That was so romantic. How did you know Spock is one of my favorite fictional characters?"

Dake chuckled. "I, uh...I made it my business to find out," he lied. If a little white lie got her looking all gushy and lusty at him, what was the harm? "See? Bet you thought Zeb was the only one in the family who could spout great poetic lines."

Gifting him with one of her dazzling smiles, Lula said, "You're truly an amazing man." She held up one hand in a Vulcan salute, which Dake met with his own, as they clinked glasses and drank.

He studied her silently for a moment before asking, "So how do you know about Spock and Vulcans, but not something simple like hot fudge sundaes?"

Lifting one shoulder in a shrug, Lula explained, "Because we finished studying the history of Earth media but haven't gotten to the chapter on Earthly culinary habits yet." She ladled some of the rich stew into Dake's bowl. "Oxtails are said to richly increase a man's stamina, Dake," she noted. "So be sure you eat a hearty portion...maybe two." She snuck a glance at him and giggled.

Dake ended up scarfing down three bowls of the delicious concoction, plus plenty of good bread, butter and wine. That chariot ride must have made him hungrier than he thought. He should have been bursting at the seams, but instead of being stuffed, he felt perfect, well fed and ready to do the horizontal mambo. Of course, with his amazing little winged nymph, it didn't necessarily have to be horizontal.

"Let's see what Cinnamus had his cook prepare for our dessert." Lula lifted the dome cover from one of the chilled servers. "Mmm, another of my favorites," she said, lifting one goblet and placing it in front of Dake and the other at her place.

Dake looked down at the white and brown stuff in his dish and wrinkled his nose. "What is it?"

"Greek yogurt with raw honey, almonds, walnuts and a dash of cinnamon."

Dake pushed his goblet away. "Sorry. I don't like yogurt."

"Do you like ice cream?"

"Baby, you know I do," Dake said with a devilish smile. "Especially when I get to lick it off your juicy little body."

"And do you like cheesecake?" Lula went on, clearly doing her best to ignore Dake's comment, but the pink spots in her cheeks gave her away.

"Love it," he said. "And I'll bet it tastes even better spread all over your —"

"Good, then you'll like this," Lula cut in. "Try it."

This time, it wasn't just the hot spots in her cheeks that tattled on her, but the pair of stiff peaks at her breasts, straining at the silky material.

"It's made from full-fat milk and cream," she chattered on as Dake stared at her, making his intentions known.

His thoughts fled from the yogurt and locked on to images of them fucking until they dropped from exhaustion under that waterfall.

"So there's less tang," Lula added. "It's drained until it's nearly as thick as cheese." She scooped a dollop onto her spoon and leaned toward Dake, pressing the tip of the cool metal to his lips.

Dake took the spoon into his mouth, surprised that the yogurt was just as tasty as Lula promised. As her hand started to retreat, Dake held it firm, locking gazes with her as he licked the spoon and then trailed his tongue across her fingers and thumb. She nibbled her bottom lip as she watched.

The nearby sound of three short muffled gongs captured his attention. "Aw, shit." He sat up in his chair, shifting to accommodate his swelling cock. "Please don't tell me that's the doorbell. Not now."

"Three gongs means there's a message for us."

"Well, good. We can get it later. After we —"

"It's probably important, otherwise Cinnamus wouldn't have had us disturbed," Lula noted. "It must be about our plea to the Council of Deities, Dake." She scooted her chair back, rising to her feet. "I'll be right back."

It seemed like a small eternity before Lula returned, which Dake supposed wasn't all that surprising considering how gigantic Cinnamus' house was. Finally she came back to the table, carrying what looked like a parchment scroll. She looked a little green.

"Uh-oh...bad news?" Dake asked.

"I don't know." Lula sucked in a deep breath, expelling it with a whoosh. "I haven't read it yet. But it's from the council." She dragged her chair next to Dake's, pushed the food away and set the scroll on the table between them. "You open it," she said. "I'm too nervous."

Dake unrolled the document, skimming along until he got past all the mumbo-jumbo. "Looks like even the gods use lawyers," he quipped before going on. He got to the part that had to do with him and Lula and read carefully. He looked up at Lula, who was busy wringing her hands, and smiled.

"The good news is that we're getting this all over with tomorrow," he told her. "The even better news is that Cinnamus and my brother are pleading before the council too!" He laughed. "Well, can you beat that?"

"Beat it how?"

"No, Lula, I meant..." Dake laughed again. "Never mind. Here, look." He smoothed the scroll out in front of her. "See?"

Lula mumbled the passage aloud and after corkscrewing her features, covered her face with her hands and burst into tears.

"What's wrong, honey?" Dake pulled her into an embrace, caressing her back. "This is good news, isn't it?" Damn, he hated to see a woman cry. He never knew what in the hell to do or say to make it better. "Don't cry, Lula, don't cry," was all he managed to come up with.

"I-I'm crying because I'm so happy," she wailed through a hiccupping sob. "Because the council has agreed to hear our plea and...and because the second and third most favorite men in my life are so much in love they want to be together forever." After dabbing her eyes with her napkin she sniveled and said, "Can you find a pink rose and bring it to me please, Dake?"

Dake stopped patting her back and looked at her like she was crazy. "Now?"

She nodded. "Please." And then she started bawling again.

He hesitated for an instant and then decided this was no time to start in on the questions, so he got up and started scouting around the vast garden looking for a damned pink rose. He'd never paid attention to whether roses grew on trees or out of the ground like dandelions, so he just inspected everything that looked pink, had petals and smelled like a rose.

It didn't take too long before he found what he was pretty sure was a rosebush, but the blooms were all red. Another one next to it had all white roses. "Does it have to be pink?" he called back to Lula.

"Yes. A true pink, not peach."

"Huh? Who the hell does she think I am, Zeb?" Dake grouched under his breath. "What the hell could she possibly need a pink rose for now, right at this very minute?"

He'd never understood women and it looked like he wasn't having any better luck with nymphs. "This is nuts," he muttered, digging through the section where he'd

spotted the other roses and swearing every time he got stuck by a thorn, which was often. Finally, *finally*, he found an entire shitload of pink roses.

"How many do you want?" he asked. "A dozen?"

"Just one large perfect bloom," Lula answered.

"Well fuck," Dake mumbled to himself. "Like I'm really gonna know the difference." Braving thorns and spiders and other creepy-crawly things for the woman he loved, Dake plucked the pink rose that looked the best to him and hightailed it back to the table where she sat.

"Should I put it in a vase or something?"

Tears still streaming down her face, Lula shook her head back and forth, snatched the rose from Dake's fingers and promptly began to devour the petals.

"Honey...?" Maybe she was having some sort of nymph breakdown. Maybe everything was suddenly caving in on her. "Lula...?"

"Pink roses have a tranquilizing affect on nymphs," Lula explained as she plucked another petal and popped it into her mouth. Damned if Dake couldn't see her features relax with each petal she ate. By the time she finished the flower, her eyes were dry and her nose and eyes weren't all red and puffy anymore.

She cradled the thorny stem in her hands and kissed it. "Thank you for your kind sustenance," she said to the naked stem before setting it on the table and smiling up at Dake.

Dake leaned his ear close, listening.

"What are you doing, Dake?"

He straightened. "Waiting to hear..." He took a deep breath. "Damn. It's not going to answer you, is it, Lula?"

Chuckling, she smoothed her fingers along his jaw. "Of course not. It's a flower, Dake. They don't have any vocal cords."

"I just thought that maybe up here on Olympus..."

Lula shook her head. "Nope." She frowned as she glanced at his arms. "Oh my poor Dake, look at you! You're bleeding!"

Purposely flaunting a hero's smile and a chivalrous shrug, Dake said, "Anything to make you happy, my sweet, lovely Lula." And then he kissed the tip of her nose.

"Even your shirt is torn," she said, fingering the ripped fabric over his biceps as a soft whimper escaped her lips. "And your big, broad, beautiful chest is scratched." She poked a finger through one of the tears, finding his flat nipple and fondling the flesh.

"Does that turn you on?" Dake asked, already getting the answer from the hot and bothered look on his nymph's face.

"Apparently so," she whispered just before indulging in another little moan. "Fuck me, Dake. Grind your bruised and assaulted body hard against mine. Let me feel the

hard ridge of your cock burning between my thighs. Do it, Dake. Blast into me. Fill my cunt with your –”

Dake scooped her out of the chair, a low growl rumbling in his throat as he lifted her into his arms.

He only had one word to say to her as he sprinted across the grass.

“Waterfall.”

Chapter Eighteen

Dake flung his jeans across a sculpted hedge at the same time Lula struggled to get out of her dress.

"I'm not used to these sliding tracks," she complained, her arms twisted at her back. She grumbled, acting as if she were snagged in a spider's web as she scraped and tugged.

"Here, let me help," Dake offered, gliding the zipper down her back.

Finally shrugging out of the dress, Lula breathed a sigh of relief. "I do so love most things I've discovered on Earth, but I can't understand why they make their clothing so restrictive and fumblesome. Easy, comfortable garments are one of the things I'll miss most when I leave Olympus."

The reminder of what loomed ahead for them the next day at the hands of the council stung. He didn't like his life being toyed with, no matter how high and mighty or omnipotent the players might be. Being at the mercy of a group of beings he'd always considered to be mythological was disconcerting at best.

The sight of Lula's dress flying through the air toward the hedge snagged his attention back to the present.

Off came her bra and panties, tossed on the bushes to join her dress and Dake's clothes. "Okay, let's do it," she said with a bright, eager smile. "Fucking, fucking and even more fucking until we go insane with the sheer pleasure of all that glorious fucking. Oh Dake, I'm so horn-like, I can barely stand it." She shimmied, wiggling all the good stuff.

Dake shook his head and laughed before snatching Lula into his arms and squeezing her round curves hard against him. "Horny."

"Oh good. I'm glad you are too, Dake."

He opened his mouth to correct her and shut it again, chuckling. It was flat out amazing how a woman could keep him laughing while managing to turn his cock granite hard at the same time.

"So you think you can take whatever I can dish out, hmm?" Lula grinned and nodded confidently in response. "Well, get ready to have your sweet little pink cunt fucked so hard and long that you'll get down on your knees before me and beg for mercy."

"Whatever you say, Dake. But I can think of better things to do with my mouth than beg when I'm down on my knees," Lula said, licking her lips as she eyed his cock, just as it reached an all-time record for mimicking a column of marble.

God, she was an amazing woman.

Before he had a chance to say anything, she splayed her hands wide against his chest, examining every scratch and puncture from the thorns and kissing them one by one. "I'm sorry you were wounded on your quest for the pink rose, Dake," she said without lifting her gaze from his chest.

He flexed his pecs for her and she let out a dreamy little sigh. Another flex and she moaned. "No you're not. Admit it. You're just a bloodthirsty little minx."

"Oh... Well, maybe just a little. Bravery and daring deeds always bode well with me," Lula confessed softly, playing with the fine hair on his chest. "Especially when the courageous one is as handsome and beautifully muscled as you, Dakin."

She rasped her thumbs over his nipples then raked her fingernails gently from his pecs down to his waist. "The sight of a man's broad, naked, muscular chest after he has braved obstacles for his lady fair does truly make my clit quiver."

She squirmed a bit and Dake's gaze flew to her pussy and the juices trickling down her soft thighs. If she kept this up, he was a goner. *He'd* be the one begging at *her* knees instead of the other way around. Of course, why waste time begging when he could be worshipping at the altar of her slick, juicy womanhood? Or nymph-hood, or whatever it was.

Turning her attention to his arms, Lula trailed her tongue across the scratches on his biceps. "Mmmm...Dake...you have such a magnificent hero's body."

"Well, hell. If getting a few scratches makes you this hot, I'm definitely going to have to plant plenty of thorny rose bushes when we get back to Earth. And if you're a very good girl I just might treat you by throwing myself into them and getting torn up every so often." He winked.

"Thank you." Lula breathed a sigh. "That would be wonderful, Dake. And in return, I shall offer you my soft, wet pussy so you can forget the sting of your wounds as you thrust into me over and over again. Harder and harder each time." She squirmed again. "Making me tingle deep inside as your white hot semen gushes hard and strong until your pulsing cock is fully depleted."

Bug-eyed, Dake gaped at Lula, swallowing hard. His dick jerked in what was obviously the prelude to a happy dance. "You're going to have me coming all over myself right here if you don't stop talking like that."

"Or you could come on *me*, instead," she said with a wicked little smile. "All over my breasts, like you did that other time. And then I could lick your essence off again. Ooh, that was such fun, wasn't it?" Her gorgeous tits bounced as she hopped in place. "You taste so good, Dake. Hmmm...I wonder how your creamy cum would taste on a hot fudge sundae..."

Talk about dying and going to heaven. Damn! No matter what else happened in their lives once they got the okay from the big guns to stay together, Dake knew boredom and lackluster sex would never enter the picture.

Hand in hand, they stepped into the nearly hidden cove and through the crystal-clear curtain of rushing water to find themselves ensconced in a small cave. A personal-

sized lagoon awaited them at the base of three flat stone steps. Lily pads floated on the water's surface while vines of sweet-scented flowers snaked up the stone walls.

Smaller waterfalls trickled and gurgled as their water splashed into the lagoon. If all that weren't enough, dozens of niches in the cave's walls held lighted candles while some soft chanting music played in the background. Dake looked all over but couldn't spot any speakers.

"Wow. This place is really something." If Dake was the kind of guy who could conjure up the idea of a super-sexy, perfect romantic spot absolutely made for fucking, this would definitely be it.

"It's beautiful," Lula agreed. "I haven't seen it from the inside before. Is it any wonder why Cinnamus teaches the art of love?"

"The guy definitely has a knack for setting the scene," Dake agreed. And then his face fell. "Damn, Lula. I totally forgot to bring condoms with me." He took a deep breath, eyeing her moist pussy with a smile. "No big deal. I can think of plenty of other ways to satisfy my...*horn-like* little nymph." His tongue glided across his lips.

"There's no need for those bulky condoms here on Olympus, Dake. We use a far superior method of protection." She glanced around until she spotted a verdigris metal cylinder resting in one of the niches. "This must be it," she said, lifting the tube and opening its gold and gem-topped cover. Dipping her finger inside, she smiled. "Yes. Bring your big, bold cock here to me," she commanded.

"Whoa. Wait a minute," he protested, watching the clear liquid drip from Lula's fingers. "You're going to put that stuff on my dick? What is it?"

"Earth men are even bigger babies than Olympians," Lula said with a giggle. "Do you honestly believe I would coat your love machine with something harmful?"

"Love machine, huh? Yeah," he nodded, "I like that."

Lula gave a dismissive wave. "It's from a story I read or maybe a movie I watched. Cinnamus teaches us to be creative when it comes to things of a sexual nature, so during the last three days on Earth, I've been trying to discover as many imaginative synonyms for your manroot as possible."

"My *what*?" Dake erupted with laughter.

"Your big salami."

"Oh Christ, Lula, stop. Please stop. You're killing me." He wiped his eyes.

"If sausage references are not to your liking I've also learned the terms schlong, wiener...oh wait, that's another meat reference." She shrugged and continued, "Rocket, pecker, jutting spear and hot throbbing organ." She counted the terms off on her fingers. "Do you find those more preferable than big salami?"

"Look at me," Dake complained through his laughter as he gestured toward his ready-for-action cock. "By all rights, I should be shrunk down to the size of a peanut after laughing so hard but, damn, you and your silly synonyms have got my...hot organ throbbing." He laughed even harder until he felt Lula's finger smoothing over the

entire surface of his *manroot*. The last vestiges of his chuckle morphed into a long, low groan.

"This covering allows full sensation," Lula explained, demonstrating with a teasing swirl of her fingers along his length. "It's readily available in liquid form for whoever wants to use it. The gods can apply the wrapper without the need of any liquid, simply through a thought process while gliding their finger along a cock."

"Feels like nothing's there," Dake said. "Come here so I can try it out, sweetstuff. If it works as good as you said, maybe we can bring a case of it back to Earth." He led her down the steps to the lagoon. When he was thigh-deep and they stood beneath a slow, steady shower of water, he stopped and drew her close, planting little kisses along her neck and throat until his mouth found her breast.

Flicking his tongue to catch a droplet of water that clung to her nipple, he clamped his teeth down on the crinkled peak and sucked hard. Lula gave that delicious little moan he loved to hear, so he added some biting action as she writhed in his arms.

She reached between his legs and cupped his balls, gently squeezing the heavy sac that held the essence of his manhood. A tremble went through him at the feel of her tender, loving touch. He loved Lula's hands on him, her lips on his, her tongue and mouth sliding up and down the length of his cock. Whatever he'd done to deserve having Lula in his life must have been pretty damn special. He sent up a silent prayer of thanks.

After lavishing her breasts with ample attention, he lifted Lula, cradling her ass as she wrapped her legs around his waist and he strode through the water to a nearby wall. "These vines don't have thorns, do they?"

Lula glanced behind her and shook her head. "No. Why?"

Bracing her against the wall until her backside was blanketed by the pale blooms, he wasted no time. With a single thrust high, deep and hard, he'd seated himself. If he'd had to wait another minute to feel her silken heat gloving him he'd go fucking nuts. Moisture seeped down the walls of her cunt like honey, bathing his cock and trickling onto his thighs. Life just didn't get any better than this.

Lula cried out, arching her back. Returning his attention to her breast, Dake nipped at one of the rigid, rosy peaks, tugging it as he pistoned into her slick, silky depths.

"That's why," he growled, in answer to her question. The feel of her wet heat encasing his cock was amazing. Through the thin film of protection she'd applied he could feel everything he'd missed when using condoms. Every glide through her sweet pussy as her inner muscles clenched him, inviting him deeper, was like the best joyride of his life.

"You make my body pulse with excitement, Dake. I like the way you stretch me wide...the feel of the friction as you push into me." Lula clutched her breasts, pinching her erect nipples and dissolving into a series of little moans as he watched, mesmerized. She abandoned one of her breasts to claw at his chest, whimpering when a small rivulet of blood trickled from one of his scratches.

She looked exquisite, magnificent, caught in the raw unadulterated pleasure of their union. Never had he known a woman to freely abandon her inhibitions and throw herself so wildly, so wholly into lovemaking. She'd always be a goddess as far as Dake was concerned.

"You're phenomenal, Lula," he said, screwing himself into her again. "I love everything about you. The way you look, the way you act...everything, inside and out. They broke the mold when they made you."

"Yes, that's what Cinnamus keeps telling me when I make an error in judgment."

Dake chuckled at that. "You feel so fucking good. So damn amazing I don't think I'm going to last long." He slammed into her again, his balls slapping against her with each thrust. It wasn't long before he felt the familiar pull in his balls, the tingling tightness in his cock. "God, I wish we could stay like this forever. I love being inside you, sweetheart."

"Me too," she panted in response. "Don't worry about premature ejaculation, my handsome love machine. We can make love all night."

Digging his fingertips into the soft flesh at Lula's hips, a twisted cry erupted from Dake's lips, half laugh and half tormented ecstasy as pulsing streams of cum shot out. The high, operatic note signaling Lula's orgasm echoed off the walls, mixing with the angelic chants, and Dake opened his eyes in time to watch her wings spread wide against the flowers.

He couldn't believe there was a time when that singular action had scared the living shit out of him. Now, watching his beautiful Lula's delicate wings extend and flutter was like second nature.

Two hours later, exhausted and depleted from making vigorous love to his insatiable winged nymph an unbelievable five damn times, Dake bellowed a yawn. He was satisfied, sated and entirely content.

"Dake?" Sitting on a deep, flat stone, Lula swished her feet in the water as she worked on a chain of flowers.

"Hmm?" he asked lazily, resting his head against one smooth rock as he reclined against another.

"Are you worried about our meeting with the council tomorrow?"

"Let's just say I'll be glad when it's all over with."

"I hope you don't have to fight any dragons or battle any other fierce beasts."

Heaving a sigh, Dake pulled himself up on his elbows, slanting Lula a skeptical look. "Lula."

"Mmm-hmm." She joined the ends of the flower chain, positioning the ring of blooms on her head. A true flower child, complete with butterfly wings, it looked perfectly natural on her.

"Can you maybe keep your fascination with bloodied heroes limited to wrestling thorny rose bushes and not getting barbecued by dragons or skewered by one-eyed monsters twice a man's size?"

She turned to look at him in surprise. "Oh Dake, I never meant—"

"Uh-uh." He wagged a finger at her, shaking his head. "I'm not buying it. I've watched plenty of movies with dragons and fiendish monsters, you know. I've seen the way the female is always breathing heavy and getting that certain look in her eyes when her hero returns home all bleeding and battered."

"It is a rather romantic notion," she said sheepishly.

"Well, just forget about it, okay?" Dake sat up fully, scooting next to Lula and swinging his feet in the water. "This isn't a romance novel, this is real life."

"Perhaps you'll only have to battle a small troll," she offered helpfully.

"And perhaps we'll go to this council thing," Dake countered, "and discover that everything's handled in a sane, sensible, responsible, adult manner. Without any bloody skirmishes."

As she nibbled her lower lip, Lula patted his thigh. "Keep practicing your positive thinking, Dake. I'm sure it can't hurt."

"So if you haven't managed to get me eviscerated by some gargoyle or something by the time I'm eighty, I guess that means I'll be old and pruny while you still look all young, bouncy and perky, huh?"

"Yes," Lula said with a wistful sigh. "I've thought about that and it makes me very sad."

"Yeah well, I'm not all that crazy about getting old either, sweetheart. Although it might be kind of cool to be a wrinkled old geezer with a hot babe on his arm. I just hope I can still get it up then." Dake chuckled.

"It's not your youthful looks or ability to perform sexually that I fear losing, Dake. It's you. I love you." She poked his chest just above his heart and gazed into his eyes. "The you that's inside." Leaning her head against his chest, she sighed. "Oh Dake, whatever will I do once your short life span has ended? I can't even imagine enduring that pain."

Draping his arm around her shoulder, Dake drew Lula close. "Aw, honey, don't worry about that now. We've got a good forty-some years together before I check out."

"Check out?" She gave him that wide-eyed questioning look.

"Kick the bucket. Keel over. Bite the dust." He couldn't help grinning as he saw her perplexed expression. "You know, when I've cashed in my chips, bought the farm and I'm pushing up daisies."

"Ahhh..." Lula nodded thoughtfully. "Those are euphemisms for death, right?"

"You're not the only creative one around here." Dake winked as he tapped his finger against her temple.

She patted his thigh and smiled. "That's very sweet of you to avoid using the word *die* when referring to your imminent death so as not to upset me."

"Imminent? Hey, are you fixating on dragons again?"

"Of course not. I'm simply thinking about the forty-some years you mentioned. It will pass in the mere blink of an eye, Dake. We will have such a short time together before you...kick the bucket." Her chin trembled.

"Whoa, time to change the subject before you start crying again and send me out in search of more pink roses. It's getting dark out there and I might not find my way back," Dake teased.

"You could get mightily scratched up," Lula said with a bit too much enthusiasm.

"Forget about it, sweet lips."

Lowering her head, Lula glanced up at him through her lashes and smiled. "I was just making levity."

"Yeah, right." He studied her for a moment before resting his chin atop her head. Her hair smelled faintly of the flowers ringing her curls. "Funny. We've known each other less than a week and I feel like I've known you all my life."

"That's because we're true soul mates," Lula said, cupping his depleted cock with her hand. When her fingers started caressing him there, Dake smiled. No way in hell was his dick going to respond this time. Uh-uh. Not after she'd practically killed it with two hours of her ravenous carnal appetite.

"Look at Zeb and Cinnamus," Dake noted. "They've just known each other a day and they're ready to commit for life."

"Cinnamus has waited a very long time to meet his soul mate." Lula continued to massage his cock with gentle, teasing strokes.

"Zeb too. He's a good guy. Always putting everyone else's needs before his own. He deserves to find someone who really cares about him."

"I hope the council grants their wish to be together," Lula said. "Perhaps because Cinnamus is a god, it will be easier for him to get a positive ruling from his peers. I surely hope so."

"I know my brother. He's gotta be loving it here. If they stay together, he'd rather live on Olympus than back on Earth." The sudden realization that he and Zeb might not get to see each other again after tomorrow clawed at Dake's gut. "What happens if we're down there and Zeb and Cinnamus are up here? I mean, do we get visitation rights?"

"I don't know, Dake. Our futures will be determined tomorrow by the whim of the gods." She did a curlicue thing with her fingers at his cock at the same time she pressed her breasts against his side and kissed his shoulder. "All I know is that I want to make this night together unforgettable, as it may be our last. Let's go back to the house." She shivered and pressed herself harder against him. "It's getting chilly out here."

Foolishly ignoring all reason, Dake's cock swelled. A potent combination of lust and love churned deep in his gut as he caressed Lula, never wanting to let her go. "I hope we don't need a map to the bedroom."

"I remember where it is."

"Famous last words." Dake gave a husky chuckle. He helped Lula to her feet then picked her up in his arms. She wrapped her arms around his neck, cooing as she rested her head at his shoulder. At that moment, as he gazed down at her sweet face, taking in her pouty lips, pink cheeks and wondrous blue eyes, Dake knew.

He knew without a doubt he'd willingly battle dragons, beasts, trolls or anything else they threw at him if it meant being able to hold Lula in his arms like this for even one more day.

Chapter Nineteen

"I'm not going there dressed like a girl," Dake complained.

"Trust me, Dakin, you do not look like a girl." Zeb heaved a monumental sigh. "You look sophisticated. Like an Olympian."

"It's a skirt, for fuck's sake."

"It's a toga," Zeb corrected. "And you look very masculine in it. Look at me, don't I look masculine in my toga?"

Dake gave his brother a quick appraisal. "I'm putting my jeans back on," he announced, snatching them from the chest of drawers.

"Listen, this is important, Dakin. You can't show up at the council wearing a torn bloody shirt and jeans. Your clothes look like you were in a grubby cock fight, for heaven's sake." Grabbing the jeans from his brother, he studied them before letting them drop to the floor of the dressing room in a wrinkled heap. The shirt followed. "What in the world were you and Lula doing last night, anyway? Were there any whips and chains involved?" Zeb snickered.

"Hardly. But do me a favor and don't give her any ideas, okay?" Dake laughed. "She's bloodthirsty enough already."

"I can see where you might have gotten all those scratches from her fingernails in the heat of passion, but that doesn't explain the ripped clothes."

"Rose bushes." Dake sighed. "I got caught in the thorns."

"Hmmm, and little Lula got turned on when she glimpsed her big strong he-man all torn up. Is that it?"

"Something like that." Dake fidgeted, flipping the skirt of his mid-thigh-length toga and wiggling his toes. "And what's with these girly sandals with all the crisscross stuff up to my knees? I feel silly—like a fucking ballerina, for chrissakes. What if I walk in there and they all start laughing?"

"Will you *puhleeze* stop grouching! You look just like Marc Antony. Just like a brave Roman soldier."

"Maybe I'd feel better if I had some armor."

"Dakin."

"What."

"I love you."

Dake stopped his fiddling and looked up at his brother with surprise. Zeb's expression was serious, solemn.

"You know there's a chance we may never see each other again after today," Zeb said, clapping a hand on Dake's shoulder. "I'm not sure I could bear losing you, Dakin."

"Hey, we're not going to lose each other." Dake grabbed his brother into a hug, giving him a hearty pat on the back. "Everything's going to be just fine. You'll see." He backed out of the embrace. "Hey, Zeb?"

"Yes?"

"I love you too."

Zeb sniffed and then busied himself in front of the full-length three-way mirror, primping. "What do you think of my hair like this?" he asked, fingering the dark curls flattened at his forehead. "I thought I'd go for a classic Roman look."

"It's all right, I guess." Dake shrugged. "If you like curlicues."

"You know I do," Zeb teased with a wink.

"So you really love this guy, right? I mean, you and Cinnamus have only known each other for a day and—"

"And one spectacular night," Zeb breathed.

"I don't want to hear about it."

"He was incredible, Dake."

"I don't want to hear about it."

"The man's a god in more ways than one."

"Yeah, but can he fly?" Dake asked with a devilish smile.

"Hmmm," Zeb tapped his chin, "I never thought to ask. But he has a *very* big chariot, if you know what I mean." Zeb gave his own devilish smile.

"I don't want to hear about it." Something nudged Dake's bare leg and he glanced down. "Holy fucking shit!" He jumped back. "What in the hell is that thing?"

"Shame on you," Zeb said, getting to his knees and patting the unicorn after it started with a fright at Dake's outburst. "You're frightening him."

"Him who?"

"Sabellius. He's a miniature unicorn. Cinnamus calls him Sabby for short." Zeb smoothed the little creature's mane.

Dake dropped his head into his hand and groaned. "Aw jeez, Zeb. This is all too much. Unicorns and gods and chariots and flying nymphs... How did we get ourselves mixed up in all this shit?"

Zeb arched an eyebrow. "Are you saying you're sorry you met Lula?"

"Hell no." His shoulders sagging, Dake sucked in a deep breath, letting it out with a whoosh. "Of course not. I love her more than I ever thought I could love a woman. It's like she's a part of me." He extended his hand and the unicorn licked it. Then it nuzzled up to Dake's leg. The little guy was just like a dog. With a big corkscrew horn coming out of its head. He patted Sabby's flanks.

"And I feel the same way about Cinnamus. So that means we have nothing to complain about, right?"

"But it's all happened so fast," Dake said. "How can you be sure you want to spend the rest of your life with Cinnamus after knowing him for just a day—and one spectacular night," he added quickly before Zeb could.

"He's been waiting for me for more than nine hundred years," Zeb said with a faraway look in his eyes as he rose to his feet. "And I've been looking for him all my life. It doesn't matter if falling in love takes a lifetime or happens at first sight, Dakin. All that matters is that we find our soul mates and recognize them as such before we do something foolish enough to lose them forever. We've been given a rare and precious gift, you and I."

He smoothed his hand along Dake's arm and Dake gave him a playful punch in return.

"Yeah, you're right. It's been fast and it's been weird—and it'll probably get a lot weirder before the day is over. But if it means I can stay with Lula and you can stay with Cinnamus, then it's all been worth it." He clasped his brother's arm. "I'm really glad you found someone, Zeb. He seems like a really good guy." Dake thought of Cinnamus' amazing painting skills. "Did you see his kitchen yet?"

"No, we woke up late and had brunch served in bed. Why?"

"It's magnificent. The most astounding thing I've ever seen. Cinnamus is an extraordinarily talented man."

"My brother...waxing poetic over a kitchen?" Zeb gave him a strange look before resting the back of his hand against Dake's forehead. "Are you all right? That doesn't sound a bit like my macho brother. You sure you haven't been taken over by aliens?"

Dake laughed. "Sorta sounds that way, doesn't it? You'll see what I mean when you see the kitchen. As a matter of fact, we should be heading over there now. Lula and Cinnamus are waiting for us. I just hope we don't get lost along the way. It took us thirty minutes to find the damn bedroom last night."

"This place really is magnificent, isn't it?" Zeb asked as they left the dressing room and walked down the art-lined hall, Sabby trotting by their side. "I've never felt so at home anywhere before."

"I told Lula you'd feel that way. Me? I feel like I'm in a museum. Too big, too marbly, too artsy, you know?"

Zeb laughed. "I'm not surprised. This isn't your style. Cinnamus told me about the waterfall cave on your side of the garden. How did you like that?"

"Now *that* I liked," Dake said as they rounded a corner, entering a long gallery of huge framed paintings and sculptures. "Very cool. It was like something right out of a romantic chick movie, with all the flowers and candles and chanty music. All the stuff women eat up."

Zeb stopped in front of a pedestal holding a four-foot-tall stone sculpture. "I'll bet you any amount of money you can't guess the name of the artist who created this statue of Cinnamus."

Dake studied the statue. It reminded him of something he'd seen in history books. Then he remembered the kitchen. "Michelangelo," he said, snickering as Zeb's jaw dropped in surprise.

Zeb's hand flew to his chest and he gasped. "How in the world did you come up with that? I didn't even know you knew who Michelangelo was."

"He was a contemporary of Leonardo da Vinci." Zeb gasped again and Dake laughed. "Hey, I'm not completely lacking in artsy-fartsy knowledge, you know," he scoffed. "Mom took me to museums and made me read books too, remember? Besides," he grinned, "I saw Cinnamus' kitchen."

The sound of Lula's laughter caught their attention. Dake pointed. "Follow that sound." A moment later, they entered the kitchen.

"Oh my goodness, Dake, how very handsome you look," Lula said. "You too, Zebulon."

"Thank you." When Zeb reached Lula, he lifted her hand and kissed it. "And you look like a goddess, darling."

Dake stared at Lula a moment. She looked so beautiful she took his breath away. "Zeb's right. You look really hot, sweetheart. Super classy and elegant," Dake said, eying the white floor length gown, draping in soft folds as it meandered down Lula's curves. Her gold curls were piled high atop her head, crowned with a woven ring of laurel leaves. A gold coil wound around one arm a few inches above her elbow.

"You look just like one of those sexy chicks out of a Hercules movie."

Lula cocked her head. "Oh, is he making movies now?"

"She does look magnificent," Cinnamus said. "All eyes will be on her when we enter the auditorium."

Lula blushed peppermint pink. "Thank you all. I must admit I do feel quite pretty today." She patted the back of her sophisticated hairdo.

Cinnamus turned his attention to Dake, "And you certainly clean up well," he said. "It's a far better look than those raggedy clothes you had on earlier."

"So you don't think I look silly – like a girl?"

The toga-clad Cinnamus rose from his seat, hands fisted at his hips and a scowl across his features. "Does anything about my appearance strike you as girlish?"

"No." Dake held up his hands in surrender. "No way. I didn't mean to imply you look girly in those dresses you wear, I –"

"Togas," Zeb corrected, elbowing Dake in the arm.

"I mean togas," Dake quickly amended. "It's just that I'm used to wearing men's clothes." Cinnamus' frown deepened. "Uh...pants, I mean. I'm used to wearing slacks. Jeans."

"The toga is a time-honored tradition, Dakin. Strong, brave, intelligent men have been wearing them centuries longer than denim jeans."

Dake nodded thoughtfully. "That's true. Good point." Shit, the last thing he wanted to do was piss off the one god he could depend on. "Lula showed me your artwork yesterday," he said, quickly changing the subject. "And she told me all about it. It's amazing. Some of the best damn stuff I've seen anywhere. You're one helluva painter, Cinnamus."

He nudged his brother and gestured to the wall at the far end of the kitchen. "See, Zeb? That's what I was talking about."

Zeb squinted and then gasped. Reaching for Cinnamus' arm, he clasped it. "You painted that? It's exquisite."

"There's an interesting story behind it," Cinnamus said, covering Zeb's hand with his and walking with him to the other side of the kitchen.

"Whew!" Dake wiped the sweat from his brow. "That was a close one. So how are you feeling, sweetheart? Ready to face the gods?"

"As ready as I can be." Lula sighed. "At least we shared a magical night of love together beforehand—one that I shall never forget. And you, Dake? Are you prepared to stand before the council?"

"Yeah." Dake nodded and then leaned close to whisper, "Except I'd feel a whole lot better if I wasn't all dolled up in this bed sheet."

Lula giggled. "Have no fear. You look magnificent and very mannish. Just pretend it is All Hallows Eve and you are attending a masquerade party."

A gong sounded, similar to the one Dake had heard the night before.

"Another message?"

Lula shook her head. "A single gong signifies there is someone at Cinnamus' door."

A moment later, a big, burly, handsome guy who looked to be about fifty-ish entered the kitchen. Nodding his head in a short bow, he said, "Your chariot awaits, Master Cinnamus."

"Thank you, Hercules," Cinnamus called from across the room. "We'll be there momentarily." His manservant nodded again and left the room. As they walked across the length of the massive kitchen, Cinnamus and Zeb exchanged loving looks, speaking to each other in hushed tones.

Dake swallowed hard and looked at Lula. She had the distinct look of a deer caught in headlights. "It's going to be okay, honey," he assured, drawing her near. "Before the day is over, the four of us will be celebrating. Trust me." Dake just wished he could believe his own words. He was practically shaking in his sandals worrying about what might happen, but if he let Lula suspect that, she'd be a basket case.

"We must make haste," Cinnamus said, leading them from the house to his chariot. "The council's center of operations is a goodly distance from here."

The long walk through the house and through the front garden to the chariot reminded Dake of a death march. All that was missing was the sound of a death knell – or maybe the wail of a screaming banshee.

“What a stunning vehicle,” Zeb said.

Dake studied the ultra fancy white chariot, complete with extensive raised gold scrollwork, fine black detailing and rows of what appeared to be inlaid turquoise. The horses were big, black and shiny. Proud looking animals with jeweled harnesses.

The best part, as far as Dake was concerned, was that the chariot was outfitted with black, leather upholstered seats. One up front for the driver and a passenger and another seat big enough for two in back. While the back of the vehicle was open, at least this chariot had two large side doors, one on each side, allowing easy step-up access.

“Great-looking chariot,” Dake agreed. “I like the horses.”

“Thank you both,” Cinnamus said, ushering them into the chariot. “It’s one of my formal chariots. I felt it was befitting the occasion.” He patted Zeb’s hand as Zeb stood next to him. “The horses are my finest obsidian-black stallions.” He paused a moment and then added, “Dakin?”

“Yes?”

“I apologize if I seemed rather cross earlier. I admit I find myself unduly stressed over today’s impending events. I should not have taken my apprehension out on you.”

“Hey, no problem. Thanks, Cinnamus. I guess we’re all a little tense.”

They all sat there for a long moment, exchanging glances and silently speaking words of love and support with their eyes alone.

Filling his lungs with air and expelling a loud breath, Cinnamus, reins in hand, signaled his horses and they were off.

* * * * *

“Interlopers. I simply can’t abide by interlopers,” Venus growled. Pacing back and forth, the stunning woman perfumed the air with the delicate scent of lilacs.

“Cupid assures me they’re worthy of the council’s time,” Psyche said, hurrying along to keep up with her mother-in-law. “Remember, there was a time you thought of me as an interloper too.”

Venus stopped her pacing long enough to hike an eyebrow at Psyche and ask, “And when did that time stop?”

Psyche laughed. “Yes, but at least I’m an interloper who can put up with your mischievous, naughty son – and keep him out of too much trouble.”

A smile curved Venus’ lips. “Yes, I’ll give you that.”

“My ears are ringing,” Cupid said, strutting into the large auditorium stretching and bellowing a lion-like yawn. “What are my two favorite girls saying about me,

hmm?" He draped his arms around their shoulders, giving each woman a kiss on the cheek.

"We were discussing the plea of Cinnamus, Lula and the mortals, darling," Psyche said, snaking her hand around her husband's arm. "They're expected soon. And, of course, we were also extolling your countless virtues. Isn't that right, Venus?"

"Indubitably." She offered Psyche a conspiratorial wink. "What are you doing here, Cupid? You're not on the council."

"I'm here to support Cinnamus and Psyche is here in support of Lula. Believe me, Mother, if it weren't for the fact that Cinnamus was involved in this, I'd waste no time in giving that flighty nymph and her mortal boyfriend a big thumbs down. But since Cinnamus is an old friend and since he's smitten to the point of distraction with the mortal boyfriend's brother, I've agreed to act in his favor."

"All these years and I still can't understand how you ended up being the god of love and eroticism," Psyche complained. "You should be elated that Lula and Cinnamus have found love matches, Cupid."

"I'm thrilled," he said with another yawn.

"Mmm-hmm. Well, don't think you fool me for a minute," Psyche chastised. "I know how fond you are of Lula. She's an excellent, devoted student of your academy."

"I—" Cupid started.

"And I saw that sparkle of admiration in your eye," Psyche cut him off, "as you told me about how the brave mortal defended Lula and stood up to Vibius' repulsive antics. You *should* have turned that vile satyr into a horned toad."

Cupid shrugged, a smile teasing his lips. "Okay, so maybe Lula and the mortals aren't so bad. Seriously, how long do you think this will take? I've got a new shipment of gold-plated arrows coming in and I want to inspect them."

"I'm the only one of the twelve here so far," Venus said. "But then I'm always the most punctual. If the other eleven don't get their lazy asses here soon, this hearing could drag on well into the night."

"My lazy ass is here, madam," Mars boomed as he strutted across the floor to the bank of thrones, slumping into his velvet-lined seat. "What is all this nonsense about Cinnamus being enamored of a mortal? He's always been so levelheaded. What's gotten into him?"

"He's a good guy, Dad," Cupid said. "And the best teacher I've got. Give him a break."

"He's taking up valuable time that could otherwise be spent making war," Mars grumbled, reaching for a cluster of grapes from one of the platters on the table and plucking the fruit off with his teeth.

"My, aren't we grumpy this afternoon?" Apollo said as he skipped into the room in time to the lively melody he played on his golden lyre. "I'm simply dying to set eyes on

the mortal who's finally turned Cinnamus' head after all these centuries. He must be absolutely delicious."

"I agree. It all sounds positively sweet to me," Diana said as she came toward the group and motioned for Egeria, the water nymph who was her servant and assistant midwife, to take a seat in the auditorium. The seats were filling quickly. "Hello, brother dear." Diana exchanged air kisses with Apollo. "I say Cinnamus deserves to find himself a hot little stud muffin."

"Puhleeze." Venus rolled her eyes. "This coming from the virgin goddess."

"Oh mee-ow, Venus," Diana countered. "How many times do I have to tell you I'm a goddess *to* virgins—it doesn't mean I'm one myself. I mean, seriously. You're just jealous because I can shoot arrows twice the distance you can." She raised her empty bow, aimed it at Venus and plucked it.

"Well, duh, you're a huntress," Venus said, pushing the bow to the side and crossing her arms over her breasts. "Must you always carry that thing around?"

"Are you two at it again?" Ceres said as she crossed the room and deposited a large basket of fruits and flowers on the table in front of the thrones. She carefully adjusted the garland of wheat ears circling her head.

"Aren't they always?" Psyche chuckled, looped her arm through Cupid's and led him to the reserved seating section at the front of the auditorium.

"It's been eons since we've had two Earthly mortals making a plea," Ceres noted. "It's the first time in quite a while that they've been brothers. Fascinating. Cupid tells me they're both quite attractive."

"I knew it," Apollo said with an impish grin before he went back to strumming his lyre, headed to his throne and took a seat. "He'd have to be a hunk to snag Cinnamus."

"Ceres, we all know where your loyalties lie," Venus accused. "After all, you *are* the goddess of the Earth and all that warm fuzzy maternal stuff that goes along with it." She gave a dismissive wave.

"Well, the way *some* of you have a habit of ganging up on mortals," Ceres countered, "it's a good thing they've got someone like me in their corner."

"How are the thrones holding up?" Vulcan asked, seemingly oblivious to the conversation as he strode past the others and headed for the bank of thrones.

"Good and solid as always, brother," Mars said. "Not a creak to be heard."

"Nice and comfy," Apollo offered as Vulcan tested each chair, making sure it didn't rock or squeak. "You clearly made them to last forever."

"Don't bother saying hello, Vulcan, dear," Venus quipped.

Vulcan looked up, clearly distracted. "Oh hello, Venus. You're looking lovely as usual," he said in such a way that meant he hadn't really noticed.

"Of course I am." She patted her golden upswept locks. "It's what I do best."

A stern-looking woman garbed in a long dress and with her head covered moved past them without uttering a word.

"There goes Vesta," Diana whispered. "I swear to Jupiter the woman never even cracks a smile."

"She's been hanging around her adoring Vestal Virgins too long," Venus snickered.

"I heard that," Vesta said, depositing her scepter on the table in front of her throne chair then taking a seat after Vulcan finished examining it. "As far as I'm concerned, this is a serious and solemn occasion. One not to be taken lightly."

"So says the goddess of hearth and home," Ceres said, applauding Vesta before taking her seat next to her.

"Miserable mortals and nymphs be damned for ruining my holiday," Neptune grouched, striking the tip of his trident hard against the marble floor with each step he took toward the front of the room. "There had better not be any lengthy grandstanding," he warned, frowning as he plunked down into the seat of his throne. "I want this to be over fast so I can get back to my vacation."

"Where are you vacationing?" Apollo asked, absently plucking the strings of his lyre.

"Inland." Neptune grinned, grabbing a skewer of shish kabob from a platter and pulling a handful of the roast meat from the blade. "A marvelous little place on Earth called Arizona where there's barely a speck of water to be found. Nice break from the daily deluge." His expression quickly became a scowl. "Until I got dragged back here for this lovey-dovey nonsense." He popped the meat into his mouth, chewing vigorously.

"Look," Venus said to Diana as she clasped the woman's arm. "There's Cinnamus and the other three." She narrowed her eyes and frowned. "I don't like the looks of Lula. She's too attractive for her own good."

"For *your* own good, you mean." Diana laughed. "It's a miracle your skin doesn't turn green from all that envy coursing through your veins. Oh dear, poor Cinnamus looks tense, doesn't he?"

"As well he should," Venus huffed. "He knows damn well we don't take kindly to the pairing of gods and mortals. Look at the others with him." Venus chortled. "They look about to faint."

"Mmm, but the two mortals *are* indeed scrumptious, aren't they?" Diana observed. "Come on," she tugged Venus' arm, "let's take our seats before the head honchos make their grand entrance."

"All rise, all rise!" Mercury announced a moment later, holding his caduceus aloft as his winged helmet and sandals allowed him to glide through the air two feet off the floor. Everyone in the auditorium seats as well as the thrones got to their feet. "The great ones arrive!" When Mercury got to the front of the room, he took his place standing before one of the four vacant thrones.

Trumpeting music swelled as Minerva entered. Wearing a coat of mail and a helmet, she carried a spear in one hand and braced an owl on the other.

She was followed by her father, Jupiter, and his wife, Juno. In one hand Jupiter clutched a cluster of thunderbolts and on the other an eagle rested. Looking as majestic as ever, Juno wore a diadem on her head while clutching a pomegranate in one hand and leading a peacock on a fine, slender gold chain with her other.

As soon as the trio was seated, the music ended and all the gods but Mercury took their seats. Unrolling a ceremonial scroll, Mercury read aloud, introducing the *Dii Consentes*, the twelve major gods of the Roman pantheon, to all in attendance.

"Here sits before you Jupiter, supreme god. Ruler of the gods. God of sky, lightning and thunder. Protector of the laws. Son of Saturn. Brother of Neptune, Pluto and Juno, who is also his wife." Jupiter raised his hand and the auditorium cheered.

"At his side sits Juno, queen of the gods. Goddess of women and fertility. Protectress of the Roman laws. Sister to Jupiter, Neptune and Pluto. Daughter of Saturn. Mother of Juventas, Mars and Vulcan." She raised her hand, nodded and again the room erupted in cheers.

Mercury gestured to the next throne. "Minerva, daughter of Jupiter and Metis. Goddess of wisdom, learning, art crafts and industry. Virgin goddess of warriors, poetry and medicine. Inventor of music. At birth she sprang fully armed from the brain of her father." Minerva gave a queenly wave and the audience applauded.

"Please," Mercury said, raising his hand. "From this point forward, I will ask you to hold your cheers and applause until I have finished introducing all the gods." He waited a moment until the gathering stilled and then went on.

"Here sits Vesta, goddess of hearth and home. In her temple the sacred flame burns eternal, maintained by the Vestal Virgins. To her side is Ceres, goddess of the earth, growing plants and of motherly love. Protectress of women, motherhood and marriage. Next is Diana, goddess of the hunt. Fertility goddess. Moon goddess. Goddess of nature, childbirth, forests, animals, mountains, woods and women."

Each goddess nodded or raised her hand as she was mentioned.

"Venus, goddess of love and beauty, daughter of Jupiter and mother of Cupid sits here," Mercury said, gesturing.

"And here sits Mars, god of war. God of spring, growth in nature, agriculture and terror. God of anger, revenge, courage and fertility. Protector of cattle. Son of Jupiter and Juno. Father to Cupid and to Romulus, founder of Rome. Next to him is Neptune, god of the sea. Supreme dweller of the ocean floor. Brother of Jupiter, Pluto and Juno."

Pausing to take a breath, Mercury looked out at the crowd once more.

"To my left," Mercury continued, "sits Vulcan, god of blacksmiths, fire and volcanoes. Son of Jupiter and Juno. Manufacturer of art, arms, iron and armor for gods and heroes. Master builder of the thrones you see before you." He gestured to the full bank of thrones.

"To my right sits Apollo, god of music and athletics. God of healing who taught man medicine. God of light and truth, who cannot speak a lie. Eternal beardless youth."

As Apollo made grand, sweeping gestures while Mercury exalted his attributes, the crowd ignored Mercury's edict and cheered.

Arching a cautionary eyebrow in Apollo's direction, Mercury continued. "Carrier by chariot of the sun across the sky. Son of Jupiter and Leto. Twin brother of Diana."

Re-rolling the scroll, Mercury smiled as he took a seat himself. "And I am Mercury, messenger of the gods. God of travelers, tradesmen, merchants and profit."

With the last of the twelve gods introduced, the room erupted in cheers, whistles and applause.

Mercury struck the table three times with his caduceus. "Let the pleaders come forward so that we may sit in judgment and put forth our rulings."

Chapter Twenty

Dake sucked in a deep breath. "This is it," he whispered to Lula, Zeb and Cinnamus as the three stood up.

With Cinnamus in the lead, they marched to the front of the room, standing before the council side by side. Dake fought the urge to fidget as Mercury read the pleas aloud. The damned recitation seemed to go on forever. The council apparently felt the same way because the mighty yawn Neptune roared was infectious. Soon each of them was yawning. It was hard as hell for Dake not to give in to one himself.

"What say you, Cinnamus," Jupiter boomed in a deep, formidable voice that echoed off the marble walls of the auditorium, "god of teaching, god of intellectual achievement and education, god of literature and the fine arts—" Jupiter glanced down at the document in his hand. "Etcetera, etcetera," he added with a dismissive wave.

"No wonder you know Shakespeare," Zeb whispered to Cinnamus.

"Make it short, teacher," warned Mars. "I'm not in the mood for lengthy dialogue."

"Hear, hear," Neptune chimed in.

"Esteemed council members," Cinnamus said with a courtly bow. "I stand before you for the first time in all my days to plead for myself. You all know me. I've taught you as well as your children and your children's children. My life has been full, rich, satisfying and complete with the exception of one key element—a soul mate with whom to share my existence.

"In the educated, cultured, witty, caring mortal florist, Zebulon Dronyer, I have found my true love at last. I entreat each of you to grant my request to keep my beloved Zebulon," Cinnamus glanced at Zeb then, clasping his hand, "at my side evermore."

"Is it your wish to remain here on Olympus with this mortal?" Juno asked.

Cinnamus glanced at Zebulon who nodded. "It is," he answered.

"Mortal," Venus said, addressing Zeb, "what makes you think for even a moment that you would integrate well with Olympians?"

Zeb stood proud, shoulders back and chin elevated. "I was born to live on Olympus," he stated with assurance. A collective gasp could be heard throughout the auditorium.

"Oh shit," Dake muttered under his breath.

"Self-important human," Vulcan groused quietly as Neptune nodded his concurrence.

"Is that so, mortal?" Minerva said, looking not at all pleased. "On what, pray tell, do you base this high and mighty assumption?"

"Indeed it is so," Zeb replied. "I state this not to be arrogant but, rather, to honestly express to you my heartfelt belief. I've spent my entire life studying your history and customs. I believe with all my heart, mind and soul that spending the rest of my life here with Cinnamus is my intended fate. My destiny."

"No wonder you fell for him, Cinnamus," Apollo said with a broad smile. "He's absolutely precious."

"And he has balls," Mars added with a toothy grin. "I like that in a mortal."

The gods whispered among themselves for a few moments. It looked to Dake that Zeb and Cinnamus had won most of them over, but there were a few holdouts.

"What if we decreed that you could stay together," Diana asked, "but that you would have to live on Earth. Cinnamus? Zebulon?"

Zeb and Cinnamus looked at each other and smiled. "While I strongly desire to remain here and continue teaching the residents of Olympus," Cinnamus said, "I will go anywhere the council deems, as long as it means we can be together."

"Thank you." Zeb smoothed his hand along Cinnamus' jaw. "My love for Cinnamus is so great," he told the council, "that I would give him up and remain on Earth alone for the rest of my life rather than to pluck him from this life he loves so dearly."

"Well said," Vesta noted.

"Beautiful," Ceres agreed, wiping a tear from her eye.

"What of his status as a short-lived mortal, Cinnamus?" Juno asked. "How will the two of you cope when your mortal's body descends into inevitable decay?"

"I care not that Zebulon will lose his youthful appearance, but I confess it will break my heart to lose him when the time comes for him to journey to the afterlife. It is with this in mind that I humbly request the council consider bestowing the gift of immortality on Zebulon."

"The audacity!" Venus gasped.

"What, besides your obvious affection for him," Minerva asked, "makes you feel this mortal is worthy of becoming a minor god?"

"Aside from what Zebulon and I each stated previously, as well as what I included in my written plea," as he said that, several of the gods scanned their documents, "Zebulon brings exceptional botanical skills and talents to share with our residents. He is a florist of incomparable skill, even to the point of understanding the fine art of communication with flora. With his talents, each of your gardens would be as lush and abundant as mine, perhaps even more."

"If we grant your plea, Zebulon," Jupiter bellowed, "what will you do if it is under the condition that you and your brother may never see each other again?"

Zeb turned toward Dake, reaching out for his brother's hand and clasping it hard. It was all Dake could do at that moment not to tell the bastards sitting up there all righteous-looking in their fancy thrones to go fuck themselves.

"I honestly don't know how to answer that," Zeb said softly, his gaze still locked with Dake's. "It would be like asking me to tear my heart and soul in half if you asked me to make that choice."

"Is it okay if I say something here?" Dake asked.

"No. It's not your turn," Venus said.

"You may speak," Jupiter said, overriding the snarky goddess.

"I love my brother more than anything in this world, except for Lula," Dake said. "Zeb's the best, kindest, most deserving, selfless guy I've ever known. There's nobody better and nobody deserves to be with their soul mate more than he does. Yeah, it would kill me if I could never see my brother again, the worst hurt I can imagine. But it's more important to me that Zeb and Cinnamus are able to be together than any pain I might go through if I lost him."

Dake went to stuff his hands into his pockets only to remember he was wearing a damn bed sheet. "Anyway, I wanted you all to know that before you make your decision."

"Dakin," Zeb said, yanking his brother into a fierce hug. "I love you so much." And then he let out a sob.

"Dammit, Zeb," Dake said, squeezing his brother hard and taking a deep breath, "don't you go and make me cry in front of Lula and all these assholes while I'm standing here in a fucking skirt."

Zeb chuckled at that. "Okay," he said, wiping his eyes quickly as he and Dake ended their embrace.

"Your brotherly love is very touching," Juno said with a smile. "Does anyone in attendance have anything to add in support of this plea?"

Cupid stood in the front row. "I do. I doubt any one of you council members has ever heard even one single complaint about Cinnamus. He's well liked, respected, a damn fine teacher and an even better friend. I trust his judgment implicitly, and that includes his choice in a life mate. I recommend the council approve his request and grant Zebulon status as a minor god."

Cinnamus turned and nodded at his friend. "Thank you." Cupid winked and took his seat again.

"We do," came a chorus of voices from further back in the auditorium. Dake looked behind him to see Lula's classmates from the chariot sitting together with their hands raised.

"Speak," Juno said.

Maureen, the banshee, stood. "I speak for the entire class," she boomed.

"Fine, fine, just keep it down and don't break into one of your wails, banshee," Vulcan said.

"I'll do my best, sir," she said. "We all agree that our teacher, Cinnamus, is greatly deserving of having his plea request settled in the most positive manner. Let him and

Zebulon live together for all eternity!" She and the rest of the students erupted with cheers, whistles and applause.

"Silence!" Jupiter said, holding one of his thunderbolts aloft. The eagle at his side squawked. "Is there anyone who can show just cause why Cinnamus and," he looked down at his document, "Zebulon," he continued, "should not have this plea granted?"

The room was silent. "Very well then. I think we have enough evidence with which to make a ruling. Agreed?" he asked the other eleven gods. With their concurrence, he said, "We will hear the plea of the nymph and the other mortal before we retire to chambers to discuss the matters and reach our rulings.

"What say you, Lula?" Jupiter boomed before glancing at his paperwork again. "Daughter of Arrius and Venuvia," he continued. "Dryad and Limoniad nymph."

Dake and Lula exchanged glances and he smiled, doing his best to impart as much support and love as possible in that single gesture.

"Thank you, Your Graciousness, for..." she paused when she heard giggles around her. She cleared her throat and continued. "For honoring me, a mere lowly, humble, insignificant, inconsequential, undeserving, unworthy —"

She stopped when Cinnamus nudged her and shook his head. "Um...thank you for hearing my plea," she finished with a curtsy. As she lowered her head, a cluster of curls popped loose. "Oh dear," she said, trying to tuck them back in place only to loosen more ringlets. "I did so want to look sophisticated today."

More muffled giggles could be heard.

If Dake wasn't so damned nervous and concerned for poor Lula, he would have been laughing himself. "That's okay, honey," he said softly, taking Lula's hand and smiling. "You're doing just fine."

"Oh goodness, I'm so nervous I've completely forgotten what I wanted to say. Please excuse me for just a moment."

Dake wondered what in the hell Lula was doing when she let go of his hand and snaked her hand inside the top of her gown, fishing around. A few seconds later, she pulled out a folded paper and opened it.

"Whew!" she said, beaming a smile and waving the paper. "I'm glad I remembered to take this." She cleared her throat again loudly. "Thank you, Your Graciousness, for honoring me," she read aloud, "a mere —"

"We've already heard that part," Neptune grumbled. "Can we get on with it please?"

"I'm sorry. Yes." Lula scanned her paper, mumbling aloud as she found her place. "While Dakin Dronyer may be nothing but a lowly, mangy mortal, as Cupid called him," she began and Dake groaned, "I would like the council to know that he is also a fine, good-hearted and extremely handsome man with exceptional carnal skills."

"Well, I'm sold," Diana quipped.

Lula frowned when she heard giggles behind her. "Dake is a master electrocutioner," she continued reading, "who provides customers with the electrocution systems they need for their homes and businesses." She paused to look up at Dake, Zeb and Cinnamus, who were all chuckling.

She smiled at them and went on. "Dake is a man who is brave and fearless enough to battle fire-breathing dragons and one-eyed beasts if that is the only way we can remain together."

Lula, honey," Dake said.

"Yes, Dake?"

"Can I see that paper of yours?"

"Of course." She handed it to Dake.

He skimmed the paper and grinned. While it would be sure to generate ample laughs, if Lula kept on going, he'd most likely be thrown to the lions and she'd be demoted to the rank of fruit fly before it was all over. He tore the paper two ways and tucked the pieces back between her breasts, kissing the tip of her nose when she gave him that wide-eyed look she did so well.

"Oh that's a shame," Apollo said. "That was the most entertainment I've had in a week."

"We're not here for your entertainment," Diana said.

"Aw, sis..." Apollo grumbled.

"I'm Dake Dronyer," Dake said, addressing the council. "The lowly, mangy mortal Lula was talking about. Look, the reason we're here is simple. We love each other. Period. I don't just mean we have the hots for each other, I mean we're seriously in love and want to spend the rest of our lives together. I'm just an average Earth guy, but I make a good living as an *electrician*." He arched an eyebrow at Lula and smiled.

"I can provide her with a nice little house with a picket fence, a dog, a bunch of kids and everything else that goes along with the American dream. The whole enchilada."

"That sounds just like marriage," Lula said, an adoring look of expectancy on her face.

"Well, of course it does," Dake said. "What do you think I've been talking about all this time when I was telling you I loved you and wanted to spend my life with you?"

"Oh Dake!" Lula jumped up, wrapping her arms around his neck. "You want to marry me!"

The audience resounded with *awwws*, sighs and applause.

Dake hugged her back before setting her down. "Yeah, but first I'd like for us to get out of this place alive." He winked at her.

Dake looked at the council members and shrugged. "That's about it. End of story. According to the rules you guys set up, we're here to ask you to have a heart and let me and Lula stay together."

"You can't possibly imagine yourself becoming a resident of Olympus," Venus said, looking down her nose at him. "What could you possibly have in common with Olympians?"

"Not a whole lot," Dake readily admitted. "And no, I don't imagine myself becoming a resident here, so you can stop worrying about that. Lula and I would like to settle down back on Earth where we both feel more comfortable."

"What would she do there?" Ceres asked. "She has no real skills other than what she's learned in Cinnamus' classes."

"Sure she does," Dake said. "She has a close personal relationship with plants and flowers. We already talked it over and Zeb said if everything works out, he wants to give his flower shop, Cupid's Headquarters, to Lula. She'd make a damn fine florist. We think the flower shop would make a great permanent meeting place for the students of Cupid Academy when they come to Earth for class assignments. That way no one would get lost trying to find a different location each time."

"I don't know," Diana said. "I understand Lula's rather scatterbrained and absentminded."

"No kidding," Venus interjected.

"What guarantee would we have," Diana continued, "that she wouldn't cause embarrassing problems acting as an official representative of the academy?"

"Oh, I'd be exceedingly careful not to disgrace the fine reputation of the academy," Lula said, reaching for the crown of laurel leaves that slipped to the floor when she nodded. She parked it back on her head, askew. Dake reached over and nudged it in place.

"May I?" Cupid asked from the audience, rising to his feet.

"Of course, son," Venus said with a warm smile.

"Cinnamus and I discussed the prospect of Lula maintaining an Earth outpost and contact station for Cupid Academy travelers and we believe it's an excellent idea. Lula may be a bit, uh...distracted and forgetful every so often, but she's bright, diligent and completely devoted to the academy. With her mortal partner being more of a linear thinker, Cinnamus and I feel Dakin will be a positive influence on Lula as far as organization and structure goes."

"And you would accept the responsibility of managing Lula's duties as an Earthly contact?" Vesta asked Dake.

"Absolutely. No problem there. Organization's my middle name."

"How curious," Minerva said.

"I don't believe he means it literally," Mars said. "Can you adequately protect your nymph from the dark forces?"

"Uh..." Dake looked at Lula and Cinnamus and then back to Mars. "Can you give me an example?"

"Malevolent interlopers who would try to steal the academy's materials and secrets," Mars clarified with a frown. "There are many who would fight to the death for an opportunity to get their grubby hands on Cupid's secrets."

"Definitely," Dake said, figuring no interloper could be as bad as dragons or monsters.

"Some of them may be dragons or monsters," Mars added.

Dake couldn't help laughing. "I promise to do my damndest to protect Lula and all of Cupid's secrets."

"You've got balls, just like your brother, kid," Mars announced with a resolute nod.

Dake looked down at his mid-thigh skirt and scratched his head. "I usually prefer to keep them covered in a pair of jeans."

Mars, along with several of the other gods, goddesses and audience members, roared with laughter.

"Does anyone in attendance have anything to add in support of this plea?" Juno asked.

"I do." Zeb raised his hand, twiddling his fingers. Juno nodded for him to speak. "I just want to add that if I'm granted immortality and minor god status, then I hope Dakin is too."

"You can say that again," Dake said. "The last thing I want to be reminded of by my little brother is that he's a god and I'm not." Muffled laughter followed his statement.

"Just a word, if I may," Psyche said from the front row where she sat next to Cupid.

"My beloved husband and I are a prime example of what can come of a mixed marriage. While most believed our relationship was ill-fated, I think you would all agree that the strength of our love, devotion and commitment to each other is proof that the success of such unions can surpass all expectations. I know Lula personally and am proud to call this fine, honorable nymph my friend. It's evident that she and Dakin are deeply in love, as are Cinnamus and Zebulon. Please grant their pleas."

She took her seat again, with an adoring Cupid planting a kiss on her cheek.

"I'd like to add something."

Dake turned to see a big, buff, beefed-up, really good-looking guy he hadn't seen before.

"Speak, Hercules," Juno said.

Dake looked at Lula and she nodded. "Yes, he's the one you've read about," she whispered.

"As you all know, I was a mortal who became a god and —"

"Oh but darling," Venus cut in. "Look at you and look at them. They're positively puny compared to your muscled magnificence." As Venus spoke, Dake caught Diana making a *call me* gesture to Hercules at the same time Apollo was doing the same thing.

"Size doesn't matter," Hercules said and this time the women roared with laughter. "I don't know these mortals personally," Hercules continued when it quieted down, "but it's clear to me they're deeply in love, intelligent, valiant and more than willing to protect the secrets and traditions of Olympus. Isn't that what being a god is all about?"

"Hey, thanks, buddy," Dake said. Hercules smiled and waved as he sat down.

"May we speak?" It was the group of Lula's classmates. Juno nodded, extending her hand. Dunniger the dragon was the spokesperson this time and Dake eyed him cautiously.

"First of all," Dunniger said, "I take exception to all the negative talk about dragons. We're like honey bees. Gentle unless provoked." He offered a pleasant, soothing smile. "We had a chance to meet the mortal on the chariot ride and found him to be quite charming and likeable, as well as noble when faced with...a particularly negative influence." Dunniger shot a heated glance at Vibius.

"And who doesn't adore Lula?" he continued. "She's sweet and generous and fully deserving to be with the man of her dreams. We hereby request that their plea be granted." Most of the students chimed in with cheers of agreement.

"Silence!" Jupiter warned a second time, reaching for a thunderbolt. "Is there anyone who can show just cause why Lula and Jake—"

"Uh, it's Dake, sir," Dake said.

Jupiter looked down at his document. "Whatever," he said. "Any objections to this plea?"

"I object," came a familiar voice from the crowd.

"Aw, shit," Dake muttered as he spotted goat boy standing and walking toward the front of the auditorium.

"State your objection," Jupiter instructed.

"Lula and I were to be mated until this Neanderthal interfered," Vibius said.

Lula gasped. "Vibius, you are such a liar!"

"Vibius speaks the truth," Seraletta the undine said as she rose to stand by Vibius' side. "Lula is flighty and self-centered. Here one of her own kind, a fine, strapping satyr, desires to make her his mate and what does the nymph do? She leads him on only to break his heart when her juices run for this mortal. I will agree to take the mortal off her hands so Lula can return to Vibius, her true intended, and make amends."

"Sorry, Seraletta," Dake said to the sexy, bare-breasted, blue-fleshed woman. "You'll have to do your soul searching elsewhere. I'm sticking with Lula."

Lula fisted her hands against her hips, telegraphing a narrow-eyed glare the undine's way. "Everyone in attendance knows you just want to steal my mortal for your own selfish reasons, Seraletta."

"The protesters have the floor," Minerva warned. "Lula...Dakin, please refrain from speaking until their objections have been heard."

"I am curious about something," Seraletta cooed in all innocence. "Is it the custom of the council to place physically flawed beings in positions of great importance?"

"You know it's not," Venus said.

Seraletta shrugged. "Then perhaps the council should be made aware that the nymph is defective."

"Defective?!" Lula nearly screeched. "I beg your pardon."

"How so, Seraletta?" Juno urged.

Seraletta's expression became gleefully malevolent as she glared at Lula. "Why not command her to spread her wings for you and see for yourself? An easy enough task for a nymph of the winged variety, is it not?"

"Oh Seraletta..." Lula said softly, shaking her head. "I told you that in strictest confidence. I truly believed you were my friend." Dake longed to take Lula in his arms and soothe her when he saw how stricken she looked.

Miverva tsked. "Of course she can spread them." She gestured toward Lula with a wave of her hand. "Go ahead and demonstrate for us, Lula."

Lula hung her head. "I-I'm unable to comply at the moment."

"Aha!" Venus slapped the tabletop. "I knew the nymph seemed too perfect to be true," she said, clearly brimming with joy.

"It makes no matter to me whether the nymph has use of her wings or not," Vibius said. "As long as all her other parts work," he joked, only to have his quip met with silence. He cleared his throat and continued. "Even though Lula is physically deficient, I stand by my offer to take the deformed nymph as my mate."

"Forget about it," Dake said.

"Silence, Neanderthal! I have the floor. It is my belief," Vibius went on, addressing the council, "that this scrawny, undersized, unctuous mortal wove some heinous black magic or perhaps even drugged Lula in order to win her affections. Look at him." Vibius gestured toward Dake with a sneer. "How else could she possibly choose this diminutive human over me?"

"That's ridiculous," Dake said. "The only magic going on with Lula and me is the magic of love. But I doubt that's something you could understand. And, listen, just because I'm not a huge, honkin' goat doesn't mean I'm scrawny or undersized, got that, goat boy?"

In an instant, Vibius was at Dake's side, grabbing his arm and twirling Dake to face him. Dake had to look up, *way up*, to lock gazes with the seven-footer. The pronounced smell of alcohol on the satyr's breath was unmistakable.

"You insult me," Vibius sneered, digging his long nails into Dake's arm and drawing blood. "Is this the behavior of one who seeks to become a minor god?" he asked the council.

Dake shrugged free of Vibius' grip. "If you want to talk about acceptable behavior," he countered, "how about those lewd remarks you made to my woman on the chariot ride? You know, when Cupid threatened to turn you into a frog unless you shut up."

"She is *not* your woman," Vibius growled, shoving Dake's shoulder with enough force to knock him off balance and to the floor. "You don't belong with Lula," he said as Dake shot back up to his feet, adopting a fighting stance. "You are not of her kind."

"You leave Dake alone," Lula shouted, pummeling Vibius' hairy chest with her fists.

"Lula," Dake cried, "stay away from him, he's drunk."

"Mind your place, nymph!" Vibius warned, swatting Lula aside. A swat from him was akin to a full blow from a human male. She careened backward and fell on her bottom.

"You rotten son of a bitch," Dake said, swinging a fist at Vibius and connecting with his chin while aiming for the tall guy's nose. "Instead of picking on defenseless women, how about taking on someone your own size?" As soon as the words were out of his mouth, Dake realized how ludicrous they were.

"I'll kill you if you ever touch Lula again." He leaned to the side, glancing at Lula. "Are you okay?" She nodded as Zeb helped her to her feet and then they both gasped. Before Dake had a chance to realize why, Vibius gored his upper arm with one of his horns.

"Dake!" Lula screamed, struggling to rush to Dake's side as Zeb held her back.

Enough!" Jupiter bellowed. "Return to your seat at once, Vibius."

Dake looked down at his bleeding arm in disbelief. "God damn," he muttered, "that hurt like a motherfucker."

He pulled back his fist, but Vibius was too fast. Goat boy ducked and then kicked Dake in the thigh with one of his hooves, again with enough force to send Dake hurtling to the floor. Blood gushed from the wound, but Dake was on his feet in the blink of an eye. This time when he punched, his fist made direct contact with Vibius' nose.

Dake waited for blood to pour from the wound, but Vibius just stood there with a big shit-eating grin on his face.

"Puny, pathetic human," he snorted, raising his arm to backhand Dake.

"Enough, I said!" Jupiter roared.

"Let them at it," Mars said, a bloodthirsty gleam in his eye as he swung his fists in the air, grinning like a hyena. "There's nothing to spice up a plea hearing like a good bloody fight."

Ignoring Jupiter's command, Vibius rammed Dake's chest with his horns, knocking the wind out of Dake and sending him sailing through the air. Vibius galloped to where Dake had fallen, standing over him with one hoof raised, ready to stomp.

"Oh dear God, Dakin!" Zeb yelled, racing toward his brother. With Vibius poised to clomp, Zeb let out a tribal yell and tackled goat boy just like an ace football player.

"Mmm...the mortals are impressive," Diana said, her voice husky.

Unfortunately, Zeb's full-body tackle had little effect on the powerful satyr, who smacked the well-built Zeb clear across the floor as if he were nothing more than a bug.

"Holy shit," Dake managed to eke out as he rolled and struggled to his feet. "Zeb!"

"Zebulon, my love!" Cinnamus called out as he rushed to Zeb's aid. "Vibius, have you gone mad?" Cinnamus shouted, helping Zeb to his feet and holding him close. "I demand you desist in this idiocy at once!"

"Or what, teacher?" Vibius scoffed. "You'll put a red check next to my name in class?" He roared with laughter.

"Oh Dakin," Lula cried, hurrying to Dake's side. "Are you all right? Oh!" Her eyes filled with tears. "Look how you're bleeding."

Through blinding pain, Dake did his best to offer a chuckle. "Don't get any funny ideas," he said, winking. "I'm not up to it just now, honey."

Cinnamus helped a limping Zeb to where Dake and Lula stood. An instant later, Vibius' ferocious naying baaah shocked the hell out of them as they looked up to see the satyr hunching his shoulders, snorting and swiping his hooves on the floor, much the same way a bull does a moment before it attacks.

"Oh shit," Dake and Zeb chorused.

As Vibius galloped toward the foursome, the auditorium filled with an earsplitting, bloodcurdling wail so piercing Dake and the others covered their ears.

Dake looked over to see Maureen, bless her wild screaming banshee heart, standing at her chair, mouth open wide, clearly in an attempt to divert Vibius. Screaming in agony, poor little Ofradurn the troll clapped his hands over his ears and rushed from Maureen's side toward Vibius, nipping at the satyr's ankles to distract him. He got a swift kick for his efforts.

"Oh Ofie!" Maureen cried out, her howl increasing as she ran to him.

"Damn, that banshee can sure hold a note," Apollo said with admiration. He played along with her wail on his lyre.

"Cease your incessant shrieking, banshee, or I will crush you along with the others," Vibius spewed, raising his hand to swat the banshee. Dake, Zeb and Cinnamus ran at him, tackling the satyr together. They could have been characters in a cartoon the way they slammed into goat boy and then bounced off, falling to the floor without so much as throwing him off balance.

Dunniger the dragon rushed forth, his eyes blazing red. "Desist, satyr, or I will gladly convert you into a smoking platter of crisp roast goat as an offering to the gods," he cried, smoke curling up from his nostrils.

"Dunniger, don't!" Cupid called as the dragon filled his lungs, ready to spew fire.

"Let the dragon roast him," Neptune called out. "Grilled goat would be a nice change from all that fish and seafood."

"The honey bee has been provoked," Dunniger snarled. "Please, Cupid, allow me this one simple pleasure."

"Relax, I'll handle this," Cupid told him. "I don't want you backsliding, Dunniger."

Hercules at his side, Cupid hopped over the rail that separated the audience from the main floor of the court. Hercules bounded toward the satyr, who planted his hooves firmly and growled at him with a *come-and-get-me* challenge. With no more effort than plucking a doll from a toy chest, Hercules snatched the inebriated Vibius off his feet with one hand, elevating his arm and holding the snarling creature high over his head.

"He's all yours, Cupid," Hercules said.

"No!" Vibius howled, eyes wide with fright as Cupid raised his hand, fingers poised to snap.

A second later, Vibius had been turned into a horned toad.

"I warned you, Vibius," Cupid said, taking the small green animal from Hercules' hand. He sniffed the air and screwed his features.

"Phew! You smell like a distillery, toad." He motioned to one of his aides. "Send him to detox," Cupid instructed. He turned his attention back to Vibius before the aide left. "Shame on you. You'll stay this way and remain in detox until we can be certain you've had enough time to ponder your dishonorable deeds and are ready to reform."

"All rise," Mercury cried out and all eyes were on the twelve gods as they filed out of the auditorium. "The council retires to chambers to resolve the fates of the pleaders."

Chapter Twenty-One

After applying salve to Lula's sizeable bruise, practitioners of the healing arts tended to the wounds of Zeb and the troll. Dake's wounds were the most serious by far and were still being cared for while Lula, Cinnamus and the others milled around with members of the audience. While all present were supportive, expectations of the verdicts varied.

"All would have proceeded well," Lula noted, "if it hadn't been for the outrageous antics of Seraletta and Vibius." She nibbled her bottom lip. "I feel certain the resulting turmoil did not leave a positive impression on the gods."

"I wish I could offer knowing reassurance," Cinnamus said, wrapping one arm around Lula, "but I'm afraid I stand here as eager and concerned as you. The Council of Deities is an unpredictable lot."

Zeb came to stand next to Cinnamus and Lula greeted him with a warm smile. "Oh Zebulon, I'm so very proud of you. You were so brave and fearless in coming to Dake's defense."

"How about that rebel yell?" Zeb asked with a laugh. "Honestly, I didn't know I had anything like that inside me. I just saw red when that hairy, overgrown beast went for my brother."

"You were the epitome of Prince Charming, my love," Cinnamus said.

"I was quite the dashing gay blade, wasn't I?" Zeb quipped.

Lula remembered the look of respect, awe and admiration in Dake's eyes after Zeb's brave intervention. "Dake will never forget how you put your life in jeopardy for him."

"He would have done the same for me, darling," Zeb said seriously. "We're brothers. Always..."

It nearly broke Lula's heart to see the anguished uncertainty in Zeb's eyes. How she hoped they wouldn't be parted forever. "If Dake and I lose our one chance to remain together because of my physical deficiency," she said, "I shall never forgive myself."

"You're neither deficient nor deformed, my little Lula," Cinnamus said, lifting her chin and offering a comforting smile as he gazed into her eyes. "You're simply...wired somewhat different than most." He chuckled. "If you can generate a wingspan during an intimate moment, I fully believe you have the capability of producing the same effect at other times. But it is not I who must believe, Lula...it is you." He kissed her forehead.

Lula didn't have much time to toss the idea around in her mind because she spotted a bandaged Dake limping toward them, assisted by Dunniger.

"I've known many mortals in my time," the dragon told Lula, "but never have I been as impressed as I have with yours. He's a good man with a brave heart, Lula."

"The finest," Lula said, lightly and gingerly resting her head against Dake's arm. She was almost afraid to touch him because he appeared to be injured most everywhere.

"Hey, thanks, Dunniger," Dake said. "I appreciate that – and, of course, the fact that you didn't barbecue me or anything." His chuckle morphed into a grimace as the dragon gave Dake a playful punch.

"Oh sorry," Dunniger said, clearly contrite. "Hit the wrong spot, I guess."

Dake laughed. "There is no wrong spot. I'm just one big walking ache." With a nod and a smile, Dunniger went back to his classmates.

"My poor, sweet Dakin," Lula said. "Are you all right?"

Dake wagged a finger at her and winked. "I know what you're thinking."

"Oh no, Dake. Sincerely I'm not," she fibbed, trailing one finger lightly along his gored arm. Allowing her gaze to roam his hard, muscular body, now wounded, bloodied and bandaged, Lula breathed a sigh. The sight of her bold, handsome hero returning from a fearsome battle made her so horn-like, she could barely contain herself.

"I'm merely concerned for your wellbeing," she told him, silently praying she and her love would still be together that night so she could tend to his combat wounds in her own special way.

"You don't fool me for a minute." Dake brushed his lips across hers. Leaning close and whispering softly for her ears only, he added, "Trust me, sweetheart, I'm not so banged up that I can't hold you in your arms and watch those beautiful wings of yours sprout as I make you see stars."

Lula felt terribly naughty and guilty. She was fairly certain nice nymphs weren't supposed to feel all squirmy because their pussies were trickling while they were waiting to hear a verdict from the gods.

She tried her best to think of solemn, serious things. Like her physical imperfection. Dake's mention of her wings brought Lula's thoughts back to what Cinnamus said. Could he possibly be right? Could she actually overcome her heritage and do what no other female in her family had been able to for generations?

"I believe I can," she muttered beneath her breath. "I believe I can."

"Did you say something, honey?" Dake asked.

"No. Nothing. Just thinking out loud."

Dake turned his attention to his brother. "You son of a gun," he said with a wide grin. "Little did I know there was an inner he-man living next door to your inner woman. Damn, Zeb, you were awesome out there. Like a linebacker, for chrissakes. If it weren't for you, bro, there'd be a hoof hole right about where my heart's supposed to be." He gave Zeb a hearty pat on the back.

"Just because I like to wear pink doesn't mean I'm a pansy, dear brother." Zeb patted his Roman-style hairdo and smiled.

"You're both heroes as far as I'm concerned," Cinnamus said.

"All rise, all rise!" Mercury announced, again floating through the air as the other eleven gods followed him into the auditorium.

Lula sucked in a sharp breath. All thoughts of carnal dalliance fled her mind as the deities took their seats.

"It has been a most interesting occasion," Jupiter boomed. "It's been a long while since the council has witnessed such a melee."

"More like a circus," Venus huffed, sitting back in her throne with her arms crossed over her breasts as Jupiter held his hand aloft, signaling for her silence.

"This doesn't sound good," Dake whispered out the side of his mouth. Lula grabbed his hand and squeezed in response. She scanned the gods' faces. All looked quite somber, except for Venus, whose lovely face was marred by a sneer.

"We have been dismayed and left aghast by some of the appalling behavior this evening," Jupiter said. "We have also been pleasantly surprised and thoroughly amused by other actions. Mercury will now proclaim the council's findings."

"In the matter of Cinnamus and Zebulon," Mercury read aloud from a scroll and Lula heard Zeb's intake of breath. She grabbed onto his hand as well. "After much discussion, the council finds no cause for denying this plea. After many years of excellent service, Cinnamus has earned the right to live alongside his soul mate."

Lula heard Zeb release the breath he'd been holding with a whoosh. "Thank God," he whispered. And Lula was elated for him and Cinnamus.

"The council was duly impressed by the plucky mortal Zebulon," Mercury continued, "and has agreed that he is correct in his spirited assumption that he is destined to dwell on Olympus. The rank of minor god is to be bestowed upon Zebulon, carrying with it all due responsibilities and the rare and precious gift of immortality."

"Yes!" Dake shouted, yanking his brother into a hug. Lula saw Dake wince in physical discomfort, but knew his joy at Zeb's happiness was far greater than any aches or pains he may be suffering.

"In the matter of Lula and Dakin," Mercury went on, bringing both Lula and Dake to attention. Her mouth suddenly felt as dry as dust. "The council regrets..."

Regrets... At the sound of that word Lula's knees went weak and Dake stiffened. They squeezed each other's hands so tightly it felt as if their flesh had almost become fused.

"The council regrets they have found cause to deny this plea."

"Motherfucker," Dake muttered beneath his breath. Lula wasn't certain of the word's meaning, but whatever it was, she entirely shared Dake's sentiments.

"We were duly impressed with the mortal's fortitude, bravery and sense of honor. While perhaps unpolished, the council believes Dakin shows great promise as well as willingness. While the gods declared their confidence in the mortal's skills and abilities to manage, organize and maintain an Earthly outpost for Cupid Academy, they find

that the nymph, Lula, cannot by all rights be elevated to the position of Earthly contact due to her physical deficiency."

I believe I can...I believe I can. I have enough love in my heart for Dakin to overcome any and all obstacles. I believe I can...

"Please," Dake spoke up. "Can I ask a question?" Jupiter nodded. "What does it matter if she has a physical deficiency as you call it? Lula's smart and devoted and, hell, you'd never find anyone who'd do a better job. Please..." Dake's voice caught. "Please..."

"It's not that we have anything against Lula personally," Juno said kindly. "We find her quite endearing and charming. It's just that she must be lawfully recognized as a minor goddess in order to be promoted to such an important position. There are some factions who don't recognize nymphs as goddesses.

"In order to bestow the official rank of minor goddess on her, Lula must be without any significant imperfections. As a winged nymph, the inability to spread her wings at any time is considered a significant deficiency."

"If I may?" Cinnamus asked. Juno nodded. "Is this the only reason the council is denying their plea?"

"Yes," Juno said. "I'm sorry. We wish it could be different."

Cinnamus gave Lula a pointed look.

"The council sincerely regrets," Mercury read from his scroll, "that Lula the nymph must remain on Olympus, seeing to her studies, while the mortal, Dakin, be returned to Earth. All memory of Lula and all things having to do with Lula and Olympus will be erased from his memory, including the fact that Zebulon will reside on Olympus. Dakin will only know that his brother is missing."

"Oh my God," Zeb said while Dake stood ramrod straight and expressionless.

"Furthermore," Mercury continued, "for the benefit of all involved and for the protection of Olympus, the brothers will not be permitted to be in contact with each other in the future. All Dakin will know is that his brother has disappeared."

"No...no..." Zeb muttered, shaking his head. "Dear God...no..."

Dead silence filled the auditorium. Lula looked up at Dake, who remained stoic except for a single tear trickling down one cheek as he looked straight ahead.

Lula felt her heart splinter into a thousand shards as the sickening reality of the council's cruel, but necessary, verdict sank in. Lifting her eyes to the heavens, she raised her arms high and chanted just above a whisper, *I believe I can, I believe I can...* until she opened her mouth wide and sang out a high, protracted faultless note as tears streamed down her cheeks and her wings burst open wide in all their glory and majesty.

"Lula!" Dake gasped.

"No!" Seraletta the undine screamed from the audience. "No!"

Lula lifted from the floor and rose, still singing as Apollo accompanied her on his lyre. Halfway to the ceiling, Lula flew and fluttered and sang around the entire

auditorium, soaring above her classmates as they gasped in awe, floating above the council as they all gazed up at her and then bringing herself to a graceful touchdown right next to Dake. As soon as she'd landed, he grabbed her, hugging her hard and muttering sweet nothings as he kissed her eyes, nose, cheeks and lips.

"Lula, retract your wings and spread them again," Minerva said. "Immediately."

With a deep, shuddering, hopeful breath, Lula closed her wings, waited a moment and then flapped them open wide again, smiling as she lifted from the floor and floated in place.

"Again," Ceres said, and Lula repeated the process with ease and grace. She repeated it several more times at the request of some of the others on the council.

"Well damn," Venus said, sitting forward, propping her elbows on the table and supporting her chin on her fisted hands. "It appears that we've made an oopsie."

"I'll say," Diana offered with a roll of the eyes. "I hereby rescind my objection to their plea."

"Yup, me too," Venus said, raising her hand. The rest of the council chorused their agreement.

"Ahhh, I've always loved a happy ending," Mars roared. "Especially following a big, bold, bloody battle."

"Holy shit. Does this mean what I think it does?" Dake said to Lula, Zeb and Cinnamus.

"It appears so," Cinnamus said, beaming a bright smile. "Our little Lula has saved the day."

"Hold me up," Zeb said to Cinnamus. "I think I'm going to faint."

"In light of the fact that we have apparently made a...eh...slight gaffe," Jupiter said in a softer voice than he'd used during the rest of the proceedings, "the council hereby grants the plea of Lula and Dakin to remain together on Earth."

The auditorium erupted with wild cheers and applause that went on and on.

"Oh my darling Lula! We did it! Sweetheart, we did it!" Dake shouted to be heard about the roar, squeezing her so tight she had trouble catching a breath. "But what...how did you manage...?"

"By believing I could, Dake," Lula yelled back. "Because, my beloved soul mate, I love you with every fiber of my being. And because my life would be meaningless if I lost you." She reached over and took Cinnamus' hand. "Thank you, dear, dear Cinnamus. Thank you." When she glanced back at the council, they were all laughing and cheering themselves.

"Silence!" Jupiter bellowed, clearly trying to hide a jovial smile. "We still have one important issue to address. Juno, my dear." He gestured to his wife.

"It is with great happiness," Juno said, "that I decree on behalf of the entire council that the rank of minor goddess is to be bestowed upon Lula, carrying with it all due responsibilities and the rare and precious gift of immortality. In addition, the rank of

minor god is to be bestowed upon Dakin, carrying with it all due responsibilities and the rare and precious gift of immortality. Dakin and Zebulon?"

"Yes, ma'am?" the brothers chorused, each boasting grins so wide Lula thought it was a miracle their faces didn't split open.

"The rank we are about to bestow is highly venerated. It means vast changes for both your lives. All gods are expected to act and conduct themselves honorably in accordance with an extensive list of rules and bylaws. The gift of immortality is not given or to be taken lightly, dear boys. We expect your dedication, devotion and loyalty so that the mystic secrets of Olympus and all that we are about will remain preserved and protected for eternity. Are you in agreement?"

"Yes, ma'am," they again said in unison.

"Does this mean we'll be able to stay brothers—I mean, stay in contact?" Dake asked.

Juno smiled. "It does. Special dispensation will be granted to allow you and your brother extended travel privileges to and from Olympus."

"Wahoooo!" Dake shrieked, grabbing his brother and planting kisses all over his face as he hopped around doing a happy dance.

"Why, Dakin! Your inner woman has finally emerged!" Zeb said, laughing and crying at the same time while he grasped his brother close.

"All of the details of your new rank and responsibilities," Juno added, "will be outlined for you in a briefing session. Cinnamus, if I'm not mistaken, you are the instructor in charge of tutoring new gods and goddesses, am I correct?"

"I am." Cinnamus nodded. "And may I just say that I've never been so happy in all my nine hundred seventy years. Thank you, one and all."

Tears of happiness spilling down her cheeks, Lula retracted her wings and spread them again. Clutching Dake in her arms, she lifted them from the floor a few feet, gently twirling as she captured his lips in a deep, soul-reaching kiss.

Chapter Twenty-Two

"Do you like to watch me do this?" Lula said, plucking the rigid peaks of her nipples with her fingers, moaning as she tugged and twisted. "Or do you like this better?" She snaked one hand between her thighs and rubbed herself, squirming as she continued pinching one nipple.

Dake's cock shot up, saluting the ceiling of Lula's little fairytale-like cottage. "Aw, man, you naughty, horny, wicked little nymph, you," Dake said through devilish laughter.

They were in the bedroom of her small house, tucked away in the middle of a dense Olympian forest. Empty champagne glasses and a half-full second bottle of the bubbly sat on a nearby table. Dake lay happily sprawled in the center of her bed, which was cloaked in a fragrant, living blanket of soft roses — of the thornless variety.

The walls and ceiling were papered with floral wallpaper, while paintings of forest scenes and winged creatures dotted the walls. Furniture was covered with calico and chintz and ribbons and bows and...well, it was certainly the most ultra-girly place Dake had ever seen. More to the point, it was definitely Lula.

"I'm not being wicked in the least," Lula said, smoothing her palm over the crown of Dake's erection, then licking her hand. "Why, I merely thought I'd check to see if you were well enough to engage in sexual union yet, that's all," she offered in all innocence as she stood before him wearing nothing but her wings.

Dake chuckled. "I think, my bloodthirsty little nymph, the part you liked best was when Cinnamus told me and Zeb that, while we're immortal now, we can still be injured—but we heal quickly." He patted his bandaged chest and belly and Lula eagerly hopped onto the bed next to him. "That way you can have your cake and eat it too."

"Mmmm, I do love to eat you, Dake." Positioning herself between his spread thighs, she snaked down, mindful not to put her weight on the hoof wounds in his leg.

Once her face was even with his cock, she kissed the tip and watched as it jerked. Uttering a low moan, she wrapped her lips around him and sucked while rimming the bandage on his thigh lightly with her fingers. "Does the injury still hurt terribly?" She lapped at his cock as if she were a cat supping cream. Dake gave in to a contented groan.

"Honey, when you have that pretty mouth of yours on me, I can honestly say I feel no pain."

"Do you speak the truth or are you just trying to be brave?"

Dake pressed her head back down where it belonged. "My leg's feeling much better," he answered as Lula did all sorts of swirling magic with her tongue. "Pretty amazing, considering the impact of goat boy's hoof. Jesus, what a maniac. My chest and arm are feeling better too." Dake folded his hands behind his head and smiled. "You can go ahead and remove the bandages if you want to check my wounds out for yourself...and I know you do." He laughed.

Lula's head popped up from her carnal task. Her curls were haphazard, her eyelids half-closed and her lips wet from sucking him. She never looked more beautiful.

"I promise to be very careful," she said, unwrapping him just like he was a birthday present. "Oh, it looks so much better." She pecked a ring of kisses around the wound in his thigh. "The bleeding has stopped and the swelling is already subsiding. Oh Dake," she smoothed her fingers around the circumference of the hoof print, "you were so very brave. But foolhardy too. Vibius could have easily slain you."

"At least I had a better chance with him than getting char-grilled by a dragon," Dake said as Lula tugged him to sit up so she could unwrap his chest and belly. "Speaking of which, I really like Dunniger. He's a good guy."

"He's quite fond of you too, Dake. He's hosting a farewell barbecue picnic for us tomorrow afternoon before we fly back to Earth," Lula said, trailing her tongue along the discolored flesh where the crazed satyr rammed Dake with his horns. "All my classmates, as well as many of the gods, will be in attendance. Zebulon and Cinnamus too, of course."

"Sounds great – as long as I'm not on the menu."

"Ooh my poor baby. Look at this tear along your big, beautiful strong biceps," Lula said, uncovering his arm and tracing her finger alongside the wound. She straddled his thigh, opening wide enough to slick her fingers across her clit before resting her soft, wet pussy on top of the hoof print.

"My gallant, courageous hero," she breathed, cradling his wounded biceps between her breasts, pressing them together against his flesh as she writhed atop his leg.

"Oh yeah...I am a happy man," Dake said, lifting her fingers to his lips and sucking her pussy juices from them. In the blink of an eye, Dake pinned Lula down against the flowers, careful not to damage her wings in the process.

"What are you going to do?" she said in that delightful innocent way of hers.

"Gobble you up, my pretty," Dake said, going down on her.

"Mmmm...that feels so good. Oh my darling Dakin, when I think of how frighteningly close we came to never seeing each other again, never pleasuring each other again..."

"I know, baby," he said between licks. "But we don't have to worry about that ever again, my beautiful little nymph goddess."

"But I'm not a—" Lula stopped short and giggled. "Oh, well I suppose I can't say that any longer. Shall I give you my first command as an official minor goddess?" she asked.

"Goddess or not, your wish is my command, sweetheart."

"Good. Then I command you to eat me, lick me, nibble me, slurp me and otherwise pleasure my goddess sex parts until I quake and quiver and shudder and—" She arched her back and indulged in a lingering moan as Dake sucked her clit between his teeth and nibbled it. "Ohhhh...Dakin...oh...gods..."

"You called?" Dake said, coming up for air and licking his lips. "Minor god at your service, ma'am." He went back to the agreeable job of sending his sweet, beautiful Lula over the edge. Her wings already extended, they flapped and fluttered as she sang out her bliss. She lifted horizontally, a good two feet off the blanket of flowers.

His tongue still busy licking her to full completion, Dake clasped Lula's hips and rose to his knees, watching in amazement as her lush body quaked, writhed and quivered in mid air.

"God damn, if that's not the most beautiful thing I've ever seen," he said, positioning himself at her pussy and thrusting into her depths as she floated on her back before him. What she offered was just too damn good to pass up.

Lula growled out her pleasure. "Yes...fuck me, Dake. Fuck me hard and fast," she moaned. "Let me feel the full, dynamic impact of your godly powers."

He had no idea if it had anything to do with his new status as a minor god or the release of stress from the day's trauma or just the fact that he was so fucking happy he could barely see straight, but he was a goddamn erotic powerhouse! He rammed himself in and out of Lula so fast and hard that her eyes flashed wide and she screamed out, erupting into another orgasm before the final waves of the first had even subsided.

Dake felt the familiar pulling, tickling sensation in his balls before the tingle snaked up into his abdomen. His muscles and tendons constricted as it seemed his entire being was about to detonate. He pulled back and then shoved into her warm, silky depths again with even more ferocity.

Feeling the slap of his balls against Lula's dewy flesh, Dake's body tightened in anticipation of impending climax. The heady sensation captured him wholly, utterly as the first potent waves of release surged forth. He felt Lula's inner muscles squeezing, pulsing against his cock as she exploded with her third orgasm. At the apex of mind-bogglingly painful pleasure, hot cum spurted swift and forcefully and Dake roared out his climax.

Clamping her legs on either side of him, Lula eased them both down until Dake was on his back and she'd collapsed on top of him.

"Guess we'd better step up those wedding plans just in case, huh?" Dake asked a few minutes later, weaving his fingers through Lula's curls.

"I like the idea, but why? What do you mean?"

"We didn't use any protection," he said, splaying his fingers over Lula's soft belly. "For all we know, there could be a tiny little nymph coming to life as we speak."

"Dake, did you mean it when you told the council you would provide me with the whole tortilla?"

Dake gave her a curious look. "The what?"

"You know," Lula clarified, "a nice little house with a picket fence, a dog, a bunch of babies and everything else that goes along with the American dream."

"Oh!" He chuckled. "You mean the whole enchilada. Of course I did. Whatever your little heart desires, as long as you're happy."

"And will you mind keeping me organized and focused on my Cupid Academy responsibilities as well as my duties operating Zebulon's flower shop while you continue to perform your electrocution services?"

Dake broke into full laughter. "Electrician." He rapped his knuckles against Lula's head. "Get that through that silly little head of yours or else people will think you're married to a prison executioner or something. And the answer is no, I won't mind at all—as long as you work very hard not to misplace things or leave them where you shouldn't. By the way...when are you going to fess up and tell Cinnamus about those class items that flew off the chariot?"

"Oh...that..." She nibbled her bottom lip.

"Yes, that." Dake smiled and kissed the tip of her nose.

"Don't worry, I will. I promise. I just hope..."

"What, honey?"

"Well, that my bow and arrows are still where I left them in the flower shop. I...well, I kind of forgot about fetching them and bringing them back with me in all the commotion the other morning."

"I forgot about them too, until just now. Well, nobody's going to see them anyway because they're invisible," Dake said. "So there's no problem...right?" he asked hopefully.

"I sincerely hope not. If a mortal gets his hands on them, the effect can be intoxicating enough to make the mortal quite..." She twirled her finger at her temple to indicate craziness. "How is your spear, my darling? Is it jutting yet?" Lula giggled.

Dake rolled his eyes. "My godly cock is coming around again. You may worship it if you like."

"Oh I like," Lula said, her voice growing husky as she sashayed down toward Dake's groin. She made a luscious tit sandwich, capturing his cock between her breasts and clasping them as she glided them up and down his shaft. She paused a moment to swirl her tongue around the purple crown that poked through her deep cleavage.

Dake propped himself up on his elbows to get a better view.

"In a few minutes," Lula promised, "I'm going to have your jutting spear pulsing hard as it sprays me with your hot, creamy, godly essence. All over my breasts, Dake. And all over my belly."

"Damn."

"I just wanted you to know that before I fuck you with my goddess breasts."

"You keep talking like that and it'll be a whole lot sooner than a few minutes before my cum starts spurting, baby," Dake said hoarsely. He played with the golden ringlets atop Lula's head as she fucked him.

"Wherever we end up living, we're going to have a mirror on our bedroom ceiling so I can watch you as you do this from every angle." A lingering groan rumbled up from his chest as Lula alternately rubbed, licked and sucked. Just when he swore he couldn't take any more, she reached for her nipples, pinching them hard as her eyelids fluttered shut and a jagged little moan tore from her lips.

Dake's cock pulsed hard as warm ribbons of semen jetted onto Lula's throat. Maneuvering his cock with her hands, she aimed the stream at her breasts and belly, giving Dake one hell of an eyeful before she popped his still throbbing cock into her mouth and sucked him dry.

* * * * *

"You have the keys to the shop and my apartment," Zeb said just before Cinnamus' chariot descended toward Earth. "And if you have any questions, just call me. Oh!" Zeb's fingers flew to his lips. "I guess we can't do that, can we?"

"Don't worry, communication is fully covered in your Minor God 101 instruction manuals," Cinnamus said, guiding the horses toward their destination. "Zeb and I will return in a few months along with Cupid and your former classmates to see how the two of you are adjusting and how the redesign of Cupid's Headquarters is coming along."

"Pretty cool," Dake said. "Who would have thought that Portland's Olympian Contractors was just exactly that?"

"We have branches in several key locations around the world," Cinnamus told him. "They'll know exactly what to do to transform the shop into an official contact location."

"This is all so exciting," Lula said. "I can't wait to begin my life with Dake on Earth. But, oh, I'll miss you and Zebulon so much," she told Cinnamus.

"I have a feeling the next few months are going to go by in a whirling blur," Zeb offered with a snap of his fingers. "Just like that."

"You must remember to read the chapter in the manual about the snapping of fingers now that you're a minor god, Zebulon," Cinnamus said, stilling Zeb's fingers. "There can be dire consequences. You too, Dakin and Lula. Promise me you'll make certain to fully study your books."

"Absolutely," Dake said. "I want to learn everything I can about my ultra cool new status and what comes along with it."

"Lula," Cinnamus said, wagging a finger under her nose, "do not, under any circumstances, misplace your manual."

Dake saw Lula gulp. "Never, Cinnamus. I promise."

"We're ready to land," Cinnamus added a moment later. "I've veiled the chariot so it's invisible and we're each wearing our invisibility traveling gear so there will be no problem. Dakin and Lula, you have appropriate Earth clothing on beneath your invisibility garment, so you're all set to blend right in."

"I like being able to see invisible stuff now," Dake said, looking down at himself. "I'll finally be able to see that bow and arrow set of yours, sweetheart," he said to Lula.

She winced and made a shushing motion as the chariot came to a smooth stop.

Cinnamus turned to her, looking mighty serious. "Just exactly where *are* your bow and arrows, Lula? Come to think of it, I don't remember seeing them since I last dropped you off on Earth. You haven't lost them, have you?"

"Oh no, of course not, Cinnamus. I know exactly where they are. They're safe and protected. But...um..."

"But?" Cinnamus arched an inquisitive eyebrow.

"Well, the funniest thing happened on my last trip to Earth with you, Cinnamus." Lula erupted in nervous giggles. "In fact, it's so funny it will most likely make you laugh too. Isn't that right, Dakin?"

Dake just gazed at her silently, feeling sorry as hell for her, but knowing it was best if he kept his mouth shut.

"Zebulon?" Lula tried again with a pleading look. Zebulon chewed his fingernails and looked away. "Oh dear," Lula muttered, and then she giggled once more.

"Why don't you tell me all about it so that I may join you in laughter, Lula," Cinnamus said, folding his arms across his chest and looking none too amused.

"Remember how bumpy that last chariot ride to Earth was?" Lula asked. "There was a great deal of turbulence, remember, Cinnamus?"

"I recall that it was a somewhat bumpy flight, yes."

"Well, you see..." Lula was gripped by another round of giggles. "During the midst of the most powerful jolts and thuds, all of a sudden, *zap!*" She slid her hands together, making a flying motion.

"Zap?"

Lula nodded. "Out flew a few of my belongings before I could catch them."

"Such as?" Cinnamus said, the muscle in his jaw clenching and unclenching.

"Oh...just a miniscule amount of insignificant items."

"How insignificant?" Cinnamus gave her a warning look.

"Um, let's see," she counted on her fingers, "well, there was the forgetfulness powder and," she cleared her throat, "the invisibility serum. Then there was my Perfect Love Matches 101 textbook and my notebook and, um, my invisibility traveling garment. That's all."

"*That's all?!*" Cinnamus boomed. "Lula, that was practically everything you had with you."

"At least my bow and arrows are still safe," she offered.

"And you call this loss insignificant? Oh Lula, Lula, Lula. It's a good thing I didn't know of this before the council plea because..." He paused, looking into her fear-widened eyes and at her trembling chin and heaved a sigh. "Dakin, do you have any idea what a serious and monumental responsibility you are undertaking in watching over Lula?"

"Yes, I do. And I give you my word, Cinnamus, that I'll see to it she's extremely careful from now on."

Cinnamus' shoulders slumped and he breathed another sigh. "I'll have to dispatch a team of investigators to search out and retrieve the items. They could be anywhere, lost in any time period... I just wish you had told me earlier so I could already have sent out a team by now."

"I am so truly sorry, Cinnamus. I know how profoundly I've disappointed you. Please, please forgive me." Lula rested her hand on Cinnamus' arm. "You are so very dear to me and if you hated me for the rest of my life, especially seeing as how I'm immortal now and that will be a very long time indeed, I don't know what I would do."

"I'm sure we'll succeed in recovering the items." Cinnamus patted Lula's hand, giving her a tired smile. "And of course I don't hate you, Lula. How could I hate my favorite student?" He smoothed one knuckle along her cheek.

Lula clapped her hand against her chest and gasped. "Me?"

"I only tell you that now because you are no longer officially a member of my class. Just make sure you keep the information to yourself."

"Oh you can *always* trust me, Cinnamus," Lula assured him, and Cinnamus just groaned.

The foursome made their final goodbyes, complete with hugs, kisses, words of affection and a few tears, and then Cinnamus and Zeb were off to the skies again, leaving Dake and Lula in the waterfront park, scurrying behind a cluster of bushes to remove their invisibility garments.

"Do *not* drop that anywhere," Dake said, poking the garment in her hands.

"Don't worry, Dake." Lula clutched it tight to her breast. "You can count on me. I've learned my lesson."

Dake narrowed his gaze at her. "Here, give it to me. I'll carry it for you until we can put it in a safe place."

Cinnamus had arranged the trip back to Earth so that Lula and Dake had arrived back in Portland a mere sixty minutes after they left when, in reality, they'd been gone for several days.

As they walked down the street toward Cupid's Headquarters, Dake marveled at all that had transpired in a week's time. Too bad he couldn't add Immortal Minor God just below Master Electrician on his business card. The thought made him chuckle. The Dronyer boys, minor gods. Sheesh. If only his mother and father could see them now.

As soon as the thought flitted across his mind, he could almost swear he heard his parents' voices saying, *We do see and we're so proud, Dakin*. Dake started at that. He'd never experienced anything similar before. He looked at Lula to see if she heard anything, but she seemed happily oblivious as they headed for the shop. Maybe there was something about otherworldly communication in his manual...

He rapped his knuckles on the book and smiled. Then he glanced at the manual Lula held in the arm she swung lackadaisically at her side. He plucked it from her hand and carried it with his own, just to be on the safe side.

He wasn't too worried about any screw-ups happening. He'd keep an eye on his adorable, flighty Lula and help her all he could to become more trustworthy and, hopefully, less absentminded. Yup, Cinnamus, Cupid, Zeb and all Lula's old classmates would find everything running smooth when they came back. Just like clockwork.

They entered Cupid's Headquarters hand-in-hand. As soon as the little bell over the door jingled, Zeb's fulltime employee, Edwina, rushed to greet them, wringing her hands.

"Oh Dake" the middle-aged woman said, "I've been trying to reach your brother for the last hour. Something strange has happened. Where is Zebulon?"

"Zeb decided to take an extended vacation with a friend," Dake said smoothly. "My fiancée Lula and I will be taking care of the shop during his absence. What's up, Edwina?"

"Oh, it's Alfred. I think he's gone crazy."

Dake scratched his head. "Well, I remember he was having some sort of crisis the other day. He was crying buckets over something or other."

"His boyfriend, Leonard, broke his heart," Lula reminded him.

"Yeah, that's it. So what's wrong? Has Alfred been blubbing all over the place or did he call in sick or what?"

Edwina shook her head. "No...it's very bizarre. The two of us were putting away a shipment of supplies that had just come in when, all of a sudden, Alfred swore a blue streak. And Alfred never uses harsh language. I came to see what was wrong and found him hunched down behind the front counter laughing as something rattled around in his arms."

"Uh-oh," Lula said, nibbling her bottom lip.

"Now, Dake," Edwina went on, "you know I'm a sane, reasonably unflappable woman, right?"

"Sure, Edwina. Zeb always says he doesn't know what he'd do without you. Tell me what happened?"

"The rattling I mentioned? I-I couldn't see anything. I mean, there Alfred was, talking and laughing and cursing to himself and apparently cradling something that was...well, I know it sounds crazy, but it seemed like something invisible. But it sounded heavy, like metal."

Lula sucked in a gasp and ran to the rear of the front counter with Dake and Edwina following behind her. She got on her knees, ducked her head and felt all around.

"Oh no, oh no, oh no!"

"Don't tell me," Dake said. "Please don't tell me."

"They're gone! My bow and arrows are gone!"

"Bow and arrows?" Edwina said.

"Where's Alfred now?" Dake asked, clasping the woman's shoulders and gazing into her eyes.

"Gone."

"As in gone home?" Dake asked hopefully.

"I don't think so." Edwina shrugged. "He jumped around the counter back here and then danced around the shop cheering until I thought he'd lost his mind. Alfred's usually so meek and quiet, you know. Then he turned to me and grinned. Said he was quitting and going on a mission to find true love."

"Aw shit," Dake said. "What are you doing?" he asked Lula, who simply held up a finger, motioning for him to wait. He watched as she dipped her fingertip into one of the small vials in her purse and then pressed it against Edwina's temple.

Edwina looked blank for a moment, blinked a few times and then smiled. "Oh hello, Dake. I must have been daydreaming," she said with a tranquil smile. "I didn't even hear you come in. Did you see Zebulon off on his trip? I do hope he has a good vacation. He really does work too hard."

Dake just stared at Edwina, mouth agape.

"Dake?" Edwina looked at him curiously. "Are you all right?"

"Is...is Alfred around?" he asked cautiously.

"I'm afraid not," Edwina said with that same calm smile. "Zebulon said Alfred tended his resignation and won't be working here any longer. I see your lovely fiancée is here with you. It's a pleasure to meet you, Lula." Edwina extended her hand. "I've heard so many nice things about you."

"Thank you, Edwina," Lula said, pumping her hand. "I've heard wonderful things about you too. I look forward to working with you."

"If you don't mind," Edwina said, "I'll just go back to putting that new shipment of supplies away."

After she went in the back room, Dake turned to Lula, aghast. "We can do that?" he asked, tapping his temple. "Make them forget and change stuff around in their memory?"

"Quite easily." Lula nodded. "I believe it's in chapter eight of our new manual."

"Holy shit," Dake said.

"What are we going to do about Alfred, Dake? If Cinnamus finds out, he'll be terribly disappointed—and Cupid will be furious. Why, if the council finds out that I was so careless with the academy's property, they might withdraw my goddess status and separate us."

Dake sucked in a deep breath and laughed. He couldn't help it because he had a feeling this was just the beginning of many such crises he'd encounter in his life with Lula.

"Looks like we gather up our gear, sweetheart, and find Alfred before he wreaks all sorts of havoc with your bow and arrows."

"Oh Dake. I'm so sorry." Lula leaned her head against his chest. "I'm such a...what is the term? A fuck-up," she said mournfully.

"No you're not." He wrapped his arms around her, kissing the top of his adorable, capricious little nymph goddess' head. "It's okay, sweetheart. We'll take care of it before anyone finds out what happened."

"Thank you, Dake. I promise nothing like this will *ever* happen again."

Dake heaved a sigh and chuckled.

"Dake?"

"Hmmm?"

"I love you."

"I love you too, sweetheart."

Nope, no doubt about it. Life with his darling Lula would never be dull or boring.

About the Author

Daisy Dexter Dobbs has a valid reason for lying when she's asked where she gets the ideas for her books. She knows most people wouldn't believe the truth about the madcap mayhem that goes on in her daily life. Case in point: Imagine frantically trying to file your way out of a locked bathroom door with a teeny nail file, dressed in nothing but a too-small towel while you're waiting for a real estate agent and a family with three small kids to arrive for a showing of your house. Okay, now picture the contents of a box of just-delivered sex toys (purely for research purposes, you understand) strewn on the bed just outside that locked bathroom door. Mmm-hmm, it really happened.

Happily married to her soulmate, the award winning artist and writer believes in love, happily-ever-afters and the wondrous, magical escapism of reading and writing.

Daisy welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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