

Mate Marks 4: Pulse  
Kate Hill

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Long ago a Roman soldier fell in love with a Kushite noblewoman and changed his allegiance to serve her. Bound by an ancient magic to protect her, Marc Claudius failed in his duty and was cursed with immortality, awaiting the rebirth of his lover and a second chance to fulfill their burning passion.

In the modern world, Amina has always felt strong ties to the past. Teaching a night class in history, she is enraptured by a handsome foreign student. When looking into Marc's intense, dark eyes, she can't control her desire. This man arouses yet haunts her, but when he reveals their timeless bond, will she accept his confession or deny a love that has burned for over two thousand years?

In a time before recorded history, some with otherworldly powers mastered a spell that guided destined mates to each other. Though few now wield this ancient power, some masters of the art still exist. Those bound by mate marks cannot resist their magical pull, but the marks can only bind souls that are meant to be shared.

## Part One: Then

### Chapter One

Kheb stepped into the garden and shrugged off her thin linen robe, baring her body to the moonlight. Pausing by the edge of the square pool, she stretched her arms skyward and closed her eyes for a moment.

It felt so good to stand here, naked, free and alone. The past days had been stressful and she had no doubt the worst was yet to come.

At her mother's request, she had traveled from Kush to meet with a Roman official. Rome already had control over Egypt. Though her mother had sent her to discuss peace, Kheb knew she would have to report back to the Kandake, the Kushite Queen, that it was impossible. She found the Romans to be

falsely polite, condescending and power hungry. Despite their semblance of respect for the Princess, she knew her people wouldn't be safe from their greed. Unless the next few days revealed a drastic change in their stance, her people would soon be engaged in battle with these pale invaders with eyes as hard and sharp as the weapons they carried.

Kheb lowered her arms and sighed deeply, glancing down at the fullness of her lush brown breasts. She stroked them lightly with her long, slender fingers.

Though still a young woman, she was already a widow and it had been too long since she had known the touch of a man. For the past few years since her husband's death, she hadn't thought much about the pleasures of the flesh, until she had arrived in Egypt.

He had prompted these lustful thoughts. From the moment their gazes locked, she'd felt a tightening in her belly and a desire she'd never known before. Not even her husband, in their most intimate moments, had quickened her pulse like this man had done with a mere look.

These feelings were wrong. The man who inspired them was Roman and soon to be her enemy. Why, then, did he make her nipples tighten and tingle? Why did the thought of his hands on her body make her burst into flames? Even now the soft flesh between her legs ached with need.

She swept her thumbs over her nipples, making them stiffen even more. In her mind *his* hands caressed her. She imagined his finely shaped lips sliding over the spiky peak of her breast and the sweep of his tongue teasing her until she trembled.

The sound of water rippling in the pool made her look up and when she did her heart nearly stopped beating.

He waded out of the shadows at the end of the pool from where he'd apparently been watching her. He strode closer and paused waist-deep in the water.

Kheb stared for a moment, unable to tear her gaze from his water-slicked torso. The man was absolutely beautiful -- lean and sinewy with broad shoulders and a chest that looked as if it had been carved from stone. The moonlight and water accentuated the ridges of muscle in his flat belly and Kheb licked her lips.

Of course he had no business here and even less business staring at her with such a hungry look in his gleaming black eyes.

Her first reaction was to cover herself, but she had no reason to hide. She was a noblewoman and he a mere soldier. *A Roman* soldier.

Straightening her shoulders and lifting her chin, she said coolly, "What are you doing here?"

"Admiring the view."

Kheb's jaw tightened and her eyes widened in rage. "How dare you speak to me like that? I could have you punished."

His brow furrowed and a faint smile tugged at his lips. "For admiring the garden?"

Heat rose in her face, whether from embarrassment or anger she wasn't sure. Was he telling the truth?

Had she been hoping he admired her or was his response an attempt to disguise the original meaning of his words?

"I've come here almost every night since our arrival in Egypt," he continued in his quiet voice with husky undertones that made her think of lovemaking. "It reminds me of the baths back in Rome. I didn't mean to startle you."

"I accept your apology," Kheb stated, trying to keep herself focused on something other than his magnificent chest. She studied his face with all its interesting angles and planes, but that was just as bad. The man was irresistible; yet resist him she must.

Even during her talks with the officials, this soldier had distracted her. He'd stood off to the side, dressed in his warrior's garb, looking powerful and manly with the sword at his hip, his long legs spread in a formidable stance. She had no doubt that he would go far in the Roman army.

Kheb wasn't speaking only as a woman, but as someone of experience. All her life she had stood beside her mother as the Queen led the people of Kush. Kheb had seen many warriors and had come to know which were the strongest, fiercest and most cunning. She could pick out the leaders among thousands of men and this Roman soldier had the heart of a lion.

Though she hadn't lowered herself to ask his name, she'd overheard it. Marc Claudius.

"You may go now," Kheb told him.

The soldier's smile broadened and he walked to the edge of the pool. Kheb's breath caught at the play of muscles in his arms and back as he hoisted himself out of the water. She noticed the broad expanse of his back was covered with old scars. Beatings were common punishment for Roman soldiers. She doubted he had been punished for a lowly act, such as cowardice or theft, but was most likely beaten for insubordination or some other arrogant behavior. He rose from a crouch position, giving her a clear view of his taut, rounded backside and long, muscular legs.

Instead of walking away, he approached Kheb and her heartbeat quickened. She stood her ground, even as he walked so close that his chest nearly touched her breasts. Her nipples tightened even more, as if reaching toward him.

Though tall, Kheb had to tilt her head slightly to meet his gaze. Looking into those dark eyes made her feel unimaginable things.

"You have no right to touch me," Kheb stated firmly.

"I haven't," he said, his husky voice just above a whisper.

This was either the most arrogant man she'd ever met or the most stupid. Even the Romans couldn't allow this sort of behavior toward a woman of her status. If they didn't demand punishment for his insolence, her guards would most certainly dole it out.

Of course her guards were nowhere in sight, since she had purposely come to the pool alone, seeking time to breathe away from the pressure of her duties.

"You'd like me to, though. Wouldn't you, Princess," he said, his gaze burning into hers.

“By the marks on your back you’re no stranger to punishment, but if you continue to insult me I’ll see that you’re beaten to the brink of death.”

“If I’m going to suffer then at least give me a worthwhile reason,” he said and before she could reply, he wrapped a sinewy arm around her waist, pulled her close to his powerful chest and kissed her.

Kheb’s first impulse should have been to pull back and scream for her guards, but she didn’t want to. Placing her hands on his lean waist, she made a mild attempt to push him away, just to tell herself that she tried. She shouldn’t do this. Not with this lowly foreigner. This man was completely unworthy of her.

Yet at the moment all she could think about was the feel of his warm, moist lips against hers. His body was slick from the pool and his flesh felt so good against her palms as they slid up his back. She felt the ridges of those old scars and the ripple of hard muscles beneath his warm skin.

He ran the tip of his tongue over her lips, then thrust it into her mouth. Kheb opened to him, her tongue meeting his with heated strokes. From the moment she’d seen him she’d dreamed of kissing him like this, but never thought it would actually happen.

His cock stiffened, pressing against her and she moaned softly, thrusting her hips against him.

Marc Claudius groaned deep in his throat and tightened his hold on her. Her soft breasts flattened against his chest. He slid one hand down her back and caressed her buttocks.

Goddess help her, this was the most exciting moment of her life.

Finally he broke the kiss, but continued holding her close. Slowly she opened her eyes and gazed into his, almost overwhelmed by the desire burning there.

“Now that’s almost worth dying for,” he said.

In response, she took his face in her hands and kissed him again. Her tongue thrust into his mouth. Now that she’d had a taste of him she desperately wanted more.

She must be mad to encourage him. If they were caught, there would be repercussions on both sides, but at the moment she didn’t care.

All she wanted was to keep tasting and touching him, to keep feeling his hands and lips on her body.

Their tongues swept against each other in a primitive dance while he continued caressing her from shoulders to buttocks. His hands were big and the palms callused, yet he touched her gently. The roughness of his skin and his raw strength aroused her so much that she could scarcely wait another moment to feel him inside her.

Despite his obvious arousal, he seemed in the mood to take his time. He broke their kiss only to nuzzle her neck. The roughness of his day’s growth of beard tickled her flesh, but she loved the sensation. His lips pressed kisses down her throat and across her collarbone.

“You’re so beautiful,” he breathed, kissing the plump top of one breast while his thumb swept over her nipple. “When I first saw you I knew I had to have you, no matter what the price.”

“You must be mad,” she murmured, running her hands over his head. His dark hair was cropped close

to his scalp and she loved the feel of it against her palms. Usually when she saw him he was in full uniform, including a rounded helmet. She'd often wondered what he looked like naked and he was even more magnificent than she'd imagined.

"I am. I've been mad since you came here." He swept her into his arms and kissed her again. Taking her lower lip between his teeth, he nibbled it gently.

Her arms wrapped around his neck, Kheb responded enthusiastically to his kiss. She nipped and licked his lips.

Marc Claudius carried her several paces, then placed her on her feet. He bent, picked up his cloak and spread it on the ground. Taking her hand, he tugged her down beside him.

Kheb stretched out on the cloak, loving how it carried his scent.

Bracing a hand on either side of her head, he lowered his face toward hers. His eyes closed halfway, his thick, dark lashes casting shadows on his face.

"Princess," he whispered and brushed his cheek against hers. His lips caressed her temple before he kissed her mouth again.

Marc Claudius stretched out beside her and trailed one long, slender finger between her breasts. Then he took a nipple between his thumb and forefinger and rolled it gently. His head dipped toward her breasts and he took her other nipple between his lips. Kheb gasped as his tongue swept over the taut peak. When he sucked on it, drawing it deeply into his mouth, she couldn't control her little cry of pleasure.

While he teased her breast, he lightly stroked her ribs and hip. His hand covered her soft mound and kneaded, stirring her passion even more. She gasped again when he slid a long finger inside her, then withdrew it and stroked her sensitive nub. He circled it then ran the tip of his finger up and down its center.

Kheb moaned and her heart pounded. The flesh between her legs ached and throbbed. No doubt she was thoroughly soaked with passion and more than ready for him. She wanted to beg him to take her, but pride prevented her from doing so. It was enough that she was allowing him this pleasure. She would not plead with this arrogant soldier to fill her with his thick ivory cock.

But perhaps she could tease him as he was teasing her.

She placed a hand to his chest, kneading the sleek muscles. When she paused for a moment, she felt his heart pounding against her palm and a smile tugged at her lips. By the rhythm of his heart and the size of his cock, he was just as aroused as she was. It probably wouldn't take much teasing for her to lure him inside her.

Her hand dipped lower and she curled her fist around his thick shaft. It was so warm and rock hard. She stroked it in a rhythm that soon had his breathing ragged. He released her nipple and arched his neck, moaning as she stroked faster.

"I think you really will be the death of me, woman," he breathed.

She only prayed they wouldn't be the death of each other. Something told her that even if they weren't

discovered tonight, they would pay the price for this indulgence.

“Enough,” he growled, grasping her wrist and guiding her hand away from his swollen cock. “You’ll unman me before we have a chance to truly enjoy this.”

“I like touching you,” she admitted, her fingers stretching toward his thick shaft. “Your cock is so big and pale. The head is almost the same color as your lips. I want to kiss it.”

“Oh the gods,” he murmured and fell onto his back, a smile tugging at his lips.

Kheb climbed between his legs, and he spread them to accommodate her. Claspings his cock, she lowered her lips toward the ruddy, bulging head.

This was unseemly. Beneath her. Completely inappropriate.

But Kheb had spent her entire life doing what was demanded of her, by birth and duty. If she wanted this soldier, she would have him and no one need know about it. For once she would do what she wanted, not for her country, not for her mother or her brother, but for herself.

She took the tip of his cock between her lips and rolled her tongue over it.

Marc Claudius groaned. He raised one hand over his head. His eyes closed and chest heaved with scarcely controlled pleasure as she licked and sucked him.

Her tongue flicked the underside of his cock head, then swept over the top. She tasted the first droplets of his masculine elixir and knew that if she wanted to feel him inside her, she would need to stop soon.

After a few more flicks of her tongue, he grasped a handful of her hair and gently tugged her away from his cock.

He grasped her beneath her arms and tugged her up his body. They lay, breast to chest, his thick cock trapped between them and their gazes locked.

“I want you, Princess,” he said, staring at her with such raw emotion in his eyes that her heart skipped a beat. “Tell me you want me too.”

“I shouldn’t.”

“Tell me,” he said with a commanding edge to his voice.

This man would never be content as a mere soldier. He would not spend his life taking orders from other men.

“I want you too,” she said, her gaze locked on his. Admitting her lust for him wasn’t an act of submission, but one of defiance and independence.

Kheb had always done exactly what was asked of her to serve her people. She had already married an appropriate man. He had died and she had mourned him, but this was her decision now. Her moment of pleasure.

Her words made the soldier’s eyes gleam even brighter. He guided her onto her back, covered her body

with his and entered her with a long, slow thrust.

Moaning, Kheb gripped him hard, her fingers biting into his shoulders. She wrapped her long legs around him as he pumped into her soaked pussy.

Both were already so hungry for each other that they hovered on the edge, yet Marc Claudius thrust with impressive control, keeping his rhythm steady.

The friction of their bodies and the feel of his big cock rubbing her in all the right places soon pushed her into bliss.

Even as she moaned and pulsed around him, he didn't increase his pace, but continued thrusting slowly and steadily, edging her toward another climax.

"Oh yes," she panted, wrapping her arms around him and trying to hold him even closer.

"Yes, what?"

"Yes, it feels good."

He chuckled, an almost sinister sound from deep in his chest. "That's not what I mean."

"What?" she panted, opening her eyes halfway to meet his burning gaze.

He paused in thrusting, his breathing ragged, but he had a determined look on his chiseled face. "I want you to call me by my name."

"What makes you think I even know your name?" she goaded.

His lips curved into a positively wicked smile, and he started pumping faster than before.

Kheb's clit tingled and her heart pounded. Heaven above, she wanted him to keep thrusting. She hovered so close to the edge again.

Just when she teetered on the brink, he paused. His forehead pressed against hers and she knew by his harsh breathing he was as close as she was.

She tightened her internal muscles around him and he groaned and thrust twice more, then stopped.

Entwining his fingers in her hair, he kissed her, then gently bit her lower lip. "My name," he whispered and began thrusting hard and fast.

"Oh... oh goddess..." Kheb wailed, almost blinded by the pleasure. She held him so hard that her arms ached. She was so close... The climax nearly took her breath away. She moaned and thrashed beneath his heated body and cried, "Oh yes, Marc Claudius. Yes! Oh, Marc Claudius!"

"That's what I wanted, Kheb," he panted, then unleashed his desire. His body strained into hers and he gave a raw cry of fulfillment as he poured his passion into her quivering pussy.



## Chapter Two

Kheb sat across the table from Lucius Titinius and tried to control her temper. He wasn't a tall man, but sturdily built and despite his refined manners, he had a reputation for being ruthless.

He smiled and asked, "More wine?"

"No. I have had enough," she said coolly. "Lucius Titinius, I have been here for eight days and our discussions have gone nowhere."

"On the contrary. I have greatly enjoyed our time together. It has allowed me to understand your people better, not to mention I've had the pleasure of your company."

Kheb resisted the urge to grit her teeth. "You are avoiding the true purpose of our meeting."

The official smiled at her indulgently and said, "I'm sure you and your mother are worthy women; however, the fate of a country should be decided by men."

"If you will not talk to me about politics then my time here has been wasted." She stared at him hard for a moment, a muscle twitching in her jaw. Drawing a deep breath, she let her gaze drift across the room to where Marc Claudius stood guard at the door. He wore an unreadable expression, his face like stone. Only his black eyes gleamed, and the look in them ignited her passion despite her anger toward Rome.

They had made love for the first time six days ago and Marc Claudius had come to her every night since then. When she was with him, she placed aside her doubt, fear and anger. He made her feel things she'd never experienced before. In those hours when their bodies entwined and he filled her with his thick, pulsing cock, it didn't matter that he was Roman and she a Kushite.

Very soon they would part forever. There would be a battle and one or both might die.

"I will leave tomorrow," Kheb said and rose to her feet.

Lucius Titinius didn't bother standing.

Kheb headed for the door and her personal guard, Set, followed. He was a tall, ebony-skinned warrior, far more handsome than any Roman. Why then did she burn for Marc Claudius? Even as she left the room, her chin lifted, she let her gaze drift to the Roman soldier. Their eyes locked briefly and so many emotions passed between them.

Then Kheb turned away and headed for her chamber. In the Egyptian style, the room was decorated simply, with two square stools and a small table upon which rested a pottery oil lamp. A bed stood against one wall, with a carved trunk nearby.

Kheb's old companion, Bast, stood by the open door at the back of the room, looking out at a small garden. Bast had cared for Kheb since the day she was born. The woman wasn't of royal blood, nor

was she a mere servant. She had strange powers that the Queen believed came from the gods. These powers sometimes allowed Bast to see into the future, among other things.

In truth Kheb felt closer to Bast than to her own mother. It was Bast who had nursed her through childhood illnesses and shared the simple daily pleasures with her. Bast had guided her through young womanhood and prepared her for her duties as a wife. When her husband died, Bast had understood that while Kheb hadn't been in love with him, she still cared for him and would miss him.

Though she trusted the older woman, Kheb hadn't confided in her regarding Marc Claudius. She wasn't sure why. Perhaps because Kheb hadn't completely come to terms with her feelings for him. What did she feel?

Yes, Marc Claudius aroused her and made her feel more alive than ever before, but there was something else between them. Something Kheb didn't want to consider because theirs was a forbidden love.

Love. No, she could not use that word for a Roman soldier whom she'd known for only eight days.

"Is something wrong?" Bast said, approaching Kheb, her dark eyes narrowed. As always, she wore a large but simple carnelian pendant around her neck. Bast believed the round, reddish stone was important to her magical powers.

"Everything is wrong," Kheb admitted. "Tomorrow we'll return home. Our time has been wasted here. My mother believes war between us and Rome is inevitable. I should have listened."

"If she didn't think you had a chance to reason with them then she wouldn't have allowed us to come here. Yet I fear you're right. Until we arrive home, we must be careful. I don't trust these Romans."

"Neither do I."

Bast raised an eyebrow. "Is that true of all of them?"

Kheb's stomach tightened. She should have realized that even though she hadn't told Bast about her Roman lover, she would sense their attraction.

"What about the soldier, Marc Claudius? Do you trust him or is he simply a diversion?"

"That's not your concern, old woman," Kheb snapped. She sighed and shook her head, then placed a hand on Bast's arm. "Forgive me. I shouldn't be angry at you for my... indiscretion."

"He is very handsome for one of his kind."

Shrugging, Kheb walked to the bed and sat. "I suppose."

A smile flirted with Bast's lips. "You suppose?"

"He doesn't really matter, does he? After all, we leave tomorrow and I'll never see him again."

A sound from the garden drew the women's attention. Kheb's heart skipped a beat. At night, Marc Claudius often climbed the wall surrounding the garden and entered her chamber from there.

"I will call a guard." Bast headed for the door, but Kheb rose and stepped in front of her, lightly grasping her shoulders.

"No. It was probably just the wind."

Bast looked skeptical. "The wind you say? Can you be sure it isn't an assassin, sent by Lucius Titinius?"

A suspicious feeling swept over Kheb, but she thrust it aside. When she'd undertaken this journey, she had fully understood the dangers of it.

"Or is it perhaps someone else?" Bast asked softly, glancing toward the garden that was now bathed in a dim reddish light from the setting sun.

"Leave me please," Kheb said, her voice soft yet commanding. "I will call for assistance if I require it." She slid a dagger from the sheath at her hip.

The older woman glanced at the blade, then with a reluctant nod, left the chamber.

Kheb strode to the garden, dagger in hand.

"Marc Claudius," she said.

He stepped from behind a willow tree, wearing only a knee-length tunic and his leather sandals. Without the bulk of his armor, the lean, hard perfection of his body was clearly visible. Just looking at him made Kheb tingle all over.

Beneath her thin linen robe, her nipples stiffened, standing out dark and hard against the pale fabric. Despite how she wished to race across the garden and throw herself into his arms, she remained rooted in one spot. Standing cool and proud, she let him come to her.

He approached slowly, his strides long and confident. The passion in his eyes belied the almost stony cast to his face. She'd come to realize that he didn't smile often and when he did it was usually a wicked grin, used for intimidation rather than to reveal true amusement. Every so often he dropped his hard veneer and offered a genuine grin or laugh. When he did, he almost became a different man, or perhaps it was a glimpse of the real man beneath the soldier.

Marc Claudius was difficult to read, except when it came to lust. Then he made his desires completely known.

Reaching her, he grasped her shoulders, dipped his head toward hers and covered her mouth in a breath-stealing kiss. When it broke, he gently cupped her chin in his hand and gazed into her eyes.

"I'm sorry things didn't go as you wanted with Lucius Titinius," he said.

"I had hoped for a different outcome, but this doesn't surprise me. It seems your kind won't be satisfied until they conquer everyone and everything."

"Is it so terrible to want victory?" he asked, a faint smile on his lips. That smile reminded her too much of Lucius Titinius' irksome grin.

"I shouldn't expect you to disagree with your superiors," she said. "After all, you're merely one of a

thousand goats waiting for direction from the shepherd.”

He dropped his hand and his brow furrowed. “One day I intend to be a shepherd.”

“No doubt.” Kheb snorted and walked away from him. She paused by a date tree and folded her arms beneath her breasts. “If you survive that long. How many battles do you plan to fight? You can’t expect good fortune to stay with you forever.”

He walked toward her, his expression once again unreadable. “I’ve seen many battles, Kheb, and I plan to see many more. True, not all of us survive, but I will.”

“How can you be so sure? If you go to war with us, it won’t be an easy fight for you.”

“Nothing worth having is ever easy.” He cupped the back of her head and kissed her again.

Part of her wanted to push him away, but another part wanted to hold onto him for as long as she could.

“My biggest regret is seeing how this has hurt you,” he whispered against her lips. “Of knowing you might be hurt even more in the future. And I regret that after tonight we’ll probably never see each other again.”

“I have no such regrets about you,” Kheb stated fiercely, though she wondered if she sounded convincing. She hated the thought of him dying in battle almost as much as she hated the thought of the impending war itself. If he fought, no matter how confident he was, she believed he and many others would die. The Queen would not surrender. Rome would never take what was theirs.

“I think you do,” he said, holding her gaze. Was that hope gleaming in his eyes? “I think these past days have meant more to both of us than simple pleasure.”

“It doesn’t matter. It’s over now.”

“No.” He took her face in his hands and brushed his lips across her forehead. “We still have tonight.”

“Then we shouldn’t waste it with more idle talk.” Kheb placed her hands on his wrists and caressed them, loving how thick and strong they felt.

He kissed her again, his tongue sliding between her parted lips and meeting hers with long, tender strokes. He broke the kiss and nuzzled her neck.

Kheb ran her hands over his head and caressed his neck and shoulders.

“Discussions with your kind are useless,” she breathed.

“Actions are stronger than words,” he said in a husky voice, then kissed her full on the lips while at the same time guiding her to the ground.

She lay on her back among the flowers and trees while Marc Claudius’ long, slender fingers unfastened the belt on her robe. She shifted position, allowing him to remove the garment, then she stretched out again, naked except for her sandals.

He cupped her breasts and kneaded them. Kheb sighed with pleasure, loving the roughness of his

callused palms against her soft flesh. Her nipples tightened and ached and she arched her back, thrusting against his hands.

“You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen,” he murmured, stretching out beside her and covering her breasts with kisses. He gently squeezed and stroked one while taking her nipple between his teeth and teasing it. His tongue lashed over the stiff nub and Kheb moaned, clutching his head even closer.

Marc Claudius covered her smooth, rounded belly with kisses and dipped his tongue into her navel. She laughed softly and writhed beneath him.

He guided her legs over his shoulders and grasped her buttocks snugly in his big hands. Moistening his lips, he covered her clit with his mouth and Kheb gasped with pleasure. She tightened her grip on his shoulders while he lapped and sucked her throbbing little nub.

“Oh goddess,” she panted, trying to squirm but he held her fast.

His tongue moved from her clit and thrust into her pussy, tasting and swirling until she thought she might go mad from the pleasure.

When he began flicking his tongue over her clit in relentless upward strokes, Kheb moaned and thrashed, her entire body aflame. It seemed the pleasure increased each time they were together. He’d taken her in many ways, but this was the first time he’d devoured her like this.

“Oh goddess. Marc Claudius, don’t stop. Please don’t stop.”

He was the only man who had ever wrung a plea from her lips and she knew in her heart he was the only man who ever would.

A few more flicks of his expert tongue and she climaxed so hard she thought she might faint from the intensity. His lips and tongue didn’t leave her until she lay, completely satisfied.

While she recovered, he rested beside her, caressing her from breast to hip.

Finally she opened her eyes and met his gaze.

“I wish there was some way for us --” he began, then shook his head. “Even if I took you as a lover, we’d hardly see each other. I have at least another thirteen years of service. Maybe longer, if I go as far as I plan to.”

Raising herself on her elbows, she narrowed her eyes at him. “Are you quite mad? What makes you think I would debase myself by becoming your concubine? I am of a royal bloodline and you’re a --”

“Mere soldier. I know. You’ve made that clear from the first.” He loomed above her, bracing a hand on either side of her head.

Kheb hardened herself against the enticing look in his eyes and turned away.

“Look at me,” he ordered and for some reason she obeyed.

Their gazes locked and he said, “You don’t want this to end and neither do I.”

“We have no choice. I have my duty and you have yours. We’re from different worlds, Marc Claudius. Just because we’ve taken pleasure in each other’s bodies doesn’t mean we can ever share a life together. You dream of me following you to Rome, but would you be so eager for us to continue if you turned your back on your people and returned to my home with me?”

His brow furrowed and an incredulous smile spread across his lips.

“You see,” she said. “You could no more come with me as my slave than I could be yours.”

He closed his eyes for a moment and rested his forehead against hers. “I have willingly shed my blood for Rome and I know its power. When and if we decide to advance, you will be taken or destroyed.”

A coldness swept through her and this time she pushed hard against his chest. When he didn’t move, she spoke through gritted teeth, “Let me up. Now.”

Seeing her fury, he did as she asked and Kheb rose swiftly to her feet.

Marc Claudius picked up her robe and also stood, handing it to her.

Snatching it from his hand, she pointed toward the wall over which he’d climbed to enter the garden. “Go, Roman, and I hope I never set eyes on you again.”

“That’s not true,” he said in the soft, husky voice she adored, but this time she would not be persuaded by his masculine charm.

“Go or I’ll call my guard.”

He nodded, though his gaze remained locked on hers. She knew he probably had no fear of her guard. A man this arrogant feared very little.

He walked across the garden and paused by the wall. “I will miss you, Kheb,” he said, but she didn’t reply.

A strange feeling, something between hopelessness and grief, washed over her as she left the garden and walked to her chamber.

When she reached the door, she turned around, but Marc Claudius was gone.

### Chapter Three

Just moments after Marc Claudius left Kheb’s chamber, Bast returned.

“I would like to be alone,” Kheb stated.

“We must talk first.”

“About what?”

“You’ve always known about my powers.”

“Of course.”

“And you know I love you as a daughter.”

Kheb met Bast’s gaze and sensed that something was wrong. She rose, approached the older woman and rested a hand on her shoulder. “Bast, what are you trying to tell me?”

“I feel your life is in danger.”

“We’re leaving tomorrow. I’ll be fine.”

Bast shook her head and stared at Kheb hard, her dark eyes gleaming. “No matter how soon we leave or what you think, I know these Romans will do you harm. There is a way I can prevent it. Tonight I had a vision.”

Kheb raised her eyes to the heavens.

“Don’t take what I tell you lightly,” Bast said with an angry edge to her voice. She took Kheb’s hand and held it tightly. “In my vision, you were attacked. At that time, the vision split. In one instance, you were killed. In the other, a man protected you. This man was your destined mate. He was your lover and your protector.”

“Who was this man?” Kheb asked.

“I couldn’t see him clearly.”

Kheb shook her head. “That’s a fanciful story.”

“Is it?” Bast demanded. “In the vision, he was called to you and that can only mean one thing.”

A faint smile played around Kheb’s lips. Most of the time she trusted Bast’s intuition and she had witnessed her power, but this was madness. A lover and protector called to her. It was like a legend of the gods.

“It means that you must allow me to perform two very old rituals. One is called a mate mark ritual and the other a protector summoning.”

Kheb’s brow furrowed. Folding her arms beneath her breasts, she walked to the door leading to the garden and gazed out. She glanced around, wishing Marc Claudius was waiting there. “Mate mark ritual,” Kheb murmured. “Does that mean you can call this protector to me?”

“Once the ritual is performed, he will be drawn to you. I have sensed that your destined mate and your destined protector are one and the same. He is a warrior, and he is very near.”

A strange feeling washed over her. According to Bast, that meant the man she was meant to share her life with was among the warriors who had accompanied her from home. The one who kept the closest watch over her, who was always posted outside her door, was Set. He was a good man, though not of her class. Set was strong, handsome and loyal, yet she had never desired him.

“If you perform this ritual, will I want my destined mate?”

“The ritual can only bind those who are meant to be together, so you won’t be able to resist him.”

She hadn’t been able to resist Marc Claudius, either. If only he was her destined mate.

No! That was madness. Their peoples were on the verge of war. They could never be together. It was impossible.

“Please, Kheb. We must act quickly.” Bast approached, twisting her slender hands. “In my vision, you were here when the attack came.”

“Then we should go.”

“As long as you’re within Rome’s reach, you won’t be safe.”

“If you could perform this ritual, then why didn’t you do it before?”

“Because your mother had already selected a husband for you. You know that nothing changes her mind when she wants something. Bringing you and your destined mate together when you couldn’t marry would have been cruel.”

“If my destined mate is a warrior, as you have foreseen, then he is most likely not of royal blood. That means that even now I couldn’t marry him.”

“You’re a woman, Kheb. Not a child as when you married before. I know you have become as strong willed as your mother. If you want your destined mate, neither she nor anyone else will stop you from having him now.”

Bast was right.

Or was she?

The truth was, Kheb couldn’t stop thinking about Marc Claudius, yet she would never debase herself by binding herself publicly to that *Roman*.

“I fear that without the rituals, you will die here.”

Kheb closed her eyes for a moment and sighed deeply.

Having an irresistible lover appealed to her. She had already been married to a decent man who had never thrilled her in the bedroom or out. They had cared for each other, but never felt a connection. Kheb was ready for a meeting of hearts.

“Do it,” Kheb said. “Summon my destined mate. My protector.”



Bast breathed deeply. "I only pray that we're not too late and there is time for me to complete both rituals before the attack comes."

"If it comes."

Glancing at the Princess from the corner of her eye, Bast said, "If you didn't believe me, you wouldn't consent to this."

Kheb didn't respond, but continued staring out at the garden.

\* \* \*

Marc Claudius was no stranger to passion. He had sated his desires with women, but none had touched him as deeply as Kheb.

She was right that they could never be together. She was a proud woman and would not submit to him.

No doubt Rome would conquer her people, but she would never surrender. If he forced her to come to him, it would destroy their bond. Making love to her was like holding a magnificent wild bird in his hands. Though her beak drew his blood, he couldn't tighten his grip on her. To stop her from flying away, he would have to break her and that was something he would never do.

It was madness to obsess about a woman, even the beautiful Princess. He'd devoted his life to soldiering and planned to go far. He was strong, skilled and feared nothing except failure. His confidence occasionally caused him problems, such as a few years back when a superior had beaten him for voicing his opinion about the tactics of a battle. It had turned out that Marc Claudius had been correct and if his advice had been taken, they would have won the battle with far fewer casualties.

Luckily Lucius Titinius had taken notice of his attributes and requested him as part of his personal guard. The favor of such a man would greatly help Marc Claudius' career. That should be his main concern. Not Kheb.

At the barracks, he was about to prepare for sleep when the strangest sensation swept over him. His gut tightened and he closed his eyes against a strange pounding in his head. Yet it wasn't only in his head. His entire body throbbed as if he were trapped inside a giant heart.

What was happening?

The pulsations quickened.

*Fear.*

*Peril.*

*Kheb.*

All he could think about was Kheb.

Something was wrong with her. He knew it.

Drawn by an irresistible force, he grasped his sword and raced back to her chamber.

He nearly stopped breathing when he saw the Princess' ebony-skinned guard, Set, lying dead outside her door.

Kheb screamed and Marc Claudius leapt over the body and into the chamber. Inside, the old servant, Bast, sprawled on the floor. Kheb stood with her back to the farthest wall, a bloodied dagger clenched in her fist and a wild look in her eyes as she faced a towering Roman guard. Marc Claudius recognized him as Brutus Fabias. The guard's forearms dripped with blood, apparently from Kheb's blade. He lunged at her, managing to catch her wrist in his steely grip. His hand momentarily locked around her slender neck just before Marc Claudius lunged at him, using a dagger to slit the soldier's throat.

Brutus Fabias dropped his hold on Kheb and clutched his throat. His horrified eyes turned and met Marc Claudius' gaze before he sank to the floor, his life bleeding away.

Marc Claudius turned to Kheb. He still felt the pulsations and somehow he knew she had something to do with it.

He had killed one of his own for this woman. Worst of all, he guessed that Lucius Titinius had probably ordered the guard to kill her. His career was no longer an issue, for once Lucius Titinius realized what had happened, Marc would probably be as dead as Brutus. Yet if he had these moments to live over again, he would have done the same thing. The thought of Kheb being murdered was unthinkable.

She stared at him, her expression reflecting his bewilderment.

He managed to find his voice first and asked, "Are you hurt?"

"No." She shook her head, then glanced toward her servant, who was moaning softly. Kheb hurried across the room and knelt beside the older woman. "Bast! Are you wounded?"

"No," the old woman said. "I just have a bump on the head. Set."

Both women looked toward the guard who lay outside the door. Marc Claudius walked to him and checked for a pulse, though he knew the man was dead.

Kheb helped Bast to her feet and they approached. "Is he..."

"Yes. Dead." Marc Claudius grasped the man's legs, dragged him into the chamber and closed the door. He stood, glancing from Kheb's dead guard to the slaughtered soldier.

"This is Lucius Titinius' doing," Bast stated. "I told you this would happen."

"You also foresaw my protector," Kheb murmured, her gaze fixed on Marc Claudius.

He stared at her. "What?"

"This isn't what I expected," Bast said, knitting her eyebrows. "Tell me, both of you, do you feel any different?"

"I heard, no, *I felt* a strange sensation," Kheb said. "Like a heartbeat."

Marc Claudius' stomach lurched. "So did I. It was as if --"

“As if I was standing inside a giant heart,” she said.

“The mate mark ritual is different for each pairing,” Bast said. “My guess is you’re sensing each other’s heartbeats.”

“Mate mark ritual?” Marc Claudius demanded, curling his lip. “What in the name of Pluto is going on?”

“We have little time,” Bast said, grasping Kheb’s arm. “An attempt has already been made on your life. We must leave quickly and quietly.”

“You’re right. It’s no longer safe to wait until morning,” Kheb said. “But what of Marc Claudius? Surely he will be punished for protecting me.”

“He must come with us, of course.”

“I must what?” Marc Claudius growled. “On impulse I killed one of my own to protect Kheb, but I am still Roman. My place is here. I will not alert anyone if you choose to leave now, but I will not go with you.”

“If you don’t go now, you will follow later,” Bast said, glancing at him with a hint of compassion. “From now on, you and Kheb are bound to each other. And you... Marc Claudius, you are not just her destined mate, but her bound protector. You will do whatever is necessary to keep her safe.”

“That is madness!” he snapped, though in his heart he knew Bast spoke the truth. It was impossible, but something had changed inside him. He felt it, just as he felt Kheb’s heartbeat. It had faded a bit now that they were together and the danger had passed, yet it was still there. Faint yet at the same time powerful. Strange, he couldn’t always feel his own heart beating, yet he felt hers.

“We must move quickly,” Bast said. “We will take Set’s body with us. He deserves a proper burial. Marc Claudius, what should we do with this soldier’s body?”

“I’ll have to hide it.” Marc Claudius closed his eyes for a moment, disgusted with himself. Yet to protect Kheb as well as save his own life, he needed to conceal Brutus Fabias’ death for as long as possible.

“While we clean up the chamber, I will tell you about the rituals,” Bast said to him. “Maybe then it will be easier for you to accept your destiny.”

## Chapter Four

During the journey to Kush, Marc Claudius kept watching over his shoulder. Lucius Titinius might send soldiers after them, or he might simply wait for the full attack that would no doubt be launched upon the kingdom.

Marc Claudius could scarcely believe he had cast aside Rome and given up all he had worked for to follow a woman he had known for slightly over a week. He should have laughed at the old servant's story about the rituals that bound him to Kheb. It was pure madness, yet for some inexplicable reason he couldn't allow the Princess to leave without him.

They traveled with scarcely any rest. Kheb's surviving guards watched Marc Claudius so closely that he sensed his life was in as much danger from them as Kheb's had been from the Romans.

Finally they arrived at their destination and were brought directly before the Queen.

Like Kheb, she was a tall woman who carried herself with great dignity. She wasn't as beautiful as her daughter, though, nor did she have the underlying compassion in her eyes that he saw in Kheb's.

The Queen was a formidable woman and for the first time he wondered how Rome would fare in battle with her.

After exchanging a brief greeting with Kheb and Bast, the Queen's unreadable gaze fell upon Marc Claudius. "Who is this man?"

"Mother, we have much to discuss," Kheb stated. "We should speak in private."

The Queen agreed and invited them to her chamber where she ordered the guards to wait outside. As she heard Kheb's report about her meeting with Lucius Titinius, the Queen's expression grew even harder. When Bast explained about the protection ritual, the Queen's gaze again fixed on Marc Claudius.

Neither Bast nor Kheb mentioned the mate mark ritual. Marc Claudius guessed by the Queen's cold reaction to him they thought it best not to tell her that her daughter was bound to a Roman.

The Queen seemed to weigh Bast's words carefully and finally consented to allow Marc Claudius to remain as Kheb's protector.

"Keeping her safe means keeping our land free of Rome," the Queen said, staring hard at Marc Claudius. "You will tell us all you know about Roman training, warfare and of course their plans against us."

His jaw tightened, and he had the urge to snap the arrogant woman's neck. As much as he had adored Kheb on sight, he disliked her mother.

Considering they were bound by destiny, he and Kheb already had many strikes against them. If not for his feelings for her and the way he felt her heart beating as surely as he felt his own, he wouldn't have believed in the mate mark ritual.

"I will not," he stated, his gaze locked with the Queen's.

She drew a deep breath, her nostrils flaring. "You are either the most arrogant man I have ever met or the most foolish. Whether you live or die is my decision. You are no longer among Romans. Here you obey me or die."

"I will protect Kheb. In that I have no choice, but I will not betray Rome further by providing you with information to use against them."

Kheb glanced at him sharply.

A faint smile, sinister yet amused, played around the Queen's full lips. This was not a woman to be trifled with, yet Marc Claudius had never been intimidated by anyone, male or female. He still had his pride and would not help the Queen, other than protecting her daughter.

"We have ways of making you tell us what we wish to know," the Queen said.

"Mother, no," Kheb stated. "He saved my life and will continue to defend me. He is a servant here, not a prisoner."

"Do you favor this slave more than your country?" the Queen demanded. "Do you lust after him, daughter? Has desire for him overtaken your reason? Perhaps we need to find another husband for you."

Anger flashed across Kheb's face and she drew a deep breath. Her slender hands curled into fists at her sides. "You know I have always been loyal. If you accept him as my protector, then he must be allowed certain courtesies."

"He has turned his back on his people to follow you here. That means he now belongs to us. Daughter, you already know that I will have no man here who disobeys my commands."

"I know nothing about Rome's plans regarding your kingdom," Marc Claudius stated coolly. "Use whatever methods you want, but you will find that is the truth."

The Queen studied him carefully. "And if you did know?"

"I would face whatever torture you contrive rather than tell you."

"Even if that information protects Kheb?"

Marc Claudius closed his eyes briefly and sighed. A heaviness settled into his heart. When he opened his eyes again, all three women were staring at him.

"If it means her life, I will do anything to protect her," he admitted. No matter what he wanted to believe, this was the truth. When he heard her heartbeat and sensed she was in danger, he had been driven to her side. He hadn't wanted to stop. Worst of all, if given the choice to purge himself of this magical hold, he would keep it. Even before the rituals, Kheb had a hold over him. After the first time they made love, he knew he would spend the rest of his life wanting -- *needing* -- her.

The Queen leaned back in her chair, her hands resting lightly on the arms. After a moment, she said, "Very well. I will not force you to speak now. Do your duty and keep my daughter safe. When and if the time comes when your knowledge will save her life, you had better be prepared to divulge whatever you know. For now, you are all dismissed."

\* \* \*

That night, Kheb paced her chamber by the light of an oil lamp. Anxious over the situation with Rome and concerned about what would become of her and Marc Claudius, she doubted she would sleep at all.

She knew her mother disliked Marc Claudius and he had done his best not to impress her. What was

wrong with the man? Didn't he know the Queen wasn't a woman to cross?

He was supposed to be Kheb's protector, yet she feared for him if he stirred her mother's wrath. If anything happened to him --

No. She couldn't think about it.

Even before the mate mark ritual, she had felt an irresistible connection to Marc Claudius. Now she couldn't bear the thought of being without him.

Even now she felt his heartbeat. It grew stronger until her entire body throbbed with it. He was near. He had to be.

She looked up and found him standing in the doorway, staring at her with his gleaming eyes. A little thrill darted through her and she had to restrain herself to keep from leaping into his arms.

"I couldn't sleep either," he said.

Folding her arms beneath her breasts, she said, "You put yourself in danger today. If you're to survive here, you must show my mother the proper respect."

"If respecting her means degrading myself, then it won't happen."

"As a soldier I'm sure you're accustomed to submitting to your superiors." Kheb shook her head, recalling the scars on his back. Perhaps that argument was wasted on him. "You must behave accordingly. I don't want to see you punished."

A smile played around his chiseled lips as he strode toward her. "Worried about me?" He reached out and caressed her cheek.

Kheb's eyes closed momentarily and she leaned her face against his hand. He brushed her mouth with a kiss and she pressed closer to him.

Taking her in his arms, Marc Claudius deepened the kiss. His tongue slid between her lips and hers met it. They tasted and teased each other. A soft moan escaped Kheb, and Marc Claudius groaned in response, a sexy rumble deep in his chest.

His large, warm hands caressed her back through her sheer robe. Stepping back only to loosen her belt and part her robe, he let his gaze linger over her in a way that made her heartbeat flutter. Grasping her bare breasts, he swept his thumbs over her taut nipples.

Kheb's eyelids fluttered and she arched toward him. Cupping one of her breasts, he lifted it while bending toward it so that he could capture the nipple between his lips.

"Oh, Marc Claudius," she breathed, clutching his head and stroking his thick, dark hair.

His teeth gently tugged upon her nipple and his lips teased it lightly. Every sweep of his tongue against the sensitive flesh excited her so much that she could scarcely wait for him to take her. That hungry place between her legs dampened and heated with need.

Marc Claudius released her breast only to reach for the other. He nibbled and sucked that nipple until it

was so tight and sensitive that his touch became the sweetest agony. Then he pressed his face between both of her full breasts, kissing and nuzzling them. Slowly he sank lower, kissing his way down her belly. Finally on his knees in front of her, he rested his cheek against her stomach and rubbed his face against the cushion of hair between her legs.

He slid his hands over her hips and grasped her buttocks, massaging gently.

Kheb continued stroking his hair, her head tilted down so she could watch him through half-closed eyes. She loved the sight of his face so close to her most tender parts.

He tilted his gaze toward her and moistened his lips with the tip of his tongue. Then his eyes closed, his thick dark lashes casting shadows against his cheeks, and he began sucking her clit.

Gasping with pleasure, Kheb could no longer keep her eyes open. She moaned and rocked against him, her buttocks tightening as his fingers kneaded gently.

Every sweep of his tongue against her delicate nub made her tighten and throb with passion. He lapped and sucked, teasing her until she thought she'd go mad with desire. Flicking her clit with steady upward strokes, he hurled her toward a shattering climax. His hands gripped her bottom tighter, for if he hadn't she would have crashed to the ground from the force of her release.

Marc Claudius stood, sweeping her into his arms. Clinging to his neck, Kheb rested her head against his shoulder and closed her eyes. She loved his scent and the feel of his warm, strong body against hers.

He carried her to the plain wooden bed and placed her upon it.

Kheb watched him undress. Goddess, he was so strong and masculine. A golden tan kissed his skin, and she loved the dark rose color of his tight little nipples.

Kicking aside his tunic and sandals, he approached her. She sat up and he embraced her, resting his head against the top of hers. For a moment Kheb simply enjoyed his nearness and the feel of his heartbeat against her cheek.

Unable to resist any longer, she nuzzled his chest then trailed her tongue over his breastbone. She licked one of his nipples, loving how it felt against her tongue. Her teeth played with it then she sucked it gently.

He groaned with desire and she felt his hard cock trapped between their bodies.

Smiling seductively, Kheb once again lay on her back, raised her knees and spread her legs, eager to feel him inside her, but Marc Claudius was in no mood to hurry. He rested his hands on her knees and guided them even farther apart, then knelt between her legs.

Caressing her inner thighs, he bent and kissed her stomach, then teased her clit with a few strokes of his tongue.

His gaze followed his hand as it trailed up her belly. He used a callused fingertip to stroke between her breasts, then he lightly pinched each nipple.

Drawing a deep breath, Kheb shut her eyes and arched her back. "I want you, Marc Claudius. I want to feel your cock inside me."



Grasping her hips, he pulled her nearer, guiding her legs around his waist. She opened her eyes and stared at his ivory cock that stood straight as bamboo. The head was flushed deep red and she longed to be filled with the thick, hard shaft.

Marc Claudius swept his thumb over her clit, stirring her desire even more.

First he slid one finger inside her, then two. He rubbed her soft, wet flesh. It felt wonderful having him explore her like this, but even more she wanted him to thrust his big, stiff shaft into her.

He caressed the swollen little nub in tender circles until Kheb hovered on the edge again. Her heart pounding and breathing ragged, she squirmed, but Marc Claudius grasped her buttocks and tugged her even closer. He pressed the tip of his cock into her drenched pussy and his eyes closed momentarily, a look of sheer bliss on his face.

He spoke a few Latin words that she didn't understand, though she guessed by his tone that they were quite wicked. She smiled, then again gasped with pleasure when he began thrusting while at the same time using his hands on her buttocks to pump her onto his cock.

One hand moved to her clit and he used his fingers to caress it while still thrusting into her. The marvelous sensations built and built, making her internal muscles tighten and her pulse race.

She felt his pulse surrounding her as well and she loved it.

Her climax broke over her so swiftly that she cried out, straining against him.

Marc Claudius groaned with pleasure and surged into her. Finally he pulled out of her sated body and lay beside her, holding her close.

"Promise me you'll obey my mother," Kheb said, pressing delicate kisses to his chest.

His long, slender fingers caressed her hair and he replied, "I will show her the proper respect, but I am not her slave. I'm your protector. Even though my connection to you is stronger than anything I've ever felt before, I am still Roman."

That attitude, she feared, would one day cost them dearly.

\* \* \*

The next day, Marc Claudius began training with the Kushite guards. He had no illusions about being accepted by them and realized he would have to earn their respect, if possible. Since turning his back on Rome, he could scarcely respect himself.

During training, the warriors challenged Marc Claudius to the utmost, but he stood against their worst. By the end of the training session, he bore more cuts and bruises than he'd sustained during most real battles. His sword arm was so tired that he could scarcely lift it and he knew this was only the beginning.

He almost felt like a new recruit again, being tested by his superiors. If he had survived the brutal training in Rome, then the Kushites would not break him.

With his training over for the morning, he sought out Kheb and found her in her mother's private garden. Bast and several other women, apparently servants, were there as well, sewing and looking after a group



of young children.

One of the children sat on Kheb's lap and the Princess was feeding her pieces of melon.

The sight of her with the child made Marc Claudius imagine how she would look holding their child. A smile tugged at his lips, then he scowled. Such a thing might never happen, and if it did how would they build a life together? They couldn't marry. Kush would not accept them nor would Rome.

They would be forced to seek their way elsewhere, living like wanderers. What sort of life was that for a woman like Kheb, or a man like himself for that matter?

Yet the thought of a life without her was unacceptable.

Kheb's gaze riveted toward him, and she smiled, beckoning him closer with a crook of her finger.

He approached and squatted beside the stool on which she sat. The little girl on her lap glanced at him curiously as if he was some kind of exotic creature.

Chuckling, Kheb placed the child on the ground and gave her the rest of the melon.

"She's never seen a Roman before," Kheb explained.

With one last glance at him, the little girl turned away shyly and went to join the other children.

Kheb glanced at them and sighed. "I was never blessed with children. My husband was understanding, but I think my mother holds it against me."

"I've never considered having a family," Marc Claudius replied, touching her knee. "Until now."

She turned to him, a sad smile on her lips. "I wish it could be different for us."

"So do I."

Kheb lightly touched his cheek. "You're bruised."

"It's nothing." Taking her hand, he guided it away from his face to kiss her palm.

She tugged away from his grasp and glanced toward the servants. "They're loyal to my mother," she whispered.

"And we know how much she likes me," he said sarcastically.

"Don't be dismissive of her reaction to you."

"I'm not, but I sense that no matter what I do, she won't change her feelings toward me."

"Perhaps you're right, but goading her won't help your cause, either."

"I'm not a fool, Kheb."

"Sometimes I think we're both fools." Sighing deeply, she stood and walked toward the beautiful

jasmine flowers across the garden.

Marc Claudius followed her. When they were near like this, and both calm, he scarcely noticed her heartbeat, yet if he concentrated on it, he could feel it pulsing through him. Standing so close behind her that their bodies almost touched, he closed his eyes and enjoyed the scent of her floral perfume. He focused on her completely and sighed with pleasure when her pulse filled him.

When he'd first learned about the mate mark ritual, he'd almost thought it a curse, but now he realized it was a bittersweet gift.

"Meet me in my chamber," she whispered, then turned to him and said loudly, "You may go continue your training. You're not required at this time."

Marc Claudius narrowed his eyes. Her arrogance would have irritated him had he not known what she was planning.

"Of course," he replied and bowed his head to her, a faint yet playful smile on his lips.

He left the garden and headed down a corridor. Several servants passed by him, but they didn't so much as cast him a glance. Marc Claudius couldn't care less about servants. All he could think about was meeting his lover.

A short time later, he stepped into her chamber where Kheb stood by a tall, potted tree. His pulse raced at the sight of her naked curves. She placed a hand on her rounded hip, her shoulders proud and her full breasts waiting for his touch. Her gorgeous, dark nipples were already stiff with arousal and he could scarcely wait to roll his tongue over them.

Kheb pulled up his tunic and slid her hands beneath it. Smiling, she curled her fingers around his cock. Marc Claudius groaned, his already swollen shaft growing even more as she stroked him.

"Oh, it's so big and powerful," she breathed, gazing at him with her large, dark eyes. Her full lips parted, and he couldn't resist kissing her. Cupping the back of her head, he gently sucked her lower lip then thrust his tongue into her mouth. He pulled back slightly, so that he felt her soft breath against his lips. She continued, "I want to suck you, Marc Claudius."

His eyes closed momentarily and he practically growled, "You're going to be the death of me, woman."

She sank to her knees in front of him. He knew Kheb would kneel to no other man. This act of lust and affection touched him deeply. It made his cock ache and his heart soar. He tore off his tunic and stood before her wearing only his sandals.

Pleasure raced through him when she caressed his ankles and covered his thighs with kisses. He braced his legs firmly apart and caressed her hair while she licked his inner thigh. Her tongue tickled his pelvis. Cupping his balls, she kneaded them, then sat back on her heels, grasped his shaft and took as much of his balls as she could fit into her mouth.

"Ah, gods!" Marc Claudius gasped, his legs and buttocks tensing. Her hot, wet mouth sucked and teased him while her hand stroked his shaft. Her thumb teased the underside of his cock head.

Kheb swirled her tongue around his balls and moaned as if she thoroughly enjoyed tasting him. Watching her pleasure him like this was almost as exciting as the sensations she stirred.

Finally she released his balls and covered his cock with kisses from base to head, then she licked him, running her tongue up, down and around him.

No Roman man was a stranger to lust, but no one had ever roused his passions like this gorgeous woman. He could scarcely believe they belonged to each other, that their souls were bound forever.

Kheb held his twitching cock steady and sucked the head until he was forced to push her away. Clamping a hand around the base of his shaft, he panted, "Enough, or you'll finish me."

"I don't mind." She reached for him again, but he grasped her wrists and sank to his knees, facing her.

Taking her face in his hands, he kissed her and then said, "As much as your offer tempts me, I want to feel your hot, wet pussy around me. I want to drive you over the edge of passion and look into your beautiful eyes when you shatter beneath me."

The lust on her face was nearly enough to make him burst in ecstasy. Her magnificent breasts rose and fell with each excited breath. Marc Claudius licked his lips at the sight of her long, dark nipples. He couldn't resist caressing them. His thumbs rolled over them and she moaned and arched against him.

Grasping her breasts, he gently kneaded and squeezed them.

"Please, Marc Claudius," she murmured, covering his hands with hers. He continued massaging her breasts. Then he lifted one and kissed it. He sucked her nipple into his mouth while guiding her onto her back.

She clutched his head and caressed his shoulders and back. The desire to thrust into her overcame him, yet he moved slowly and carefully. As always, her pleasure was foremost in his mind.

Gods, he loved the smoothness of her breasts as he covered them with kisses and he relished the feel of her stiff yet delicate nipple against his lips and tongue. While his mouth remained busy with her breasts, his hand caressed her rounded belly and slid lower to massage her soft mound. His fingers dipped into her drenched pussy, then he circled her clit, stirring her to the edge of passion.

He knew by the rasp of her breath and the way she squirmed with pleasure that she had nearly reached her peak.

Marc Claudius covered her body with his and entered her slowly, savoring every moment of her soft, wet pussy swallowing his shaft.

"Yes, oh yes, my love," she breathed, wrapping her arms and legs around him.

He pumped into her in a steady rhythm, neither too fast nor too slow. Kheb was already so close that it took just a few thrusts to hurl her over the edge. She throbbed around him, squeezing his stiff cock.

Marc Claudius had planned to make this an extended session, but he was too far gone. Her climax spurred on his and he came long and hard, surging into her throbbing body.

Collapsing beside her, he held her close to his heaving chest and touched his lips to the top of her head.

By the gods he'd never imagined loving anyone like he loved her.

## Chapter Five

Over the following weeks, Marc Claudius' skill and stubborn nature gradually won over some of the Kushite warriors, including Bast's son, Amun, who was a man of considerable rank. He was married to Neferet, one of Kheb's handmaidens. Kheb had often said that Neferet and Bast were the only servants she trusted completely.

After a grueling morning session with the guards, Marc Claudius walked to the river to bathe. He had just finished undressing when seven Kushite warriors approached with their weapons drawn.

Marc Claudius picked up his sword and faced the men. He wasn't sure if they had decided to attack him on their own, or if the Queen had sent them. No matter what their reason, they wouldn't get through this unscathed. Even if they succeeded in killing him, Marc Claudius vowed they would suffer for this act of cowardice.

They attacked simultaneously. Marc Claudius moved with the speed of a cobra, blocking blows from all angles, yet he was too greatly outnumbered. A blade cut his upper left arm. A spear pierced his back, and he grunted in pain. He struck down two men and injured the third before a bellow from Amun brought the fight to a halt.

"What are you doing?" Amun demanded, striding toward the group. He was taller than the other guards and glared at them with his fiery dark eyes.

Panting, the guards who were still standing looked at each other, but didn't speak.

"I asked a question," Amun growled.

One of the guards moistened his lips and said, "The Roman insulted us, so we had to defend our honor."

Curling his lip, Amun said, "You would have me believe that a naked man incited an argument with seven guards dressed for battle? I will listen to no more of this. Pick up your wounded companions and return to the barracks. I will decide on your punishment later."

The guards nodded and hurried to carry out Amun's orders.

Amun approached Marc Claudius and inspected his wounds.

"Thank you for the assistance," Marc Claudius said.

"One thing I cannot abide is cowardice. They cannot defeat you on the training field, so they attack you while you're bathing. Such behavior is unworthy of a warrior."

“No behavior is unworthy when it comes to an enemy and I have no doubt that most people here consider me an enemy.”

“That shouldn’t be,” Amun said, his hands applying pressure to the wound on Marc Claudius’ back. “You belong to the Princess.”

Marc Claudius was torn between liking the idea of belonging to Kheb and hating the idea of being considered the property of any woman.

“These wounds need care. Gather your clothes and come with me,” Amun said.

Marc Claudius pulled on his tunic and picked up his armor and sword. He followed Amun toward the chamber he shared with Neferet.

Amun was cleaning and dressing Marc Claudius’ wounds when Neferet, Bast and Kheb entered the chamber.

“What happened?” Kheb demanded, hurrying toward Marc Claudius.

There was no missing the concern in her eyes and seeing it made him feel good. Sometimes Kheb disguised her feelings, appearing almost as cold and hard as her mother. He liked knowing that he stirred her passions and touched her heart.

“It’s nothing that should concern you,” Marc Claudius replied.

Bast examined the wound on his back that Amun had yet to dress.

“He is healing very fast,” Amun stated.

“Yes. It’s part of the protection ritual,” Bast said. “It allows him to recover quickly so that he can protect Kheb more efficiently.”

Moments later, a male servant appeared and said that the Queen wanted to speak to Amun and Marc Claudius. They followed the servant to the Queen’s garden. Kheb and Bast went as well.

The Queen sat on a stool amidst the flowers while a female attendant braided her long, black hair. She glanced at her visitors and gestured for them to approach.

“I’ve heard you’re a worthy warrior,” the Queen said to Marc Claudius. “You have done well with my guards. Amun, I understand several of my men are awaiting punishment for what happened at the river today.”

Amun raised an eyebrow. “You know about that, my lady?”

“I arranged for the exercise to test this Roman. I wanted to know if he’s worthy of being my daughter’s protector. There is no need to punish the men further, Amun. Their failure to perform well against one man is punishment enough.”

“Mother, how could you do this?” Kheb said, rage gleaming in her eyes.

Marc Claudius’ heartbeat quickened and his cock swelled. She was so beautiful when she was angry.

Fierce. Passionate. He felt her pulse throbbing around him and it aroused him so much that he fought the urge to fuck her right here before Queen and all.

"You know the time has come for us to meet the Romans in battle," the Queen continued. "Otherwise they will take from us. We will not bow to them."

"I agree," Amun stated.

"Initiating a war with Rome is foolish," Marc Claudius warned.

"You swore to do everything in your power to protect Kheb," the Queen said. "It is time to stand by your words, Roman. We will ride into battle. All of us."

Marc Claudius curled his lip in disgust. "You would drag your daughter into battle just to manipulate me?"

"I'm not afraid," Kheb stated. "I would rather fight beside you than wait here."

"You fear for her?" the Queen asked.

"I don't want her placed in danger," Marc Claudius said, his gaze fixed on the Queen. If he could kill with a look, the woman would have died then and there.

"Then I give you this choice, Roman. You can either ride into battle with her beside you or you can accompany me alone and protect her before Rome overtakes our kingdom."

"I choose the latter."

"And if you betray me, you have no idea how much you will suffer." The Queen drew a deep breath, an almost pained look in her eyes. "And so will my daughter."

Kheb stared at the Queen, but didn't look surprised by her words.

"Daughter, I cannot allow my love for you to affect my judgment. The survival of our people depends upon our actions over the forthcoming months."

"I understand," Kheb said.

"Leave me now," said the Queen. She grasped the wrist of the servant who was still braiding her hair. "You as well. I want to be alone."

Everyone left the garden. Marc Claudius walked alongside Kheb. They made their way to her chamber and once inside, her stoic demeanor fell away and she practically growled with rage.

"There are times when I hate the life I was born into," she said, pacing the room, her fists clenched. "I don't want you to go to battle, but I must be loyal to my people. If you can help keep us safe..."

"I don't think your mother needs any help keeping her kingdom safe," Marc Claudius said, torn between bitterness toward and admiration for the Queen. "I loathe myself for what I'm about to do, but if I must choose between you and Rome, then I choose you."

"It's not fair to you," Kheb stated. "You're bound by a ritual that was performed without your knowledge. I swear, Marc Claudius, that when I agreed to allow Bast to perform it, I thought my guardian and my destined mate would be a Kushite."

He closed his eyes and sighed deeply. "You regret that I'm Roman."

"No." Her brow furrowed and she approached him. Taking his face in her hands, she said, "I wanted you from the moment I saw you, Marc Claudius. If not for the ritual, I doubt I would have the courage to admit how much I have come to love you. When you return, there will be no more secret meetings and no more separation. If we must leave Kush to be together, then I will follow you anywhere. Just do everything in your power to return to me safely."

Staring deeply into her eyes, Marc Claudius said, "I will return to you and I will hold you to this promise. You are mine, Kheb."

"Yes, Marc Claudius. And you are mine."

He covered her mouth in a bittersweet kiss of passion and sorrow.

\* \* \*

Over the following weeks, while Marc Claudius, her mother and brother raided Egypt, doing battle with the Romans, Kheb was in charge at home. She spent most of her time with her mother's advisors, seeing that the daily life of their people continued with as little change as possible.

Every now and then she received word from returning soldiers that their warriors were doing well against Rome. With her mother at the lead, Kheb didn't doubt it. She was the strongest woman Kheb had ever known. The Queen wasn't much for affection, but she was a wealth of knowledge and a master of discipline. Kheb had learned much from her. It was the strength forged since childhood that prevented Kheb from surrendering to the worry she felt and the fear that she might never see her beloved Roman soldier again.

Then one day, the troops returned.

The Queen had been wounded in battle, but the injury was not life threatening and she bore the scar with pride, for she had done what few could. She had defeated the Romans.

Kheb's main concern wasn't for her blood relatives, however, but for her destined mate.

Only when she saw Marc Claudius among the soldiers did she whisper a prayer of thanks to the goddess. He came to her, his tunic and armor filthy from travel and a haunted look in his dark eyes. At first they didn't speak, merely stared at each other. Then he took her in his arms and kissed her.

Kheb clung to him, not caring that they were among a crowd of soldiers, servants, priests and priestesses. Before he left she had made him a promise and she intended to keep it.

"Come with me to my chamber," she whispered. "Now."

"I have work to attend to first."

Kheb held his gaze, then nodded. She lifted a hand to his cheek. "You don't seem to be injured, but

some wounds aren't visible."

"I fought against my own kind. I stood by and watched as the statue of Caesar fell. I no longer have the right to call myself Roman, but worst of all part of me doesn't care. Hatred and violence have stolen lives on both sides. You and I will no longer be part of this, Kheb."

She drew a deep breath and released it slowly. "I agree, but my mother will not. We must leave soon and without word."

A faint, sad smile touched his lips. He brushed her mouth with another kiss, then turned and rejoined the warriors.

## Chapter Six

A few hours later, as dusk settled over the land, Kheb waited alone and naked in her chamber. She felt his pulse before she saw him, and her own matched its frantic rhythm.

Marc Claudius stepped in wearing only a tunic. His black hair clung wetly to his scalp, and as he took her in his arms, she caught his fresh scent. Apparently he had bathed in the river before coming to her. She had also washed in a bath prepared by her attendants, probably the last such comfort she would ever have. When they left Kush, they would travel hard and live as a simple man and woman, not a soldier and princess. Strangely, she didn't care.

"You don't know how much I missed you," he said, his voice husky as he nuzzled her neck. His hands caressed her back and cupped her buttocks.

"Yes, I do, because I missed you just as much."

"I love you, Kheb, more than I have ever loved anyone. More than I ever thought I could love."

"That's how I love you, Marc Claudius." She took his face in her hands and spoke against his lips. "Now, no more words. Just show me how much you love me. I need to feel it."

Marc Claudius' mouth descended on hers in a kiss that nearly stole her breath. His hands roamed over her back and buttocks, and she caressed his powerful shoulders, loving the play of muscles beneath his battle-scarred flesh.

Kheb had never imagined loving a man like this. She knew that Marc Claudius was truly part of her soul.

Trapped between their heated bodies, his cock swelled. She loved the feel of the thick, hard shaft covered in soft skin. Reaching between them, she grasped his cock and stroked it. It pulsed in her hand, and Marc Claudius groaned with pleasure.



Placing his hands on her shoulders, he guided her to the floor.

“On your back,” he commanded, his voice husky with desire.

Kheb stretched out on the tile, enjoying its coolness against her heated skin.

Settling between her legs, Marc Claudius moistened his lips, then slid his hands beneath her buttocks and covered her clit with his mouth.

His tongue rolled over her delicate flesh. He took his time exploring her and seemed to savor her texture and taste. Every now and then a groan of pleasure escaped him. Kheb couldn't keep from panting and moaning. It felt so wonderful when he devoured her like this. Her entire body burst into flames and below the waist she pulsed and ached from raw pleasure.

Shifting position slightly, he thrust his tongue into her pussy. The feeling of his tongue inside her made her squirm with need, yet he continued to hold her steady.

Kheb's breath came in frantic sobs, and she tossed her head from side to side. Her fingers tightened on his scalp and as much as she loved the way he teased her pussy, she wished his wickedly skilled tongue would return to her clit. She wanted release from this almost unbearable desire.

He must have sensed her needs and felt her heart pounding because she felt his. It throbbed almost as quickly as hers. The sound of it mingled with hers and echoed in her ears.

Growling with pleasure, he withdrew his tongue from her pussy and once again devoured her clit. His lips tugged on it, then he flicked his tongue over it.

“Oh, Marc Claudius! Goddess help me. This is too much to endure. This is...” Her voice drifted off and she panted hard, her body tense and beaded with sweat. His tongue flicked her stiff little nub with upward strokes that flung her into the most intense climax of her life.

He didn't stop lapping until she lay completely sated. While she recovered, he kissed her from head to toe.

Finally she opened her eyes and smiled, stretching her arms overhead. Marc Claudius kneaded her breasts, then tickled beneath them with the tip of his tongue. He sucked one of her nipples into his mouth and rolled his tongue over it, then nibbled it gently.

When he rolled her onto her stomach, she willingly followed his lead. He grasped her hips and tugged her onto her hands and knees. Kneeling behind her, he caressed her buttocks.

Kheb's heart pounded with anticipation. She could scarcely wait to feel him inside her. Already she wanted to climax again. She couldn't get enough of her beautiful Roman lover. No, more than a lover. He was part of her soul.

His hands grasped her hips and his cock entered her from behind, his motions slow and gentle though she knew he was as aroused as she was.

Bracing her forearms against the floor, Kheb thrust her bottom toward him, her hips matching his rhythm. His hand slid around to fondle her clit, stirring her desire even more.

Soon she teetered on the brink of ecstasy and she knew by his ragged breathing and jerkiness of his movements that he was close as well.

A few more thrusts and sweeps of his fingers over her clit and she burst in pleasure. Groaning, Marc Claudius clasped her hips with both hands and pumped fast and hard. He cried out when he came, a sound of raw male delight that excited her so much that she came again.

They rested on the tile, their bodies entwined.

"I love you, Kheb," he said close to her ear.

She pressed her lips to his hot, damp neck and said, "I love you as well, Marc Claudius. Always."

\* \* \*

Kheb shouldn't have been surprised that Bast knew she and Marc Claudius planned to flee from the kingdom. What shocked her most of all was that Bast, Amun and Neferet decided to join them.

They left very early one morning, before most people awoke, and they traveled hard for days.

Once she realized they'd gone, the Queen might send warriors after them or she might not.

It wasn't Kushite warriors who found them, but a large group of thieves. All five fought hard, especially Marc Claudius and Amun. Kheb also wielded a blade with great skill, though Marc Claudius protected her so fiercely that the thieves scarcely reached her.

One flung a dagger and it struck Marc Claudius in his chest.

"No!" Kheb shouted as he staggered almost to his knees. As she went to assist him, agonizing pain tore through her. She tried to breathe, but her lungs no longer seemed to work.

One of the thieves had thrust a blade through her back. Her hot blood soaked her robe and she collapsed.

Marc Claudius bellowed like a wounded animal. The dagger still protruding from his chest, he lunged at her attacker and thrust his sword through his heart. Then he turned and took Kheb in his arms.

Unable to speak, she stared at him. The physical pain of her wound and the emotional agony of knowing they would never share the life they had planned overcame her. She tried to tell him with her eyes how much she would always love him.

"Please. No," he whispered, tears streaking his face as he gathered her closer. The blood from their wounds mingled and she felt his pulse surrounding her. It was faint and erratic and she knew he too was on the verge of death. Perhaps they would be together after all.

"Oh sweet Goddess," Bast said.

Amun had driven off the remaining thieves and he and the two women approached the injured couple.

The last thing Kheb saw was the eyes of her beloved Marc Claudius.

\* \* \*

Marc Claudius felt his life fading and he welcomed death. Without Kheb, there was nothing left for him. Knowing he had failed as her protector destroyed him. Nothing mattered anymore. Not Rome or Kush. Nothing.

Her pulse ceased and he felt unbearably empty. Holding her even closer, he touched his lips to hers and breathed his last breath against her mouth.

\* \* \*

Marc Claudius awoke to the coolness of the desert at night. He caught the scent of smoke and saw a fire burning nearby. Amun and Bast sat near it.

"He's awake," said a soft female voice and he turned to see Neferet seated beside him. She placed a hand on his shoulder. "How do you feel?"

"Where is Kheb?" he said, pushing himself to a sitting position. Though his clothes were stained with dried blood, the wound on his chest had healed. Since the rituals, he had healed very quickly, but he couldn't have possibly recovered from that dagger wound. It had killed him.

Or at least he thought it had killed him.

"She's gone," Bast said, approaching him. She looked almost as sad as he felt.

"Why am I alive?" he demanded, his gut twisted with grief.

"The protection ritual," Bast said softly. "I didn't tell you before because I wasn't sure how you would react. You cannot die."

"What?" Marc Claudius said, his breathing ragged. This couldn't be happening. His fists clenched and he spoke through gritted teeth. "What have you done to me, old woman?"

"Because of the ritual, you cannot die except by your own sword."

His heart pounding, Marc Claudius searched frantically for his weapon, but it was nowhere to be found. "Where is it?"

"We've taken it for safekeeping," Amun stated.

Marc Claudius would not lower himself to beating an old woman in his anger, but Amun was another story. He stood and so did the young warrior.

"You give me that sword, Amun, or I will kill you."

"No!" Neferet forced her way between the men. "It's not his fault!"

"If the only way I can rejoin Kheb is to fall on my own sword, then I will do it!"

"That's not the only way," Bast said quietly.

He turned and glared at her. "No more riddles and no more secrets! For once speak plainly."

"You are bound by the mate mark ritual. One day Kheb will be reborn in this world and you will seek each other out. You can have her again, Marc Claudius, this time in a world where you won't have to run away and hide your love. Don't you want that?"

His throat constricted. So many emotions battled inside him. Anger. Grief. A longing so painful that it was almost unendurable.

"Yes, I want it," he said in a strained whisper.

"Then let us help you," Bast said. "I can place you in a sleep as deep as the dead. We will wrap you as one of the dead and you will rest. Dream of Kheb during your long sleep. When she returns to this world, you will know it."

He would know it.

Closing his eyes, he tried to feel her pulse, but it was gone.

"You're saying I'll feel her again?" he asked.

"When the time is right, you will meet again and this mistake will be corrected. I have foreseen it."

"Then do it," he said. "But I want to be entombed with my sword, for in this future that you see, if we are again parted by death, I will join her."

Bast nodded. "As you wish. Prepare yourself, Marc Claudius. I will say my goodbyes now, for when you gaze upon this world again, I will no longer be in it."

## Chapter Seven

England, 1979

Marc Claudius felt a throbbing heartbeat. It wasn't his own, though he did feel his pulse quickening as he awoke from a sleep that seemed to have lasted for centuries.

He became aware of the pressure of the strips of cloth that bound him from head to toe. Groaning, he tried to force his deadweight limbs to move, but only managed a slight twitch of his right hand.

Hours seemed to pass before he heard voices.

A man and a woman.

All the while the pulse continued to beat, growing stronger. It was a familiar heartbeat, one that made him ache with longing.

He moaned and this time when he focused on moving, a spasm shook his entire body.

"He's awake," said the woman.

"We have to unwrap him," said the man. "Quickly."

*Yes, quickly. I feel like I'm suffocating.*

Hands lifted his head and someone began unwinding the bandages.

The pressure left the top of his face, baring his eyes. Cool air touched him and he forced his heavy eyelids to open. It took a moment for his gaze to focus on his attendants. The woman he didn't recognize, but the man he would know anywhere.

When he'd finished freeing his face, the man gently lowered his head back to the table upon which he rested. He was in a dimly lit stone room. It was cool and now that his blood had started circulating faster, he realized he was quite cold.

"Amun," he said, his voice raspy after so many years of silence.

The man's brow furrowed. "My name is Hanif. This is my wife, Layla. I am a descendant of Bast. It has been the duty of my family line to watch over you until Princess Kheb was reborn."

"Kheb," Marc Claudius whispered. The very thought of his beloved brought tears to his eyes. After such a long separation, they would finally meet again. "How long has it been?"

"About two thousand years."

Marc Claudius closed his eyes tightly. His head spun and his body throbbed with Kheb's heartbeat.

*Two thousand years!*

"I must go to her," he said.

"Yes. We will help you," said Layla. "But you must regain your strength first and you have much to learn about the modern world."

She was right. Most likely the world had changed in ways he could scarcely comprehend, but he didn't care. He would learn all he had to. He would do whatever was necessary. All he asked was that he and his beloved have a second chance for a full life together.

## Chapter Eight

The suburbs of Boston, 2009

Amina hated being late for class, especially on the first night, but tonight it couldn't be avoided. Her car had broken down halfway to the local high school where she was teaching an adult education history course. The tow truck driver dropped her off at the school before taking her car to her cousin's auto repair shop.

She hadn't yet thought about how she'd get home after class, but now her main concern was getting started. Glancing at her watch, she noticed she still had about five minutes before her class was scheduled to start. It was a good thing she had left her house so early. She'd wanted to settle in and relax before the students arrived. Now she'd have to dive right in with scarcely a chance to collect her thoughts.

Adjusting her pile of books more comfortably in her arms, she hurried up two flights of stairs and pushed open the door to her classroom with a little more force than she'd intended.

Most of the students had already arrived, and they glanced in her direction.

She smiled and exchanged greetings with them while placing her books on the desk and dropping her favorite canvas bag on the floor. It wasn't an attractive accessory but roomy and durable. She was the kind of person who liked to be prepared for anything, so when she went to work she carried everything except the kitchen sink in that bag.

"Just give me a few minutes and we'll get started," she told her class. "I had a little car trouble..."

Her voice faded as the strangest sensation overtook her, as if she were standing inside a giant, beating heart. The throbbing grew stronger and her own heartbeat seemed to match its rhythm.

The door opened, and the most stunning man Amina had ever seen stepped into the classroom. He was tall and lean with broad shoulders and incredibly long legs. Exuding laid-back elegance, he wore a white shirt, unbuttoned at the throat, and black trousers. His matching black jacket was slung casually over his shoulder.

His face was classically handsome, except for his longish nose, but that particular feature only added to his masculine charm.

Lord, she'd never met a man this fine. Dreamed about them, yes, but never seen one in the flesh. He looked like he'd just stepped out of a photo shoot for a men's fashion magazine.

He carried himself with an uncommon air of dignity that she found incredibly sexy.

His intense, dark eyes fixed on her and Amina almost stopped breathing. What was it about this guy that made her react like this?

Strangest of all was the feeling that she'd seen him before.

Clearing her throat, she said, "All right, let's begin."

Her newest arrival took an empty seat toward the back of the room. He sat, one long leg stretched out so that his pant leg tightened around his chiseled thigh.

Amina's pulse quickened and she thanked heaven she'd worn a bra with a lining, otherwise her stiff nipples might just poke right through her tan silk blouse.

She began with roll call, eager to connect a name to her most compelling student. It didn't take long since his last name was toward the beginning of the alphabet.

"Marc Claudian," she said.

"Here."

Lord, even the sound of his soft yet husky voice speaking that one word sent a lustful shiver down her spine.

"Well, you have the perfect name for a class in Roman history." She smiled, then finished with the roll call.

Amina began with an open discussion about what the students hoped to achieve from the class, then she presented the syllabus and dove into her lecture.

Amina had always been a natural teacher. She felt a strong connection to ancient history and enjoyed sharing knowledge. Usually she was in total control when she stood in front of a class, but tonight she wasn't at her best. Oh, she looked confident, but inside she felt strangely vulnerable, especially with Marc Claudian's black eyes following her every move like she was an exotic dancer instead of a history teacher. His gaze lingered on her mouth when she spoke and drifted to her breasts when she fell silent to listen to students' questions. Yet he didn't look like a drooling lecher, more like an art connoisseur admiring an irresistible painting.

Not that *she* considered herself irresistible. Attractive, sure, but certainly not hot enough for a man to look at her like this. Obviously Mr. Claudian thought she was pretty hot, though, and she wasn't sure if she liked it or not. He was certainly a distraction.

When the discussion turned toward the Kushite Queen who had stood against Rome during their conquest of Egypt, she realized Mr. Claudian was becoming a problem in more ways than one.

He had been quiet throughout most of the class and to her annoyance took few notes. She had started to wonder if he had any interest at all in ancient history. Then someone asked a question about the Kushite Queen and he had launched into an impossible account of her personal behavior that turned everyone's attention from Amina to him.

"When it came to the survival of her people, no sacrifice was too great for the Queen, or Kandake, as Kushite queens were called at the time. She was an arrogant woman." Though his words irritated her, she couldn't help loving the sound of his voice. It was calm and soft but also a bit rough, and he had the sexiest English accent.

"Why? Because she ruled men?" Amina interjected, pushing aside her lustful feelings. It wasn't all that

difficult when his attitude annoyed her so much. Even in this modern age, men couldn't stand to acknowledge a woman of power.

Their gazes locked, and a faint smile touched his lips. "No, because of her attitude."

"Why is it, Mr. Claudian, that male leaders are considered dominant and admirable, but females with power are still considered ball busters by men like you?"

He chuckled. "Men like me? You're misunderstanding me, and I never said the Queen wasn't admirable. On the contrary, she was an impressive woman in most ways. She was a great warrior, a bold tactician and an astute leader. When her soldiers fought for her, they knew she would back them at any cost."

The students stared at him and several scribbled notes.

Amina folded her arms beneath her breasts and said, "You almost speak as if you know her. It's impossible for anyone to know what she was like personally. These aren't facts you're spouting, Mr. Claudian, but speculation based on your personal beliefs about women in positions of power. Now if you don't mind, I would like to continue *my* class."

"I apologize." He bowed his head slightly. "I shouldn't have interrupted."

"No. I value my students' input, but I think your topic of conversation is better suited for a discussion regarding opinions rather than historical facts."

The class continued and Marc Claudian kept his silence, though by the expression on his face she had the feeling he had more to say. The man aroused and irritated her and he also caught her intellectual interest. Yes, his stories had been more fantasy than history, but they were appealing in their own way. It was rare to find someone this into history. She wouldn't mind talking to him more outside of class. Maybe over dinner or in bed --

Damn! Where had that thought come from? Amina didn't sleep around. She could count on one hand how many lovers she'd had in her lifetime. There had been her professor in college. His idea of romance was reading the Viking sagas while she gave him a hand job. Exciting. Not!

After that she'd tried someone less intellectual. Another student who was hoping to become an Olympic swimmer. He had a great body. Tall, lean and supple. Unfortunately his brains must have leaked out his ear from so much swimming because talking to a stone wall was more stimulating.

Amina had dated a few others, but no one who made her think remotely of a long-term relationship and no man had made her tingle all over like Marc Claudian.

When class ended, the students filed out of the room while Amina sat and shuffled through her notebook. A shadow fell over her desk. Her heartbeat quickened and when she glanced up she wasn't surprised to see Marc Claudian standing over her.

"Can I help you with something?" she asked coolly though inside she was burning hot just from looking into his gorgeous eyes. They were so dark they looked black and they reminded her of something sexy and wild, like a hawk or eagle.

"I wanted to apologize if I offended you tonight. When it comes to some periods in history, I get a bit



carried away.”

She smiled. “I can understand that. Just next time ask before taking over my class, okay?” She hoped he’d catch the teasing note in her voice.

He did and offered her a charming smile. “It’s dark out there. Would you like me to walk you to your car?”

Damn. She’d forgotten that she had no ride.

“No, thanks. My car died on the way over.”

“Can I give you a ride, then?”

Amina paused, her gaze sweeping over him. There was no way in hell she should get into a car with a strange man, not even one who turned her on this much. For all she knew, Marc Claudian could be an ax murderer, yet her intuition told her she could trust him.

Actually, standing here with him, she felt that strange pulsing sensation again. That giant heart beat a little faster with each passing moment.

Mr. Claudian drew a deep breath, his broad chest expanding beneath his white shirt. Part of the gorgeous breadth of skin was visible due to the open top buttons, and she saw a faint dusting of black hair. He had an absolutely gorgeous neck, too. It looked strong, but not overly thick. She wanted to kiss it and roll her tongue over the slight curve of his Adam’s apple.

Her nipples tingled, and she tried not to squirm in her chair.

“You’re hesitant because you don’t know me,” he said. “I understand. Do you have a cell phone? If you don’t, you can use mine to call a cab.”

“No. I have one. Thanks. And thanks for the offer of a ride. You’re sure it won’t take you out of your way?”

His eyes widened a bit, and a smile curved his lips. He had a really nice mouth. The lips were chiseled and the top one formed the cutest bow. She wondered if they’d feel as soft and firm as they looked.

“Not at all. I just moved to town, actually,” he said.

“I only live about ten minutes away,” she told him, gathering up her books. “Down by the lake.”

She reached for her oversized canvas bag, but he picked it up then offered to carry her books as well.

“That’s okay.” She grinned, holding the books. “You have to let me carry something or else I’ll feel like some kind of princess.”

“You should be treated like one,” he said and Amina thought she’d died and gone to heaven. Where had he been all her life?

Then a thought struck her. This guy had to be married. She would just keep it cool. Take the ride home, hope that her gut instincts had been right and he was safe, then forget about him, except for class of

course.

They left the classroom and walked down the stairs. She was a tall woman, but he was a few inches taller. Despite his slimness, he exuded strength. His shoulders were so broad and that chest... All she could think about was rubbing her cheek against it, feeling his warm skin and finding out whether or not that fine dusting of chest hair tickled.

When they reached the entrance to the school, he opened the door and held it for her. Damn. This guy had class. The kind that most people didn't admire anymore, but Amina did. Her parents had brought her up with manners, and she detested rudeness.

Few cars were left in the parking lot, and she knew instantly which one belonged to Marc. It wasn't the jeep with the peace signs stuck all over the rear window, nor was it the 1960s horror classic painted florescent pink.

He guided her straight to the elegant black sports model that probably cost as much as her salary for the last two years. After opening the door for her, he slid into the driver's seat.

Amina glanced at him. She tingled all over like a kid with a crush. Until now she had never met a man sexy enough to make her hands shake.

By the way he kept glancing at her from the corner of his eye, he thought she was pretty hot too. Or did he? He was probably one of those sleazebags who ogled everything with breasts. And she reminded herself that he had to be married.

"Do you mind if I ask what you do for a living?" she ventured.

"I'm an antiques dealer."

"Successful apparently," she said, glancing around the inside of the sleek car.

"Quite," he admitted.

"You must have an extensive background in historical studies," she said.

"Yes. I specialize in ancient Rome, Greece and Egypt. My two partners have other areas of expertise, so we've done well."

Amina wrinkled her nose. "Why are you taking a night school class in ancient history? You could probably teach it yourself."

"I thought it would be a good way to meet people in town who share my interests."

"I see, but I still think your views are a bit speculative."

Another smile curved his lips. "Maybe we could talk about it more sometime. Over dinner, perhaps?"

"Are you married?" she asked bluntly.

He knitted his groomed black eyebrows. "Of course not. Are you?"

“No, I’m not married.”

“How about dinner?”

She cast him a flirtatious look. “I’ll let you know.”

“Ah.”

A short time later, she directed him into the driveway of her small yet cozy Cape.

She picked up her books and bag and turned to Marc, who was staring at her with his gleaming black eyes.

“Thank you for the ride, Mr. Claudian.”

“Please call me Marc.”

“I’ll see you in class on Thursday night,” she said, then added, “Marc.”

Just speaking his name made her heartbeat quicken. She was glad the night class was twice a week. She didn’t want to wait a whole seven days to see him again.

“Goodnight... Ms. Banyon.”

“You can call me Amina.” She stepped out of the car. Before she closed the door, she said, “Goodnight.”

He smiled and nodded. She noticed that he waited until she entered the house before driving away.

Inside, she dumped her books and canvas bag on the kitchen table, then searched the refrigerator for a snack. Though her stomach rumbled, she wasn’t concentrating all that much on food. Usually she was ravenous after night class, but tonight her main focus was on her sexy new student.

After eating, she tried to get her mind off of him by correcting some quizzes, but she was so aroused by visions of Marc that she could scarcely concentrate.

Oh yes, she’d have trouble sleeping tonight. Maybe a nice, warm shower would relax her.

In the bathroom, she undressed, put on her shower cap and turned on the water. Standing beneath the warm flow, she closed her eyes and let it soothe her.

Then she imagined Marc in the shower with her. He was tall and broad shouldered, and she guessed he was quite lean and hard. His golden skin told her that he was a guy who enjoyed the outdoors.

Drawing a deep breath, she took a cake of soap and ran it over her breasts then she let it slip from her fingers. Glancing down at her breasts, she looked at the strange yet attractive birthmark that stood out against her right nipple. It was small, but oddly shaped, like a soldier’s sword from ancient Rome. She’d always liked that birthmark, and when she was younger, she’d felt it was a sign that she should study history.

History wasn’t on her mind at the moment, though.

She cupped and caressed her breasts, imagining Marc's hands upon her. His large, long-fingered hands were so beautiful yet masculine.

Sweeping her thumbs over her nipples, she arched her head back slightly. She pictured those long, tanned hands sliding down her belly.

Turning to face the wall, she dipped a hand between her legs and rubbed. As she stroked her clit, her breasts thrust forward and her nipples scraped against the tile. A shiver of pleasure darted through her at the sensation.

Now, in her mind, Marc was worrying one of her nipples between his teeth. His tongue rolled over it while his fingers continued working between her legs, rubbing up and down her clit then caressing it in a circular motion that made her heart pound and her entire body tingle.

"Marc," she breathed, just for the sheer pleasure of speaking his name. "Marc Claudian."

Her fingers rubbed faster, and as her body jerked, her nipples scraped against the wet tile. The friction against them aroused her almost as much as her stroking hand.

Marc Claudian stood behind her and cupped her breasts. His fingers teased her tight, sensitive nipples while his cock filled her from behind.

Over and over he thrust.

Over and over her fingers rubbed her clit.

*Amina*, she heard his husky voice whisper in her ear.

"Marc," she murmured, her fingers rubbing faster and hurling her into an orgasm that made her legs tremble and her heart pound.

She relaxed against the wall, letting the water wash over her.

That was fun and a pleasant release, but she wished Marc were really here. She wanted to make love with him and fall asleep in his arms.

Amina couldn't believe she felt this way about a man she had just met. It was crazy and it would make it even harder to look at him in class.

She opened her eyes. How the hell could she stand there and teach when she'd just been fantasizing about one of her students?

Of course he wasn't an average student. If most students were like him, she'd never get any work done. It was worse because he also seemed to be attracted to her.

She'd just have to remain cool and collected. Amina had always been good at that. She was a mature, dignified woman and no one, not even suave Mr. Claudian, would ever change that.

## Chapter Nine

When Marc drove away from Kheb's -- Amina's -- house, his heart was still pounding and his breath short with excitement.

Amina. He had to remember that was her name now.

Even though he'd had thirty years to get used to her new identity, it was difficult not to call her Kheb when he looked into her familiar brown eyes.

He'd been patient, waiting for her to reach the point in her life when he believed she would accept him. From a distance he'd watched her grow up and a few times in her life had done his duty as her protector when she'd been in mortal danger.

The first time had been when she was five years old and was nearly struck by a car. He'd been watching over her and managed to sweep her out of harm's way. Then he'd disappeared so that no one would question him. The second time she'd been on vacation in the Bahamas and nearly drowned, but he'd pulled her out of the ocean and again melted into the crowd on the beach before anyone could approach him.

He'd wanted to keep his identity secret from her. When they truly met for the first time, he wanted it to be as a man and a woman.

Though he had already waited over two thousand years for her, a few more decades should have meant little. Yet this time, knowing she was in the world, was far more difficult than when she was among the spirits. Even when she reached womanhood, he waited, giving her time to live and grow. When they were reunited, he wanted to enrich her life, not smother it. Before that happened, she must have the chance to live.

The hardest part of waiting was watching her in the arms of other men. Those men were unworthy of her, and they had no idea about her past.

Hanif and Layla had been a great help during those times. Long ago, Bast had taught her son and daughter-in-law all her magical secrets, especially regarding Marc Claudius. This information had been passed down to descendants through the ages. Hanif and Layla, like the others before them, had been preparing for the moment when the protector would awaken, signaling the return of the Princess.

Bast had meddled with nature itself and tormented two souls with her rituals. Her descendants had agreed it was the duty of their family to see the damage undone.

They had provided Marc Claudius -- now Marc Claudian -- with a legal identity and taught him everything he needed to know about the modern world as well as Bast's ancient magic. They instructed him in English so that he and Amina could communicate and all three moved from England to America so that he could watch over her during his training.

Marc studied hard and immersed himself in work to keep from going mad while waiting for his love to become a woman. He worked as a laborer while attaining college degrees in business and history so that he could join Hanif and Layla in the world of antiques. The husband and wife were successful dealers, but once Marc got a feel for the job, he excelled and the three flourished more than ever.

While Amina grew up and followed her dream of becoming a teacher, Marc's life was an endless cycle of study, legwork, auctions and appraisals. The only items he and his partners refused to sell were passed down from the time of Kheb and Bast. These were their most prized possessions. In particular Marc treasured a necklace belonging to the Princess and, of course, his sword.

That sword had been his companion in battle and saved his life many times. Now, if and when the moment came, it would be his only chance for death. This time Kheb would not leave this life without him, but he hoped they would share many years before that time came.

Hanif and Layla had given him Kheb's necklace when he first awoke, but he didn't consider it his. He had been holding it for Amina and could scarcely wait for the day when he presented it to her.

It would take time, though. Just as Kheb had not surrendered to him immediately two thousand years ago, Amina probably would not either. When she did, he would have to make the first move. He didn't mind, but relished the thought of seducing her.

When he'd walked into the classroom and she had looked at him and spoken to him for the first time in over two thousand years, his emotions had threatened to overtake him. His throat had constricted and his heart pounded. He'd even found himself trembling.

He was a two-thousand-year-old Roman soldier. Nothing should affect him like that, but when it came to Kheb, he had never been able to deny his love for her.

In that classroom, he'd had to struggle not to take her in his arms and kiss her full, luscious lips. He'd wanted to whisper sweet words in her ear and feel her soft, warm curves pressed against him.

Marc drew a deep breath and released it slowly, trying to calm his pounding heart and tame the raging erection that bulged uncomfortably beneath his trousers.

Patience.

He needed patience.

When he arrived at his house, he went to the third floor room he used to keep the few relics from his days as a soldier, including his sword. He also used the room to practice the magical rituals Hanif and Layla had taught him. From a velvet box that rested on a small marble table in the corner of the room, he picked up a carnelian pendant suspended from a gold chain. The pendant had once belonged to Bast and had been passed down through the ages. Hanif and Layla had taught Marc how to use it for magical practice. With it he could usually watch Amina from a distance and sometimes foresee danger in her life. That was how he had sensed her childhood accidents, and because of the pendant he'd been able to protect her.

Holding it in his palm, he gazed at it and murmured a few words in ancient Egyptian. He waited. The stone didn't always cooperate.

Then in the murky reddish depths, he saw Amina. She stood naked in a shower. Water poured down

her lovely face, over her broad cheekbones and full lips. It glistened on her breasts and rounded belly and it gleamed in the patch of dark hair between her long legs. What he wouldn't give to run his hands over her thighs and taste her plump, enticing clit.

His cock twitched and ached, and he shifted his stance.

It was wrong to watch her like this. In the past he had only used the pendant for the sake of her safety. He had *never* spied on her in such a private moment.

This was wrong.

She picked up a cake of soap and ran it over her breasts and between her legs.

Shaking his head, he closed his fist around the pendant and returned it to its box.

Their souls were linked, but she hadn't accepted him yet.

At least she had shown an interest in him. That had been obvious. He was also certain that she had felt the pull of the mate mark ritual. Each time he got near her, the feel of her heartbeat grew stronger, surrounding him. By the look in her eyes, she had also felt his pulse.

He wouldn't sleep tonight. Not knowing that tomorrow he'd see her again. Still, he had to be up early in the morning to appraise some items for a client. He decided to have a workout. Maybe a long, hard practice session with his sword would tire him enough to sleep, though he doubted it. Only one thing would soothe him, but he would have to wait to feel Amina's hot, drenched pussy around his cock again.

\* \* \*

Amina usually dressed in casual yet professional clothes when she taught classes. She always looked tidy and attractive, but tonight she took special care with her appearance. Instead of her usual pants, she wore a black suit with a skirt that fell just above her knees. Instead of tying back her long hair, she let it flow. She wore gold stud earrings and an ultra-fine gold chain.

Her cousin had fixed her car and dropped it off at the college a few towns over where she taught during the day. At least she was able to arrive early that night for the adult education class. She wanted some time alone first to collect herself, especially before seeing Marc again.

Last night she'd been so preoccupied with him that she had scarcely been able to sleep. By now she should have been exhausted, but she was too excited. Just thinking about the man made her tingle all over. The clichéd butterflies fluttered in her belly and a sexual thrill shot through her whenever she remembered the look in his eyes.

Several students started to drift in, and though she looked calm, her heart pounded with anticipation each time the door opened.

A few moments before the class was due to begin, she felt that strange, pulsing sensation again. It grew louder and stronger. This time instead of closing her eyes, she stared at the door, her heart keeping time with the pulsations. It thundered in her ears at the moment the door opened and Marc stepped inside. No sooner had their gazes locked than the throbbing softened, almost fading, though when she concentrated she still sensed it.

Her brow furrowed. What was happening to her?

“Good evening,” he said, a smile playing around his lips.

“Hello.” She nodded and returned the smile.

Their conversation was simple, cool and collected. Why, then, had her temperature shot up so that she almost felt the need to take off her jacket?

Marc took his seat as the rest of the students entered, and Amina began teaching.

When class ended, Amina spoke with a few students who had questions, then gathered her books and notes. Marc approached, and she told herself that there was nothing between them. He was a student and off-limits.

“Is your car fixed, or would you like a ride home?” he asked.

“It’s been repaired, but thanks.” She grasped her bag and headed briskly for the door.

“Wait. Your books.” He took her books off her desk and approached. “How about dinner tomorrow night, if you’re not teaching?”

She paused, one hand on the doorknob. Her heart skipped a beat.

*Remain calm, Amina. Be firm, but not rude.*

She met his gaze. It was hard to think straight when he looked at her like that. “I’m sorry, Marc, but I don’t socialize with students.”

He stepped toward her, and she tilted her gaze to meet his. Damn, he was so tall, lean and sleek. She caught the scent of his cologne, and she resisted the urge to close her eyes and savor it, except that would mean she wouldn’t be able to see his compelling face. She wanted to trail her fingertips over those sharp cheekbones and touch her lips to his adorable mouth.

“How about if I quit the class?” he asked. “Then I wouldn’t be a student anymore.”

Was he serious? Did he want to go out with her that much, and if so, why? Was it because he was as attracted to her as she was to him, or was it because he was the kind of asshole who wouldn’t take no for an answer?

When she didn’t reply right away, he shook his head. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable. How about I don’t quit the class and we don’t go out tomorrow.”

“I didn’t mean --”

He touched a finger to her lips and continued, “But I’ll ask again in the future, unless you don’t want anything to do with me.”

She grasped his wrist and guided his hand away from her face, yet for some reason she didn’t want to let him go. Touching him sent a jolt of desire through her. His wrist was sinewy and strong. The flesh was warm and slightly dusted with hair. Impulsively she stroked the back of his wrist with her fingertips.



Marc tilted his head slightly to the side. His lips curved upward and an inviting look gleamed in his black eyes. It was so damn hard to resist him.

If she refused to see him tomorrow, that would mean she'd have to wait five whole days before seeing him again.

"I have essays to grade tomorrow night," she said, hoping to sound nonchalant.

"When are you free?"

"Saturday."

His eyes narrowed and another sexy smile flirted with his lips. "Six o'clock?"

Amina's pulse quickened. "All right."

"Then I'll pick you up at six on Saturday evening." Still holding her books in one arm, he held the door for her.

They walked to the parking lot. He'd parked a few spaces away from her economy car. She couldn't help glancing with longing at his sleek black vehicle. She'd much rather be riding beside him again, and it had little to do with the cool car. Something told her she'd be happy riding next to Marc in a jalopy.

"See you on Saturday," he said, handing her the books. She tossed them into the backseat along with her old canvas bag.

"Goodnight, Marc."

"Goodnight." He bent and kissed her cheek.

Amina drew a sharp breath, her nipples tightening and belly clenching with desire. How would she react if he kissed her mouth? Again she felt her body heat rise and knew it was time to go. After all, she didn't want him to get the idea that she lusted after him, even if it was true. It was much better to keep him guessing, at least until she got to know him.

She ducked into her car and drove off. When she looked into the rearview mirror, he was still gazing after her.

## Chapter Ten

Amina found it difficult to think about anything except her date with Marc on Saturday. She could scarcely concentrate in class and getting through the student essays on Friday night was like a mild form

of torture. Usually she enjoyed reading most students' perspectives, but lately only one student had fully caught her interest.

It wasn't like her to be obsessed with men, but she'd never met anyone quite like Marc. Though it sounded clichéd, she felt as if she had met him somewhere before. There was something familiar in his eyes and in the way he spoke to her. When he'd touched her and kissed her cheek it had felt *soright*.

On Saturday morning, she met her friend, Jewel, for coffee at the bakery in the town square. Seated at an outside table, the women enjoyed the sunshine, though Amina's thoughts again fixed on Marc.

"Okay, what's up?" Jewel asked.

"Why?"

"I know that look. You've got something on your mind."

"More like someone."

Jewel pushed her metal-rimmed glasses up higher on her nose and grinned. "Now this sounds interesting. Who is it?"

Amina hesitated a moment. It wasn't that she didn't want to tell Jewel about Marc. She and Jewel had been close since college and told each other just about everything. Even after Amina started teaching and Jewel entered law practice, the women had remained close despite their busy schedules.

"Well?" Jewel asked. "Don't you want to talk about it?"

Shrugging, Amina replied, "I'm not really sure if there's anything to talk about."

"Oh no." Jewel placed her coffee on the table and leaned closer to Amina. "Now *I know* there's something to talk about. Who is he?"

"A student from my night class."

Jewel's eyes widened. "Oh wow. You and a student? He must be something special for you to break your no socializing rule -- and a rather good rule if I might add."

"You're making me feel worse about refusing him."

"How old is he? Tell me he's not some eighteen-year-old kid."

Amina wrinkled her nose. "Please. Younger men are fine if that's your thing, but I like a date with at least some life experience and chest hair. I'm guessing Marc is in his early thirties."

"Marc who?"

"Claudian."

"Is he the guy associated with MHL Antiques?"

"He's a dealer, but I don't know anything about MHL."

“My firm had dealings with them when they opened their gallery here a few months ago. It’s got to be the same guy. How many people around here are named Marc Claudian? Anyway, if it’s him then I’ve changed my mind. Don’t let him get away. He’s rich and from what I hear pretty good-looking.”

“More like gorgeous,” Amina murmured.

“Then what’s the problem? Is he weird?”

“Very, but in a good way I think.”

Jewel curled her lip. “What’s a good way of being weird?”

“Whenever he’s around I feel a little out of control, like I want to dive into his pants or something.”

“And that’s a bad thing?”

“Jewel, I’m serious.”

“So am I. Amina, you’ve spent most of your life in control, especially these past few years. Sometimes you just have to let go and remember how to have fun. I was just like you until I met Rick.”

“Yeah, and now you’re an old married woman,” Amina teased.

“No, I’m a happily married woman. It’s no fun sleeping alone every night. I remember.”

Lifting her chin, Amina said, “I have no problem sleeping alone every night.”

“How would you feel about Marc in your bed?”

Amina’s pulse quickened, and a smile played around her lips.

“Just what I thought,” Jewel stated and took a sip of coffee.

“He’s a student, Jewel. I shouldn’t be breaking my own rules.”

“Well, he’s not an average student, and what’s the worst that can happen?”

“I get fired for fraternization.”

“Come on! It’s a non-credit night course you’re teaching on the side.”

Jewel was right. Maybe Amina was using her job as an excuse to avoid a man who set her blood on fire. She’d never reacted like this to anyone and in a way it frightened her. Marc made her feel soft and feminine. She wanted to fall into his arms and snuggle against his gorgeous chest. Even now she had a mental picture of it, or at least the chiseled, tanned portion she could see in the open-neck shirts he liked to wear.

Jewel glanced at her watch. “I have to go. I have to catch up on some paperwork. Keep in touch.”

Amina nodded and watched her friend hurry toward her car.

*MHL Antiques.*

Amina had some time to kill. It wouldn't hurt to take a look at the place.

Less than an hour later, Amina stepped into the MHL Antiques gallery. She wandered to an exhibit from the Nile Valley and was immediately drawn to a turquoise collar necklace. A strange feeling came over her as she stared at it, but for some reason she couldn't look away.

That pulsing sensation overtook her again and she tingled all over. What was going on with her lately? She wondered if she should see a doctor. But what could she say? Every now and then she sensed a mysterious heartbeat?

"Hello, Amina."

She jumped at the sound of Marc's voice behind her. Turning to him, she touched a hand to her breast. "You surprised me."

Worst of all, she realized that whenever she sensed the heartbeat, Marc appeared. Did it have something to do with him?

"I'm sorry," he said, tilting his head in that endearing way she was becoming accustomed to. "Are you all right?"

"Yes. I was mesmerized by this necklace. It's beautiful."

"Not half as beautiful as the woman it belonged to."

She raised an eyebrow. "Oh really?"

"It belonged to a woman named Kheb, daughter of the Kandake we discussed during your first class."

Amina's brow furrowed. "There's no mention of her in history, as far as I know."

"The Queen tried to erase her existence after Kheb fled with her Roman lover."

Smiling, she turned back toward the necklace and said, "That's quite a romantic story, Marc, but I'm not sure I believe you."

He moved nearer to her, so that his chest brushed against her back. Reaching around either side of her, he trapped her between his arms as he opened the glass case and picked up the necklace. "Try it on," he said.

"No way." Amina laughed. "It's worth a fortune. What if something happens to it?"

He ignored her protest and placed it around her neck.

Amina glanced down at the beautiful turquoise beads resting against her cocoa skin. She gently ran her fingers over the necklace, admiring the workmanship. It amazed her that she was wearing a genuine piece of history. Though she didn't believe his fanciful story, this necklace was the sort that might have been worn by Egyptian or Nubian royalty. Now here it rested, two thousand years later, on the neck of an

average history teacher. Strangely, it felt right on her, almost as if it had been made for her.

She gave a snort of laughter. Why not? What woman wouldn't feel *right* in a gorgeous arrangement of turquoise and gold?

"I know history, but I'm not qualified to appraise something like this," she said. "About how much is it really worth?"

"It's priceless," he replied, his voice just above a whisper. He stared at her with gleaming eyes. For a moment she couldn't tell if he was upset or merely admiring the necklace.

Then he shook his head slightly and met her gaze. "It's priceless to me. It's part of my personal collection and not for sale."

She reached up to unfasten the necklace. "I should take this off. Would you help me?"

His deft fingers removed the necklace and returned it to the case. "What brings you here, Amina? Is this a coincidence or were you looking for me?"

"It's not a coincidence," she admitted. "But I wasn't exactly looking for you, either. I was curious about the gallery."

"Then let me satisfy your curiosity by showing you around." He offered her his hand, and she slipped hers into it.

She noted that while his touch was warm and gentle, his palms were quite callused, a rather refreshing contrast to his refined appearance.

He probably got the calluses from lifting weights or something like that. Most likely he was a workout junkie. With a body like his, she didn't doubt it.

As he gave her a tour, she began to relax. Walking hand-in-hand with him seemed so natural, as if they belonged together.

She told herself to rein in her feelings. She and Marc hadn't even had a first date yet.

They stood admiring an eighteenth century chest of drawers when a tall woman beautiful enough to be Cleopatra herself approached them.

"Excuse me, Marc," she said and a twinge of jealousy shot through Amina. Who was this woman? Did they work together, or was their relationship personal?

"Layla, this is Amina."

"I'm honored," the woman said, bowing from the neck.

Amina wasn't quite sure how to react. The woman looked at her as if she were royalty.

"Nice to meet you." Amina extended her hand and the woman shook it almost hesitantly, still staring at Amina with a star struck look. Raising an eyebrow, Amina wondered if she had any reason to be jealous in regards to Marc. By the way she was gawking at Amina, this woman seemed to lean toward the same

sex.

“Did you need something, Layla?” Marc asked.

Layla’s gaze riveted to Marc. “Hanif needs help upstairs moving the Dutch cupboard.”

“Oh yes,” he said. “I forgot.”

“I’ll let you get back to work,” Amina said. “I have a few errands to run before getting ready for tonight.”

Marc took her hand and kissed the back of it. Amina’s belly fluttered. Was it her imagination or had the temperature in the room just risen ten degrees?

“See you tonight,” he said, giving her hand a squeeze before releasing it.

Amina smiled at him, nodded to Layla and left. She was glad she’d decided to come here. Talking to him outside of class made her feel much more comfortable about seeing him tonight. Actually she could scarcely wait to be with him again. This man not only turned her on, but she genuinely liked him. He was intelligent and polite, yet sexy. Though he radiated alpha male power, he knew how to treat a lady.

Where had he been all her life?

\* \* \*

After soaking in a scented bath, Amina rubbed lotion all over her body and dabbed perfume behind her ears.

At least tonight she could drop the professional clothing and wear something more tempting. Not that she planned on having anything but dinner with Marc, but just in case her passions overtook her, she’d bought a box of condoms and shoved them in her purse.

Amina decided to take Jewel’s advice and cut loose. She wore her sexiest outfit -- a tunic-style dress of dark purple silk, tied at the waist with a beaded gold belt. The hemline fell a couple of inches above her knees, and the deep neckline accentuated her full breasts. She slid her feet into high-heeled gold sandals, then stood in front of the full-length mirror in her room and admired herself. She looked pretty damn good. If her students and co-workers saw her now, they’d probably never recognize her.

The slight smile on her lips faded when she became aware of the pulse again. Moistening her dry lips, she tried to control her heartbeat.

This time, she decided to go with whatever was happening to her. She knew this pulsing sensation meant Marc was near. Taking her purse, she hurried down the stairs and peered out the window.

Just as she guessed, Marc’s car was parked in front of her house and he was walking up the driveway. Looking gorgeous enough to take her breath away, he wore black trousers and a V-neck sweater of charcoal gray. The lightweight material clung to his sculpted torso like a second skin.

She moved away from the window and realized she again felt shaky from excitement. This man made her feel as if she’d been reborn.

He rang the doorbell, and she paused a moment before answering. After all, she didn't want to look as eager as she felt.

She opened the door and he smiled, offering her a single perfect peony.

"Thank you," she said. "It's beautiful. I'll put this in some water before we go. Come in."

He stepped into the foyer while she walked to the kitchen and filled a vase, then placed the peony in it. She couldn't remember the last time someone had given her flowers.

When she returned to the foyer, Marc stood gazing at the print of a Roman soldier hanging at the bottom of the stairs.

"I know it's not the greatest piece of art in the world, but I like it," she said.

"It's attractive. Brings back memories."

"Of what?"

He turned to her and blinked, as if rousing himself from a daydream. "It's just the armor is familiar," he said.

"You've probably seen lots of armor and weapons in your field."

"Quite a bit. Are you ready for dinner?"

They left the house and during the ride to the restaurant she gazed at him while he drove. Every now and then he'd glance at her from the corner of his eye. His expression aroused her, yet it was also familiar. She had a gut feeling their paths had crossed before, but she couldn't place where.

At the restaurant, Marc asked for a booth in the corner of the dining room. It was more private than the other tables and partially concealed by a potted tree. After they placed their order, the waiter left them alone.

"You look lovely tonight," Marc said.

"Thank you. You're quite handsome yourself."

He smiled. "I'm glad you think so. Tell me something, Amina, what got you into history, in particular Roman history?"

"I've always felt a real connection to ancient Rome, especially their dealings with Egypt. I know this probably sounds strange, but I have a birthmark that looks like a Roman sword."

He didn't appear surprised by this at all. "Where is it?" he asked.

Heat rose in her face, partly from embarrassment and partly because she couldn't stop thinking about what it would be like to make love with him.

"I can't show you," she replied, then glanced at him flirtatiously and added, "At least not here and now."

His eyes seemed to catch fire, and he moistened his lips.

“How about you?” she asked. “Why the interest in history?”

“Do you believe in reincarnation?”

She grinned. “Are you trying to tell me you think you’ve been reincarnated and that’s why you’re into history? What were you, a king?”

“Just a common soldier.”

She shook her head and took a sip from her water glass. Their conversation was getting strange, yet she was enjoying it. Maybe this was his way of flirting.

“What do you think you were in a past life?” he asked.

“I’m not sure I had a past life.”

“I’m sure you have.” He reached across the table and gently rested his hand over hers. Though slim and long-fingered, his hand was quite large and covered hers almost entirely. His thumb lightly stroked her wrist, sending little ripples of delight through her.

She decided to play along. “All right. What was I?”

“Someone very proud. A woman who was greatly loved.”

Chuckling, she turned her hand palm-up and entwined her fingers with his. “This is an interesting line.”

He knitted his groomed black eyebrows. “It’s not a line.”

“Then you really believe in reincarnation?”

He nodded. “Yeah.”

Thankfully the waiter brought their salads just in time. This conversation was becoming a bit uncomfortable. Yet it shouldn’t disturb her if he believed in reincarnation. It was a fascinating concept, not that she necessarily thought it was real. Of course she didn’t rule it out entirely. She had always felt an irresistible connection to history. When she studied ancient life in the Nile Valley, she almost felt as if she’d been there. Many people experienced *deja vu*. Who was to say that their souls weren’t linked to the past, or even the future?

One thing she knew for certain was that she’d never been this drawn to a man.

Throughout the rest of the meal, she only grew more attracted to him. She knew her panties must be drenched with desire, and her nipples hadn’t softened once all through dinner. Usually nothing affected her appetite, but this state of arousal made it difficult to eat or even think clearly.

By the time he drove her home, she knew she’d have to dip into her supply of condoms, providing he was game. Just because she wanted him so badly it was almost a physical ache didn’t mean he felt the same. Yet if the look in his eyes and the way he kept touching her hand throughout the meal were any indication, it wouldn’t take much to lure him into the bedroom.



She needed to find a way to get him to make the first move, though, because no matter how hot she was for the man, she was not about to throw herself at him.

Let him come to her.

When they reached her house, Marc walked her to the door. "Goodnight, Amina," he said, his voice soft and husky.

"Goodnight." She moistened her lips and gazed up at him.

Marc cupped the back of her head and covered her mouth in a tender kiss. When his lips opened against hers, she followed his lead. He moaned softly and thrust his tongue into her mouth.

Desire built inside her with each swipe of his tongue against hers. Marc wrapped his arm around her waist, and she clung to his neck, pressing even closer to him. Damn, he was as lean and rock hard as she'd imagined him to be. No, he was actually even better.

When the kiss broke, they remained locked in a snug embrace. Their gazes fixed on each other and there was no mistaking the desire in his eyes, or the feel of his erection trapped between their bodies.

Amina's heart pounded and her clit ached with need. She arched against him and moaned when his stiff cock rubbed enticingly against her soft, aching flesh.

Almost before she realized what she was saying, Amina whispered, "You want to see that birthmark I told you about?"

A seductive smile spread across his face. "I thought you might never ask."

Inside, she led the way up to her bedroom. She bent and picked up some clothes that were strewn across the floor and tossed them into the hamper in the adjoining bathroom.

"It's a little messy," she said. "I wasn't expecting company."

He didn't speak, but wrapped an arm around her waist and tugged her close. Caressing her hair, he gazed into her eyes and strangely any nervousness she felt melted away. Though it was the first time making love with him, she felt as if they somehow belonged together.

Marc kissed her tenderly, his lips scarcely touching hers at first, then he slowly deepened the kiss.

Amina closed her eyes and melted against him. Her lips parted for his thrusting tongue, and she tightened her arms around him.

His hands caressed her back and swept over her buttocks, then cupped her bottom, pressing her closer to him. The thickness of his erection rubbed against her, and her heartbeat quickened. She ran her hands over his hips, then reached behind him and squeezed his taut ass while her other hand lightly traced the bulge in the front of his pants.

His cock felt so stiff and thick. She could scarcely wait to see it.

The kiss broke and Marc's lips hovered over hers. His breathing had quickened, just like hers, and there

was no mistaking the gleam in his eyes.

“Amina,” he whispered, lifting his hand to stroke her face. “You’re so beautiful and I feel...”

His voice trailed off and she leaned closer, brushing her nose against his. “What?”

The expression in his eyes both surprised and touched her. The other men she’d been with had never looked at her like this, with such naked emotion. Clearly this man wasn’t simply interested in sex, or if he was he had the most convincing act she’d ever seen.

He gently cupped her jaw and kissed her again, deeper yet with even more tenderness than before. Damn. If she didn’t know better she would swear she sensed genuine love in his kiss, but that was impossible. They had just met. This could only be lust, not love.

Whatever it was, she’d never been this aroused in her life. Her nipples tightened and strained beneath her bra, and she was already wet for him.

Marc released her only to pull off his sweater.

Swallowing hard, she tried to calm her rapidly beating heart. Damn, his body was even more gorgeous than she’d imagined. He was so lean, but his muscles were well developed, like an Olympic athlete. The dusting of hair that scattered over his sculpted chest tapered to a slender line down his flat stomach.

Her brow furrowed when she noticed he had lots of scars.

Stepping closer, she trailed her fingertip over a thick scar in the center of his tanned chest, then she traced another scar that wrapped from his ribs around his back. When she stepped behind him she almost gasped.

“What happened to you?” she asked softly.

“Let’s not talk about it,” he said, turning and kissing her again.

She shuddered to imagine what might have caused scars like that, but if he didn’t want to talk about it, she wouldn’t push him. Maybe after he knew her better he’d be willing to confide.

He kicked off his shoes and bent to pull off his socks, revealing his long, lean feet. Amina stared as his long, slender fingers worked the button and zipper on his trousers, then he pushed them down.

Amina felt her nostrils flare as she drew another deep breath. He wasn’t wearing underwear so his big, ivory cock literally popped into view. The man had a ferocious erection. The shaft stood up straight and rock hard, and the thick, pink head looked ready to explode.

Licking her lips, she imagined sucking that gorgeous cock, or even better feeling it deep inside her.

She’d been so focused on watching him that she’d forgotten to undress, but Marc quickly reminded her.

Wearing nothing but a seductive smile, he stepped behind her and unzipped her dress. As he slid it off, he kissed her shoulders as they were bared. He pushed the dress over her flaring hips and let it drop to her feet. She kicked it aside, but remained standing where she was. Marc wrapped his arms around her, nuzzling her neck and caressing her rounded belly. He cupped her breasts and brushed his thumbs over

her nipples, making them stiffen even more beneath her satin bra.

“I could touch you forever,” he said, one hand reaching down to cup her soft mound through her panties.

“That feels so good,” she whispered, leaning against him. She lifted her hand and stroked his face.

From behind, his erection pressed against her, sending little thrills of delight through her. He unfastened her bra and slid it off, then turned her to face him.

Amina met his gaze before he looked down at her breasts.

“They’re gorgeous,” he said, lightly squeezing the full spheres. He caressed her birthmark. “You’re right. It does look like a Roman soldier’s sword.” Marc bent and kissed her birthmark, then took her nipple into his mouth and sucked it.

Gasping, Amina clutched his head even closer to her breasts. He licked and sucked her nipple, and her pulse raced out of control. She could scarcely believe she was still standing since her entire body had gone weak.

She felt that strange, pulsing sensation around her again. It was like a heart beating hard. Perhaps it was her own? Or was it his? It didn’t matter. All she wanted was for Marc Claudian to make love to her.

Then a little voice of reason reminded her that before she got too carried away, she better take precautions. She picked up her purse, took out a condom and handed it to him.

Another faint smile on his lips, he opened it and rolled it on.

Marc guided her to the bed, and he sat on the edge of it, tugging her onto his lap. Amina wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him. She loved the feel of his firm, moist lips and the little groans of pleasure that escaped him.

Neither the professor nor the swimmer had ever made her feel like this. Compared to Marc Claudian, they knew*nothing* about what a woman wanted, at least not as far as she was concerned.

While kissing her, Marc’s hands caressed her shoulders, back and breasts. Amina couldn’t keep from touching him either. She stroked his hair and ran her hands over his shoulders and back, feeling the ridges of those scars and again wondering where he’d gotten them. They looked like whip marks, but where would he have been whipped?

*Beatings were common punishment for Roman soldiers. She doubted he had been punished for a lowly act, such as cowardice or theft, but was most likely beaten for insubordination or some other arrogant behavior.*

Goodness, where had those thoughts come from?

The kiss broke and another strange sensation came over her.

“Amina, are you all right?” he asked.

“Yes,” she whispered. “Kiss me again.”

He did as she requested. His tongue thrust against hers, and she moaned, holding him tighter.

Marc guided her onto her back and loomed above her. The look in his eyes almost took her breath away. Then she felt the tip of his cock pushing into her and she closed her eyes from the pleasure.

Slowly he filled her. Amina was so drenched that he slid in easily despite his thickness. Damn, it felt so good having him inside her.

He thrust slowly at first. While pumping in that almost frustratingly unhurried rhythm, he kissed her. His tongue explored her mouth thoroughly and hers did the same with his.

Everything about him aroused her -- his feel, taste and scent.

Very soon she teetered on the edge of orgasm. She clung to him, panting, as he quickened his pace enough to push her over the edge.

When she came, she cried out, her arms and legs tight around him. She noticed he didn't come, but paused in his motions, letting her pulse around him. Despite his rock-hardness and rasping breath, he controlled his desire until she once again lay still beneath him, then he began pumping into and kissing her again.

"Oh, Marc," she breathed as her pleasure rekindled.

He groaned softly and kissed her neck, then her mouth.

Little tremors of delight rolled through her, and she clung to him tighter as she once again teetered on the edge.

This time when she came, he cut loose entirely. His hips pumped hard and fast, and he tore his mouth from hers, gasping as ecstasy overtook him.

"It's been so long," he panted, lost in ultimate pleasure, his voice trembling with emotion. "So long."

Damn. If he meant it had been a long time since he'd made love with a woman, then he certainly hadn't lost his touch.

He collapsed near her on the bed and pulled her close, his arm wrapped loosely around her. Amina rested her cheek against his chest, listening to the frantic rhythm of his heart finally begin to slow.

"That was really nice," she murmured, stroking his ribs.

"Give me a few minutes," he said, a note of challenge in his voice. "We're not quite finished yet."

On Sunday morning, Amina had just stepped out of the shower when the phone rang. She hoped it was Marc calling, but didn't want to appear eager, so she waited for the answering machine to pick up.

The sound of his voice made her want to squirm with delight. She grabbed the phone, interrupting his message.

"I hope I didn't wake you," he said.

"No. I just got out of the shower."

"Would you like to come to my house for lunch? There's something I'd like to show you that I think you'll enjoy."

"I've already seen it and there's no doubt I enjoy it," she purred. Usually she wasn't into flirting, but Marc did strange yet wonderful things to her.

He gave a throaty chuckle that made her toes curl from the sheer, masculine sexiness of it. "I'm talking about my pool room. It's modeled after the Roman baths and being a history fan, I think you might like it."

"I'd love to see it." She tugged off her towel and tossed it on the floor. Naked, she stretched out on the bed and stroked her breasts with her fingertips. Just hearing his voice stirred her desire. She wished he were with her now so she could caress his gorgeous body and feel his warm, moist lips all over her. A little shiver darted through her when she recalled the way his tongue had teased her clit. He'd known just how to touch her.

"What time do you want me to come over?" she asked.

"Noon."

"I'll see you then."

"I can hardly wait," he said in a husky voice.

"Then I better hang up so I can get some clothes on."

"Good thing I'm not there or else you'd never get dressed," he said, his voice low and seductive.

Amina smiled. Closing her eyes, she dipped a hand between her legs. She wondered if she could come just from hearing his voice.

"See you soon, Marc," she said.

"I'll be waiting."

She switched off the phone and placed it on the bedside table. Just talking to him had her tingling with desire. She briefly considered masturbating before getting dressed, but she decided to save it all for Marc.

Glancing at the clock she saw that it was almost eleven. Damn, she had really overslept, but after last night she wasn't surprised. She and Marc had spent most of the night in bed and they certainly hadn't been sleeping. He'd left around two in the morning and she'd hated to see him go. Next time she'd invite him to stay the night.

Amina fixed her hair, applied her makeup and arrived at Marc's home a few moments after twelve. He lived on the outskirts of town in a colonial mansion painted white and pale gold. The place had been on the market forever and by its size and the amount of land surrounding it, she understood why.

She made her way up the cobblestone walk and rang the doorbell.

A moment later, Marc greeted her. This was the first time she'd seen him really dressed down and she loved it. He wore jeans that accentuated the length of his legs and a dark blue T-shirt that exposed his muscled arms and hugged his powerful shoulders and chest. It fitted to his lean waist and when he kissed her hello she couldn't resist caressing his sides. Her fingers slid over his ribs then trailed up his back.

When the kiss broke, he guided her inside, keeping his arm around her.

"This is a beautiful house," she said.

"I think so, but it still needs a lot of work. The pool is this way."

They walked past the kitchen and parlor and down a long corridor. They paused in front of double doors.

"This is a new addition," he explained, opening the doors and extending his arm for her to enter.

Amina walked into the vast room. The floor, ceiling and walls were covered in pale blue, pink and cream-colored tiles and the high, arched windows reflected in the enormous rectangular pool in the center of the room. Tall, torch-style lights stood at each corner of the pool. At one end stood a statue of a classically handsome nude man and at the other end a voluptuous nude woman.

"Wow," Amina said. "This is beautiful."

"Want to go swimming?"

"I didn't bring a bathing suit."

Leaning a broad shoulder against the wall, he folded his arms across his chest and grinned. "You don't need one."

She raised an eyebrow. "I guess we're alone then?"

"Yes."

"No staff in a house this size?"

"I have a cleaning lady and gardener who come by a couple of times a week, but no one's here today. How about it, Amina?" He straightened and pulled off his T-shirt.

Amina drew a deep breath. Her gaze riveted to the sculpted expanse of his chest and trailed over his

sleek abs. Arousal shot through her, and she thought her nipples might leap right through her bra.

He approached and took her in his arms, his mouth covering hers in a passionate kiss.

Moaning softly, she caressed his back and kneaded his steely shoulders. Marc's tongue stroked hers, and then he gently broke the kiss and nuzzled her neck.

Her eyes closed, Amina cuddled even closer to him. She thrust her pelvis against him, relishing the feel of his bulging crotch against her softness.

When he tugged her blouse from the waist of her pants, she didn't protest, but stepped slightly back and raised her arms overhead so he could remove the flimsy silk garment easily. He placed it in a nearby basket filled with neatly folded towels.

She glanced at the pool. "You know I used to be terrified of the water. I almost drowned in the ocean when I was a teenager."

He placed a fingertip beneath her chin and guided her face toward him. Holding her gaze, he didn't speak but waited for her to continue.

"Some guy pulled me out of the water. I never even got a chance to thank him."

"Maybe knowing you survived was thanks enough."

A faint smile touched her lips. "I was a lucky kid. You know, when I was five I nearly got hit by a car, but someone saved my life then too. Sometimes I think guardian angels do exist."

Amina removed her bra and tossed it on top of her shirt.

He murmured in what sounded like Latin and cupped her breasts, his thumb sweeping over her stiff nipples.

"I didn't know you spoke Latin," she said.

"Fluently."

"With whom?" She chuckled.

"Some things never die."

"That sounds like an ad for a horror movie."

He tilted his head to the side, a smile playing around his lips. "Are you laughing at me?"

"Never." She grinned, took his face in her hands and kissed him.

Marc reached down and unfastened her pants. He squatted in front of her and slid the cotton fabric down her long legs. She wore lavender panties beneath and he cupped her soft mound, caressing her through the silk.

Moistening his lips, he knelt in a more comfortable position and covered her clit with his mouth, sucking

and lapping her through the panties.

“Oh damn,” she breathed, her blood pounding through her body. Closing her eyes, she arched her head back and stroked his short, thick hair.

Her panties grew damp from his licking, and the friction of his tongue against the wet silk made her shiver with pleasure. Finally he tugged down her panties and she kicked them off, along with her sandals.

Grasping her hips, he covered her clit with his mouth again and devoured her.

“Oh, Marc,” she panted, clutching his head. If he hadn’t been holding her so snugly, she probably would have collapsed.

His tongue found the perfect place and rhythm and he licked until she quivered and quaked in one of the most intense orgasms of her life.

“Ohh, damn,” she moaned, her ass tight and hips thrusting in time with his lapping tongue. Her lower half burst and pulsed in an extended climax that she thought might never stop.

He finally rose to his feet and held her close while she leaned against him, her entire body weak and satisfied in the aftermath.

When she finally regained her strength, she glanced at him and smiled. “How about if I return the favor?” she asked.

His eyes burned with desire and he reached down and unzipped his jeans. His thick, hard cock sprang free and she knelt in front of him, curling her fist around it. Marc reached into his back pocket and pulled out a condom. Smiling, she took it from him and he shoved down his jeans partway. She tugged them to his ankles. After stepping out of his flip flops, he kicked his jeans aside as well.

Amina loved his legs. They were so long and hard, the muscles sculpted and the golden tanned flesh dusted with dark hair. She rubbed her cheek against his narrow hip, then stroked and kissed his thighs.

When she ran her tongue along the joining of his thighs, he groaned and gently thrust his hips against her. His cock grew even thicker and harder. Unable to resist any longer, she opened the condom and rolled it on him, then she clasped his shaft and guided the head to her lips.

One hand held him steady while she sucked and lapped while her other hand cupped his balls and kneaded them. She loved their softness and the dusting of ultra-fine hair over them almost as much as she loved his stiff, hard shaft.

Marc caressed her hair and moaned, his hips rocking as his pleasure grew.

Growling with desire, he gently pushed her away and took an oversized towel from the basket. He spread it on the ground and Amina settled onto it, noting how soft and thick it was. It felt good against her back, and she closed her eyes for a moment and squirmed with pleasure.

“Marc,” she said in her most seductive voice. She held out her arms to him and that was all the invitation he needed.

His warm, hard body covered hers and he nuzzled her neck. Running his lips along the side of it, he



groaned softly. His hand slid between their bodies and rubbed her soft mound.

Amina knew she was wet for him, but he seemed in the mood to take his time. His fingers dipped into her pussy and stroked while his thumb circled her clit, making her tingle from the roots of her hair to the tips of her toes.

While he kissed and caressed her, Amina stroked every part of him she could reach. She ran her fingertips over his shoulders and back, feeling every hard, straining muscle, then she traced his ribs and curled her fist around his rock hard cock.

“Amina,” he breathed, bracing his hands on either side of her head and gazing into her eyes.

The intense look on his face spurred her desire even more.

“Come on, Marc,” she said, running her hands over his shoulders and back. She rubbed her feet along his calves and thrust her pelvis against him.

Covering her mouth in a penetrating kiss, he thrust his cock into her and she gasped, arching against him. “Yes, baby,” she panted.

He pumped into her over and over, nibbling her ear and kissing her neck. Then his lips returned to hers and his tongue thrust into her mouth to the same rhythm as his cock.

Amina closed her eyes and let him claim her, stealing her breath and making her heart pound. She felt that pulsing sensation all around her. Its pace quickened along with Marc’s thrusts and she knew that she was somehow feeling his heartbeat.

This aroused her so much that it took only a few more thrusts before she exploded, crying his name.

Her orgasm incited his and he joined her in ecstasy, his cock surging into her. Tearing his mouth from hers, he groaned and panted more Latin words she didn’t understand, but at the moment she didn’t care.

This was the most exciting relationship of her life, and she planned to savor every moment.

\* \* \*

Over the following weeks, Amina and Marc were practically inseparable, except for work. They spent each night together, either at his house or hers, though she had to admit they preferred his place, especially the pool room.

They went to plays and museums and one weekend he brought her to the mountains. Amina enjoyed riding her bicycle for exercise, so Marc got one too and they often went for rides together after dinner. What Amina loved most were the times they spent quietly at home, wrapped in each other’s arms, simply talking or making love.

By now she had come to accept the pulsing sensation whenever he approached and had even learned to love it. Though she still couldn’t explain it and hadn’t mentioned it to him for fear he’d think her crazy, she enjoyed knowing that whenever she felt that mystical heartbeat, Marc invariably appeared.

Toward the end of the third week, Amina knew she and Marc weren’t having a simple fling, but that their relationship had the potential to be something much deeper. The biggest clue was when she asked

him to join her at her parents' house for dinner and he seemed as eager about it as she did. When it came to her dates, Amina's father had always been a particularly hard sell. Even though she was thirty years old, he still considered her his "baby" and no man was good enough for her. Yet Marc won him and her mother over with his direct yet polite manner.

Yes, Marc Claudian was something special.

It was a Friday afternoon when she got a message from him on her cell phone. It was unusual for him to call her during classes. A twinge of worry darted through her. She hoped there was nothing wrong.

She had a few moments before her next class, so she sat on a bench on the spacious college grounds and returned his call.

"I know we didn't have plans yet for tonight," he said, "but there's something I'd really like to talk to you about, Amina. Will you come over for dinner?"

"Of course. Everything is okay, isn't it?"

"Yes," he said, "everything is fine."

Why didn't she quite believe him? There was an almost anxious edge to his voice. Unusual for Marc, who was the kind of guy who always seemed in control.

Throughout the rest of the day she wondered about their conversation, and by the time she arrived at his house that evening, she was practically dying of curiosity.

He had given her a key to his house, so she let herself in and called, "Marc?"

The delicious scent of roast beef cooking drifted throughout the house. Good. She was starving.

He stepped out of the kitchen, wearing a dark green tank tucked into paler green cargo pants. The casually sexy outfit showed off his lean, athletic body to his advantage.

She wrapped her arms around him and kissed him.

"Hi," she said. "What did you want to talk about?"

He drew a deep breath and gestured toward the hallway. "Let's go to the pool room. The food is almost ready. I wanted to talk about this after dinner, but I can't wait."

"What is it?" she asked. "You're starting to make me nervous."

"Don't be."

"It's hard not to be when you're acting this weird."

His brow furrowed and he teased, "You've always said I'm weird."

"Yeah, but not like this."

In the pool room, a wicker table and chairs had been set for dinner. He held a chair for her and she

settled into it, noting that a lovely Egyptian style box rested by her dinner plate.

“What’s this?” she asked.

“It’s yours. Open it.”

Smiling, she opened the box and her eyes widened. The turquoise collar necklace she’d seen in his gallery rested in the satin-lined box.

“Oh wow,” she murmured. She tore her gaze from the necklace to stare at Marc, who was watching her with an almost tense expression on his face. “Marc, I can’t take this.”

“It’s yours,” he repeated firmly. He stood, took the necklace from the box and fastened it around her neck, then he knelt in front of her and took her hand. “Amina, during these weeks together, haven’t you felt the connection between us?”

“Of course.” She squeezed his hand. “How could I miss it?”

“But you still don’t know who I am and who *you* are.”

“Marc, this isn’t about reincarnation again, is it?” Sometimes she thought he was obsessed with the subject.

“Amina, these have been the most wonderful weeks of my life.”

“Me too,” she admitted, though the conversation was starting to worry her. What was wrong with him?

“I want to marry you,” he said.

Amina’s stomach clenched. She wasn’t sure if she wanted to run away or scream with delight. Instead, she spoke with deliberate calm. “Marc, I agree that I’d like an exclusive relationship, but it might be a little soon to talk about marriage.”

He closed his eyes for a moment, an almost pained expression on his face. Then he collected himself and met her gaze. “How do you feel about me?”

“I care about you a lot,” she said without hesitation.

“I love you, Amina.”

Lord, she wanted to say she loved him too, but it seemed too fast. Yet she did love him. If she could only let go, as Jewel so often told her to do, then she could admit her feelings for him. However, the sensible, regimented woman she’d always been couldn’t tell a man she’d known for three weeks that she was in love with him. Though to her it seemed they had known each other for much longer than that. When she looked into Marc’s eyes, it was as if they had always been together. She couldn’t imagine a future without him, but maybe she should put some distance between them before they made an impulsive mistake.

“Marc, I don’t want to rush.”

“You don’t have to. I just want you to know how I feel. Take all the time you need, Amina, but I think

you know the truth in your heart. You and I have always belonged together.”

“What are you trying to tell me?”

“Haven’t you ever wondered why you’ve felt such a connection to the past? Doesn’t your birthmark raise questions? It’s the shape of a Roman soldier’s sword, like the sword I carried. I know you can feel me all the time, just as I can feel you. We can sense each other’s heartbeats.”

“What?” she demanded. This was impossible.

“You have felt it, haven’t you?” His intense dark eyes stared into hers, and her pulse raced. A faint smile touched his lips. “You have felt it. I can tell.”

“This is crazy.”

“It’s not. There’s so much I have to tell you about myself and about us, but I can see you’re upset.”

“No,” she said, a strange feeling breaking over her. She wanted to tell him to stop this foolishness, but if he was crazy it was best to find out now. “Talk to me, Marc. I’m... confused about us.” At least that much was true.

Still on his knees before her, he told her a story about a Kushite princess and a Roman soldier that sent shivers down her spine. He spoke of strange rituals and said that the sword on her breast marked her as his. None of it could be true. There was no magic. No mate mark ritual and no protector summoning, yet as she thought back on her life, to the times when she’d been rescued from certain death...

No! It couldn’t be. The man who had saved her from the car and from drowning were one and the same. In her mind she saw his dark eyes, his chiseled face and black hair.

“Marc, I can’t do this,” she said. “I’m sorry. I care about you, but this is too crazy.”

She stood and he also rose to his feet, his hands resting on her shoulders.

“Amina, I didn’t want to upset you, but for us to go on in this relationship you have to know the truth.”

“I agree and now that I do, I’m not sure I can let this go on.” She shook her head and pressed her hands to her temples. “I need some time away from all this. You mean a lot to me, Marc, but I can’t marry you.”

She tried to unfasten the necklace. “I can’t get the damn thing off.”

He reached behind her and gently restrained her fingers. Gazing at her with a sadness in his dark eyes that tore at her heart, he said, “Keep it. I told you it’s yours.”

“I’m not Kheb! I’m Amina. Get it?”

With a tender smile, he caressed her cheek. “You’re both.”

Emotionally torn, she jerked away from him, picked up her purse and stalked out of the house.

\* \* \*

“Amina, this is ridiculous,” Jewel said. It had been nearly a week since Amina had broken up with Marc and she had been miserable ever since.

She missed him so much that it was almost physically painful. All she could think about was him. She struggled through her workday, and nights were even worse. It was funny how after a few short weeks she had gotten so used to seeing him.

When she got home after work, she longed to be cuddled by him, to kiss him and hear his voice. During the short time they were together, they had discussed everything from serious to trivial matters and also comfortably enjoyed moments of silence.

Marc seemed to know when something was troubling her and always tried to make her feel better. She had read him just as well, sensing when he’d had difficulty with a client or simply needed an embrace. When they made love, they knew each other’s bodies even better than their own.

“You can’t just sit around depressed,” Jewel continued.

It was Saturday morning and Jewel had stopped by, uninvited, because other than work Amina had been living like a hermit since her split with Marc.

“I can if I want to,” Amina said, knowing she sounded childish, but she didn’t care. She was upset and confused.

What frightened her most was that his crazy story about reincarnation and a mate mark ritual made the strange occurrences of the past weeks seem reasonable. Why else had she heard his heartbeat and so easily fallen into bed with a man she had only just met? What other reason could there be for a birthmark so clearly shaped like a Roman sword that it looked more like a tattoo?

She didn’t believe in magic or the paranormal. Until Marc she had almost stopped believing in love too.

“I don’t get it,” Jewel said. “If you miss him this much, then why don’t you just see him again?”

Amina curled her lip. “I told you what he said about us. He thinks we’re these star-crossed lovers reincarnated. It’s crazy.”

“Crazy is avoiding someone you’re in love with.”

“How can I be in love this fast?”

“Rick and I fell fast,” Jewel said. “When I first met him, I knew he was the guy for me.”

“This is different.”

“Why?”

“Because Rick doesn’t think he was Julius Caesar in a past life.”

“No, he thinks he was Erik the Red.”

“That isn’t funny, Jewel,” Amina snapped.

“Who’s trying to be funny? When I told him about what Marc said, he told me he thought he was Erik the Red, Viking warrior.”

Despite her irritation, Amina couldn’t keep from grinning. “That’s crazy.”

“So maybe I should divorce him,” Jewel said sarcastically.

Amina shot her a look that said, *don’t go there* .

“So Marc has a weird view of the afterlife.” Jewel shrugged. “Is that really a good enough reason to keep away from a rich, nice, cute guy who obviously loves you?”

Sighing deeply, Amina felt almost on the verge of tears. “I don’t know.”

Jewel placed a hand on her knee. “Do you love the man?”

“Yes,” Amina admitted, swallowing past the lump in her throat. “I really miss him, Jewel.”

“Then what the hell are you sitting here with me for?”

\* \* \*

Since Amina had walked out of his house, Marc had forced himself to avoid her. He knew that in her heart she must realize they belonged together, but if she needed time apart, he would give it to her no matter how much it hurt.

He threw himself into his work and though he didn’t approach her, he kept watch over her by using Bast’s pendant. A few times he had even watched her sleep.

As for him, sleep eluded him. He longed for her so much that he couldn’t stop thinking of her. He’d doubled his daily exercise sessions, hoping to tire himself enough to get some rest.

Hanif and Layla noticed his distress, but they had learned to keep their distance when he was in such a mood. Only Kheb -- or Amina -- had ever dared stubbornly confront him when he was irritated or upset. By the gods, he missed her.

It was Saturday morning and he had just finished a practice session with his sword when the phone rang.

He answered and when he heard Amina’s voice his heart nearly leapt through his chest. Still, he made a point to sound cool and calm. “Yes?” he said.

“I just wanted to see how you are,” she replied.

“I’m well. And you?”

She released a trembling sigh, as if she’d been crying or was about to cry. This worried him. It wasn’t like Amina to become emotional.

“What’s wrong?” he demanded. “Talk to me, Amina.”

“I miss you.”

His own emotions nearly overwhelmed him, and he couldn't keep the smile from his lips. “I miss you too. Do you want to see me?”

“Yeah.”

“I'll come get you.”

“No, I'll ride over on my bike. I need the fresh air.”

After hanging up the phone, Marc ran upstairs and showered. Waiting for her, he felt giddier than he ever remembered. He'd been right in giving her time. A woman like Amina needed to do things on her own terms and he respected that. Trying to force her was a sure way to lose her and this time he intended to spend a long, happy life with her.

When he finished showering, he pulled on jeans and a black T-shirt, then jogged upstairs to look into Bast's pendant. Though he knew Amina was on the way, he wanted to see her right then.

No sooner had he picked up the carnelian pendant than he saw in it a vision that nearly stopped his heart. Amina rode her bike down the street when out of nowhere a speeding car swerved and struck her down.

Panicked, he dropped the pendant and raced out of the house.

Was this a vision of something happening now or was it a future vision, something he could stop? Usually he got a sense of when the visions would occur, but this time it was different.

He ran toward his car, but caught sight of Amina peddling down the street. Relief washed over him, though he wouldn't relax completely until she reached the safety of his driveway.

“Amina!” he shouted, and she waved to him.

A car shot out of a side street, and he bellowed in horror as it crashed into her.

\* \* \*

One minute Amina was peddling down the street toward Marc's house and the next she was falling through a tunnel of blinding light.

When her vision cleared, she gazed at her strange surroundings. It was a spacious chamber, sparsely decorated with simple wooden furniture trimmed with gold.

Egyptian.

What the hell was going on?

The room had a reddish glow from the setting sun. Through an open doorway, she saw a garden filled with exotic trees and flowers. She heard footsteps approach, and Marc strode out of the garden.

He wore a knee-length tunic and sandals and carried the sword of a Roman soldier at his hip.

*He visited her in secret. Her talks with his superiors hadn't gone well. Rome would no doubt cause trouble for her people.* "I thought you might not come tonight," Kheb said.

"It was difficult to get away," he admitted, strode toward her and knelt in front of her.

She stared into his dark eyes and was about to speak, but he pulled her into his arms and covered her mouth with a breath-stealing kiss.

Kheb clung to his neck and arched against him, loving the feel of his big, hard body against hers.

Marc Claudius guided her onto her back and parted her sheer robe. He caressed her breasts, lightly pinching her nipples, then bending to lick and suck them until she sighed with need. He kissed her bare flesh beneath her turquoise collar necklace, then he covered her body with his. Moaning softly, Kheb slid her hands beneath his tunic and grasped his tight, rounded buttocks.

His hand dipped between her legs and his long, slender fingers stroked her until she trembled on the brink of ecstasy. Then he filled her with a long, hard thrust of his beautiful ivory cock.

Over and over he pumped while she trembled and moaned, lost in sensation.

The bright light flashed again and this time when she woke, she stood before a long-limbed, exotic-looking woman. The Queen.

"I arranged for the exercise to test this Roman," the woman said. "I wanted to know if he's worthy of being my daughter's protector. There is no need to punish the men further, Amun. Their failure to perform well against one man is punishment enough."

"Mother, how could you do this?" Kheb said. She glanced at Marc Claudius who stood beside her, his expression proud and determined despite the fact that he had just been ambushed by the Queen's soldiers.

The light flashed again, and Kheb lay on the brink of death.

Marc Claudius, his face stark and his clothes drenched in blood, held her close, tears gleaming in his beautiful dark eyes. "Please no," he whispered.

His pain cried out to her, and as she sank into darkness, she heard his beloved voice. *I love you, Amina. This time, one way or another, we will be together.*

\* \* \*

Marc sat by Amina's hospital bed, holding her limp hand. It had been almost five days since her accident, and he had only left her side to shower and change his clothes. He hadn't slept, except for a few brief moments in the chair by her bed, when exhaustion had overtaken him.

Her parents and Jewel visited daily, as did Hanif and Layla. Medical science had helped Amina as much as it could. Even Bast's magic couldn't aid her now. Neither Hanif, Layla nor Marc knew of any ritual that could wake her from this sleep.

Though her broken leg, cuts and bruises were well on their way to mending, her head injury had caused



the most damage. Now they could only wait.

This time, if she died, Marc would not linger on. Hanif had agreed to help him do the deed and run him through with his own sword, the only sword that could kill a man under the protection ritual. There would be no more entombment for him. No longing for his soulmate, century after century. If he died as well, he had no doubt that he and Amina would be together for all time.

Marc had learned that once a couple met under the mate mark ritual, their souls would always find each other again. Two thousand years was long enough for any man to live one life, but Amina was too young to die. Not now.

Perhaps he was her curse instead of protector.

“Why couldn’t I save you, then or now?” he murmured, raising her hand to his lips and pressing a kiss to the back of it.

Her fingers tightened around his and his heartbeat quickened. “Amina,” he said, leaning closer to her.

Her eyes opened partway and she slowly turned to him. “Marc,” she whispered. “Marc Claudius.”

His gut tightened. She had called him *Marc Claudius*, not *Marc Claudian*.

“My love,” he said, his voice husky with emotion.

“You were right,” she murmured. “I know now that you told me the truth about our past.”

Closing his eyes momentarily, he pressed another lingering kiss to her hand. “I love you, Amina.”

A faint smile tugged at her lips, and she said, “Call me Kheb.”

## Epilogue

### Six Months Later

Marc and Amina were married in his house, now their house, in an informal ceremony. They invited only their closest friends and family.

The greatest gift they received was from Hanif and Layla. The two had finally translated an ancient scroll passed down from Bast. It explained how to break the protection summoning so that Marc could be released without being stabbed with his own sword.

At first he was hesitant, wanting to keep Amina safe for as long as he could. Then she pointed out that while he was sentenced to immortality, he had not been able to rescue her every time she was in danger.

They both had decided that the ritual should be broken, so that they could live a normal life together.

On their wedding night, they lay cuddled in their oversized bed, warm and relaxed in the aftermath of lovemaking.

“No matter how many years we have in this life, our souls are bound forever,” she said.

“I would want it no other way, Princess,” he told her, nuzzling her neck.

“Neither would I.” She turned to him and opened her mouth to his deep, tender kiss.

Kate Hill

What do trips around the world, endless nights of breathtaking sex, and a muscular, 6-foot 3-inch, brown-haired, blue-eyed significant other have to do with Kate Hill? Absolutely nothing, but she can dream, can't she? In reality Kate is a single, thirty-something vegetarian New Englander who loves writing romantic fantasies. Visit her online at <http://www.kate-hill.com>, [www.myspace.com/katehillromance](http://www.myspace.com/katehillromance), or join her newsgroup at [groups.yahoo.com/group/katehill](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/katehill). Stop by Kate's Amazon blog at [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com).