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Utter
Cupidity

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Samhain Publishing, Ltd.
577 Mulberry Street, Suite 1520
Macon GA 31201

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Copyright © 2008 by Toni L. Meilleur
ISBN: 1-59998-545-4
Edited by Tera Kleinfelter
Cover by Dawn Seewer

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First Samhain Publishing, Ltd. electronic publication: July 2008
www.samhainpublishing.com

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Dedication

Sometimes the best changes we make are the ones forced upon us.

One: We reap what we sow

The hotel room reeked of stale alcohol. The figure, though swift and sure-footed, doubted even he could avoid all the beer cans and empty liquor bottles strewn without care throughout the suite. The man in white tennis shoes with pure gold wings somehow embroidered into them tried with great stealth to maneuver around the obstacles. A partially clad woman with more of her body hanging off the couch than on it snored lightly. He wrinkled his nose to ward off the offending smell of old alcohol, then settled for putting his arm across his nose instead. His keen vision located the sleeping area and he headed that way. Realizing what a futile endeavor it was to avoid the beer cans, he gave in to simply kicking them out of his way—it wasn't like the inhabitants were going to wake up from the noise. He knew it would take nothing short of a jackhammer to wake the passed out occupants.

The object of his mission lay sandwiched between two naked women. Each one had thrown a rather possessive arm around him. Even in his sleep the man seemed to have a mischievous grin on his face. The life of a scoundrel; he shook his head in disappointment. Dreading the news he had to tell him, he leaned over the bed and shook the sleeping man. Once, twice, and then in frustration, he slapped him perhaps a little harder than necessary. Blue eyes shot open in indignation, albeit a little bloodshot, but no less an incredible blue. The expression changed from anger to a roguish familiar grin.

“Herm, old friend!” He sat up, running a hand through his long, curly, sun-blond hair. “At last giving in to your more carnal side?” Somehow he managed to disengage himself from the grasp of the two women and stood without regard to his naked form in front of his best friend.

“Get dressed, we have to go,” Hermes said grimly, well used to the antics of his friend.

“Can't do, Herm. I promised these three ladies a weekend of debauchery, and so far we're only into day one.” He seemed to look around for the third one then shrugged it

off. He looked around in curiosity before he went to the mini-bar and grunted in dissatisfaction at its empty contents. “Want to go on a beer run with me?”

“There will be no beer runs, old pal. You have to go. I was sent to retrieve you by any means necessary.”

“Did my mother send you? I told you don’t listen to her, I’ll talk to her when I’m good and ready.” In a blink of an eye he was dressed in a form-fitting black T-shirt and jeans. “Really, since when do you do her bidding anyway?”

“It’s not her who sent me. The Council sent me.” There! Hermes said it and waited for the impact of his words. His friend squinted at him. “They were tired of their summons being ignored. You really need to come with me, I can’t leave without you.”

“What is this about? Has something happened to my mother? Or did my delightful wife find yet another way to make life miserable for the Council?”

“I’m not allowed to talk about the nature of the meeting, only...”

“Only what? This is unlike you, Hermes. Tell me what’s going on.”

“I wish I could, but I am under a strict and personal order from the Big Guy.”

“He’s just blowing a lot of hot air. He’s full of himself. Look, why don’t you and I—” Before he could finish, Hermes locked him into a bear hug and moved faster than anything on earth could ever dream of doing.

Within moments, he found himself standing in front of a fully assembled Council. Cupid was a little dizzy and sick from the flight, because even he couldn’t move that fast. He laid his hands on his thighs and took a deep breath before he looked upon the Council again—this time Hermes was seated. Cupid acknowledged each of the eleven members with a nod. When he got to the twelfth, he bowed in demanded custom, hating every second of it.

“You may rise,” a voice boomed. When he rose from his bowed position, the Big Guy began.

“You have been found guilty of neglect of your duty. Each Council member here has agreed that drastic action must be taken to maintain the integrity of our positions as a whole. You have ignored our summonses and displayed utter disregard to your superiors. In the past this was tolerated, but it is no longer. It has gotten, as they say, ‘out of hand’.

In order to maintain the benefits that your birthright has given you, you have been sentenced to a task that you have exactly one month from tomorrow to complete. If you fail this task, you will be stripped of all privileges and maintain a common life.”

A sickening feeling settled into the pit of Cupid’s stomach. Every member of the Council, including his own mother, looked upon him without pity. One month to complete a task? How hard could it be? What did Zeus mean by “maintaining a common life”? He couldn’t possibly mean...

“Yes, that’s right, I see that understanding is now upon you. If you fail to meet the challenge of this task you will be stripped of your immortality and your divine gift.”

“You would make me human?” he spat out, disgusted with the avenue the meeting was traveling on.

“Yes, without hesitation!” the Big Guy roared back, irritated at having been interrupted. Not intimidated, despite the knowledge that the Big Guy could indeed do that. Cupid warily pressed his next question.

“What is this task you demand of me?”

Zeus immediately looked smug as he settled himself a little more in his throne. Despite knowing what was about to happen, every Council member leaned forward in anticipation. His mother had a worried look upon her face that wasn’t there when the meeting first began. She began wringing her hands together; whatever was going on, she didn’t look as if she approved of it. But then again, she was never known for looking at the fine print for anything.

“I wasn’t aware of—” she started to say then was silenced by the eldest god.

“I have no tolerance for you today. You were given a full report on the proceedings here. Perhaps you should spend just a little bit more time reading than getting laid, hmm?” he challenged her. “As for you—” he directed his piercing gaze to Cupid, “—in order to maintain your position you must prove that you still have what it takes to keep it. You must get a mortal to agree to marry you within one month.”

It took him a moment to digest the words, before laughter threatened to bubble up and cascade out of his mouth at an alarming rate. Were they kidding? Perhaps these people spent much too much time with their heads in the clouds.

“I hate to break this to you, but I thought it was common knowledge that I’m already married. Not the happiest man, but married all the same.” It took great effort keep the smugness out of his voice.

“Which brings us to the other matter at hand,” Zeus stated, still looking as sly as a fox that had caught more than one hen. “Your wife has petitioned, and I have granted her, what is it they call it? Ah yes, a divorce.”

“What?” His ears rang a bit. He didn’t hear that. No god had ever gotten a divorce. It was unheard of. It was behavior like that of the common people. “She divorced me? I’m no longer married?”

“Yes indeed,” Zeus proclaimed. Even his mother looked happy at that news, no-brainer there. His mother had never liked his wife. “Cupid, your wife, Psyche, has divorced you. You would have known this had you answered any of the summonses sent to you in the last year or so. I had no choice but to give her her freedom. This, of course, works in nicely with your task.”

“Wait a second. I’m divorced and you want me to get married right away?”

“That’s right—to a mortal woman,” the elder god proclaimed.

“But why? It’s no secret that you, Zeus, have had more affairs than can be counted on everyone’s fingers in this room. Psyche and I had an understanding—she was crazy and I no longer loved her. Why am I being punished for the behavior every god in this room has indulged in?”

Cupid knew that perhaps he had gone too far in pointing out Zeus’s affairs, with Hera in the room, but right now this reeked of lopsided justice. Zeus’s face had gone red with anger, but Cupid held his ground. He wasn’t going to be stripped of his immortality without a fight.

“Because none of us have ignored our job,” Zeus declared. “Tell us of the latest epic affair you arranged, God of Desire? Marriages in the human society have been falling apart for lack of *desire*. Businesses haven’t grown, because of lack of bed-hopping, which we all know can seal a deal. By the gods, boy, we’ve lost whole species of animals on this planet because of the animals’ lack of *desire* to mate. These things affect us in one form or another. Apollo cannot tell you the last time he aided in the writing of great

music or the production of a great masterpiece, for the humans are not driven by a need to express their physical *desires*. Families are small because there is no physical desire and therefore little or no procreation—what is Hestia to do? As for Athena and Ares, there are no wars. Remember the fall of Troy? That was some of your greatest work. The desire for Helen was—”

“I got it!” Cupid risked retribution for cutting Zeus off, but really, he got the point. “Besides do we really need a war?” he questioned the Council and was greeted by cold stares, in particular from Athena and Ares. “I got the point, just give me a few days, I’ll right things.”

“I’m afraid you’re past that point,” Athena intervened. “If you had answered our summonses like Father mentioned, then perhaps we could have negotiated. But your actions were not wise and therefore you have no choice now. It takes all of us to strip you of your immortality. We have agreed, even your mother, Cupid.” Athena said the last part a little snidely. A quick glance to Aphrodite and he knew she had not intended this. What Aphrodite’s intention was in agreeing to participate in his judgment was beyond him and would be explored later. But for now his well-formed butt was in some hot water.

“Athena, you are a chaste god and therefore you want to see me fail,” he sneered at her.

“My personal feelings have nothing to do with this. Remember, Cupid, there are twelve of us sitting here.”

“I don’t see how marrying a mortal will prove anything.”

“It will give us an idea of how strong your talents are since it has been awhile since we have witnessed them,” Athena answered. A strangled cough mixed with laughter came from Hermes, who was no doubt thinking of the state in which he’d found Cupid. He’d deal with Hermes later.

“Fine, I’ll be right back with a mortal wife.” Cupid allowed his wings to surface. Large, snow white wings that were the length of his body appeared and stretched out. Cupid was impatient to resume his rather debaucherous weekend.

“I’m sorry, you haven’t heard the rules,” Hera piped up. Cupid knew she was intent on adding a little sting after he’d waved Zeus’s affairs in her face.

“What are the rules?” Cupid asked her in a bored voice, relaxing his wings just a bit. He refused to show Hera the respect he showed Zeus. After all Hera could be quite the bitch. Sometimes he didn’t blame Zeus for seeking pleasures elsewhere.

Hera leaned even further forward in her seat. “Number one, you cannot lie to the mortal woman you pursue.”

“What?” Cupid was dumbfounded. Not lie? Well, he could still achieve what he needed without lying. “Go on,” he urged her, still quite confident in his abilities. However, it didn’t knock the shine of triumph from Hera’s face.

“Number two, she must agree to marry you within one month.”

“Yes, well, I heard that one earlier, is that all?” he asked her in arrogance, prepared to leave at the soonest opportunity.

“Well, then there’s number three. You can’t use your divine powers to seduce her in any way, Cupid.” Now Hera sat back in her throne, triumph settling around her like a fine perfume. She struck an elegant pose and enjoyed the look of shock on his face.

“I can’t use my powers?” He had to admit *that* one would probably cause a problem. While he had great confidence he could seduce any mortal woman, the women of today were less likely to just jump into marriage. Bed maybe, but not marriage. This could be a problem but he had no intention of letting Hera know that. “Fine then, I’ll be on my way,” he announced to the Council. He would just find the most desperate human woman the earth had and then offer to marry her.

“Wait, there’s more.” Hera sounded like an infomercial as she smiled wickedly at him.

“More rules?” He cocked a perfect blond eyebrow, determined not to let her get the upper hand.

“No, just an FYI. It is only fair to the mortal that *if* you accomplish this task, Artemis will erase her memory of the whole ordeal. But remember this is only to make it easy on the *mortal*. You see, we couldn’t make this too easy for you, so the Council has agreed to let Artemis pick the woman.”

Now his gut fell to his feet. That was not good. That was not good at all. Artemis, the goddess of hunting and archery who opposed marriage, was smiling at Cupid.

Two: Sugar and spice

Brea Saunders wanted to bash in the face of the old man as he insisted, for the third time, that she could find the replica paintings she had already spent three months looking for, for his new country cottage. His jowls jiggled as he pointed at her, smiling, telling her that he was bringing his new *young* wife home, and wanted the atmosphere of romance. What she really wanted to tell him was that his young wife already had the atmosphere of romance in his very ample checkbook, but what she said was, “Of course, Mr. Forbright, I will continue to look down more *unconventional* avenues.”

He waved his hand in the air to scatter her thinly veiled meaning. “I really don’t care how you go about it or how much the dealer wants. I want those particular paintings. Then you can consider my house decorated and I’ll have a sizable check for your troubles. So far the house is everything I dreamed of, but I want those paintings.” He smiled at her again. The smile that said *I already know she’ll do what I ask because I’m rich*. He heaved his ancient, sagging butt out of the chair with the help of his cane and caretaker. For just a second Brea envisioned kicking the cane out from under him to see him sprawl at her feet. She smiled. Mr. Forbright took it as acquiesce to his almost unreasonable request.

Lindie held the door for him as his caretaker helped him out of the door. As soon as it shut, Brea said the one thing she’d wanted to say since he walked into her office. “Old bastard,” she muttered, flopping in the chair he had just vacated. Lindie perched her petite bottom on the wooden desk across from Brea. Lindie Yang was short, petite and beautiful. Her straight, waist-length black hair looked like she glossed each strand. Her bangs were ruler straight, accentuating her exotic eyes—eyes that now scrutinized Brea.

“You know he’s paying you good money. It’s okay for him to be picky.”

“Lindie, as a former art major you know how hard it is to get those paintings. They are extremely rare. You yourself said it would be damn near impossible unless divine intervention was at play. We’ve been searching for three months, which by the way,

equals the time he met and married the skank he's trying to impress. She wouldn't know a Sellaio painting from a Crayola box. Which, I'm guessing, she still colors with."

"You just hate men in general. He could actually love her, Brea," replied Lindie, the ever-hopeful romantic—she was a lost cause.

"Of course I hate men. They're disgusting. If it weren't for the one function of procreation, they would serve no purpose. Look at him; he must be like, what, a thousand years old? She's twenty—if that. It's disgusting. Men only want one thing. They don't care about the person giving it to them."

"I thought we weren't going to bring him up," Lindie chided.

"I didn't say his name. Do you think my ex-boyfriend has the patent on being a no-good, two-timing, good-for-nothing asshole? No, my dear friend, they are in abundance, and always in season."

"Every man isn't Terry. There is someone out there meant for you, Brea—" Brea cut Lindie off before she could start her long diatribe of two halves of one soul coming together and blah blah blah.

"I'm not in the market. I've been celibate for a year and I'm fine."

"A little cranky, but I wouldn't say fine." Lindie laughed, throwing a paper clip at Brea.

"Yes, well, you stand a better chance of seeing Moses part the Red Sea again than my thighs being parted by any man. But seriously, we have to find a very good replica of those paintings. I don't know where to start." Brea played with her curly, long dishwater-blond hair, twisting it around her finger. Unlike Lindie, who was pure Asian through and through, she was of mixed origins. The hazel eyes and blondish hair, along with her very light sun-kissed skin color, spoke of her Caucasian genes. But it was the high angled cheekbones, sensuously plump lips and firm, rounded derrière that told of her African American heritage. She had been called everything from striking to beautiful, and she didn't care. All her beauty did was attract all the wrong people—particularly men.

"Well I guess it wouldn't hurt to hit the Internet one last time," Brea said on a sigh, her brain running on fumes.

“You already know there’s nothing there, not even on eBay.” Lindie hopped off the desk. “I’m hungry, let’s get something to eat. What’s this?” Brea half turned in the chair to see Lindie peeling a small flyer from her shoe. “It must have blown in when Mr. Forbright left.” She held it with caution between her fingers, as if she’d just picked up a paper smeared with dog poo. “Hey, Brea, I think we might be in luck.”

“Why is that?” Brea got out of her chair to stand behind Lindie as she read the yellow flyer. “Now that is weird. But timely.” She smiled. “Well let’s get something to eat and then you, my wee secretary, can call and see what kind of paintings this shop has.”

“I do believe we might have struck gold,” Lindie called to Brea over the rushing sound of the shower. They were camping at Brea’s house for the evening.

“What?” Brea yelled, turning the shower off.

“That shop on the flyer, Olympiad Paintings, says they have what we’re looking for, except you’re not going to believe this.” Lindie waited patiently until a robed Brea entered the room with a towel wrapped turban-style around her head.

“Okay, whatever it is I’m not going to believe is causing you great joy, so spill it quickly.”

“He’s pretty sure he has some rather pricey replicas of the paintings at his partner’s store, but he says his partner is kind of well...” Lindie was hesitant, which didn’t bode well. It didn’t matter. If there was a chance in hell she could get the paintings for Mr. Forbright, then she would go through hell or high water to obtain it. She just wanted to get paid and get out from under his thumb.

“Spill it,” Brea ordered, taking the towel from her head and squeezing the excess water out of her curly hair.

“Road trip!” Lindie squealed, jumping up and down, her black hair flying, then obediently settled as it was before. Brea looked at her wet, disobedient hair and snorted. Some women had all the luck.

“What do you mean ‘road trip’? Can’t we just order it and have it delivered to the cottage? When I make my final rounds at the place to make sure all is intact I can arrange to have it hung.”

“Well that’s just it. You see the owner is kind of—well, according to the guy I spoke with on the phone, he said his partner opens the store by appointment only.”

“What?” Brea screeched. “Just where is this shop? With my luck, probably Timbuktu.”

“No, that’s the beauty of it. You can kill two birds with one stone. It’s in Ashe Bay.” Lindie was bobbing her perky head up and down, willing Brea to see the logic in the luck. A slow smile spread over Brea’s face.

“You mean the shop is in that little rinky dink town about forty miles from where Forbright built his house?” Brea briefly had the nagging thought they had gone through that town and never saw an art dealer. Perhaps it was housed within another building. It didn’t matter. Things were looking up.

“Yes!” Lindie squealed with delight, jumping onto the couch like an excited child. “We can obtain the paintings and you can finish up the deal. We’ll be done with old wrinkle-face.”

This time, Brea allowed herself to squeal like a thirteen-year-old girl. She laughed hysterically. The thought of seeing an end to this job was a relief she couldn’t express in words. Yes, the money was good, but the sleepless nights and all-day headaches she could do without. “Did you make an appointment?” Brea asked as she came down a little off her high. Lindie’s smile dimmed somewhat.

“That’s the only snag so far.”

“What do you mean?” Brea felt the joy slipping right through her pores.

“Well, the guy who said his partner is out of town a lot but he knows for a fact that he’ll be home for a few days starting tomorrow.”

“So you’re telling me we need to go ASAP so we can make the appointment and be able to keep it before the guy goes back out of town?”

“Well, we could stay here and if we don’t get in touch with him, we could miss the opportunity. But if we go, we have a better chance of catching up with him and getting

him to open up the shop for us before he leaves for God knows where for who knows how long.”

Okay, yes, this was sort of desperate. But desperate times called for desperate measures. The end of Mr. Forbright was near, and though she was sure she had better things to do than run down artwork for some old fogey who probably went bird-watching in every state, it seemed necessary. She kissed her massage appointment for tomorrow goodbye as she told Lindie to cancel all appointments for the next few days. Ashe Bay was three hours away from Canton, Michigan. She was sure she would enjoy the trip back a lot more than the trip there, because she knew her burdens would be lifted and the world would look a whole lot more inviting without Mr. Forbright and his floppy jowls ordering her about.

With Lindie on the phone canceling appointments, Brea took the sheet of paper with the address of the shop on it and MapQuested it. An hour later she found herself picking up some of Lindie’s things from her house. With luggage in the back and Lindie in the front seat, squirming like a kid on the way to the ice cream parlor, Brea headed onto ninety-six west toward Ashe Bay, with printed-out directions and a disturbing feeling that something monumental was going to happen.

“You do realize you’re not supposed to use your powers,” Hermes drawled as Cupid erected an art dealership before their very eyes.

“If memory serves me I’m not supposed to use my powers to *seduce* her,” Cupid corrected. “Hera said nothing about building structures. Besides don’t try to help me now. If it wasn’t for Arachne telling me *something* about the woman, I wouldn’t know where to start.”

“You’re splitting hairs,” Hermes said, admiring the new building. “It looks too new to be an old shop.” He waved his hand, adding a layer of decrepitness to the structure. “That’s better.”

“Which brings me to my next question. All twelve of you had to agree to this task, how could you, my best friend in the world, betray me?”

“Oh, spare me the drama, Cupid.” Hermes shook his head. “We both know if I would have protested they would have brought in Dionysus and then they would have voted to keep me from helping you in any way. My way was better.”

Cupid snorted. “That doesn’t explain why my own mother betrayed me.”

“Are you serious? You really can’t figure that out? One word. Psyche.”

“Surely she’s gotten over that.” Cupid looked disbelieving. Aphrodite had wanted Cupid to make Psyche fall in love with a rather distasteful gentlemen, for she was tired of people comparing Psyche’s beauty to her own. But Cupid had taken her as his wife instead, further infuriating his mother, who insisted Psyche was not right in the head. Unfortunately, this was one of the few times his mother had been right. The marriage had been disastrous. It was perhaps a good thing Psyche divorced him after all. They hadn’t shared a marriage bed in centuries.

“Your mother is not known for getting over things, Cupid, not to mention what you did to her with Adonis.”

“By the gods, I was a child, it was an accident. I did not mean to make her fall for that young man. Besides if memory serves me right she didn’t seem all that resentful afterward.”

“It caused a scandal.”

“My mother is a scandal unto herself. Enough of this talk. Did you lure them here?”

“Yes, I spoke with a rather pleasant woman on the phone. I’m sure they took the bait and should be here soon. Why not woo her there, old friend? Why make her come all the way out in the middle of nowhere?”

“Distractions. I have a time limit. The city offers too many distractions, too many avenues of escape for my prey. I need her to concentrate on me and only me.”

“Ah, well I can see that.”

“Have you seen her?”

“No one but Artemis has seen her. But knowing Artemis, she’s probably uglier than the bottom of a septic tank.”

Cupid laughed, but disagreed. “No, an ugly woman would be easy to seduce. This woman must have some sort of problem. Perhaps she’s mental like Psyche. Maybe she even likes women instead of men.”

“No, your mother made sure it was fair in that area. Remember, Artemis said she marked her with the letter A, so be on the lookout. Well, anyway I can help you let me know.” Cupid nodded his head and before he could blink, Hermes was gone.

Cupid thought it a good time to use his only resource. He summoned forth the lovely spider. It appeared on his hand and traveled up his arm. He brought his forearm to eye level.

“Hello, Arachne. When she arrives I am counting on you to give me any inside information. Her seduction will be a cinch. I will need all the information you can give me. Stay close, until I call you.” Cupid allowed the spider to send her thoughts to him and he smiled. “Yes I haven’t forgotten all the fine print of our deal, I appreciate your help and regardless of the pact, I am forever in your debt.” The spider bade him goodbye before it shimmered and then was no longer there, leaving Cupid on his own to finish devising a plan to keep his immortality. He was the god of desire, how bad could this mortal be?

Three: A fish out of water

“You know, isn’t MapQuest supposed to give you the fastest route to your destination? Why does it seem like we’ve been driving for hours?” Brea sipped the last of her banana-flavored chai tea and threw the empty cup in the backseat to join the others. Lindie’s gaze followed the course of the discarded cup then she winced out loud.

“Really, Brea, what man is going to want a pig?”

“If I’m lucky, not one of them.”

“Look, you’re going to pass our turnoff again.” Lindie pointed to the exit and Brea relaxed a little. Okay maybe it wasn’t MapQuest that got her all turned around. It was probably the pit in her stomach that churned and turned and told her something was amiss. She dreaded this trip; it reeked of change, surprise. Brea didn’t like surprises. She liked total and utter control.

“I’m sorry, Lin, but I told you, I have a feeling about this, it’s... I don’t know.”

“Get out of your comfort zone. You’ve been having Mr. Forbright riding your butt for so long maybe you’re used to it and you’re really not ready for this business relationship to end.”

“Thanks, Oprah, but believe me, I want it to end.” Brea squinted in the darkness. Didn’t these people know how to erect streetlights? She’d been down here once, and that time Mr. Forbright had her flown in by helicopter. All the pieces of furniture she’d ordered for the house had been delivered and he had made sure she oversaw the placing of each and every piece. There was no time for sightseeing, because as soon as she and the furniture movers were done, he had the helicopter waiting to return them home.

“I can’t believe he’s letting us stay in one of his cottages. I thought surely he’d make us pitch a tent or something,” Brea murmured almost to herself as she strained her eyes to see the road where she had to turn to get to the cottage.

“Well, he said not to touch anything and to sleep in the guest rooms only. Old fart. We’re down here for him and he can’t even be hospitable.”

“Trust me, if there were hotels in Ashe Bay, that’s where he’d make us stay. Wait a minute; I think this is us.” Brea turned the car onto the freshly graveled road.

“It’s the only house for miles I’m sure,” Lindie chimed in, forgetting the sour mood she was in just a moment ago. “Despite the circumstances, isn’t it great to get out of the city for awhile? Nothing but crickets singing. And look, you can see the stars out here!” Lindie gushed, barely letting the car come to a stop before she was bolting out. “Listen to the crickets singing!”

Brea got out of the car and slapped her arm in irritation. “Yeah, well, feel the mosquitoes biting,” she grumbled as she swatted at her neck. “Come on, get your luggage. I’d love to play Little House on the Prairie with you, but I’m the one who drove the whole way out.” As Brea went to the back of the car to get the luggage, she noticed a rather large house across the street, but down the road a bit. Was it there the last time she was here? Surely she would have noticed it? She grabbed the luggage that Lindie made clear she had no intentions of helping with. It could be that she was so wrapped up in Mr. Forbright’s house that during the daytime hours she wouldn’t have noticed it. A shiver went down her back, as she got the vague feeling she was being watched. The house appeared empty and dark, but that didn’t mean someone wasn’t inside watching her and Lindie. Brea shrugged; she was tired and had an overactive imagination anyway. Slamming the trunk lid shut, she shoved Lindie’s bag in her arms as she passed her. “Let’s go, it’s creepy out here,” she muttered. Lindie looked at the stars once more and smiled.

Cupid and Hermes watched the women as they pulled up. Their night vision as sharp as their day vision, they had no problem seeing the humans clearly. Cupid smiled as the first woman burst from the car, excitement radiating from every pore of her being. Would Artemis be so kind as to give him such a beguiling creature to seduce? It would be like taking candy from a baby. She was a petite, exotic beauty and Cupid could see helping himself to her rather innocent charms. If things went his way, he’d have her saying yes to

his marriage proposal in a week. Arachne had done well. Her information gathering was proving to be priceless.

Then the other woman stepped from the car, slapping at her arm and neck in obvious irritation. Okay, so this one wasn't as much a nature lover as the other one. Hermes snorted when the woman seemed to zero in on the house.

"That one is trouble, my friend."

"How do you know that? Humans tire easy and she has just taken quite a drive. I am quite sure her negative body language is due to exertion." But even as Cupid reasoned, a knot formed in his gut. She did look like trouble; beautiful, sexy trouble. For a second it seemed as if she were looking right at him. He knew it was impossible, human vision did not function well in the night especially at this distance, but it sure as hell *felt* like she saw them.

"Do you think the tall one can see us?" Hermes asked a little uncomfortably.

"No, she's just sensitive. It says a lot about her nature."

"Such as?" Hermes raised his pale eyebrows and looked at Cupid head-on.

"She's suspicious by nature. A survivor even, always on the lookout for danger."

"Then I would venture to guess that Artemis might have picked her."

"You're jumping to conclusions, Herm, old friend. Don't underestimate the exterior of an innocent. That little one could be just as much trouble with her innocence. Full of archaic ideas like no sex before marriage." Cupid shook his head and shivered, he was glad the human race had been lost some of their hang-ups they'd revered in the past.

"Well," Hermes began, stepping away from the window, but not before taking one last look at the small beauty. "What are you going to do about a name? You know one of the rules is no lying. In this day and age you can't go around with a name like Cupid."

"What is wrong with the name Cupid?" he responded in defense. "I certainly like it better than Eros. Come to think of it, none of us were too crazy about our Roman names."

"To put it in simple terms, it sounds—uh, feminine. That is unless you're a male stripper, then I would say it's perfect." Hermes poured himself a drink, oblivious to the insult he had inflicted.

“Really? When was the last time you told a human your name is Hermes?” Cupid threw back, watching as Hermes choked on the drink. “I know why, because maybe your name sounds a bit backwoods? Like maybe your mother and father were related?” Hermes stood astonished before he burst into laughter. “Touché, my friend. But you have to admit, you cannot tell her your name is Cupid. She’ll think you’re crazy.”

“Well I’ve already thought of this, and I think I have a solution. I could choose a name that defines me, defines what I am.”

“Any ideas so far?” Hermes poured another drink for himself and one for Cupid. He reached into his pocket and pulled out two small, meticulously wrapped objects. He unwrapped one and plopped it into his drink, he repeated the process for Cupid’s drink. “How about a little ambrosia to give this drink some kick, eh?”

“Thanks,” Cupid gratefully accepted the drink, the ambrosia making it sweeter but more potent. “So far, I’ve come up with nothing, what about you?”

“Hmm, give me a moment.” Both gods sat in silence, racking their ancient brains for one name.

“What about the name Bob?” Hermes asked seriously.

“Did you somehow make your drink extra-strong?” Cupid wrinkled his face in distaste.

“Well, it’s a common name.”

“I am many things. Common is not one of them.” Cupid replied disgusted by the suggestion. “Besides what does the name ‘Bob’ mean, anyway? I am sure it has nothing to do with me or my situation.” Both men fell into silence again. The room was radiating with the brain energy being exerted.

“I have it!” Hermes snapped his fingers and a sly grin creased his face.

“Well, let’s hear it.” Cupid urged in annoyance.

“Jordan.” Hermes waited while Cupid mulled the name over in his mind. “It means descendant.”

“I know what it means, and you may have something there.” Cupid stood and began to pace the floor in the dark room. His wings shimmered into view; he stretched them,

letting them flap in a slow cadence as his mind worked feverishly. “Areson.” He pronounced as last.

“I don’t follow.” Hermes sat his half empty glass on the table next to him and ran a hand through his closely cropped blond curls.

“Areson—it means son of Ares, which by the way I am. Jordan Areson. Descendant, son of Ares,” he proclaimed with triumph. “Not a lie whatsoever.” He shook his wings before they shimmered out of sight. Hermes picked up his glass and bade Cupid do the same. When Cupid complied they raised their glasses to toast. “To you my friend, Jordan Areson.”

“Should we do some sightseeing?” Lindie asked as she tied her sneakers.

“No, I just want to go to this—what’s the name of the store again?”

“Olympiad Paintings,” Lindie supplied standing and smoothing her skirt down.

“Olympiad Paintings, and get the hell out of dodge. Is that businesslike?” Brea asked, showing disapproval in Lindie’s choice of clothing.

“Brea, we are in Mayberry so to speak. Country folk, pure and simple. Do you really think we’re impressing them with business attire?” Brea groaned as she looked at her own cream-colored suit skirt and saw Lindie’s point. She flipped through her packed clothing, tossing them about until she unearthed the simple jeans and white T-shirt. “That’s better.” Lindie smiled, looking at Brea as she slid into her tennis shoes.

“Let’s just find this shop and get the paintings. We can grab something to eat, then hit a hardware store so we can hang the paintings. Then we’re leaving, tonight if possible, first thing in the morning at the latest.” Brea was determined to get this over with. She shoved the credit card Mr. Forbright had delivered to her so she could buy the paintings into her back pocket.

“We’ll see.” Lindie tossed back at her as she headed out the front door. “I’ll drive since you drove down here.”

“Yeah, Lindie, that makes us even.” Brea followed her out, trying to ignore the knot in her stomach that seemed to get tighter and bigger with each step she took.

Twenty minutes and much too much foliage later, they hit the downtown area of Ashe Bay. Perhaps “downtown area” was too strong a reference. Brea couldn’t keep her mouth from gaping open in astonishment at the small town. It looked like a movie set. There was one restaurant simply named “Restaurant” in faded letters. Farther down was one mercantile store which boasted it sold everything. Brea doubted it. A town hall that also doubled as the town jail, which stood right next to the town bar. The bar that was descriptively named “Joe’s”. And how convenient was it to have the bar right next to the jail? The town was plain but functional. It seemed every expense was spared in building it.

A lone building sat a little off road. It was rather sturdy looking compared to the other antique structures in town. Brea could barely make out the weathered sign that read “Olympiad Paintings”.

“Are you kidding me?” Brea said incredulously.

“There’s nothing wrong with leading a simple life in a simple town.” Lindie responded, pulling the car to a stop in front of the mercantile store. “Besides I would have thought you would like this place. It may not have a ton of men here to hit on you and make your life miserable,” Lindie finished sweetly. Brea let the comment go, because on some level Lindie was right. Still, she did want a little bit more out of life than the bare necessities.

“Why park here and not in front of the shop we actually want?” Brea asked. Lindie tsked at her, something she knew irritated Brea.

“Because no matter what, we’re coming here for souvenirs, not to mention the restaurant is right next to this. Which by the way, you were the one who said we would go to the store and then get something to eat.” Brea hated when Lindie got in her know-it-all mood, particularly because that’s when she was most efficient and most annoying.

As Brea was exiting the car, she saw that the front door to the mercantile store was open. She was about to peer inside when she was hit dead on with a wave of dirty water. It splashed onto her fresh white shirt and splattered her face and hair. Lindie covered her

mouth in horror. Brea stood there dripping with dirty water. An older woman rushed out the store.

“Oh dear, I’m so sorry. I saw you a second too late.” She fluttered around Brea. She had black hair streaked with gray, her brown eyes, sincere and contrite as she looked upon the soaked Brea. “I’m sorry. I was throwing the mop water out. You see no one ever comes this early in the day. Oh my, I should have looked more closely! I don’t get customers at this time. Please come inside.” She gestured rather anxiously for Brea to come inside the shop. Stiffly, Brea followed, trying very hard to keep a lid on her anger. The woman had apologized; it couldn’t be undone.

Brea allowed herself to be led into the cool shop, Lindie close on her heels. The shop did sell a great many things, some of them Brea would classify as junk. They all had Ashe Bay written on them in some form. The old woman was sifting through a pile of folded shirts on a shelf when she pulled one out.

“This should fit you. It’s one of our best sellers. Of course it’s on the house. You can change right through there.” She pointed to a small bathroom. Brea gave her a stiff smile before taking the folded shirt. “There should be a clean towel in there. Please feel free to clean up; use whatever you need.” The old woman fiddled with the necklace at her throat. Brea said nothing; she was far too disgusted and mad. Yes, she knew it was an accident, but she knew that knot in her stomach wasn’t for nothing. This town just gave her weird vibes all the way around. Ten minutes later, Brea emerged from the bathroom, her own ruined shirt balled up in her hand. Lindie was sipping a cup of tea, having made instant friends with the drive-by bucket lady.

“There’s a cup of tea for you too, Brea.” Lindie informed her cheerfully before taking in the shirt Brea was wearing. It was white with a huge A in the middle of the shirt, with the words “Ashe Bay, when you need to get away from it all”, underneath it. Huge tacky dandelions acted as quotation marks. Lindie stifled a snicker. Best-seller indeed, with the older generation.

“Thank you.” Brea responded before looking at the old lady. “Thank you for the shirt.”

“Oh dear, it was the least I could do. That’s never happened before.”

This didn't make Brea feel any better. The only thing it proved was that weird things were probably happening *because* of her.

"Your friend here was telling me you girls are going to that shop down the road. I tell you, it just sprang up out of nowhere." Brea turned to look around the shop and rolled her eyes. Yeah, an old shop that sprang up out of nowhere. The old lady was slightly off her rocker. "Of course strange things always happen here. The supernatural like to play here because it's out of the way."

"Excuse me?" Brea whipped her head around, looking for the crazy gleam she just knew she would find in the old woman's eyes.

"We're so far off the beaten path that supernatural creatures abound here. Sometimes they, too, like to get away from it all. And sometimes they can seem untrustworthy. But you have to trust your instincts." The woman looked at Brea and Lindie with a knowing smile, as if what she said was normal.

"Yes, well we have to be going now. Lindie, put the cup down," she ordered.

"Oh, I see. You're not a believer." She came from around the counter and walked right up to Brea, studying her. "No matter, life will make a believer out of you." Then she grabbed Brea's hand. "Sometimes things are not always as they appear but that doesn't mean it's a bad thing." Then she seemed to add as an afterthought, "And call me Artie." She patted Brea's hand and released it. Brea grabbed Lindie around the arm and manhandled her out of the store.

"Let's get the damn paintings and go. I've had enough of this place." Lindie, walked with Brea toward Olympiad Paintings.

Four: A clandestine meeting

Brea entered the shop first. For a building that looked old on the outside it sure smelled new on the inside. The light scent of vanilla wafted in the air. Brea took a deep breath as she walked further into the store and without preamble tripped over the ridiculously plush rug and almost landed flat on her face. Lindie squealed and ran to her side, trying to help her up.

“Of all the stupid places to put a rug!” she ranted, on all fours, now letting her anger loose. She let out a puff of air, strong enough to blow back the damp hair from in front of her eyes. First the water, now this—she couldn’t get out of Ashe Bay fast enough.

“Actually, it’s a common place to put a rug,” a resonating voice said, coming from somewhere on the other side of the shop.

“Yes,” Brea snapped. “But not one that’s deep enough to sink the Titanic. You have to step *up* just to step *on* the friggin’ thing.” Brea leaned back, her butt resting on her heels. Her hands smarted just a little from having to stop her own weight from crashing down and smacking her face. She shook the tingles out.

“Please allow me to help you,” the voice said again, closer now, his footsteps light on the wood floors. Brea ignored the fact that his voice held a deep, sexy, hypnotic timbre—well almost ignored it.

“Oh? Do you have a coat rack that will snag me around the collar and hang me? I understand putting that by the door is commonplace as well.” As Lindie helped Brea to her feet, she heard her murmur something about “yummy enough to eat”. But she didn’t care. The owner had to understand that there were certain things you did *not* put in front of doors. This was a lawsuit waiting to happen.

“Hi, I’m Lindie,” her friend said breathlessly, as if she had just been the one to trip and fall. “This is my, uhm, friend, Brea.” Brea stood, now slightly behind Lindie, who was acting as if she were a teenager with her first crush on the really cute, most popular

guy at school. Brea's hot mood mirrored that of a hurricane. It just built and built and would leave destruction in its path.

"Allow me to introduce myself. I am Jordan Areson and I am the owner of this shop."

"You mean part-owner." Brea corrected him, still not looking at him, instead making sure her body was in working order. "I understand you have a business partner in Canton. He was the one who suggested we contact you. He believes you might be able to help us. Though I hope your art collection is much savvier than your decorating skills." Brea bent down to massage her bruised knees.

"If you're done checking my friend out, I was wondering if you had some really good replicas of Sellaio paintings?" she said rudely.

What Brea wanted to say was: ohmygod, ohmygod, ohmygod! She didn't think she'd ever seen a more breathtaking male. His long, blond hair was pulled back into a curly ponytail. It was not feminine in the least, but somehow only added to his sex appeal. Jordan Areson looked like he'd walked off the pages of Playgirl magazine—*every* page. She could see the magazine devoting an entire issue to this...perfectly made man. His body, though ensconced in a form-fitting black shirt and black slacks, yelled of perfection. She could almost see the six-pack abs, his arms muscular but not to the point of being ridiculous. He looked like a mischievous angel. Even Terry, with his boy-next-door looks, couldn't hold a candle to this sex god. With the thought of Terry, Brea was ripped back into reality. "Well?" she prompted with more venom than she felt. He was dangerous; he ate at her resolve not to get involved ever again. Brea watched his well-formed, sensual lips purse into a slight smile, as if he'd just come to some sort of conclusion.

Cupid searched frantically for the letter A on the small, petite, kind-natured woman who was clearly smitten with him. He could taste the foul mood the one named Brea was in. It *had* to be on the little one somewhere. Then the tall, strikingly beautiful woman with the most disagreeable personality he had ever known on a mortal woman stood up

straight and stepped forward in front of the smaller one. Her sculpted face enthralled him. The hazel eyes were lined with long thick lashes, which with one wink could have brought him to his knees. It took everything in him not to make his face go slack with disbelief, for a large A jumped out at him off her ugly shirt.

Despite her disposition, he was attracted to her. Her hazel eyes tried to pierce right through him. Renegade curly hair framed a perfect face. Her plump lips inspired him to kiss her. It would probably only earn him quite a smack across the face. He slowly walked around the two women, blatant in his appraisal of them. Though the smaller one was beautiful, she didn't have the derrière of the taller one—it took everything not to feel the plump globes. He circled until he now faced the two women, his hands clasped behind his back, more to keep from grabbing Brea and kissing her senseless, than having a relaxed stance.

“Well, what?” he questioned, losing track of the conversation.

“Do you have high quality Sellaio replicas or not?” He could see the waves of irritation coming off her. His work was cut out for him.

“Possibly,” he threw back, turning and heading toward the back of the shop. A second later he heard the women following him.

“Your business partner assured me that you had them. We came all this way because he said it was rare that you were here. We were trying to catch you before you left again.” Lindie poured out. Even without using his powers, he knew he had a strong presence. There was no helping the pheromones his body gave off. He was the god of desire, after all, and Lindie was very receptive.

“I could check what I have catalogued.” He stopped at the small counter, leaned back and faced the two women, as if he had nothing at all to do.

“Well, when would you be able to do that, Mr. Areson?” Brea piped up.

“I don't know. I'll have to check my schedule. After all, I'm a very busy man.”

Brea watched him as he leaned against the small counter and lazily eyed them. “You don't look occupied now,” Brea said, a little too sweetly.

“I have customers,” he retorted, staring into her hazel eyes.

“But *we’re* the customers,” Brea replied, exasperated. She was hanging on to her sanity by a thin thread.

“Exactly, and I can’t go off looking for something while you two just stand here.”

“So if we left, you’d look for them?” Brea knew this was the most absurd conversation she’d ever had.

“It’s possible,” he said again, not moving an inch.

“Look, do you want to sell us the paintings or not? We’re prepared to pay top dollar for them.” Brea crossed her arms in front of her chest. She shifted her weight to one leg, and tapped her foot in irritation.

“If I didn’t sell you the paintings, I believe I could still sleep at night.” He pinned Brea with his gorgeous blue eyes, lowering them just a tad as he studied her. Brea ignored the fact that the expression made him look sexy as hell.

“What’s your point?” With unparalleled intensity right here and now she hated men.

“You want to *buy* the paintings a whole lot more than I want to sell them.”

“Why don’t we stop playing games here, Mr.—”

“Jordan, I insist.”

“Jordan then.” Brea repeated. “What is it that you want?”

“A date.” There it was. He wanted a date; he might as well have said he wanted one of her kidneys.

“I don’t date people I do business with.”

“I haven’t done any business with you that I can recall.”

“But you might.”

“But I might not.”

Now they were at a stalemate. Lindie just looked from one to the other. Brea’s hazel gaze clashed with blue. He wasn’t budging any more than she was. Lindie pulled Brea back a few feet, but Brea refused to break eye contact with the man. Lindie turned Brea’s stiff body around until they were eye to eye.

“Look, Brea, you yourself said you couldn’t wait to get out from under Mr. Forbright’s thumb. It’s one date. He isn’t liver casserole here.” Lindie threw Jordan an appreciative glance before she went on.

“You’re on his side?” Brea whispered fiercely at Lindie, keeping an eye on Jordan as he feigned busy-work, moving papers around on the small counter.

“No, I’m on our side. One date. You’re one date closer to getting away from Mr. Forbright. We did not drive four hours down here so you can turn tail and run from the most gorgeous man on the face of the earth.”

Brea took a deep breath and looked at the pleading face of her best friend, who was now also acting as the voice of reason. One date, that’s all she had to do. She walked up to Jordan, who now stood feet planted apart; even just standing there he reeked of sexuality. Her mouth went dry as she took his measure. He was trouble. She hated trouble. Her traitorous body with the tacky T-shirt demanded that he touch her. She took a step back, knowing that small amount of distance did not lessen her desire for him.

“Fine, Jordan. A date.”

“Thank you. I’ll pick you up about nine.”

“Nine?” Brea shrieked. There was no way she could leave tonight if the date didn’t start until nine.

“Anxious for me are you?” he teased, deliberately provoking her. His sexy grin showed off deep dimples, doing things to her libido that she had thought was long since dead.

“No, nine is fine. I’m at the—”

“Forbright place. I know. I’ll see you at nine.”

There was no sense in asking how he knew that. This was a small town. They had intel better than the military. Brea nodded and with stiff legs began to make her way to the front door. Lindie waved at Jordan until she almost knocked over a rack of postcards with famous paintings on them. For the second time that day Brea grabbed Lindie by the arm and hauled her butt out the door.

Brea sipped the tasteless, warm liquid. Her mind was in so much turmoil she couldn’t even enjoy a simple cup of coffee. How dare he blackmail her into a date? He

showed no shame or remorse. No hint at being reasonable. Lindie reached across the table and punched her in the arm.

“Ow!”

“Get your head out of your ass!” Lindie demanded in a very uncharacteristic show of hostility.

“What is wrong with you? You’re supposed to be rooting for the home team and you’re practically salivating over him.”

“Well, he *is* gorgeous. He reminds me of a Greek god.”

“Oh please!” Brea added a little more sugar to her coffee, thereby making it ninety percent sugar. “He’s okay.” Her lips barely formed the lie. In all honesty, he was gorgeous. She’d never been so attracted to a man in all her twenty-six years. Which meant she would make sure nothing happened between the two of them. Besides, he lived too far away to even think of getting involved with him.

“You know, for the most part you’re a good liar, but he must really have knocked you off your axis, because even I can see you’re lying through your teeth.”

“Fine,” Brea conceded, absently adding more sugar to her coffee. “He’s a Greek god. Blah, blah, blah. Get over it. It’s going to be one date and one date only. Once I get those paintings we’re burning rubber. Understand me?” Brea pointed a finger at Lindie to drive her point home.

“I don’t think he’s going to let you get away that easily. He sure seemed like he had your number, Brea. He didn’t even bother to try and ask nicely, oh no he went straight for the kill—blackmail.” Lindie couldn’t keep the admiration from her voice.

“Could you praise him a little bit more, I don’t think you quite covered all the bases,” Brea responded with sarcasm, this time adding cream to the coffee that was threatening to spill over the rim.

“He’s got your panties in a bunch doesn’t he?” Lindie giggled.

“No, he doesn’t bother me at all.” Brea feigned nonchalance as she looked at Lindie’s amused dark eyes.

“What you have there is not a cup of coffee, but a cup of diabetic shock.” Lindie tilted her head at Brea’s coffee. Lindie pushed it away from Brea in disgust.

“Why does he want to go out with me anyway? Clearly you were more than willing to date him.”

“He’s old school, Brea. He likes the chase.”

“Well, I’m not playing. Let’s go. We might as well sightsee while we’re here.”

“Oh good!” Lindie brandished a tourist map from her purse and slapped it on the table. She already had places on the map marked off in bright red. Brea caught a glimpse of some of them and winced. An old cider mill? Old Indian caverns? The actual bay that Ashe Bay was named for? Oh Lord, she was in tourist hell. The date with Jordan seemed a lot less torturous.

Five: The best offense is a good defense

“She couldn’t be a shape-shifting barracuda. I don’t think the devil spawned her. But there might be some truth to your belief that the Council has it in for you by picking this particular woman.” For the last half hour Hermes had been trying to convince his best friend all was not lost.

“You didn’t actually talk to her, Herm, if she were any more venomous she could have poisoned me from across the room—*without* biting me.”

“You can’t be poisoned, Cupid.” Hermes drawled, seeming already bored with the line of conversation.

“You know what I mean. She agreed to the date because she had to. I really don’t think she is just going to give in and play nice, no matter how much she wants those paintings.”

“Would you listen to yourself? No wonder the Council is picking on you. You’re whining. Since when did a woman get you this upset?”

“Since my immortality depended on it.” Cupid snapped, still pacing the floor in the art shop furiously.

“But you’ve been seducing women for centuries. You’ve helped less skillful mortals seduce others. This should be nothing for you.”

“I know, I know. But something about this woman gets to me.”

“Well, I have no advice for you other than go with your gut. Now if we’re finished here, I want a beer.”

“No can do, I need to speak to Arachne. Brea is without question going to take some pre-planning to get around her defenses.”

As Hermes vanished from the room, Cupid’s attention flashed on the plush rug Brea had tripped over. He couldn’t help himself to an eyeful of her backside as she had pulled herself up on all fours. He called Arachne to him. It was best he didn’t torture himself with all the positions he would like to see her in.

Brea wished she could somehow mentally will the man to speak faster, but no, after every word or two it seemed mandatory that he take his baseball cap off and scratch his head before he could finish a sentence.

“Now what year...” Cap off, scratch, scratch, cap on again. “...did it dry up? Let me think here...” Cap off, scratch, cap on again. Brea was going crazy. Even Lindie looked regretful that she had enlisted him as a spur of the moment tour guide.

“Really, sir, it’s not that important. But what you’re saying is there is no actual bay?” Brea asked, trying to speed up the most boring tour she’d ever been on.

“Nope. We just keep the name...” Cap off, scratch, scratch, cap on again. “...to draw visitors.”

Yeah, right, they’re flocking to Ashe Bay like flies to garbage. Brea stared at the swamp-like land in front of her and seriously doubted there had ever been a bay anywhere, at anytime. The man stood there with a grisly gray beard, one eye heavy with cataract, the other trained on her, looking with an interest that made Brea sick. He had to be kidding.

“So, what are you girls up to tonight?” He took his cap off. This time he held it between his hands as he looked at Brea and smiled. Yep, she’d won the bet. He had four teeth; Lindie said at least seven.

“I have a date.” Brea couldn’t say it fast enough. He turned to look at Lindie with hope in his ancient face.

“I have to help her get ready. She’s awful on her own. Well, thanks.” Lindie pushed a couple of bills in his hand and the girls scurried off as fast as they could.

“I can’t thank you enough for that tourist experience, Lindie.” Brea burst into laughter as soon as she got inside the car. Within moments they were heading back toward the cottage.

“Well, okay, it wasn’t Disneyland, but didn’t you learn something?” Lindie implored. “I’m not yet ready to admit that the whole tourist thing had been a waste of time and a bad idea.”

“Yes. I learned don’t ask the locals to act as tour guides. Especially ones who are sitting outside the bar whittling wood.”

“He looked authentic. Like he knew stuff.” Lindie snickered a little.

“Like how far he could spit a wad of tobacco?” Both girls shivered in disgust at the memory of seeing the brown juice being continuously spat out.

“Well, Jordan should take away any unpleasant memories.” Lindie eased into the topic.

“Don’t remind me.” Brea groaned. Like Lindie had to. It was the one thought that kept running through her mind the last few hours. Well, that and getting away from her tour guide.

“Really, Brea, you should try to enjoy yourself for once. Every guy isn’t Terry.”

“You’re right, every guy is some form of Terry.”

“Look, you don’t have to marry the guy, just go out on a date. Have fun, no strings attached.”

“Ah but there are strings attached.”

“He just used the paintings to get you to say yes. I thought it ingenious. For God sakes, Brea, have a fling! You can’t spend the rest of your life celibate.”

“Says who?” Brea looked out the window at the passing scenery. Lindie took a deep breath and fell silent, leaving Brea to her thoughts.

Brea didn’t like being backed into a corner. She didn’t like to be told what to do, and she certainly did not like being attracted to that control freak, Jordan Areson. She had to give it to him; he’d won this round, making her go out with him. But round two? That was hers.

“Hey, Lindie, before you take us back to the cottage, stop by the mercantile store. I want to pick up something for my date tonight.”

Lindie beamed at her, switched the CD player on and began singing along with Rob Thomas. Brea knew what she was thinking—that she had come around to resigning herself to enjoy her date, and she was right. She had every intention of enjoying herself.

“Brea, come on. I want to see how you look before Jordan gets here,” Lindie whined for the fourth time. She’d been instructed to stay in the car when Brea got out to make a purchase at the store. Brea didn’t even show her what it was once they got back to the cottage. They watched a DVD Lindie had brought along just in case they had time on their their hands, and she couldn’t help eyeing the bag throughout the whole movie. It was eating her up inside to know what was in the plain brown paper sack. Brea had kept it close to her at all times, refusing to show Lindie what it was. After the movie, Brea had dragged her luggage to the bathroom and refused to come out until she said her look was complete. Whatever that meant. Lindie hoped Brea was letting her guard down and would go out and have some fun. The doorbell chimed at exactly nine o’clock. Lindie ran to the bathroom door “He’s here!” she screeched, trying to keep her voice low.

“Well, go let him in,” came Brea’s muffled response.

Lindie hightailed it to the door and threw it open. His beauty knocked the air right out of her lungs again. He was dressed casually in a dark blue dress shirt with a button or two undone and black slacks. His hair was tied neatly in a ponytail; his blue eyes twinkled as they looked at her, admiring her beauty as well.

“Well, hello again, Lindie.” His sexy voice wrapped itself around her, making her knees want to just give out. “Is Brea here and ready to go?”

“Yeah, she’s just putting on the finishing touches. She’s been getting ready for you for the last hour. Wouldn’t even let me help her,” Lindie spilled out. Words just tumbled when she was nervous.

“Did she specify I wait out here?” he asked in amusement.

“Oh, gosh no. I’m sorry, please come in.” Lindie stepped back so he could come in, berating herself for not asking him in. No sooner had he come in, then the bathroom door clicked open and Brea stepped out. Lindie and Cupid both stared in disbelief.

Brea smiled at them as she approached. She sported two very neat, ponytails on either side of her head. Her face was scrubbed clean of any and all makeup, though that didn’t detract from her beauty one bit. But the extra-large Mickey Mouse fleece top and bottoms swallowed her statuesque figure. It was the outfit that Brea wore around the house to be comfortable, and she was now wearing it on her date. Lindie’s eyes bugged

out as she looked at Brea's feet. She now knew what was in the brown paper bag and why Brea wouldn't let her see it. Because Lindie would have burned the super-fluffy, pink rabbit boot slippers (complete with floppy ears) that Brea wore. Upon closer inspection, the slippers had those googly eyes that moved around when you walked, and right now, they were cross-eyed.

"I'm ready to go," Brea announced. Lindie yanked her by the arm, begging Jordan to excuse them for a moment.

"What are you doing?" Lindie whispered, anger in her voice.

"Going on a date," Brea responded in innocence.

"You look like you're going to a slumber party filled with teenage girls," Lindie shot back. "In case you haven't noticed, that is one hundred percent prime male over there. Oh, wait!" Lindie gasped as realization set in. "You want him to *not* want you. Brea, you're sick."

"No, I'm comfortable. Now if you'll excuse me." She brushed past a blustering Lindie and grabbed her newly purchased, and equally tacky, Ashe Bay tote bag that she was using as a purse for the evening. "Are you ready to go, Jordan?" She held her arm out so he could hook it. Without a beat he took her by the arm and bade Lindie a good night.

He wanted to laugh. He wanted to laugh as he hadn't laughed in a very long time. She was incorrigible, if tonight was anything to go by. She would be many things, but boring would not be one of them. Even with her outrageous attire he found her breathtaking. She'd said nothing at all since getting into the car. If she thought for a moment she could deter him, she was sadly mistaken. Too much was riding on him seducing her. There wasn't a woman alive that he couldn't seduce and walk away from, Brea would be no different once he accomplished his task.

"Aren't you curious as to where we're going?" he asked, maneuvering the cherry red Corvette. He drove way past the speed limit, which was about five miles per hour in this neck of the woods.

“Not really,” she said icily.

“So you’re saying you’re up for anything tonight?”

Brea caught the dark meaning but refused to react to his words, instead she opted for bored.

“Within reason.” She picked at her nails, trying desperately to ignore him, but it was hard. He looked edible. She wanted to rip the tie out of his hair and run her fingers through the baby-soft locks. No, she wasn’t bored at all; she was a bundle of nervous energy.

“I’m taking you someplace special.”

“That’s nice.” She flicked at imaginary lint on her sweat pants.

Cupid allowed her to wallow in silence; he had just the thing for her. He cut on his CD player and within moments Sarah McLachlan’s haunting voice oozed out of the speakers. She turned her head to look at him in shock.

“You don’t like the music? I can play something else if you like.” He kept the smugness out of his voice, trying to appear accommodating and sincere.

“No, I love her, she’s my favorite.” Brea grudgingly admitted. “I never pegged you for a fan.”

“She has a beautiful voice. I appreciate beauty in all its forms,” Cupid responded and realized he was telling the truth. The woman did have a beautiful voice. Brea had good taste in music. Arachne definitely had her uses.

“Is that what got you into selling art?” Brea asked.

Oh boy. Cupid had to think. One of the rules was not lying. She was looking at him intently; she could smell a lie a mile away.

“Art was a way for me to acquire a certain beauty that I wouldn’t have had any other means of securing.” She seemed to think about it for a moment then let it go. Cupid let out a breath he’d been holding. Minutes later they turned onto a dark road, so pitch black the headlights could barely cut through it.

“Where are we?” She sat up in her seat, squinting to no avail. She wondered for a second if she’d allowed herself to be kidnapped by a serial killer. But the sound of music drifted to her ears the deeper they drove into the darkness. Then, out of nowhere, a huge

structure loomed. White, string lights decorated the outside. Expensive cars were parked to the left of the building. It took Brea a second to realize that the building was in fact a house—a large house that had been converted to a business. A club.

“One of the most exclusive places in the world believe it or not. By invitation only. High rollers, politicians that sort of thing,” Jordan informed her with a sly smile.

Brea looked aghast as they pulled to a stop in front of the valet. Jordan got out first and came around to open the door for her. Brea sat there as women beautifully dressed walked by. She looked down at her own attire, and realized she had made a grave mistake, and the look on Jordan’s face told her he was well aware that he had won round two as well...

Six: The road to hell

Brea hesitated for what seemed like an eternity. She stared at his bronzed, muscular arm reaching out, waiting for her to grasp it. Briefly she wondered at the golden tattoo of a bow and arrow on his inner right wrist before she made up her mind. She was not going to become a shrinking violet just because she wasn't dressed in a Donna Karan dress, or Jimmy Choo shoes. It didn't matter that her face wasn't exquisitely made up with fine cosmetics from Sephora. Wasn't bothering her one bit that she had not one trinket of Tiffany's gracing any part of her body. At least that's what she told herself as she exited the Corvette and sniffed to herself, trying to get courage when she was running on empty.

Instantly, he pulled her close to his body when she stood. A rather possessive gesture, but her irritation vanished when he leaned in and whispered close in her ear, "You have no need to be self-conscious. Your natural beauty far outshines any dress or trinket these women wear." The flip-flop her heart did could not be ignored. His warm breath against her ear caused a shiver down her spine she'd never experienced. It took everything in her not to collapse against him and beg him to whisper more into her ear.

"Thank you," she replied rather demurely.

The path from the makeshift parking area to the house was lined with lights. As they came closer to the house she could see a lake behind it. A soft breeze blew fresh and sweet. She inhaled deeply. She had always loved the smell of the lake. When they entered the house, a man in a tuxedo stood waiting by a coatroom to take whatever wraps they had. Jordan nodded and tipped him, though they had no use of his service. He flashed a huge grin and bid them welcome.

"What's the name of this place?" Brea asked, looking at the glossy wooden floors. The place was decorated with antique furnishings. Some people were draped over the furniture, others were in small groups, laughing and talking.

"It has no name." Jordan winked at her. Brea noticed he still had not released her arm as they walked. "It is a club for the powerful and affluent."

“That exclusive huh?” Brea smiled. Sometimes people had too much money.

“Exactly. You must understand even the rich like to party and not have it on the front of a news rag. Those who are important enough or have the means to frequent this place know where to find it.”

“So selling paintings is that profitable for you?” Brea asked, wondering just how much money this man had. Did that make him think he could acquire anything he wanted—like her? Again, he seemed to hesitate before he answered.

“No, it is only a means to an end. Would you like to dance?” He stopped then, looking her fully in the face, waiting to see her reaction.

Now Brea found herself hesitating again as she looked at the huge dance floor they came upon. It was a beautiful dark cherry floor that reflected the soft lights from the chandelier above. People were watching dancers while seated at the candlelit tables surrounding it. Some even enjoyed scrumptious elegant meals, while drinking from crystal wine flutes. She glanced down at her bunny slippers, which while in the store looked funny as hell because they seemed to stay perpetually cross-eyed, now looked childish and stupid. Talk about a plan going awry.

“Uh, yeah, sure,” she murmured, feeling her insides turn to mush at the thought of all eyes being on her and her bunny slippers, and oh lest she forget, the Mickey Mouse get-up. Her outfit clashed with the Old World elegance of the club. Tuxedoed waiters brushed by seeing to the every whim of the patrons. She had on an ensemble that would go over well at Chuck E. Cheese.

He led her onto the dance floor and Brea could have sworn she heard a hush go through the crowd. Of course it could have been her overactive imagination coupled with her low self-esteem made for quite the combination tonight. When he circled her waist with his arm and firmly held her hand with the other, Brea gasped. She couldn’t get used to the reaction her body had to him.

“Breathe,” he said into her ear. She’d never been so nervous in her life. “You’re a beautiful woman, Brea, surely physical accessories are not throwing you for a loop?”

“No. Uh, well, maybe a little,” she admitted, letting out a deep breath. She was being silly. “It’s not like I know any of these people, right?” She forced a laugh.

“Miss Brea Saunders, is that you?” came the slightly southern voice of the biggest pain in the ass in the whole world. Brea stopped cold and found herself staring at the very ancient Mr. Forbright.

“Hello, Mr. Forbright.” Brea stammered. Tonight just took first place as the worst night this year so far.

“What are you doing here? Shouldn’t you be off acquiring my merchandise?” The tall, thin, brunette on his arm with glassy eyes that spoke of her being heavily illegally medicated, zoned her gaze onto Jordan.

“Miss Saunders is working, Forbright. I requested her presence this evening in exchange for information on the paintings you speak of.” Jordan smiled. It did not go unnoticed that he had referred to him as Forbright. This evening was getting better and better.

“Why, Cupid, I didn’t know you’d be here tonight. Hell, I just heard you left here the other night with three of our club sisters to have a wild weekend.” He winked conspiratorially at Jordan, who seemed to pale at the information.

“Well, you know how things get blown out of proportion, Forbright. Believe me. I did not have a wild weekend with those women. Now if you’ll excuse us, I believe Miss Saunders here wanted to take a walk by the water.” Jordan seemed as if he wanted to get away from Mr. Forbright more than she did. As soon as they were out of earshot she abruptly stopped and turned to him.

“What’s this Cupid business and how well do you know Mr. Forbright?” Was he squirming? Did he look just a little bit uncomfortable?

“They call me Cupid here. Many people here go by alter ego names, it’s fun for them. As for Mr. Forbright, I know him from this club. It’s where he met his wife, who of course was serving drinks at the time.” He smirked at that one.

“Why didn’t he just ask you to sell him the paintings then?”

“Unless a person is infamously known, we don’t ask the occupation of guests here. He doesn’t know I sell them.”

They arrived at the edge of the water. It was breathtaking. The lake was completely smooth like black glass. A swimming raft was barely illuminated by the lights from the shore.

“Care for a swim?” he asked, looking at her. Then he did something unexpected. He pulled her close to him and his mouth descended toward hers. She could have stopped it at any moment, but she didn’t. She just watched his beautiful lips descend and she tilted her head up to accept them. The moment her lips made contact with his, all her insides melted like ice cream in a broiler. She pushed her body closer, melding it against his hard body. His tongue swept inside her mouth, tasting, dueling, daring her to respond, and now that all common sense had left the building she saw no reason not to comply.

Her fingers went to his confined hair, yanking the leather tie out. His hair fell around her fingers and she tangled them deliciously in the curls, pulling his lips closer against her own. His hands traveled with ease under the large sweatshirt finding their way to her breasts. Gently he caressed them. Electricity seemed to pulse between their bodies. She could feel his arousal sandwiched between them and she began to grind herself against it. It was her own wanton moan that jerked her back into reality. She broke the kiss, realizing with horror that she had abandoned her own agenda for the evening. She wanted to turn him off from her, to keep it businesslike. Instead, she found herself masturbating against him and returning his hot kisses.

“Would you like to take a swim now?” he dared her, his breathing uneven. It did great things to her self-esteem to know he was just as affected by that kiss as she was, though his arousal had already driven that point home.

“Why does it seem like you goad me on purpose?” she inquired, debating if she wanted to take him up on his silent dare.

“It’s the hard shell you have around you. I want to be the one who cracks it.” He looked serious as he said it.

“You don’t know me, Jordan.”

“That’s what I’m trying to remedy. If you allow me.”

“You just want to get laid,” she responded boldly. Brea was never really one to mince words.

“Yes, I like to get laid. But I assure you this isn’t about getting laid. I really want to get to know you. You’re not like other women. That intrigues me.”

“All men say that to women. But thank you for being honest. I’m not sleeping with you.” Brea took off her sweatshirt, not looking at him, for if she did she would lose her nerve. “I will go for a swim however.”

She could feel Jordan’s, gaze glued to her as she brought the sweatshirt over her head. Her nervousness made her feel like a little girl, and at the same time a very desirable woman. She used one foot to pull one slipper off by the heel, then the other one, and she stepped back, not looking at him once. She gripped the band of her pants and pulled them off. Brea now stood there in a plain bra and panties and looked at him.

“Am I to swim alone then?” she challenged.

Brea watched and swallowed as his chiseled chest was revealed before her eyes. His six-pack abs were sculpted. He, too, toed off his shoes and wasted no time at all sliding his pants off. He obviously had no problems going commando. He stood gloriously naked in front of her. He could have been a statue, his body was perfection. His loose hair blew back and Brea unconsciously stepped forward.

She ran her fingers along his chest and body as if she were blind. She heard his sharp intake of breath. She’d never had a man react to her like this before. Jordan expertly pulled the straps of her bra down, then reached around her to unclasp it. He stared at her body as the bra fell at their feet. Her nipples stood erect and she wanted so desperately for him to take them into his mouth. She eased her underwear down and stepped out of those as well, revealing her most intimate parts.

“By the gods you’re beautiful,” he choked out, looking into her hazel eyes. Even in the dim light Brea tried to hide her vulnerability as she stood naked before him.

“So are you.” She smiled shyly then, as she looked at the most male part of him, still aroused and almost pointing at her. Then it was her turn to act without warning. She turned, flashing her firm, rounded bottom before she splashed into the lake and squealed from the coolness of it. Jordan soon followed.

As Brea swam out to the raft, she tried to quell her swirling thoughts. He was beautiful and she wanted him, on the other hand he was trouble. Her body was just as wet from his touch as it was from the lake. It was a struggle of pure will not to drop to her knees and take that glorious cock into her mouth. No, that would start something she didn't want started. He was a business contact, a means to an end. She couldn't get involved with Jordan Areson. Of course, this was all fine reasoning if she wasn't stark naked with him right behind her. What the hell was she thinking taking his challenge? She was enjoying herself, she had to admit begrudgingly. It was like he had some inside track to her personality. He knew the right things to say. He took her to this beautiful, exclusive club complete with a lake. He liked the same music she liked.

It was eerie, but as she reached the swim raft she could barely hear him swimming behind her. His strokes were perfect, almost silent as he cut through the water toward her. She heaved herself up and found herself shivering. Within seconds he was next to her.

"I have enough body heat for the both of us," his deep voice wrapped around her senses, already warming up her body. She nodded when he sat behind her. His body, though wet, was warm.

"You're as toasty as a warm blanket," she commented, clamping her lips shut when she felt his cock nestle between them, impressive and aroused. His strong arms came around her and one hand played with her nipple. Tomorrow she would wonder what madness came over her to allow him such access to her body.

"I bet there are parts of you much hotter." He laughed, a sexy sound rumbling from deep within his chest.

Brea didn't reply as she sat there, melted against him, feeling an energy from him that seemed to magnify itself in her. "What if someone finds our clothes?"

"Then I think it will be pretty obvious what we've done and they'll give us privacy." He pulled her closer, until she stopped shivering.

"This is crazy." Brea breathed deeply then let it out slowly.

"What is?"

"This, us—swimming naked. I don't do these things."

"Maybe you should try to have fun more often then."

“You sound like Lindie.”

“She sounds wise.” Brea could hear the smile in his voice.

“She’s too trusting.”

“Perhaps you’re not trusting enough.”

Brea stiffened in his arms, then scooted away. “Trust is earned, not given. I’m ready to leave now.”

“I’m sorry if I offended you. I only meant—”

“I know what you meant. This between us tonight should have never happened. I don’t even know you that well.” Brea jumped off the swim raft and headed for shore.

Cupid cursed silently to himself as he dove in after her. He could have easily overtaken her but he knew she was trying to work off her anger, so he held back. She’d been hurt. That much was obvious from the hard veneer she put on. It would take a lot to knock down her walls. He found himself wondering if he should continue this. He shook his head and banished the thought. Artemis said once the chosen woman agreed to marry him she would erase her memory. Did they have a right to play around with her life like that? How could he ask her to trust him when he had ulterior motives?

For the first time that night, Brea was glad she’d worn the large sweats. Not only did they go on easily despite her being dripping wet, they were warm. Even the dark pink bunny slippers warmed her cold toes. Her anger, however, held her in the grip of its heat. How dare he judge her? He had no idea what she’d been through. Was she supposed to trust anyone who had large amounts of testosterone? Not likely. This was her just desserts for letting her guard down. All because a man was unnaturally handsome and sexy. She knew Jordan had made it to shore and was behind her dressing. She tapped her bunnied feet in impatience. When she saw he was dressed, she stalked around the house. Brea stiffened slightly as his hand somehow found its way to the small of her back and guided her toward the valet.

The whole drive home was in utter silence. Twice he tried to apologize; twice she glowered at him refusing to speak. She felt him glance her way and still she kept her gaze

glued to the dark scenery as it flew by. Finally, the dreaded silence ended as they pulled up to Mr. Forbright's cottage. Brea let herself out before he could get out of the car and slammed the door. She could feel his stare as he watched her until she entered the cottage. He even stayed there until she'd clicked on all the lights. Brea sighed. He was wasting his time. She could never see giving him another chance.

Seven: Mending fences

Brea lay in bed refusing to face the day. She had tossed and turned all night thinking of the gorgeous naked guy she had swum with last night-and probably overreacted to. The fact that she was lying here regretting her actions spoke volumes she didn't necessarily want to hear. She didn't know him, and no matter how many times she told herself she didn't want to know him, she saw it for the lie that it was. This wasn't purely professional. There was something about him—something intrinsic that was attracting her like a moth to a flame. A very big flame—a big gorgeous blond flame. With incredible abs and baby-soft hair and intense blue eyes... Arrrgh! What the hell was wrong with her?

She stared off into the far right corner of the room as something shiny reflected in the sunlight. A silver, beautifully spun spider web glittered in the sun. Brea could see the small, colorful spider in the middle of its web. Though Brea was not an arachnid expert, even she could see this was no run-of-the-mill house spider. It looked too exotic. Brea suppressed a wave of panic that surfaced when she realized the spider could be very poisonous. Her gut instinct told her it wasn't. Momentarily distracted by the spider, all thoughts of Jordan escaped her mind as she climbed out of the bed and walked with caution toward the corner, keeping a careful distance in case it was a jumping spider.

“Well, hello there,” she cooed at the spider. “What kind of spider are you anyway?” Upon closer inspection it was gorgeous. She was no spider-lover but even she could appreciate the almost iridescent colors on its back. For a second she considered getting a shoe and killing it. “How about we make a deal, little one? You don't bother me and I won't bother you.” She looked at it a second longer before Jordan invaded her thoughts again. “Well, I'm up now, I might as well get dressed,” she mumbled.

Five minutes later, she sat at the polished oak table in disgust. Lindie always woke up way too happy. It wasn't normal. Everyone should be protesting getting out of bed to work or do some other heinous chore that required them to get up. But no, not Lindie, she

danced around with her iPod earphones in, blissfully happy at eight in the morning. When Lindie spotted her sitting at the table she yanked out the earphones and plastered herself in the seat across from Brea.

“I didn’t hear you come in last night, how’d it go?” Her almond-shaped eyes bore into Brea’s with unabashed curiosity.

“We went to an exclusive club, swam naked, got into an argument and then came home,” Brea responded matter-of-factly. She walked to the couch then plopped down.

“You swam naked!?” she squealed. “Oh my God, is his body as sinfully gorgeous naked as I imagined it to be?”

Brea blushed, knowing Lindie hadn’t been the only one imagining him naked. She, however, got to see the real deal and he was mighty impressive.

“I have no idea what you imagined, Lindie, but yes, he was perfect if you go for that sort of thing.” Brea tried to sound nonchalant but the image of his aroused cock danced around in her brain.

“Oh, I’m so proud of you—wait.” Lindie paused recalling Brea’s words. “You got into an argument? What on earth could you have argued about? You were naked for God’s sake!”

“He—well I might have overreacted to a passing comment he made.” Brea tumbled out, her face getting hot. She’d reacted badly.

“You, Brea? Overreacting? To something a guy said? I can’t imagine.” Lindie got up and flopped down next to Brea. “You gotta stop doing this, hon. I know Terry hurt you, I was there for you, remember? But Terry wasn’t representing the whole male population, just the assholes. Fine representation by the way.” Lindie got the smile from Brea she had been going after. “Just have some fun for once. Don’t think about long-term relationships or past involvements. Think about having fun.” She leaned her head until she and Brea’s were touching.

“I screwed up. He probably won’t even sell me the paintings now.”

“No, if I read him right he’ll come back stronger than ever. I could see he marked you, Brea. He wants you.”

“You have a very romanticized view of the world, honey. He didn’t get what he wanted last night, he won’t come sniffing around here.”

The knock at the door stopped all conversation. They both sat up straight and looked at each other. Lindie had a huge smile on her face.

“I bet that’s him,” she whispered as if he could hear her through the thick door.

“This early in the morning? I think not. Does he look like a guy like who gets up this early?” Brea whispered back.

“If you don’t answer that door, I will.” Lindie whispered fiercely. Another rap on the door echoed in the cottage. Lindie and Brea eyed each other until Brea broke the connection and went to answer the door. She took a deep breath before turning the knob and opening the door.

Jordan stood there with his hands behind his back and the sexiest grin ever.

“Good morning, Brea.” His deep voice made her belly do a flip. He was dressed in a pair of nice-fitting jeans and a T-shirt, almost her exact clothing twin.

“Good morning, Mr. Areson,” she said in her best professional voice. She wanted to start off fresh, professionally. She heard Lindie snort loudly from the couch. Jordan raised his eyebrow in surprise.

“I thought we dispensed with the formalities. I intend to keep addressing you as Brea and hope you will continue to call me Jordan.” He smiled, letting his gorgeous dimples sucker her into a smile as well.

“Fine, Jordan, how can I help you?”

“I was under the impression we could help each other.” Still smiling, he brandished the items from behind his back, a steaming cup of coffee and a plain white paper bag. “Breakfast. Coffee and a bagel with French onion cream cheese. I do hope you like bagels and cream cheese.” He looked at her in question.

“It’s my favorite on-the-go breakfast.” She was stunned. How did he do that? How did he know exactly what she liked and what she didn’t? For reasons Brea couldn’t explain, the spider in her bedroom flashed in her mind, Brea pushed it to the back. She accepted the coffee and bagels, loving the feel of the hot container as it warmed her fingers. “Is this some sort of peace offering?”

“Yes and no,” Jordan replied, watching her as she sipped at the warm coffee. He appeared mesmerized for a moment. “I thought I could provide a peace offering as well as a bribe.”

“Bribe for what?” Brea was catapulted into suspicious mode.

“I was wondering if you’d like to assist me in my store today to look for the paintings you’re trying to acquire. I could do it alone, but it would take longer and I am a little ashamed to admit I sometimes have trouble staying focused on a task.” Brea took her time responding.

“Sounds fair,” she said at last. Truth of the matter was, she was wary about being alone with him. He did things to her resistance that she didn’t like. Or rather, she did like it. That’s what bothered her. But she was determined to stay in control. She never ran from anyone or anything and she wasn’t going to start now. “Let me tell Lindie—”

“Lindie already knows. Have fun!” Lindie called from the couch. Sometimes Brea could really strangle her best friend. She turned to throw Lindie a death look before stepping out of the cottage and closing the door behind her. She could do this; she could be around Jordan Areson and not act like a complete slut.

He concentrated on the drive to the shop. He was very much aware of every molecule of Brea in the next seat. She demurely sipped at the coffee and refused to look at him. Out of the corner of his eye he could see her long legs encased in almost perfect-fitting jeans. Her T-shirt only emphasized her small waist and firm breasts. He squirmed a little in his seat.

“You’ve already eaten?” she asked around a bite of bagel.

“No, I’m not hungry. Maybe I’ll grab something later.” He chanced a quick look and saw a tiny dot of cream cheese on her lip. “Please, allow me.” His voice sounded low and deep as he restrained from leaning over, grabbing her by the back of the head and kissing her silly. Brea turned to him, curiosity in her hazel eyes. Slowly, so she could follow his movements, he alternated between watching the road and swiping the renegade cream cheese from her lips. Her lips were soft, and they trembled when his fingers brushed

against them. Though he had no need to consume human food, he licked his finger, tasting her more than the cream. He saw her eyes darken in a moment of uncontrolled desire, then it was gone replaced by the ever-competent professional.

“Thank you,” she responded coolly. Jordan nodded, willing the bulge in his pants to mercifully recede.

“We’re here,” he announced, getting out of the car. At last she was going to be alone with him. There would be no friend to act as referee. No room full of people to buffer. It would be just him and her for hours. Alone. He came around and opened the door for her. He could see she clenched the bag tightly in her hand. Cupid leaned in and took the cup from the holder, then held his hand out to help her out of the car. He used his Old World manners, hoping to break down the wall she put up. He had very little time and a lot to accomplish.

Eight: If you can't stand the heat

The shop was cool and dark as she stepped in cautiously and stopped while Jordan reached around her to flick the light switch. His scent rolled off of him and into her nostrils in light waves. He was close enough that she felt his body heat as he reached around her. Yeah, she could do this, it was cake. She stepped farther into the shop as the lights flickered on one by one. She felt herself plummeting to the floor yet again, but this time she was caught by strong hands, as he righted her.

“Remember, you have to step up just to step on the rug,” he teased.

“Yeah, silly me,” she croaked out of her suddenly very dry throat.

“I keep all the paintings in the back. I catalogued everything and I'm sure I have it here somewhere, I just can't tell you exactly where.” It was the truth. He had ordered Hermes to hide the paintings among the rest of them so he could say that and not be lying.

“Really, you should get a secretary or something.” Brea followed him to the back of the shop. Why couldn't she get her blasted heart to slow down? He was just a man for God's sake.

“No, I have a good friend who handles all the fine details.” Hermes would kill him if he heard him say that.

Jordan opened another door and it yawned into a large room. He flicked on the switch. Paintings were stored in crates without the benefit of labels. There had to be at least a thousand or more. This task could take days. Days of seeing no one but Jordan. Days of fighting her attraction to him and not sure if she would win in the end. “Maybe we should ask Lindie to help, and that friend of yours.”

“Are you backing out?” he challenged her. “I never pegged you for a coward, Brea. It's just a little tedious, mind-numbing work. You want this painting, you help. That's my offer.” He concentrated his stare on her.

“I don’t back out of things and I’m not a coward, I just didn’t want to take up all your time, Jordan. After all, aren’t you supposed to be leaving soon?”

“I’ve delayed all plans until you and I have finished our business.”

“I feel honored,” she retorted sarcastically. “Fine, where do we start?”

“Where do you want to start?” There was no missing the double meaning to his words. He stepped so close to her she could see the fine eyelashes and piercing blue of his eyes.

“Wh-where it would most likely be.” Her voice stammered, she cursed silently. She refused to step back. She held her ground. She took that last step that connected her breast to his chest. “Do you have a good idea where you put it?” She could play that game too.

“I can be quite...” his pause was dramatic “...inventive. There are a few choice places I could have put it.” His voice had lowered to a whisper, his hands reached for hers and when she gave no protest he clasped them together. “I want to kiss you, Brea, but I need to know you want it too.” He saw the war in her eyes and waited for her to work it out.

“I would like for you to kiss me,” she said at last.

“No.”

“No?” her forehead wrinkled as she looked into his eyes.

“No. I would like for *you* to kiss *me*.”

Leave it to Jordan to turn things around. If she kissed him, she would be advancing things. She would be responsible for taking things beyond the professional. He was giving her the control, when, at the moment, she didn’t want it. “What the hell,” she said out loud and pressed her lips against his waiting ones.

Shyly at first, her tongue stole into his mouth, tasting, exploring. As her confidence grew, so apparently did her desire for him. She teased his tongue into a dance, deepening and then retreating. She wanted him in a heightened state of arousal, just as she was. He let go of her hands and caressed her round bottom, squeezing, and used her hips to pull her lower body into his. He ground his erection against her as she plundered his mouth. She heard the soft moan that slid from her throat. She was on fire. Her desire for him

coursed through her, threatening to consume her. His breathing became raspy as he used one hand to hold her head still as he probed his tongue deeper into her mouth.

She relaxed against him, letting him have complete access to her body. He tasted sweet, and felt like granite. She could feel every muscle in his body she was pressed so close to him. Her legs threatened to give out, any excuse to feel him on top of her. She wanted to feel his soft hair fall around her. This was her show, and she could run it any way she wanted. She began to drag him to the floor. She didn't care that it was cold and hard. He fell in line, going to floor with her, but he twisted around so that she lay on top of him. All the while the kiss was never broken.

Jordan held her hips in place as he ground his cock into her core. She pulled at his shirt from the hem, and her small, warm hand found its way under. She caressed the hard muscle, running her fingernails across the valleys and ridges. The other hand she used to untie his sun-kissed hair. She threw the tie aside and delved her fingers in the silken tresses. His hand, too, had found its way under her shirt, pushing her bra up and out of the way. He then used his forefinger and thumb to roll a nipple. It responded instantly, hardening and elongating for him. He was like an aphrodisiac, sending her common sense to Timbuktu and waving her hedonistic nature home.

They found a rhythm and each rubbed against the other, giving pleasure as well as receiving it. "You have too many clothes on," Brea panted and began tugging at his jeans. He laughed at her impatience. In seconds she had them unbuttoned and unzipped. He lifted his butt off the floor so she could push them, along with his boxers, past his hips. Then she tore at her own jeans and underwear, pushing them past her hips. "No penetration," she stated and looked into his sexy eyes.

"No penetration," he repeated. She was wet with desire as she ground her mons against his cock. Her juices began to coat him, making it so slick and hot between them, they both moaned in unison. She was in a frenzy, like he was injecting desire into her with a needle. He slapped her ass hard and she bucked. Her eyelids were heavy from lust.

"Again," she demanded, grinding against him wantonly. He complied. The sound was loud in the room. He continued to toy with her nipples as she pushed against his cock.

“Jordan, I’m—I’m,” she gasped as she began to feel the first waves of her orgasm.

He grabbed the back of her head and forced her mouth to his and their tongues clashed. She shattered on top of him, her body humming as it bucked under the onslaught of her orgasm. He captured her scream in his kiss and seconds later his cock jetted ribbons of seed between them, splashing his belly as well as hers. At last he broke the kiss, and she collapsed, spent, on top of him. They lay there on the floor, their hearts racing, their minds demanding some sort of equilibrium.

“We’re never going to find those paintings this way,” Brea said at last.

“No, but I would be willing to keep trying this method for some time before we give up,” Jordan chuckled.

“I don’t know what got into me. It’s like you’re walking sex or something. I feel this pull to you.” She sighed in pleasure.

“You aren’t alone, Brea. I can’t ever recall wanting a woman so much.”

“You don’t have to say that.” Brea stiffened.

“I know that,” Jordan responded, his voice sincere. “I said it because I meant it.”

“What now?”

“We clean up and look for your paintings.”

“Sounds like a plan, Mr. Areson.” Only this time when she said it Jordan didn’t mind, it sounded more like an endearment between lovers.

The silence was the loudest sound in the room. That and the occasional small thump of canvas as they scoured through the crates. Brea threw herself into the search for the painting. Truth be told, she could have very well laid eyes upon it and never even have known it. Her brain was mush. Her pride was about the size of a grain of sand. Her libido was rocketing out of control. To sum it up nicely, she was an utter and complete wreck. What the hell happened earlier? What was she thinking? Was she thinking? Another painting was pushed forward as she examined the next one she really wasn’t seeing. When she went to flip that one forward it refused to budge. It took a second for her to realize Jordan was holding it in place.

“What are you doing?” she queried, irritated and quite ready to spread it.

“You’re upset, we need to talk.” He knelt down next to her, searching her face, trying to get her to look him in the eye.

“What makes you think I’m upset?” She scooted over to the next crate and began to idly flip through that one as well.

“Because you’ve gone through this same crate three times in the last two hours. I think it’s safe to say that the paintings aren’t in this one.” He moved next to her, stopping her progression in that crate as well. “Please talk to me,” he said softly. This time, against her will, she lifted her eyes to meet his. She hoped he couldn’t see the uncertainty and the shame swimming around.

“Don’t do this, Brea, we did nothing wrong. Nothing to be ashamed of.” Jordan tried to hold her hand but she wiggled away from him, afraid of touching him again.

“Maybe in your life you have casual sex, but I don’t. I don’t know what got into me. I don’t mess around with business associates.”

Guilt stabbed at Brea, its aim true as it consumed her. What happened to her vow to stay away from men? She couldn’t understand why she was sexually drawn to him. Granted he was gorgeous, but the way she was connected to him was almost ridiculous. It was like she was under some sort of spell.

“Truthfully, neither have I.” Brea looked at him in suspicion. It was possible that he’d never fooled around with a business associate. “It’s true, whether you choose to believe me or not. I don’t feel guilty about it in the least. As a matter of fact, I was hoping I could convince you to see me tonight.”

Brea studied the gorgeous guy with his sincere expression and found her resolve melting like an ice cube on a hot sidewalk. Why was she making a big deal out of this? Why couldn’t she just have fun and move on like a man? Once she got the painting she could leave Ashe Bay and never see him again. No harm no foul. No Jordan. *Have some fun*, Brea said to herself. *Have some fun, girl*.

“What do you have in mind?”

“If I told you, it wouldn’t be a secret, then I couldn’t watch the way your beautiful face lights up.”

Dammit if the man didn't know how to make her blush. She was acting like Lindie for God's sake. She stood up and stretched. Jordan accompanied her.

"Let's call it a day here. I'll take you home," he suggested.

"That's fine, we'll just put in double time tomorrow," Brea agreed, heading toward the front of the store. She could feel him staring at her. She stopped and turned; he hadn't moved a muscle since he stood up. "What's wrong?"

"Absolutely nothing." He leered at her. Only *his* leering was sexy. "I just like watching you move." he sauntered her way. "You have one gorgeous ass, lady," he whispered in her ear as he brushed passed her. Brea blushed.

The small room next to the Olympiad meeting room provided a perfect place for the two conspirators. They double-checked the room and the surrounding quarters before their private meeting began.

"Well?" Psyche demanded, snapping her fingers in impatience. She tossed her long blonde hair over her shoulder and gave Eris a hard green-eyed stare. The other goddess merely yawned as she seated herself rather dramatically on the marble table.

"Have a care with that tone of yours, Psyche," she warned as she stared at her freshly manicured nails.

"Would you please get on with it?" Psyche began again, forcing an amiable tone.

"I couldn't get a clear, long look. You know how Daddy is about his scrying bowl." Eris, daughter to Hera and Zeus, also known as Discordia by those who knew her *really* well, wrinkled her brow. "From what I saw, they seemed to be getting along if that floor action was anything to go by."

"Damn him!" Psyche yelled, her voice echoing. Eris rolled her eyes. Psyche was such an amateur.

"You do realize, of course, this is part of his condition to remain immortal, hon?" Eris supplied to the fuming goddess. "It's not actually cheating if, you know, you're divorced. And from what I understand you initiated the divorce, after *your* last affair."

Eris cracked her ambrosia-flavored gum. She was truly wasting her time with this one. Psyche was more psycho than wicked, a real disappointment.

“None of that matters. I’ve decided I still love him and want him back. Did he look like he was devastated at all?” Psyche’s voice cracked with emotion.

“No. What do you want him back for? You two haven’t been happy for centuries. Even *I* couldn’t duplicate that kind of misery. Look, is there something here for me to do? I’m bored, you told me an opportunity had arisen that would allow me to play. So far nothing. What gives?”

Psyche looked the dark eyed Goddess of Discord in the eye and smiled. Eris had counted three mood swings in the last two minutes. This one was a nut job. It didn’t matter though. Not if it allowed her to cause a little bit of mischief. Psyche could be as crazy as she wanted.

“I need you on more of a consultation level. Can you handle that?”

“I can handle anything you got.” Eris snapped her gum. “What’s your goal?”

“To get my wayward husband back, and if that doesn’t work, help strip him of his immortality.”

Eris smiled. Finally, it was time to play.

Nine: Birds of a feather

“This is ridiculous!” Hermes grumbled as he located the paintings he’d previously hidden, just so he could hide them again.

“Just do it. I need a reason to keep her coming here, and if I sell her the paintings she’s going to hightail it out of here as soon as possible.” Cupid kept his back to Hermes as his friend went about his task. “I can’t lie to her, so this is a safe avenue for me. Are you done yet?” Cupid asked impatiently.

“Yes, turn around,” Hermes snapped. “How come I get to do all the tedious, dumb work?”

“Tedious yes, but dumb never. I need you, Herm, you’re the only one on my side. I can’t do this by myself. I can’t shake that nagging feeling that someone up there is out to see me fail.” He pointed upward as if Hermes couldn’t guess what he was referring to.

“Well, you have pissed a lot of them off,” Hermes supplied.

“Thanks for easing my fears. Oh hello there, Arachne,” he greeted the spider as it appeared on his forearm.

“You know you’re walking quite a fine line with that one.” Hermes indicated his head at Arachne. “That’s using power.”

“No, friend, I was not allowed to use *my* power. I’m using Arachne’s, with her permission of course.” He gave a rather charming smile to the spider. Hermes grunted in disgust as the spider gave off waves of pleasure. “What do you have for me today?”

“I’m out of here,” Hermes muttered, not keen on seeing his friend charm a spider. It didn’t matter if it used to be human at one point, it was just plain weird.

“Yes, well, don’t go too far, I might need you.”

“Yes, well, I can’t wait.” Then he was gone, leaving Cupid to collect his information in peace.

“Well, that didn’t take long,” Lindie chirped as Brea walked through the door. Lindie was comfortably spread out on the floor, her nose almost buried in a sudoku puzzle book. “When are we leaving?” She took a second to spare Brea a glance before she began staring into the book again, her pencil poised threateningly over the page.

“I didn’t find the paintings,” Brea declared, trying to get into the guest bedroom before Lindie asked any more questions.

“Then why are you back so early?” Lindie scribbled a number in a box, then began to look over each square carefully.

“Uhm, Jordan just wanted to call it a day. We’ll just look for them tomorrow.”

“Okay. Wait a minute.” Lindie erased whatever she’d just written in frustration, then focused her gaze on Brea. “What are you not telling me?”

“You’re imagining things. I’m going to take a bath.” Brea was an inch from closing the bedroom door when Lindie stuck her tiny foot through it.

“Uh-uh, you’re not getting away with it that easy. What happened?” Lindie pushed the door open. Her Nosiness was in high gear and she wasn’t giving up.

“Nothing,” Brea squeaked, her traitorous face going up in flames as she removed her T-shirt.

“Spill it, or I will hound you every second of your life, and we both know I’ll do it.” Lindie folded her arms across her chest, looking like a very beautiful, nosy, porcelain doll. Brea took a deep breath in defeat. That bath was looking better and better.

“You win, Lindie, I will not go into the fine details, but Jordan and I had a—a moment.”

“What’s a moment? You locked eyes? You kissed? You realized you both were raised as barbarians? What is a moment?”

“We had a certain level of intimacy, and that is as far as I’m willing to go with it.”

Lindie paused, digesting the information. She looked at Brea. “Good,” she finally said.

“Good? Is that all you have to say after all that hounding? Good?”

“Obviously this is uncomfortable for you, and the only reason it’s uncomfortable is because whatever ‘intimacy’ you shared with Jordan you liked. In the end that’s all that matters—you had fun.”

“Yeah,” Brea agreed. “It was fun. He wants us to get together tonight.”

“Are you going to go, or are you going to play chicken like you always do?”

Brea let the snide comment pass. “I’m going to go, but believe me, I’m not getting heavily inv—”

“I don’t want to hear it.” Lindie held up her hand, “I’ve heard this long speech a million times. I’m not asking you to, I want you to have fun while we’re here. Then you can leave the most gorgeous man in the world behind and get back to your mundane, sexless life in Canton.”

“I do not have a—oh wait, yes, it is sexless. That’s why I can’t control myself around him,” Brea mused, glad she had found a reason for her wanton behavior. Her hormones were out of control because she barely used them. “Whatever, I need a bath. Torture me later,” she ordered Lindie out of her room. Lindie bounced out with a sly grin on her face.

Brea smiled and began to finish undressing. As she was about to remove her pants, something caught her eye. The spider web glistened in the afternoon sun. Brea stared at it a moment, following the design with her keen eyes. Was she crazy or did it have a dream catcher woven in as a pattern? She got closer to the web; it was a freak of chance. Like seeing a potato with the profile of Abraham Lincoln. She thought about taking a picture of it with her camera phone since no one would believe her. She pulled the phone out of her back pocket after she removed her jeans and snapped a picture, tossed the phone on the bed and went about preparing for a bath.

Brea sank down in the warm, bubbly water and let it ease her strained muscles. She tended to carry all her stress in her shoulders. She looked at the small wicker stand, her eyes trained on the towel that was wrapped around what she needed. She suffered the cool air for a moment as she got up grabbed the towel and sat back in the water. Slowly she unwrapped the towel to gaze upon her favorite waterproof toy—a purple vibrator

with a rabbit. She tossed the towel over the side of the tub and lovingly caressed the almost realistic feeling material. Perhaps her fascination with Jordan was because she not only hadn't gotten any in awhile, she hadn't even played in awhile, thanks to Mr. Forbright. Quickly, she banished the image of the old man and opted for something sexier, warmer, more obtainable—Jordan Areson.

She slipped the vibrator underwater and switched it on. A low hum escaped her lips as the thought of pleasure camped itself out in her mind. She spread her legs, running the vibrator along her inner thighs, close but not quite touching where she wanted it. She allowed the soapy water to lubricate the toy for her. Images of Jordan played out in her mind. She took the fabricated cock and let it hum on top of her clitoris. She nearly bucked out of the water from the sensation. Oh yes, it had been too long. Deliciously slowly, she put the head of the cock at her entrance and pushed, her tight hole momentarily resisting the invasion. She pushed it further in, placing her legs on top of either side of the tub, spread open for Jordan. She imagined his cock sliding into her, filling her. Brea kept her moans of pleasure low, so Lindie wouldn't hear her.

Finally, she let the vibrator rest inside of her, humming. The rabbit flicked furiously at her clit as she gyrated her hips in a circle. Water began to splash over the side of the tub but she didn't care as her desire began to build. She could see Jordan, his blue eyes staring down into her hazel ones as he fucked her. His hair freed from bondage fell softly around her face like a curtain, carrying his scent to her, driving her wild. She was pumping the vibrator in and out at a mad pace, the rabbit flicking at her hardened clit as she fucked herself. Her legs strained as she felt the beginning of the end. She could see the sweat pouring off of Jordan. She clung to him, encouraging him with her moans. His face took on an almost ethereal quality as he came inside of her, Brea could practically feel his semen rushing in, coating her walls—and that's what took her over the edge. The vibrator hummed relentlessly as she toppled into a chasm of utter joy.

Her vaginal muscles clamped onto the toy in powerful waves. With one hand she clutched the side of the tub, the other held the vibrator in place, until the last wave subsided. Slowly she pulled it out, her breathing raspy. Despite the water, she knew the toy was slick from her own juices. She leaned her head back and took a deep breath,

lowering her legs back into the warm water. She felt boneless, almost relaxed. Almost, because now she couldn't get the picture of Jordan out of her mind, and realized the satisfaction she just gave herself was but a teaser. She now wanted the real thing more than ever.

When Cupid found himself alone in his house, the torment started. He smelled her all over him. It would be hours before he could see her. Would she let him touch her again? Cupid could feel his cock swelling in his pants. How long had it been since he got laid? Three, four days? It seemed an eternity. He wasn't just craving sex, no, he was craving *her*. He wanted one woman. If a dozen beautiful women came through that door, he wouldn't touch them because they weren't Brea. They wouldn't have her attitude, her creamy golden skin, that natural scent that drove him wild. Cupid tried to adjust himself in the form-fitting jeans as he paced in his bedroom. Why didn't they make the crotch bigger?

He paced and tried not to look out the window at the house down the road. She was in there, probably naked. He shook his head; there was no way in the world he was seeing her tonight without trying to make love to her. This morning had been fantastic, and even without penetration he felt fulfilled. But he wanted to be inside her. He wanted to slide himself in and out of her. He wanted to feel himself in her mouth, those plump lips wrapping around his cock... It was that thought that did it. He couldn't use his powers to seduce Brea, but he could certainly use them to seduce himself. He conjured up an exact image of Brea, stark naked. He made the illusion real enough so that he could feel it when she touched him. She smiled at him. He hardened even more.

Cupid walked across the room to her, she was made of particles strewn together, but for the moment Brea was there in the room with him, just to please him. Brea continued to smile at him as she went to her knees in front of him. He undid his jeans for her. She watched him with hungry eyes.

"You want this, don't you?" The image nodded to him, her gaze never once leaving his crotch. "You want to taste me, baby?" he crooned to the crouching Brea. Her eyes

opened wide when his cock sprang free, so hard and strung tight it bounced in front of her waiting lips. “Open your mouth for me, Brea, let me feel your tongue on my cock.” His voice went hoarse from his desire. The doppelganger took Cupid into her mouth, first sucking just the velvety mushroom head. She placed her soft warm hands on either one of his thighs as she suckled him.

Cupid let his head fall back in complete abandonment to pleasure. She ran her tongue under the head of his cock, before licking it from base to tip, and then she starting humming on it. “Yes, that’s it,” he directed Brea, grabbing her head and guiding it along his cock. “That feels so good.” He moaned as she sucked at him harder. She took him so deep he felt himself go down her throat, but there was no gag reflex here, she knew what she was doing and she took his length without a problem. Cupid picked up his tempo. Now he looked down at her, watching her beautiful curls bounce as she took him in and out of her mouth, her throat...

Cupid couldn’t stand it any longer, his body demanded release. He held her head in place and pumped into her mouth, deep into her throat. Her warm hands held tightly to his thighs to keep her stable as he rutted in her mouth. “By the gods!” he roared as his semen spewed down her throat. He could hear her greedily swallowing every drop of him. He began to slow his breathing as she licked the last evidence of his pleasure from the tip of his cock. She sat there smiling up at him. He kept the image in his mind as he waved his hand, scattering the particles, until nothing of her image remained. As he adjusted his jeans, his craving for her had only increased.

He looked at the clock and groaned. He needed to release his pent-up tension. In a blink, Cupid’s wings shimmered into place. He stretched them, loving the feel of freedom his wings gave him. Flying always cleared his mind, and right now Brea permeated every cell in his mind.

Ten: The road less traveled

Brea looked at the storm clouds with a bit of anxiety. If it stormed badly enough, would Jordan cancel their date? She ignored the ugly question that kept surfacing: What did she care? Somehow this date had become important to her, too important. Why was she letting herself fall for Jordan Areson? He was everything she had warned herself to stay away from. He was tall, good-looking, rich and way too sexy. She was in deep trouble. The night fell softly, but by the look of the storm clouds it would throw itself into a frenzy. Brea got the nerve to back away from the window and finish her lukewarm coffee.

“You’re not going to cancel because of a cloud or two?” Lindie asked, stuffing a large lump of chocolate ice cream into her mouth.

“No. I was just wondering would it be worth it, if it starts storming.” Brea sat in the chair opposite Lindie.

“Are you kidding me? Storms are the best date weather. It’s making love weather.” Lindie eyes grew reminiscent.

“Oh snap out of it. No one’s making love tonight, at least not me.” Brea frowned at the cold coffee and got up to nuke it—again.

“You know, I bet that stuff is toxic now.”

“You’re right.” Brea grinned, deciding to toss the contents of the cup into the sink instead. “I’ll just make a fresh cup.”

“So you can worry the hell out of that one too? Why are you so keyed up? Remember, Brea, have fun. That means no stress.” Another gob of ice cream met its demise down Lindie’s throat.

“Having fun is stressful business,” Brea lamented, rinsing the dirty cup, thankful she had something to do with her hands.

“You really need a clue and a vowel,” Lindie teased, shaking her head at her friend. “What time is he supposed to be here?”

“Soon, I guess.” Brea turned from the sink and crossed her arms in front of her in deep thought. “I wonder what he has planned tonight.”

Headlights flashed in the window and Brea’s heart flipped in excitement. Her feet, however, stayed glued to the spot. She hadn’t thought of what it would be like to face him after what they had done earlier. Did he expect more of the same? Truth be told, Brea would be disappointed if there wasn’t more. Seconds later a sharp rap sounded on the door. Brea was stuck.

“Are you going to let tall, gorgeous and rich get soaking wet while you daydream?” Lindie queried, looking strangely at her friend. “Are you okay, Brea?”

“Yeah, yes, could you get that for me? I need a moment.” Brea didn’t stay around to hear Lindie’s answer. She went into her bedroom and hyperventilated. She counted to ten as she stared at her reflection in the mirror. Did she overdo it tonight?

Her hair fell in soft curls framing her face. Just a hint of green eye shadow made her eyes appear more green than hazel. A lip tint with a high gloss made her lips look like they were begging for a kiss. She looked at the tunic, with different shades of brown and knew somehow it complimented her coloring. A pair of well-fitting, flared jeans rounded things off. She was somewhere in between comfy and dressy since she didn’t know what she was doing this evening.

As she turned her head to view her profile, the chandelier earrings dangled. Maybe she was overdoing it. Maybe she wasn’t dressy enough. Maybe she should say to hell with it. She’d never been so nervous about going out on a date, least of all with a guy she’d already had an orgasm with. He was, after all, just a guy. With her new resolve, she straightened, her breathing easy. Jordan Areson could kiss her ass—he wasn’t causing any drama here.

The moment Brea stepped out of the room, Lindie’s incessant chatter faded into the background and his breath hitched in his throat. She looked breathtaking. He half expected her to have on bunny slippers and a jogging outfit. Did she do this for him? He

let himself believe that she wanted to impress him. “You look beautiful.” He watched her like a hawk, noted the way every curve swayed as she walked toward him.

“Thank you,” she replied, looking almost shy. “I’m ready. I hope I’m dressed okay for whatever we’re doing.”

“You could be naked for all I care and you’d be dressed perfectly.” A devilish grin popped out.

“Well, thank you, but tonight I think I’ll stick with clothing.” Lindie snorted at that.

“Where are you taking her?” Lindie scraped the side of her bowl, trying to make the question appear offhand.

“It’s a surprise, like I told you two minutes ago when you let me in,” he chastised her lightly.

“Well, I tried,” Lindie responded, not looking the least bit guilty about her prying.

“Come on, are you going to at least tell me?” Brea concentrated on her steps to the door. He had put his large, warm hand in the small of her back as he led her out, and all she could think of was that that same hand was on her ass earlier, grinding her against his body...

“No, some things make a better impact when shown,” he whispered in her ear. Goose bumps marched down her spine post haste.

As Brea sat in his Jeep, she wondered just how many vehicles the man owned. She stole a glance at him, then relaxed when she realized he couldn’t see how hard she was staring in the dark. It wasn’t like he had night vision. He wore a plain, short-sleeved, dark blue T-shirt with black jeans. Wherever they were going obviously wasn’t too fancy. She relaxed a little. She didn’t feel like a lot of company, she wanted to be alone with Jordan, maybe pick his brain a little bit.

“So do I pass inspection?” His sudden question made her jump.

“What? I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Brea was so embarrassed at being caught staring her ears burned.

“You’ve been staring at me for a few minutes now. I was assuming you were trying to figure out where we’re going by how I’m dressed. Tell me, detective, what did you come up with?” His voice sounded so heavenly when he teased her. It sounded heavenly anyway.

“Nothing.”

“Ah. I see you’re not cut out for detective work.”

“I never said I was.”

“Well, the only hint I will give you is this: it’s something I’ve always wanted to do, but never got around to. So I figured if I was going to do it, I wanted my first time to be with you, Brea.” Jordan looked at her for a moment, total sincerity in his eyes.

“Well, now I’m intrigued,” Brea whispered.

“That makes two of us,” Jordan said, looking at her again.

Twenty minutes, with no super-secret building hidden between trees, Brea was perplexed. The storm clouds had now completely taken over the sky, and she was afraid of storms. Then the Jeep just stopped. Brea stared around in the darkness. Nothing but trees greeted her line of vision. Jordan popped the trunk then got out of the Jeep. He came around to her side and helped her out, before going to the back of the vehicle. Seconds later a flashlight came on and he put it in her hands, then turned on one for himself. When Brea shone the light on him, she could see a picnic basket in one hand and the flashlight in the other.

“Watch your step.” He grinned. Brea fell in step behind him. They hiked through foliage for several minutes until her flashlight fell on a large triangular shape. Jordan stopped, and Brea heard the flicking of matches. In seconds, kindling was on fire.

“Welcome to Camp Areson,” he said, waiting for her reaction.

Brea was stunned. An area for a campfire had been meticulously dug out. A large tent that looked like it could sleep at least six people sat about four yards from the fire. Jordan had begun to unpack the basket he’d been carrying. He indicated she should sit on the log in front of the fire. Brea sat down numb from surprise. Out of the basket came a

bag of marshmallows, graham crackers and chocolate. Followed by two wine glasses and a bottle of red wine.

“You did all of this for me?” Brea asked with caution.

“For us,” he amended. “I’ve wanted to do this for a long time, I thought now was as good a time as any.”

“You seem to have put a lot of thought into this date.” Brea waved a hand toward the items freshly laid out.

“Because the lady deserves it,” he responded with a dimpled smile.

“Oh what are you waiting for?” Psyche hissed at Eris as they watched the couple. Again Eris couldn’t help thinking what an amateur Psyche was. Any wrongdoer worth their salt knew timing was everything.

“For the right moment,” Eris responded sweetly. “Watch and learn my little cuckoo bird, watch and learn...”

“Ohh, you’re good at this,” Brea praised Cupid as he handed her another perfectly made s’more. “You know I’ve never gone camping. It’s what I’ve always wanted to do.” She popped another of the sweet treats into her mouth, leaving a smudge of chocolate at the corner. Cupid couldn’t take his eyes off the temptation.

“Why didn’t you ever go camping?” He briefly looked her in the eyes, his attention riveted on the chocolate on her mouth.

“Too busy, I guess.” She put another morsel into her mouth; his gaze followed the graceful line of her neck as she swallowed. It brought back memories of the Brea he’d conjured up in his bedroom. “It was one of those things you put on your ‘to do’ list, but never get around to.”

“I have a thing on my ‘to do’ list that I would like to accomplish right now.” His voice had dropped low, and she flushed.

“What would that be?” Her voice sounded breathless.

“This,” he responded. He leaned over and licked at the chocolate that tempted him. Rather deftly he slipped his tongue inside her warm mouth. A mouth that tasted like warm chocolate and sensual woman, Immediately, he felt her response. She leaned into him. Reluctantly, he ended the kiss. He had to make sure she understood his attraction to her wasn’t just about sex.

It was then that Cupid had to reprimand himself. What was this about? His immortality? Was he seducing this woman for his own selfish reasons? He looked into the fire, afraid she might see something in his eyes she wouldn’t like.

“What’s the matter?” she asked with hesitance in her voice. Cupid turned to her, clearing his expression.

“Just wondering exactly what we’re doing here,” he answered honestly.

“What are we doing here, Jordan?” Brea asked. Cupid paused.

“Hopefully we’re getting to know one another.”

“I don’t know if I’m ready for that.” It was her time to look into the fire.

“Would it help if I went first?” he whispered in her ear. Then he turned her face to look him in the eye. His eyes searched hers. “Well?”

“I don’t know,” she repeated. Cupid took a deep breath, then made the plunge.

“I didn’t become wealthy by selling paintings. I grew up privileged. I had a very doting mother, and though I knew my father, he wasn’t what one would call a role model. I was in love once. Fell in love with a woman my mother hated. I married her and lived to regret it. We’re divorced now. I think it was the best thing that could have happened, and right now I am right where I want to be.” He reached for her hand. Her small, soft hand shook from nervousness. “I have to say, I’ve never talked to a woman, not the way I want to talk to you.”

“Not even your ex-wife?” she asked gently.

“Not really, I realized I fell in love with her beauty. We talked, but nothing had any real meaning. I was younger then, now I feel like I’ve grown a bit. I want more from a woman than just a beautiful face to look upon and warm thighs to move between. Besides, she turned out to be quite psychotic.” He smiled, trying to lighten the mood a bit.

As Cupid said these words to Brea, he believed them. His life had been empty. He did want more from a woman. Did he want those things from Brea in particular? A voice in his head screamed yes! He looked at her. He wanted to her to confide in him, without coaxing. He was soon rewarded.

“I was in love once. With a guy who was rich, handsome and said he loved me. Eventually I found out he was just using me. I was a cover, an acceptable face to show his aristocratic parents. His real love was a single woman with three kids his parents would have never accepted into their affluent fold. Do you know that bastard was supposed to marry me? His parents gave him a rather large monetary gift on the day of our wedding. He thanked them and promptly disappeared before the ceremony. You would think never to be heard from again, but oh no. He was in the society pages two days later, shown celebrating with his new bride and the newly inherited shitload of money. I bet his parents kicked themselves over that one.” Brea laughed without mirth.

“You’re right, trust is earned.” Cupid closed her small hand between his. “I’m sorry for what I said the other night.”

“It’s okay. I kind of jumped in your face unnecessarily. You know tonight is the first night I’ve talked about this to anyone besides Lindie.”

“Well, thank you.” He smiled, letting his dimples woo her.

“Thanks for listening.” Brea made the first move and leaned in to kiss him. Her kiss was warm, but the desire flared into a white-hot flame. Oddly enough Brea began to shake her hand. She shook it again and Cupid began to wonder at her odd behavior. Then she broke the kiss.

“Something is crawling on me.” They looked down at her hand to see a small black spider crawling. No, it was several spiders crawling all over her and up her arm. Brea jumped up, screaming and flicking the spiders off. They were all over her, and when she looked at him she had an expression of horror. They were crawling all over him as well. He began to brush them off of her, ignoring the ones crawling all over him.

“Oh my god! They’re everywhere!” Brea screeched. “They’re coming out of nowhere!”

A quick assessment and Cupid decided that using his gifts were in order. He wasn't using them to seduce her—he would be using them to protect her. He felt her fear, and knew she was on the verge of hysteria. He called Arachne to him, and bade her to get rid of the spiders. Within moments, Brea was swatting at spiders that were no longer there. “I think we got them all.” He grabbed her hands to still them, forcing her panicked eyes to look into his calm ones. “They’re gone, Brea.”

“What the hell just happened? They came out of nowhere. I’ve never seen anything like that.”

“It was probably the fire,” Cupid threw out just to get her mind off the attack.

“I had no idea fire drew spiders like that. They left that bit out of Camping 101.”

Cupid sensed a very familiar presence, but he couldn't place it. It fueled his belief that someone on Olympus wanted to see him fail. “It’s over now. Let’s enjoy the rest of the evening,” he suggested. He wanted to make this evening special for her. For them. She swatted at two more imaginary spiders before she got herself under control.

“You’re right, I’m sure this was just some sort of anomaly.” She looked at him for reassurance.

“Come here,” he beckoned her, drawing her into his arms. “Come hell or high water, nothing is going to ruin this night for us.”

It was at that moment, a loud thunderous crack rent the air, followed by the heavy onslaught of rain.

Eleven: When life gives you lemons

Psyche and Eris nearly peed their pants laughing. Eris mimicked the mortal with perfection as she assumed her voice. “Oh my god! They’re everywhere!” she danced around comically, causing Psyche to go into another fit of laughter. “You see it’s all about the timing,” she laughed, dropping to the ground beside Psyche. “And speaking of timing, the rain couldn’t have come at a better time. While I don’t have the power to control the weather, I can manipulate the elements a wee bit...” Psyche looked at Eris in sheer adulation, as she caught the wicked gleam in her eye.

Inside the tent, Cupid listened to the sound of the fire hissing before it went out, overpowered by the rain. He could see well in the dark, but used it as an excuse to brush up against Brea. “We left the flashlights outside, but I have light in here.” He purposefully glanced his hand off Brea’s breast, before he reached behind her to obtain the lantern. It did not go unnoticed that her nipples went erect under his touch. He brought the lantern to him and had to resist the urge to light it with a wave of his hand. Instead, he dug in his jeans pocket to pull out the matches. An uncomfortable chore since he too was getting aroused just being this close to Brea. In seconds a soft glow lit the tent. Brea’s hair was damp, but looked sexy as hell. She took in her surroundings, noting the luxurious fluffy sleeping bags lying next to one another.

“Were you assuming something about this evening?” she asked, raising an eyebrow indicating the slew of pillows inside the tent.

“Yes, your comfort,” he came back without missing a beat. “I assumed you’d want to be comfortable no matter what we did—or didn’t do,” he added quickly, seeing the quick temper rise. “I’ll be right back. We left the wine and the glasses outside.” She nodded before settling herself against the pillows.

Cupid stepped out of the tent and into the blanket of rain. He could still sense someone near but without use of his magic it could have been any one of the gods. He

could, of course, send out a small probe, but that one small use could affect Brea and then all bets were off. He grabbed the glasses and the wine and headed back inside the tent.

“You’re all wet.” She eyed his damp shirt and jeans.

“Yes, well anything for the lady.” He zipped the flap of the tent then gallantly handed her a glass.

“Okay, well you can’t just sit here wet and uncomfortable.”

“What would you have me do?” he asked, trying to get a feel for her intentions. He knew better than to just assume anything when it came to her.

“We’re grown here, right? Take them off and lay them out over there.” Brea indicated the corner of the tent that was bare.

“You’re telling me it’s perfectly okay with you if I lie next to you naked?” Hope and disbelief entwined themselves.

“If you promise to behave,” she said devilishly.

“I’m afraid I can’t promise you that, Brea.” This honesty thing was going to be the death of him.

“Hmm.” She seemed to ponder his response.

Cupid leaned over, making his intentions clear. She lay against the pillows, beautiful, absolutely willing. Her soft mouth opened for him and immediately she responded to his probing tongue. Liquid fire shot through his veins as he deepened the kiss, pushing her further against the pillows. His hands found their way to her breasts, her nipples hard and pushing against his palm. He pulled her tunic up and caressed the soft, warm flesh. His hand traveled upward until he came to the mounds of creamy flesh demanding his attention. He slipped those beautiful firm breasts out of the bra, so that now they were on display for his eyes alone.

Cupid broke the kiss, trailing kisses down her neck. He positioned his body so that his mouth had easy access to her breast. With his teeth, he gently grasped the nipple and sucked it into his mouth. Brea arched her back, pulling his head closer. He drew upon it. Only stopping to bite the underside or to place kisses all over before he went to the other one. Brea moaned low in her throat. His other hand sought the crevice between her legs.

Over the material of her jeans he ground his palm against her and she responded by gyrating her hips, adding more friction.

Then he stopped. Desire and frustration clouded her eyes; Cupid knew she was on the cusp of an orgasm.

“Allow me to take these off.” He was already pulling her ankle boots off. He then leaned over and grasped the zipper in his mouth and slowly unzipped her jeans. Brea jerked. He smiled at her reaction as he began to tug the jeans over her hips and down her long legs. He threw them in the corner that Brea had indicated his clothing should go. She sat up for him so he could take the tunic off as well; he made short work of that. In seconds he had unsnapped her bra and threw it somewhere.

Now he paused as she lay there in her black thong. He panted slightly from anticipation. “Watch me, and don’t take your eyes off me, understand?” he directed her. Brea took his orders without protest. Again Cupid leaned over her and nipped at her belly. Brea giggled. He took the soft material between his teeth and began to tug down. Brea spread her legs slightly and raised her butt. He *growled* at her, actually *growled* at her he was so turned on. She bent her knees as he scooted back, and pulled the thong over them. He took her legs in his hands and held them in mid air while he worked the underwear off her ankles. Still in his mouth he flung them behind him.

“Oh boy,” Brea muttered to herself. He still held her legs, kissing each ankle. Then he spread her legs and set them down. He alternated between each leg, kissing the inside of one, nipping at the other while his hands traveled up and down her legs in one long caress. Eventually all roads led to one place, he pushed her thighs further apart to make room for himself as he settled between her legs. At the first lick, Brea closed her eyes in ecstasy. “Don’t take your eyes off me,” he demanded again. Brea’s eyes flicked open and she trained her hazel gaze on him.

He licked her again between her delicious folds. Cupid’s tongue found her clit and he sucked at it and swirled his tongue around it. Brea pushed herself closer to his face. His head moved slowly as he used his hands to further spread her nether lips and then his tongue went inside of her, tasting the sweet essence of her. His tongue plunged in and out of her, fast then slow, intent on driving her crazy. She gripped his head, then her body

seemed to stiffen. “Jordan, do you feel that?” Cupid didn’t want to stop, he was caught in the throes of their lovemaking. “Jordan, it’s wet all around me.”

At those words Cupid stopped his ministrations. It was then he too felt the water. “Come on,” he rasped, standing up and grabbing her hand to help her up.

They looked around them to find that the rain had somehow leaked into the tent. It poured in, flooding it quickly. Cupid unzipped the flap of the tent to find the total darkness, though he could see quite clearly. He turned and grabbed the lantern off the floor and held in front so Brea could see the water.

“Geez,” she said in disbelief as she followed him out of the tent, completely naked.

The storm raged and Cupid led her to a fairly large tree that provided a little shelter from the rain. He would have been screaming mad if Brea didn’t look so sexy wet and naked and standing before him.

“Are you afraid?” he asked her softly, seeing the wild panic in her eyes as she looked at the rainstorm around them.

“A little,” she admitted as he stepped closer to her, sheltering her body as much as he could from the rain. “Just bad memories of a tornado that leveled my house when I was a kid.” She looked down. “I can’t believe I’m still afraid of storms.” Cupid hooked a finger under her chin and lifted her face. “Let me help you love storms. Will you let me do that?” He searched her eyes, looking for anything that told him she wasn’t ready for this—for him. She nodded slowly, then smiled at him. That was all the encouragement he needed. He took his hiking boots off, his clothes followed. He tossed them, and didn’t care where they were as he looked upon her. The only thing that stood between them was his cock that was already quite enamored of her. He pulled her roughly to him; his desire would let him do nothing less. He clamped his mouth over hers, and held her tight against him. Her arms went around him as well, she held him as if he was her lifeline.

The rain came down hard still and even under the tree the rain drenched them. It slid off their bodies in rivulets. They moved against one another in the kiss, the warm rain making their bodies slick and heated. He grabbed a handful of her hair and kept her head still while he had his way with her mouth, his hands caressed her ass. Before he broke the kiss he bit her lip gently and spun her around. She grabbed the tree, her fingers clawing at

the bark. He moved up behind her, positioning himself at her entrance. She tried to brace herself. She'd seen that large rod and had briefly wondered if she could take him.

He nudged the head at her entrance and held her hips, gently he pushed into her. Brea could feel herself expanding for him, he pushed more and more using her hips as leverage. Brea thought he would split her open he was so huge.

“Relax, you can take me, Brea,” he encouraged.

She relaxed her clenched muscles and he slid in, filling her up. Slowly at first, he slid in and out of her. She wanted him to fuck her into oblivion. But she knew she was tight and he would hurt her if she didn't take her time and adjust to him. She could feel how wet she was for him. Her body sucked him in every time he pulled out.

“More!” she demanded and pushed back against him. She wanted to break his control.

He pumped into her with abandon. His fingers dug into her curvy hips as he slammed her from behind. Brea mewled low, urging him to go faster and harder. Jordan complied. He reached one hand around to play with her clit as he fucked her just the way she wanted. Brea's legs began shake as her orgasm, having been interrupted before, was now released. The waves slammed into her violently her knees buckled, but Jordan caught her as he continued to pump into her madly. He held her ass tightly against him as pounded into her, then Brea heard him let out a low roar as he came in her. He shuddered against her. Even with the warm rain coming down; Brea could feel his hot semen overflowing out of her and down her legs. They both collapsed to the wet earth, panting. Brea laid her head back against his chest. Miraculously, even though he had just orgasmed, he was still hard inside of her.

“I can say with certainty that I love camping—despite the spiders—and I love storms now.” She laughed, knowing she would never experience another storm without thinking of this night.

“I have to agree with you on that.” He nibbled her ear. Brea trembled from the sensation.

“I have warm clothes in the car. I can come back another time and gather our things. We should get out of here before it floods. Help me find my pants to get the keys and

we're out of here." He nipped her ear again before he pulled her up with him. She turned and gave him one last kiss before they searched for his pants. When she found them, she turned to tell him and caught a nice view of his backside. She crept closer as he seemed convinced that maybe he'd thrown them in the nearby bush. It was then that she spotted two scars that looked like parenthesis on his back near his shoulder blades; they were spaced about eight inches apart.

"What are those?" she inquired, using her fingers to trace one of the scars. Jordan jumped and turned around, a surprised look on his face.

"Birthmarks," he replied looking just a little uneasy. Brea decided not to press; if it was painful then she had no business asking about something he wasn't ready to share.

"Oh, okay, look." Brea held up the missing keys. Jordan took them from her, placing a warm kiss on her lips as a reward.

"Let's get you dressed before I try to have my way with you again." He raised his eyebrows as he leered at her. Brea laughed, not remembering the last time she felt so carefree.

"Nice going, Eris," Psyche shot nastily at the goddess. "Is that what you call mayhem and discord? I would hate to see what total anarchy looks like." Psyche made a rude sound before she waved at the scrying bowl, dismissing the image of her ex-husband and the mortal.

"A setback. That's all it is. That was small potatoes. I think this situation is going to call for a more hands-on approach," Eris replied, ignoring the comment of the unstable woman pacing the floor. She sat in her usual stance, perched on the table. "Believe me, next time I'm going to do major damage." Both women looked at each other and smiled as a new plan began to form between them.

Twelve: A dead ringer

“Are you sure you’re not imagining things?” Hermes asked, sipping at his ambrosia-laced coffee. He swirled the contents in the cup, listening to his friend rant about his paranoia.

“I’m sure of it. The spiders were completely unnatural. And the tent. That was a brand new tent and it had a hole ripped into a corner. There was no way that water should have flowed into it. It wasn’t even the natural course of the water flow on that campground.” At two in the afternoon, Cupid was already on his second beer. He sat across from his friend on the patio.

“So who do you think it is?”

“Of course I think it’s Psyche. But why would she? What would she get out of it? She has her divorce, I thought she’d be somewhere on some tropical island, stalking some poor mortal by now.”

“Well, she’s not the most stable thing on Olympus,” Hermes supplied.

“Yeah, but she hasn’t the power to induce spiders or manipulate elements. Someone’s definitely helping the little crackpot,” Cupid’s voice trailed off as his mind searched. It could be any number of the gods. He was looking for a needle in a haystack.

“Well, if things are going as good between you and the girl as you say, take a break. Snoop around and see what the talk is about,” Hermes suggested.

“You know, that’s a good idea, Herm. Immortals can be dangerous when they’re out for revenge. They don’t care who gets caught in the crossfire.”

“And you do?” Hermes gave him a shrewd look. “Be careful, Cupid, you have the look of the damned.”

“The look of the damned? I don’t think so. I care for the girl, she’s wonderful. But don’t think I’ve lost sight of what this is all about.” Even as he said it, he knew the words to be a little blurry. He did care for her, very much. His mind raced back to the moment after they’d gotten into the Jeep.

She was laughing. They laughed and talked all the way to the Forbright cottage. She'd reached for his hand and held it all the way home. Brea looked adorable in his clothes. True they were huge on her, but a beautiful woman looked good in anything. He had kissed her goodnight and waited until he was sure she locked the door behind her, before he turned to leave. It was the hardest thing he'd ever done. His willpower was tested as it took everything, every molecule in him, not to bang on that front door and demand to sleep in her bed all night, making love to her.

"Hello? Where'd you go?" Hermes snapped his fingers in front of the dazed eyes of his friend.

"Sorry, what did you say?"

"I said you seem distracted."

"All right, maybe a little bit," Cupid admitted sheepishly. "I'm going to stop by Olympus first to see if I can find something, then check in on Brea."

"Good plan. She sure has you checking in already." Hermes laughed, slapping his leg at his own mirth. In retaliation Cupid threw a ball of fire at Hermes, who was way too quick and alert to get hit by it.

Olympus was no doubt quiet because all the gods were off tending to their own business or getting into one another's. Cupid stepped lightly, hoping to hear a conversation, anything that would help quell the feeling that something was definitely about to go wrong. He stepped into the large meeting room that still seemed to echo his sentence. The last time he'd been here, he had been on trial, his immortality in the balance. Had it only been a week since he'd put his plan into action? That left three weeks. A thought gnawed at him. Perhaps it would be more fitting to say his conscience gnawed at him. A conscience he hadn't seen or heard from in years chose now to rear its ugly head.

It whispered of his impending treachery to Brea. It accusingly pointed out that this was wrong, all of it. It didn't matter that her memory would be wiped clean. She was a mortal and he was stealing time from her that she wouldn't regain. Cupid wandered into the weapons room, half expecting his father, Ares, to be lounging about. It remained

blissfully empty. The faint sound of voices wandered into his ear. It seemed to come from the small storage closet where Zeus kept his most prized thunderbolts. Thunderbolts he used in particularly nasty storms when he was venting his anger. Since these were custom made by Hephaestus, they were secured because in the wrong hands they could be quite dangerous. Only Zeus had the key. No one could materialize into the closet or out.

Athena, wise as she was, saw to this particular detail. The bolts were usually locked up nice and tight. At least they were supposed to be locked up. The door to the closet stood ajar. Cupid approached the door, opening it just a little to get a clear look inside. Brea ran through his mind again as he thought that he had three weeks until he could set her free. He still had three solid weeks to seduce her into marriage—that was more than enough time since things were going so well. Cupid felt a hand at his back shove him into the closet, immediately followed by the sound of the lock snicking into place.

“You’ve been humming all morning. Last night must have been great,” Lindie observed, sipping at her tea as she stared into the sudoku book with renewed determination.

“It was nice,” Brea answered hesitantly, not sure how much she wanted to divulge to Lindie. Brea carefully poured herself a cup of tea then carried it to the table and sat. While Lindie was her best friend, she could be a little too girlie with all the squealing and “I told you so’s”. She glopped honey in her tea, trying to avoid the conversation.

“Nice? Please, spill it. You’re glowing.” Lindie looked up from her book to stare at Brea. “Oh my god! You had sex! You did it! Yay for you! Details, details!” Lindie squealed, slamming the book shut and setting the tea down. She gave Brea her full attention.

“Really, Lindie, there’s nothing to—”

“Oh stop lying. Did you forget who you’re talking to? There’s no way in the world you had sex with *that* guy and there isn’t anything to tell. He is walking sin. Desire incarnate. Now tell me!” Lindie demanded.

Brea shook her head. There was no way she was telling Lindie that she had sex with *that* guy in the pouring rain in the woods. That he'd made her orgasm harder than every male she'd had sex with put together. That right now she'd give just about anything to have Jordan between her legs. She wouldn't tell her how giddy she'd been on the way home. She was like a schoolgirl with her first crush; she'd held his hand while they drove home for God's sake! Brea groaned inwardly. There was no way in the world she was telling Lindie any of that. She'd have a thousand questions and each question would force her to remember the evening in fine detail. Something she wasn't ready to come to terms with yet.

"Sorry, Lindie, not this time. I will say it was nice. That's all you're getting from me." Brea had to raise her voice over Lindie's protestations.

"You're cruel," Lindie grumbled, opening her book again but still giving Brea the most evil eye she could produce. As Brea stirred her tea, she couldn't help but hum to herself.

"Are you ready for your close-up?" Eris purred at Psyche.

Psyche stamped her foot in impatience. "Will you just get on with it?" Psyche's voice was scraped with annoyance.

"Just hold still, it tingles a little." Eris ignored Psyche's demeanor. After all, she was dealing with a bomb with practically no fuse at all. "I believe *this* plan will work."

True to her warning, it seemed that every nerve ending tingled. It was so intense it bordered on pain. Psyche gritted her teeth. No pain no gain. That was her mantra. In seconds, the blasted tingling stopped and Eris just stood there looking at her with a big, satisfied grin on her face.

"I must say, that's some nice work," Eris complimented herself as she slowly walked around Psyche, looking for any flaws in her latest masterpiece. "Remember, duckie, just like Cinderella, there's a time limit on this façade. You're just an immortal not a god, despite the rumors that you are. You don't have the genetics to uphold this for long. Your body will get tired, so work fast." Eris leaned into Psyche, their noses almost touching;

she needed to drive the point home. “So there’s an expiration date that you’d better heed: three hours. No more.”

Psyche waved her hand in the air as if to brush away Eris’s words when her new hand fascinated her.

“Yes, it will take some getting used to, but you have to remember who you are, or shall I say pretending to be, at all times.” Eris’s voice held a slight warning.

Psyche looked down at her new body in wonderment. Her eyes glittered with a maniacal gleam. “This is going to be so much fun.”

When Brea opened the door to go for a late afternoon jog, Jordan stood on the threshold, apparently getting ready to knock.

“Well, hello,” Brea said breathlessly, trying to smooth the curls into place that had escaped her ponytail. She suddenly wished she were standing here in an elegant, sexy black dress and stiletto heels, instead of a white T-shirt and jogging pants.

“Hi,” Jordan replied looking her up and down. Was that a sneer? “Did I interrupt something?” he asked, eyeing her clothes with just a hint of disdain.

“Oh no, I was just going to go for a quick run.” Brea felt self-conscious. “Care to join me?” she lightly taunted him. Jordan stared down at his dark slacks, and casual top in disbelief.

“I don’t think so,” he replied with a raised eyebrow.

Brea didn’t know why her alarms were going off. She trusted her internal protection system, and it was screaming for her to get away from him. It didn’t make any sense. She enjoyed his company whether she liked to admit it or not. The only warning she ever had was that he was a danger to her celibacy, and well, that was shattered so what the hell? She couldn’t shake the feeling that he seemed different. Did he regard her as non-consequential since he’d conquered her quite nicely last night? Was she dumb enough to fall for the “he’s only in it for the chase” bit?

“I was hoping to talk to you,” he said nicely—a little too nicely. Alarms were going off like it was the Fourth of July.

“Oh, about what?” Her curiosity surfaced.

“Us, of course. I brought a nice bottle of wine, and I was hoping we could lay out a blanket and enjoy the nice weather.” Jordan smiled at her hopefully, with the oddest gleam in his eye. Perhaps he wanted to get another crack at her, Brea thought sourly. Hell, if she were being dumped, she would do it on her terms.

“Fine, let’s go.” She couldn’t keep the icy edge from her voice. She stepped out of the cottage and closed the door firmly behind her. Jordan’s Corvette was parked rather askew. Jordan extended his hand in a gallant invitation for her to proceed before him. Brea huffed past him, struggling to get her emotions under control.

She waited by the car, knowing Jordan insisted on his Old World manners. To her shock he was already on his side of the car, getting ready to get in. Brea rolled her eyes when Jordan’s eyes widened and he hurriedly came around to open her door. When they were both settled into the car, Brea stared out the window, willing her anger under control. Her anger was directed at herself, as well at the gorgeous man across from her. A loud, grinding noise assaulted her ears.

Brea looked at an apparently flustered Jordan. “Sorry, put it in the wrong gear,” he said rather sheepishly, then attempted it again. This time the car began to roll back—without stopping. “Just a second.” He shifted again. The car jerked violently forward, almost sending Brea smack into the dashboard. Thank goodness she always wore her seatbelt. “This thing’s been acting up lately,” he said apologized, then just as quickly an intense hatred seemed to claim his features. “Come on, you son-of-a-bitch! I fucking hate this thing! Piece of shit car!” Jordan growled before he put it in the right gear and the car began to coast at a reasonable speed. Brea couldn’t keep the utter shock from her face as Jordan spared her a glance, without a trace of anger. It was like he wasn’t even aware that he’d spoken out loud. “I picked a beautiful place for us—uh, honey.” He smiled. However dazzling the smile, it didn’t cover up the fact that he’d choked over the word “honey”.

Yes, the place Jordan picked out was indeed beautiful and Brea might have enjoyed it a lot more if her mind hadn’t gone out to lunch and her emotions weren’t in total chaos. Again, Jordan forgot to open the door for her. Truth be told, when Brea huffed and got out of the car, she could have sworn that Jordan was waiting for *her* to open the car door

for *him*. He just sat there, while she walked around the car looking at the scenery. When she looked at him giving him the “what?” look he shook his head as if he was remembering something before he joined her out of the car. Jordan retrieved the wine, blanket and glasses out of the trunk and led them under a beautifully blooming tree.

There was no talk until the wine was poured and they were settled rather comfortably across from each other.

“Thanks for coming,” Jordan began, taking a sip rather delicately. Brea frowned, she remembered Jordan being sophisticated, not delicate. “You are truly a beautiful woman, Brea.” He said it as if he’d just come to this decision.

“Thank you,” Brea said shortly. If he wanted to dump her, she wasn’t going to make it easy. She wasn’t going to fight it, but she sure as hell wouldn’t make it easy.

“Tell me, where do you think this thing between us is going?” he asked flat out. Brea choked on her wine.

“Excuse me?” she coughed.

“This thing we have. You don’t think it’s leading to something serious do you?” he asked. When Brea looked as if she were about to answer, Jordan cut her off. “I mean last night was...interesting.” A hard edge crept into his voice. “But I think it fair to mention my wife.” He watched her closely. Brea set her glass down. Clearly she wouldn’t be drinking any of that right now without choking.

“You mean your *ex*-wife,” Brea corrected him. Brea saw his spine stiffen. “What about your *ex*-wife?” she repeated. She’d found a button and she was going to push it. Jordan paused dramatically, seeming to mete out his words with care.

“We were married a long time. One forgets the *ex* part sometimes. At any rate, you must know I still am quite in love with her.” A smugness crept over his features. What kind of game was Jordan playing with her?

“The psycho?” Brea asked incredulously.

“Excuse me?” Jordan ground out, clearly pissed now. “Did you say psycho?”

“Yeah,” Brea reiterated, not backing down. “You were the one who told me she was psychotic, and you’re telling me now that you’re still in love with her? I thought you said you wanted more than just a beautiful face and warm thighs.” Brea could feel herself

getting hot under the collar. How dare he? The bastard, he was just an upgrade in looks, but he was still a Terry. She'd fallen for it again. "Look just take me home, tomorrow we can look for the paintings—"

"No need." Jordan set his glass down and stood looking down at her. "I can find them myself. Leave me with an address and I'll have them delivered." Brea stood as well.

"Well, thank you for a very unlovely afternoon drink," Brea said in mock politeness. "Would there be anything else?"

"Yes, a kiss to say goodbye," Jordan said hopefully.

"Are you out of your mind?" Brea screeched.

"It doesn't have to end this way, Brea. No hard feelings?" he implored her and smiled. The dimples, the beautiful perfect teeth flashed at her, but not one clench in her gut. Not one feeling of uncontrollable lust. Perhaps all it was was a need to get laid. Maybe she'd worked out her libido last night. Maybe this break up or whatever it was wasn't so bad. It was inevitable anyway.

"Sure," she heard herself say, needing to prove to herself that what she'd felt for Jordan was dead and gone, just a product of her horny state.

Jordan came in close, the very male smell of him, seemed to be missing or at the very least, it was extremely faint. She allowed him to pull her close. Their bodies were aligned perfectly as two bodies could be. Jordan lowered his face to hers, and seemed to take her lips shyly at first. The kiss deepened as Jordan swept her mouth with his tongue, Brea responded a little hesitantly. The kiss was nice, not what she was used to from Jordan, but it was nice. It seemed as if something was missing. Slowly, Jordan pulled away, looking into her eyes. His eyes were dreamy as he looked at her.

"Your kiss really nice, Brea."

"I could tell you liked it," Brea responded, not as aroused by it as he. Something about him was off it seemed.

"Yeah, how so?" he asked, still looking at her slightly swollen lips.

Brea let her eyes travel deliberately down at his crotch. He actually gasped in surprise at his own erection. Brea stepped back, curiosity getting the better of her as she

watched him fondle himself openly. “I see you like to touch yourself.” Brea snickered, watching the glazed look in his eyes, at the feelings he caused.

“What? Oh, well I didn’t know it felt so…” He seemed to be at a loss for words.

“Should I leave you alone with yourself?” Brea asked, wondering if Jordan himself wasn’t crazy and she somehow convinced herself that he wasn’t.

“Would you consider having sex with me?” he asked. “I have about—” he actually had the audacity to pause and look at his watch, “—two hours to spare.” He looked at her with a hopeful expression. “I would really like to take advantage of the experience while I can,” he offered by way of explanation.

Brea couldn’t have been more disgusted. Why? She had reasons: for one, her alarms were so overworked she was finally going to heed them. She needed to get away from him. There was no way she was going to get back into that car with him. He was a rude, ex-wife-obsessed pervert with no regard to her feelings. It was like last night had never happened. Like the Jordan from last night was a completely different guy. She looked at him and wondered how he could have charmed her so. How could she have slept with this guy last night? Gorgeousness aside, he was one crazy asshole, and she needed to get away as fast as she could and nurse her hurt feelings. Brea took her vow again. No more men in her life. No more hurt.

“No, but thank you. I’ll just walk home.” Without waiting for an answer, Brea began the long walk home. Minutes later, with much grinding, she heard the car take off and speed in the other direction. It was a long walk home, but then again, she had a lot of things to sort out. It was time for a new plan when dealing with matters of the heart.

Thirteen: Recon

Cupid lost track of time as he waited for someone, anyone, to open the door. He had visited insanity as he thought about Brea. He wanted to be with her, kiss her, talk to her. How long had he been in this damn closet anyway? The bolts dug into his back as he tried to get comfortable around them. As soon as he was out he was going straight to Brea to tell her everything. Okay, maybe not, she'd put his balls on a plate and microwave them after she called the asylum to pick him up. What would he say anyway? *Hi, I'm Cupid and I'm only dating you to keep my immortality?* Cupid shook his head in disgust. What the hell was the matter with him anyway? The last time he fell for a mortal didn't turn out so well.

The lock on the door turned, causing Cupid to jump. He scrambled to his feet, determined to see who had the balls to lock him up. Whoever it was, was going to pay. As he exited the closet, silence and an empty room greeted him. He grunted in frustration. He had to see Brea. *Needed* to see her. Cupid flexed his wings and shook them to prepare for a rapid and rough flight.

"Is he gone?" Psyche asked in a bored voice.

"Yes, he looks pissed though," Eris responded as she and Psyche shimmered into the empty weapons room, still a little leery. Eris turned to Psyche. "You came back in plenty of time. Good girl. You didn't do anything to tip her off did you?"

"Oh please." Psyche strutted past Eris, still enjoying her very male, very Cupid body. "I was the epitome of perfection, not a hair out of place. Loved that car after I figured out how to work it, even took it for a long spin. How long do I have left to enjoy this visage?"

"Look, my little dodo bird, it's best you get out of that as soon as possible. You don't want to run into a god and then all of this would have been for nothing," Eris chastised.

“You’re probably right. Oh, Eris, I experienced the most wonderful physical pleasure as a man. You know, I think I know why men do such stupid things to lay a woman.” Psyche idly stroked herself. “I had no idea you gave me working parts,” she murmured.

Eris rolled her eyes into her head. Why did she always deal with nuts? Of course the nuts were the only ones who required her service, it was a bittersweet romance. “Of course I gave you working parts. I told you it was some of my best work. I wanted you to be fully functional in case screwing the little mortal was a necessity to keep up appearances.” Eris finger combed her long jet-black hair, peering at Psyche sideways. “So how long do I have to wait for details?”

“You mean you weren’t watching?” Psyche sounded hurt.

“No, darling. I had to make sure your ex-husband here didn’t find a way out.”

“How pissed was he?” Psyche asked with that maniacal gleam in her eye.

“Pissed enough that I will do everything in my power to make sure he never learns it was me who shoved him in there. Besides, if Daddy found out I stole his key, no telling what he’d do to me.” Eris studied her black nails then looked Psyche pointedly in the eye. “Details.” Psyche squealed, crossing the room in two powerful strides. Somehow, when this was over, she would have to convince Eris to turn her into a man again.

Psyche leaned in close, whispering the day’s shenanigans in Eris’s very attentive ears, when a reflection near one of Zeus’s favorite portraits caught her eye. She whispered frantically in Eris’s ear. Within moments Eris disappeared, only to reappear before the painting with a glass container. Before the object of her attention could react, Eris had it shut into the specially made glass container. “Look, Psyche, we got ourselves a spy here,” she called over her shoulder. Eris and Psyche looked impishly into the glass container at Arachne.

Cupid pounded on the door for the third time before Lindie threw it open, irritated.

“Look, I was trying to be nice by not answering the door, but you wouldn’t go away. Now you’re forcing me to be rude, and I don’t like being rude, but I like even less what you did to my best friend. So here it is: Get the hell away from this door!” She tried to

slam the door in his face, but Cupid was much quicker and prevented the door from closing, using one strong arm.

“Excuse me? What did I do to Brea?”

“Oh don’t act all innocent, though I must say you act rather well,” Lindie observed. “You’re an asshole, go away.” She tried again to shove the door closed, but Cupid prevented it. A nasty knot was forming in his chest, and he knew things somehow had gone to shit.

“Could you just tell Brea I’m here?” he pleaded, trying to capture Lindie’s gaze with his own. He knew the girl had a tiny crush on him and he hoped it would work to his advantage.

“Who do you think told me to tell you to go away?” Lindie challenged. “Look, you’ve done enough, the least you could do now is just give us the damn paintings so I can take her home.” Lindie blew out an exasperated breath.

“We’re going home anyway. Whether we get those paintings or not.” Brea’s voice floated past Lindie, then she was there, in all her beautiful glory. Brea nodded for Lindie to go away. Lindie eyed him one more time before she found her way to the back of the cottage. Brea leaned against the doorframe pinning him with an accusatory stare. “What do you want now?”

“Now?” Cupid knew he sounded like a parrot, but something definitely wasn’t right here. “Brea, what’s going on?”

“Oh I don’t know, Jordan. Maybe you’d like to tell me a little bit more about how you still have the hots for your ex-wife. Perhaps you’d like to ask for one more romp in the hay before I leave, all the while whispering in my ear, that this thing we have isn’t going anywhere while you’re fucking me into next week.” Brea’s voice had turned to pure stone. “I’m a smart girl, Jordan, and I catch on quickly. I fell for another asshole’s ploy to get me into bed. I can’t even fathom why you’re here.”

“I wanted to see you.” Cupid answered. Rage began to fester at the unseen force driving him apart from Brea. “Can we go for a drive—?”

“No, it took me an hour and a half to make it back from the last drive you took me for. Though I must say it did me a lot of good mentally. I got a lot of stuff straightened

out here.” Brea pointed to her head. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m in the middle of packing to get the hell out of Ashe Bay.” She stared at Cupid and waited for him to release the door before she slammed it shut. Something inside of him broke. Shattered. A wrenching in his chest, an almost-fatal blow that seemed to have been struck from the inside consumed him. As he stared at the door, he knew there was no way in hell she was ever getting away from him.

Brea slid down the door until her bottom came in contact with the warm wooden floor. Tears that had threatened to fall since the walk home finally made good and slowly descended to her cheeks. Why was she crying over this asshole? And what was wrong with her, that now all of a sudden she wanted him? When she saw him standing there, her spirit jumped for joy, and her body seemed to remember him on sight, as her cunt grew hot and tingled at the sight of him. His blue eyes seemed sincere now, not the almost wicked light they seemed to have had earlier. Did he regret what he’d done to her? Brea almost ran after him, thinking that maybe a second chance was in order. She, however, stayed rooted to the spot as the hot tears followed the path of the ones before them. She was being stupid, he’d hurt her. Deliberately, that was the word. He’d been deliberately cruel.

Lindie came in and silently sat and pulled her into her arms until Brea’s head nestled in the crook of her neck. Brea turned her body into Lindie’s in an almost fetal position as she cried. They’d done this before—when Terry had hurt her. Brea couldn’t understand what made men want to hurt women—hurt her. Why did Jordan affect her so deeply when she had known him but a few days? Desperation? Loneliness? She’d opened her heart, only to have it stamped, folded, stapled and shoved ruthlessly back into her chest. But it was like she’d said to Jordan; she caught on quickly, for pain was an effective teacher.

Cupid howled in agony at the wind as he flew to nowhere in particular. His huge white wings beat violently as he soared higher and higher bellowing in rage. Someone had hurt Brea, and they’d been using his face. Psyche didn’t have that kind of power but

there were many gods who did. It could be any number of them. Cupid didn't exactly get along with everyone, and he sure as hell wasn't going to try. There were few he trusted and counted as friends. Arachne was one of them, but she hadn't answered any of his summonses. That was unlike her, and he worried that she too had been the victim of some kind of foul play.

He did a flip in the air, trying to expend the energy from the rage that had built inside of him. She was leaving and right now he was powerless to do anything about it. She was going back to the city, where there were many places she could hide—but not from him. He would have to find a way to ingratiate himself to her again—and this time it would be even harder. What could he possibly do to get her back in his arms? To get her to trust him again? Unfortunately, something took precedence over getting her back. He had to find out who was behind his undoing. For all of this would be for nothing if that someone kept usurping his efforts to win her. Right now he knew he needed to give her space and time. The two things in the world he didn't want to give her. He wanted her next to him, under him, riding him. He wanted Brea spending her time with him.

The only thing he could do right now was apologize. It didn't matter if he was the cause of it or not. She believed him to be and there was no disputing it. A small plan began to form, crowding out the intense anger. There *was* something he could do for her. There was a way for him to apologize and it also would create an opportunity for him to get back into her life. First things first, he had to find the soon-to-be corpse who was behind this.

Fourteen: As tough as nails

Lindie had driven home while Brea sat amongst the junk in the back seat, balled up. Not one word was spoken the whole ride back. A Carrie Underwood CD played on a loop. This was not the type of trip Brea had in mind when she took it. She thought this trip back would be full of relief and joy and getting rid of Mr. Forbright. Instead it brought her a fresh brand spanking new heartache, because the first one didn't kill her.

The days went by and Brea decided to go about her life as if she had never heard nor slept with anyone named Jordan Areson. Lindie was being quite a doll not mentioning it either. She fielded all calls from Mr. Forbright, telling him his paintings were on their way. It was the last phone call that got Brea to conversing with Lindie again.

“What was that about?” Brea asked from behind her desk.

“He says his wife is gushing about the cottage. He told me to thank you for a job well done.” Lindie shrugged her shoulders in confusion.

“But I never...” Brea furrowed her brow.

“I don't know, Brea, he says everything was how he pictured it. He says he recommended you to a friend.”

“Oh great.” Brea rolled her eyes. “Another old fart bastard trying to impress his wife who's probably not much older than his granddaughter.”

“We could use the clientele, Brea,” Lindie said softly. “Maybe having something to do will get your mind off, er, uhm...stuff,” she finished lamely.

“Whatever, want to go to lunch? I'm starving.” Brea stood, grabbing her purse off the hook on the wall behind her chair.

“You buying?” Lindie was already putting her jacket on.

“As if you ever bought me lunch.” Brea laughed. “I'm sure we could use it as a write-off.”

Lindie was the first one to the door. “Can we go to that new—” her words faltered and stopped altogether when she opened the door. Brea was searching for her car keys in her desk drawer, distracted.

“Sure, just give me a moment,” she muttered, slamming the drawer shut and pulling out the other one. Brea smiled in triumph. “Got them, now where are we going?”

“Any place you want. Lunch is on me, ladies.”

Brea could feel the air hitch in her lungs. Brea believed for the first time she was actually choking on air. She looked up to see Lindie standing with the door open, completely immobile. And there in the doorway, dressed in a light leather jacket and dark jeans with his perfect, beautiful hair pulled back in a ponytail, stood Jordan.

“We could make this a business lunch. Mr. Forbright recommended you for my new project.” He flashed her that megawatt smile that she had been trying to delete from her brain the last few days.

“We’re not going anywhere with you,” Brea said coldly. “Lindie, shut the door, you’re letting the trash blow in.” Lindie looked confused.

Exasperated by Lindie’s ineffectual door slamming, Brea came around the desk, shoved Lindie out of the way and began to push the door closed, despite the fact that Jordan still stood there. She didn’t care that she met the resistance of his body, she just shoved the door harder. Jordan slapped a palm to the door to prevent her from shoving at him any further.

“I was hoping we could talk,” he said stiffly.

“I was hoping you would drop off the face of the earth, but look, you’re standing right here so what’s your point?” Brea put her weight behind the door as she continued to push.

“You do realize you owe me,” he said nonchalantly, as if he weren’t standing there, trying to prevent his face from being slammed into the door.

“I owe you nothing.” Brea was breathing a little heavier now from her die-hard efforts. “Lindie, get over here and help me!” she snapped at her friend, who stood looking at the situation with a expression between mortification and humor.

“You aren’t just a tad bit curious as to how Mr. Forbright got his paintings?” he baited her.

Brea paused. Okay, she was planning to think about that later. She allowed herself to look into his gorgeous blue eyes and hated herself for still drowning in their devilish depths. “Let me guess, out of guilt you decided to do me a favor. Well, when you do a person a favor, Mr. Areson, you don’t come to their door telling them that they owe you.” Brea let go of the door and made her way to her desk and plopped down since it was obvious he wasn’t going anywhere.

“You’re partly right. I gave him the paintings on your behalf out of guilt. I hung them as a favor.” He stepped into the office, closing the door behind him. Lindie’s mouth hung open as she watched the two of them, her head swinging from side to side as if she were watching a tennis match.

“I didn’t ask you to.” Brea rolled her eyes, ignoring the way her body was reacting to him.

“Well, you didn’t refuse either,” he quipped.

“Because I didn’t know.” Brea shook her head.

“Well, despite that, my statement still stands true. Now, I did come here for business. You do run a business here, correct?”

Brea said nothing; she just sat there struggling to holding her tongue and not give him a piece of her mind. Maybe if she were unresponsive he’d leave her alone.

“Great, I love an attentive audience. May I sit here?” he asked Brea, indicating the seat in front of her desk reserved for clients. Brea just pursed her lips tighter together. He sat down anyway.

“I just acquired a condo here and I would like for you to furnish it.” His vivid blue eyes caught hers in his gaze.

“I’m not interested.” Brea stood. “But thank you for stopping by.”

Jordan reached into his jacket and pulled out a check already filled out. He pushed it across her desk and leaned back watching her. “If it’s not enough let me know. I have no problem adding more zeros.”

Brea glanced down and her mouth fell open. She picked it up just to make sure she was seeing what she thought she saw. Lindie, seeing her expression, ran around and peered over Brea's shoulder. They shared the same expression. Lindie's cell phone rang and she quickly answered, drifting over to her desk for a little privacy.

"I see I have your attention," he said arrogantly.

"I didn't say I would take the job." Brea quirked up an eyebrow.

"Yet you are holding on to my check for dear life."

"A girl's gotta eat." Brea gave him a smile full of arsenic. "When do I start? And, oh, I would like to reiterate this is strictly a business arrangement." She widened her grin.

"You start now, over lunch. I will tell you what I want." At the last sentence his eyes dropped down and appraised her body. Brea's cheeks flushed and she became angry with herself for it. She had to keep in mind that he was the enemy.

Lindie, who was always one to be counted on for a free meal, begged their forgiveness as soon as they got outside the office. It seemed she'd forgotten a very important errand. Brea fumed inwardly, intending to rip a new hole into her when she saw her later. As she went for her car, Jordan cleared his throat rather loudly.

Brea stopped her progress and rolled her eyes before turning around. He stood next to his very sporty red car with the door opened and a huge grin on his handsome face. Brea wanted to bash it in. Instead, she pasted on the fakest smile she could muster and climbed into the car. She didn't have to talk to him, at least not yet anyway.

As they made their way to God knew what restaurant since Lindie wasn't there to direct them, Brea made sure nothing about her posture indicated she was comfortable with him. She wanted to dissuade him from any attempt at conversation.

"You know, you're sitting there with your knees locked together tighter than bark on a tree. Are you thinking about entering a convent?" Jordan asked her with a smirk.

"Maybe. At least there aren't any jerk-faced men in there." Brea slid him a disapproving look.

"Jerk-faced?" he sounded truly insulted.

“Jerk-faced,” Brea repeated. This time he fell silent. Brea couldn’t help the smile that flirted at her lips.

They pulled into the parking lot of what appeared to be an Italian restaurant. Before Jordan could come around to the other side, Brea already had her door open and was out. She purposefully slammed the door extra hard. Jordan looked at her but said nothing. He did, however, manage to get ahead of her and open the door, much to Brea’s chagrin. Excellent manners wouldn’t change her mind about him.

It seemed no matter where Jordan went people scurried to serve him. They were seated immediately despite the small crowd that had been waiting before they arrived. Brea made sure not to make eye contact with any of them. She could feel the holes they were boring in her back.

Jordan took the liberty of ordering her a red wine. Brea said nothing, the less fight she put up the faster this would go. Jordan put his arms on the table and steepled his fingers under his chin as he studied her. “Shall we start in the bedroom?” he asked.

“Start anywhere you like,” Brea muttered low, glancing around at the occupants. Anything but stare into his gorgeous face. She settled her gaze on a picture of cherubs who were up to no good by stealing apples from an orchard. One of the cherubs in particular looked a little more mischievous than the others.

“Am I boring you, Brea?” Cupid asked, following her gaze.

“No, the painting just caught my eye.” She seemed to be studying it intently.

Cupid looked at the painting in question and winced. He hated catching glimpses of himself as a baby. Aphrodite had made sure everyone had seen her little boy. He indeed was the inspiration behind the cherubs. “You don’t like it?” he queried.

“Well, I don’t really like cherubs,” Brea said at last. Cupid coughed, trying to cover the indignant retort he was about to make. He had been a cute kid.

“Why is that?”

Brea took her time answering. “I don’t know really, they’re kind of cheesy. And that one there.” Brea pointed to the one who was a direct duplicate of him. “He looks naughtier than the rest. He looks to be the type of child I’d put over my knee and spank

repeatedly. He looks to just be *begging* to get punished. He appears to be more of a scoundrel-in-training than a baby angel.” It was the most words she had spoken to him and the most insulting.

“It’s just a painting,” he said at last.

“True,” Brea agreed, taking a sip of the wine the waiter set before her.

“Brea, I think we should talk about what happened in Ashe Bay.” Cupid approached the subject carefully.

“I don’t, you made yourself clear. You’re still in love with your ex—who’s really not that much of an ex, and there’s no future for us other than the romp we had. I’m a big girl. I got it and now I’m moving on.” She gulped down her wine.

“I wasn’t myself that day,” Cupid began.

“Yeah? You looked pretty Jordan-ish to me.” Brea kept looking around.

“Can we start over?”

“Yes, but only in the business sense. That’s all I have for you, Jordan.” Brea settled her hazel eyes on him. “You only get to hurt me once.”

“I didn’t mean to hurt you, ever. I have no recollection of what went on. I’m not excusing my behavior, just asking you to give me another chance.” It was the truth. He couldn’t remember what he didn’t do in the first place.

“No, Jordan, just business. If you want me to work for you, start talking, or else I’m giving you this check back and walking out of here.” Her words were hard as she looked at him. She seemed determined to stick to her guns on this. He was determined to get back in her good graces and her bed.

“Fine, that’s how it will be—for now.” Cupid retreated for the moment. He still had roughly two weeks. A lot could happen in two weeks. “Then I insist we start in the bedroom.” He smiled at her, knowing she liked his smile. “I have an idea of what I want in there.” He winked at her. “After we finish up here I’ll take you to my place, that way you can get started immediately.”

“Fine by me.” She flipped the menu open and ignored him. Yes indeed this was definitely going to be an uphill battle.

“So how did it go?” Hermes slouched in the only chair in the sparsely furnished condo.

“She’ll be here later today. Seems after she swallowed her meal whole and practically ran out of the restaurant she remembered a previous engagement.” Cupid couldn’t help but smile at her rather graceless exit. “She wouldn’t even let me take her back to the office.”

“Sounds like she’s going to be a tough nut to crack,” Hermes observed, taking a piece of ambrosia candy out of his pocket. “Somebody did a number on you my friend.”

“Yes, and that somebody has a lot to answer for. Any ideas?”

“Well, let’s see. On the night in question every member of the Council has an airtight alibi.” Hermes crunched on the candy, searching his thoughts.

“Everyone?” Cupid was shocked. “Zeus?”

“In bed with a strumpet.”

“Hera?”

“Locked in her quarters, working on a curse for Zeus.”

“Ares?”

“Off trying to start a war in some third world country.”

“My mother?”

“Trying to stop Ares.”

“Hephaestus?”

“Gay club.”

“What?” Cupid looked at Hermes sideways.

“Seems they’re more accepting of his disfigurement, in fact I understand he’s considered...”

“Enough, really I don’t need to know the details.” Cupid held up his hand as if to ward off any more visuals from Hermes. “Well, if everyone on the Council is accounted for, then that means we have a lot of suspects to weed out. I have a gut feeling one of them is definitely my ex-wife.”

“I agree.” Hermes popped another piece of candy into his mouth. “It could be anybody helping her.”

“No, it’s obviously someone with a grudge against me.”

“Like I said, could be anybody.” Hermes grinned. “And you know gods don’t have to have a grudge to be malicious. But don’t worry, I haven’t met anyone who can cause more trouble than me. I’ll find them.”

“Any word on Arachne?”

“No, don’t worry, Cupid, we’ll find her, I have plan.” Hermes stood, ready to take his leave.

“Good, because without her I’m working blind trying to seduce Brea.”

“Maybe you should try to get to know her yourself, and stop cheating.” Then Hermes was gone.

Cupid hated when he did that. Delivering the last word then leaving. But Hermes’s words made an impact. He would have to make an honest effort to find out all those little things about her for himself. Cupid had never done that. Every affair he’d had had been a whirlwind, even his marriage. He had two weeks to get to know the tsunami that was Brea and get her to marry him. Easy as pie.

Fifteen: In one fell swoop

“Doesn’t he know how to give up?” Psyche threw her arms in the air. She paced the hotel room they were staying in—illegally. After all, when you have a friend who can appear and disappear at will it seemed rather useless to check into a hotel.

“Apparently so. You two are divorced, correct?” Eris drawled, perched on the sofa and watching the craziest woman she had ever known pace the luxurious carpeting.

“He actually came here and took her out to lunch.” Psyche made a sound of disgust. “You know, she isn’t even all that pretty. Take away the sculpted cheekbones and plump ass, she’s just another somebody.”

“Nobody,” Eris corrected.

“What?” Psyched looked at Eris, puzzled.

“She’s just another *nobody*. Really, Psyche, if she were *somebody* you wouldn’t be this angry.”

“True, can you believe he gave up someone like *me* and now he’s dating *her*?”

Eris refused to point out—again—that it was Psyche who divorced Cupid, and that Cupid had been forced to date *her* to keep his immortality. It was the inability to grasp little facts like this that made Psyche just a little off balance.

Eris however was glad she had someone to appreciate her skills. She certainly wasn’t going to split hairs with the loon. “I say my work here isn’t done.” Eris waited for Psyche to stop ranting to herself long enough for her words to sink in.

“What do you have in mind?” Psyche’s green eyes glittered in interest.

“Well, I noticed humans can be quite superstitious. Maybe if I can convince her to see Cupid as a bad omen, she’ll *want* to stay away from him.” Eris clapped her hands in merriment. “Oh, this is going to be some of my best work.”

“Oh, boy, I’ve heard that before.” Psyche looked at her with doubt.

“Just be ready to be entertained,” Eris winked.

Brea wished she hadn't drunk the wine so fast. Her head was killing her and the wine had done nothing to sweeten her mood. After catching a cab back to her office, she bee-lined for Lindie's house. She had quite a big bone to pick with her.

Lindie had deserted her. No—betrayed her, leaving her alone with Jordan as if they were star-crossed lovers. She planned on yanking out Lindie's hair strand by glossy strand, and Lindie had better pray that appeased her anger.

She knocked hard on the door, since Lindie had a habit of listening to her music at the highest volume. Brea could see her through the sheer curtains, peeking out at her.

"Open up, Lindie, I can see you," Brea barked.

Seconds passed before she heard the locks turning. Lindie stepped outside, pulling the door closed behind her. She gave Brea a sunny smile. "Well, how was lunch?"

"How was lunch? Lindie, you deserted me. I could kill you right where you stand."

"Wait, Brea, I had a really good reason, honest." Lindie tried to look pitiful.

"You wanted to see him rip my heart out a second time?" Brea poked Lindie in the arm. "Honestly, Lindie, I thought—"

"Who is at the door?" came a familiar old screechy voice that put Brea's nerves on high alert.

"That's not who I think it is, is it, Lindie?" Brea dropped her voice. She caught the faint smell of burning incense and looked at Lindie accusingly.

"Yes, I didn't have time to tell you. She called me at the office to let me know she had taken an earlier flight..."

"How long?" Brea poked her again.

"How long what?" Lindie rubbed the spot.

"How long have you known she was coming?" Brea began tapping her foot in irritation.

"A month. But, Brea, so much was going on, it must have slipped my mind," Lindie apologized.

Before Brea could spin around and break for her car, the door behind Lindie opened and there stood Lindie's Grandmother Pinn, a short, stocky, gray-haired woman with enough acid on her tongue to burn down a city. Grandmother Pinn hated Brea. She

insulted her continuously every chance she got. She blamed Brea for Lindie not having an illustrious career in arts because Lindie had chosen instead to help Brea with her fledgling business. It was never Lindie's dream to be a major art dealer but she'd never stopped to correct her grandmother out of fear.

"Oh, I see. It's your well-to-do employer, delivering personally the good news of your raise," Pinn remarked, looking Brea up and down contemptuously.

"Good afternoon, Grandmother Pinn. I trust Seattle threw a much deserved party after your departure." Brea barely smiled.

"Guys, please," Lindie begged. "Grandmother, please go back into the house, I need to speak to Brea." Grandmother Pinn looked at Brea and snorted before going back into the house. "You see why I didn't want to tell you?"

"Fine, I'll let it go this time but—" Brea's cell phone went off. Brea just waved goodbye at Lindie, taking the call as she went back to her car. She could just go home early and—

"What?" Brea yelled into the phone, not sure she heard correctly.

"I'm contacting all the tenants now, I don't know yet what started this fire, but as of now, the building is not fit to be occupied." Her landlord was close to tears and she felt sorry for her, but even sorrier for herself.

"Can't I at least get some of my things—my things aren't burned up are they?" Panic went through Brea. Everything she owned was in that apartment.

"Sorry, full damage hasn't been accessed yet. Look I'm sorry, Brea, but I've got a million other phone calls to make. Sorry again." The line went dead.

Brea snapped her phone shut, near tears. She would just die if all of her things were burned up. She wasn't in a position to replace anything. She was struggling with the business as it was.

Brea sat in the car in front of Lindie's house trying to get her frozen brain to work. Okay, so there was a good chance that her things were fine, but until then she needed a place to stay. Fine, she could just stay in a hotel until her landlord, Ms. Markesan, called. Now that she had a plan she felt a little better. She'd just stop at the drugstore and get the basic toiletries she needed then check into a hotel.

“I’m sorry your card has been declined,” the woman said with sympathy, handing Brea back her credit card.

“You must be mistaken, my card is in good standing.” Brea pushed the card back at the woman firmly. “Could you try it again?”

“Sure.” The woman took the card with a look that said “we both know how this is going to end”. After several seconds she handed the card back. “It’s still declining it.”

“Is there a number or something you can call? I pay my bill every month. This makes no sense.” She felt pitiful.

“If you’d like to have a seat over there, I can see to that for you.” The receptionist smiled warmly as she lifted the receiver of the telephone. Brea thanked her, then plopped down in one of the soft leather seats.

She started going over her options. Lindie was out. With that troll of a grandmother there, Brea wasn’t setting foot in Lindie’s home. She didn’t have enough cash on her and there was nothing in petty cash at the office. The receptionist interrupted her planning time.

“It seems the bank’s computers have crashed because of some sort of virus. They don’t know when they’ll be back online again. They apologize for the inconvenience. Do you have another card you can use?”

Brea sat at the bar enjoying the only thing she could afford right now, a margarita. With a total of twenty-three dollars in cash, it looked like she’d be spending the night at her office. She wanted to repeatedly smash her head against the varnished wood on the bar. It seemed like bad luck was just following her wherever she went.

“Hi,” a smoky female voice said, with accompanying expensive perfume. Brea turned to see a gorgeous woman with long black hair sitting next to her. She hadn’t even heard her approach, let alone sit down. The woman held out a hand with perfectly manicured black nails. Brea shook her hand.

“Hi,” she returned.

“You look kind of bummed and your drink’s almost gone. Can I buy you another one?” the woman offered.

“No, I’ll need to drive later,” Brea said sourly. “There’s a couch with my name on it at my office.”

“Oh, well, that doesn’t sound very comfortable.” The woman laughed lightly. “Why don’t you just go home?”

“Burned down.” Brea emptied her glass.

“That’s terrible, anyone hurt?”

“Not that I know of.” The last thing Brea wanted to do was chitchat with a woman whose only problem was probably deciding which designer purse to carry.

“Well, that’s a relief, maybe you can bunk with a relative or a friend meanwhile.”

“Can’t, her piranha of a grandmother is visiting.”

“Oh, boy well I guess that’s why you’re here in the hotel then. How long will you be staying?”

“I won’t be, can’t afford to.” Brea rose off the stool. “I gotta go.”

“Well, I sure hope things look up for you. You know it’s almost like you’re cursed or something. You know some people just attract negativity.” She held out her hand for a goodbye shake. “It was nice meeting you.”

Brea shook the woman’s hand and left the bar, her words ringing in her ear. It sure felt like she was cursed. Brea drove to the office, debating whether she should stop by a discount store and invest her twenty-three dollars in a pillow and blanket. It wasn’t like she could afford much else. She needed a quick nap, something to get her through the rest of the evening.

Her mood was definitely salty as she walked to the front door of the office. Digging into her pocket for the keys, she found them empty. She rolled her eyes and prayed silently as she went through her purse, still no keys. Brea jogged back to the car and searched every compartment—she had lost the keys to her office. “Dammit!” she screamed in frustration.

The day went to crap as soon as Jordan arrived. Her mind briefly went to the woman at the bar. Some people did seem to attract negativity. Jordan was a walking umbrella in

the house. Bad luck. She'd experienced nothing but suffering since meeting him, of course, not counting the time they spent on the floor of his store. Or even the camp-out that rained them out. But other than that he was bad news. She was going to stay as far away from him as possible. After she gave him his stupid check back.

"I think we have her hook, line and sinker." Eris smiled, delicately sipping a rather expensive wine. Psyche sat next to her at the bar.

"I'll believe it when I see it," Psyche said skeptically.

"Trust me." Eris held up the keys to Brea's office. "She'll make the connection. I gave her a little bad luck to get things moving."

"Yeah, you called me down here to brag about what?" Psyche frowned, waiting to be impressed.

"She has nowhere to go, no money and no friend to boo hoo to. With a few well-placed words she'll be seeing Cupid as nothing but a bad omen." She made an identical glass of wine appear in front of Psyche. "Drink up, little girl. I believe your soon-to-be-mortal husband will be back in your bed soon."

Brea pounded on the door of the condo. He'd better be here! Jordan opened the door with a towel wrapped around his narrow waist. Brea stared with her mouth agape. His hair was slicked back. A bead of water rolled from his impressive chest down the grooves of his muscled abs, and into the band of the towel. He was so delicious, wet and tempting...

"You're early," was all he said, standing there looking perfect. It took Brea a moment to unscramble her brain to speak.

"Yes, well I came to give you this back." Brea balled up the check and threw it at him. It bounced off his chest and into her eye.

"Dammit!" she cursed again, putting her hand to her eye. "That's it, you're bad for me, Areson. Stay away from me. I've had enough of your negativity!" She went to turn away to make a hasty exit, but he grabbed her about the shoulders and dragged her into his condo.

Sixteen: Taking the tiger by the tail

“What the hell are you doing? This is abduction!” Brea yelled as Cupid dragged her into his condo. She fought him like a wild animal. Somehow he managed to get her wrists locked together in one hand while he closed and locked the door with the other.

“It’s not abduction when you came to my house,” Cupid replied, crossing his arms in front of his chest. “Now explain yourself.”

“I have decided that you’re not good for me. You’re a bad omen, Jordan. You have your check, now I’m leaving.” Brea made a move to brush past him, but Jordan gently pushed her back then recrossed his arms.

“You made a deal with me and accepted my check. Does your word mean nothing?” Her pride was definitely a sore spot, so he exploited it.

“Look, since you have crossed paths with me I’ve experienced nothing but bad karma or whatever it is they call it. I’ve had enough.” Brea slashed her hand in the air to emphasize her point.

“I’ve apologized and unless you give me a chance, you won’t be able to see how sincere I am. You didn’t seem this fed up earlier. What has happened since lunch?”

Cupid was getting the feeling that someone was sabotaging him again. At this rate, he was definitely looking at a very mortal life.

“It would be easier to answer what hasn’t happened.” Brea began using her fingers to tick off the day’s events. “First, you show up, which is an automatic deal breaker for a good day.” Cupid ignored the insult. “Second, Lindie’s witch of a grandmother shows up, depriving me of much-needed assistance. Then my landlord calls to inform me that my apartment building had a fire and I can’t come home or gather any belongings. If that’s not enough, my bank’s computer system crashes and I am left without a workable dime to check into a hotel.” Brea took a deep breath.

“I admit you have had a bad...”

“But wait there’s more!” Brea mimicked the famous sales line. “So I decided to sleep in my office, but wouldn’t you know, I lost the damn key! So I traced all this bad luck back to you, Jordan Areson. Ever since you stepped in my office, my life has gone to shit. Thank you very much but I certainly don’t need help screwing up my life!” This time she brushed past him, bumping him on purpose.

“Where are you going if you don’t have any money?” Cupid tried very hard to keep the condescending tone out of his voice, but she was acting irrationally.

“To my car if you don’t mind.” She was trying to figure out how to work the locks.

“Stay here,” Cupid said simply. Brea’s fingers froze.

“What did you say?”

“I said stay here. There’s more than enough room, and besides, you’ll become better acquainted with the feel of the place. I can give you a cash advance to tide you over until the mess with your bank clears up.” It all sounded very reasonable to his ears.

“That’s stupid!” Brea retorted. “I don’t work for you remember? Besides it sounds like you’re just trying to get me into bed. I said our relationship is purely professional.”

“Okay, you have to decide—do you or don’t you work for me? If our relationship is purely professional then you work for me. If indeed I am trying to get you into bed then it’s personal—you choose.”

“You’re twisting my words.”

“You’re hedging. Think about it, Brea, you can’t just sleep in your car. It’s not charity because you’re earning the money by decorating as you agreed to do in the first place.” Cupid hoped she didn’t continue to be unreasonable; he’d force her to stay here physically if he had to. There was no way she was sleeping in her car. Her fingers started working the locks again; Cupid blew out an exasperated breath. “Brea, think about—”

“Oh, save it, I’m just getting my check out of the hall before someone steals it!” Brea grumbled. “I’ll be right back. I left some stuff in the car.”

“She’s a handful,” Hermes murmured softly when Brea left. Cupid turned around to see his friend leaning against a wall.

“More than you know.” Cupid ran his fingers through his wet hair. “Anything new?”

“I’m working on it. I just came from consulting with Hecate and she gave me a possible way to find Arachne.” Hermes went to the window, waiting for Brea to appear.

“Hecate? Her help comes with a price. She still hasn’t gotten over not being invited to sit on the Olympian Council.” Cupid gave his friend a sympathetic look.

“Yes, well I plan on passing the debt on.” Hermes spotted Brea getting a bag out of her car. “How did you manage to convince her to see you?”

“Desperation, thank Olympus for a bad economy. She needed the money. Though I have to say, someone has been meddling in her life, only this time it worked in my favor.” Cupid gave him the story Brea told to him. Hermes whistled.

“Well, someone is definitely out to get you, Cupid. She’s on her way back. I have to stop by Ashe Bay to collect some of Arachne’s web for Hecate. I’ll keep you posted—good luck.”

Good luck indeed. He would need it where Brea was concerned. He’d made a very chivalrous comment about respecting the business relationship, but he didn’t promise her. If he couldn’t win her heart while she was living with him then he most certainly deserved to be mortal.

“You’re an idiot!” Psyche screamed the words at Eris as she scattered the images in the scrying bowl. “The only thing you’ve done is make it *easier* for him to seduce her. ‘Trust me’, you said. He’s going to make sure that place is warded to keep us out!”

“I didn’t see you coming up with any ideas, you little crackpot! I don’t need this!” Eris was about to leave when Psyche stopped her.

“Wait! Don’t go, you’re the only friend I have,” Psyche wailed.

Eris groaned. She didn’t want to consider herself Psyche’s friend. She saw an opportunity to cause trouble and she took it. This was one of those times her father referred to when he said she should take the time to think about her actions before she carried them out.

“Fine, but no more name calling, understood?”

Psyche yelped in glee. “All right, my banana brain friend, let’s figure out how we can turn this situation around.”

Eris rubbed her hands together devilishly.

Cupid changed into some comfortable clothes then ordered Chinese while Brea showered. He went to retrieve blankets for himself to sleep on the floor until a impish thought entered his head. He willed all the blankets away but one and made the bed. He was glad he hadn't brought any furniture at all when he decided on coming here to finish what he started.

He poured two glasses of wine when he heard Brea exiting the bathroom. Setting the glasses down, he waited for her entrance. She stepped into the kitchen wearing one of his long shirts that reached well past her hips. Her hair hung wet and curly in one ponytail high at the back of her head. Her face, scrubbed clean of makeup, looked innocent and sensuous at the same time.

He let his gaze travel leisurely to her smooth bronze thighs, to her shapely calves, to her bare feet. On one of her toes she wore a silver band with a Celtic knot. He regretted not being able to fully appreciate her beauty the night they'd made love at the campsite. He was more than willing to make up for it now.

"You're staring." She picked up a glass of wine.

"You're beautiful." He picked up his glass and clinked it with hers.

"I think I'm becoming an alcoholic, this is my third drink today." She took a sip anyway.

"Well, considering the day you've had I would say you deserve it." Cupid leaned on the counter. "As much as I hate to say this, tomorrow you and I are going to get you some clothes to wear."

"I don't want to be a burden, I understand you move about a lot—and aren't you going to some wild, exotic place soon?"

"No, the time for being a nomad is over for now, I have other matters that require my full attention."

"A business man, I can appreciate that. So what business do you have in Canton, Jordan?"

"Acquisitions," he answered readily, then the doorbell rang.

“I didn’t know you had a doorbell. I didn’t see it on the way in.” Brea looked mildly surprised.

“*We* have a doorbell,” he called back as he went to answer the door. “You probably missed it when you were breaking down my door in a rage.”

A few minutes later Cupid had the food spread out on the kitchen counter. “I forgot something.” He snapped his fingers then went into the other room. Sarah McLachlan’s voice floated into the room, Cupid came back into the kitchen with a grin on his face. “She makes food taste better.”

Brea smiled back, digging into the food. Cupid stood across from her as they ate while listening to the music. Light conversation flowed between them, an hour later Brea was sitting on the counter next to Cupid. They were laughing about the absurdity of Brea’s day.

“My mother always said ‘when it rains it pours’.” Brea sighed.

“You sound like you miss her.” Cupid wanted to reach out and stroke her cheek but he refrained. It was too soon.

“I do, she’s been dead about three years now. She was my best friend.”

“How did she die?”

“Being a hero,” Brea said sadly. “She volunteered at a drug rehab center. A guy walked in whacked out on drugs. He just started shooting, shot my mom three times. She was a hero to me, always trying to help.” Brea sniffed.

“I agree, she was a hero. I’m sorry you lost her. What about your father?”

“My mother said he wasn’t ready to be a father so she asked him to leave when I was two. He left without looking back once. I don’t remember him, so I don’t miss him.”

“Your mother sounds like a strong woman. I can see she passed that on to you.” Cupid meant it. If Brea was anything, she was strong. He had never met anyone like her.

“Thanks, I’m tired. I think I’ll turn in now. Where am I sleeping?”

Cupid had forgotten about the sleeping arrangements until now. “I only have one bed and no couch. I can sleep on the floor...”

“Do you have extra blankets? I could sleep on the floor. I am sort of crashing here.”

“Don’t be silly, you take the bed. I don’t have any extra blankets, but one night on the floor won’t kill me.” Cupid hopped off the counter.

He began cleaning up the food and putting it away, Brea helped. “Okay, I can’t let you sleep on your own floor. We’re adults and we can sleep in the bed together without—well you know. Right?”

“Of course,” Cupid agreed and he wasn’t lying—technically they could. He didn’t say he wanted to.

“Okay.” Brea closed the refrigerator.

“Okay,” Cupid echoed, extending a hand for her to go first.

He watched her plump bottom shift under his shirt and he licked his lips. Perhaps this wasn’t such a good idea. He didn’t know how he was going to spend the night in the same bed with the most beautiful, desirable woman he had ever met and not touch her. Especially when his body remembered her and liked her—a lot! It was going to be a long night.

Seventeen: Home advantage

For the millionth time, she changed positions. Every part of her body was aware of Jordan lying next to her, and her body wanted to play with his. But she had to repeatedly chastise her traitorous body by reminding herself of the hurt he had caused her in Ashe Bay. He was still in love with his ex-wife. He saw no future for them. Still, Brea's body ignored the echoes of her broken heart.

He'd removed his shirt before bed, and at least three times, her bare arm had brushed his taut, smooth back...arm...back. Arrrgh! She shifted again to her back in frustration as the shirt she was wearing was riding up her thighs. Jordan shifted and his hand brushed her thigh. Brea's breathing momentarily stopped. She wasn't sure what she would do if he touched her on purpose. After a few seconds, she realized the touch was by sheer accident. Perhaps he was sleeping and unaware.

Letting out her breath slowly, she decided that maybe if she stopped fretting about not falling asleep, she'd fall asleep. She began to focus on the day's events and wondered how much bad karma she must have out there to have such a healthy dose of sour luck. She'd had enough things go wrong in one day to write a country song. Brea giggled to herself.

"Want to share the joke?" Jordan's voice was slightly muffled by the pillow.

Well, that answered her question about whether he was sleeping or not. "It's private, you wouldn't get it."

"Humor me." He changed positions so that he lay on his side. "It doesn't seem as if the sleep fairy is going to visit anytime soon."

"You'll think I'm crazy," Brea hedged.

"That happened quite a while ago. You've nothing to lose." Out of the corner of her eye she saw Jordan's smile and she fell victim to it.

"I was thinking about writing a country song," Brea said quickly.

“Well, let’s explore this. What would the song be about?” Jordan propped himself up on one elbow and looked down at her.

“Well, I don’t have a dog, so that’s out. But my house burned down, I don’t have any money and my best friend deserted me—sort of.” Brea giggled and Jordan chuckled.

“I think a country song is the way to go—it’d be hard to rap about that.”

“Who said anything about rap?”

“You know, in case the country doesn’t fly,” Jordan said, pretending seriousness.

Brea pulled the pillow from under her head and swatted him with it. Jordan grabbed it and pummeled her relentlessly. Brea held up her hands in surrender. “Okay, fine, I’m sorry,” she laughed. Jordan hit her one more time before tossing the pillow back at her.

“You shouldn’t hit with pillows if you can’t defend yourself.” He laid back on his pillows, his hands cupping the back of his head.

“Who says I can’t defend myself?” Brea rolled over with the pillow in her hands. She straddled him about the waist, and put the pillow across his face in an attempt to smother him.

Smoothly, Jordan grabbed her about the waist and flipped her so that now he straddled her. He yanked the pillow out of her hands and tossed it carelessly. Brea looked up at him with her wide hazel eyes. Even with tousled hair he was gorgeous. He stared down at her with eyes so blue she could see them in the dark. They stayed that way for a few heartbeats before Jordan lowered his head and kissed her on the lips.

Against her better judgment Brea found herself responding. Her body screamed accolades at her. She ignored her first instinct to stay clear of any romantic ties. His kiss was addictive, erotic as his soft hair brushed against her cheeks. He kissed her slowly, with so much skill that he drove all thought from her mind.

Slowly, he ended the kiss. As he pulled back he stared into her eyes, never seeming to blink.

“I’m sorry, Brea, for any hurt I’ve caused you. Please give me another chance.” He carried his own weight as he waited for her answer. Brea wanted to scream “yes” until her throat hurt. But if she was ever to learn from her mistakes, she couldn’t go backward.

“I’m sorry, Jordan. I can’t. There can’t be anything between us.” She turned her head to the side to avoid his eyes. She felt him move and she knew he sat next to her. She knew he was watching her.

“I don’t know what happened, other than what you told me. It sounds crazy I know. I wasn’t myself. I swear it won’t happen again. I want you, Brea, you excite me like no woman has ever done. You can feel what’s between us; I know you can. Think about it.” Brea felt the bed shift as he lay down.

And she was supposed to sleep on it, right? Arrrgh!

Bleary-eyed, Brea called it a night and joined Jordan in the kitchen. The sunshine shone with a comforting warmth in the condo. It was definitely something to keep in mind when she began decorating the place. The smell of coffee drifting in the air was seductive. Jordan was leaning against the counter, swilling the brew. He pointed to the second Styrofoam cup sitting on the counter.

“You look like how I feel,” Brea said, scratching her head and picking up the much needed beverage.

“Well, I didn’t sleep much.” He sipped at his coffee.

“Yeah, well...” Brea let the sentence trail. “I’m going to call the bank today—”

“I’ve already opened an account for you at my bank. I deposited the amount I’d given you on the check.” He rubbed at his eyes.

“Wow, I didn’t realize one could get so much done before nine.”

“I might as well be productive if I’m not going to sleep. Besides banking rules don’t apply to me. Remember, money gives special privileges.”

“Does this mean I have to tear the check up?” Brea smiled at Jordan. He gave her a half smile in return.

“Keep it.”

“Why would you pay me double the amount?”

“Because I’m going to be your only client for awhile. I’m very picky about the way I want things. Consider yourself attached to my hip.” He set his cup down.

“What?” Brea could feel her temper rising. “You think you can just pay for my time?”

“Isn’t that the nature of your business?”

“You’re twisting the meaning and you know it. I’m not your personal servant!”

“No, you’re my personal decorator. Get dressed, we’re going shopping.” With that he left her standing in the kitchen with her mouth hanging open.

He bought her more clothes than she owned. She protested every single article of clothing—except the black leather skirt that looked absolutely adorable. They sat across from each other in silence after the waiter had taken their lunch order.

“It seems to me that since I now have access to money I could just stay in a hotel.” Brea played with her utensils.

“That’s a foolish idea,” Jordan responded.

“Why?”

“Because you’re burning money unnecessarily. Save it. I told you before, it would probably be better for you to stay in the condo, get a feel for it. Besides, if I have an idea in the middle of the night I certainly don’t want to wait until you can come over to discuss it.”

“That’s what telephones are for.”

“I hate speaking on the telephone. Look, if it’s the sleeping arrangements, after lunch your first official duty will be to choose a bed to go into the guest bedroom. Then you can sleep there.”

Brea frowned. She *would* be wasting good money. But on the other hand, being that close to Jordan would be hell. She had to remain professional. If they slept in different bedrooms she wouldn’t be so tempted.

“Fine, we’ll do this on a trial basis.”

“Agreed.” Jordan paused “Have you thought about what I asked?”

What could she say? It was the thing that was going on in her head since it left his mouth. She’d found to her shock that she had actually *debated* about it. What was it about him that seemed to pull her toward him despite her better judgment?

“A little bit.”

“And?”

“And I haven’t changed my mind.” Brea had to remind herself to kick herself later.

“I don’t like that,” Cupid said for the millionth time, in question to the millionth bed they looked at.

“I thought you said I could choose the bed,” Brea huffed.

In reality, Cupid couldn’t care less about the bed, any bed for that matter. Just give him a bed with Brea in it and he wanted it. In truth she had excellent taste. Every bed she looked at was ready to be delivered—as is. That wasn’t what he was looking for.

“What about that one?” He pointed to a king-sized sleigh bed that had drawers built underneath. The wood was expensive and the stain flawless. The display sign proudly stated they were willing to do custom work.

“Oh, that one.” Brea looked happy for a moment that he’d chosen a bed. “Jordan, it has to be professionally assembled.”

“So?”

“So, the soonest that could happen is tomorrow.”

“You mean they do custom work that soon?” Cupid whistled in mock impressiveness. “I had no idea.”

“What custom work?” Brea turned around and looked at him in frustration.

“I like the bed, but it could use a bit more design on it, don’t you think?” Cupid stepped to the front of it and pointed to the smooth bare area at the front. “I think a little artwork here would be different.”

“Jordan, it could take more than a week and that’s being hopeful.” Brea put her hands on her hips.

“I’m not in a rush, are you?” Cupid had to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing. She was spitting mad and trying hard to hide it.

“No, of course not. It’s your house, you should have what you want in it.” She walked around the bed until she stood next to him. “What kind of artwork do you have in mind?”

“Something...sensual.”

“That’s vague.” Brea rolled her eyes.

“Well, that’s your job, to figure out for me what I want.” Cupid smiled at her.

“I thought you knew what you wanted.” Brea looked at him in suspicion.

He stepped forward until he was in front of her. “Make no mistake, I know what I want.” He put as much desire in his voice that was allowed without using his gifts. Cupid felt the summons of Hermes. He hoped it was good news. “I have to go.” He tossed her the keys to his car. “I’ll catch a cab. Put the order in for the bed and surprise me with the artwork. I’ll meet you at the condo later this evening. We’re going out for dinner.” Cupid gave her a quick peck on the cheek and left before she protested.

He walked out, around to the back of the store, and when he was sure no one else was around he brought forth his wings, and took off for Mount Olympus.

“What is it, old friend?” Cupid asked, meeting Hermes in the official meeting room for Council.

“Hecate has traced Arachne here, I can’t find her.” Hermes seemed deep in thought.

“You’ve searched everywhere?”

“No, Cupid, I sat here and waited for Arachne to show up,” Hermes said sarcastically. “Hecate is sure she is here, but I’ve looked everywhere.”

“Well, apparently you haven’t if you still haven’t found her.” Cupid smirked at him. “How hard can it be to find a teensy weensy spider?”

“Look, we’ll split the rooms in half and look separately.” Hermes ignored Cupid’s jibe.

They sat down and split the rooms in half on Mount Olympus. Cupid didn’t feel it was fair, after all with Hermes’s quick speed he was bound to finish before Cupid.

Two hours later Cupid was ready to give up, when he looked at the weapons room. It usually stayed empty since the vengeful gods always seemed to have a need for vengeance. Cupid let his sight settle warily on the closet Zeus kept his weapons in. He was rather reluctant to search that particular area. The thought of being locked into that closet again was quite undesirable. He summoned Hermes.

“You found her?” Hermes asked seconds after the summons.

“No, I need you to go look in there.” Cupid pointed to the closet.

“You’re kidding right?” Hermes looked in disbelief at Cupid. “Don’t tell me you’re afraid to look in there.”

“First of all it’s locked, and everyone knows you can pick any divine lock.”

“I resent that.”

“It’s no less true, go on, check it out.” Cupid pushed him toward the closet. Hermes grumbled, but picked the lock in three seconds flat.

“Well?” Cupid asked anxiously as Hermes disappeared into the closet. Hermes didn’t respond. Eventually he came out with a glass container with a very sick-looking spider inside.

“She’s not dead is she?” Hermes asked, handing the container to Cupid.

“She’s immortal remember? I think she’s just sick.” Cupid studied the glass trying to find a way to open it. Eventually he hit upon something because the container began to open. Cupid and Hermes sat on the floor with the container.

“No telling how long she’s been trapped in there. Ask her,” Hermes prodded Cupid.

Cupid concentrated, trying to find the wavelength on which he communicated with the spider. Arachne was quite shy; she didn’t communicate with just anyone. Cupid was one of very few she talked to. Arachne didn’t respond.

“I think she’s too weak.” Cupid gave up. “I don’t think she’s eaten.”

Hermes began to dig around in his jacket. He pulled out a piece of ambrosia candy and set it in his palm, then smashed it into small pieces with his thumb. He took the smallest piece and set it in front of the spider. “I can’t believe I’m hand-feeding a spider,” he muttered as the spider weakly began to eat the ambrosia.

“She used to be human,” Cupid reminded him.

“Yes, well sometimes it’s hard to remember that when I’m looking at eight legs.” He pushed another small piece in front of the arachnid.

“Can you keep an eye on her?” Cupid asked.

“You want me to baby-sit?” Hermes was insulted.

“Arachne has feelings, remember that, Herm. I can’t take her home. Brea is there. Besides, whoever did this will be looking for her once they realize she’s gone.”

“Fine, but you owe me, Cupid.” Hermes scooped up the bottom half of the glass with the spider inside and stood. “Let me know how things are going.” Then Hermes was gone before Cupid could thank him.

Eighteen: Treading deep water

Brea realized she was still standing in the store, with her hands on her hips in indignation, a full two minutes after Jordan left. She snapped her mouth closed and hailed a salesman. She really had to give herself a pat on the back, when she requested artwork on the front board of the bed. It had been almost too much of a temptation to *not* tell the salesman she wanted Mickey Mouse carved into the bed. She settled on a design that she herself loved and decided he'd just have to deal with it.

She did admit to herself that she loved driving the sporty Corvette. She even let her hair down just to feel it whip about her shoulders as she made her way home. Home? She made her way to her place of employment that she happened to be staying.

In two trips she managed to get all her bags in the door. After she wrestled all of them in, she sat in a chair and contemplated her next move. It was early evening and Jordan had mentioned they were going out to dinner. It was a business dinner. That was why Brea pulled out the leather skirt and barely there top that had made Jordan's eyes bug out when she picked it up.

His libido was not her problem. She pulled the plush robe and new body shampoos and lotions out of the bag and headed for the shower. No, it was not her problem whatsoever, she told herself, as she began the process of layering herself with her new sensual fragrances.

An hour later she looked nothing less than delectable, if she said so herself. The doorbell rang. She purposely waited for it to ring two more times before she sauntered to the door. Brea tried to appear indifferent when she opened the door.

"You should have more than one set of keys." Thank goodness that was all she intended to say because her mouth went dry.

Jordan stood with a single rose in his hand and presented it to her. His hair appeared freshly washed in its ponytail state. As usual, he wore black, this time he was in a full tuxedo, with a grin a world famous modeling agency would love.

“You look absolutely ravishing,” he declared as his eyes appraised her hotly. He pulled her to him and whispered in her ear. “You should know better than to tease a starving man with a tasty morsel that he can’t eat.” His warm breath tickled her ear.

She blushed from her upswept hairdo to her black stiletto-heeled feet. His double meaning was not lost upon her. She let the visual of his words sweep her up for the moment, then she shook it off as she took a step back.

“Thank you. You clean up well yourself.” Brea had to watch her words carefully. For a second she felt as if she were flirting with him.

“Your chariot awaits.” His hand swept out in a flourish, indicating that she should venture out first.

“Let me get my purse and the keys to the car.” Brea turned to grab her purse, adding a sway to her hips that came out of nowhere.

“Leave the car keys,” he said with a secretive look on his face. Brea looked over her shoulder at him, then grabbed the keys to the condo and her purse and exited.

“I had no idea you owned a chariot.” Brea looked at the four white horses with nothing short of shock. When he said her chariot awaited she assumed he had another vehicle at his disposal.

Cupid smiled smugly, Apollo wouldn’t miss them if he had them back by morning. He’d thought long and hard about this one. Technically (and he was beginning to love the context of the word) he wasn’t using his abilities to seduce her, he was using Apollo’s. “They, I must confess, are borrowed.” He helped her into the chariot before he entered.

“Well, this is going through an awful lot of trouble for a business dinner.” Brea said, adjusting the short skirt as Cupid sat next to her and took the reins.

“Nonsense,” he replied urging the horses to go.

“You don’t consider borrowing horses and a chariot a lot of trouble?” Brea was agog with wonder.

“I was referring to your comment about this being a business dinner.” He eased the horses into a slow trot. Anything faster and they would be flying—literally.

“This *is* a business dinner,” Brea insisted, primly trying to adjust a skirt that didn’t have enough material to adjust.

“So tell me, fair maiden,” Cupid laughed “When was the last time you wore a black leather skirt and stiletto heels on a business dinner?”

Brea let out a huff of air and turned away from Cupid, but not before he saw the smile that crept across her lips.

“What is this place?” Brea looked at the nondescript building that gave nothing away. Cupid jumped down and out of the chariot first, tying the reins to a nearby post. He held out his hand and helped Brea down and out of the chariot before he answered her.

“It used to be a chocolate factory. But it was bought some years back and turned into a rather exclusive place to eat.” Cupid crooked his arm and she slid her arm around his as they fell into step together.

He left out the part about it being exclusive to non-human entities. Gods, fairies, shapeshifters, you name it, you’d probably find one inside—except this night. The owner, a prince from overseas, owed Cupid a favor. Having been cursed by an enchantress, his only way to end the curse was to have someone love him. Cupid had had a hand in a certain beauty falling for the cursed beast. No longer a beast, the prince seemed pretty happy with his wife.

Tonight the guest list was very selective, if you couldn’t pass for human, you weren’t allowed in. Everyone had been instructed to be on their best human behavior. Cupid led her up to the door that was opened before he could even give the coded knock.

“Welcome!” the prince greeted Cupid. “We have a table all ready for you and your lovely companion.” Cupid gave the prince a hug and they were seated. He watched Brea’s eyes as they darted around the room, not sure where to look first.

It was an impressive restaurant. One wall had been turned into a giant waterfall. Large chandeliers hung from the ceiling. Each table seemed ornately carved and one of a kind. The seats were large and comfortable; they looked more like thrones than chairs.

“I’m speechless. I’ve lived here a long time and I have never heard of this place. What is it called?”

Of course she never heard of it, no mortals ever did. She’d never be able to find it on her own. “I’m glad you like it, the food here is excellent.” Cupid swerved around her question. “What are you in the mood for?” he let his words drip with innuendo.

“I’ll need a menu.” Brea looked around the restaurant again with appreciation in her eyes.

“You don’t need one, order anything you like, anything at all,” he encouraged her.

“Are you serious? What if I ordered a rack of lamb?”

“They’d make it for you,” he said smoothly sipping the water in front of him.

“Wow! You sure know how to impress a girl.” Brea sipped her water.

“You’re not just any girl, Brea. I’ve told you that.”

“I said—”

“Frankly, I don’t care what you said. You and I both know that something is going on between us. I’ve made love to you, Brea, you think I’m just going to give up?”

“It was just sex.” She seemed unsure of her words.

“If it was just sex, you wouldn’t have gotten so mad at me when I acted crazy.”

“It’s what you said…”

“Fine. If you’re going to go by things that I say and believe them than why can’t you believe me when I say I am truly sorry and want to start over?”

“I don’t know,” she said at last.

“Well, I do, and I say stop fighting me and forgive me.” He grabbed her hand and lightly brushed the top of it with his thumb. “I want you, and not just in my bed.”

“Why do you want me, Jordan? What’s in it for you?”

Cupid’s heart sped. He couldn’t lie to her. He certainly couldn’t tell the reason behind everything. “I want you because you were handpicked for me above all others by a divine being. Having you in my life gives me a chance at something that I treasure quite dearly.” Not a lie, Cupid decided, not a lie at all.

“Those words are quite eloquent.” Brea blushed again.

“Well?” he brushed the back of her soft hand.

“One chance, last chance,” Brea said.

Cupid barely had his hand in the air to summon a waiter when one appeared at their table. “We’d like to order your best champagne, a celebration is in order.” The waiter bowed and disappeared.

“Did you hear that?” Psyche hissed at Eris across the table. She and Eris were a scant three tables away from the new couple. Psyche didn’t worry about Cupid sensing them. There were too many immortals in the room for him to notice. “If I didn’t know any better I’d say he actually cared for her, but I do know better. He only loves himself, and me when I can make him realize it again.”

“Yes, I heard him, this is his last chance and ours too, so I’d better make this good.” Eris said deep in thought.

“You think we should just kill her?” Psyche asked in all seriousness, licking chocolate off her fingers.

“Well, we shouldn’t rule it out,” Eris mumbled.

Nineteen: Starting anew

Dinner, in her opinion, was the most delicious meal she'd had in a long time. The wine had been fantastic and was swirling quite effectively in her head. The night had fallen cool, but Brea didn't notice much since she was snuggled up to Jordan as he drove the carriage. Brea giggled at the envious stares as they passed people on the street.

"How are you doing?" Jordan asked, seeming to look longingly at her lips.

"I'm fine, a little inebriated, but fine." She smiled back at him. "So where does this chariot go once you get me home?" Brea blinked at her own words that had come with ease. *Home*. As if they lived together. Jordan seemed to stiffen at her words, then quickly relaxed.

"Back to its owner. I don't think we have room for them in the condo." He seemed to consider the issue seriously. Brea punched him playfully in the arm.

"Really, I didn't know this city had a place you could rent a horse and carriage."

"It's not rented, more like borrowed. The place isn't all that far for me."

"You do know some pretty interesting people," Brea responded. "Who owns a carriage just for the sake of owning one?" She frowned.

"I believe it has something to do with their occupation," Jordan responded then changed the topic. "Are you tired?"

"Why?" Brea looked at Jordan carefully.

"Because I'd like this evening to continue with something special."

"Does that something special involve me spreading my legs?" Brea asked with boldness, slightly annoyed that he thought she'd just hop into bed with him because they just made up. She would, of course. She'd wanted nothing more than to do that since he'd showed up at her office. The wine was quite the conspirator as it blasted through her common sense and insisted she act irrationally. Still he didn't have to assume it.

He tsked her. He had the nerve to tsk her!

“Oh, Brea, there’s more to life than just sex. I’m surprised you keep your head in the gutter.” Brea laughed when she realized he was teasing her. “There’s no sex involved, to be clear there will be no penetration, but I hope you don’t object to other forms of play.”

The carriage stopped in front of the condo, and Brea was breathing like she’d just pulled the carriage. His words excited her and the wine—dammit!—made her resistance marshmallowy. “We’ll see,” she managed coyly as he’d already jumped down and out of the carriage and held his hand out gallantly to help her out of the carriage.

“I have to return these horses, so you have a small window in which to think about it. But regardless of what you decide I would still like to remain in your company this evening in any capacity.” Those gorgeous electric blue eyes looked sincerely into hers and Brea found herself ready to blurt out that she wanted to play with him tonight.

Jordan leaned over and kissed her on the forehead, then each cheek. He waited until he held her gaze before he kissed her on the mouth. So gently his tongue demanded entrance and she weakened. His hands, at the small of her back, pulled their bodies closer and Brea felt like she was kissing him for the first time all over again.

Too soon Jordan broke the kiss. “If I don’t go now, these horses won’t be returned. And I guarantee you, the sun won’t rise for the owner of these horses.” Jordan stepped back, putting distance between them. “Wait up for me.” It was more a question than a statement.

“We’ll see,” Brea laughed, walking to the condo.

Jordan waited until she disappeared on the other side of the door before he hopped back into the carriage. Mentally he checked to make sure the barrier was still in place at his condo. He couldn’t have anyone popping in while he was gone. He was sure Psyche was behind his sour luck and he wasn’t taking any more chances.

He went about a block before he hopped out and checked to make sure no one was around. Jumping back in, he said the command he knew that would make the horses spring toward Olympus. He became no more than a streak in the night sky.

“You were playing it awfully close, my friend,” Hermes drawled as Cupid locked the stable doors. “Apollo was on his way in here to check on them.”

“Pray tell, what distracted him?” Cupid grinned at his friend.

“Someone told Apollo there was this young musician who could outplay him.” Hermes said in innocence.

“I wonder who that could have been. What happened?”

“The young musician was good, but of course, Apollo played so hard the guitar caught on fire. He’s now enjoying the fruit of his labors with two very appreciative female fans.”

“Well, as usual I owe you, old friend.” Cupid laughed. There was no love lost between him and Apollo. If circumstances had been different he would have kept the horses just to annoy the arrogant god. “How’s Arachne? Any change?”

Hermes almost looked gentle when he spoke of Arachne. “Better, but not much. Don’t let her size fool you, she can eat a lot of ambrosia.” Hermes seemed to smile to himself. Jordan suspected he was becoming fond of the arachnid. “So far she’s been able to communicate one name—Psyche. Give her some time, I think we’ll have her partner in crime soon.” Hermes kept grinning.

“What now?”

“Well, I put the container back in the Big Guy’s closet, with a hologram of Arachne, we don’t need to tip our hand yet.”

“You know, that’s why you’re my friend and on my side. I would hate to have you working against me.” Jordan slapped his friend on the back. “As soon as Arachne gives you a name let me know.”

“Will do, Cupid,” Hermes replied.

She had no sexy lingerie. Just the fluffy bathrobe she’d just bought. Brea was frustrated. She wanted to feel sexy tonight in something slinky. Not parade around like a sheep. She blew a raspberry at herself in the mirror. She probably couldn’t even seduce a sheep in this getup.

Brea checked her makeup and hair once more before she left the bathroom. Jordan's keys clicked in the door and her pulse quickened. He was back a lot sooner than she had anticipated. She looked about the bedroom and squealed at the mess of packages all over the bed.

"Brea?" Jordan called. "Is everything all right?"

"Oh, fine," she called, knocking the bags to the floor and kicking them under the bed.

"I thought I heard you scream." Jordan was right outside the door.

"I thought I saw...something. False alarm," she called back, pushing a big bag under the bed.

"Can I come in?" Brea could hear his hand was already on the knob, the bag caved at last.

"Uh, yeah, sure." She looked around furtively one last time.

Jordan stepped into the bedroom. His bow tie was gone, the first three buttons of his shirt were undone. Brea caught a peek of his muscled, tanned chest against the stark white of the shirt. In distraction, he pulled the leather band from his hair. His blond hair fell forward, giving him a wild, untamed look. Brea licked her lips. His eyes tracked the movement.

"Thank you for waiting up," he said at last.

"You weren't gone long." Brea cleared her throat in nervousness. Now that the wine was wearing off, so was her sexual boldness.

"Good, a gentleman doesn't keep a lady waiting," he commented, undoing the buttons on his jacket. "Will you help me?" He put both of his arms in front of him, indicating that she should help with the sleeve buttons. Brea knew he could have taken them off blindfolded.

"Sure," she replied, wiping her sweating hands on the plush robe. Of course it immediately reminded her of what she was wearing as opposed to what she *wished* she was wearing.

He stood statue-still while she undid the sleeves. She stepped in front of him, taking the jacket on each side and pushing it back until it slid off him and down his arms.

Knowing what he expected, she started at the fourth button and unbuttoned the shirt completely. Her hands shook from nervousness and doubt. She was playing with fire, he'd already hurt her once, and she couldn't control the attraction she had to him.

Just like the jacket, she took the shirt off of him until it fell to the floor. He stood there looking absolutely gorgeous half-dressed. "Do you want to continue, or would you like me to do this myself?" He brushed the back of his hand across her cheek.

Brea said nothing as her hands went to his pants and undid first the clasp then the zipper. She took hold of the band of the pants and pushed them down, squatting as she neared his ankles, he'd already removed his shoes and socks. He obediently stepped out of the pants.

Brea, still squatting, looked up to see the silk black boxers he wore, with a very impressive arousal plumping them out. She stood, trying not to notice what was very, very obvious.

"I meant what I said, Brea, no sex tonight."

Brea looked at him in surprise.

"This isn't about just sex between you and me, Brea. I need to show you that." He grabbed the end of the belt of her robe and pulled it slowly, giving Brea time to protest. She kept her eyes glued to the ties coming undone. When the tie was undone he parted the robe, displaying her body for his viewing feast.

Brea blushed as if she were some sort of virgin. But she knew him. Her body remembered Jordan well, and reacted strongly. He mimicked her behavior and slid the robe off her slender shoulders, until she stood naked before him. His eyes missed nothing.

"Before, when you and I were together I didn't get a chance to just savor your beauty. Please, allow me," he said low, staring at her.

His eyes took in everything, the soft swell of her stomach, to the well-toned legs. Her nipples were already peaked from his stare alone. He walked around her, quite comfortable in his nakedness. He ran gentle fingers across the firm swelling of her plump backside. "Your beauty is like insanity, driving men to desperate measures just to be with you," he seemed to say to himself as he made his way back where he'd started.

“And you, Jordan?” Brea found her boldness returning at his words.

“That’s easy. I was lost the moment I set eyes on you,” he said frankly.

“You stand there and look at me as if you want to throw me down and devour me. Yet you say no sex tonight. What else is there?” she queried.

Brea had no idea she was with the god of desire. The one being in the world who knew everything about physical pleasure. For not only did he inspire desire, he *was* desire incarnate. She was now on his playground. Cupid grinned at her, his smile alone made her realize that there was so much about him that she didn’t know. He was the mold that bad boys were made from.

He pushed her back until she fell across the bed. “Better question, can you handle the ‘what else’?”

Twenty: Carte blanche

Cupid looked down at her. His whole body pulsed for her. He would be lying to himself if said he didn't want to part those golden legs and slide between them. Pleasuring himself and her until oblivion sucked them up whole. But he had said there would be no sex between them this night and he meant it. Cupid reached down and retrieved the discarded bow tie from his pants pocket.

“Do you trust me, Brea?” he asked, smoothing the material slowly.

“No,” she said in all honesty, her hazel eyes honest and clear.

“Good, then let me earn it this night.” He leaned forward with one knee on the bed.

He motioned for her to sit up and he tied the material around her eyes, blindfolding her. “I won't hurt you. Let me earn your trust by giving me permission to touch you at will.”

Cupid knew this was hard for her. Trust was a huge issue in her life. It had already been broken in his name and therefore he was asking a lot. However, they had to start somewhere. “If I do anything to make you uncomfortable or you just want me to stop, just say so,” he added, wanting her to know she controlled the situation. He watched her with deep intensity as she bit her lip in concentration.

“All right,” she said at last, leaning back on the bed.

Cupid straddled her across her hips, holding his own weight off her. Touch was a powerful thing, when executed properly. First, with just his fingertips, he touched her face as if he were a blind man. Memorizing every soft swell and every angle of her bone structure. He touched her softly, making the touch sensual, hypnotic.

Slowly, his hands moved down to her neck, hovering over the pulse that was beating a wild tattoo against her chest. He leaned over and placed the lightest of kisses over it. She jumped in surprise at the oral contact but settled down. He picked at random soft spots on her lightly perfumed neck and kissed her, inhaling her scent. Brea's breath was becoming shallow.

“Relax, just enjoy. Nothing is expected of you,” he said into her ear then kissed the spot right under it. This time a small smile hovered at the corner of her lips. He shifted further down her body, tracing her collarbone. He ran his warm fingers up and down the length of one of her arms, only stopping long enough to switch arms. He could feel the tension draining out of her, but the sexual awareness building.

Cupid then came to her breasts, and took a moment to take in their beauty first. He molded one hand around one breast and leaned down and licked it once, then twice. Brea moaned out loud when he tweaked the nipple between his fingers. When he became satisfied he couldn't arouse that breast any more he concentrated on the other one, assaulting it just like the other without remorse.

He was pleased to see Brea's hands fisted in the covers as she struggled to maintain her self-control. She was fighting a battle already lost. He shifted again so that now he could place light kisses down her belly, nibbling at her taut stomach on the way down. Briefly he brushed his face against the soft curls that nested above the apex of her thighs, reveling in and remembering the scent that was Brea.

She moaned louder, her head thrashed in sweet torture. Cupid ignored the enticing juncture beneath the soft curls and simply bit into her inner thigh, eliciting a squeal of surprise, as he looked up and watched her face. She smiled, forgetting it was only she who was blindfolded.

Cupid traveled the length of her legs until he came to her feet. Taking them both in his hands, he kissed the center on the bottom of each foot. She wriggled and laughed, but her breath hitched, a sure sign that even here she was sensitive. He licked each delicate outer ankle and this time she shivered.

She, however, wasn't the only one in sweet torture. Her scent of arousal filled the bedroom and he knew without touching that she was saturated with her own cream between her legs. He knew if he just pulled her legs apart he would see the glossy lips of her sex taunting him. Instead he began to travel up her body, making sure to rub sensuously against her. Brea's arms wrapped around him tightly.

He lay on his side, one of her arms trapped underneath him, but not pinned. He took one leg and slid it between hers. His free hand crept to the center of her thighs. He hissed

low at the moist heat he found there. Briefly he paused trying to control the image he had of himself feeling her warm moist heat surrounding his cock. After taking a deep breath, he began to rub her aroused clitoris.

Immediately her hips pushed forth, encouraging his hand deeper, but there would be no penetration of any sort. He just rubbed her with the skill of centuries. Knowing when she was about to climax, he would level off just to bring her to the brink of frenzy again. He wanted her to want him, not just the feeling of completion. She had to want it from him personally. He kept up the torture. She gritted her teeth in frustration.

“Please—...” she stammered out between breaths.

“Please what?” he asked low in her ear, as if he had no idea what she wanted.

“End this...” she answered in frustration, her hips frantically moving, trying to force his hand into finishing what he so skillfully started.

“You’re going to have to be clearer than that,” he teased as he bit her ear lightly.

“Let me...let me...come,” she got out at last.

“I understand what you want...” he paused dramatically, as if there was still some confusion. “But I’m not clear on who you’re talking to. Who you are asking.” He continued to stroke her sensuously, slowly. She had no idea how lucky she was that he couldn’t use any of his abilities on her. She would be but a puddle next to him.

“You know damn well—”

“I haven’t a clue,” he finished for her, sweeping her mouth into a kiss. He edged even closer to her, letting his body slide against her erotically as he kissed her, touched her, brought her to the brink of sexual insanity. He broke the kiss, his chest heaving from his irregular breathing. He began to wonder who would crack first.

“Jordan, please. Bring me. Let me come,” she said at last. Cupid removed the blindfold so that he could see her desire-laden eyes.

It was a bittersweet victory. For Cupid, as promised, brought her to the peak of pleasure—twice. She jerked violently against him as she came. He held her close, feeding off her vicariously as she reached satisfaction. It was sheer joy bringing her to such passionate climaxes, however it was dampened by the fact that she had called him Jordan. The only name she knew, but he wanted to hear his given name, falling from her sweet

lips. Curiously enough he would give anything to have her scream at the top of her lungs—Cupid!

During the night, Cupid pleased Brea continuously until she half-heartedly begged him to stop. He refused his own release. It was about Brea. He needed her to understand that his attention was focused totally on her. By the time he allowed her to sleep, she lay curled against him, her forehead to his chest as she slept soundly.

It was the first time Cupid had been so selfless. It felt good to please her. The hard-on was painful, but the way she made him feel when she reacted to him upstaged the discomfort. He held her, inhaling the scent of her hair. Imprinting everything about her onto his immortal mind.

They both were awakened to the sound of Brea's cell phone shrilling. She had decided that she'd just let her voicemail take the message. But whoever the caller was was very insistent and the calls continued. Eventually, with regret, Brea fell out of bed and half crawled to the living room where she'd left her cell phone in her purse. She sat on the floor, still too sleepy to take notice of her nudity.

"What?" she said angrily into the phone.

"Oh, Brea, that's no way to answer the phone," Lindie's cheerful voice piped up.

"Lindie, what do you want this early in the morning?" Brea growled.

"Early? It's one in the afternoon. What have you been—Oh my God, Brea, are you alone?" Lindie's voice took on that high-pitched nosey tone that Brea could usually ignore—usually.

"Lindie, why are you calling?" Brea tried to switch the conversation. "I thought all bets were off until your grandwitch left."

"Brea, that's not nice." Lindie's voice became muffled and she knew Lindie was covering the phone. No doubt the aforementioned just entered the room. Brea rolled her eyes as several seconds passed before Lindie continued in hushed tones. "I went out for coffee this morning and thought to drop you a cup, you know as an 'I'm sorry' but they

wouldn't let me in. Why didn't you tell me your building had a fire?" Lindie sounded hurt.

Of course, since Lindie couldn't improve her situation she saw no reason to call her. She'd been meaning to get around to calling her, but Jordan had... Her shoulder was being nibbled. She closed her eyes. He was insatiable and obviously so was she, if she kept responding to him. She hadn't even heard him come into the room.

"I—I didn't want to worry you." It took her a second to remember what Lindie had said.

Jordan began tugging at her, so that now, she was on all fours—well threes, because she had to keep the phone to her ear. Brea's heart hammered in her chest as he reached his hand around and began to rub her. Her ass was nestling his cock. She looked over her shoulder and mouthed "*What are you doing?*", though she knew exactly what and made no move to stop him.

"But I'm your best friend, I'm going to worry anyway," Lindie whined.

Jordan mouthed back one word—*penetration*. Brea's heart stuttered as she watched Jordan over her shoulder take his erection in his hand and thrust it into her. Before she could stop herself, she gasped.

"What was that?" Lindie asked. "I didn't get all of that."

Brea's mind worked at a feverish pace to continue the conversation despite what Jordan was doing to her. In other words she was trying to chew gum and back flip at the same time. "I—I said it's only temporary," Brea got out.

Jordan had her by the hips, pushed deeply into her and pulled out almost to his tip only to thrust back even deeper. Brea squeezed her eyes shut at the pleasure. He hunched over her and began to fondle a breast with one hand, tweaking her nipples.

"Are you okay? You sound sick." Lindie's voice dropped again. "Hold on." Lindie began talking to her grandmother in the background.

Brea collapsed to her elbows, the phone still at her ear. She looked at it and clicked mute. "Jordan—you—you can't do this right now." She moaned as she pushed back against him. "Let me hang up from Lindie," she pleaded as his thrusts increased and he played with her clit.

“Stay on the phone,” he ordered.

“B—but I can’t concentrate.” Even now she couldn’t concentrate on their conversation.

“Come on now, Brea...” he said between thrusts. “Play this game with me, you’ll like it. It’ll make you come harder. I promise.” There was no mistaking the wickedness to his tone. Brea found herself intrigued. Could she carry on a perfectly normal conversation while in the throes of passion? She really didn’t have a choice as Lindie got back on the line. She clicked off the mute button and put the phone to her ear.

“I’m still here,” she said as clearly as she could. Jordan pulled out of her, and bade her to lie on her back and spread her legs for him. Obediently she complied. “What is it, Lindie?” she asked on a sigh as Jordan entered her.

“My grandmother is driving me crazy,” she said into the phone conspiratorially.

Jordan began with a slow rhythm, his golden hair fell about his face, as his eyes stared into hers. Brea reached one hand out, the feel of his chest intoxicating under her fingers. “Get rid of her,” Brea clipped as Jordan latched on to her breast. He sucked it hard, causing her back to arch off the floor.

“I can’t, she’s not scheduled to leave for two days. Two whole freaking days!” Lindie shouted into the phone before she caught herself.

Jordan began pounding into her at a faster rhythm. His thrusts became more powerful. He seemed to swell even more inside of her. Brea felt so full, she didn’t know if she could take anymore. His thrusts were so deliciously deep and hard. “That’s so hard,” she said into the phone while looking at Jordan. He gave her a sexy, arrogant smile.

“I know,” Lindie responded. “But she is my grandmother, and God knows she won’t be alive forever.” The irritation seemed to be leaving Lindie’s voice. “It’s just two more days, I can do this,” Lindie said with shaky confidence. “I can do this, right, Brea?”

Jordan’s breathing was erratic and Brea could tell he was about to orgasm. But he would be one step behind her, she felt her very soul in the orgasm that rocked her. “Oh yes!” she screamed into the phone. “Oh God yes!” Her voice dropped a level as the pleasure traveled to every part of her body.

“You’re right!” Lindie tried to match her tone to Brea’s enthusiastic one. “Thanks, Brea, I’ll call you.” The line clicked.

Brea looked at Jordan as his face contorted in pleasure. He pulled out of her, and Brea watched in fascination as ribbons of his seed splashed across her belly. It was hot as it landed on her flushed skin. It was one of the most erotic things she’d ever seen. He was definitely branding her with his influence.

Keeping himself braced above her, he grinned, those gorgeous dimples popping out. “Good afternoon, Miss Saunders.”

“I thought you said no penetration,” she reminded him, snapping her phone shut.

“Are you accusing me of not being a man of my word?” he said in mock hurt.

“Well, I felt some definite penetration,” Brea said, looking around, whistling.

“Yes, that rule was for last night, this is the next day,” he corrected her. “And to further defend my reputation—” he went down on his elbows, his lips touching hers as he spoke, “—did you or did you not come harder?” he asked as he kissed her lightly.

Brea never answered him; instead she wrapped her arms around him and pulled him into a deeper kiss, which was a good enough answer for him.

Twenty-One: In time all is revealed...

“They have been locked inside of his condo for more than three days,” Psyche complained to Eris. “What could they possibly be doing for three days?!” Eris rolled her eyes at Psyche before adding another layer of black lacquer to her nails. “Okay, so I know what they’re doing, but sons of Zeus, three days!!” She plopped onto the couch, proper posture totally forgotten. She and Eris had gotten into the habit of meeting in the lounging hall at Mount Olympus. It was rarely used since none of the gods wanted to socialize with one another.

Eris paused in her grooming, setting the brush back in the bottle and scooted back far enough from the table to cross her legs. She hugged her knees delicately, her instantly dry nails in no danger of becoming smudged. “He is the god of desire, so therefore it stands to reason three days of sex would be nothing to him. Furthermore, your whining hasn’t gotten us anywhere in the past three days.” Psyche sat up straight, defensive.

“*Me?* If *you* would have done the job I commissioned you for the first time, I wouldn’t be whining. Every plan you’ve had so far has failed. I think a little of my whining is in order. After all it’s *my* husband who’s off sleeping with a mortal!”

“Ex,” Eris drawled, picking at imaginary lint on her Egyptian cotton black pants.

“That’s a technicality and you know it!” Psyche snapped at her, then took a deep breath before she started again. “Look, he has a little over a week left. Maybe when he loses his immortality he’ll come back to me,” Psyche said hopefully.

Eris gave her a look of pure disgust. “So you’ve reduced yourself to the consolation prize? Ugh!” Eris affected a shiver. “I thought you had more fight than that in you. Oh well, it looks like I’m no longer needed here, since you’ve settled—er, I mean, solved your dilemma.” Eris stood, dramatically taking her leave.

“Wait, what about that other thing?” Psyche asked, seeming unsure if she should voice it aloud.

“What other thing?” Eris feigned confusion.

“That thing we talked about at the restaurant the other night. You know, about just killing her.” Psyche looked suspiciously around the room as if someone could hear her.

“Oh, that thing. Well, that’s a foolproof plan if I ever heard one. There’s no coming back from dead.” She looked at Psyche “Have you ever killed anyone?”

“No,” Psyche said quickly, then smiled crookedly. “But there’s a first time for everything.”

Arachne, now recovered, listened intently to the two women conniving. She spun a web of memory, recording every detail in her intricate design. When they were done, Arachne gathered the web for transport, then shimmered out of her well-hidden space, and headed straight for Hermes.

“I really have had enough of fast food.” Brea rolled over and groaned, as Cupid proposed they order in—again. They’d been having food delivered for the past three days. Neither one of them had wanted to leave the bed. Not that their lovemaking was solely restricted to the bed, it was the only place to comfortably sleep.

Brea stretched, feeling like Play-Doh, as Cupid had bent, folded and held her in positions she didn’t think were humanly possible as he made love to her. She wasn’t complaining. There seemed no end to his imagination, or his ardor for that matter.

“Are you suggesting—” he gasped in mock drama “—that we venture outside of the bed? Outside of the home?” He clutched at his chest as if he were having a coronary.

“I’m saying unless you want a pleasantly plump girlfriend, we need to expend energy doing more than, well, what we’ve been doing.” She grinned wickedly, scooting over and laying her head on his chest.

“I like plump,” he said simply, trying to sit up to grab one of the many menus on the floor. Brea pushed down his half-hearted attempt at rising.

“I don’t. So I have first dibs on the shower and you can figure out where we’re going.” She sat up and kissed him on the nose before shimmying seductively to the bathroom and closing the door.

Cupid was sure he had the stupidest grin ever on his face. The last days with Brea had been wonderful. Aside from the physical bonding, he’d gotten to know her quite

well. They stayed up well into the night talking or debating. She even blew off Lindie to spend time with him. He was ecstatic. He tried to think of where to take her to grab a bite to eat, but his brain wouldn't cooperate.

Guilt ate at him. Made a meal of him if he were honest. He'd pursued her originally to simply keep his immortality. Now he cared for her. He loved her. He finally admitted it to himself; he was in love with a mortal. This was different than what he had with Psyche; he knew Brea. Liked her personality—no, loved her personality.

Asking her to marry him now seemed wrong. There was no disputing the fact that he wanted to keep his abilities, wanted to keep his immortality. He wanted to keep Brea as well. He never thought he'd wind up in such a fix. But it had to be done. He had to get her to marry him. A niggling in his brain told him Hermes was trying to summon him.

He listened and heard the shower still going. He donned her large fluffy robe then went out to the living room. He let Hermes know it was okay to come. In a second, Hermes was standing next to the window as if he'd been there the whole time.

"What is it?" Cupid asked, preoccupied with his former thoughts.

"Arachne has some interesting—" Hermes stopped, scowled, then burst into laughter as he looked at Cupid. "What in Hades are you wearing?" he laughed, as he looked at Cupid in the plush pink robe.

"Are you done yet?" Cupid gave his friend an irritated glare. On the third attempt Hermes stopped laughing.

"As I was saying, Arachne came across some interesting news. You've been cooped up here the last few days. I haven't been able to tell you the other news first."

"What other news? Arachne found out what?" Cupid was all ears.

"Eris," Hermes said. "Eris is helping Psyche."

"We should have guessed." He shook his head. "What about the news Arachne has?"

"Apparently your ex-wife is planning on killing your future wife," Hermes said gravely, all humor aside. There was nothing amusing about a disgruntled immortal bent on killing.

"What?!" Alarm sliced through Cupid's heart at the thought of any harm coming to Brea.

Hermes gave Cupid the short version of the recording he had taken from Arachne's web. Cupid's face was contorted in anger. He wished he had his blonde, crazy ex-wife in his sights right now so he could strangle the life out of her. That is if she were able to die.

"Did they say when they plan on doing this?" Cupid asked, hearing the shower shut off.

"No, but soon. You don't have a lot of time left. If I were you I wouldn't let her out of my sight." Then Hermes was gone before Brea padded into the room with a towel wrapped around her.

"Are you talking to yourself?" she asked drying her hair with a smaller towel.

Cupid turned around and pulled her into his arms and held her tightly. Brea, taken by surprise, allowed the hug and hugged him back as well. "No, I was not talking to myself. I was thinking about where we should go to eat," he said at last, finally relaxing the hug. It wasn't a lie, he had been talking to Hermes and he did think about where to take her to eat.

"And what did you come up with it?" she asked sweetly, laying her wet hair against his chest.

"It's a surprise. Get dressed. I need to call in a favor." He swatted her on the butt and when he was sure she was out of earshot, he called to Dionysus.

"Okay, I'm ready." Brea buckled the last strap on her heels and stood, smoothing what little material there was of her dress. When Jordan had first picked up the sexy red number and winked at her, she'd rolled her eyes at him and reminded him that their relationship was strictly business and he would never see her in it. Jordan had winked again and given it to the saleslady for purchase. She didn't care if he gloated; she looked good as hell in it.

"Give me five minutes," he called to her as he whisked past her to the bathroom. Brea took the time to appreciate his form before the door closed. His body was perfect, though the scars on his back didn't bother her, they did seem like rather odd birthmarks. Aside from the tattoo on each wrist, he had no other markings. He was just a tall, muscular dollop of ooh-yummy-yummy!

Brea checked her reflection in the hand mirror Jordan had bought from one of the boutiques. Her cheeks were flushed and dare she say it, her eyes held real joy. She looked like a well-satisfied woman. Already she felt a bond with Jordan that seemed to go much deeper than what she'd had with Terry. Even just mentioning Terry's name brought her no more pain, he was just a bookmark in a bad chapter of her life.

She had no idea where things were going with Jordan. She'd didn't want to speculate or over think anything. There was no denying that he did something to her, he weakened her at the same time he seemed to make her stronger. But she loved him. It was a good thing she was next to the bed when she dropped the mirror. It landed with a soft thud. However her revelation crashed into her head.

She couldn't love Jordan! She hardly knew him! Oh, of course she knew him well in the biblical sense, and yes, they had talked through the nights, but she didn't *know* him. She didn't know where he was born, or even what his mother's name was. But as corny as it sounded in her mind, she felt like she knew his soul.

Jordan came out of the bathroom, unabashedly displaying his perfectly tanned body. "You sure I can't interest you in staying in another night?" He leaned against the doorframe of the bathroom, looking like sin in the flesh. But Brea wanted this night out. She needed to be able to talk to him without getting distracted by his touch.

"Get dressed, Cupid, we're going out," she said with a firm smile. Brea wasn't sure if it was her imagination but he seemed to pale at her words.

"What did you call me?" he asked, standing up straight.

"Oh, you don't like that name? How about Romeo, Lothario, Casanova, take your pick. But you are not seducing me into staying here, as tempting as you are. Get dressed," she ordered again, grabbing her lipstick and heading to the bathroom to apply it.

"They're amateurs," he called to her after she was in the bathroom.

"Yeah, well at least they're dressed," Brea called back, laughing.

It was so easy with him. So easy to talk to him, to laugh with him. Even arguing with him was a rush. She pressed her lips together, coating them evenly with the lipstick, then smiled. He made her do that a lot. He was sooo far under her skin. Brea knew that if he hurt her again, she might not recover from it.

“Are you ready?” he called as if he’d been waiting on her forever.

Brea came out of the bathroom to see him not only dressed, but perfectly groomed. She’d never seen a man get ready so quickly—that is, if he weren’t just sliding on jogging pants and a T-shirt. Jordan was dressed in a black, simple, long-sleeve silk shirt and casual black pants. He, however, made it look as if it were the hottest new look of the year.

“You clean up quickly,” Brea remarked.

“So do you, and by the way, Miss Saunders, you look ravishing in that particular dress you swore I would never see you in.” Jordan caressed her bottom as she preceded him out of the bedroom. “I can’t wait to see you out of it.” Despite his roundabout gloating, Brea laughed.

“How can you sit there so calmly?!” Psyche demanded as she and Eris looked down into the scrying bowl that sat between them. They’d been waiting for hours to see when Cupid and Brea would eventually emerge from the condo. “Wait, there they are!” she squealed, reaching across, patting Eris’s shoulder in excitement.

Eris shrugged, stopping Psyche from touching her. She might be in the woman’s company but it didn’t mean she wanted her touching her. “Calm, down!” Eris wished for the millionth time that she had someone a bit saner to work with. “Let’s follow.” Without waiting for Psyche, Eris disappeared.

“Why is it that I’ve lived in Canton for quite awhile and you keep finding these places I didn’t know existed?” Brea asked, looking around the beautiful Italian restaurant. Large oak barrels lined the walls, giving the restaurant an Old World feel. Each chair was plush and covered in material Brea knew was quite expensive. A small band of musicians played an authentic Italian piece complete with rich vocals.

The waiters and waitresses served in what looked to be tailor-made tuxedos. The centerpieces on each table were unique, none were duplicated. Their table in particular boasted a small fountain that Brea could only guess ran on batteries. Two large pillar candles sat on each side of the fountain. It was breathtakingly romantic.

“Over the years I have made some very useful business acquaintances. Places like this aren’t available to the general public.” Jordan played with the edge of the cloth napkin on the table.

“You mean poor people,” Brea cut to the chase.

“Yes, I guess you could say that.” Jordan grinned somewhat sheepishly. “I have nothing against poor people and I am not a snob,” Jordan replied, sipping his water.

“I never said you were.” Brea smirked. “I think you’re basically a nice guy.”

“Really?” Jordan’s eyebrows perked up in interest. “What else do you think of me, Brea?”

Brea was caught off guard with the direct question. She was still wrestling with the fact that she’d fallen in love with a man she didn’t know all that well. She wasn’t going to go gushing her feelings about him.

“I think you’re decent, and you can be quite romantic and thoughtful,” Brea began carefully. “I also think that despite the fact that you were once married, you really don’t know how to have a relationship outside of the bedroom.”

Jordan looked at her with intense interest. “What makes you say that? You haven’t enjoyed my company these past few days?”

“Of course I have. I know I’ve forgiven you for that debauché in Ashe Bay but I can’t help but think you did what you did and said what you said because you were afraid of this thing between us leading to something.” Brea shrugged. “It was strange, you didn’t seem like yourself. Not that I claim to know you all that well,” she added hurriedly, she didn’t want to give him the impression that she considered herself an expert on his personality and habits.

“I’m hoping you will get to make that claim,” he said softly. “I want us to get to know each other. I like being with you, Brea.”

“And I like being with you as well. But we have to take this thing slowly, Jordan. It’s not like either of us is in a rush to walk down the aisle. We have time.” Brea reached across the table and stopped his hand from fiddling with the napkin. “I trust you, Jordan, and this is a lot for me.”

“I hate it when she touches him.” Psyche rolled her eyes. “She acts like she has a right to touch what is mine.” They peered into the restaurant window, unseen by human eyes. Cupid sat with his back to the window.

“Sssh!” Eris shot daggers at Psyche. “The waiter is bringing the wine.”

Eris and Psyche looked eager as the wine was being served. Eris, with a flick of her black-tipped fingers sent the poison into Brea’s glass of wine and smiled. The mortal thanked the waiter and took a sip of the wine and smiled. “Have you picked out your new wedding dress?” she said to Psyche, genuinely interested.

“No, how much time do I have?” Psyche asked excitedly at the prospect of shopping.

“Roughly two to three days,” Eris replied. “It works slowly, but it’s very thorough.”

“Oh good then! I can get one custom made.”

Cupid had felt their presence. It took everything in him not to turn and confront them. The one thing he wanted more than being with Brea right now was strangling both Eris and Psyche. He’d known that soon enough the both of them would cross a line. Then just as quickly as they had come, they had gone. He returned his full attention to Brea and sighed inwardly.

The plan was to satisfy Brea’s thirst for getting out of the house and get her back to his home, before Eris and Psyche could cause real unforeseen damage. All through dinner his mind kept rewinding to the news of those two witches out to hurt Brea. *His* Brea. He thought of her belonging to him—no that wasn’t entirely true, he thought of her more as belonging *with* him.

Cupid couldn’t help but fall victim to the way her hazel eyes sparked with excitement when she talked of things that meant a lot to her. A sobering thought entered his head. What if she somehow found out what he was and the purpose for the courtship? He would never see her look at him this way again. He had little over a week to get her to agree to marry him and she didn’t seem too keen on trusting him entirely for a relationship.

He was tired of hiding who he was. He wanted her trust and love. Love? Cupid hid the wave of panic that flowed through him as he sat across from Brea. The god of desire in love? With a mortal? Again? It was a Greek tragedy waiting to happen to him. He couldn't love Brea. But as he sat there listening to her and loving everything about her from her curly hair to her fast red-hot temper, he knew. Sons of Zeus! He had fallen in love!

Twenty-Two: The company we keep...

“You’ve been quiet since we left the restaurant,” Brea observed as she slid out of the uber cute, painful sexy heels. She rubbed her feet, apologizing to them for the torture. “Is something wrong?”

Jordan had thrown his shirt to the floor and released his blond tresses only to run worried fingers through them. He kicked off his shoes. “I’m fine, just doing some mental adjusting,” he replied with this back to her, looking out of the bedroom window.

“This is too much,” Brea said suddenly, going for her tennis shoes under the bed. Jordan turned to look at her curiously.

“What is too much?”

Brea, having rescued both shoes from under the bed, stood with one in each hand waved them wildly in affectation. “Us. This, this living together. Sleeping together. It’s too much too soon, you’re overwhelmed.” She shed the red dress and began looking through the new bags of clothing for something to wear. “I understand. Listen I’m sure I can stay with Lindie. Her grandmother should be gone by now, or I can stay at a hotel.”

She pulled out the light blue sweats and began to dress. “I didn’t ask you to go,” Jordan said quietly.

Brea paused in her dressing. “You haven’t asked me to stay either.” She slid the sweatshirt over her head and the sneakers on her feet.

“I like you here, Brea, I want you to stay. What’s going on inside my head is my problem and mine alone.” Jordan crossed the room as she swept up her purse, looking for her car keys.

“It’s my problem, because I am the cause of it, I know it.” Brea delved inside of her purse and triumphantly pulled out the keys. “Look, it’s no big deal. We moved too fast, we took this someplace we shouldn’t have.”

“Don’t go.” He tried to capture her in a hug but she wiggled away. “Brea.”

“Tell me what’s bothering you isn’t about me, Jordan. Tell me it has nothing to do with me and I’ll stay.” Brea stood in front of him her car keys in her hands, ready to stay or ready to go at his words. “Just tell me the truth.”

There it was. The truth. He couldn’t lie to her. It did have something to do with her, everything to do with her, but not in the way she thought. “Brea,” he began.

“Just the truth, no fancy words or explanations. Better yet, answer me this with a yes or no. Am I the reason you’re doing this mental adjusting?” The room was so quiet, it echoed both their breathing.

“Yes,” Jordan said at last. “But let me...”

“No need. I’ll be in touch.” Brea was out the bedroom in a blink. He could have easily stopped her. But what then? A full confession? She would certainly want to know and right now wasn’t the time. The door slammed, and his heart slammed simultaneously against his chest. He wanted to roar in anger and frustration until his voice gave out.

He paced the bedroom until he needed more than pacing. Cupid left the condo through the back entrance. Since it was a newly built unit he had no worries of neighbors sitting on their patios. He flexed his wings, and took off in the night sky.

Brea had no idea how she got out of the condo. Her vision was blurred with tears. This is what she had feared and been waiting for, the other shoe to drop. After getting into her car, she sat behind the wheel and just let the tears flow free. She couldn’t just stay there. If Jordan looked out of the window he would see the weak woman that she was sitting in the car crying. Brea made it as far as around the corner, behind the condos, and slumped in her seat.

They had moved too fast. No, that wasn’t the real problem—the problem was she should have never forgiven him in the first place. She should have stuck to her resolution of keeping things nothing but business. But he would look at her with those electric blue eyes, and just the proximity of him made her want to reach out and touch him. He somehow bewitched her.

A thin light came from the back of one of the balconies, obviously someone had opened and shut a door. Brea looked up not really interested, but drawn to the light.

There Jordan stood as if he were surveying the area around him. Then, to Brea's astonishment, stark white wings appeared behind him and flexed. In mere seconds he had leapt into the air, and the large wings beat furiously, carrying him skyward.

Brea sat in her car for three solid minutes before she remembered to close her mouth. Her mind had gone blank except for the one mantra, *I didn't just see that, I didn't just see that...* Brea shook her head, trying to will the outlandish thought from her head. Jordan some winged creature of the night? She was stressed, stressed beyond her normal limits. With all that had been happening to her lately it was no wonder her mind went out to lunch.

Even as she convinced herself that she didn't see what she saw, Brea got out of her car and headed around to the front of the house. It was then that she remembered the old lady's words, "*Oh I see. You're not a believer. No matter, life will make a believer out of you.*" Her legs were stiff, her brain on autopilot. She had to prove to herself that she wasn't crazy. Or at the very least that she was, and that she should seek medical help immediately. Opening the door to the condo, Brea took a deep breath and went inside.

It hadn't helped. The faster he flew, the more he raged against himself for hurting Brea—again. He had been caught unawares by his realization that he loved her. He certainly could have handled things better. He would have to find her, beg her to return. Sweat poured off of him from his rigorous flight. In seconds he would be home, he would shower and find Brea. He would tell her how much he loved her, and hope that it worked out.

He landed without sound on bare feet. Cupid stretched his wings one last time, preparing to put them away when a soft gasp caught his ear. Cupid turned, tracing the sound to a shadowed corner of the balcony. His sharp vision picked up something he should have picked up before had he not been so self-absorbed. Brea.

She stepped forward, shock in every nuance of her expression. Her hands curled and uncurled by her sides. Her head shook slowly in defiance as she looked at his wings. She made a wide berth around him, swallowing hard before she spoke. "I'm not seeing this.

These can't be real." *No matter, life will make a believer out of you.* The words reverberated in her head.

Brea reached out and lightly touched the edge of one of his wings. "This feels real, Jordan." Her voice cracked. "What—I don't understand." She fingered a feather in astonishment. If it weren't for the tense situation he would have reveled at the feel of her soft hands on his wings.

"I was going to tell you," he began, not sure how or even where to start.

"Tell me what, Jordan? What are you?" She took a step back as if he suddenly posed a threat to her. Jordan cringed at the last question.

He made his wings shimmer out of view, thinking that perhaps if she weren't so focused on seeing them right in front of her, it would make it easier to talk to her. She gasped again, and moved even further out of his reach. "I won't hurt you, Brea, you know that."

"I know nothing," Brea whispered, still looking at the spot where his wings had been.

"Let's go inside, and I'll make coffee. We can talk..."

"I don't want to go inside." Brea hugged herself. "Just tell me, what are you?"

If ever there was a loaded question. Where did he start? What could he possibly start off with that wouldn't make her bolt? He took a step back, trying to give her a sense of security through distance. It hurt him to think that she believed him capable of harming her.

"Before I start, I need you to promise me something." He leaned against the brick wall.

"I can't promise you anything," Brea replied with a shaky voice.

Cupid considered her words for a moment. "Fine, then at least try to hear me out—all of it." He looked closely at her. She looked ready to bolt right now.

"I—I can try."

It was something, Cupid decided. "I am often referred to in human history books as a god." He paused, waiting for her to run, her eyes enlarged, but still she stayed glued to her spot. He didn't know if it was out of sheer terror or interest. "I am an immortal, at

least one type.” Maybe if she realized there were more supernatural creatures out there he would look a lot less frightening. Wrong, she paled even more.

“How old are you?” she asked in a small voice.

“Older than most civilizations,” he said with a wry grin. “Brea, come inside, this is not the place to—”

“*What* are you?” She jerked her head, indicating the wings that were now absent.

He couldn’t lie to her and her question was direct. There was no wriggle room in it whatsoever. Cupid sighed regretfully. Things were going all wrong, so fast. “I am what your history refers to as a Greek god. Though I go by different names, depends on the culture.”

“Which one?” she said after a long scrutinous pause.

Cupid stood straight then and walked the few paces toward her so she could see clearly. He turned his arms supine, so that what she thought were tattoos faced her. “The golden arrows are for inspiring love, the black to end or repel.” He shimmered his wings into view, displaying them proudly. “I am the god of desire.”

Brea looked at him, her hazel eyes swam with unshed tears. “You are Cupid,” she said as the revelation swamped her. “What could you possibly want with me?”

“That’s not an easy question to answer.” Cupid begged her with his eyes to give him a chance to explain.

“It seems pretty direct to me,” Brea answered, her strong personality surfacing as she began to absorb the shock.

“Seems pretty direct to me too,” came another annoying voice.

The evening just officially got worse. He had made sure his house was protected to make sure no one could just drop in unannounced, unfortunately, they were outside and things were fair game. Cupid looked to see Psyche perched on the railing, running her fingers through her long tresses. Her green eyes stared at him with ill concealed jealousy.

Brea turned as well, her eyes growing round at the sight of the woman who had quite literally come out of nowhere. “Who are you?” Brea asked the woman. “And where did you come from?”

The woman jumped off the railing and smoothed her slacks. Her heels made a slight clicking sound on the patio. "I'm his wife," she said cheerfully.

"Ex-wife," Cupid corrected her. "Get out of here, Psyche," he warned her.

"Oh, come on now, your little mortal friend here asked me a question." She turned to Brea, flicking her shiny blonde hair over her shoulders. "Technically I just came from Mount Olympus. I was looking down at this through the scrying bowl, but thought it would be much more interesting watching it live. Like a play," she squealed, clapping her hands together. "I must say, up close and personal you do look really pissed and hurt. Cupid can do that really well, piss people off. That's kind of where you come in—"

"Shut up!" Cupid roared at her surprising Brea with his anger, but not Psyche. Psyche giggled like a schoolgirl.

"Oh, I think he's really mad now." Psyche waved her hand in the air to dismiss his anger. "He'll get over it, now where was I? Oh yes, I was telling you about the trouble Cupid here got into."

"Shut up, Psyche, the Council won't look on your interference too kindly," he warned again, taking a step forward.

"Oh please, they have bigger fish to fry, namely you." She pointed at Cupid and smiled hard.

"I won't warn you again." Cupid lifted his arm with the black arrow. "I will see to it that you never find love of any sort with anyone, for the rest of your immortal days."

"Oh, Cupid, you're so dramatic!" Psyche giggled again, but clearly she had taken heed to his warning. "Oh well, I have to go. I have a dress to shop for." She winked conspiratorially at Cupid. He looked at her with nothing short of disgust. "Don't forget to tell her why you pursued her, and remember, you can't lie." Then she was gone.

Brea just looked at him. Finally she cleared her throat. "This evening has been a bit much for me." She inched toward the patio door that led into the house. "I need to think, I need time to digest this."

"Stay here, Brea, let me explain everything," he shamelessly begged her.

"No, I need to go." For the second time that night, Brea left him. Cupid stood on the back patio with no idea what to do. Suddenly he wished the biggest problem between

them was her mistaking that he needed space from her. But the can of worms had been busted open, and he had no idea how to clean up the mess.

Twenty-Three: Tying up loose ends...

“What are you doing here at this hour?” Lindie practically screeched. Dressed in an oversized beer advertising T-shirt and super fuzzy socks, it hardly looked as if Lindie’s night had been interrupted.

Brea said nothing; she didn’t even look at Lindie. Didn’t know how she drove the way over without crashing her car. Her mind was riddled with all sorts of wild thoughts and she didn’t know how to go about sorting out what was real and what she had obviously made up in her overactive mind.

Lindie pulled her into the house and chattered enough for the both of them. “Grandmother Pinn left a couple of days ago, and not a day too soon. Though I have to say, she could have left much sooner, in my opinion. I don’t really have any food in the house. Grandmother Pinn insisted on making authentic Japanese dishes and she knows I was born and raised on American cuisine. I said all that to say I threw out everything she cooked the same day she left. I might have some leftover applesauce, but I think—”

“Vodka,” Brea said as Lindie pushed her down on the sofa.

“What? Oh vodka. Well, of course I never told you about Grandmother Pinn’s drinking habit. She cleaned me out until I took her to the store and got her a bottle of saki. That’s all I have.”

“Fine.”

Lindie looked at Brea suspiciously before fetching the drink. She came back carrying a shot glass in one hand and the bottle of saki in the other. “She didn’t leave much...” Lindie offered the glass to Brea.

Brea took the glass and emptied the contents then reached out her hand, indicating that Lindie should give her the bottle. Reluctantly, Lindie handed it over. “You should go easy on that. It has a reputation for a reason,” Lindie warned, sitting on the arm of the sofa. She watched Brea empty the contents of the bottle then just sort of let it slip out of her fingers and into the corner of the cushions.

“What happened to you? I tried calling the last couple of days and left like a dozen messages. You look bad, Brea. What happened?”

What happened indeed? Brea thought to herself as she stared at nothing in particular. It seemed as if her eyes didn't even want to blink on their own accord she was in such a catatonic state. How did she even begin to tell her best friend that her current lover was a Greek god, with a psycho, immortal ex-wife?

“I can't talk about it right now. Can I sleep here tonight?” Brea managed, already snuggling into the cushions that smelled like incense. Lindie's grandmother no doubt did that spiritual cleansing thing she did every time she came into town. She claimed the special incenses warded off evil and helped identify supernatural creatures. Grandmother Pinn was a fry short of a Happy Meal. At least Brea used to think that. She wondered how much truth lay in the rituals.

“Sure, I'll get you a blanket and some pillows.” Lindie scurried off and came back moments later, gently putting a pillow under Brea's head and covering her with the warm velour blanket. “We can talk tomorrow,” Lindie began, cutting off the lights in the house.

“I'm tired, Lindie,” Brea muttered. “I'm just so tired.” A tear rolled down her cheek.

“Get some sleep, Brea, things have a way of looking so much better in the morning,” Lindie tried to soothe her. But Brea knew it didn't matter how many mornings she woke up to from now on. The results would be the same. Of all the men in the world, she first chose Terry, a selfish, two-timing asshole who taught her the meaning of betrayal. Then she meets Jor—ah, Cupid, a deceiver and a god. She had great taste.

“I don't understand, Brea, it'll all smell like smoke, if something is left,” Lindie whined yet again as they made their way up the steps to Brea's smoked-out apartment. After rising in the morning and deciding that the past couple of days hadn't happened she checked all the messages she had been avoiding since...since she became busy.

Ms. Markesan had left a message informing her that she could salvage what she could from her apartment. And, oh by the way, the fire had started in her apartment as well. Seems there was some sort of faulty wiring, that's the only excuse they could come up with since other reasons eluded them.

“Some things are worth saving at any price,” Brea said stiffly, turning the key in the lock.

Meticulously, Brea picked through her smoked-out, burned-out belongings and found, to her dismay, that there really wasn’t anything worth saving. Lindie complained the whole time about the smell and how it was going to take a multitude of showers to get the smell of “burned” off of her.

“Lindie, I have to ask you something and you can’t look at me like I’ve lost my mind,” Brea stipulated, throwing down a ruined blanket in disgust.

“You take the fun out of everything, but fine, ask away.” Lindie put her hands on her hips and gave Brea her undivided attention.

“Do you believe in the supernatural?”

“Yes,” Lindie answered quickly.

“How can you be so sure?”

“Sweetheart, the supernatural is all around us. When we pray, whom do we pray to? A supernatural being. I for one have seen ghosts. My Grandmother Pinn says no matter how great a thing is, there is always something greater and more powerful. By default alone, there must be things greater than ourselves. It’s foolish to think otherwise,” Lindie said matter-of-factly.

“But what about myths? Do you believe the myths are real?” Brea implored, taking Lindie’s opinion seriously for the first time in a long time. Lindie seemed to think about that for a moment.

“It has to be. Myths have to be based on something. You know the old saying, ‘where there’s smoke there’s fire’. Oh, my bad,” Lindie apologized, looking around.

“Forget about it.” Brea smiled.

“Why do you ask? Does this have something to do about last night?” Lindie acutely observed.

“Yes. But don’t ask right now.” Brea half smiled. “I’m really tired. It’s like after dinner yesterday I just seemed to get really tired.” She yawned.

“Maybe you should just go back to my house and get some sleep,” Lindie suggested. “I’ll stop by the office and check on things.” She handed Brea the key. “I can walk from here, it’s a nice day.” Brea suspected that Lindie just wanted to air out from the smoke.

“Thanks, I’ll be bunking with you until I can find a new apartment.”

“Goes without saying.” Lindie waved on the way out.

The drive back to Lindie’s house seemed to take forever. It seemed she just got more and more tired as every minute passed. She practically crawled to Lindie’s couch before she fell asleep. Brea couldn’t help but think that maybe she wore herself out staying so busy the last couple of days.

“You should check on her,” Hermes suggested, looking into the bowl with Cupid. The mortal had barely made it home, had it not been for Cupid’s divine intervention he was sure she would have crashed her vehicle.

“She’s just tired.” Cupid stared at the image of the sleeping Brea. “She needs time away from me to work things out.”

“You don’t have that kind of time,” Hermes reminded him.

“I’m not so sure I want to involve her any longer,” Cupid declared.

Hermes looked at him like he was a three-headed Gorgon. “You don’t mean that, old friend. You’re just frustrated. We’re talking about your immortality here, your natural gifts. Without them you’ll be vulnerable to disease, age, sickness and worse, steady mortal employment.” Hermes shook himself at the thought.

“You mean keep my gifts and my long life? And then wrestle with my conscience every day of it?” Cupid walked around the pedestal with the scrying bowl, still staring at Brea.

“You know as well I as I that time does fade the effects of a trauma. Besides, the Big Guy said that her memory would be erased of everything. She won’t even remember.”

“But I will, Herm. I will know how much I have hurt her and how I used her. Even if I somehow, by some miracle, got her to agree to marry me, I would still be betraying her, whether she remembers it or not.”

“I think you’re reading too much into this, unless of course, you’ve done what I warned against, and fallen in love with her.” Looking at Cupid’s intense study of Brea, Hermes groaned. “Oh, you have fallen in love with her.”

“Yes, I have,” Cupid admitted out loud and realized it wasn’t such a bad thing. It didn’t seem as devastating as it did last night. Once he admitted it out loud and to someone else it actually felt kind of good.

“Hmm, so what are you going to do about Psyche and Eris?”

“They have a lot to answer for. I’ll have to think about that.” Cupid walked away from the bowl. “I think she’s safe for now. I think they’ve lost interest.”

“Let us hope,” Hermes said, throwing Cupid a piece of ambrosia candy. “You look a little pale.”

“Thanks.” Cupid accepted the ambrosia gratefully. He really hadn’t paid much attention to his one dietary need since Brea was around.

“How do you think the mortal feels about you?” Hermes asked, sitting in a nearby chair.

“Honestly, I know she used to like me, now I don’t know. She knows what I am and it’s hard for her.”

“Well, wasn’t it hard for you to accept the fact that you fell in love with a mortal-again?” Hermes pointed out.

“Yes, don’t think the irony was lost on me.”

“Then I believe in the interest of time you need to go to her.”

“I’ll probably scare her.”

“She has to face you sometime,” Hermes said wisely.

“I will go to her, in a few days,” Cupid said firmly. “Meanwhile, we have some meddlers to deal with. We have to think cleverly about this—but not here.” Both gods looked at one another in understanding, then disappeared.

“Brea, let me call a doctor,” Lindie begged again. For the last two days, Brea hadn’t moved off the couch. She seemed too weak to eat, let alone move.

“I’m just tired and probably depressed,” Brea said weakly.

“But you’re pale, and I hate to point this out, but you’re bi-racial. You shouldn’t be able to get this pale unless you’re sick.”

“Thanks for the biology reminder,” Brea said sarcastically. “I tell you what, if I’m not better in a day or so, then by all means, cart me off.”

“Deal,” Lindie said worriedly. “I’m worried, Brea, you’ve started talking in your sleep about some really weird things. I think maybe you’ve suffered some kind of break down. Should I call Jordan and tell him you’re sick? You did take on a job for him right?”

Brea had completely forgotten about her agreement to work with Jordan. She was sure it didn’t matter. He was a god. Hell he could get whatever he needed himself. “No, I’ll straighten it out later. Don’t worry I’m fine.” Brea snuggled under the blanket as sleep began to claim her again.

“Look at her, she’s dying,” Psyche cooed at the scrying bowl as if she had just told someone they had a gorgeous baby. “You know it might take some doing, getting Cupid to love me again, but I have faith,” she declared to Eris, who looked downright bored as she looked at Brea.

“Whatever, I’m bored now and my job is done.”

“You’re not leaving are you?”

“Yes, and here’s some reality. Cupid doesn’t want you. He’s done with you. You need to face that,” Eris said brutally.

“You’re wrong, how can you say such mean things?” Psyche sobbed, then, just as quickly, snapped out of it. “If you thought this, why did you help me?”

“It’s my job. I create discord and mayhem.” Eris shrugged.

“Don’t you want to stick around and see her take her last breath?” Psyche enticed her, not ready to let go of the only friend she ever had.

“Well, when you say it like that...” Eris smiled.

Neither of them noticed the tiny spider under the lip of the scrying bowl, weaving another very unique web.

Twenty-Four: Oh what a tangled web we weave...

“Are you sure this is such a good idea?” Psyche prodded again as they stood outside the house Brea was dying in.

“Yes, she should have died last night and that irritating roommate of hers will take her to the doctor and possibly save her life,” Eris replied, clearly bothered by Psyche’s question. “I will just put her out of her misery. Besides, she can’t hold on much longer.”

“Something just doesn’t feel right.” Psyche looked around nervously as they walked toward the front door.

“That’s just your brain finally realizing it’s sick,” Eris muttered, a bit louder she continued. “It’s fine, the scrying bowl led us here, and it’s never wrong,” Eris reminded her.

“Eris, let’s just wait,” Psyche suggested again.

“That’s it!” Eris stopped, grabbing Psyche by the arm and spinning her around. “I’ve had enough of your sniveling. We’re doing this and that’s final. Gird up, woman. You enlisted me for my help, now accept it and shut up! I’m going to suck whatever life is left in that bothersome gnat right out of her and then I’m done. Understand?”

Psyche nodded slowly, admiration in her eyes. “Good, now follow me,” Eris ordered as the two made it to the front door. Eris reached for the knob. Without warning, Eris and Psyche were thrown back violently. They flew back at least twenty yards before smashing into a tree. Psyche landed on top of Eris, in a very ungodly fashion.

“Get off of me,” Eris said weakly and pushed at Psyche, completely winded. But something cool and hard slipped around her wrist then clicked. She heard the sound again and looked up in surprise. Hermes stood over them both with a huge grin on his face. Eris looked at her wrist to see that she’d been handcuffed to Psyche.

“What in Zeus’s name are you doing, Hermes?” Eris demanded.

“Capturing two very meddlesome creatures.” Hermes performed an exaggerated stretch. “Wasn’t too hard once you understand the machinations of a defective mind, right, Cupid?”

Psyche looked around alarm. “Up here,” Cupid yelled, jumping from the high branch of the tree and softly gliding down. “Good work, Herm, your speed never ceases to amaze me.”

Eris snorted. “I hear he’s quick.”

Hermes chose to ignore her. “I’ll take them to their special cell.” He pulled both women up easily. “You take care of business down here.” He jerked his head in the direction of the house.

“Special cell? You must be kidding.” Eris laughed and tried to shimmer out of the cuffs. To her frustration she didn’t go anywhere.

“Oh yeah, we borrowed these from Hephaestus. There will be no escaping these puppies, you know that, little girl,” Hermes chided her.

“We have something special planned for the two of you.” Cupid grinned, taking a bow.

“Yes, well let’s see how happy you are when you find your little mortal girlfriend is dead. She’s been poisoned and she’s going to be giving up the ghost real soon.” Eris smiled as Cupid stared at her in mortification, then he burst out laughing.

“Oh, I had you going there didn’t I?” Cupid laughed. “She’s not poisoned, you moron. As a special favor to me Dionysus blessed all the wine with an anti-dote. Her sleepiness is just an extra favor to fool the both of you infidels into believing she was dying so you’d leave her alone.” Cupid laughed again and bowed.

“You planned all of this?” Psyche screamed. “You knew all along?”

“Well, we didn’t know someone in the house practiced the old arts. Apparently somehow you were warded from going inside the house. It made things easier for me and Herm here.” Cupid tapped his finger on his chin in mock thoughtfulness. “Anyway, Herm. Take them away. I’ll join you later.”

Cupid smiled at the screams of Eris and Psyche before they disappeared with Hermes. Now that he was alone and looking at the house, Cupid grew nervous. He

retracted his wings as he walked up to the front door. He wondered if he too was warded from the house. But he meant no one harm here. Taking a deep breath, he reached for the knob and nothing happened. Gratefully Cupid went inside.

Brea couldn't get the feverish dreams to stop. Every time she closed her eyes she saw Cupid. Saw him smiling at her, making love to her. She could hear his moans of satisfaction as he exploded inside of her. She tossed in her sleep until she woke up. Her eyes settled on a rather blurry image of the man she now referred to in her head as Cupid.

It was bad enough that she kept dreaming of the man when she was asleep, now she couldn't even get respite in her waking moments. For the briefest of seconds, she allowed herself to stare into the eyes of the apparition. They looked so genuinely concerned for her, so very lifelike.

"How are you feeling?" the apparition asked.

Brea tried to bolt upright and found her body, though feeling rested, still felt quite tired. She shoved at the hand that lightly caressed her face. "What are you doing here?" she said in sleep-roughened voice.

"I came to see how you're feeling," he answered, leaning back and casually resting the hand she shoved away from her on the back of the sofa.

"I'm fine, please go." Brea sat up on her elbows and scooted back so she could sit up a little. As far as she was concerned enough time hadn't passed for her to come to terms with what she'd discovered the last time she saw him. In fact she was beginning to convince herself that none of it was real. Until she glimpsed the tattoo on his arm that rested above her.

"I can't do that, we need to talk." He got up and clasped his hands behind his back throwing a glance her way as he paced back and forth. "We need to talk."

"Fine, talk," Brea said stubbornly, determined not to digest one single lie. He could just talk and leave.

"It seems you feel I've misled you," he began. In seconds Brea broke her promise to herself as she digested what she construed was a lie.

"You mean making believe that you were human?"

“Yes, but in all fairness, think about it, Brea. You would have thought I was crazy. I have seen the reactions of humans and I know their inability to accept things beyond the norm.” When he saw the softening set of her stubborn chin he continued. “I liked you and wanted you to like me.”

“Is that all?” Brea asked, skepticism heavy in her words.

“What do you mean?” Cupid sat on the sofa, but a little farther down than he did before.

“I don’t understand why you even pursued me. Why me?”

This was the moment Cupid had been dreading, with a week or so left on his task he knew he was nowhere close to achieving success. How could he tell her that just like her ex-fiancé, he intended to use her to get what he wanted? It didn’t matter that he fell in love with her along the way. All that mattered was that she had been singled out for the intention of gaining something for himself. He didn’t want to hurt her. He had already decided what he would do.

“Because when I saw you I wanted you.” It was a complete lie. It was a lie in answer to her question, but it was true of the situation. He had wanted her, despite her foul mood. He had grown to love everything about her in such a short time.

He had broken one of Hera’s rules. He had directly lied to her, all bets were off. “But I deceived you and you have a right to be angry with me. I am—” Cupid never finished his explanation. He was pulled out of the living room right before Brea’s terrified eyes.

“What in Hades have you done?!” Cupid yelled as soon as he felt the pull. The Council was gathered. Apparently he wasn’t the only one who had been snatched unexpectedly from their lives. Aphrodite looked as if she were in the middle of seducing someone. She hurriedly snapped her fingers and clothed herself.

Artemis was dressed in a surprisingly familiar form of an old woman. Hera held some sort of beaker in her hand with a substance that Cupid immediately suspected was meant for Zeus. Zeus sat in his chair, with a pair of panties on top of his head. He quickly snatched them off. Hera swirled the liquid threateningly. It would have been funny at any other time...

“It’s the spell,” Athena answered, wisely not appearing to have been interrupted doing anything. “The rules were set and once broken, invoked immediate judgment. We were all part of the structure of this trial and therefore we are bound by its rules as well. Since we have all been assembled, it is without question that you must have clearly broken a rule.” Athena looked at him, with what appeared to be sympathy.

Zeus looked down upon him. His blue eyes bore into him. “What rule have you broken, boy?” he bellowed, angry that he was interrupted.

“I lied,” Cupid admitted, his head held up. “I lied quite clearly.”

“You force us to judge you.” Zeus rolled his eyes in a very human manner. “We will reassemble in one hour and hear the nature of the lie. Upon then, we will determine if you can continue or not. You are bound to Mount Olympus until your trial is over.” Zeus turned his head to Hermes. “I know he is your friend, but your duty is to the Council first, you may not assist him in any way or you will pay a heavy punishment,” Zeus warned.

Hermes looked to Cupid in sorrow, but bowed his head in acceptance to Zeus. One by one the gods left until there was but Cupid and Hermes. When Hermes opened his mouth to speak, Cupid shook his head no. It didn’t matter, he had done the right thing and he wouldn’t undo it by making things easy for himself. He left the room and headed for his own quarters.

Brea sat up in disbelief at the space Cupid had occupied just moments before. She knew that his kind of people could appear and reappear at will. It did not look like Cupid had intended on leaving. It was as if he were drawn against his will. Shaken, Brea pulled her knees up to her chest in comfort.

How long she sat that way, she didn’t know. Something was wrong. She could feel it. She heard the front door open and the sound of feet rushing in. Lindie came into the living room with an excited look on her face.

“Oh good, you’re awake and you look much better.” Lindie looked at her closely and seemed to approve of her health. “You wouldn’t believe who I just ran into.” Lindie clapped her hands and jumped up and down excitedly. Brea doubted she would get an honest chance to guess. Truly she wasn’t in the mood.

“Who?” Brea asked with the barest trace of interest, she just wanted Lindie to deliver the news and leave.

“Artie!” Lindie yelled.

“Who?” Brea’s mind was foggy she had much more important things to think about.

At that moment the person who Lindie spoke of walked into the living room. Brea frowned, wondering what this woman was doing in here. She should be in Ashe Bay somewhere throwing a bucket of mop water on some unsuspecting tourist.

“I see from your expression you remember me,” the old woman said as her greeting.

“Can you believe it, I was sticking my key in the door and when I turned around she was standing behind me like she came out of nowhere,” Lindie gushed, looking from Brea to Artie.

Brea’s blood ran cold. In her short experience she knew what type of people could do that. This was no coincidence. “Lindie, I am feeling much better, but I would die for some chai tea.” She smiled sickly at Lindie.

“Oh, Brea, that’s fine, it’s going to take a minute to make. You know I think that damn machine is going to give out. Would you like a cup too, Artie?” Lindie asked, already on her way to the kitchen. Artie nodded yes. “Okay, well add even more time to that minute. With two cups, it’ll be awhile.” Lindie disappeared down the hall.

“Your face is easy to read,” the woman observed. “You know what I am but not exactly who.” She sat on the hard-backed oriental chair, right at the edge of the seat. She turned her frail body to face Brea.

“Yes, you’re a Greek goddess,” Brea said in affirmation.

“I am Artemis. This of course isn’t my real form, but I fear your friend’s return and that could make for an awkward situation.”

“Why were you in Ashe Bay?” Brea swung her legs to the floor and put her elbows on her thighs, looking closely at the goddess.

“Contrary to Cupid’s belief I had no desire to see him fail.” Artemis smoothed her gray hair.

“Why would Cupid have an idea like that? Is it true? Wait a minute, fail at what?”

“You ask too many questions at once.” Artemis laughed. “I am the goddess of hunting, and yes, I am opposed to marriage, but not for the reasons most think. Humans and gods alike marry for the wrong reasons, and they sully the symbolism of marriage. In fact, I believe marriage is wonderful when soul mates are involved.

“In answer to your next question, no, it isn’t true. I have disliked the actions of Cupid. He has had his share of women without any real emotional attachment. He even married Psyche more because he fell in love with her beauty not her. I disapproved of his lifestyle.”

“I don’t understand what you mean by ‘see him fail. Fail at what?’” Brea asked. She was also truly intrigued with the realization that she was conversing with a goddess as if it were an everyday occurrence.

“I’m going to tell you the real reason Cupid pursued you, but you must listen carefully because we don’t have a lot of time,” Artemis warned.

“Time for what?” It felt as if her belly dropped out. Whatever Artemis was about to say was going to be bad.

“To save him,” she replied. “Now you must listen to me with an open heart.”

Twenty-Five: Crime and punishment...

“Where is Artemis?” Zeus asked with a sullen expression. Every god tried not to look at his cerulean colored face. Hera sat next to him with the biggest grin on her face that anyone had seen in a long time. Hermes snickered, trying in vain to keep his humor under control. Seconds later, Artemis appeared with apologies.

“Then let us begin.” Zeus took his thunderbolt staff and hit the floor in three quick successions, signaling the official beginning of proceedings.

Cupid sat on a chair made much like a pedestal and didn't seem to appear to be at all interested in what was happening. Some of the Council already looked bored, some looked at him with pity and still others, like his mother, looked guilty as Hades.

The trial started with Hermes recounting the events at the last gathering. He was made to tell in great detail the condition in which he found Cupid. Echo was called in for her services, as she echoed back the full session of the proceedings. She was dismissed immediately after her relay.

Athena recalled the rules set before Cupid to accomplish his task and his agreement. It was also noted that Cupid had failed before his time expired. Apollo snickered derisively.

“Cupid,” Zeus asked in his naturally booming voice. “Is there any reason you feel you should tell us why you failed? Perhaps conditions beyond your control?”

“No,” Cupid answered succinctly.

“Wait!” Hermes jumped up. “That's not entirely true.”

The Council looked at Hermes with mixed feelings. Hermes himself wasn't exactly a boy scout. He was hardly one to vouch for his best friend's character. Hermes dove in anyway.

“Cupid was forced into the position he is in because of outside forces, namely Eris and Psyche,” Hermes declared. The Council now gave him their rapt attention. Hermes

related the incidences they were responsible for, and he even had Arachne un-spin the web and re-spin it, using the same thread to show the recorded actions and conversations.

If Zeus hadn't been turned cerulean, the red anger would have showed up much more impressively. "She stole my key?" he roared, shaking the very walls of Olympus.

"Apparently yes, and returned it before you missed it," Hermes said smoothly and began to further relate their last scheme of murdering Brea. Hera at this point was just as angry.

"Where are they now?" Zeus asked.

"Locked in your bolt closet," Hermes answered, seating himself.

"How are they locked up if I have the key?" Zeus squinted at Hermes.

"I'm not the one on trial here," Hermes said, drawing attention away from his lock-picking skills. "The point is, Cupid was given an unfair situation. If it weren't for those two he wouldn't be in the situation he's in now."

"Cupid, why did you lie to her?" Artemis asked. "Please be truthful, everyone is listening, and I mean everyone."

Cupid looked at the assembled Council and his first impulse was to tell them all to go to Hades. They sat in judgment of him while they performed heinous acts against one another. They had no right to make him tell the truth. But he would tell it anyway. He wouldn't be like the rest of them. Cupid stood and looked each Council member in the eye before he began.

"I lied because I didn't want to hurt her. She's been hurt enough. By other people and by people because of me. Brea didn't need one more person in her life using her. She needed someone to love her. I have grown to care for her. I care enough to protect her from pain that might affect her negatively for the rest of her life. Even if that means my immortality."

"But, son," Aphrodite pleaded. "Is she really worth it? You know how fickle mortals can be."

"Yes, I do, Mother and I know gods can be just as fickle. But there is no way I could live with myself knowing the price I made Brea pay for my immortality."

"But I would have erased her memory," Zeus said.

“Yes, but not mine. I would have known what I had done. Deceived her for my own gain.”

“Are you sure this is what you want to do, boy?” Zeus asked, turning in his chair.

“Yes,” Cupid answered, sitting back down.

“What an idiot,” Apollo said loud enough for Cupid to hear him. Cupid chose not to answer. He had no more patience for stupid gods.

Zeus stood with his staff in his hand. “I sentence Cupid to a mortal life, his abilities will be stripped posthaste. If there is anyone here who has to dispute this judgment please speak now or the sentence shall be executed.”

“Please, wait!” a female voice called out. Cupid’s head snapped around, tracing the source of the voice. He knew that voice. It haunted every crevice in his mind. Cupid’s gaze finally settled on the figure making her way around Artemis’s large chair. “I find dispute with your sentence,” she announced.

Cupid’s confusion was only surpassed by his elation at seeing her. Come to think of it, what was she doing on Mount Olympus?

“You are the female he was ordered to woo,” Zeus stated.

“Woo?” Apollo laughed. “That’s about as archaic as it gets.”

“Quiet!” Zeus roared, effectively shutting up the arrogant god. Zeus turned his attention back to Brea. “How did you get here, child?” Zeus looked at her with a twinkle in his eyes. Hera cleared her throat in warning.

“Yes, my name is Brea.” Brea made her way past all the throne chairs until she stood next to Cupid’s chair, facing the Council. “You judge him in error.”

“You question the judgment of a god?” Zeus slammed the staff to the floor.

“It was you who said if anyone should find fault to speak, now you’re offended that someone stepped forward?” Brea snapped, appearing to lose control of her temper. “Besides, I don’t really consider you a god, just a different breed of being.” Brea sniffed. “I’ve been thinking if you all were gods you’d be omnipotent, but you’re not, and that suggests a fault with your belief that you’re all gods.”

The Council began to murmur in outrage, however, it was Athena who spoke. “Well said. We are not gods in the sense your people believed us to be once. But it is the closest thing to describe us. Please refer to the term loosely.”

“Fine.” Brea breathed deeply, reigning in her temper. “As I’ve said, I find fault. I was told the reason why Cupid was given this task and his punishment should he fail. He hasn’t failed. Yes, technically he didn’t get me to marry him, but then again, he didn’t ask.”

“He lied to you and broke a rule. That makes him a failure,” Apollo spoke up.

“No, it makes him better. If he would have asked, who knows what I would have said. But he didn’t take the chance because he didn’t want to deceive me. He didn’t want to hurt me with the truth of why he pursued me in the first place. At least this is what I believe.” Brea looked down at Cupid. “Is this the reason?”

Cupid was so full of emotion it took him the second try to speak. “It is,” he croaked out at last. “You don’t have to do this, Brea. I put myself in this position. I will deal with the fallout.”

Brea shook her head. “You don’t understand. You didn’t fail. Cupid, I love you. Not because of any special tricks or potions. Because you were you. I gather from what I’ve heard of those two crazy women that they were probably behind you telling me those horrible things.”

“That wasn’t me.”

“The crazy thing was, it didn’t feel like you, but it looked like you.”

“I’m sorry they hurt you.”

“I’m sorry too.” Brea turned back to the Council. “He went out of his way to protect me. He was willing to endure mortality for my heart not to break. It’s breaking now anyway because of what you all want to do to him. He is the god of desire and love. I feel both of those things for him and he didn’t use any of his abilities to persuade me. He has proven he is still worthy of his position.”

“Silly girl.” Athena laughed. “That’s not what this was about. Of course he can still do those things.”

Cupid looked at Athena. “What do you mean? Those were the reasons you gave me to take on this task.”

“No, those were the reasons we used,” Athena reasoned. She turned to Artemis. “Explain it to him.”

“Cupid,” Artemis began, “it’s no secret how I’ve felt about your behavior in the past. When Psyche first approached the Council about a divorce it got me to thinking. You had a wife that you fell out of love with and all you did was move on to the next person. Then this creature here, called to me.” She pointed at Brea.

“What?” Brea said confused, pointing to herself. “I called you? You must be mistaken.”

“Trust me I am not mistaken. When your old lover broke your heart after refusing to marry you only to marry another, your pain called to me. I wanted to make you one of my warriors, only you’d be a warrior in the boardroom, crushing powerful men who have done women wrong.

“When I asked the Fates if it was your destiny to be one of mine they told me you were meant to be with Cupid.”

“You knew she was destined to be mine? What was the task for? Why did you not tell me? Oh, I forgot. The gods would never be so direct.” Cupid ran his fingers through his hair in irritation. “It would have been far easier just to tell me,” Cupid accused.

“In your state of mind?” Artemis laughed bitterly. “You would have hurt Brea with your immaturity and callousness. You cared for no woman you bedded. I didn’t want to see her hurt again. Yes, she would have wound up with you, but in the end you would have hurt her.”

“She’s right you know,” Aphrodite spoke up. “She came to me to tell me she had found your mate. I didn’t want you messing this up. You have neglected your job, son, and the world has suffered. But we figured if you had love in your life, you’d go back to doing what you were born to do.”

“You knew all of this?” Cupid turned an accusing stare to Hermes. Hermes just shrugged.

“Wait a minute, no one told me this. Why wasn’t I told this?” Apollo demanded angrily.

“Because you would have told him and ruined his chances on purpose.” Aphrodite turned to Cupid “It was for your own good. We never had any intentions of stripping you of your powers. We were hoping you would grow up, so to speak, and appreciate what you haven’t in a long time. The power of love,” Athena finished. “The mortal is right. You have not failed, for she loves you. The only question that remains is, do you love her as well?”

Without missing beat, Cupid responded, “More than anything.” He looked at Brea. “I’m sorry for all that you’ve been put through at my expense.”

“Oh it wasn’t just about you,” Athena told the couple. “It was about Brea as well. She had to learn to trust again, to love again. She was growing colder and more bitter each day. Trust me, Cupid, you are not the only one who has learned something.”

“She’s right you know, I was mad at you. But when I realized what you’d done for me and you never even told me, I had to believe that good guys really do exist.”

“Oh, please, you guys aren’t going to do that kissing thing? Oh spare me, I don’t want to see that,” Apollo said in disgust. Ares smacked Apollo in the back of the head as his first warning to shut up. Cupid looked at his mother in understanding.

“You fooled me, Mother. I thought for sure you either had no idea what you’d gotten me into or you were trying to get back at me.”

Aphrodite smiled dotingly.

“If you would have answered some of my summonses in the past, you would have known I was taking up acting lessons with a very famous actress,” Aphrodite said proudly.

“Take the mortal back and good luck, Cupid.” Zeus winked at him.

“Wait,” Cupid said “She is mortal. If she is meant to be with me, I want her life to be as long as mine.”

“Uhm, Cupid.” Brea tapped him on the shoulder. Cupid looked at her questioningly.

“You do want to be with me always don’t you?” Uncertainty slid into his voice.

Brea smiled. “Artemis came to me and told me everything. She was sure of your love for me. She took away my mortal breath and filled my lungs with immortality. At least that’s the way she described it. It didn’t hurt, it just felt like I was suffocating.”

“You did that for me?” He looked genuinely surprised as he centered his gaze on Artemis.

“I have told you many times, Cupid, I have nothing against you personally. I actually like you. But don’t disappoint me.” She smiled. “She would have made a fine ballbuster.”

“There’s still hope for that.” Brea winked at Artemis.

“What about Psyche and Eris? They sabotaged me, not to mention they tried to kill my future wife.” He looked at Brea. “You will marry me, right?”

Brea hit him in the arm. “For the god of love and desire, that’s the lamest proposal I’ve ever heard. Really, Cupid, you could have done much better than that.”

Cupid grinned sheepishly. “I’ll buy you a really big ring to make up for it.” He pulled her close in a hug and kissed her. He didn’t care who was watching. Hermes cleared his throat.

“As much as I would love to end things on this note, there’s the little matter of my ass being on the line,” Hermes said to the Council.

“Explain yourself,” Zeus ordered.

“Well, it was your daughter who was partly responsible for me having to make a deal with Hecate to find Arachne here. I have taken on Cupid’s debt to Arachne.” He flashed Cupid a grin. Cupid gave him a quirked eyebrow in return. Hermes looked down fondly on the arachnid. “I think my debt should be passed on,” Hermes said with much certainty.

“Ares, go fetch the girls,” Zeus ordered, but Hermes insisted on going instead, citing he would be much quicker. He, of course, didn’t mention that it would give him great pleasure to escort them to their doom. After he brought the girls before Zeus, he stepped back, joining Brea and Cupid, ready to enjoy the show.

“You disappoint me yet again, Eris,” Zeus began with his daughter. “Time and time again I have barely had the patience to deal with you. This time you crossed a line. And you—” he pointed at Psyche with his staff, “—you have made me regret every day that you were turned immortal.”

Both women opened their mouths to speak, but Zeus silenced them with a thunderous look. “Hermes, what is the condition of your debt?”

Hermes stepped forward. “I have to serve Hecate for one hundred years as her personal servant.” Hermes stepped back with a huge grin splitting his face.

“I have passed Hermes’s debt on to you two. He is my messenger and I simply cannot do without him. Not to mention, Hecate can punish you far better than I.”

“Are you kidding, Father? She’s a vile pig. She lives among peasants in third world countries, she’s uncouth.” Eris wrinkled her nose in disgust.

“I have to agree with Eris, she has no fashion sense and is completely hopeless when it comes to personal grooming habits. Let’s just say we’ll never do this again and call it a day,” Psyche piped in.

“Silence!” Zeus roared and electricity sparked in the room. Both women snapped their mouths shut. “You are hereby stripped of your powers for one hundred years.” Eris and Psyche gasped at the same time. “You will serve Hecate during this time.”

“One hundred years, for silly little stuff like floods and murder? Aren’t you being a little harsh, Father?” Eris said, whispering as if no one else could hear.

“You’re right, daughter.” Zeus seemed to think things over a little longer. “Another hundred years for stealing my key.”

“Shut up, Eris.” Psyche turned and screamed at her, “Nice going. Some professional you are.”

“You know, if I wasn’t dealing with such a psycho, I could have gotten away with everything as I always do!” Eris yelled back.

“Come to think of it,” Zeus said loudly, drowning out their bickering. “I think it would be a good idea to leave them handcuffed together for the duration of their punishment.” Psyche and Eris screamed. “Is there anyone here who disputes this judgment? Speak now or the sentence shall be immediately executed.” It was the quietest moment ever in Olympian history. In moments, both women disappeared.

Twenty-Six: As the story goes...

“That’s going to take some getting used to,” Brea said breathlessly with her hand over her heart. They were standing in Lindie’s living room.

“Traveling the way of the gods will come easier with time,” Cupid assured her. “Thank you again for standing up for me.”

“Yes, well I suppose living forever will certainly ease the transition.” Brea smiled, going into the embrace Cupid offered.

“I owe Hermes a lot. We should throw him a party,” Cupid suggested.

“Actually when you think about it, the whole Council—maybe except Apollo—was rooting for you. Given what I have read about the Greek gods, that is highly unusual.”

“I agree. It does answer my question why my mother was in on this. She is the first goddess of love. I should have guessed.”

“Where did you come from?” Lindie asked, carrying a tray with two steaming cups of tea. Brea had completely forgotten about Lindie making tea. “Where did Artie go? I told her it would take a while.” Lindie set the tray on the coffee table.

“You ask too many questions at once.” Brea laughed, releasing her hold on Cupid. “Thank you, Lindie, but Artie had pressing business. But I will take my cup.” Cupid passed her an amber colored piece of what looked like candy.

“Put it in your tea, trust me. It’s the food of the gods.” He winked at her.

Lindie looked at both of them and smiled. “I don’t know what’s going on, but you guys look happy. And you, Brea, did you do something different? You look absolutely radiant. I’m glad you’re feeling better.”

“Me too. I’m going to take this with me.” Brea nestled the cup in her hands.

“You’re not staying?” Lindie sounded disappointed.

“No, Cu—uh, Jordan and I are going to go for a walk, I’ll pick up my car later.” She kissed Lindie on the cheek. “Thanks for the tea and hospitality.”

Before Lindie could get in another wail of disappointment, Cupid and Brea were out the door. Once they cleared the block. Cupid whisked them back to his place. “That’s going to take some getting used to,” Brea repeated.

“Yes, and you’re going to have to learn to do that yourself.” Cupid took the cup out of her hands. “Now, it’s tradition to make love like crazy on your wedding day.” Cupid gave her a mischievous smile.

“We’re not married,” Brea said, backing up toward the guest bedroom.

“No, but we should practice so we’ll know what we’re doing when the day comes.” Cupid made a grab for her but Brea dodged him.

“There’s no bed in here, Cupid, it’ll be another week before—”

Cupid made a grab for her and this time he caught her. “I don’t care about that bed or any other, all I care about is you in my arms right now.” He kissed her softly on the lips.

Brea broke the kiss. “Well, if you think we need the practice...” Brea began to disrobe.

“Oh I do, young lady, I most certainly do.” Cupid leered at her, stripping his own clothes from his body.

“I want you to do something for me first,” Brea said, taking a step back.

“What would that be?” Cupid began to advance on her.

“I want to see your wings, Cupid,” Brea said. Cupid stopped short.

“Are you sure? You seemed frightened the last time.”

“I was surprised. But now I want to see them.”

Cupid paused before letting his wings shimmer into view. He spread them slightly. He heard Brea gasp, and immediately began to fold them.

“No.” Brea put her hand out. “They’re beautiful,” she breathed, stepping forward and this time she touched them lovingly. She ran her fingers along the soft edges, feeling the strength in the wings at the same time. “Leave them out—while you make love to me.”

Cupid hadn’t made love that way since Psyche. All his other lovers had been human after her. The thought of running his feathers all over Brea’s soft body aroused him further. “Your wish is my command,” he said, freely able to use the power of his voice to seduce her.

Her remaining clothes disappeared with a flick of his hand. He stepped to her, taking his wings and folding them around her naked body. Gently, he brushed the feathers against her skin. Brea closed her eyes from the sensation. “That feels so wonderful.”

“It gets better,” he promised, lifting her up, not needing to hide his strength as she wrapped her long legs around him. “This is the way I’ve wanted to make love to you since I saw you,” he whispered in her ear, biting the delicate part of her ear. “I can hold you in this position for hours.”

He lowered her onto his cock. Her arms wrapped around his neck, her fingers twined in his soft hair. Brea laid her head against his chest as Cupid moved her body up and down his erection in agonizing slowness. His fingers caressed her bottom as his wings grazed her body. Brea sighed in contentment.

It was slow lovemaking. It was bonding. It was two souls for the first time bare of all secrets, coming together. They showed one another who and exactly what they were and still loved each other. So connected to each other they both thought the same thing as they made love—*it would be this way between them forever...*

About the Author

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Look for these titles by Toni L. Meilleur

Now Available:

The Prometheus Promise
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How can one angel's wish cause so much trouble? Heaven only knows.

One Angel's Wish

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After wishing he were dead—then having it happen—Chris has given up wishing for anything. The problem? His salary as a Guardian Angel is paid in wishes. He hasn't spent a one, and after a few years of hard work, he's accumulated quite a pile. Enough to take over Heaven, if he wished with them all at once. All he lacks is the desire to use them, until Geena comes along.

Geena just wants to get through her first day as an Angel In Training. But she's already lost her Mentoring Angel and now she's been zapped into silence for taking God's name in vain. Chris immediately leaps to her rescue, wishing he could help her. Literally.

And that's when the trouble really starts.

Warning: As you've no doubt come to expect from this author, this title contains the following: explicit sex and graphic language.

Enjoy the following excerpt for One Angel's Wish:

Romaine stroked the skin under her fingers, calming him. "You're a special one, Chris. I've known that since the day you came to me."

"This is Heaven. Everyone is special here," he pointed out.

"Don't interrupt," Romaine shot back. Her eyes sparkled with good humor when she spoke again. "I don't know what it is about you that makes you different from the others. Better."

She had to be speaking a lie. Divine Judgment was swift here, so he waited to see what her sentence would be. But there was no booming voice. No penalty. Either someone was sleeping on the job over in FACTs—Fair Assessment of Cosmic Truths—or Romaine spoke the truth.

Satisfied that the correct conclusion had registered in his brain if the cat-like smile was any indication, his boss continued. “You’re wasting your talents here. Let me put you up for promotion. You could be performing Miracles.”

Chris thought that preventing mortals from shuffling off their coil prematurely was a miracle in itself. He didn’t want to do anything else. “Thank you, but I’m happy here. I’d like to stay.”

“You didn’t even think about it. You could do so many wonderful things.”

He glanced at the board. Tony’s replacement, a woman named Mei-Ling from China, rolled from “Troubled” into “Desperate”. Her account hadn’t been assigned. That was Romaine’s job and he was keeping her from doing it.

He shifted his gaze back to Romaine. “There are many wonderful things I can do here. Want me to take this one?”

She snapped her fingers, dissolving the privacy shield. “No, it’s time for your rest break. You’ve earned it.” Raising her voice, she called out to a nineteen-year-old with skinny limbs and a gentle smile. “Cyril, honey, Mei-Ling needs you.”

“I’m on it,” he replied and dashed out the door, leaving it open.

Romaine kissed Chris’s cheek and said, “You did good, sweetie. Now think about what I said. We’ll talk some more during your next shift.”

Chris hoped not. Wishes were something he’d rather ignore altogether. Saving souls was reward enough in his opinion. He didn’t want the responsibility of carting around a bunch of Wishes too. But since the chits were Heaven’s method of rewarding their employees, the best he could do was accept the ones he was given and put them away for safe keeping.

His assigned cube sat in the center of the room so he had to dodge a lot of flying feathers to reach it. Once there, he opened his fist, planning to put the silver button in his filing cabinet with the rest. But this one winked at him under the divine light illuminating his cube and he paused to study it.

Such a small thing, these Wishes. How many did he have? Chris wasn’t sure. He’d never counted them. Never really thought about them, except when he had a new one to add to the pile. Humans didn’t seem to give them a second thought either. They tossed

Wishes around like Frisbees, so many of them flying so fast that the Wish Exchange could only register a fraction for consideration.

I wish it would stop raining.

I wish she'd shut up.

I wish he'd call.

I wish I was dead...

Suddenly the little silver button in his hand quivered and began to expand with purpose...

Passion and danger on a collision course with the Mayan Underworld...

Mayan Secrets

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If you found an antique journal with the map to the Mayan Underworld, would you follow it? If you're Tyre "Indiana" Rasmussen, you would. Tyre's reputation for unorthodox treasure hunting is matched only by his reputation for breaking hearts.

The ever-professional Troya Twamley is determined to get her hands on the secret journal of a great explorer, even if that means joining forces with the sexy renegade and his oddball crew.

Tyre and Troya think they're about to discover an ancient treasure, but instead find a horror that might end their torrid affair-and their lives.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Mayan Secrets:

Troya awoke and wished she hadn't. Her head spun with pain, making her stomach churn. She opened her eyes and saw nothing but a faint light from under a wooden door. She ran her hand along the back of her skull, where a tender goose egg bulged beneath her hair. Where the hell was she? Where were Tyre and SinJin? She tried to prop herself on one arm to slither to the door, but the exertion sent her vision swirling, and she fell back to the ground, helpless and frustrated.

"Help!" Her raspy call was a mere whisper, and she realized that she was completely parched. How long had she been there? The earth—no, it was stone—was cold beneath her skin, and she ran her hand along the roughly-hewn surface, looking for any clue to her surroundings.

A scratching noise nearby sent coils of dread spiraling up her limbs. God, was it an animal? A rat, or worse?

She kept perfectly still, peering into the blackness, wondering what she could do to fight off the creature. Something grasped her ankle, and she screeched in terror.

"Quiet," came a man's harsh reprimand. "You don't want them to come."

Troya realized that a human hand held her ankle, and pulled away in horror, close to vomiting from the fear. Biting back tears, she edged her way closer to the door, away from her companion.

“Who are you?” *What are you?* “Where are we?”

“We’re underground, in a building they call Chicanna.”

Chicanna. The Serpent House. Surely this was a nightmare, brought on by too much of Catherwood’s journal, too much stress, fear for Jack. She must have fainted and hit her head. Any moment, Tyre would wake her up and hold her.

“Who are *you*?” the man demanded. “How did they get you? Are there others?”

A sudden fear of giving Tyre and SinJin away stopped Troya from speaking. Had they really been captured? Why?

“Look, we may not have much time. Right now I’m all you have, and that’s not much, trust me. Tell me who you are and how you got here.”

“You’re American.” A tourist?

“So are you, Boston from the sound of it.”

“Where are you from?” Troya was trying to buy time, wondering what was safe to tell the stranger she couldn’t see, the man who could be friend or foe.

“As much as I’d like to chat over a Corona with you about our backgrounds, it’s more important right now for you to *get a grip* and tell me who you are. We’re prisoners, and any time now may be sacrificed at the altar of Xibalba. I know that doesn’t mean shit to you, but trust me, it won’t be pretty.”

“Oh my God. Are you Jack Peders?” A wave of relief was quickly replaced by renewed fear. If it was Jack, he would certainly speak the truth. Were they both about to be murdered?

With labored breath, obviously in pain, he inched his way along the stone floor, closer to her. She squinted, pain still pounding through her brain from the blow to her head, trying to make out his image in the darkness. All she saw was the outline of a man, propped on his side, with something around his waist.

“Yes,” he blew out finally. “I’m Jack Peders.”

“I’m Troya Twamley.”

“Oh God. Tyre brought you here. For the journal. The fucking journal.”

“Tell me what’s going on. Surely this Chicanna House isn’t real? Have you been here all this time? What happened to you? We’ve looked everywhere for you. SinJin and...”

“Quiet. Whisper softly. The longer they think you’re out, the more time we have. Now, tell me, who else were you with?”

“Tyre and SinJin.”

Jack groaned. Troya held still, then heard Jack’s low sobbing. “I prayed for them to come. Then I prayed for them to never come. If they get hurt because they came for me... Tam and the baby. Oh God.”

Troya edged closer to Jack, heart breaking for him. Of course, he’d been trapped, alone for all these days, mind tortured with fear, even possibly literally tortured. She reached out and found his shoulder, edged closer and pulled him into her arms. He wept as she brushed away his tears.

“I’m sorry. Behavior unbecoming an explorer. Sorry.”

“My God, don’t apologize. I’m so sorry we couldn’t find you sooner. Who are these people?”

“Lunatics. Dangerous lunatics. Black marketers, engaged in every other illegal activity as well, at least as far as I can tell. Sometimes they speak in Mayan, and I get a little lost.”

“Why would they capture us?”

“Because we stumbled into the underworld.”

“Stop with the riddles. You sound like Catherwood.”

“I should. I’ve encountered everything he did. We’re in an underground sanctuary, dedicated to the Lords of the Underworld, of Xibalba. It’s a rabbit warren of rooms and hallways. From what I can get out of their conversations, these tunnels go out to the Sac Be, the path that connects all Mayan Post-Classic sites. Several of the sites have tunnels that haven’t even been discovered above ground. They’ve worked for years to keep them clear of debris, and keep the antiquities flowing. It’s a fucking gold mine.”

“They must be ancient tunnels, of course. Perhaps they were secret escape routes built for times of inter-site warfare?”

“I don’t think it’s the time to launch into a new area of research. You get that you’re in real danger, Professor?”

“Who are they? Mexicans? Surely someone would have ratted on them?” *An underground Mayan street system? Is he hallucinating?*

“Not just Mexicans. There are others.”

“What are we going to do to get out of here?”

Jack’s sigh was all the answer she needed. Her heart sunk, and she prayed that Tyre and SinJin had somehow escaped, and were planning a way to free them. In the meantime, she was going to do all she could to help herself and Jack. But how?

“You look ridiculous.” Tyre realized his voice sounded odd from the blow he’d taken to the jaw. Swollen, but not broken, he thought. He’d been swallowing his own blood for the last hour from the cuts to the inside of his cheek. He’d whispered occasionally to try to wake SinJin, fearful to call too loudly. His friend was only a few yards away, but in and out of consciousness. At times, only the gentle rise and fall of his chest in the dim light had calmed Tyre’s fears that his friend might be dead.

When Tyre had woken, he felt like he must be dreaming, or in purgatory, or worse. The first thing he saw upon opening his eyes was an odd-looking long machete, blade gleaming in the murkiness of the cell, catching the flaring of a dying torch mounted to a nearby wall. The blade mocked him—a weapon he couldn’t reach.

He had caught a flash of color and movement, and took in the fact that he was not alone, but imprisoned with a man in full Mayan regalia. He had squinted against the pain coursing through his head, only to pull back in shock at the sight of SinJin, smeared with symbols the color of dried blood, battered and bruised, in a full feathered headdress, wearing only a loincloth. He was chained to the wall, out cold.

Tyre pulled at his own chains, and came to grips with the fact that he was in the same garb, and just as helpless, although more conscious. “You look ridiculous,” he tried

again. He had to get SinJin to start talking, keep him conscious. If he slipped away again, he might slip away forever.

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