

#### ARIES: RIDDLE ME WICKED

... "Please don't tell me you've put both of our lives on the line for a Google search."

At least Lucas had the grace to look sheepish. "Well, when you put it like that..."

Ian blinked. He didn't even know what to say to the man. This entire nightmare was due to some madman's belief in a myth that every respectable archaeologist would dismiss in a heartbeat and a thrill-seeking photographer who relied on the Internet for actual facts? It was ludicrous. Beyond ludicrous. It was...for all his education, he didn't think a word existed that could encompass just how absurd it really was.

"You asked," Lucas said. "And I told you what it was about. Whether you choose to believe me or not is another matter."

"How could you possibly think that I would even entertain such a fantasy?" Ian spluttered. "If you're so aware of my education, you should have known exactly how I would view this."

"Which might be why I didn't come right out and tell you." He shoved his hands into his pockets and jerked his head toward the unknown in front of them. "Let's argue about this when we don't have to worry about Sultis breathing down our necks. Or it's all going to be a moot point anyway."

Ian could have stood there and debated the danger in lending credence to mythology when there were so many real world artifacts to be had and appreciated. But Lucas was right about one thing. Their well-being was in peril, especially since they'd deliberately chosen to try and escape Sultis's clutches. Their only choice at this junction was to set aside personal differences and find a way to freedom...

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# ARIES: RIDDLE ME WICKED

### BY

### VIVIEN DEAN

### AMBER QUILL PRESS, LLC

http://www.AmberQuill.com

#### ARIES: RIDDLE ME WICKED AN AMBER QUILL PRESS BOOK

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Layout and Formatting provided by: Elemental Alchemy

PUBLISHED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Aries: The risk taker, fiery and passionate. What an Aries wants, an Aries gets. ARIES: RIDDLE ME WICKED

# CHAPTER 1

Running for your life did wonders for coloring vocabulary. If his father could have caught even a few syllables of Ian Tunbridge's current language, he would have had a coronary.

The expletives tore more easily from his throat than wrenching his foot free from the muddy earth, but eventually, Ian succeeded. The sudden freedom jerked him off-balance, and his arms flew out instinctively to stop himself from falling flat on his face. As he scrambled back to his feet, blood oozed from the fresh scrapes on his palms, while his ankle now sported an unmistakable twinge. All that pain, however, was inconsequential compared to the greater problem currently at hand.

The men chasing after him.

He wished, not for the first time, he'd had time to grab his coat

before he'd been forced to run. His thin cotton jumper did little to protect him, and already, sweat glued it to his back. He was lucky he'd thought to grab shoes, though lucky was not the word he'd use to characterize his current situation. Mad. Horrific. Terrifying. Those were all perfectly good words, and unfortunately, far more accurate. At least, they had only shot at him once. And how ironic he considered a single gunshot in any way a good thing.

Someone shouted, and the crash of his pursuers split into two. One group stayed behind him, while another of indeterminate size began to swell around to his right. He had no idea how many men chased him through the thick trees. When the gunfire within the camp had woken him just minutes earlier, Ian had only risked a single glance out of his tent before scrambling to get dressed, get out, and get away as fast as he possibly could. It didn't even make sense that they'd been attacked. It was a routine dig, without real historical significance beyond gathering some additional Native American artifacts for the main display back in London. Only a handful of people had even known they were there.

He blinked against the angry tears that burned in his eyes. As far as he could tell, none of his colleagues were left. What a bloody waste.

His chest began to burn from his frantic pace. He was hardly out of shape, but an adrenaline-fueled dash through the northern California wilds was not the same as his carefully controlled sessions at the gym or the occasional trek in order to get to a dig site. The muscles in his legs screamed in protest, like someone was dragging hot pokers through the sinew, and his feet grew heavier with every step. His boots were made for rough terrain, not for swift running, and they weighed him down almost as much as his tiring body. If he didn't do something about it soon, his escape would have been for naught.

A break in the trees thrust him out into the open. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw two men flanking him to his right, the smaller of the pair gaining proximity more quickly than his mate. Both carried guns. Both lifted them as soon as he came into view. That was all Ian wanted to see.

He dove to the ground the second before the gun's retort made the air reverberate. Though it was loud, it didn't sound near, but he didn't have time to contemplate why, rolling toward a nearby tree in a vain attempt for cover. A sharp rock dug into his back, the sting of blood mingling with the sweat, and his fingers curled around it, picking it up and throwing it as hard as he could in the direction of his pursuers.

It didn't matter if it hit or not. The point was to let them know he would not go silently into the night.

Another shot rang out, this one closer.

Ian reached the foot of the tree and scrambled to his knees to get to its other side. He was brought up short by a pair of black boots and khaki-covered legs.

"There is nowhere to go, Mr. Tunbridge," said a soft, accented voice. A foot lashed out and slammed into Ian's stomach, driving him back against the tree trunk.

The force knocked the wind out of his lungs. Gulping for air, Ian squinted up at the unsmiling face of a burly, dark-haired man, sleek hair pulled into a ponytail, a corduroy coat unable to cover his paunch. The sound of dry branches cracking tried to drag his attention away, but he kept his gaze steady, knowing that it would be the others who had been shooting who approached.

"My apologies if my survival instincts got in your way," Ian said as soon as his breathing had calmed enough for him to speak. "I have a rather averse reaction to guns, you see. They tend to make me do irrational things. Such as run for my life."

"Who ever said your life was in danger?"

Ian stiffened. There was no way he had imagined the attack on the camp. "Perhaps it was the random gunfire around my head, and, oh yes, the fact that you killed my team."

"A necessary cost."

Strong hands scooped beneath his arms on either side, dragging him up and away from the tree trunk. Ian reacted without thought, slamming his right elbow into the jaw of the man on that side, shifting his weight so that it threw the one on his left off-balance. It worked for a moment, loosening the grips, but the swift cock of multiple guns made him freeze before he could work free.

"I do not want you dead, Mr. Tunbridge." The voice was still even, still soft, and the more he spoke, the more convinced Ian became the accent was Slavic in origin. "But I have no qualms ensuring you never walk again."

It was enough time for the men to resume their bruising holds on his arms, pulling Ian upright, though he stood a solid four or five inches taller than both of them. Now that he could assess his pursuers, he counted seven of varying ethnicities and sizes, all but their apparent leader carrying guns. One had blood stains on his coat. Another had a hole in his worn jeans with a cut oozing beneath it. Otherwise, everyone appeared unscathed from their earlier encounter.

His heart hammered against his ribs. He had no idea what this was about, why his insignificant archaeological team had been attacked or what they could possibly want with him. He was nobody, a scholar from Oxford in love with history and culture. He knew nothing about guns, or men who carried guns, or men who would chase other men through forests wielding guns. Clearly, though, he was of some importance to these people.

Ian pulled himself even straighter. It was pointless to show fear. He got the distinct impression it would matter little to the dark-haired man.

When Ian didn't speak for a full minute, the man nodded as if they'd reached some agreement. "Let's go," he instructed the others, turning on his heel. "We have delayed long enough."

The men holding Ian yanked him along to follow back into the thick trees, making him stumble for a moment before he found his footing again. His ankle throbbed, but he refused to limp.

He very much doubted it would gain him any sympathy anyway.

\* \* \*

They took him deep into the forest again. Ian recognized little of the brilliant green foliage, but he'd been too worried about saving his life to enjoy the scenery. He hadn't been in California long enough yet to learn the terrain, either. Their planes had only arrived two days previous, their camp made the day before. Today was to be their first day actually digging.

His mind worked, grateful for the distraction from the potential peril around him. Could it have something to do with the site? It wouldn't be the first time a group protested digging up artifacts or remains, though he'd never heard of murdering an archaeological team before to stop them from working.

Ian glanced at the broad back of the leader. His gut response was no. This was a Native American site, and these were not Native Americans. Scratch sabotaging the dig as a possible reason. The more he contemplated, the more convinced he became this was about him in some fashion. The leader stressed he didn't want to kill Ian, which meant he needed him somehow. Not mobile, however, if he'd been willing to paralyze Ian in order to get him to cooperate. But why kill the others? Because they were witnesses? To what?

His head hurt. From the questioning, from the running, from the pain in his ankle. Without more information, it was impossible to formulate answers, and without answers, he could do little for the time being but exactly as he was told.

The trees began to thin, but instead of the road Ian had expected to see, there was a small building, with weather-washed walls and a flat roof that looked like Gulliver had sat on it. A small enclave was visible behind it, with scaffolding and ropes hanging off the large redwood shading both, and the undergrowth had been worn away in a distinct circular patch. It was a small bit of civilization dropped into the middle of nowhere California, and Ian frowned as they led him toward it.

Words were exchanged in a language he didn't recognize. All but the leader and the two men holding him changed paths to head for the building, but his attention was focused on the small bit of land they approached.

There was a reason there wasn't any grass. At its center was a hole, its edges mostly smooth, large enough for a man to get through if it was a tight fit and he wasn't bothered with small spaces. The leader came to a stop and turned around, pulling his gun out from an inside holster to train it on Ian.

"I trust you will not run," he said.

"Never walking again. I remember."

His shoulders sagged when he was suddenly released, the two

men moving past their leader to the rigging hanging from the redwood. Ian watched, curious about what they were doing, though his awareness never wavered from the gun aimed at him. It soon became clear that it was a harness of sorts, connected to a pulley anchored to the tree. The men were careful as they positioned themselves, one near the hole with the harness in hand, the other at the end of one of the ropes.

The leader used the gun to wave Ian toward the hole. "Move." Ian's eyes widened. "Pardon?"

Beneath the rolls of his fleshy neck, his jaw hardened. "I did not ask you if you had any questions, Mr. Tunbridge. I told you to move."

He choked down the other words that wanted to bubble forth. He didn't even know what these men wanted with him, and now they wanted to stick him in some hole in the ground? Nothing good could come from it, though certainly, nothing good had come from the entire day.

With no choice but to comply, Ian took careful steps forward. The man said something in his native language, then when Ian failed to respond right away, rolled his eyes and lifted his arms, demonstrating what he would like Ian to do.

"We need to lower you down, Mr. Tunbridge," came an amused voice behind him. "And that requires certain precautions to be taken. Unless you would prefer we push you instead."

"No, that won't be necessary," Ian muttered.

He did as he was shown, moving his arms, lifting his legs, until the harness was firmly secured around his groin and shoulders. It was tight and uncomfortable, and he had to discreetly adjust himself so the thick ropes wouldn't rub against his cock and balls. Around him, the men laughed. "Take this time to rest, Mr. Tunbridge," the leader said.

Before Ian could respond, the man who'd fitted him pushed him toward the hole, making him stumble. The moment the earth vanished beneath his feet, the ropes went taut, holding him firmly in place. His hands flew to the harness, gripping it tightly, and he dangled for a few seconds before the pulley squeaked. Inch by inch, he dropped into the hole, earth catching along his already sore shoulder, the world growing darker and darker as it swallowed him up.

The air cooled as he descended, and he had to blink to adjust his vision to the lack of illumination. Within a few feet, the walls disappeared, leaving him dropping through open space. An underground cavern. California was riddled with them. In the middle of the wilderness, it would make an excellent prison.

He hit the floor sooner than he anticipated, the sudden impact sending jolts of pain through his injured ankle. Ian quickly stood, trying to get a closer look at his surroundings, but the lack of ambient light made it impossible. The little illumination filtering through the opening was blocked when the leader bent over the hole.

"Remove the harness," he called down.

The shaking started in Ian's hands as he undid the ropes. This was really happening. He was being left underground, with no light, no food, no water, and no clue as to what was going on. He was beginning to believe it would've been preferable getting shot. This had the hallmarks of sheer torture.

"How long am I to be down here?" he called back before letting go of the rope.

"You will know all you need in good time," came the reply.

The forceful tug burned along his palm, and Ian released his

hold with a pained cry. He stepped back, watching it lift up and away, and with it, any hopes for an easy solution.

Once the harness was clear of the opening, the shadows disappeared, and the faint voices of the men thirty feet overhead disappeared quickly. The small patch of sunlight that remained did little to show him what his fresh prison looked like. He could barely see his hand in front of his face, and reaching out with his arms only told Ian he couldn't touch the walls from his current position. Given what he knew, that could be either good or bad. He crouched and felt the ground, but all he could determine was that it was rough stone covered in grit. With a sigh, he sat, taking the weight off his throbbing ankle. Now, it was just a waiting game.

The waiting lasted only minutes. His ass didn't even have time to get numb.

The whistling came first, faint and tuneless. Rather than overhead, it drifted in from his left, carried on stale air. Ian turned his head in its direction, wondering if it was a trick of the environment, and though he squinted into the darkness, he still couldn't see anything more than murk.

As the whistling took shape, so did the shadows. A glow began to brighten the distance, like someone held a torch beneath a very thick duvet. Standing, he took a single step before reason stopped his feet from hurtling him toward yet another potential danger. He would not make his captors' job easier for them by being foolish.

The light refined into a more definitive shape. So did the whistling, clear and no longer unknown, the quick tones of early Beatles, if he wasn't mistaken. He cocked his head, more than a little curious about this new information, only to blink in sudden blindness when the light shone directly into his eyes.

"Hey! You're here!" A man's voice echoed from behind the

torch, but the friendliness of his tone—an American accent, Ian noted—sharpened into alarm. "Shit, what happened to you?"

Ian lifted his arm to shield his eyes, trying to see who now approached him with far quicker steps. The man who emerged was only a few inches shorter, with dark hair shaved in a military cut, and darker eyes shadowed in a long, angular face. The additional shadow in his chin could only be a cleft, and the full slash of his mouth was now drawn into a worried line. At the moment, his heavy brows were pulled together, and he switched the silver torch, nearly as long as Ian's forearm, to his left hand in order to reach out with his right.

"Did they drop you down or something?" The touches were careful and fleeting, moving from one torn part of his jumper to another. "And where's your coat? It's freezing down here."

In light of his predicament, he hadn't been that aware of the temperature, but now that the man mentioned it, he did note a distinct chill in the air. The man wore a thick windbreaker, with camouflage-patterned cargo trousers, but though his appearance seemed military, the Nikes on his feet did not.

"I'll tell you about my coat if you tell me what's going on," Ian said.

His acerbic tone must have convinced the man he was in no mood to be toyed with. The man stepped back, angling the torch downward out of Ian's eyes. "They didn't tell you?"

Ian waited for more, but when it didn't come, snapped, "And when exactly would they have done that? When they were shooting at me? Or perhaps when they thought it would be amusing to chase me through the forest?"

"They shot you?"

When he reached out again, Ian slapped his hand away. "They

shot *at* me. Though I have little doubt they would have done exactly as they threatened if they hadn't managed to catch me."

The man tilted his head back to frown at the opening in the ceiling. "Sultis!" He paused, clearly expecting someone to show up at the hole. After a minute, he growled in frustrated and shouted, "What the hell's going on up there, Sultis?"

The answering silence was damning. Ian gave him time to realize nobody was coming, then slowly sat back down on the ground. His ankle was killing him.

"I think it's safe to assume we've been abandoned," he said with a casualness he didn't really feel. "Though the gentleman who seemed to be in charge did say I'd know all I needed in good time. I wonder if he meant you."

"It's not like he knows a damn thing about all of this," the man said. With a frustrated sigh, he dropped like Ian had, sitting crosslegged in front of him with the torch in his lap.

A niggle of guilt chewed at the edge of Ian's mood. The man had been friendly upon approach, and genuinely concerned when he'd thought Ian injured. He'd also been reasonably alarmed at the prospect of his being shot, which in the measure of the morning's events, put them—at least temporarily—on the same side.

He stuck out his hand. "Ian Tunbridge."

The introduction erased the scowl on the man's face, exchanging for an easy-going smile. "I know." He stretched to take Ian's hand in a firm grip. "I'm the one who told Sultis we needed you."

"We?"

"You don't think he came up with this plan on his own, do you? The man's a thug with delusions of grandeur. He wouldn't know a treasure if it had Jack Sparrow sitting on it with a giant X."

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Ian stared at him, unsure what to make of any of this. "What on earth are you talking about? And who are you?"

The smile never wavered. "Lucas Arpini. And I'm the man who's going to put both of us in the record books."

# CHAPTER 2

Ian laughed. He couldn't help it. The entire situation was too absurd to refrain, especially now that this man—no, this Lucas Arpini, and didn't that name somehow suit this seductive, smiling stranger—professed to suffer from his own delusions of grandeur.

"The record books?" he repeated, still chortling. "Would those be the Guinness or some other organization's designed to sensationalize the fantastic? Just so that I'm perfectly clear."

His amusement didn't seem to bother Lucas in the slightest. "I'm talking international news and every significant archaeological journal on the planet. That's what you've always wanted, isn't it? To be taken seriously?" He gestured toward the ceiling with the hand that still held the torch. Circles of light danced across the packed earth like fireflies gone mad. "You're not going to get there, digging up arrowheads for Daddy."

Direct mention of his father and inference to his destroyed camp immediately sobered Ian's mood. "If you're the one who set those murderers on us, it's going to be my pleasure to make certain you never see the light of day again, Mr. Arpini."

"Lucas." He frowned. "What murderers?"

It was Ian's turn to point overhead. "Those men who put me down here."

"Who'd they kill?"

"The better question would be, who didn't they kill? I'm the only one who got away, and if I look like hell, it's because I was doing everything in my bloody power to not end up quite as dead as the rest of my camp."

His anger escalated with every word. All the adrenaline that had fueled his flight now found sustenance in his frustration. Just who did this man think he was? Lives had been lost. From the sound of it, more could meet the same fate. Claiming responsibility and then feigning ignorance either made Lucas Arpini a fool or a hypocrite.

Neither one inspired Ian to ally with him.

Shadows haunted the sharp planes of Lucas's face, all vestiges of pride wiped away. "This wasn't the way it was supposed to happen," he said. "Sultis made promises."

"Yes, well, it would seem your trust in this Sultis was a tad misguided."

Lucas glanced up again, his jaw hard. "If it means anything, I'm sorry. This wasn't the way I envisioned it at all."

Though he didn't want to, Ian believed him. "I can't say this is how I saw my first trip to California playing out, either."

When Lucas retrained his attention on Ian, it was far more

sober, more intently focused. "Did they say anything to you?"

"Nothing of consequence." The fact that Sultis had threatened to cripple him felt like too much of a guilty burden to lay at Lucas's feet. "What's this about? How do you know who I am?"

"How could I not?" He sat up straighter. "You're Ian Tunbridge, only son to James Tunbridge, retired curator for the Canterbury City Council Museums and Galleries Services, now working in London toward the restoration of World War II artifacts for an undisclosed private organization. You attended Oxford University, gained your undergraduate degree in Classical Archaeology and Ancient History, then switched to the Faculty of History and obtained your Master of Studies in Late Antique and Byzantine Studies. You went straight from Oxford to the British Museum in London, where your talents are currently being wasted refurbishing unpopular exhibits."

The more he rattled off, the farther Ian's jaw dropped. "Did you memorize my entire CV?"

"I had to convince Sultis you were the one for the job."

"The one that's supposed to put us both in the record books."

Even in the darkness, the twinkle in Lucas's eye was unmistakable. "That's the one."

Lucas probably thought he was charming, and perhaps, under other circumstances, he would have been. If Ian had met him in London, maybe, at a bar in Soho, or a theater in the West End, and Lucas had struck up a conversation with him, he would have freely admitted the American had a definite appeal. Even the harsh lines of his military appearance held a certain fascination, a raw sexiness that stemmed both from his brash personality and his striking features.

But this wasn't a social setting, and Lucas Arpini probably

wasn't even gay, so considering him anything but the instigator of everything that was currently wrong with Ian's life was out of the question.

"The only job I'm interested in right now is the one that will get me out of this hole with all my body parts in working order, and then onto a plane back to London," he said grimly. "Then, I'll devote myself to ensuring you, Mr. Sultis, and everybody else involved in this debacle are prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law."

"Now, hold on. I've been in this hole all morning."

"And by your own admission, you're the only reason I'm here."

"Sultis would have found you eventually. Just like he found me."

That gave Ian pause. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, this whole adventure started out because of Sultis. But now that you're here, we don't have to play by his rules anymore."

His head was starting to throb at the same tempo as his aching ankle and stinging palms. "I still have no idea what any of this is about. Or how you think we're going to get out of this without them pulling us up."

Lucas rose to his feet, with the silent grace of a man who knew his body very well. "Do you trust me?"

His answer was instantaneous. "No."

Lucas smiled. "Fair enough. Do you at least recognize that we're both in the same predicament here?"

Ian glanced around, the memory of the other man's approach still searing across his mind's eye. Neither one of them were getting out, and Lucas had been visibly upset by his injuries. "All right. I can concede that." "How about conceding the desire for knowledge? The need to find the answer first, to solve the riddle before anybody else does."

"What riddle?"

"Any riddle. I'm speaking hypotheticals." He swept the torch around the cavern, randomly lighting a glimmer of water on a wall, a tangle of roots dangling from the ceiling. "Sultis is an idiot. He wanted us contained so we were easier to control. But he didn't do his research. This isn't just some hole in the ground. It's connected to a whole catacomb. I can get us out of here."

Ian snorted. "If you could do that, why were you still here when they lowered me down?"

The light swung back. Lucas was smiling, his gaze as brilliant as the illumination. "Because I wanted to meet you."

"I don't understand why. I'm nobody."

"You won't be by the time I'm done with you." He held out his hand, clearly expecting Ian to take it. "You don't have to trust me yet. After what you've been through today, I can't say that I blame you. But given the choice of sitting here and waiting for Sultis to come back with his goons and all their guns, or getting up and going along with the guy who's only got a flashlight, his brain, and his good looks as weapons, wouldn't you rather take a chance that just maybe I'm telling you the truth and want only what's best for you? For both of us."

In spite of his better instincts, Ian's mouth twitched at Lucas's self-description. "You don't lack for confidence, do you?"

"Now where would be the benefit of that?"

Against his better judgment, Ian slowly reached out and accepted the outstretched hand. His body shouted in protest when he straightened, and this time, when he put his weight on his sore ankle, it buckled beneath him. Lucas appeared at his side before he could fall. A strong arm looped behind Ian's back, capable and constant, bracing him to stand again.

"Is it broken?" Lucas asked.

"I don't think so." Ian rolled his foot, grimacing as each movement shot slivers of pain up his leg. "I can move it. It just hurts like a bugger."

"Well, lean on me as much as you have to. Hopefully, we won't have to go too far before we figure out how to get out of this place. Here." He passed over the torch. When Ian took it, Lucas repositioned himself into his side, looping Ian's arm over his shoulder and grasping the wrist to help him stay balanced. "This should help."

The first couple steps were awkward, but Ian quickly deduced how best to move to match his new partner's strides without slowing them both down. He didn't know how long he could manage like this. Just because his ankle wasn't broken didn't mean it didn't require wrapping to keep the swelling at bay.

Lucas didn't seem to have the same qualms he did, though. He watched their feet until Ian found his rhythm, then turned his attention to the path ahead of them. "I've been wandering down here since before dawn," he said. "I didn't find the way out, but I smelled fresh air more than once. If we're both on the lookout, we'll be able to figure out where it's coming from."

They reached the hole in the wall from which Lucas had emerged. Now that he had light, Ian could better make out his environment. The cavern was more of a very wide hole than any true chamber. Its walls were scored with a half dozen openings, several too low for them to enter without getting on their hands and knees. Ian could only assume Lucas had done enough exploring already to know which held the best chance of success.

"How do we know it won't be coming from another hole in the ceiling, thirty feet over our heads?" he asked.

"We don't."

"That's encouraging."

"Would you rather think about the fact that as soon as they realize we're missing, Sultis is going to come after us even harder?"

Ian grimaced. He doubted the man would blink twice about following through on his earlier threat. "No, not particularly."

"Then, let's focus on what's ahead of us. You'll have plenty of time to tell me off for being crazy once we're out of here."

Ian wasn't so sure he wanted anything to do with this man once he was free, but held his tongue for the moment. Instead, he asked, "What exactly are you doing here, then? Are you an archaeologist, as well?"

Lucas laughed. "No, my grades weren't good enough for that kind of thing. I'm a photographer."

For some reason, the reality disappointed Ian. He'd expected something far more grandiose in light of the bizarre events of the day. "And how does a photographer find himself thirty feet underground? I can't say the ambient light must do you any good."

His sarcasm went unnoticed. Lucas instead chose to laugh even harder, like Ian's words were the best joke he'd heard all year. "I was riding with a French guy I met in Dordogne while he was chasing storms. He wanted to go one way, I looked at the sky and told him to go another, and we ended up on the evening news because we were smack dab in the middle of one of the biggest storms in the region. That's where Sultis saw me. At least, that's where he said he saw me." "You're a nature photographer?"

"Nature, people, things. I don't discriminate. Wherever the thrill is, that's where I'll be."

"Why would Sultis be interested in a photographer?"

"He's not interested in my work. He's interested in me." Lucas glanced up at him curiously. "He really didn't tell you anything, did he?"

"I believe I've told you that multiple times already."

The ground forked, one side slanting into a sharp incline. Ian stopped, forcing Lucas to stop as well, and directed the light upward, trying to assess whether it was a natural ramp or something else.

"That doesn't actually go anywhere," Lucas said.

That made the choice simple. They resumed walking along the flat path.

"Are you going to tell me why it is Sultis is interested in either one of us?" Ian asked. "Or are we going to continue this twenty questions game we seem to have established?"

"He needs us to find the Blood of Sheol."

Ian jerked to another halt, this time straightening so abruptly Lucas lost his grip. He shone the torch directly in the other man's face, searching for any sign of duplicity or humor. The only thing he discovered was that his eyes were not actually brown but a very deep hazel.

"The Blood of Sheol is a myth," Ian said.

Lucas smiled. "So you've heard of it."

"Of course I've heard of it. I've also heard of the Loch Ness monster, but that doesn't make it any more real."

"Sultis thinks it is."

"And you've already established you think he's an idiot. That's

hardly sway enough for me to believe either one of you."

"But you clearly place some sort of value on my opinion, or you wouldn't automatically discount Sultis. So if I told you I think he just might be onto something, what would you tell me then?"

"Exactly what I've already said. It's a myth, and anyone who believes otherwise is a fool." He shook his head. "How do you know about it, anyway? You said you didn't have any archaeological education."

"I looked it up when Sultis told me about it."

He said it with all seriousness, and though Ian kept expecting the punch line, Lucas remained silent, waiting most likely for Ian's next query.

"Please don't tell me you've put both of our lives on the line for a Google search."

At least he had the grace to look sheepish. "Well, when you put it like that..."

Ian blinked. He didn't even know what to say to the man. This entire nightmare was due to some madman's belief in a myth that every respectable archaeologist would dismiss in a heartbeat and a thrill-seeking photographer who relied on the Internet for actual facts? It was ludicrous. Beyond ludicrous. It was...for all his education, he didn't think a word existed that could encompass just how absurd it really was.

"You asked," Lucas said. "And I told you what it was about. Whether you choose to believe me or not is another matter."

"How could you possibly think that I would even entertain such a fantasy?" Ian spluttered. "If you're so aware of my education, you should have known exactly how I would view this."

"Which might be why I didn't come right out and tell you." He shoved his hands into his pockets and jerked his head toward the unknown in front of them. "Let's argue about this when we don't have to worry about Sultis breathing down our necks. Or it's all going to be a moot point anyway."

Ian could have stood there and debated the danger in lending credence to mythology when there were so many real world artifacts to be had and appreciated. But Lucas was right about one thing. Their well-being was in peril, especially since they'd deliberately chosen to try and escape Sultis's clutches. Their only choice at this junction was to set aside personal differences and find a way to freedom.

He didn't ask for help again, and Lucas didn't offer. Neither did Lucas ask for the torch back, though, which lent a small relief as they proceeded through the cavern. Ian needed the control, if only for his own state of mind. He needed to see where they were going, and how they were going to get there, even if every step he took was sheer agony.

Beads of sweat had popped out on his brow by the time there was a break in the silence wrapped around them. The faint cry of a bird echoed from above, and both men stopped and looked upward, scanning the ceiling for any sign of an opening.

"There." Lucas pointed at a spot off to their right, holding his arm still while Ian sought it out with the torchlight. "What's that?"

A ledge jutted out from the wall, thick roots curved along its length providing surprising support. At its far end, a vertical sliver bisected the darkness, like someone had ripped the wall in two.

"I think the better question is how do we get up there?" Ian shifted the beam to skim from the outcropping to the floor. "That's got to be fifteen feet high."

"I can climb that," Lucas announced, already advancing.

Ian gaped at him, swinging the light around automatically.

"You cannot."

With a wink and a grin, Lucas rubbed his palms down the front of his thighs, then reached for something unseen on the wall. Ian moved closer, illuminating the gnarled roots clinging to the earth, and watched, speechless, as Lucas scaled the distance to the ledge. Though he used the toes of his shoes to help provide anchors along the way, the vast majority of the work was done with his arms, like he was climbing a rope. It wasn't slow progress, either. He rose with the efficiency of a man with incredible upper body strength, only hesitating when he reached the ledge.

"Grab that root there," Ian said when he realized what was holding Lucas up. He directed the light at a thick woody root with wispy, hair-like tendrils a few feet to Lucas's left, more parallel to the terrace. "If you can reach that, maybe you can swing onto the ledge."

Lucas tilted his head up and down, assessing the portion of the wall Ian pointed out. Lifting his foot, he dug the toe into a shallow hole, planting it more deeply than he'd used his previous holds. Loose dirt showered to the ground. Ian's pulse jumped, but he swallowed down his panic to stay focused on Lucas. It was a long drop if this failed. They didn't stand a chance if they were both injured.

Ian held his breath as Lucas tensed his leg. He braced against the wall, utilizing the new grip as a virtual step, and let go of the root with one of his hands to reach for the other one. His body splayed against the wall, and for several terrifying moments, hung there with almost no support. Ian lurched forward. The light jumped with him. For the blink of an eye, Lucas disappeared in the shadows.

When Ian scrambled to turn it back on him, he was already

swinging in the opposite direction onto the ledge.

Ian exhaled as Lucas stood up and turned around to look down at him.

"Your turn," Lucas said.

"What?"

"You heard me." He laid down on his stomach and held his arm down over the edge. "Climb up. I'll help you the last bit so you won't have to do what I did."

"Are you barking mad?" Ian hadn't considered he'd have to join Lucas, though he should have realized that was where their escape would end up. "There is no way you can do that. I'm bigger than you."

"Taller," Lucas corrected. "I'll bet a hundred bucks I've got more muscle mass. And I've got a strong back. I can do this as long as you don't just hang there."

"You don't even know if that's truly an exit."

Lucas glanced over his shoulder. "Will it make you feel better if I check it out first?"

"I'd feel better if we had a ladder."

When it became clear Ian wasn't going to move, Lucas pushed back to his feet and walked down the length of the ledge to the opening. He didn't have to turn sideways, and nothing crumbled from its underside, but that didn't necessarily mean it would hold both their weights. In fact, Ian didn't like those odds, either. The more he thought about it, the more he would rather walk another two miles on his sore ankle than risk both of them plunging to their deaths.

"It goes out!"

Lucas's excited voice was muffled. Ian had to slide to his right to better see that the other man's body vanished into the wall. Into the crevice in the wall, that was. To reemerge a moment later with a brilliant grin splitting his gorgeous features.

"This is it," Lucas said. "It opens out on the side of a hill. The ground's rough, but I can see a road not too far in the distance."

A swell of emotion he couldn't identify—Disappointment? Fear?—nearly choked him. "I can't get up there."

"Yes, you can." Lucas returned to his spot at the edge, reaching even farther this time. "I am not going to let you fall. You have my word on that."

"You can't know that." But his certainty was wavering. It was hard to deny the determination in Lucas's face, or the inherent strength in the man's outstretched hand.

"I can." Said in all solemnity. "I got you into this mess, Ian. I'm going to do everything in my power to get you out."

## CHAPTER 3

Lucas refused to let Ian see a single frayed nerve. The guy had been through hell already today, and all because of him. The last thing he was going to do was make it worse by letting him down. Especially since if there was one person in this arrangement he wanted to impress, it was Ian Tunbridge.

He accepted Ian's fear. Even more, though, he recognized his strong will. Though blond hair hung half in Ian's eyes, and he leaned to one side to keep the weight off his sprained ankle, his shoulders were straight, his chin high. His sweater had been torn like tissue paper, yet he hadn't complained about anything but his friends' fates and Lucas's lack of foresight. Oh, and the fact that he considered the Blood of Sheol a foolhardy myth, but as soon as they got free of Sultis, Lucas had every intention of proving him wrong there.

Seconds ticked by. With each one, the urge to prod Ian to move grew harder to resist. Lucas had to bite the inside of his cheek and keep his hand steady, to better show Ian they could do this.

When Ian sighed and shook his head, Lucas nearly shouted in relief.

"I've clearly gone around the bend," Ian muttered as he approached the wall. "Or this is all one horrific dream and I'll wake up any moment to berate myself for drinking that awful herbal tea last night."

Lucas grinned. "It's not a dream. Do you think you could have made up somebody like me?"

He was rewarded with a wry smile, though it was quickly hidden when Ian ducked his head. "I'm fairly sure I've never met anyone quite like you, Mr. Arpini."

"Lucas." He would correct him all day if that was what it took. "And I'm going to take that as a compliment."

That earned him a glance upward, through one of the thickest fringes of lashes he had ever seen. "Somehow, that doesn't surprise me."

Ian started to reach for the wall, to try the same trek upward Lucas had taken, only to pause in mid-stretch. He still held the flashlight. The obvious question was, what was he going to do with it so he had use of both hands without losing the advantage of the light?

"Tuck it into your waistband," Lucas suggested.

"And if it slips and falls down the leg of my trousers?"

"Wear tighter pants next time."

Ian snorted without looking up. He examined his khaki pants, as if he planned on taking the advice, but tucked the flashlight beneath his chin instead. Lucas opened his mouth to argue against the fragile hold, only to hold his tongue when Ian unbuckled and pulled off his belt. He cinched the leather behind the wider lamp. Then, he slid the belt back through two pants loops, tying the ends together so the flashlight hung from his waistband like a utility pack.

"Not bad," Lucas said with an admiring nod.

"I have been on digs before." He grasped the same thick root Lucas had used, his arms tense. "Even if I don't look it."

*I know.* Only he didn't say it. It would freak Ian out even more, and they had a ways to go before Lucas thought the other man would get past this initial distrust. He couldn't blame him. He'd had a hell of a morning. And if Lucas ever got his hands on Sultis, he'd make sure the bastard Hungarian regretted ever lifting a finger against Ian and his team.

Ian's progress up the wall wasn't nearly as fast as Lucas's had been. For all his protestations about his experience, the vast majority of Ian's time was spent at the museum or in libraries. He didn't spend hours trekking across rough terrain like Lucas had been known to do, or days lost out in the middle of nowhere with just his camera and a backpack of rations. His explorations were all intellectual, Lucas had discovered. The man made brilliance look like child's play. Lucas had meant it when he said Ian's talents were wasted at the British Museum. If nothing else, he planned on finding out why exactly he'd squander his talent that way when he could be so much more.

After only a few feet, Ian paused, gulping for breath. "I can't do this."

"Yes, you can." He scooted a few more inches out, angling his body to redistribute his weight so he didn't go toppling over the edge. "Look at how close we are. Just a little bit more, and I've got you."

"You expect me to be able to help. I can't."

"You can." Ian's bowed head wasn't helping. "Look at me, damn it."

He waited, hand outstretched, for Ian to comply. It took longer than made him comfortable for that to happen. He didn't know how much Ian could actually see now; the flashlight aimed downward and at the wall, rather than up at Lucas. But he pretended Ian could read every intent on his face, that it made a difference for their eyes to meet, because he was not going to lose this now, not when they were so close.

"You give up, and Sultis wins." He kept his voice low and even, as soothing as he could make it. Ian was too skittish as it was. "He took everything from you and forced you to conform to his world view. Everything he and his men did to your team this morning, everything he would have done to you if he'd had the chance, he's going to get away with all of it if you don't climb that few more inches and grab my hand. I have never had any doubt in you, Ian. Not in your brain, not right now. Don't start doubting yourself, or all of this will have been for nothing." On impulse, he added, "You want to stick it to Sultis for what he did, don't you? That requires getting out of here and finding the Blood of Sheol before he figures out what we're doing. And don't tell me it's a myth. I didn't come into this completely blind. I've got the proof for you stashed someplace else. Just as long as we get out of here alive."

Another disadvantage to the flashlight's new trajectory? He couldn't read Ian. He couldn't tell if his little speech had actually made an impact, or if the man was rolling his eyes, or worse, was

about to turn around and go back the way he had come. He was gambling that everything he'd surmised about Ian Tunbridge in the past two weeks would prove true. That the man was a fighter. That he couldn't back down from a challenge. That he had a serious problem with powerful men outside his sphere of control, dictating the whys and wherefores of his life.

Ian's breathing was growing quieter. More under his control. Scattered light made portions of his face gleam from the sweat shining his skin, but his grip on the root remained steady.

"If you drop me, I reserve the right to say I told you so."

Lucas couldn't help his wide grin. "If I drop you, I'll even tell myself you told me so."

His heart started beating again when Ian resumed his climb. His pace was actually slower than it had been before, but it was upward, which was all that mattered. As soon as he was within reach, he took a deep breath and looked up.

Lucas didn't need a beacon to see what was so clearly etched there now.

Don't let me down.

Their hands met and slid past the other, each man reaching a firmer grip around a strong wrist. Lucas felt the burn immediately, the sharp yank of added weight against muscles that might have been ready but not quite as prepared as he'd hoped. He slid precious inches, the friction sliding his coat along his waist, scraping across bare skin. He caught a glimpse of panic in Ian's eyes. That certainty he was about to plummet to a bone-crushing death.

Not if Lucas had anything to do about it.

He dug his toes in, stopping his forward momentum. His hand tightened until he felt bones move beneath his fingers, and he tensed his shoulder to start the difficult pull back. Ian's height was the hardest part. The first time Lucas had seen a picture of him, he'd been reminded of a colt on the brink of adulthood, long limbs still slightly gangly and awkward as the grace of maturity set in. Now, it meant Lucas had to keep hauling him upward, longer than he might normally, and worry about Ian flailing about to try and keep some kind of balance.

The sudden slap of fingers along the edge eased some of the immediate weight. Lucas grunted and tugged harder, ignoring the sting on his belly as Ian's blond head popped into view. Offhandedly, he realized Ian's cuticles were bleeding, too, smearing along already dirty hands as they scrabbled the last couple feet. The guy was never going to get out of the shower, once they got back to civilization.

They were both panting for breath when Ian collapsed onto the ledge. Lucas was very glad it seemed to hold both of them effortlessly, but darkness had once again enveloped them. Only the glimmer from the exit to freedom gave them any illumination at all.

He poked Ian in the side. "You're lying on the flashlight."

Ian's voice was muffled from where his face was buried in the crook of his arm. "Trust me. I'm well aware of that."

More gasping. He closed his eyes and tried to imagine the best hotel he'd ever stayed in, with the most gorgeous date he'd ever had, but the cold cavern and Ian's square jaw refused to leave his head.

"I told you, you could do it."

"I'm not so sure I haven't died and gone to hell."

"Hell would be warmer."

"In that case, I'm not so sure I don't want to be there."

"Come on." Lucas nudged him again, carefully sliding up to stand without putting either one of them in danger. "I can do us better than hell."

Ian groaned, but rolled to his feet, using the wall as a brace to stay off his hurt ankle. He hopped behind Lucas toward the opening, which made the flashlight bob around in erratic arcs.

The first bite of fresh air cut into his lungs, welcome and heady. Lucas had to blink against the brightness of the morning sun, but Ian had it worse, shielding his hand along his brow to block out the worst of it. His face was flushed, his appearance much more disheveled in the light of day, but to Lucas, he had never looked so good, mostly because they were out, they were alive, and in a very short while, they would be safely ensconced beyond anybody's murderous reach.

"How familiar are you with this area?" Ian asked.

"Only a little," he conceded. "You probably know more than I do because of the dig."

Ian shook his head. "We only arrived yesterday. I didn't even have time to get much of my stuff unpacked before Sultis charged the camp." He squinted, scanning the distance. "I do know there was a town about ten miles away."

"Little Red."

"Yes. Absolute rubbish name."

"If we get down to the road, we can hitch our way into town. I can get us somewhere safe after that."

Ian stared at him in disbelief. "Do you honestly believe anybody in their right mind would pick us up? Look at us. We look like ax murderers."

"No, you look like a guy who's been beaten up pretty bad, and I'm your buddy who scared off the robbers looting our camp." He'd made the story up on the fly, but he actually kind of liked it. "That's the main road through here. There's got to be at least one trucker that comes through that'll feel sorry for us."

Ian still didn't seem convinced. "This might seem simple to you, Mr. Arpini—"

"Lucas."

"—but with the luck I've been having today, it'll likely be Mr. Sultis who finds us on the side of the road, not some nearsighted lorry driver with a savior complex."

"Hey." Lucas caught Ian's arm and forced him around again. "I got you out of there, didn't I? And I'll get you somewhere safe. I owe you that much."

Ian's lips pressed tight. He had a wide mouth, with a thin upper lip and a lower one more than full enough to make up the difference. In spite of his obvious pain, his gaze was clear and shrewd, the fighter Lucas had hoped to provoke inside the cavern.

"According to your promises, you also owe me this so-called proof the Blood of Sheol isn't a myth," he said. "Or did you plan on conveniently forgetting that part of our bargain?"

Lucas maintained a calm front, though he felt nothing of the kind. "I thought you'd probably want to call the cops on Sultis or something."

"One doesn't preclude the other." His mouth twitched. "It could slow Mr. Sultis down and give us more time to get away."

It was a brilliant suggestion. Lucas was a little annoyed he hadn't thought of it himself. "That would almost be worth sticking around just to watch." At Ian's double take, he laughed and added, "I said almost."

He didn't give Ian time to ask for help. Looping his arm behind the other man's waist, Lucas offered silent support as he crept along the least steep part of the hill. Tumbling head over heels would fit the karma of Ian's day, but Lucas wasn't going to let it happen. They hadn't gotten this far to fail now.

Though Ian falling onto Lucas wouldn't necessarily be bad.

Their progress was slow, but the forest was dead silent, the only noise the occasional bird overhead and their footsteps through the dense undergrowth. The tension in Ian's body couldn't be helped, though Lucas wished he'd stop looking everywhere but where they were going. He knew Ian was worried about being found by Sultis, but Lucas had been around the man enough by this point to know that if he'd left a mess at the dig site, he had gone back to clean it up. As far as he could tell, that was in the opposite direction, with the hill from which they'd emerged between them. Add in the time it would take for them to discover their hostages were no longer where they were supposed to be, and they should be perfectly safe, long on their way to Little Red.

The possibility that some of Sultis's men might actually be in the small town when they got there wasn't something he was going to think about. Those were odds he'd have to take. He just hoped Ian didn't think of it, too, or at least, didn't think of it until it was too late to turn back.

Ian never uttered another word. When they reached the edge of the road, Lucas got a good look at his face and realized why. He'd gone white beneath the sweat coating his skin, his mouth pinched. His breathing was more labored than it had been scaling the wall. Speech would have wasted what little he had.

"I don't think we're going to have any trouble convincing someone you got attacked." Lucas shifted his gaze to the road, straining to listen for any sign of an engine.

"Mr. Arpini-"

"Lucas."

Ian sighed. Lucas refused to look back at him and feel even guiltier than he already did.

"I'd prefer if you were honest with me, above everything else," Ian said.

"I haven't lied to you. Not once."

"But if you were working with Sultis, why should I believe you?"

"I wasn't working with him by choice."

"You hardly seem to be under duress."

A faint rumble had him tilting his head, trying to see around the bend in the road. "Sultis convinced me it was worth my while to cooperate."

"How?"

"How did he convince me, or how is it worth my while?"

"Both. And how exactly does he think you can contribute to finding something nobody in two thousand years has managed to even convince the world exists?"

The rumble was punctuated with a horn blast. A semi, at the very least. He didn't have much time, if this proved to be their ride.

"It wasn't hard for him to get me to buy his sell. I'm almost thirty. My savings account is solid, but if I hit one bad month, or all of a sudden fall off the photography radar, I'm wiped out. I could always hit the nine-to-five, get a mortgage, pack all of the travel in for something safe, something conservative, but I'd be dead within a year if I did that."

"So you'd rather tilt after windmills? The Blood of Sheol isn't going to make you rich."

"Maybe not, but finding something nobody else has? Pulling off the impossible, barely breaking a sweat? That's worth its

weight in gold."

Ian didn't speak. He was already leaning pretty heavily against Lucas's arm, getting heavier with each passing second. Lucas finally risked glancing back, and immediately wished he hadn't. Now, he couldn't look away.

Ian wasn't smiling. He wasn't frowning, either, but instead, watching Lucas with more than a little bit of quiet contemplation. When their eyes locked, he didn't blink, holding Lucas in his grasp without ever uttering a word.

"The Blood of Sheol will get you the recognition you deserve," Lucas said. "Yes, I did my research on you. I memorized your records, your resume. Call it stalking if you want, though that wasn't what it was. But the one thing I learned is that you've gone too long bending to other people's whims. It's time you started thinking of number one. We find this, and you can write your own ticket. You can tell everybody who tried pushing you into some little box you didn't want to be in, to fuck off."

A hint of a smile appeared at the last. "Aren't you trying to bend me to your whims?"

"No, because I'm willing to let you walk away. If that's what you want. You've been through hell. You can stop it all just sticking with the police." He let his own smile come out to play. "But I'll bet that if you do, if you turned your back on me, and the proof, and the potential of such a huge discovery, you will always wonder what if. What if I'd been right? What if the Blood of Sheol really does exist? And you'll be a hell of a lot unhappier than if you'd agreed to partner up and find it together."

The truck was fast approaching. Lucas didn't have to turn around to hear the engine grind to a halt, its roar softening as it coasted up behind them. Ian broke the spell between them by glancing past Lucas's shoulder at it, waiting several moments before answering him.

"I suppose the least I could do is see this proof you're so rabid about," he mused.

Though he wanted to shout in excitement, Lucas settled for a bright laugh. "The very least."

### CHAPTER 4

Ian allowed Lucas to take the lead. He was too cold, too sore, and frankly, too drained to do much more than follow where he was guided. Sooner or later, it would hit him, of that he had no doubt. But for the time being, Ian was perfectly content to let Lucas orchestrate their next moves.

Riley, the lorry driver, wasn't the stereotype he had expected. Though he had the faded jeans, boots, and telltale facial hair of a man who spent too much time outside the presence of a razor, he was younger than both Lucas and Ian, his pale gaze surprisingly naïve. He bought the story about the botched robbery with appropriate gasps of horror, and insisted they contact the Little Red police before Lucas even mentioned it. And it was Riley who suggested he take them all the way to Oakland, his final destination, when he overheard Lucas explaining to the local constabulary why they couldn't stick around.

Lucas accepted the offer without consulting Ian. The moment Riley went off to the petrol station, though, Ian pulled Lucas aside.

"I don't have my passport or any of my resources," he said. "If what you have planned—"

Lucas cut the words off with a solid hand on his good shoulder. "I'll take care of it."

He forced himself not to shrug off the extra weight. Trusting Lucas Arpini wasn't as easy as the other man would like it to be, nor as simple as Ian would have preferred. He didn't like how Lucas knew so much about him, while his knowledge of Lucas's background was so limited. It was especially disconcerting to hear such an accurate assessment of his character. But Lucas was right. If he walked away now, he'd always wonder what might have happened if he hadn't. Worse, he'd always fear another attack such as this morning. He didn't believe the Blood of Sheol could actually exist, but he believed Lucas did, and in conjunction, Sultis. Eradicate the myth, and he'd eradicate the threat to his person.

At least, that was what he hoped.

So he held his tongue when they climbed back onto the smokescented passenger seat, and he nodded mutely when Lucas suggested he get some rest. Closing his eyes, he leaned his head against the cold window.

The next thing he knew, something warm jostled his arm.

"Come on, sleepyhead." The rich, amused tones of Lucas's baritone filtered through the hazy veil. "Let's get you inside."

He blinked awake, but the moment he tried to move, his body seized up. He must have made some kind of noise. The warmth returned, this time gently behind his back, and someone else's strength helped him stumble from the seat.

"He looks pretty bad." Riley. A worried Riley. "Maybe I should take you two over to the hospital instead."

An automatic protest rose to his lips. Lucas beat him to it.

"A hot shower should fix the worst of it," Lucas said. "We'll be just fine."

"Thank you for your generosity," Ian managed to get out.

Riley's open face swam in front of him. "I'll keep my fingers crossed for you that they catch those bastards that did this."

Lucas shifted against him as he shook Riley's hand. Then they were moving, and somehow, Ian found the strength to put one foot in front of the other, though every other step was shortened due to the searing pain shooting up his leg. His boot was tight, his skin hot. Was it possible to get a fever from a sprained ankle?

His senses sharpened enough for him to realize they were entering the side entrance of a Holiday Inn. "A hotel? How did you pay for this?"

"I borrowed Riley's phone to call a friend. She booked it for me."

"Won't Sultis find us?"

"Everything's under her name. We're safe here."

He pulled the door open and held it wide to give Ian plenty of room and time to make it over the threshold. Just the sight of the red sign over the stairs to their immediate left had Ian's body aching, but Lucas led him a few feet forward before stopping in front of the nearest door.

"I told the front desk you had limited access," he explained, sliding a key card through the lock. "I got us the closest room to the door."

Ian murmured his gratitude, especially when Lucas took him directly into the bathroom. He set Ian down on the closed toilet lid and pulled open the shower curtain.

"Think you can get yourself in here okay?"

Steam already curled around the drain, where the harsh torrent splashed against the bottom of the tub. Considering the water pressure, Ian wished he could take a shower instead. Standing under that constant massage would work wonders on his aching muscles. He had to settle for a bath, though, and at least Lucas wasn't embarrassing Ian further by insisting on helping him undress.

At Ian's nod, Lucas straightened and stepped back. "I'm going to find a drugstore and get some stuff to patch you up. Don't fall asleep in there. I don't need you drowning on me now."

Though Ian assured him—albeit with a wan smile—he would be fine, Lucas didn't leave until the tub was full and Ian had removed both of his shoes. He'd had to lock his jaw to keep from screaming out in pain when he pulled the one off his bad foot, but he must have been a better actor than he thought because Lucas seemed to buy it. Five minutes later, Ian sat in the tub, his legs stretched out in front of him, the water already staining from the grime and blood dried on his skin.

He grimaced. He would have to empty the tub before he put a cloth to his body, just so he wasn't lying there in his own filth.

The heat was glorious, though, seeping into his sore muscles to melt away the worst of the pain. He couldn't lay back, not with such long legs, but that made it easier not to give in to the more soporific effects of the water. It actually woke him up a little, as if rinsing away the top layer stripped away the events of the morning.

He emptied and refilled the bath two more times before it

stayed clear enough for him to feel comfortable leaving it. His ankle was definitely sprained, the muscle swollen and tight. A mottled bruise spread over the area where the fibula disappeared beneath the swelling. Touching it hurt worse than all his other injuries combined. He only made that mistake once.

When he heard the outer door open, he was feeling more of his normal self, if a little battered and bruised. "Didn't they have anything in the hotel?" he called out. Lucas must have been gone at least half an hour. He couldn't recall what the neighborhood was like, though he would have expected a metropolitan area such as Oakland to have closer amenities.

The door opened, and he lifted his leg a few inches to better hide his groin. A moment later, his hands splashed through the water to cover himself, when he met the dancing dark eyes of a woman he didn't recognize.

"Lucas is such a liar," she said. She entered the rest of the way and stood right next to the tub, towering over him. She didn't seem abnormally tall, but he was atypically low, and the bold sweep of her gaze over his naked body made him feel even smaller. "He said you were on death's door. You're not even in the front yard."

"Who are you?" he blurted. "Where's Lucas?"

"Susanna de Morcillo. And technically, the room is mine."

He almost thought she meant Lucas had moved them into the wrong room. Then he remembered how his friend had booked it. Under *her* name.

"You're his friend." Not that it made it any easier to be stuck there under her scrutiny. "So where is he?"

"He called and asked to borrow my car." Apparently, she'd seen enough and backed up to perch on the edge of the toilet. Her sun-streaked brown hair was caught in a low ponytail, and he supposed she was rather pretty, in an earthy kind of way. Her nose was a tad too large for her face, but with her high cheekbones and pointy chin, it seemed to work for her. "I got tired of waiting and decided to see how you were doing."

"I'm doing quite well, thank you." He glanced pointedly at the door. "You can wait for Lucas out there, can't you?"

"Are you coming out?"

His clothes were filthy, left in a rumpled pile near her feet. "I hadn't planned on it just yet, no."

"Then I'm fine right here." She crossed her legs. Her sandals revealed toenails painted a bright blue, with tiny rhinestones decorating the edges. "I like the accent, by the way. Very hot."

He was already flushed from the hot water, but her frank compliment embarrassed him further. "Oh. Well. Thank you, I suppose." He cleared his throat. "Look, I'm grateful for everything you're doing to help us, but I'd really rather not have an audience, if you don't mind."

"Lucas and I go way back. It's no problem." She completely ignored his request. "Are you as smart as he says you are?"

"That depends."

"On?"

"What has he said?"

"What hasn't he said? If you ask me, I think he's got a tiny crush on you."

He startled at her declaration, his hands dropping momentarily from his crotch. "Pardon?" When he noticed her lashes dipping, he hastily covered himself back up again. "What are you saying?"

"You guys don't have that word in your country?"

"What word?"

"Crush."

"Of course, we do."

"Then, he's being a lot more subtle than he usually is if you haven't noticed it. Not that you're not kind of cute, but he's been all over the world. Your accent doesn't have the same effect on him as it does on most of us."

He could not believe he was having this conversation. In the bathtub. With a woman he'd never met before who had questionable taste in fashion accessories. He blinked once, wondering if he'd fallen asleep or passed out and was now creating odd dreams to keep himself distracted from all the pain he must be in.

"When did he talk to you about me?" Lucas had suggested he hadn't known about Ian until his unexpected alliance with Sultis, and Ian had believed that hadn't been a long-term relationship. If this woman was in on it—

"Just the two times. When he called me a week ago, and today. I asked him what was going on, but everything kept coming back to you. That's not his usual style."

He wanted to ask what the man's usual style was, but that would only prolong this incredibly uncomfortable conversation. It was unsettling enough to think about this stranger discussing him so casually. Especially when his insights were so incisive.

The outer door opened and closed again.

"Listen, I got your supplies." Lucas's voice got louder as he approached the bathroom door. "But I gotta run out again—Suse." Spotting his friend brought him up short, and his brow furrowed into a frown as he glanced from her, to Ian and his covered up groin, then back to her again with more than a little annoyance. "What're you doing in here?"

She waved long fingers toward Ian. "Getting to know your new

#### friend."

"I asked you to wait for me in the lobby."

"I got bored."

"You couldn't have gone to Starbucks to kill time like a normal person?"

She winked. Ian wasn't sure if it was for Lucas's benefit, Ian's, or her own. "Since when am I normal?"

In two long strides, Lucas was at her side, his hand on her elbow, hauling her to her feet. "I can't believe you sometimes," Ian heard him mutter as he pulled her out of the bathroom. "The man's naked, for Christ's sake."

"All the better to keep on edge so I can get the goods on him."

The door glided shut behind them, their voices growing muffled with the new wall between them. Ian remained frozen, his hands over his crotch. He didn't trust that they might not both appear in the doorway again.

He couldn't tell what they were saying, so Susanna's earlier words came back to fill in the gap. A crush. It was entirely likely she made the claim purely to wind him up, in which case, it had worked. She seemed the type to breeze through lives with little thought to the chaos she might leave behind.

On second thought, she and Lucas seemed to have a great deal in common. He'd certainly appeared in Ian's life with a bang, not a whimper.

Though Ian's assessment was too harsh. Lucas had done everything to try and fix what he had broken. That was hardly the same as his friend's.

The friend who had bailed them out in record time.

Ian sighed and sank into the water, bending his knees so he could rest his head on the rim and close his eyes. He didn't know if

he was coming or going these days. His thoughts were a muddled mess, his body not far behind, and the order he so desperately needed in his life vanished without a trace.

A crush. For both of their sakes, he sincerely hoped not. They hardly needed that added complication.

He jerked at the quiet knock on the door. Water splashed over the edge as he sat up and immediately dropped his hands back to his lap. "Yes?"

"Suse has left, so it's safe to come out now. I picked up a cheap T-shirt for you, so you don't have to put on the ripped sweater again. Do you need help getting out?"

"No, no, I'm fine." Surprising gratitude welled up inside him. "Thank you, Mr. Arpini."

"Lucas."

Ian waited a moment, then stretched to lift the plug on the drain. The water sank into a soft dip, transfixing him for several seconds before he shook off the fugue and braced his hands against the edge of the tub. He lifted himself carefully, putting as little weight as possible on his sore ankle. Back to the real world of violent threats and madmen. How he missed the sanctuary of his museum right now.

He left one of the towels on the floor for housekeeping. Nobody would be reusing that one. The other, he draped over his neck. Somehow, he managed to get his dirty trousers back on without toppling over, but by the time he opened the bathroom door, he was ready to get off his feet again.

At the blast of cooler air, he broke out in goose bumps. Ian shivered against the chill, peering around the edge of the wall to see an assortment of medical supplies spread out on one of the two queen-size beds. Lucas sat on the other one, flipping through channels on the TV. He muted the set the moment he noticed Ian.

"Just checking to see if there was anything on the news," he said, tossing the remote aside. "And I'm sorry about Suse. She doesn't have very many personal boundaries, so it's hard for her to respect others'."

Ian balanced against the wall to approach. Lucas had stood, but remained in place, watching him with a shrewd eye. Something else to be grateful for. Lucas wouldn't coddle him unless he absolutely needed it.

"What did you need her car for?" He sat down as soon as he could, stretching his sore leg onto the bed.

"There's not anything around here in the way of supplies, and I wanted her to bring my bag over anyway. So I figured I'd kill two birds with one stone." The mattress bowed where he sat perpendicular to Ian's leg. He made a face as he bent to examine it. "Shit. You really did do a number on yourself, didn't you?"

Ian let him poke once or twice without wincing. "Why did she have your bag?" He didn't want Lucas thinking about him. There were more pressing matters at hand.

"I keep bags with friends in case I stop in unannounced. I don't feel guilty about crashing there then."

His grip was light as he picked up Ian's ankle. Neither spoke as he wound the Ace bandage around the swollen joint, though Ian sighed in relief when the pressure eased the ache. He wiggled his toes when Lucas was done, testing his mobility.

"I'm never going to get my shoes on with this," he commented.

Lucas tossed a thick bundle onto his lap. "That's why I bought you some heavy-duty socks, too."

"Thanks."

"Now that I have my stuff, we've got more freedom." He stood

and bent down out of view between the beds. When he straightened, he held a long, black duffel bag that he dropped next to the supplies. "Suse is going to get into contact with someone who can get us another passport for you, but it's not like we're in any kind of hurry. We still have to figure out where we have to go."

"You don't know?"

"No." He dropped a laptop onto the pillow, followed by a skinny black binder. "Finding it requires both of us, remember? I'm just half the equation."

"I don't even know what half you are. Or what function I need to serve."

"That's what we're going to do right now." Holding out the binder, he waited for Ian to take it before settling on the opposite bed. "Sultis wanted you because of your language skills. You're one of the best translators of obscure Classical texts out there."

"And what are you so skilled at that they can't do without you?

Lucas grinned and leaned back on his hands. "I find order in chaos."

Ian had no idea what that meant, but he was too distracted by the binder's contents to ask for clarification. Its small rings held a sheaf of photocopies, the edges soft from constant thumbing. In the back was a clear plastic sleeve with a zipper that poked out beyond the width of the paper. He was too fascinated by the copies to flip immediately to the rear, though.

The first three pages were copies of someone's journal, the script tiny and old-fashioned. They had been placed four to a page, cramping the writing even more, and he had to hold the binder close and squint in order to read it. It wasn't in English. It wasn't even a Latin-based alphabet, though it was most certainly European with its runic angles. If he had to wager a guess, he'd say it was older, too. At least a century or two. The foxing from the original had come through in the copies.

He continued on, his curiosity growing.

An obituary of a young student from Egypt's *Al-Ahram*. Satellite maps of weather patterns over the Middle East for April of the year before. Reports that looked like composition analyses, but of what, he had no idea.

Then, in the back, protected by the plastic sleeve, a stack of Polaroids.

"Go ahead," Lucas said, when he caught Ian running his fingertip along the zipper. "That's what they're there for."

He tried not to look like a kid on Christmas morning as he slowly opened the pocket and took out the pictures. The top one made his heart stop, and his head jerked up, his eyes wide as they fixed on the man who had dropped this in his lap.

"This looks like it could one of the Amarna tablets," he said. "It's only a portion, of course—"

"Look at the next one."

Ian hesitated, then slid the top picture to the bottom of the next stack. Another broken slab, with the same cuneiform-like writing. The third was the same. And the fourth. The Polaroids made whispering sounds as he hastily rifled through the stack.

He finally found the strength to look up again. "What exactly are all these?"

Lucas almost winked. "Your proof."

## CHAPTER 5

Lucas had known the tablets would be the key to getting Ian's interest, but seeing the way his face lit up as he thumbed through the stack a third time exceeded all his expectations.

Ian had been flushed when he came out, though whether it was due to the sultry heat of the bathroom or Susanna's imposing presence, Lucas had no idea. He suspected it was a combination of both. He was accustomed to Susanna's brash honesty, but he fully recognized she intimidated a lot of people. Ian's reserve didn't stand a chance at standing up to it. While Lucas had chewed her out for barging in uninvited—and refusing to leave when asked because he held no doubt Ian would have said something—he silently wished he'd had the balls to do the same. Ian's exposed skin had been glistening from a sheen of sweat and condensation when he'd emerged. The same moisture clung to the fine dusting of hair that covered his chest and trailed down the center of his abdomen to disappear into his pants.

Wrapping his ankle, touching him so intimately, hadn't helped Lucas's rising desire. If anything, it added verisimilitude to fantasies he'd spent much of the ride from Little Red trying to ignore, fantasies aided by the warm press Ian's body into his side, by the occasional note of concern from Riley. Now, instead of just getting on his knees for the man, his hands itched to push him down, bend him over, and find out if he was that hard and tight all over.

"I still fail to understand what your part is in this," Ian said without looking up. He'd turned one of the pictures sideways, probably to better decipher what it might say. "What did you mean, you see order in chaos?"

"Just that. I can find patterns in things."

"What sorts of things?"

"Anything. You name it. Numbers, letters, words, pictures. Give me any kind of nonsense, and I can sort it out the way it's meant to."

The gaze Ian lifted was thoughtful, and not nearly as antagonistic as his earlier mood. "Can't a computer do that just as easily?"

"Maybe. If you've got the time to input the data. And the right kind of program so it's got the parameters you need. Oh, and power in the middle of nowhere, because that's usually where I come in most handy."

"You...go around finding patterns often, then?"

He understood Ian's confusion. He'd had to explain himself more than once in his lifetime. "You'd be surprised how much use I can get out of it. Like navigating. I'm great at figuring out where to go. Like having a sixth sense of that kind of thing."

"A human GPS."

"Not quite, but close enough. And riding around with Gerard during his storm chasing? I got us in the right direction because I could see how the clouds were moving and where they were going."

The frown wasn't banished, but it was definitely mitigated to a degree. "Talents like that are usually found in savants of some sort."

"Don't worry. I'm not going to go in circles in the driveway." The *Rainman* joke was lost on him, though, and Lucas nodded toward the binder to redirect Ian's attention. "Those tablets are the key to the Blood of Sheol, but as you can see, they're broken. They're also incomplete, but I didn't tell Sultis that."

Ian sat up excitedly, and while he jarred his leg, he didn't seem to worry about any pain. "You've seen them?"

"I saw the pieces Sultis had, yeah. But there's more. There has to be."

"Why?"

"Because the pattern doesn't make sense the way it is now."

"But why?"

"Because it just doesn't."

The frown returned, this time more skeptical. "Because you say so."

"Well. Yes."

"You do realize this is very hard for me to accept, don't you? As far as I know, you could be in this with Sultis, and merely telling me what you think I want to hear so that I'll believe you."

Now, Lucas was annoyed, too. "Haven't I done enough today

to prove I'm not in cahoots with the son of a bitch? I hate what he did to get you. As far as I knew, he was going to approach you the same way he approached me."

"I assume that wasn't with guns."

"Of course, they had guns. But they didn't kill anyone I was with..."

His voice trailed off. It sounded worse when he said it aloud. He'd always known the way Sultis had snatched him on the way back to his hotel that night in New York nearly a month earlier wasn't exactly kosher, but he'd ignored the inherent threat of the act when he'd heard why Sultis wanted him in the first place. He'd convinced himself that he could outsmart the Hungarian when the time came, and became an equal partner in the venture, at least in his head. But that wasn't the case, as that morning's slaughter would testify. Hell, Ian bore injuries as proof. In the end, they would have been disposable.

"Test me," he said, sitting up. "I'll prove to you what I can do."

Ian was visibly unimpressed. "Any kind of test you could manufacture would likely be rigged."

"Then you make up the test. Anything you want. Make it a language, since that's your specialty."

"I don't have any resources."

"Yes, you do." Picking up the laptop, Lucas carried it over to the desk and opened it up. It took a couple minutes to get logged in and connected to the hotel's wireless. As soon as it was, he stepped back and gestured toward the chair. "Get online and come up with some kind of test. Anything you want. I'll go take a shower while you do it. That way you can't accuse me of cheating by looking over your shoulder."

Though Ian sat up as well, he didn't move right away. "Any

kind of test I'd like?"

"Yep." He popped the *p*. "Whatever it's going to take to satisfy you that I'm the real deal."

"It'll take more than a few minutes."

"Then, I'll make sure it's a long shower." To prove his stand, he scooped up the duffel and headed for the bathroom. "Call me when you're ready."

He could have waited to see if Ian actually decided to do it, but also knew, for Ian, that would be admitting doubt. So he concentrated on exactly what he said he would, lingering in the shower, soaping up every nook and cranny of his body with lazy swipes of the cloth. Not jerking off to thoughts of Ian's bare chest in the next room took willpower he hadn't realized he could summon today.

*It's enough that he's here.* He repeated it ad infinitum. In the end, he almost believed it.

He felt like a new man when he stepped out of the shower, though he had to resort to using the hand towels to dry off. Leaving them in the same pile as Ian's, he made a mental note to call the front desk and get more towels delivered. He wouldn't be surprised if Ian wanted another bath before housekeeping's next visit. They needed another shopping trip to buy Ian some clothes. He'd never had the same need to be prepared as Lucas did.

He was whistling as he emerged, and immediately met Ian's triumphant gaze. "That must have been some canary," he commented.

Ian even chuckled at his little joke, a warm, rumbling sound Lucas would love to get used to. "I'm simply looking forward to proving you wrong." He stood and backed away from the desk to sit on the edge of the bed, gesturing toward the open laptop. "The programs you have on there are crude, but I was able to cobble together a small test. It's hardly dynamic, but you can write down the answers, or point them out to me, whichever you prefer."

"You really don't believe I can do this." He wasn't surprised. Most people didn't until they saw otherwise. Lucas slid into the desk chair, but rather than start on the test, he folded his hands over his stomach and leaned back to grin up at Ian. "Why don't we make this interesting, then?"

"Interesting? How?"

"A bet."

Ian snorted. "I thought you wanted me to take you seriously."

"I do. But we both know you don't."

"A wager isn't going to solve anything."

"It's not meant to solve anything." His smile widened. "It's meant to give me more ammo to rub in when I win and you lose."

"And there's that unshakeable confidence again." Ian sounded more amused than annoyed, which was a definite step in the right direction. "I can't say I'm not tempted, but considering all my earthly possessions are either back in London or likely destroyed by Mr. Sultis, it would be a pointless endeavor."

"So we take it out in other ways. I win, and you drop this Mr. Arpini business. Call me Lucas."

"And when I win?"

He didn't miss Ian's phrasing, deliberate as it had to be. "Name it. Whatever you want."

The seconds it took Ian to answer pounded harder and harder into Lucas's flesh. "The freedom to go after the Blood of Sheol on my own. With all your research."

"Done."

Ian blinked. "You didn't even hesitate."

"Why should I?"

"Because it's hardly a fair trade."

"Doesn't matter."

"And why's that?"

Lucas swiveled around to face the laptop again. "Because you're not going to win."

He tamped down his desire to gloat and clicked on the tab Ian had waiting for him. The first glimpse of what waited, however, had him turning back around and gaping.

"Fractals? Are you kidding me?"

The first hint of indecision appeared on Ian's face. "You see it, then?"

"I'd have to be blind not to."

"How do you even know what fractals are?"

Ian's dismissal of his intelligence stung. Lucas swiveled around to avoid telegraphing his hurt feelings. "I know enough to understand they base chaos science on them. That it's just a matter of generating them by doing the same thing over and over again." He traced the shape of the fractal Ian had buried in the mishmash of white noise on the screen. "And that you couldn't even pick a hard one for me to find."

The bed rustled behind him. Ian was squirming. Good. He deserved to be a little embarrassed for automatically classifying Lucas as an idiot.

He found the other four fractals without giving Ian another glance. When he was done, he clicked to the next window without a word.

This one, at least, seemed a little more challenging. Seven rows of Egyptian hieroglyphics, some of them simple, some more complex. He'd seen hieroglyphics in person more than once, though usually because he was in the company of someone who wanted to see them rather than his own curiosity. He knew at first glance they had been jumbled, each one numbered. Ian wanted him to sort them out.

Lucas didn't look away as he opened the slim drawer in front of him and pulled out a pen and a piece of the hotel stationery. The symbols meant nothing to him personally. It was the order that spoke to him. He'd read about a study where people didn't need vowels to read, their brains automatically translating the order of the consonants into coherent words. He supposed maybe his natural abilities worked along those same principles. Or like the kids who could play music by ear after only hearing something once. It was a gift. He didn't know why it worked. Just that it did.

Warmth brushed along the center of his back as he wrote down the correct order. Ian had risen and gripped the back of his chair for balance, Lucas had to tell himself. To watch over his shoulder as he worked. Still, the steadiness against his spine gave him surprising strength, and the need to prove himself to Ian intensified.

"Enjoying the show?" Lucas commented without pausing in his work.

"Have you had linguistic training?" Ian's soft, curious tone smoothed over some of Lucas's earlier hurt. "Education you've gathered from your travels."

"Nothing formal. And I can't do this the same way just by listening. I mean, I can, eventually, but it takes me a lot longer and more concentration. But looking at it..." He wrote down the last number and passed it back for Ian to correct. "The visual connection makes a big difference."

"There must be a direct connection between the occipital lobe

and the part of your brain that is responsible for this...talent."

Lucas grimaced at the visual. "Well, I'm not getting my brain split open to figure it out. I'm happy just to know it works." And happier still that Ian seemed to be less condescending regarding it.

"These are all correct." Ian set the sheet on the desk next to the laptop, and came around the side to lean against its edge. "But you knew they would be."

"You really think I'd risk you getting all the glory if I wasn't sure of myself?

An indefinable something flickered behind Ian's eyes. "I'm beginning to suspect there's no such thing as real risk for you."

Everything tightened, from his toes to his groin to the back of his neck. He kept it under control by pushing the chair back, rather than closer the way he would have preferred.

"I know what risk is," he said. "My whole life has been one risk after another. I like to think I've gotten pretty good at evaluating whether it's worth it or not."

"But this wasn't a risk for you."

"You're a risk for me," Lucas countered. "I can dig up your resume, no problem. I can Google you all I want, download as many pictures of you at museum charity events I can find, but none of that really told me what kind of man you were until I met you."

"And you consider me a risk?"

"Yes. Though not as big of one as I did this morning."

Ian toyed with the edge of the stationery. The man fascinated Lucas. He was an amazing contradiction, boldness tempered by skepticism. Lucas wanted to stare, but that sort of intent would widen the schism already between them, and he didn't have the luxury of time.

"I have to admit, I don't understand this faith you seem to have

in me," Ian said quietly. "I find it...disconcerting, to say the least. But you've proven yourself, and I respect that. I just hope I don't ultimately let you down." His shoulders straightened, and he held out his hand. "Lucas."

Lucas took the offering, warmed by the strong, dry fingers that wrapped around his. "I haven't won the bet yet."

"Yes, you have."

"What about part three?"

Humor glinted in his eyes. "You mean the part I specifically encoded with incorrect data so you wouldn't be able to solve it? There's no need. I believe you. You've won, fair and square."

Lucas stared at him for a moment, then burst out laughing. "Well, at least you're an honest cheat."

"Hey! That's not cheating."

"What do you call it then?"

"I call it a perfectly valid means of discovering the depths of your abilities." At Lucas's cocked brow, Ian lifted his chin in a show of stubbornness. He might have protested Lucas's assessment, but he hadn't lost his amusement in the whole matter. A definite step forward for them. "Finding order is a fantastic skill, as long as there's order to be found. Of what use is your ability, however, if there *isn't* a pattern? How can I be certain you're not imposing a sense of order on something that truly doesn't have one?"

His laughter faded. Ian had a point. A good point. Now, he wanted to see for himself if he'd imagine some sort of order where none was meant to be found.

When Lucas shifted abruptly to reach for the laptop again, Ian jerked in surprise. "What are you doing?"

Lucas opened the last window. "Taking the last test."

"But I said-"

"I know what you said. I'm going to find out for myself if I would have fallen into your trap."

The third test required him to lean forward and squint at the small images on the screen. They were photographs that had been cut into equal pieces, then scattered across the page like a puzzle. Each one had a piece of yellowed parchment on it, with script thick with some sort of Eastern language.

"It's Syriac," Ian explained without prompting. "Serto, specifically. It's—"

"Don't tell me." He didn't want it to influence his answer. "But where did you get it?"

"I logged onto the British Museum's system. It's part of the test that's given to potential hires. Modified slightly for you."

And an excellent tool to measure a person's skills, he had no doubt. Lucas learned by clicking on one of the pieces that he could drag it around like a jigsaw, reordering the pieces as he saw fit. Clustering them helped him get a better overview of the text involved. He'd never even heard of Syriac before, though it looked Middle Eastern. The name certainly suggested it, too. That would mean reading right to left, but he couldn't focus on that. He had to look beyond the superficial, beneath the individual words, the individual letters.

Everything had order. Logic. It was simply a matter of finding it.

The markings blurred. They were tiny and nearly impossible to see, and he had to stop and rub his eyes more than once as he sorted through the images. "You couldn't have picked something with bigger writing?" he complained good-naturedly once, but he didn't break away, didn't even glance over to see if Ian was smiling at his soft gibe.

When he was done, he'd recreated not one page of parchment, but two, each with enough holes riddled through them to make them look like they'd been peppered with buckshot. He scanned over the results again, knowing he was second-guessing himself but wanting so desperately to get this right—and to impress Ian at the same time—he couldn't not do it.

"That's completely correct." Ian's quiet announcement came with the weight of his hand on Lucas's shoulder, though that disappeared almost immediately. "I have no idea how you do it, but there you go."

Lucas stood and stretched, groaning when his neck cracked. "And I have no idea how you can stare at that stuff all day without a break. I think I need a drink to recover from that."

"Well..." What *was* that in Ian's tone? Lucas thought if he could only put his finger on it, he'd have a better bead on the man himself. "We haven't eaten. Would it be safe for us to go out and find something? I could use a pint myself."

He held back from visible glee at the suggestion and masked it with genuine concern. "You sure you're up to that? I would've thought you'd want to sleep until next Tuesday."

His smile was the freest Lucas had ever seen on him. "Hence, the request for alcohol to speed up the process. Do you mind?"

Lucas matched the expression with his own. "Absolutely not. Let's go."

# CHAPTER 6

Lucas Arpini was surprisingly good company.

No, that was a bit unfair. *Good* wasn't adequate, though *surprisingly* certainly applied. Without the barriers of fleeing for their lives, or musing over mysterious secret abilities that gave more than the impression of a savant, Ian was able to relax enough to appreciate the sharp, quick humor the man had displayed from the start. Lucas was well-traveled, too, with stories from everywhere he'd been. Dinner at the dimly lit bar they'd chosen literally flew by.

He vaguely remembered stumbling back into their hotel room. Alcohol had numbed the pain in his ankle, but that served only to confuse him further when his foot refused to behave the way he expected it to. Lucas caught him from falling—it seemed he was doing that quite a bit today—and with a strong arm around his back, helped Ian get to the nearest bed.

When he woke up, he was still fully dressed, though minus the one shoe he'd been wearing. His eyes were gritty, his tongue thick, and the prospect of a hot shower sounded wonderful until he attempted to move.

Laughter came from the next bed. "You just need to get up," Lucas said. "Move around a bit and work out the kinks. You'll be fine."

Ian cracked an eyelid. Lucas sat on the edge of the mattress, pulling on socks. His damp hair wasn't the only proof he'd just stepped out of the shower. Beads of moisture clung to the strong line of his neck, and for a brief, irrefutable moment, Ian had the fierce urge to lick them away.

"How long have you been up?" His voice came out as a croak. He cleared it and actually felt a little better.

"You didn't hear the phone ring?"

"No." He hadn't heard the shower, either. He must have slept like a rock.

"Suse called. We've got an appointment in San Fran with someone who's going to get you an emergency duplicate passport." He rose and slapped Ian's covered leg. "Which means you need to get your ass up so we can meet him. The sooner we have you legally mobile, the faster we can find the Blood of Sheol and get Sultis off our backs."

Ian was all for the latter, though he still had doubts about the former. He believed Lucas's faith in the artifact. He had even greater faith in the man's natural abilities. But the Blood of Sheol had existed as myth for centuries. The original version told of a young man who attempted to rob the dead as they were taken away

#### ARIES: RIDDLE ME WICKED

to the underworld, only to be caught and punished for his disrespect. When he was banished back to the living, broken and bleeding, he managed to steal the weapon with which he'd been tortured. Myth claimed it was a knife, and from that point on, he'd never needed to steal again, because the blade had been forged by death. There were versions in a number of ancient cultures, with no indication who was the original voice.

If it existed at all, wouldn't some sort of proof become known before now? He had to believe that. Believing otherwise threatened to crumble everything he'd ever been taught. One didn't just stumble across these types of archaeological finds. Their discovery had to be premeditated by theories based on more than ephemeral word of mouth. Ian had every expectation they just might end up disproving the existence, as much as finding it.

He tried not to think of Sultis at all as he rolled out of bed and got in the shower. Men like Sultis found motivation in things beyond Lucas or Ian's control. Like money. Honor. Respect. He wasn't entirely certain Sultis wouldn't continue to target them, whatever they discovered, but that was a bridge he'd cross when they got to it. As far as he was concerned, the authorities could take care of the man, though what could be done considering it was a Hungarian committing a crime against a British citizen on American soil, he had no idea.

The shower helped. Tremendously. He dressed in the new pair of trousers Lucas had purchased for him and one of the man's other shirts, and emerged from the steam, ready to face the day.

"I got a rental car for us delivered." Lucas flipped the room key back and forth against his thigh. One thing Ian had learned was that it was very difficult for the man to stand still. There were aspects of the night before that were a bit hazy, but his one certainty was that he'd spent a great deal of his time simply watching Lucas and being completely and utterly fascinated. "We can grab a bite on the way into the city."

"How did you rent a car without using a credit card?"

"I didn't. I used Suse's. I'm going to owe her big time when this is over, but it'll be worth it."

"So you'll come back here, then?" For whatever reason, the thought disappointed him, though by Lucas's own admission, he dropped in on friends all over the globe with little to no notice. Susanna should be no different.

"Probably. Eventually."

He led Ian into the hall, oblivious to Ian's studious attempts at keeping his gaze up and away from Lucas's ass. Ian didn't need to encourage his wayward thoughts about Lucas by lingering on his finer physical attributes. He held his tongue while Lucas picked up the rental car information from the front desk, all the way until they were safely ensconced in the front seat and Lucas began talking about where they could go for lunch in the city.

"What about the Blood of Sheol?" Ian asked.

Lucas shot him a playful grin. "I don't think that'll be very tasty."

"Very funny. What's our next step?"

"We sit down and decipher those tablets."

"And that requires my passport?"

"You really think it's going to be buried in Bobby Ray's back yard?"

No, he supposed not. "What about the other items in your binder? What are those? Your research?"

"The Polaroids are mine. I convinced Sultis they would help me sort them out. The rest of it is stuff I copied from what Sultis showed me." His fingers drummed along the wheel. "I didn't believe it at first, either, you know. Sultis had to convince me, too. With that evidence you saw in the binder, the Polaroids, and some other stuff I couldn't actually copy for my own."

"Such as?"

Lucas glanced at him out of the corner of his eye, clearly assessing his mood. "Did you look very closely at that obit?"

Ian had to pause for a moment to remember what exactly Lucas referred to. "The student in Egypt."

"Sultis killed him."

Now he wished he'd taken the time to read it. "Why?"

"Kafele Sinan was a student at Cairo University. Two years ago, he published an article in his school's newspaper, an op piece on governmental control over important cultural artifacts."

"Let me guess. He was against it."

"Actually, he was for it. His father was on the Shura Council."

"The upper house of Egyptian Parliament."

"Yes. According to Sinan, it was the government's obligation to preserve their national heritage. He argued tighter regulation would keep outsiders from stealing what was rightfully the Egyptians."

"What does that have to do with the Blood of Sheol?"

"That's one of the things I don't have a copy of. Sinan did a televised interview with a BBC crew that was there for an exhibit at the university. He was the liaison between the school, the exhibit, and the federal government, probably because of his political connections through his father. When the BBC tried to press about the significance of the exhibit, Sinan got all coy on the matter, saying things like, it was just a taste of what was yet to come, and Egypt's importance on the world archaeological stage was on the cusp of exploding."

Ian frowned. "That doesn't make any sense. Egypt is already one of the most important centers for finds. It has been for decades."

"Which means something *really* big was about to happen."

"But there hasn't been a major find that earth-shattering in the past two years. At least, not from Egypt."

"Exactly."

But the connection Lucas so obviously wanted him to make didn't materialize. "Did he say something else in the interview that linked to the Blood of Sheol? The myth's origin could have been from anywhere in the region, not just Egypt."

"No, but two days after the interview aired, part of the exhibit was stolen. Those tablets in the Polaroids."

"Sultis."

"The government laid the blame for the theft at Sinan's door. There wasn't physical evidence to be able to charge him, but he got discredited with the university, with the press, and spent the next six months trying to get himself reinstated."

"His father's connections couldn't help him?"

"His father was forced to resign when the scandal broke."

"Oh. Well, then what?"

Lucas's grip tightened on the wheel. All humor fled from his face. "Then Sultis got to him."

*Got to* was a euphemism for *killed him*, imagery Ian didn't need but couldn't avoid asking for. "He waited six months?"

"He couldn't find the key to translating the tablets. They broke down even more after he stole them. Sinan was the easiest one for him to get to." Lucas took a deep breath. "Somehow, he got him back to England. Probably used his British government connections. The video I saw-"

"You saw a video?"

A muscle ticked in Lucas's jaw. "Sultis recorded him the whole time. In case he said or did something they might have missed, or tried to escape when he wasn't being watched. He showed me the interrogation parts. The most he ever got out of him was an inadvertent confirmation that the tablets were linked to the artifact. Then...he showed me what came after. I guess he thought it would be incentive for me to cooperate if I saw his goons burying Sinan alive when he realized the boy wasn't going to betray his heritage and talk."

They lapsed into silence as Ian digested this new information. Without being able to translate the tablets, he couldn't say for certain that it had anything to do with the Blood of Sheol, but Sinan obviously had. And Sultis. Lucas. It was entirely likely the Egyptian government did, as well, or somebody at Cairo University.

They were on the bridge crossing the bay when he commented, "You think I'm going to need my passport for a trip to Cairo, don't you?"

Time had relaxed Lucas again, bringing back the playful man Ian was coming to know so well. "I was a Boy Scout. I make sure I'm always prepared."

Somehow, that didn't surprise Ian in the slightest.

\* \* \*

Susanna's contact turned out to be an attorney with a wife who worked fairly high up in the local office for US Citizenship and Immigration Services. Mr. Tyler took Ian's information with a quiet confidence, enough to convince Ian that things might work out after all. He wasn't entirely sure how US Immigration could do anything to help him retrieve a British passport, but at this point, he had to have faith in something. He was going to start with this.

"Come back at four." They shook hands as they rose from the table. "I'll have everything for you then."

"So soon?" Ian blurted.

Lucas laughed, but Mr. Tyler simply nodded. "Enjoy the city. It's a beautiful day."

"You heard the man," Lucas said once they were out on the pavement. "How do you want to enjoy the city?"

The way Lucas said it, it sounded more suggestive than Ian was sure he meant. "I'm not exactly my most mobile." He jerked his chin toward his bound ankle. It felt better today, but it was still swollen and heavily bruised. "Can we do our enjoying sitting down?"

He realized how that sounded a second too late, but Lucas didn't seem to notice. "We could always take a cruise around the bay," he said. "That should kill a few hours."

"I like that. Can we get lunch as well?"

"For you? Anything you want."

Heat crept into Ian's face. He was reading far too much into everything Lucas said today. For as well as they were getting along, this was hardly a date, and he had to stop viewing everything Lucas said or did as suggesting so.

Lucas set a slow pace back to the car, chatting about the city the entire way. During the trip to the pier, and then while they waited for the cruise to start, he listened to the broad cadences of the man's voice, torn between his natural instinct to relax in his presence and the more cautious urge to remember who they were and what they were doing. He was fortunate Lucas was too busy pointing out various tourist spots to notice how distracted Ian really was. In fact, Ian barely said another word until they'd found seats on the deck, in a section likely set aside for seniors, while others took spots at the railing.

"I didn't realize you were so familiar with the area."

Lucas gazed out the window, his strong profile softened by memory. "I get out here a few times a year if I can. My family's originally from the Bay Area."

"Oh?" This was the first mention Lucas had ever made of relatives. Ian found it curious that if he had family nearby, he'd called upon Susanna for help instead of them. "So this is coming home for you, then."

"I suppose technically. I moved away when I was eleven. I didn't get back the first time after that until...I was nineteen, I guess."

*I moved away.* Not *we*. The desire to ask about his parents almost trumped better breeding, but Ian refrained from following the obvious line of inquiry.

"It's a beautiful part of the country," Ian said, then smiled. "Not that I've seen that much of it. This is only my third trip to the States, and my first to California."

His voluntary information drew Lucas back to him, away from whatever ghosts had been haunting his thoughts. "Have you had the opportunity to travel much?"

He would have loved to say yes. A part of him craved sharing that with Lucas. But...

"Not as much as I would have liked. My two prior trips were with my father, and I'm afraid I didn't see much more than the lecture halls he presented in. But I went to Greece for some of my graduate work." It seemed vital to get that out there. "Practical studies. I was there for three months." He chuckled. "My father barely recognized me when I got back."

He'd hoped to draw a smile, but Lucas remained contemplative. "You have to introduce me to him someday. He must be a hell of a guy to keep you so tied up in knots."

Ian bristled at the assessment. "He doesn't-"

"It's okay," Lucas said. "It's not so hard to read between the lines. Plus, I talked to some woman at your museum who said you had a tendency to kowtow to him."

"Who?"

Now, he got the smile, though not under the circumstances he wished. "I tell you that, and I'll get her in trouble. I don't know why you're denying it. It's not like I think it makes you any less of a genius."

Perhaps not, but it did make him feel like Lucas might respect him less for not being more assertive. "We could always take a detour through London on our way to Egypt."

"Absolutely not. He's not getting you back until I've had my fill."

His throat shouldn't have gone so tight at such a simple declaration. "When we've found the Blood of Sheol, you mean."

Lucas shrugged, though he hardly looked apologetic. "That could take a long time. You're probably going to be stuck with me for a while."

"You'll be sick of me before we ever hit a while."

"I could say the same for you. There's a reason I spend so much time on my own out in the middle of nowhere."

"More than your pretty pictures?"

"You haven't even seen my pictures."

"I don't have to." Ian met his eyes. "I've seen how you look at the world. How you look at everything. If you know how to work a camera, I have no doubt your pictures are excellent."

He meant it in all earnestness. He wanted Lucas to know he appreciated everything he'd already done, even if Ian's behavior hadn't been entirely forthright. The glib confidence that should have rolled off the other man's tongue was slow to come, preceded by eyes widening, then lashes dipping as Lucas shifted his focus downward.

Ian couldn't breathe. Not with Lucas staring at his mouth like that.

Seconds stretched. A crush. Was there anything wrong with indulging in a little flirtation? Lucas certainly seemed interested. Every other word from him felt like innuendo. And Ian had thought him attractive from the start. They deserved whatever they wanted at this point, just for surviving.

One kiss would hardly be the end of the world. Though from the way his body heated at the thought of it, one kiss would hardly be the end, period.

The boat dipped with a sudden swell, jerking both of them off balance. Lucas grabbed the edge of the bench to keep from pitching to the side, and Ian's sore shoulder slammed into the wall, the frigid metal searingly cold even through the jacket he'd borrowed from Lucas. It subdued whatever had been brewing between them, and Ian kept his eyes away this time, looking out over the glistening water.

Better to keep things simple. The rest of his life was complicated enough.

"Mr. Tyler doesn't seem like someone Susanna would normally associate with." There. That changed the subject. Casual but still indirectly about the danger at hand.

Lucas snorted. "Susanna's crowd is eclectic, to say the least."

"How did you two meet?"

"On a fishing boat, believe it or not."

The image of Susanna's sparkly toenails stuck in a pair of wading boots jumped in front of him, and he snapped his head back around to catch Lucas's amused gaze. "You're joking."

"Absolutely not. If she hadn't been in that boat, I wouldn't be sitting here today."

He wasn't sure if Lucas was pulling his leg, but there was absolutely no reason for him to lie about such a thing, especially in such an outlandish manner. "What does Susanna even do?"

His mouth tipped. "Oh, she's a...jill of all trades. Most of which, it's smarter not to ask about."

"There's nothing dull about your life, is there?"

"Nope. Just the way I like it."

Which was even more evidence Ian needed to keep some distance. His life was staid and predictable. At least, it had been until this particular dig. But when the adventure was over, he would return to his safe life in London and Lucas would go off to some exotic corner of the world, and their paths would never have opportunity to cross again.

All the more reason to enjoy the time you do have together, a wicked voice inside him whispered. He was a little surprised it didn't add the goading, You know you want to.

"Did I lose you again?" Lucas asked.

The query cut through his mental debate. "What? Oh, no. I was just...considering the events of the past two days."

"You looked a little far away. You're not changing your mind, are you?"

"No." Though it startled him to hear the denial come so quickly, he knew before the word faded away that it was true. "I'm seeing this through to the end."

"Good." Lucas lounged in his seat, stretching his arms along the back. The one nearest Ian now pressed lightly against his shoulders, though the hand attached to it remained lax and politely distant. "Though that would've given me more chance to try and convince you to stay."

Ian sat up straighter, but not even that was enough to erase the heat bleeding from Lucas into him. "Well, until I get my passport, I'm not going anywhere."

"Only a few more hours."

"From your mouth to Mr. Tyler's ears."

\* \* \*

"It looks so authentic."

From behind the wheel, Lucas cut a glance at him, a smile breaking free. "That's because it is authentic."

Ian ran his fingers along the seam of the picture. He hadn't sat for another photo today. The thought hadn't even occurred to him. But the image that stared back at him was the same as the one that had been in his old passport. Everything about it was the same, including the date of issue. All that was missing were the stamps.

"I think you're right." He slid it into his coat pocket. "I don't want to know what Susanna does to have such powerful friends."

"She'll consider you a friend now, too, you know. She does that."

"I'm not so sure there isn't anything she doesn't do."

"Don't tell her that. Her head is big enough already."

Their light conversation bandied back and forth for the duration of the ride back to the hotel. It was exactly as the day had been, actually. Spending time with Lucas was as natural as breathing, and if ever he needed a moment of silence—to gather his thoughts, to reflect on something that was said—Lucas gave it, without asking, without comment. Perhaps that was an effect of his talent. He recognized natural order, and understanding ebbs and flows in human beings was certainly a part of it. It made for interesting theory.

They were debating what to do about dinner as Lucas pulled into the hotel lot. As close as they were to Oakland Airport, the lot was surprisingly bare, giving a clear eye line to the front door. He only glanced at it. They wouldn't enter through there anyway. But a familiar shape made him do a double take, and his hand shot out to grab Lucas's arm.

Lucas's startled cry was covered by Ian's, "Stop!"

He didn't let go until Lucas pulled into the nearest spot.

"What's going on?" Lucas said.

Ian's hand trembled as he let Lucas go. "Look." He jerked his head toward the lobby doors.

Lucas obeyed, and then hissed through his teeth. "Son of a bitch," he muttered. Together, they watched Sultis and two men Ian recognized from the chase through the woods enter the hotel. "How the hell did he track us down?"

"Could Susanna-"

"Not even on her worst day."

"Well, somehow, he found us."

"I don't know how." Lucas sounded as frustrated as Ian felt. "Everything is in Susanna's name. Everything. I haven't done anything in my own name since we got here." Nausea surged from his stomach into his throat. "I have." He felt like he was going to pass out. It took all his energy to look at Lucas. "I logged into the museum's system yesterday for that test data. It was the only way to retrieve it. If he's monitoring their computers, he could have located us that way."

Lucas's mouth tightened. "We did not come this far for that son of a bitch to win."

When he undid his seat belt, Ian panicked and grabbed his arm again. "What are you doing? You can't go in there."

Carefully, Lucas pried his fingers off and opened his door. "And I'm not leaving my binder behind."

"He'll kill you if he sees you."

"He won't. He needs me."

Ian reached for his own belt. "Then I'm coming with you."

"No. You have to be ready to get both of us out of here when I come back. We can't waste time we don't have anymore."

"What? But I've never driven in this country before!"

The steel in Lucas's jaw was matched by the tone of his voice. He wasn't going to take no for an answer. "First time for everything."

## CHAPTER 7

Lucas didn't allow himself time to think about Ian in the car. He had to get the binder. He'd worked too damn hard to make sure he had a backup to have Sultis fuck it up now. Ian might not like the idea of being left alone, but his ankle was a liability. If Lucas had to run for it, he'd only end up getting slowed down ensuring Ian was okay. At least in the car, Ian could make a decent getaway if the situation demanded it. He had far fewer resources at his disposal than Lucas did.

He had to assume Sultis had the room number already. He didn't know how he could, but Lucas always planned ahead for worst case scenarios. That made it easier to come out on top. Few people realized just how valuable that kind of forward thinking could be.

Still, Sultis would have to get through the whole hotel to reach their room. He wouldn't run through the hallways. That would attract too much of the wrong kind of attention. Lucas had accessibility on his side.

And foreknowledge.

Too bad he didn't have a gun, too.

He ran for the side door, barely stopping to swipe the key through the outside lock. The room lock opened on the first pass as well, and he darted inside, already mentally preparing the list of what he needed to grab.

The duffel sat on the luggage rack. Scooping that onto his shoulder, he ran for the desk and slammed the laptop shut, while he bent down and pulled the plug out of the wall. The binder was next, but as he tucked both into his arm, two of the Polaroids fell to the floor.

"Damn it." He picked them up in a single, fluid motion, and pivoted on his heel to race for the door.

The phone on the nightstand rang.

The shrill tone startled him into fumbling the photos again. He glared at the distraction as he retrieved them, but didn't bother stopping. It was probably the front desk, putting a call through for Sultis. Which would actually work in his favor, because that would mean Sultis didn't know the room number.

Or hadn't before the call, that is.

Which still didn't give him reason to slow down.

He dropped the keycard as he bolted out of the room, but it was no longer important. He'd call Susanna from the road to take care of the bill, and then figure out some way to make all this up to her. She'd gone the extra mile for him this time, all without questions asked. He'd even forgive her for playing Peeping Thomasina on Ian in the bath.

All he had to do was survive long enough to do it.

He slammed the heel of his hand into the exit to open it, sending sharp pains radiating up his arm and into his shoulder. The ache didn't matter, though. There was Ian and the rental, the engine purring, Ian stretching across the seat to open the door for him even before he reached it.

"Go, go!" Lucas said as soon as his butt hit the seat.

With the duffel on his shoulder and his left arm full, his position was awkward as he tried to shut the door. He had to lean forward to make room for the bag, and Ian was taking him at his order, hitting the accelerator so hard the car lurched. Lucas slammed back. His spine jarred, and his teeth rattled, but the door was closed, and Ian had both hands tight on the wheel.

He spun tight around the corner of the hotel. A Jeep Laredo reversed out of a spot, forcing Ian to cut into a row farther away from the lot exit. Lucas dropped the bag to his feet, then reached around for his seat belt. When he looked forward again, he spotted one of Sultis's men coming out of the lobby doors.

"Bugger," Ian said under his breath.

"Maybe you should just hit him."

"Tempting."

But Ian swerved before the man spotted them. The tires squealed, and the rear jackknifed for a fraction of a second before Ian got it under control again. Lucas twisted to peer out the rear window, searching the front of the hotel.

Their would-be assailant wasn't there. He ran along the sidewalk, chasing after them with his gun already in hand.

"We've got a tail," Lucas said.

"I can see that."

"Lose him before he decides to-"

The blast of the gun strangled the rest of the sentence in his throat. While Ian jerked the wheel at the sound, he didn't lose control. Nothing shattered or exploded, no glass spewed around his head. Luck was on their side for a change.

Lucas settled back into the seat. "I told you, you should've hit him."

A muscle twitched in Ian's jaw. They reached the exit, but he didn't stop, pulling out into traffic to the complaint of more than one approaching car. Once he was on the road, he sped up, weaving into an outside lane to travel even faster.

"Where am I going?" he asked.

Lucas scanned the area. Ian had turned away from the airport, which unfortunately was also away from the highway entrance. "I'm not that familiar with this area," he admitted.

He could have sworn he heard Ian growl. "Not what I wanted to hear."

Lucas looked behind them again. "Are they following us?"

"I don't think so. They'll probably try, though."

Another swerve took them back to the inside lane. The impending light turned orange, but Ian didn't slow down. He turned right just as it went red.

"What happened to you not knowing how to drive in this country?" Lucas said.

"I'm a fast learner." He nodded toward the rear view mirror. "Watch the cars back there. I'm taking us back to the motorway."

"You know how to get there?"

"We only just came from there. It'd be rather hard to forget."

"But we don't know these roads."

"I'm hoping making a square will at least put us in its general

vicinity." He finally took his eyes off the road to glance at Lucas. The muscle in his cheek relaxed, but it wasn't quite a smile. "Life with you is never dull, is it?"

Sheer relief flooded through him. He'd thought for a second Sultis's attack had lost Ian to the search for good. "Never."

\* \* \*

Ian only had one purpose.

Don't get caught.

Even after they were on the motorway, he couldn't relax until after they'd started heading west, away from the bay, toward the road Lucas said would take them all the way to Los Angeles.

"Not that we're stopping there," Lucas had said. "But it's got us headed in the right direction."

Ian had only nodded. There wasn't enough distance between them and the hotel yet for him to feel truly comfortable.

Truth be told, it didn't feel like he exhaled until they reached I-5 without incident.

"Your friend isn't in any danger because she helped us, is she?" he asked.

Lucas shook his head. "Susanna can take care of herself. In fact, if Sultis does go after her, we might actually be rid of him, once and for all. She'll cut off his balls and feed them to her cat."

The image was too ridiculous not to smile. "Have I mentioned how grateful I am she's on our side?"

"And I'm glad you were the one behind the wheel. That was some impressive driving back there."

"You wanted me to hit that man."

"It was a joke. Though considering he shot at us, maybe you

should have."

"And then we'd have the police after us for a hit-and-run. Hardly the best way to stay inconspicuous, don't you think?"

"Oh. I didn't even think of that." He laughed. "Which makes me even more glad it was you. Where'd you learn to drive like that? When I was in London, the only things I saw move that fast were pedestrians trying to catch a train."

"I picked up a few tips when I was in Greece. They make French drivers look like old age pensioners."

Another chuckle from Lucas. Ian shifted his weight to relieve some of his stiffness, stealing another glance at his traveling companion. The color was high in his cheeks, and his eyes glittered. Adrenaline still had his blood racing. Ian would bet if he'd had better light in the underground cave, he would have seen the same reaction. Lucas seemed to thrive under this sort of circumstances.

"You mentioned a right direction." Thoughts of Lucas had to wait. With the immediate threat gone, he needed to know what came next. "What's that?"

"West. We have to pick up the rest of the Polaroids."

He'd had another question already poised to ask, but the answer he got moved it down the list. "The rest? What do you mean, the rest? That's not all of them?"

"And put all my eggs in one basket? How stupid do you think I am?"

Better not to answer that question. "How many baskets do you have?"

"Seven. Well, six now. Susanna's basket is empty." A dazzling smile. "Don't tell her I said that."

He was more interested in knowing where they were picking up

the rest of them than Susanna's good will. "Where's the first one?"

"Outside of Phoenix." Lucas adjusted his seat, leaning back and stretching his legs. "If we only stop for gas and bathroom breaks, we should hit the area sometime early tomorrow morning."

"How are we going to pay for petrol? We have to assume he can find us if we use a credit card."

"Don't worry. I've got cash. It should last us most of the trip."

"Most of?"

Smiling, Lucas closed his eyes. "I told you, don't worry. This is the easy part. Enjoy it while you can. Me? I'm going to take a little nap. Wake me up if you need me."

He listened to Lucas drift off, his pose so confident, so relaxed, so trusting that Ian would keep him momentarily safe. Ian wasn't nearly as sure, though he would do everything in his power to try. But Lucas was right about one thing. Compared to the other events of the past couple days, this was a walk in the park. Ian had to enjoy it while it lasted.

Because at this point, he wasn't entirely sure it would.

\* \* \*

Driving wasn't so bad. The rental wasn't a manual, so Ian never had to worry about his sore ankle. Lucas spent the majority of his non-driving time asleep, leaving Ian plenty of opportunities to think. He liked being able to ponder the intricacies of their situation, a new puzzle to fathom out. Part of him liked to imagine this was what Lucas went through. Another part recognized he was romanticizing the entire situation far too much.

He ignored that latter part. Most of the time. He had enough he was being forced to deal with rationally. This one thing, he wanted

to be utterly reckless about.

Each stop was another piece to add to the mystery of Lucas Arpini. The first was not in Phoenix proper, but out in the desert, on a barren stretch of orange rock and sand. The sun was just starting to peek over the horizon, burning the landscape. It cast the low-slung house in silhouette, and the men who spoke in soft murmurs next to it in soft flames. Its owner stood taller and straighter than Ian, but the intimate tilt of his head toward Lucas as they spoke in a language Ian didn't recognize was all too familiar. He didn't touch Lucas, though Lucas touched him, a slide of his hand around the back of the man's neck as he pulled him into a hug. An embrace that lasted for several seconds.

Ian refrained from asking specific questions when Lucas returned to the car with a soft package in his hands, but Lucas volunteered the man's name without prompting.

Niyol. It fit the aquiline profile and the long, sleek hair that hung in a tail down his back.

He had to tamp down the flare of sudden jealousy and tuck it away in a tight little ball, where he wouldn't wish to know what it was like to have Lucas pressed against him like that.

Ian wasn't awake for the second stop. All he knew was that it took place in Pueblo, Colorado, and the package had been addressed to an M. Prochaska at Buell Children's Museum. He didn't know if M. Prochaska was male or female, young or old. He didn't ask, and Lucas didn't say.

Stop number three was in Shreveport, Louisiana. They had been comparing London eateries to those in other parts of the world when Lucas fell silent, reaching between the seats for a map he'd bought at their last petrol stop.

"Help me navigate to North Park Estates," he said, tossing the

map onto Ian's lap.

Ian opened it to discover an address already written along the edge in Lucas's sharp penmanship. "Haven't you been here before?"

"No. I never wanted to put Don and Maggie in an awkward situation."

"Until now."

No answer.

Any hints on who Don and Maggie might be came only through their home. It was a five thousand square foot, sprawling brick two-story tucked nearly out of sight from the road. Not a single light was on. Lucas parked outside the four-car garage, and, after a cursory glance over the front of the house, went around to the boot where he'd stowed the duffel bag. After closing it, he knocked on the window and gestured for Ian to get out.

"Feel like a shower?"

Ian looked from the house back to Lucas again. "I'm not sure anyone's home."

"Probably not. They have a tendency to travel this time of year."

If he owned a house like this, he'd never leave. But that still didn't mean he was comfortable taking advantage of their amenities if they weren't present.

Lucas trotted along a side path that wound around a group of flourishing bushes to a tall wooden fence, forcing Ian to follow as quickly as he could, though his ankle still twinged with every step.

"You're not going to break in, are you?"

Lucas reached over the top of the fence and undid a latch. A door swung open, revealing a greenhouse on a covered terrace that opened up onto the lavish back garden.

"It's not breaking in when I have a key."

Ian tried not to gape at the obvious luxury. As well as the massive house, the mysterious Don and Maggie owned a pool that could have easily held fifty, with a long, curving slide at the far end. After two days of being stuck in the car, the idea of jumping in and cooling off was tempting, but Lucas had mentioned showers, and the fact that he went straight to a stone Dalmatian and pulled a key out of its mouth that fit perfectly in the back door helped to mitigate some of Ian's unease.

So did seeing him punch in a code and disarm the security system.

"How do you know where everything is if you've never been here?" he asked.

Lucas dropped the duffel onto a marble-topped island that somehow managed not to consume the gourmet kitchen, but his gaze was everywhere else. Flitting over the stainless steel appliances. Pensive when it settled on an electronic receiver of some sort tucked in the corner of the counters. Not his usual brash self at all. "Don and Maggie got that Dalmatian as a wedding gift. They've always used it to hide an extra key."

"And the security code?"

"Their son's birthday." He paused in his exploration and offered a wan smile. "There's probably a boatload of bathrooms to choose from. Use whatever you want. I'm going to find the photos, then shower. We should be back on the road in an hour."

Ian hesitated at the edge of the hard wood flooring that graced the rest of the house. He was reluctant to walk away when something was obviously unsettling Lucas. "Are you all right?"

He thought for a moment that Lucas might actually answer truthfully. His smile faded, and his haunted gaze flickered to the window, the rear garden hazy and unformed through the sheer curtains. Ian took a step forward, but the sound of his hard heel against the floor snapped Lucas out of the spell.

"I'm just tired." He made a shooing motion with his hand. "Go on. Before the cops crash our party."

Ian pretended to smile at the joke, just as he was sure Lucas was glad he didn't press. He found a guest room with an en suite near the kitchen almost immediately and washed up, more questions than ever consuming him. He skimped on the toiletries he borrowed, but when he was dressed again, with his damp towel dangling from his hand, he found himself at a loss.

"I don't know what to do with this," he said as he emerged. "Should I find a dryer..."

His voice trailed off when he realized the kitchen was empty. The duffel was gone as well. For a split second, he wondered if Lucas had abandoned him, but pausing gave him time to hear the water running overhead. Of course. He was silly for overreacting.

In the end, he opted to return the towel back where it was hung in the guest bathroom. It would be dry by the time the owners returned, and if they were as fastidious as their house made them seem to be, they would swap out the towels the next time they had guests anyway.

Lucas was still in the shower, leaving Ian few options but to wander around the house. He almost wished he had a ball of wool to leave a trail so he wouldn't get lost as he meandered from room to room. What did anyone do with all this space? They either had a very large family, or had reason to entertain often.

One thing he did surmise quickly was that they loved their *objets d'art*. Asian statuary, African carvings, an entire cabinet of Austrian glass...They not only traveled, they did so extensively.

He found the front foyer, complete with marble floor and sweeping staircase, and momentarily stopped his roaming to gaze upward. The shower was silent. Lucas would come down soon, they would leave, and Ian would be no closer to understanding the mystery of the man sharing this adventure with him. If anything, he was more confused than ever. One of the only things he was sure of was Lucas Arpini collected people the way the house owners collected art souvenirs. Never in one spot for very long. Impromptu visits around the world that required emergency supplies to be left at random. In many ways, Lucas was as capricious as the elusive Blood of Sheol myth. There, but...not.

It left him a little sad for Lucas, if he was honest with himself. Lucas disparaged Ian's relationship with his father, but at least Ian had roots. He had a place to call home.

He wasn't entirely sure what Lucas had.

He shook off his malaise and turned to the closed double doors off to his left. A front room. The curtains were drawn, the air slightly stale, but a buttery soft leather couch beckoned to him to sit down and stretch his legs. A carriage clock on the wide mantel chimed softly, momentarily placing him back in England, ensconced in his parents' flat in Chiswick. The sensation almost made him smile.

Two mahogany framed pictures sat near the clock. Curious about the owners, Ian stood and moved closer, his footfalls silent until he stepped off the Oriental rug onto the hardwood floor. The nearest was an outdoor urban shot of a smiling couple, a candid from several yards away. They stood in front of a store window, heads tilted toward each other as if discussing something they saw inside. The man was tall and lean, his steel-gray hair closely trimmed, his profile oddly familiar, while the woman, though halfhidden by his body, had dimples to die for and a softness that exacerbated Ian's bout of homesickness.

He'd lay good odds it was the mysterious Don and Maggie. A happy couple in the prime of their lives. When he turned to the second picture, he wasn't actually that surprised by what he saw. It made sense in a way. There were certainly enough clues to support it.

A young boy sat in the curve of thick branches, high up in a tree. His dark hair stood up in wild shocks, his jeans were torn at both knees, and there was a definite graze across the one arm Ian could see. The smile he wore was pure joy, excitement and pride at having climbed so high. Baby fat padded his jaw, but the cleft was the same, as was the grin.

"You ready to go?"

Ian turned away from the childhood picture of Lucas to find the grown-up version standing in the double doors. "Why didn't you tell me this was your home?"

Lucas sighed and shoved his hands into his pockets. "Because it's not. It's Don and Maggie's. I told you, I've never been here before."

"But you can't deny they're your parents." He gestured toward the other photo. "I'll wager you even took that picture."

Lucas edged forward to take a better look. Genuine surprise widened his eyes for a moment before he schooled his features into a calm mask, but a telltale throb appeared at the base of his throat, visible in the V-neck of his shirt.

"They didn't know I was there," he said. "I couldn't resist the shot."

"How could they not know?"

"Because I didn't tell them." His mouth slanted. "Witness the

true power of a telephoto lens."

Ian scanned the room for other hints, then realized he'd been staring at them all along. "You send them gifts from where you've been."

"Some of them," Lucas conceded. "I come by wanderlust naturally, though. Some of the stuff, they bought."

"But I still don't understand why you didn't tell me who they were. You even referred to them by their first names to try and keep me in the dark."

"I wasn't intentionally trying to deceive you. I haven't called them Mom and Dad since I was eleven."

For some reason, that age struck a chord, but the memory took several seconds to come back. That was how old Lucas had been when he'd left San Francisco. Ian had thought it strange he'd referred to leaving on his own, rather with family. It was even stranger that his family was on the other side of the country now.

"I found the Polaroids," Lucas was saying. He'd edged away from the mantel while Ian mulled the situation and stood again in the doorway, poised to leave. "We should get back on the road."

Ian followed him out, but at the door, he paused and glanced back at the photo of young Lucas. He was too far away to see the fine details, but he sincerely doubted he would forget it any time soon.

Back at the car, Lucas blocked his path to the driver's seat. "I'm still driving."

Ian handed over the keys he'd picked up inside. When their fingertips brushed, the heat bled from Lucas into him, hotter than he remembered. Lucas didn't seem to notice the way it jolted Ian, too lost in a world of his own making as he turned away to reach for the door. Ian stopped him with a hand around his elbow. Words failed. He wasn't sure what sentiment was appropriate under the circumstances anyway. There was no telling who was responsible for the obvious estrangement, and he had no desire to make Lucas feel worse if he guessed incorrectly. But the need to assure Lucas was too strong to ignore, especially after everything he had already done for Ian.

"It's okay," Lucas said, before Ian could make any kind of decision. "I'm used to it."

He finally found his voice. "You shouldn't have to be."

Lucas gazed past him, at the house, at memories only he could see. After a moment, he shook it off, pulling away to open the car door. "Let's go."

Fifteen minutes later, they were on their way to their next stop, package number three with the others in the backseat. Lucas turned the radio on right away—to keep conversation at bay, apparently—while Ian wondered why the silence bothered him so much when before it had been a haven. It seemed unnatural for Lucas to be the one to retreat. The man didn't run from anything.

But Shreveport disappeared behind them, and then so did Louisiana.

He doubted he would ever be back.

He hoped the same wasn't true for Lucas.

\* \* \*

Package number four came from Fairlawn, Ohio, and an applecheeked cashier at the Giant Eagle grocery store named Robin. They had to wait for her to go on break so they could follow her home and pick it up. He slept through five. He didn't even know where it came from. One minute, they were on the Pennsylvania/Ohio border, the next, Lucas was shaking him awake in New Jersey because they'd stopped for a toilet break. The Polaroids were in a Ziploc bag, stacked on top of the others.

Six found them in Manhattan. No personal pickup this time. They dropped the car at the rental agency at JFK, then took the subway into the city. Lucas led the way to a bank near Wall Street and retrieved the contents of a safety deposit box he must have had there. The last packet of photographs, and a bulging envelope of cash.

"That's it," Lucas announced out on the street. "Now, we find a place to crash and finally put all these pieces together."

New York was much colder than San Francisco, driving Ian to pull the coat closer around his body. "As long as it's warm. With a bed I can stretch out in. And we walk to get there."

Lucas laughed, carefree once again. "What about your ankle?"

"My numb arse trumps a sore ankle."

"Fair enough."

But Lucas still took it into consideration, Ian realized. All they did was round a corner. He chose the first hotel they saw and got them a room with two queen-sized beds using a credit card and ID Ian hadn't seen before. He held his tongue, even when Lucas specifically asked for a lower level room. It was the same sort of courtesy he'd been granted the entire trip, the same sort of respect.

It kept him quiet until they were both in the room, and the door was shut firmly behind them.

"If you want to crash and get some decent sleep, I'll start working on the Polaroids." Lucas dropped the bag onto the luggage rack with a groan of relief. "I need the whole bed, so we'll have to take turns on the other one."

He watched Lucas brush past him to head to the bed nearest the window. He was weary from all the traveling, but he refused to shirk his share of their situation, no matter how considerate Lucas insisted on being. "I'll help."

Lucas shook his head as he dropped the packages of Polaroids onto the bed. "There's nothing for you to do."

"I can help you sort them." Removing his jacket, he laid aside the few odds and ends they'd accumulated during their trip. "We're a partnership, aren't we?"

His terminology diverted Lucas from his task. His eyes narrowed, sharp and assessing. "Are we?" he challenged. "Have you finally committed to this?"

He tried to make a joke of it. "I came with you across the country, didn't I?"

"You're closer to England now. Closer to flying home. You haven't mentioned the Blood of Sheol once since we left."

"I haven't wanted to jinx our good luck." That joke fell flat as well. His only choice was to approach, though when he stood only inches away, he was less inclined to argue with Lucas and more inclined to focus on the man himself. "I'm in. I want to see this through to the end."

Lucas searched his face, clearly waiting for the other shoe to drop. Every line was visible, from the tightness around his mouth to the exhaustion at the corners of his eyes. Ian knew he would never admit it, but the past four days had been hard on Lucas, in more ways than one. He claimed responsibility for everything that had gone wrong, from the death of Ian's dig mates to their trek across the country. It was on the tip of Ian's tongue to tell him he was wrong, that they were in this together, when the frown disappeared, replaced by a familiar smile.

"Partners." Lucas grasped Ian's shoulder and hauled him forward the rest of the way, embracing him in a loose grip as he slapped Ian's back. "Best word I ever heard."

Ian returned the hug awkwardly, all too aware of the hard body now pressing against his. Every flare of desire he'd managed to squelch since meeting this man roared back to life, stoked by his proximity, their agreement, the weight that had been lifted from their shoulders in arriving. How many times had he been lulled asleep by the sound of Lucas's voice? Or flushed at a smile caught out of the corner of his eye? Already, his blood reacted, sheer want making his hands shake and his cock thicken when he really wished it wouldn't.

Or at least, wished it could have waited until the object of his desire didn't currently feel it nudging against his hip.

## CHAPTER 8

Lucas had lived most of his life acting on impulse. His instincts rarely let him down. Pulling Ian into a loose hug had been a moment of sheer glee, relief that he didn't have to worry about Ian abandoning the hunt. He'd been suppressing his own desires for the man so effectively, he didn't give a second thought about a random casual touch. It was supposed to be brief, after all. Just two friends, relishing a minor victory.

It would have been, too, if he hadn't felt Ian's cock growing against his hip.

His breath caught. Exhaling would be acknowledgment, and then Ian would be gone, back in his virtual corner watching Lucas warily from a distance. He did that. A lot. The constant scrutiny had been mildly annoying at first, but Lucas got used to it after convincing himself it was Ian's right. He didn't know Lucas. He was a natural observer. If Lucas wanted his trust, he needed to tolerate the exposure. That had been why he'd volunteered Niyol's name after Ian witnessed their goodbye. The fact that he hadn't pressed about someone who was obviously an ex-lover was testimony to his discretion.

Lucas didn't know what had got into Ian in Shreveport. He would have loved to have some of that discretion back. The topic of his parents always unsettled him.

But for all his hope otherwise, he'd given up on anything more than friendship. He knew Ian was gay, but sharing an orientation didn't mean sharing an attraction, especially in their current circumstances. The proof that Ian wasn't as disinterested in him physically as he'd thought had his own cock swelling, the hand he had near the small of Ian's back turning a fraction to splay and hold them still.

Ian stiffened. "Lucas—"

"Don't." The word came out as a whisper, fanning down the side of Ian's long, sinewy neck. He felt as much as saw the goose bumps erupt, and when Ian tensed to draw back, Lucas heard himself add, "Please."

It wouldn't last. He knew that. Ian was too tense for anything close to what Lucas wanted to happen. But he could still enjoy this contact, the exquisite pressure of arousal against his hungry flesh, the smell of sweat and skin combining to remind him of everything he'd come to know about Ian, more than the facts or the resume, deeper than the color of his hair or the length of his stretch.

His lips parted, his tongue darting out to taste the nearest inch of skin. It was rough with stubble, tickling his taste buds to water. A gurgled whimper came from Ian's throat at the almost delicate swipe, and Lucas's hands tightened in reflex. Squeezing his eyes shut, he licked again, this time longer, higher, into the coarse edge of the hairline. More watering, another whimper, and God, how was he going to let him go now?

He nuzzled his nose in Ian's hair, his mouth moving along the hard line of his neck. His prick ached for more than the teasing contact it got, and he had to struggle not to grind against Ian's leg. The last time he'd gone more than a month without sex, he'd been stuck in northern Saskatchewan with a pair of middle-aged Metis working on collecting data on climate control. One of the advantages of moving around so much was never boring partners because he stuck around too long. They were always glad to see him when he popped back into their lives. Or at least, until they had both gotten off. But ever since Sultis—no, that wasn't entirely true. Ever since he'd found Ian. There had been a couple opportunities for quickies in the dark, something to take the edge off at the very least. He'd passed. Now he saw, deliberately. Because this was what he'd been waiting for.

When Ian inhaled to speak again, however, Lucas knew his stolen moment was gone. Reluctantly, he eased his hold on Ian's back, relaxing fingers that still wanted to delve down the back of the baggy pants and feel for himself the hot flesh of Ian's ass, and lifted his head to step away. He missed the smell and heat immediately, but put on his *it's okay, I know we're just friends* smile in anticipation of Ian's polite rebuff.

Lips brushed over his cheek, startling him into looking up in time to see Ian watching—always watching—his mouth. Lucas swallowed at the hunger reflected in the blue depths of his eyes, and took a risk, stretching to eliminate the distance again.

They came together in an awkward clash of tongues and teeth.

## ARIES: RIDDLE ME WICKED

Lucas adjusted automatically, sliding a fraction of an inch higher, fitting into Ian in a tight seal that left him throbbing. This. This was it. What he'd wanted since seeing that very first picture of Ian online. He'd been enamored by the shape of the man's mouth, jerking off more than once to what it would be like to get lost in it. The only thing that would have made this moment better was if it had been his cock that slid past Ian's parted lips rather than his invited tongue. But damn if this didn't make his head spin.

Lucas opened for more, ravenous now that he'd had a taste. Ian sucked at his tongue with an excruciating pressure, one that more than hinted at how exquisite a blow job from him would be. The quiet ones were always the best. Lucas had learned that lesson a long time ago. Susanna teased him that it was just because he had a certain type, but experience told him otherwise. He hoped beyond hope he'd have even more experience to prove his point before Ian was through.

But as soon as Lucas smoothed his hands up Ian's chest, ready to push off his coat and get to the fine fur covering the man's pecs, Ian broke the kiss. He straightened and stepped back, his breathing ragged, his mouth swollen, his cheeks stained in red. A little bit of mussed hair, and Lucas knew this was how the man would look after sex. Which really did nothing to ease the ache in his groin or the itch in his palms to reach out for him again.

"Sorry," Ian rasped. "I shouldn't have done that."

Lucas blinked. His brain was slow to reconnect after a kiss like that. "You can't think I didn't enjoy it. Because for the record, I did. A lot. More than enough to do it again."

Ian retreated another step. "We have to work together." Like that was a valid reason to stop.

"We had to work together before you decided to kiss me, so

that's not really your excuse, is it?" As soon as he asked, though, Lucas realized he didn't want to know the answer to that particular question. Because then he'd have to get verbal rejection, too, and he didn't need that kind of flagellation in the face of everything else.

But his inquiry had Ian glaring rather than going all apologetic. "You kissed me first."

"No," Lucas corrected. "I licked you. Kissing involves lips. Big difference."

Ian's gaze ducked to his mouth, as if to scrutinize the offending organ. All it did was make Lucas harder. He started to reach to adjust his erection, but stopped when Ian tracked that movement, too.

"Look," Lucas tried, deliberately adopting a conciliatory tone. High road. He had no choice but to take it, or he was going to lose Ian completely. "I can forget it happened if that's what you want. I was ready to get back on my side of the line before, anyway. Just admit that we both wanted it. And that it was good. That's all I ask."

The sound of their harsh breathing filled the room as he waited for a response. He wasn't sure he would get the one he wanted. Ian was the kind of guy who needed a dozen different verifications to believe in anything. Why he didn't trust his gut, Lucas had no idea, but in this case, if he didn't, Lucas was fully prepared to give him as much proof as it would take. Just for being stubborn.

"It was good." The declaration came out quietly, much quieter than he'd expected, considering Ian's mood. "I just don't want you to get the wrong idea."

"And what wrong idea would that be? I already know you're gay. And in case it wasn't clear, so am I."

"No, I knew that."

Ian was obviously having problems looking for the right words, and since he'd already admitted to enjoying the kiss, Lucas decided to let him off the hook. "It's forgotten," he announced. "So anything you're worried about me thinking, you can stop. I know where our priorities lay."

The tension in Ian's mouth eased. "The Blood of Sheol."

"Exactly." He swept an arm at the Polaroids scattered on the bed. "It's going to be tough enough since it's incomplete. But the sooner we get this figured out, the better off we're going to be. Then, you can go back to your life, and I can go back to mine, and you can forget all about one little kiss."

It wasn't one little kiss, at least, not to him, but he wasn't going to let Ian know how much it shook him up. For his part, Ian seemed more unsure now, rather than placated, eyeing Lucas instead of the photographs. Once, he opened his mouth to say something, only to think better of it, then nodded abruptly and backed toward the bathroom door.

"I'm going to clean up and change the wrapping on my ankle," he said. "Let me know when I can help."

Lucas held back his regretful sigh until he was alone in the room. He couldn't hold it against Ian, though if he heard sounds that the other man was jerking off in there, all bets were off. But he'd meant what he said, and just because Ian pushed every damn button he had, that didn't mean he could slack off when they finally had everything they needed to take the next step.

Each of the packages he'd mailed out held the same number of photographs. There were seventy in all, one of each shard in Sultis's possession. He'd convinced Sultis the photos would not only help him figure out the order, but also help preserve the tablets. The fewer human hands that touched the ancient stones, the longer they would keep. He'd even tossed out the possibility of Sultis selling them to a museum or collector after they were done with them. The man responded to money like a dog to a bone.

He wasn't completely sure where the tablets were now. Sultis had shown them to him when he'd been tied to a chair in a Brooklyn warehouse. Lucas still thought the man had seen one too many Scorsese movies. They'd been in long, flat cases, and inside those, each in their own box to prevent jarring against the others. Sultis had never answered his question about how he'd got them, though Lucas had his suspicions. And after he'd seen the other evidence, then done some digging on his own, Sultis had taken them away, arguing they were irrelevant until they had the man who could translate them.

The sound of the shower came from the other room. Lucas couldn't stop from glancing up, though he forced his attention back to laying out the pictures right away. He wanted to make everything up to Ian. It was his fault Ian was even involved. Sultis might have found some other language expert to help with the tablets, Ian would be safe and ignorant on his dig in California, and everyone would be happier for it.

But his mouth still tingled from that amazing kiss, and he sincerely doubted his hard-on was going anywhere any time soon. Maybe if he told Ian it was just sex. No strings. Brits might be private people, but they still knew how to have a good time. Hell, they were world experts on compartmentalizing, so a casual fling should be easy for him.

Except this was Ian he was thinking about. Ian Tunbridge didn't do casual, not the way he so carefully scrutinized everything before making a decision. He acted on instinct only when circumstances gave him no other choice—fleeing the dig to save his life, handling the rental car at the Holiday Inn like a pro to get them out of there, again to save his life.

So why had he kissed Lucas?

Lucas kicked himself the second he made the connection.

Because he'd given Ian no other choice. He'd held him tight and licked the man's neck, for Christ's sake. They were both wound up from all the traveling, and he'd preyed on that, knowingly or not.

He owed the man an apology. A better one than what he'd already said.

The shower was still running, though. He wasn't going to barge in like Susanna had and embarrass him even more.

Back to the Polaroids.

Like he'd predicted, they covered most of the queen-sized bed once they were all spread out. When he'd mailed them, he'd specifically grouped them in piles that wouldn't necessarily fit together, but scanning over the jagged pieces, he saw that he'd sorted them again without even realizing it. Sultis claimed there were three tablets, but Lucas was convinced there were four. Three shards definitely did not belong with the others, and there were holes amongst the three Sultis had owned. It raised the question of where the others could be, who was holding them for Sultis in order to keep them safe.

He hoped that wouldn't stop Ian from translating whatever they said. If it did, they were screwed. Sultis would never let them go, then. And the thought of killing Sultis left his gut churning.

Lucas shrugged out of his coat and tossed it onto the desk, grabbing the chair and hauling it to the side of the bed. He straddled it and folded his arms along the back, resting his chin to better gaze over the photos. Time to switch off. Find the pattern. Forget about Ian and the mental image of water sluicing down his lean body while he showered.

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Reveal the riddle, so Ian could solve it. Partners.

\*

Ian stood under the spray until the bottoms of his feet were pruny and his erection had finally flagged. The latter took longer, though considering the intensity of his arousal, that wasn't very surprising. He'd almost settled into stroking one off when he'd got into the shower in the first place, simply to relieve the pressure. The only reason he hadn't was because as soon as he touched his cock, the memory of Lucas returned, his tight, hot body molded to Ian's, his mouth warm and confident when he opened to both of their desire. Ian wouldn't do himself any favors by coming with images of Lucas burned onto his brain. He'd never be able to look the man in the eye again.

He wasn't so sure he could do it now. Perhaps he could make the excuse of food and go out for a brief break. From what he'd seen, Manhattan had more than enough to distract him. Lucas would want the solitude to resolve the puzzle order. Ian could grant him that, at the very least.

With a plan in mind, even as sketchy as it was, Ian scrubbed the towel over his wet body and head, noting that his ankle felt remarkably better as he stepped out of the tub. Staying off it for the better part of the last week had helped tremendously. The bruising had faded to a dull yellow-green, and it looked almost its normal size. The joint only twinged when he put all his weight on it. He could likely get away with only a narrow dressing on it now.

All he needed when he stepped out was a comb to run through his hair, and a clean pair of socks. He placed the folded pile of dirty clothes in the bag hanging in the closet and made a mental note to look for a laundry while he was out. They couldn't keep buying new clothes to replace the dirty ones. Lucas's coat wasn't hanging up, though.

Ian glanced back into the room, bracing himself for asking for food money. He hated not having his own, but he understood they had to be careful. The tableau he encountered made him freeze.

The photographs were on the bed, just as Lucas had said he was going to do, but instead of being displayed to best see them all, they were oddly clumped together. One stack didn't even look like it had been touched at all, the padded envelope they'd been in still resting next to them. Others were fanned out in half-circles, and as Ian watched, Lucas would reach forward and turn one, squaring it into place before his hand dropped back into his lap.

One minute passed without movement or sound from either of them. Then another. And another.

After five, Lucas had only moved one more time, and Ian's ankle started to ache from standing on it. Almost delicately, he cleared his throat, not wishing to startle Lucas from his concentration.

Lucas didn't look up. "I'm not a mad scientist you have to worry about going psycho," he said.

"I didn't..." He shook off the need to engage Lucas in conversation. Now wasn't the time. "I thought I'd get us something to eat."

"Wallet's on the desk."

So it was. Ian tried staying out of his direct line of sight,

hugging the edge of the room, to retrieve it. He extracted a number of twenties and slid them into his pocket. More than once, he'd seen glimpses of Lucas's life embedded in the worn leather folds, and while the urge to look more closely was close at hand, he placed the wallet back where he found it.

In the time it took to walk out the door, Lucas never spoke another word.

## CHAPTER 9

His arms were too full to manage the keycard when he returned. Ian stared at the handle for a moment, grimaced, then took a deep breath and kicked at the bottom of the door. Not too hard, not enough to get attention from anyone but Lucas, but it still felt more than a little childish to not be able to open his own door.

He stood directly in front of the peephole so Lucas would know it was him, but even then, it took several minutes for it to open. One of the bags on his shoulder slipped, but Lucas grabbed it before it hit the floor, a curious smile lighting his face as he reached to take a few more.

"Did you decide to do the tourist thing while you were out?" He stood against the door to hold it open, giving Ian room to enter. "I'll tell you right now, I'm not wearing one of those I heart New York shirts. I don't care how much you beg."

"I picked up some supplies." The plastic bags crinkled loudly where he dropped them on the empty bed. Its mate now had Polaroids over every square inch of it. "Items we needed."

Lucas rummaged around in one of the sacks he held and pulled out a box of plastic sleeves. "I figured we'd just write the numbers on the back of the pictures once I got them ordered."

"I'm still going to need them laid out to translate whatever is on them." He rolled his shoulder, wincing at the fresh ache. "I don't even know what language that is, remember."

Notebooks joined the sleeves, along with pens, poster board, thumb tacks, a disposable camera, and maps. Lucas was chuckling when he finally got to the food, shaking his head as the bed slowly disappeared.

"Just how long do you think this is going to take us?" he asked.

"Weren't you the one who said something about always being prepared? I'm merely following your lead."

"I think you took my lead and tore off into the next county with it."

When Lucas circled behind Ian to return to the other bed, Ian caught his arm. "I don't want to let you down." He'd done a lot of thinking while he'd been out. "You've risked quite a bit for this, and I've been behaving like a right prat. You deserve better."

The crooked smile that came as a response was more than endearing. It made Ian's belly flip-flop in ways he knew it shouldn't but couldn't find the fortitude to stop. "Funny. That's what I've been thinking about you. I should apologize—"

"No. Don't." Ian didn't want his apology. He thought if he heard it, it would ruin what he'd hoped to start building. "Because you were right. And I overreacted. I'm not accustomed to men quite as...bold as you."

The grin smoothed and widened. "You need to know more Americans."

Ian scoffed at that and let him go. "I think the American I do know is handful enough, thank you very much." He searched Lucas's open face. He'd been gone for several hours in hope of giving Lucas the time he required. He still didn't know if it had been enough. "Are we good?"

The hazel eyes regarding him were clear of any shadows and all ghosts. Ian's heart joined his stomach in leaping around when Lucas nodded and said, "We're more than good."

For the first time since the kiss, Ian relaxed. He started to sit on the bed, only to realize he'd buried it, and straightened with a scowl. "I'll clean this up so you can get back to work. We're going to need somewhere to sleep tonight."

"You're going to have work, too. Come here." Lucas jerked his head for Ian to follow him around to the far side of the Polaroids. When they stood side by side, he gestured toward the various arrangements he'd made. "I've got them sorted by tablet for now, and the first one is completely done so we can catalog it. The others, well, those are harder. They'll take me until tomorrow or the day after to make sure I've got them right."

Ian focused on the first grouping, crouching down to get a better look at the inscriptions without disturbing their order. "It looks like it might be Sumerian," he mused. "But not a form I'm familiar with."

"Could it be Egyptian?"

He knew why Lucas asked. The other evidence certainly suggested an Egyptian link. But...

"I'm not...it shouldn't be. These aren't typical ideograms for

hieroglyphics. But it does seem to have determinatives that other cuneiform languages don't use."

"I'm going to need a translator just for you, you realize that, don't you?"

Lucas's tone was light, but it was enough to break the spell the pictures had on Ian. He picked up the nearest one, making note of where it had been so he could put it back in the proper place.

"Sumerian is primarily a pictorial language. Symbols denote whole syllables or words, and they put them together to create the words they wanted. As it became more sophisticated, it eventually became a syllabic alphabet. However..." He pointed to a series of vertical lines that came after more than one glyph. "This looks like a determinative, which the Sumerians didn't use. The Egyptians did. They used it as a means of clarifying a word's meaning."

Lines had deepened between Lucas's brows. "It's a very good thing I've got you to tell me what all this means, because I'm having trouble just understanding what's coming out of your mouth. Especially if that's the Egyptian for Dummies version."

"My point is, it doesn't look like either one of them. It almost looks like...an amalgam of the two. Like someone who grew up with both cultures."

"Is that possible?"

"Anything is possible. The likelihood, however, is another matter."

Lucas grew silent, folding his arms over his chest as he scanned over the other pictures. Ian didn't know what he was looking for. He already had the shards sorted for the first of the tablets. But his presence was comforting, the awkwardness of earlier now gone, and Ian was glad to be able to seize that again, an anchor in an otherwise murky storm. "Tell me you can at least figure out what they say," Lucas finally said.

Ian sighed and replaced the photograph. "I'd like to say yes."

"I'd like for you to say yes, too." He leveled an assessing gaze at him. "Are you?"

"I don't know." It pained him to confess the truth. "If I had my resources back at the museum, it would certainly be a lot easier."

Lucas shook his head. "Sultis is going to have men watching your work, waiting for you to return. You can't find someone local with the same kind of books?"

"Well, I'm sure there's someone." There were a few someones, actually, acquaintances he had through the museum. "But won't I be putting them in danger as well? I thought we were trying to contain this as much as possible."

"They won't be in any more danger than anybody I sent the Polaroids to."

"I beg to differ. The people you sent the Polaroids to would never prove useful to Sultis. Somebody with the kind of translation resources I would need could easily draw his attention without even trying."

Lucas seemed to weigh this argument, though honestly, Ian had come up with it on the fly. After a moment, he nodded. "You're right. We'll have to come up with another way."

"What were Sultis's intentions? He intended to take me straight from the dig, and I didn't have the resources there, either. He must have had a plan for how I could translate the tablets once you had them ordered."

The way Lucas blinked was a sure indication that was a question he'd never considered before. "He would have had to. That's the only explanation that makes sense."

"Would he have had the books himself?"

Lucas snorted. "Sultis isn't a brainiac."

"Then what is he?" He remembered Lucas's description with a smile. "Other than a thug with delusions of grandeur."

Backing away from the bed, Lucas sat in the desk chair, sprawling as if he planned on staying there for a while. "I'd never heard of him before he grabbed me. But I did some poking around while I was looking for you. Full name, Vazsil Sultis. Born and raised in Budapest, got drafted into the military while it was still under a Communist regime and somehow thrived until they got rid of the Warsaw Pact and everything changed. For whatever reason, he wasn't interested in staying on with the army when conditions started to improve. Maybe he was still sympathetic to the old government, maybe he didn't like the way NATO did things. I don't know. I could never find anything definitive. But he went off the grid in ninety-two, and popped back up again in two thousand, meaner than ever."

Ian leaned against the edge of the table that sat under the window, taking the weight off his ankle. Just because it felt better, didn't mean he needed to push it. "You have no idea what he did during those eight years?"

"My money's on mercenary. Military training, no paper trail, asocial personality. That seems like the best fit."

He was inclined to agree. Especially considering the lengths he'd taken at the dig. "What happened then?"

"He ended up in your neck of the woods, actually. In Devon. Okehampton, to be precise."

"Okehampton? Are you certain?" The town was home to a military training base, and had been for centuries. There had even been an airbase in the town during World War II.

"He's a crack shot. Long-range weaponry is his specialty."

Ian's blood went cold. He'd been even luckier than he'd imagined, managing to escape the assault with only a sprained ankle and a few scrapes.

"How on earth does an ex-Hungarian soldier end up working for the British government?"

Lucas shook his head. "That's something else I was never able to figure out. He must know someone, or worked for someone in the time he went missing. He stayed there five years, and then went freelance, until...guess where he ended up?"

"Egypt."

"Yep. Cairo, to be exact."

At least he understood the man's excellent English now, if nothing else. "So, you think he somehow discovered the tablets' existence, stole them, kidnapped Kafele Sinan to get answers about them, then found you to put them into order? You don't think that's just a tad farfetched?"

"You make it sound like it happened, boom boom." Lucas gestured on each of his last words, indicating a rapid succession. "He claimed to have had the tablets for months before hearing about me on the French news. Everybody told him they were worthless, just pieces of rubble without any historical significance. But he refused to believe them."

"He had to have reason. How on earth did he link them to the Blood of Sheol?"

"He didn't. Kafele Sinan did."

"But if they couldn't translate them, either-"

"How do you know they didn't?"

"Because then why would he ever need you to find someone else to interpret them? All he would have to do is find the original translator. He's certainly not above kidnapping and coercion." An image of a young Egyptian student he would never meet lying broken and bleeding in some forgotten hole rose in his mind's eye. The bodies of all his colleagues from the dig immediately followed. "Or murder, for that matter."

His question silenced Lucas yet again, his gaze shifting sideways as he seemed to process it. Now that he'd posed the query, Ian couldn't let it go. None of it made sense. He seemed to serve no purpose in this equation whatsoever, except as the focus of Lucas's research and obsession.

When Lucas didn't offer a response for several minutes, Ian sighed and rubbed at the back of his neck. "I don't mean to make this difficult. Truly. I just don't understand everything that has led us up to this point, or why we ever had to be here at all."

Though he never saw Lucas move, he would have sworn the other man's shoulders slumped. "Are you changing your mind about our partnership?"

"I didn't say that."

"Maybe you're too polite to tell me you've changed your mind."

"I'm not that polite. And I'm not that fickle. I only just told you I was committed to this."

"Four hours ago."

"Which isn't that long."

"It was before we kissed. Which is long enough."

How had they managed to come back to this? "I thought we were good," Ian said. He sounded desperate, even to his ears.

Except Lucas looked as bad as he sounded. The hand he scrubbed over his face was weary, falling limply into his lap when he was done. When he lifted his eyes, the defeat Ian saw there nearly dropped him to his knees.

"You're asking questions I can't answer," Lucas said. "And what's worse, they're questions *I* should've asked before dragging you into this nightmare in the first place. But I was so excited about the potential, I didn't think it all through. And now look at where we are."

"We're in the same place we were ten minutes ago."

"No, now we're in a place where I realize I've probably made a bad situation worse by being an idiot." He rose so suddenly from the chair, it scraped back across the carpet until it slammed into the edge of the desk. "Sultis told me the tablets described where the Blood of Sheol was located. That he needed to get them put back together, because somebody was very interested in seeing them whole. Somebody very wealthy and very important. I'm the one who told him he wasn't thinking big enough. It was my idea to find someone to translate them and then keep the Blood of Sheol for ourselves and our own gain, not some mysterious millionaire who would likely find some way to screw us out of our fair share. I let Sultis believe I meant him and me, but all along, I was trying to figure out a way to keep him out of it." He waved a hand toward the scattered Polaroids. "Hence, the scenic route across the country."

Lucas had claimed from the start to be the one with the plan, but this was the most they'd talked about it since it had first been mentioned.

"How did Sultis react to the suggestion?"

"He didn't even argue. He thought it was brilliant. He actually let me go at that point and shook my hand. Told me he should have realized what a valuable asset I'd be." Lucas scoffed at his own naivete. "And I fell for it. I was laughing so hard at him on the inside, because I thought I'd played him. When all along, he'd played me."

"You don't know that. Just because I've thought of these questions now, doesn't mean they're actually valid. Maybe Sultis never got the original translator's name from Sinan. Or maybe the translator was dead. And you said it yourself, he's not exactly part of the brain trust. He could have been very single-minded on his mission with the tablets. He's used to following orders, after all. Perhaps whoever hired him was taking care of those details."

Though the argument sounded good to him, Lucas still looked dubious. "I should know these answers. We shouldn't be guessing."

"Then, *we*..." He deliberately stressed the partnership, since Lucas seemed to think he'd abandon it so quickly. "...should find the answers as soon as we can. The more information we have, the better we can play Sultis's game."

Lucas returned to the other side of the bed, resuming his position. With his arms folded over his chest, he was as formidable an opponent Ian had ever seen. If he was Sultis, he would have been more than a little nervous. The T-shirt stretched over the sculpted muscles, molding to his upper arms and reminding Ian once again how strong Lucas was. Now that he'd had a taste of the power they contained, even if it was only in the form of a hug that had gone further than he'd anticipated, he didn't think he'd easily forget it.

"Let's go out." Ian blurted the suggestion without thought, actually pleased when Lucas visibly startled at it.

"You just got back."

"And you've been cooped up in here all day. We'll go get something to eat."

"But you bought food already."

Ian dismissed the bags with a wave of the hand. "Snacks. We deserve a real meal, don't we? For getting this far in one piece."

Lucas's hesitation came with another glance at the photos. "You don't think we should finish this?"

"I think we should definitely finish this." He cupped Lucas's elbow and pulled him firmly away from the bed. "After we've had a spot of fresh air, some decent food, and a good pint or two."

Thankfully, Lucas didn't protest further, following him out into the hall. He scooped up the keycard and his wallet on the way, with his jacket coming right after. "We can talk about how to go about translating the tablets. Come up with some options on how to proceed next."

"Right."

Except Ian had no intention of discussing the tablets, translations or otherwise. They had both been consumed by thoughts of the Blood of Sheol for too long. It was time to clear their heads and revitalize themselves. The best way to do that was to walk away and concentrate on something else for a short while.

He had absolutely no qualms providing Lucas with the distraction. Lucas wasn't the only one who could be so bold.

## CHAPTER 10

Dinner found them at a tiny Italian place two blocks away, complete with red-checked tablecloths, a swarthy waiter who in spite of his short stature had one of the tightest bodies Ian had ever seen fully clothed, and Dean Martin crooning softly in the background. The hostess sat them at a table against the brick wall, and though Lucas had spent the first few minutes glancing all too noticeably at the front door and exposed plate glass window overlooking the street, even he had eventually relaxed enough to focus on the moment and the piping hot bread the waiter kept bringing out while they waited for their food. He'd even laughed at Ian after they'd emptied the second basket.

"You're not going to be hungry for the main meal," he teased. Ian caught a drop of the infused oil they'd poured onto the small plate between them, used for dipping the bread into, and licked it off his finger. Garlic and basil burst onto his tongue. "It won't matter. This is quite possibly the best olive oil I've ever tasted. It would all be worth it, just for this."

The lazy smile Lucas wore was free of the stress that had plagued both of them back at the hotel. Ian warmed at the sight of it, and more, that he was likely the cause. "You might be the easiest date I've ever had."

Ian ignored the label—for all the frissons of desire it evoked and rolled his eyes. "I would hardly call being forced to run for your life easy."

"Even compared to your life back in London?"

Not for the first time, he wondered how much of his life back in London Lucas had been able to glean from his research. "I think comparing anything to that would be a losing battle. Even the flight to the dig was more exciting, I'm afraid."

"It's been a while since you've been on a dig."

"Yes, that was my first for the museum."

"Did you ask for it? Native American artifacts don't seem like your area of expertise."

"They're not. I was assigned at the last minute." The waiter arrived to refill their water glasses. Ian took a quick sip to dampen his dry throat. "The man originally slated to oversee the excavation was hospitalized a few days before their departure. The museum had to scramble to find someone to cover for him."

"And they picked you."

"They didn't have much of a choice. No one else was free for that length of time." But this topic was barreling far too quickly back into the details of their current predicament, a conversation Ian still wanted desperately to avoid as long as he could. "My life back in London isn't quite as dry as you think, though. I do go out."

The candle at the edge of the table reflected in the hazel depths of Lucas's eyes, dancing as if Lucas instilled the energy in it himself. "I never found anything that linked you romantically to anyone."

"I like my privacy."

"Does that mean I have to worry about some guy showing up to beat the shit out of me for having the hots for his boyfriend? I have to warn you. I fight dirty for what I want."

The comeback was poised on the tip of his tongue, ready to continue the light banter, but hearing Lucas so blatantly admit his attraction, with the violent addendum suggesting Ian was something worth battling over, sent heat billowing beneath his skin. He couldn't even protest the flirtation. He'd wanted it, practically demanded it by dragging Lucas from their hotel room. And yes, he could freely admit he'd been the one to force their nearness earlier. Lucas would have pulled away if Ian hadn't kissed him. Ian had instigated it all along.

"No," he managed to croak. "You're safe. There's no one who'd go to those lengths."

If anything, the smile deepened. "That's a shame. I would've looked forward to getting you to pamper me after I won."

"You don't have enough people in your life to do that already?"

"Is that your way of asking if I've got a boyfriend? Because the answer to that is no."

"What about Niyol?" He was embarrassed he remembered the man's name, but there were moments, when his eyes were closed and his thoughts roamed too free to rein in, when the image of Lucas in the larger man's shadow refused to go away.

That did the trick, though he hadn't intended it to. Lucas shifted uncomfortably in his chair, the somber mood bleeding back in around their teasing. "He wants different things than I can give him. That's why it never worked out."

Ian immediately regretted mentioning him at all. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have—"

"No, no, that's okay. It's not your fault."

"Still. It was hardly my place to mention him."

His mouth tipped. "You mean, you're not interested in knowing whether or not you have competition? I thought I already made it clear you don't."

Beneath the table, a foot nudged against Ian's. He had a choice here. Withdrawal was certainly acceptable. He recognized Lucas was attempting to test their boundaries without making either of them uncomfortable. And it only took a single look at Lucas to know he was more than willing to break those barriers down. He'd wanted to do that back at the hotel. Ian had felt that evidence firsthand.

Ian was the one who had to make the next step. More than inviting him out for dinner, more than mild teasing. He had been the one to walk away, so it was his obligation to come back.

As he reached for his glass, Ian turned his toes toward Lucas's leg, hardening the contact between them. A tremor ran through his fingers at his own bravado. It was ridiculous, really. He'd spent a great deal of time with this man. He respected him. He was certainly attracted to him. There was no reason to be nervous about finally admitting to wanting more.

It just wasn't in his nature to be so cavalier about it. Sex had never been simple for him, even when he wanted it to be. Pulling the casual one-night stand satisfied physical itches, but did little for him otherwise.

"You don't have to do this, you know." Lucas's voice broke through his reverie, demanding his full attention again. "I meant it when I said we could pretend the kiss didn't happen."

"Except it did. And...I don't want to pretend." Saying it aloud actually helped lift some of the weight from his shoulders. So did the slow slide of Lucas's foot along his. Ian took a deep breath and smiled. "At least, I don't want to pretend about that part. But why don't we start over?"

"How do you mean?"

Ian wiped his hand off on his napkin before thrusting it out over the table. "Ian Tunbridge. I'm a curator at the British Museum. And you are?"

"Dropping to my knees because of that delicious accent?"

Ian laughed. "I'm serious."

"So am I."

He'd already been semi-hard at their under the table shenanigans. The prospect of Lucas following through on his innuendo finished the job. "You're too jaded to even notice my accent."

"And how do you know that? I thought we were strangers."

"You're not making this easy."

"Easy's overrated. And don't tell me you're not having fun."

"I'm not having fun."

"Liar."

Ian dropped his hand, feeling a little foolish at keeping it held out there, but enjoying the game nonetheless. "If you follow that up with a reference to my pants being on fire, I'm afraid I'll have to put an end to anything right here." "You're going to demand I be creative? Damn. Well, can't fault a guy for having high standards." Though Ian had already withdrawn his greeting, Lucas held his hand out, waiting until Ian shook it to say, "Lucas Arpini. Photographer, traveler, expert at finding trouble."

The warm, dry clasp of their fingers sent a fresh thrill up the length of his arm, better than any alcohol. "Somehow, that doesn't surprise me in the least. It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Arpini."

"Lucas."

Ian's smile bloomed at the response.

\* \* \*

Dinner arrived with a bottle of red wine Lucas had deferred to Ian's judgment on. He hadn't recognized many of the menu's options, but rather than order a European red he might have trusted more, he threw caution to the wind and selected a Chilean merlot at random. The initial sip had both of them moaning in delight, and the first bottle was gone before either man had taken more than a handful of bites off their plates.

The second was gone by dessert, a lemon torta mascarpone with an almond biscotti crust for Ian, and a trio of cannolis dipped and filled in a variety of flavors for Lucas. Lucas rolled his eyes at Ian's obvious taunt, picking up the chocolate one to hold it out in offering.

"You should get the first taste," he said.

Ian waved his fork at the plate in front of him. "I have my own dessert."

"And that somehow means you can't have two? If I believed in that philosophy, I wouldn't be here right now."

It was the first allusion-even as slight as it was-to the Blood

of Sheol, but Ian found he didn't mind. He liked the insight it gave into Lucas, because the man sitting opposite him was not a man content to rest. He would always need to go after the next shot, the next prize, the next myth, heedless of how many he might already have. He was so different from Ian, in so many ways, differences that transfixed Ian in their harsh beauty. He had no fear, or if he did, he hid it away so well it might as well not exist.

He was intoxicating. More than the wine. More than the sweet dessert when he obligingly leaned forward and accepted the first bite. More than anyone or anything Ian had ever known.

All his doubts felt foolish now. It could have been the alcohol—probably was the alcohol—but he couldn't stop wondering why he'd been so hesitant about accepting what Lucas so freely offered. He'd been friendly from the first. Flirtatious. Susanna called it a crush. Maybe it was. What twisted and twined in Ian's gut certainly felt like the beginnings of a crush of his own, but not even recognizing that was enough to make him pull away. If anything, it spurred him to want more.

"So riddle me this." Lucas leaned back in his seat, legs sprawled beneath the table. Their games of footsie had become increasingly bolder as the meal progressed, until now, their knees kept finding new ways to touch the other man's thighs. "If you hadn't gone on the dig, and I'd been able to talk Sultis into letting me approach you in London, would you have agreed to come with me?"

Ian contemplated his answer as he sank his spoon into his torta. "Probably not," he admitted.

"Why?"

"Because you would have likely found me at the museum." Lucas frowned. "What does that have to do with anything?" "It's my comfort zone. A haven." The lemon was tarter because of the sweetness of the chocolate he'd tasted from the cannoli, and Ian took a sip of water to try and clean his palate. "I'm still not convinced the entire thing isn't a myth, and I wouldn't have had any qualms in having you thrown out for being a charlatan."

"I wouldn't have given up, you know. I would have hunted you down and made you listen to me again."

"I know." He cast Lucas a long look through his lashes before ducking his eyes back to his dessert. "Now, if you'd approached me elsewhere first, you would have had much better luck."

"Because you'd have been out of your comfort zone."

"Because I would have seen you on a more visceral level first, rather than a professional one."

"And my visceral level is more persuasive than my professional one? I'm not sure if that's a compliment or not."

"Trust me." He sat up straighter, trapping Lucas's knee between his legs and squeezing. Much farther, and Lucas would feel the erection that refused to go away. "It's a compliment."

With a low chuckle, Lucas gestured for the waiter. "Can we get the check and boxes to take these with us?" he said when the waiter came over.

"You're ready to go?" Ian asked.

Neither one of them had eyes for the attractive waiter as he walked away. The desire burning in Lucas's eyes was no longer shielded by whatever pretenses he affected for Ian's sake, scorching enough to tighten Ian's throat and obliterate any hope he had of breathing properly.

"I think we're both ready to go," Lucas said. "But I'll bet right now that you're more fantastic than anything we had for dinner tonight." Ian was speechless as the waiter returned, then while he boxed their desserts and Lucas took care of the bill. He had to let Lucas go in order for him to get to his wallet, and the absence of the pressure against his thighs left his cock aching. Whatever happened when they were alone, he feared it wouldn't last for very long, considering his current state. He could only hope Lucas wouldn't be satisfied with something quick, and give Ian time to come around for additional rounds.

His breath plumed in front of his face as soon as they stepped onto the walk, but before he could shove his hands into his pockets to warm them, Lucas grabbed the nearest and laced their fingers together. The heat helped, though it was just as distracting as Lucas had been inside. A small, fearful voice in the back of his mind begged Ian to pull away, that someone might see them, and for a moment, his muscles tensed to comply. Lucas's sharp tug and the smile he shot at Ian over his shoulder as they started to walk, however, immediately deflated the protest.

They walked in silence back to the hotel, their strides long and even. Each step thundered through Ian's blood, until he couldn't feel the cold anymore, couldn't feel anything but the rough glide of calluses along the side of his clasped hand and the fury of his own desire. He kept stealing glances sideways to validate Lucas's presence.

This was really happening. They were really going to do this. After all the confusion and nightmares of the past week, the exhausting drive, the tumultuous questions that refused to go away, it was almost a relief to be able to satisfy the attraction, at the very least. Lucas might be able to see past chaos, but Ian was inclined to believe his gift went further than that. He broke things down to basics. Skin to skin, body to body, it didn't get any more basic than that.

Lucas slid the keycard through the lock and led Ian into the darkened room, allowing the heavy door to glide shut behind them. Ian twisted to reach for the light switch, but Lucas refused to stop or let him go. Glimmers from the city's neon filtered through the blinds, and for a split second, Ian was back in the underground cavern, choking on fear, blind to everything but the mystery guiding him forward.

Even he heard his breath catch.

"It's all right." The low cadences of Lucas's voice inexplicably fit their murky environment, shadowed and smoky, wrapping around Ian's body as tightly as his hand did. "Christ, Ian, if you haven't figured out by now I'm on your side, maybe we shouldn't do this at all."

One distinct difference separated this moment from those in the belly of the cavern. The fearful desperation in the other man's tone.

"I know you are."

To prove it, he got rid of the final buffer between them, turning toward Lucas as he shrugged out of his coat. He felt Lucas doing the same, but rather than lose the contact of their joined hands, he kept a light hold of his wrist until both jackets were on the floor. Then, he curled their arms behind his back. It fused their bodies together, nudging his erection against his fly to the point of pain. It also put a strain on his shoulder from the awkward angle, but Lucas fixed that almost right away, releasing his hand so he could flatten his palm against the top of Ian's ass.

Just like he'd done when Ian had kissed him.

He bent his head at the same time Lucas lifted his. Their mouths grazed at the corners, wine-scented breath hot against their cheeks. The tip of Lucas's tongue skimmed along Ian's lower lip, but when Ian tried to catch it, Lucas danced away, sampling the roughness of his cheek instead.

Ian groaned at the first nip. The inside of his cheek prickled, filling his mouth with water, and he had to swallow more than once to get rid of it. With Lucas being the one to keep the embrace, he now had the freedom to return it, to curl his arm around the back of Lucas's shoulders and refuse him the space he might demand to separate.

A chuckle reverberated through his skin. Another kiss glided along his jaw.

"I'll say this for you." Lucas pulled Ian's shirt free from his trousers, then pushed his hand deep inside the waistband to dig strong fingers into the bare flesh of Ian's hip. "When you make up your mind about something, you really do make it up."

"I don't want you going anywhere." He had to force the words out. His lungs were already tightening to the point of not working right.

"We have to end up on a bed sooner or later."

"We covered both the beds."

"You really think that's going to stop me now?"

The added bulk of Lucas's forearm strained his trousers, digging the fabric into Ian's waist, but Lucas seemed to be in no hurry to let Ian go, or get rid of the offending garment. He was too busy gnawing at Ian's neck, biting along sinew straining for more, licking over the marks he was likely leaving behind. The man certainly had a thing for licking, Ian realized. Not that he was complaining. Every swipe of his rough tongue sent fresh shivers across Ian's skin. He thought he could very well stand there like that indefinitely. Lucas flexed his hand, massaging Ian's ass with each squeeze. His fingertips tickled near the crease, teasing with how close he was, and Ian widened his stance automatically, hoping Lucas would take the hint.

"All you have to do is say the word." Lucas barely lifted his mouth away from Ian's skin to speak. "Anything you want. It's yours."

"Did you..." The question caught in his throat when Lucas bit at his Adam's apple. Ian's eyes rolled back into his head, and he clutched for a hold—anything—to keep from losing his balance. One swallow, and he found enough breath to try his query again. "What word would you like to hear?"

"Now that's a loaded question, if ever I heard one."

His hot lips disappeared, followed right away by his hand. Ian tried to stop him from moving away, but the best he could manage was keeping Lucas in front of him.

"You don't want me to get you out of these clothes?"

An embarrassed flush crept over Ian's cheeks. He was very glad Lucas couldn't see him very well. "Oh, right."

Somehow, he found the fortitude to drop his arm from Lucas's shoulders to give him room to slide his shirt off. Lucas smoothed his warm palms down Ian's biceps, and stepped close again to run his tongue along the sharp line of his collarbone.

"I don't know how you can see a thing to do that," Ian joked.

Lucas lifted his head. With the errant light from the windows, Ian could just make out a reflection off his eyes. "It's all up here," he said, tapping his brow. "I've wanted to do this for a very long time."

A very long time was entirely too relative. Ian knew for Lucas, a week fit that phrase all too well. Could he even fathom what it meant to Ian?

He remained unmoving for a moment too long.

"You've gone quiet." Lucas rubbed down the length of Ian's arms, stopping to rest at his waist. "Something wrong?"

"No, no, nothing's wrong." And nothing was. In fact, everything felt far too right, which was likely why his brain kept up the incessant questions. "Just overwhelmed. It's been...a long time for me."

The button on his trousers popped free. "A guy like you should never have to wait."

Hot knuckles scraped across his stomach in the quest to delve inside his pants. Though each touch was firm, they were also maddeningly slow, contrary to the promise in Lucas's words. Ian held his breath, waiting for them to go deeper, to touch his straining cock, to do anything but taunt him with how near they were. He gasped at the sudden flick of a tongue across his left nipple.

"Breathe," Lucas said. "Trust me. This is way more enjoyable if you're conscious."

Ian couldn't help but laugh, which in and of itself helped him relax a little. He was even able to stay like that when Lucas did the same across the right nipple, circling it with the flat of his tongue afterward to draw it into a tight peak. At his waist, Lucas found the slight indentation of his navel, tickling in its shallow depth for a moment before finally grabbing his pants and pushing them down his legs.

His erection caught on the elastic, trapping them in what would have been a humorous pose for the moments until it snapped free and slapped lightly against Ian's stomach. The wet tip rubbed over Lucas's chest as he descended, and Ian had to relinquish his hold on the other man's hips to find a better grip at his shoulders. He wished he could have turned on the light. He would have loved to see his cock disappear past those succulent lips. He would have loved even more to see the look on Lucas's face when it happened, to know definitively if he enjoyed it as much as Ian would.

And did. Because the heat engulfing his cock when Lucas sucked the head into his mouth nearly made Ian's knees buckle.

"Bloody hell," he muttered. His fingertips dug into the hard muscle, trying to find purchase, but they were poor compensation for his shattered equilibrium. His thighs trembled. His entire lower half threatened to give out entirely. He was in for a world of trouble if it felt this good just from the start of a blow job.

Without moving farther down the shaft, Lucas swirled around the ridge, keeping the foreskin pulled tightly back, holding Ian steady at the base caught between his thumb and index finger. His other hand worked at freeing Ian of his clothes, prodding Ian's feet to lift when the time came so he could step out of them completely. He never stopped sucking. If anything, the suction grew more intense, strong enough for Ian's ass to clench and goose bumps to erupt along the back of his legs.

If he'd ever been more excited than he was at that moment, Ian couldn't remember it. He could barely remember his own name as he clutched at Lucas's shoulders. He certainly couldn't tell Lucas how amazing it felt, since his voice chose that moment to disappear with any lung capacity he might have had. His earlier fear that this would all be over too soon reared its ugly head again, but all he could do was stand there and quiver like he was back in sixth form, fumbling with Gareth Hopkins in the boys' toilet.

Lucas came off his cock with an audible pop, licking down the vein along the underside until he reached the tight sac. "You've

stopped breathing again." He slipped his hand between Ian's thighs, coaxing them farther apart. His touch was velvety soft, but undeniably steel beneath, brooking no denial for what he wanted. And what he clearly desired was to touch more of Ian, to stroke along the skin behind his balls in electric sweeps, to nuzzle in the crevice where thigh met groin and audibly inhale the musky aroma.

Ian had no idea how Lucas expected anything but the most base of responses when he touched him like that, though under that rationale, breathing should have been a given. In, out, in, out, repeat ad infinitum. Except focusing on the rhythm reminded him of similar tempos, and this time, his leg really did sway, noticeably enough for Lucas to snatch his hand from between his thighs and grab onto his hip.

"Maybe you should sit down," Lucas suggested.

Ian nodded, then felt like a fool when he realized Lucas couldn't see him. No matter. Lucas was already guiding him to the side, to the hard edge of the mattress and its welcoming steadiness.

Plastic bags crinkled beneath him when he sat down, though he'd escaped landing on anything of consequence. Lucas appeared like magic between his legs, filling the space so Ian's world was consumed by his presence. A hand clamped lightly around the back of Ian's neck, drawing him closer. This time when they kissed, their aim was truer. Lips found lips. Tongue twisted around tongue. Someone whimpered, though Ian strongly suspected that someone was him. And everything that had been so shaky when he'd been standing now felt absolutely solid—his flesh, Lucas's desire.

Kissing like this also had another advantage. It gave Ian free rein to roam over Lucas's sculpted torso, sliding beneath his T- shirt to trace over each muscle. The hair trailing into the jeans tickled against his palm, but even better was the way Lucas twitched with every caress. He pushed harder into Ian's hands, demanding more without ever uttering a word. His need was just as great, just as hungry, as Ian's, and it bled into his kisses, roughening them until teeth caught at Ian's lips, moans echoed into his skin.

Lucas was the one to break away this time, panting so hard Ian felt it with every rapid rise of his chest. "I have got to get out of these clothes," he said, reaching for the hem of his shirt. He whipped it over his head, and again, Ian wished he had the light, the better to see what he now could only feel.

The rasp of a zipper came next. Another reason for illumination.

Determined not to miss out, Ian groped blindly downward, rewarded with the throbbing heat of Lucas's arousal. It was thicker than he'd expected, and the lack of a foreskin fascinated him. The only non-Brits he'd had sex with had been Greek, who didn't circumcise either. Damn it. Something else he wished he could see.

He settled for pumping up and down its length. With a hungry moan, Lucas cupped Ian's head and brought their mouths back together, devouring when before he'd been sampling. The moans didn't stop with the tangle of tongues. If anything, they became louder with every pull at his cock, until Ian was swallowing the sounds his firm touch elicited. He held no illusions Lucas would be a quiet lover, but he was equally confident he'd be attentive and thorough. No anonymous quickies in a toilet stall for Lucas Arpini. Which meant only good things for Ian Tunbridge.

Lucas slid his hands down to Ian's shoulders, pushing him away to break the oral contact. "Lay back," he ordered.

Ian complied, but refused to let go, forcing Lucas to follow. Lucas held himself up easily with one hand braced on the bed, while the other swept the supplies Ian had bought earlier off and over the edge.

"There. That gives us more room."

His heart pounded. "For what?"

His continued strokes had Lucas thrusting his hips to meet each pull. "For anything we want."

"What do you want?"

A flash of teeth from a crooked smile. "To go back in time and remember to buy lube and condoms before getting naked."

The reminder was a dash of cold water on his ardor. Ian groaned and swore under his breath.

"We can get those tomorrow." Lucas reached between their bodies and grasped Ian's cock, pulling at the same tempo Ian was. "I've got no problems sucking you dry tonight."

His blunt statement brought the desire back with a raging vengeance, startling enough for his grip to tighten and Lucas to moan. Lucas dropped his forehead to Ian's shoulder, his ragged breath washing across Ian's sweat-damp skin.

"Of course, if you keep that up, I'm going to shoot all over you before I get my mouth anywhere near your dick again."

The mirror to Ian's fears was oddly reassuring, and more than enough for him to ease his hold. He turned his head and brushed his lips across the nearest part of Lucas, in this case, the outer curve of his ear.

"Turn around so I get the same," he murmured. "Because that's what I want."

A shudder rippled through Lucas's body. The kiss he brushed over Ian's shoulder was too fleeting, too ephemeral for any kind of

satisfaction, but that wasn't what it was about. It was a promise, trust that Lucas would obey, the prospect of which was far more scintillating than Ian would have suspected.

The mattress dipped around him as Lucas edged off. Ian took the opportunity to slide farther back, though not so far as to take away all of Lucas's room. He had to let go to do so, but the exchange of Lucas's hand on his cock was worth it, if only for a little while.

"Christ, I love uncut guys," he heard Lucas say. The rest was muffled when he swung a leg over Ian's chest and scooted back, leaving a trail of pre-come along Ian's skin. Ian barely had the focus to grab onto his thighs and drag him the rest of the way before a hot mouth encircled the top of his cock, and an even hotter tongue pushed beneath the foreskin to taste more.

Ian concentrated on wrapping his hand around Lucas's thick shaft and slicking it in long strokes as he sucked the heavy sac past his lips. One ball was a mouthful. Both of them had him sighing in delight, a hint of what it would feel like getting stuffed in other ways. He rolled them against his tongue, then did it again when a groan reverberating through his cock told him how much Lucas liked that. Slowly, he jacked Lucas at the same time, setting his own languorous tempo rather than trying to match Lucas's more tenacious one.

A bead of sweat rolled down the soft skin behind Lucas's balls, tickling against Ian's nose. He released the sac to chase it down, only to discover more salt waiting for him to devour. Along the crease, in the trimmed dark hair surrounding the base, so many nooks and crannies to explore.

Teeth nipped at his shaft. Ian jerked, his head slamming back against the bed as the nibbles translated into sparks igniting along

his skin. He squeezed his eyes shut to regain his focus, but that only managed to intensify the slides of hot lips down his cock.

Better to set to his own task, lift his chin, angle Lucas down, drop his jaw to finally feel the hard flesh pass over his lips. He had to stretch to accommodate the girth, though he was hardly complaining. It meant tighter suction around the shaft as it filled his mouth, pressure Lucas rewarded with moans and deeper sucks of his own. Both men worked to set a complementary rhythm, then, a clumsy race of ups and downs until they found it seconds later.

When Lucas traced between Ian's buttocks with his fingers, Ian did the same. He even spread his legs wider to make it easier for Lucas. Lucas was the first one to hone in on the tight muscle, and the first to push a digit inside. Everything in Ian locked up at the initial intrusion, long, precious moments where he feared he was going to come just from being so shallowly penetrated. It wasn't a race, he reminded himself, but still, the notion of ending this so quickly, when there was so much left to be savored, had him breathing in deeply through his nose, forcing his body to relax.

Lucas rocked in and out of his mouth. Each time was deeper, though he never pushed farther than Ian could comfortably take. Soon, though, it wasn't enough, not for Ian at least, and he pressed against the top of Lucas's ass, not allowing him to withdraw the next time he would normally pull out. He closed his eyes, inhaled, then swallowed as he pushed Lucas down.

The thick head sank past the back of his mouth, into his throat, lodging firmly in the tight passage. His nose was buried in Lucas's balls, and his head filled with the tangy scent of his skin. Lucas made a whimpering sound before pulling off Ian's cock, but the snappy retort he expected didn't come. They both remained in that stasis, the only movement between the pair of them Ian's convulsive swallowing, until Ian relented his hold on Lucas's ass.

Lucas pulled out, giving Ian the chance to catch his breath. The hand that held Ian's cock away from his belly shook. Something primal deep inside Ian delighted in affecting Lucas so strongly, though that was only part of the reason he guided Lucas back into his mouth. He craved consuming the man. He wanted all of him, in as many varied ways as possible. He wanted to hear him shout, and when he felt the weight of Lucas's cheek against his hip, his hand replacing where his mouth had been only moments earlier, he realized he was closer to getting his wishes than he'd probably thought.

He swallowed harder, held him in for longer stretches of time, past the point of dots dancing on the backs of his eyes as his lungs fought for air. When he felt the throb of the vein against his tongue, though, Ian slid off a few inches, enough for the first shot to hit the back of his tongue. Lucas's cry echoed in his ears, adding to the blissful satisfaction at drinking him down. But it was quickly stifled, his mouth full again as he dove back down Ian's length, up and down and in and out and so overwhelming Ian could barely finish what he'd started. He had to clamp his arm around Lucas's hips to control the trembling, and squeeze his eyes shut to stop the room from spinning.

None of his efforts mattered in the end. Because all it took for Ian to break was for Lucas to brush his knuckles across his oversensitive balls.

Fire too hot to bear cascaded through his veins, alerting the instinct to arch up and away. He would have bucked completely off the bed if it wasn't for Lucas bearing him down onto the mattress, but even so, he still managed to thrash against the blankets, his free hand shooting out to his side to fist the fabric in a whirlwind bid to stay as rooted as possible.

He didn't know how many times his cock jerked inside Lucas's mouth. He didn't know how many times Lucas swallowed. He wasn't even sure what his own mouth was doing as he rode out his orgasm, though when he finally started to come down from the exquisite high, he tasted sweat on his lips he knew wasn't his. It took all his strength to lick it away.

It took even more to turn his head and press a kiss to the inside of Lucas's thigh.

Lucas rolled to the side, trapping Ian's arm beneath his legs. "Tell me you're not going to make me clean off the other bed to sleep over there."

Ian chuckled. "If you have the strength to stand and do it, I'll get on my knees and do everything in my power to make sure you can't."

"Well, when you put it like that..."

Though Lucas moved again, it wasn't to stand. He twisted until he was sprawled next to Ian, his head resting on his folded arm, a heavy leg thrown over Ian's. "I was wrong at dinner." His voice was already thick and sleepy, the individual words elongated like treacle dripping from a spoon. "You're not the easiest date I've ever had. You're one of the best."

In the darkness, Ian smiled. "Flattery will get you everywhere." "Promise?"

His own lids were getting droopy. He'd close them only for a moment, he decided, but once shut, it felt too good to break the spell again. He managed to get out his response, though, which felt more important than anything else.

"Promise."

## CHAPTER 11

Lucas woke with a mouth like the Sahara and a bladder ready to explode, but as he moved to roll off the bed to stumble blindly for the bathroom, the warm, naked body of his marvelous date stopped him. Ian had turned onto his stomach in his sleep, and had managed to snare one of the pillows to bury his head beneath. The finely arced curvature of his ass merged with the solid line of his spine, still straight even in slumber. Tiny dimples at the top of the taut flesh tried to lure Lucas into touching, but for now, he simply smiled at the memory of an amazing night and rolled in the opposite direction.

He winced at the harsh bathroom light, keeping his head low, his eyes slitted, as he relieved himself. Though he felt better when he was done, it took brushing his teeth and dunking his head beneath the tap to feel ready to face the world again.

When he stepped back out, the red numbers on the alarm clock read just past five-thirty. Ian hadn't moved. The supplies they'd swept onto the floor before crashing onto the bed still lay scattered along the flowered, dark green carpet.

He had two options. Go back to bed, sleep more curled against Ian and wake up in a few hours feeling like crap because he never slept that much. Or find a way to get some work done without waking Ian up. Both had merits. The night with Ian had been everything Lucas had imagined and more. Ian seemed to know instinctively just what to do to shove Lucas over the edge. His orgasm had ripped through him at a velocity that should have shredded his flesh. But beyond that, the date itself had been proof they got along outside of the odd circumstances that brought them together in the first place. Ian's dry sense of humor, and his seemingly endless well of knowledge, made him a fascinating companion. He gave as good as he got, and the meal had flown by, even when Lucas had been distracted by the footsie under the table.

It boggled the mind to think Ian didn't have someone significant in his life back in England. But the man's natural reserve worked in Lucas's favor. Because he was one hundred percent positive Ian would never have gone as far as he did if there'd been anybody else. He was too true to cheat.

Lucas's body responded at the memory of draping over Ian's sated body when they were done. He hadn't been able to keep his eyes open, but he'd woken up after only a few minutes to have another go. Except Ian had already fallen asleep. The lines at the corners of his eyes and mouth had smoothed, and he looked ten years younger. More carefree. No way Lucas would spoil that. He'd just watched Ian sleep until he drifted off again.

He'd probably keep that detail to himself. He was halfconvinced Ian already considered him a stalker for knowing so much about him. He didn't need to make it look even worse by adding fuel to the fire.

The decision was actually easy, then. He didn't want to bother Ian from what was obviously a restful sleep. It was the first real night of rest he'd had since Sultis had attacked the dig. Lucas refused to cut it short.

Moving silently around the room, he gathered up his cargos and the first stack of Polaroids, the ones he'd already ordered the day before. He didn't want to rustle the plastic bags to get at any of Ian's mounting supplies, but he could still write the numbers on the back like he'd originally planned in preparation for Ian when he woke up and was ready to work. He carried everything into the bathroom and shut the door. It was the only place to have a light on where it wouldn't bother Ian.

The tile floor was cold, but soon enough, Lucas was too wrapped up in what he was doing to notice. Rather than write the wrong numbers on the back, he laid the photos out again in the order he thought they took, and spent half an hour scanning them, searching for anomalies. He couldn't risk making a mistake. He'd already fucked their odds by not considering the questions Ian had raised yesterday. He wasn't going to add to their difficulties by being sloppy with the one thing he knew he could do.

He refused to dwell on the questions Ian had asked, too. He didn't have those answers, and berating himself over his ineptitude would accomplish nothing. Later, when he had the photos sorted, and there was nothing else for him to contribute, he could think about their next step, and the steps they'd already taken.

He was halfway through numbering them when a brief knock came at the door. The handle turned after his "Come in!" to reveal a rumpled Ian standing in the entrance. Lucas quickly scanned the long, lean body. He was mildly disappointed Ian had put his underwear back on, but not really surprised.

"I'm sure the desk is far more comfortable," Ian commented with a quirk of his lips.

"I didn't want to wake you." Squaring off the photos he'd finished already, he stood and stepped around the few that still remained on the floor. "I'll get the rest of these out of here when you're done."

Ian edged sideways to give him room to exit, but didn't otherwise move into the bathroom. "What are you doing?"

"I thought I'd get a heads up on organizing these. It'll save us work later."

"Yes, but..." With a slight frown, he swept his gaze over the sterile environment. "You could've woken me. We are a team, remember."

"Like I could forget after last night." The flush that crept up Ian's cheeks was adorable. Lucas couldn't help grinning. "I was up at five-thirty. Did you really want to get up that early?"

"Why were you up so early?"

"I'm always up that early." As he stepped past Ian, he resisted the urge to grab the back of his neck and kiss him senseless. His hands were too full anyway, he justified. "I'll finish these and then run around the corner to get us some breakfast. Take your time in there."

Ian hesitated in the doorway, his gaze palpable on Lucas's back. Lucas started to turn around and ask if he was okay, but by the time he'd done so, the door was clicking shut.

He dressed in a rush, uncaring of how rumpled his T-shirt was before hitting the street. New York was waking up, cars thickening traffic to hint at the clots that would plague motorists the rest of the day, white collar workers in their sensible shoes marching briskly along the sidewalk on their way to their offices. Though he spent a lot of his down time here, he'd never really liked it. It simply offered the amenities he craved when he was so long gone from civilization. If San Francisco had been located on the east coast, he would have much rather set up home base there. Less pollution, slower paced, more tolerance.

Considering he was jogging to get to the deli, though, perhaps he fit in here better than he thought.

He had a bag of fresh bagels, two tubs of cream cheese, and a tray of steaming coffees in hand when he returned to the room. He had to hold the bag between his teeth in order to work the keycard, but as soon as Ian saw him with his hands full, he hopped up from where he'd been sitting at the desk and rushed over to help ease the load.

"I've been thinking about our plans," Ian said after they'd divvied out the food. He cradled his hot cup between his palms, his fingers looking extra long where they lapped over each other. Lucas tried not to stare, but it wasn't easy. He kept remembering that hand around his cock, how tightly it had gripped, how Ian's strength had surprised him. He'd had a lot of fantasies about what sex with Ian would be like, but the actual events, even if all they'd done was suck each other off, surpassed everything he'd ever wanted.

Lucas rested his ankle on his knee, trying to discreetly hide his rising erection. Now was not the time for this, no matter how much he might wish otherwise. "What did you come up with?"

Droplets of water still clung to the ends of his hair, occasionally losing the battle with gravity and spilling down the side of Ian's sculptured cheek. "Well, you have to finish finding the order in the tablet shards, right?"

"Right."

"And I have to find some way of interpreting them."

"That's the hope."

"The resources I need aren't your typical public texts, so I can't very well just pop on down to the corner bookstore and pick something up."

"Right. But you said you didn't want to put anybody you knew here in New York in danger, either."

Ian nodded. "My best odds, frankly, are with my books back at the museum."

Lucas waited for him to elaborate, but nothing came. "I thought we agreed Sultis would be watching your work. There is no way for us to get to those books safely."

"What if the authorities were notified?"

"What are you talking about?"

Ian set aside his coffee without taking a sip and leaned closer. A bright gleam had appeared in his eye at some point, a fervor Lucas was starting to recognize. "Sooner or later, the events at the dig are going to be discovered, no matter how much Sultis tries to hide it. We were supposed to contact the museum once a fortnight with our findings, so they could be ready for whatever we brought back with us. As far as we know, they're not even aware yet that there was any foul play. I could contact London authorities now, report the incidents, and we can use their protection to keep us safe from Sultis until we've translated the tablets."

Lucas had considered any kind of contact with the museum as

suicide. He still did. Sultis had any number of British contacts, and there was no saying they would even be able to land safely on British soil without Sultis finding out. He hadn't said so to Ian before this, though. He hadn't wanted to sour what was already a tenuous situation.

"Do you really think London police are going to believe you if you come forward now?" he asked. "Sultis attacked the camp over a week ago. And you filed a false police report with them when we got to Little Red. You're going to be the one who looks guilty, not Sultis."

"We filed the police report because we feared for our lives." Ian almost looked smug at having a ready response. "This is the first opportunity we've had to contact them where we didn't. And we have corroborating stories. At the very least, they'd have to investigate, which would put Sultis on the defensive for a change."

"They'll want to know why Sultis would do it."

"And?"

"And? What do you mean, and?"

"I don't see why we don't tell them the whole story," Ian said. "We'll have far greater resources at our disposal, and better luck at actually finding it."

"Are you kidding me?" He bolted from his seat and started pacing the length of the room. They weren't having this conversation. They *couldn't* be having this conversation. He had not gone to all these lengths, taken advantage of his friends, and put his life on the line, to have somebody else steal this away from him. "I thought you knew what finding this meant to me. I thought we were in this together. You and me. Partners, remember?"

Ian stood as well, though at least he didn't attempt to stop Lucas. "Of what use am I to you if I can't translate the tablets? I'm thinking of the bigger picture here."

"The bigger picture leaves us out in the cold. That's not good enough."

"For who? For you? Certainly not for me."

Lucas folded his arms over his chest. He was getting sick and tired of Ian's lack of ambition. Considering how smart Ian was, it didn't make any sense. "You're giving up before we've even gotten started."

Pure fury emanated from Ian's suddenly tense muscles. But the hand he lifted to point a finger at Lucas was slow and controlled, proof of his mastery over his emotions. "I think I've come bloody far in this little game of yours," he said, his voice so tightly held it pierced the air between them. "I've watched people I care about get slaughtered. I've followed you without demanding even more answers than the oblique references you deigned to drop in my direction when it suited your purposes. I've thrown myself into this whole charade of believing the Blood of Sheol even exists—"

"Because it does!"

"On whose proof? Sultis's?" Ian's bark of laughter cut deep. "I've seen your so-called evidence. Yes, it's intriguing. Yes, it's likely to lead to something archaeologically significant. But I haven't seen an iota of proof that it has anything to do with the Blood of Sheol. All I have is your word on the matter."

"And that's not enough?"

"When we're trapped with our backs to the wall? No, it bloody well isn't."

He had never heard Ian swear so much before. Under other circumstances, it might have been amusing to tease him about it, or to figure out what it took to push him even further. Right now, it made Lucas want to lash out, give as good as he got. The problem with that, though, was it divided their loyalties. Whether Ian saw it or not, there were two sides to their problem—Sultis and them. If Ian turned himself in, Lucas would be alone, and that prospect was more frightening than anything he'd experienced since Sultis had first grabbed him. More terrifying than nearly getting caught. More debilitating than believing Ian would ditch him and think him a fool at any point in the past week.

He couldn't lose Ian. Not now. Not when they'd only just stepped over the wall that had been separating them. He would even be all right if Ian said no more sex. At least he would have had a taste of what it could have been like, one amazing night where the world disappeared and for a few liberating hours, Lucas could just be. It took all of his self-control to relax his arms and let them drop to his sides. It took even more to keep his voice calm.

"Other than turning ourselves in, tell me what it'll take to help you," he said. "I'm not ready to stop trying, and I'd like it if you weren't, either. I can't do this without you, Ian."

Doubt still darkened Ian's eyes. The twitch of a muscle in his cheek threatened to kindle into something more, but Lucas watched him swallow twice, each time steadying his breath another fraction, until his nostrils no longer flared.

"I don't want to be your nemesis on this," Ian said.

The choice of word struck Lucas as more than a little funny, and he had to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from smiling. He couldn't afford pissing Ian off more than he already was. "So let's figure this out together. We're smart guys. Hell, you're the smartest guy I've ever known." Now, he dared a half-smile, keeping it as light as possible. "Didn't you tell me last night that flattery would get me everywhere?"

He meant to remind Ian of how good it had been between them.

Focus on the positive, stay away from the negative. Ian wasn't used to that mentality, obviously, but Lucas would beat it into his head until he believed in himself as much as Lucas did, if it was the last thing he did.

When Ian glanced at the bed, Lucas knew he had him. He dared a step forward, closer to the man who fascinated him, the man who turned him upside down just by being in the same room.

"Sultis can't hold a candle to you," Lucas said. "And maybe you're right. Maybe it's not the Blood of Sheol at all. But we won't know if we don't try, and if we go public and it turns out we're wrong...?"

The question dangled between them, the answer obvious.

We look like even bigger fools.

Ian stared at the bed for several seconds longer, lost in his head, leaving Lucas behind. Other times, he might have resented it. Now, he only hoped it played in his favor.

"I need my books," Ian finally said. He still wasn't looking at Lucas. "I'm not putting anybody else in danger by borrowing someone else's."

"All right," Lucas hastily agreed. "How do we get them without tipping Sultis off?"

The determination was back in Ian's lifted chin. He even almost smiled. "By being in two places at the same time."

# CHAPTER 12

Ian would have liked to say he didn't start feeling jittery until they landed at Heathrow, but that would have been a lie. The nerves started when they stood in line at the Air India counter at JFK, when he couldn't stop playing worst case scenarios in his head about what would happen when the officials realized Lucas's British passport was a fraud. On the bright side, being in jail would certainly protect them from Sultis, if nothing else. On the not so bright side, they'd be caged with men who made Sultis look like a character out of an Enid Blyton book. Ian hadn't exhaled until they passed through security, and then it was a race against time to reach a toilet before he lost what little contents his stomach contained.

Lucas had returned from one of the airport shops with a

toothbrush and paste, and watched him silently as he rinsed out his mouth. He rubbed the tight muscle between Ian's shoulder blades, smiled at him in the mirror, and said, "Everything will be fine. Trust me."

He said that a great deal. Trust me.

How could Ian say he trusted Lucas more than he trusted anybody else he knew? It was the situation and everyone else he found lacking.

The fact that the flight was an overnighter helped. He was exhausted after two days of whirlwind activity, though thankfully, his ankle had healed enough to make all the running around easier. Lucas had taken his suggestion and run with it, executing ideas so seamlessly Ian wondered if he hadn't had the notion before Ian said something. For his part, Ian could simply attempt to keep up. His role would become much more significant once they reached London. Then, Lucas would be the one relying upon him, instead of the other way around.

If he was honest with himself, he looked forward to the shift in power. He needed to prove he wasn't the dead weight holding them back. That had been the true crux of their last argument. Lucas might not have seen it, but Ian had lashed out because of his pent-up fears and stress. He wasn't accustomed to feeling so helpless, or in handing so much control over to another person. Even when that person was as competent as Lucas Arpini.

He woke up a couple hours before landing, having been lulled to sleep by the melodious voice of their petite flight attendant and her all too frequent beverage stops. Turned out, three bloody marys worked the same as sleeping pills. Air India had been his suggestion, but he'd made it ignorant of their standards. His reasoning said if Sultis was monitoring international travel, they

#### ARIES: RIDDLE ME WICKED

were better off selecting an airline not quite as obvious. That immediately discounted BA, Virgin, US Airways, and American Air. The amenities with Air India, however, far exceeded his expectations. Service was impeccable, he actually had enough leg room to fall asleep comfortably, and the flight itself was painless. When his eyes fluttered open, he felt refreshed rather than worse for the attempt.

At least, until he remembered what they had still to face at Heathrow.

At his sigh, Lucas elbowed him in the ribs.

"Relax," he said, smiling. "This trip is a good thing, remember? Books, and dusty old stuff, and winning one for the Gipper?"

His lips twitched in amusement, in spite of his better judgment. "We're on our way to England. We should be winning it for the Queen, shouldn't we?"

"Only if it means I don't have to wear a crown."

"I would have thought you'd like showing off."

"I don't need sparkly jewels for that."

"Somehow, I don't think you even need to be present for that."

Their light banter helped, though. As Lucas had noted in New York, they had far more to fear from the Americans than the Brits. His accent was passable as long as he didn't say much. Everything would be fine.

He just wished his stomach would listen to reason and settle down.

Adjusting the orange blanket that covered his lap, Ian rested his hand on the armrest to push the button to straighten his seat. The light clasp of Lucas's hand around his wrist stopped him.

"Try going back to sleep," Lucas said. "I'll wake you when we land."

Ian shook his head. "I'm not tired."

"You mean, your brain won't turn off."

"Fair enough."

"I could call a flight attendant. You can have another bloody mary."

"No, no more alcohol. I don't want to risk saying something that will jeopardize everything we've planned."

Lucas let him go, but rather than withdraw, he slid his hand beneath the blanket. It rested lightly on Ian's thigh, massaging in long, slow caresses that melted the muscle. It was the first sexual contact they'd made since the night of their date, and while Ian's body leapt at the obvious invitation, his gaze immediately followed suit, sweeping across the darkened cabin to see who might be watching.

Lucas chuckled. "Everybody's asleep."

"Does that even matter to you?"

Another throaty laugh. "No, not really."

He fell silent, though his fingers continued their stroking. Ian's cock hardened with each passing second, pressing against his zipper with a small bite of pain by the time Lucas spoke again.

"Tell me to stop, and I will."

Mute, Ian shook his head. He closed his eyes and leaned his head back against his pillow. It was a relief to allow Lucas the freedom to touch. He'd hated the fight that had erupted the morning after, and while their camaraderie had returned in the past two days, he much preferred the new ground they had forged with their date to the friendship they had prior. Partners, in more than the business sense of the word. He was well aware it might not last. It might only be for the duration of their task. But he would enjoy it as long as he possibly could. His breath caught when Lucas slid his hand higher, more closely to his inner thigh. Now, each knead brushed knuckles against the tip of Ian's erection, fleeting and far too light. He squirmed in his seat, his legs parting of their own volition to give Lucas more room, and though he felt mildly decadent indulging in this sort of public petting, the last thing he wanted was for Lucas to stop.

"Are we going to have some down time before we hit the museum?" Lucas asked.

His quiet question took a moment to break through the haze he was creating in Ian's body. "A few hours, at least. We want to synchronize what's happening in New York with when it's best to go into the museum, don't we?"

"Yeah. Just making sure." He edged inches higher, no longer pretending to ignore Ian's aching cock. He squeezed the length, forcing the hard edge of the fly along the shaft, until Ian gasped in fiery delight. "We haven't had a chance to have a follow-up on our date. And something tells me we could both use one."

Ian swallowed against the sudden tightness of his throat. The ghost weight of Lucas against his tongue made his mouth water. "You don't think it'll distract us?"

"Distract us?" The jolt from his weight leaning against Ian's arm was quickly transcended by the heat skimming along the surface of his skin when he brushed a kiss over Ian's ear. "Hell, the longer I have to go denying what you do to me, the more uptight I get and prone to mistakes. If anything, it's going to make our work better."

Ian laughed softly. "That just might be the most contrived excuse to have sex I've ever heard."

"Do I need excuses?"

It was a simple question, but deep beneath the careful tone was an undercurrent of longing Ian recognized all too well. Opening his eyes, he tilted his head to the side to strengthen the caress, wishing they were alone so he could do more than absorb Lucas's breaths.

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"No," he murmured. And meant it.

Lucas's mode of distraction worked for the duration of the flight. His chin remained on Ian's shoulder, his voice in his ear, filling Ian's head with descriptions of all the places across the globe they could shut out the world and get lost in the mindless fucking. Ian was hard, but he didn't give another thought about bogus passports or indecipherable languages, until the flight attendant glided down the aisle to tell the passengers to fasten their belts and return their seats to an upright position. Even then, though, Lucas kept his hand on Ian's thigh. The weight was enough to quell the worst of the butterflies, though when the wheels touched down to the tarmac, and Lucas pulled out the cell phone to check messages, there was a decided flutter in his gut.

"Well?" Ian prompted.

Smiling, Lucas slid the phone back into his pocket. "We are officially booked into a hotel in Brooklyn using one of my credit cards, and about an hour ago, you got online at a Starbucks on Columbus and logged into the museum's computer system."

Though the plan had been his to begin with, Ian matched the grin with his own. "You'd think I would be smart enough not to make the same mistake twice."

"You'd think."

"Now we have to hope Sultis is still tracking that sort of

information."

"He is." The seat belt light dinged as it went off, and in the state of mass exodus, Lucas slid from his seat to reach for their bags in the overhead compartment. "That's a dog who loves his old tricks too much to let them go."

Ian allowed Lucas to retrieve their carry-ons, taking the handle of the small pilot's case they'd purchased in New York to carry all the evidence and their supplies when there was room for him to move out into the aisle. Stepping off the plane and onto the gangway elicited mixed reactions. Anxiety that British immigration would be more thorough than the Americans. Relief that he was back someplace familiar. Excitement about potentially finding the answers they sought.

First step, though, was making sure Lucas didn't get stopped before they ever got out of the airport.

His suggestion they leave an electronic trail in New York that ran concurrently with their actions in London had come without much thought of the actual necessities it would require. He hadn't been surprised, though, when Lucas picked up the phone and called a friend, who called another friend, who then called Lucas back to make arrangements to meet with him in a Soho loft to take photos and stats for a UK passport. Ian hung in the background, watching Lucas chat with Thao like they were discussing dinner plans, not working together to forge international travel documents. Those had happened as well, and later, when Thao had turned a smile in Ian's direction, making it all too clear he was welcome to ask for more than food, he'd almost choked on his takeaway kebab.

Lucas claimed not to have met Thao before that night, but Thao seemed all too similar to the coterie wandering around the edges of

Lucas's life. Ian briefly wondered if he appeared the same to the others. Then stopped, because he was fairly sure he didn't want the answer.

The passport worked, though. And now, they queued with the other British nationals, awaiting their turn with an Immigration official.

Ian went first, and out of the corner of his eye, saw Lucas almost immediately ushered to another kiosk farther down the line. He barely heard the official's welcome home, and took back his passport at the same time he saw Lucas reach for his. They passed through and met at the top of the stairs, Ian with a bemused smile on his face, Lucas beaming like he'd just won the lottery.

"Let's get out of this place," Lucas said in his fake British accent.

Without having to pick up luggage, they zipped through customs and headed straight for the taxi rank. He'd only debated taking the Underground for a moment. Though there was a direct route from Heathrow on the Piccadilly line, it was a far more circuitous path, and would take them twice as long to reach their destination. The anonymity they would gain from being part of the crowd wasn't worth the time they could save simply by hiring a taxi.

"So..." Lucas dropped the accent as soon as they were safely ensconced in the backseat. Gray morning light filtered through the windows, but for as dismal a morning it was, no place had ever looked quite as good to Ian. "What's in Uxbridge? You haven't told me squat about where we're staying."

Because Lucas had been too wrapped up in taking care of things on the New York side of the problem, but Ian refrained from saying that. "An old friend. You're not the only one with contacts, you know."

Lucas cocked a brow. "An old friend like Susanna? Or an old friend like Niyol? Because if this is an old boyfriend..."

He could very well have turned it back on Lucas, asking why it was all right to flaunt his exes in front of Ian but he couldn't do the same. But Lucas's tone was playful, with only a hint of jealousy. He was teasing, attempting to keep Ian's spirits up. Ian liked him all the more for the effort.

"Not like either of them, actually. Beryl's husband was a teacher I had in college. My favorite teacher, actually."

"And you're not worried about Sultis tracing anything back to them?"

"It's just Beryl. Owen passed a few years ago. But she's not in the country anyway. She spends winters in Spain. I don't see how Sultis could connect anything with her. I didn't tell her anything when I called and asked if I could use the house for a couple days."

Lucas's confusion deepened, a sexy line appearing at the corner of his mouth when he pursed his lips. "And she didn't question why you'd need someplace to stay, when you already have a place to live in London?"

"I told her a friend was visiting." Ian smiled. He loved being the one with all the information for a change. "In her generation, a lady would never press for details."

Either it took less time to reach Uxbridge from Heathrow than he realized, or time had a way of shrinking when he and Lucas were together. Both were probably true. The driver pulled in front of Beryl's semi all too soon, idling the engine while Ian took care of the fare and Lucas got out to examine their new hideaway. He waited on the outside of the gate barring the narrow front path until Ian was done and the taxi had disappeared around the corner. The key wasn't near the door, but rather around the front corner, under a tiny potted fir that adorned the edge of the drive. Ian let them in, but paused in the foyer, blinking against the shift in light as he reached for the switch on the wall. The sense of homecoming was stronger, almost overwhelming, here, though he only visited her once a year, always when she returned from Spain. Perhaps it was the scent of nutmeg and lemon cleaner in the air, even as slightly stuffy as it was, or maybe the familiar fall of nets at the front bay window, framing the row of porcelain bells she'd collected for as long as Ian had known her. It could have been any number of things, or all of them combined. It didn't matter. It felt like sanctuary, and in that moment, it was worth more than any mythical artifact.

When the overhead light flooded the narrow foyer, Lucas touched the small of his back, stepping closer. "Are you all right?" Concern tinged his voice. "You don't see something out of place, do you?"

"Absolutely not," Ian murmured. He nodded toward the stairs. "The guest room has an en suite, but if you're hungry, we can pop around the corner to the café and pick up some sandwiches before we settle in."

The contact at his waist firmed, Lucas's arm sliding around to pull him into a loose embrace. Though their coats prevented the intimacy Ian would have preferred, Lucas leaned in to run his mouth along his rough jaw, dragging his tongue through the stubble to send a rasp of shivers down Ian's spine. "The only thing I'm interested in right now is you," he said into Ian's skin. "Everything else can wait."

As Ian curled his free hand around the back of Lucas's head to hold him steady while he reciprocated the faint kisses, one thought

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superseded everything else.

Truer words had never been spoken.

# CHAPTER 13

The house typified everything he had imagined Ian's home life as a child would be. The dark, densely printed Axminster carpet. The heavy mahogany furniture laden with books. The right angles on everything from the brass implements on the hearth to the Gainsborough prints on the walls. Lucas had no idea how Ian's relationship with this Beryl had developed—though from the sounds of it, she seemed to play a maternal role—but Ian was more relaxed now than he'd ever been, even the night of their date. Stepping across the threshold, he'd left behind whatever shell he'd been hiding within, and now touched Lucas with a sensual familiarity that made every caress to date seem like playacting.

Upstairs, he had said. Only a few feet away to a bed. But Lucas couldn't bring his feet to move yet, not when Ian felt so good in his

arms, not when that firm mouth sought any exposed inch of skin it could find. He'd been waiting for this for hours, days, maybe even weeks. Ian had given himself before, and it had been amazing; Lucas had been blown away by how good it had been, in spite of the fight that had driven them two steps back the next morning. Right now, though, Ian massaged his nape in tender, long strokes that elicited memories of the flight, his lips inviting and open.

That was it. It wasn't just his kisses that were inviting and open. It was Ian himself, in the way he accepted Lucas's touch and desire as if he deserved it. That was a first. He'd been so wary understandably so—almost from the beginning that Lucas had given up hope of ever getting over the walls he erected. At least, over them completely. He'd been allowed to sit atop and get a view of the other side the night of their date, but this was different, this was better, this was feeling like maybe Superman had a pretty sweet deal being able to leap over those buildings without even breaking a sweat.

He didn't want to let go, but he had to pick up his duffel if this was going anywhere. Keeping his arm around Ian's waist, he tore his mouth away and leaned down, scooping the strap over his shoulder in a clean sweep.

Ian's glistening mouth slanted into an amused smile. "You're going to unpack first?"

Lucas shifted the weight so he could push Ian toward the stairs without knocking both of them over. "No, I'm just not going to get my hands on your ass and then realize I left everything down here."

Ian caught his hand to better lead the way, all the while color creeping up the back of his neck. Lucas wished he could see the embarrassed flush full on. He loved seeing the man so nonplussed.

"I didn't realize you'd found the time to purchase anything."

"Are you kidding? You were as much of a priority for me as anything else the past couple days."

The shy smile Ian shot over his shoulder contradicted the burn in his eyes. His fingers tightened, but not to hurt or hurry. They clasped Lucas's like he didn't want to let go. The single word "Don't" hovered on Lucas's tongue, unspoken, but he couldn't get it out over the lump forming in his throat. He squeezed back instead, and deliberately ducked his avid gaze to the curve of Ian's ass, focusing on the visceral of the moment rather than the emotional.

For a guy who spent most of his time in books, Ian had a fantastic body. Long, trim legs with surprisingly strong calf and thigh muscles. Naturally curved buttocks, not too fleshy but with more than enough meat to sink a cock between. The night of their date, Lucas had been ready to suggest slicking up Ian's crack and fucking the cheeks, but sleep had won over sex. He still might suggest it for later. The thought of shooting over Ian's back aroused him as much as burying inside him did.

Ian pulled him into the first room they reached, flipping on the overhead to reveal a double bed with a fluffy cream duvet and a tall pine wardrobe nearly filling the space. There was barely room to drop the duffel before they reached the edge of the mattress. When it was off Lucas's shoulder, he let Ian go, toeing off his shoes as he worked to divest himself of the rest of his clothes.

Ian did the same. They'd been indulgent once already in undressing the other. They would have other times to enjoy the luxury. Now was not one of them.

Ian was naked first, and went over to the radiator beneath the window to turn it on. It was the first time Lucas had noticed the distinct chill. His skin scorched at the prospect of wrapping around Ian, and stripping only heightened his awareness of how sensitive he felt everywhere. He resisted touching his cock, though it sprang free of his pants, ready for attention. The real thing was only a few feet away.

His mouth went dry at the sight of Ian's blatant erection as he turned back, the shiny tip wet with pre-come as it peeked out of the delicious foreskin. Their sixty-nine had been one of the best of his life. Ian's cock wasn't so thick to choke him when he swallowed it down, and getting to dig around beneath the foreskin, devouring the salty musk, elicited every primitive instinct Lucas had. He'd exploded harder than he could remember, having to pull off Ian's prick for fear of doing the man damage when he came. But he'd gone back to it as quickly as he could, and when it was Ian's turn to come, he hadn't let a single drop go to waste, staying long enough to lick it completely clean.

Another blow job would hardly be amiss. He was ready to drop to his knees when Ian reached for him and tugged him onto the bed.

He sank into the duvet, enveloped as much by the thick down as Ian's long limbs. He'd anticipated their positions the other way around, but with the coil of Ian's leg around his, the rub of their cocks together, he decided he could get used to being smothered by the other man. More than used to it, if the ferocity of the kisses that now peppered his collarbone was anything to go by.

Lucas gasped when Ian bit at a soft patch of skin near the hollow of his throat, throwing his head back into the pillow and arching away from the bed. His cock caught on Ian's stomach, then skipped free when the wet tip slicked an escape path. Ian responded by reaching down and dragging his fingertips through the pre-come smeared along his skin. He brought them up to Lucas's chest, rubbed it into a puckered nipple, and bent to lick his new treat away.

The merge of mouth to skin was even more intense for the moan that came with it. Lucas let go of the hold he'd had in the blanket, to grab the back of Ian's head and hold him still, forcing harder sweeps of his tongue. The addition of teeth at the very tip tripped his pulse even further.

"And here I thought I was going to be the one to ravish you," he teased, more breathless than he expected.

Without fighting Lucas's hold, Ian shook his head, the brush of his lips over the flushed skin drawing new cascades of pleasure from Lucas's flesh. "You got that privilege last time."

He couldn't argue with facts, and honestly, he had little desire for Ian to stop. He could, however, take advantage of his freedom, and did so, smoothing his other palm down Ian's side to find the taut curve of the closest buttock.

"As long as I end up buried inside you, you can do whatever you want to me." He squeezed once, deliberately with more pressure than he normally would, and smiled at the corresponding jerk of Ian's body.

"Those are dangerous words."

"For you, or for me?"

Ian lifted his thick lashes, catching Lucas's gaze. Dropping his jaw, he dragged the flat of his tongue in a wide swathe around the edge of the dark nipple, tickling the light sprinkling of hair surrounding it. "Perhaps for both of us."

Deep in his gut, Lucas agreed. Ian knew how to get to the essence of a moment, sometimes with a look, sometimes with a word. The more time Lucas got to spend with him, the harder he fell. He'd done what he could to stop it from happening when they were in the States—well, to stop it from happening *more*. But he was powerless in the face of this new Ian. Shedding the last of his reservations brought forth the man Lucas had always known was there, lurking beneath the surface. And he was even more magnificent than Lucas had imagined.

Minutes disappeared as Ian took his time exploring Lucas's upper body. He seemed particularly fascinated with his nipples, though it was more likely the fact that they were so responsive. Lucas had always thought they'd been hardwired straight to his cock. One touch, even a casual flick of a fingernail, had the power to make him erupt, depending on how close to the edge of orgasm he was. It was certainly enough to make him hard. In cases like this, where he was hard already, it thickened liquid desire into sheer molten need. His only means of keeping things at bay was to keep his hands moving with their own tasks.

He held Ian firmly by the hips, one rooted to keep him between Lucas's legs, the other massaging his ass, encroaching ever closer to the hot cleft and the hole waiting for his aching cock. Ian didn't fight the embrace. There were moments when Lucas suspected he squirmed into a new position just to get Lucas to delve deeper. Those prompted a matching roll, the grind of his cock against a flat stomach, more pre-come sticking their bodies together until Ian cleaned it away again.

His head spun from how amazing it felt. He only hoped Ian felt the same way.

A scrape of Ian's scruffy jaw across his stomach was his only forewarning the other man intended to move his exploration farther down. Lucas abandoned his appreciation of Ian's ass to dig in and hold him still, gulping for breath as he waited for Ian's attention. "My turn," he announced simply.

Before Ian could protest, Lucas hooked a leg around the back of his knees and flipped their positions, grinning widely at the startled surprise on Ian's face.

"Stay here," he ordered. He held Ian against the bed for a moment to ensure he obeyed, then leapt off to go fumbling for his duffel.

The lube and condoms were in a side pocket, the box economysize but the lube tiny. Since they weren't checking luggage, he'd been forced to buy it at JFK after they'd gone through security, when he ran out to get the toothpaste and brush for Ian. He'd considered buying more than one, but for all the confidence he'd had that they would eventually get to the point of needing it, he hadn't wanted to scare Ian off in case he found it before Lucas could explain.

Now he wished he'd bought out the whole damn store.

Ian hadn't moved a muscle by the time he climbed back onto the bed. With his hands laced behind his head, Ian appeared all too much like the cat who ate the canary, his eyes glittering, the shy smile returned. His gaze flickered when Lucas tossed the condoms and lube to the side, but it was as languid and needy as before as it swept up the length of Lucas's body.

"I hope you didn't have a preference." Ian's voice caressed like a rough, black silk blindfold, sliding into place. It blanketed out everything else, tunneling sensation to those parts of his body that already threatened to combust, and still had the power to make him reach for more. "But I want to be on my back."

Lucas gripped Ian's thighs and pushed them up and out, exposing the heavy balls and shadowed crease. "Why would I have a problem with that?" When Ian rested his heels on the bed to hold the position, Lucas skimmed his hands downward, allowing the coarse hair to tickle along his fingers. "Sounds like a win-win to me."

The muscles twitched in Ian's stomach when Lucas bent his head to run his tongue along the line where leg met hip. "Some people prefer it from behind."

"Since when am I some people?"

"Point taken."

Lucas avoided Ian's cock, as enthralling as it was. They were agreed on what they wanted, and as good as it tasted, he'd have to wait until the next time to wrap his lips around the flared head again. Instead, he concentrated on the slightly damp skin behind his balls, resisting the urge to suck them into his mouth. Ian was surprisingly smooth here, though fine hairs teased a little bit lower, and when Lucas licked along the center ridge that blazed the way to the clenching hole, Ian bucked in response, much like Lucas had from the attention to his nipples.

He chuckled. "Reactions like that are only going to encourage me to rim you more often, you know."

"I can..." Ian stopped and cleared his throat. The husky sound shot straight to Lucas's groin, adding a new throb to his cock. "I can think of little else I'd like more."

Lucas could, though he refrained from saying so. The promise of heat and exquisite tightness beckoned to him to continue, and he swallowed down his sudden salivation to trace the dark pucker with the tip of his tongue.

Ian jerked away from the bed with a cry, to come crashing back at Lucas's command. Lucas expected hands to clutch at his head, but Ian remained strong, keeping them locked behind his neck. They stayed there during each long, wet lick around the muscle, and through each erratic thrust of his hips as he tried to open himself wider. He succeeded in the latter, though, helped by Lucas pulling the cheeks apart. Lucas would have thanked him, but that would have meant tearing his mouth away.

That certainly wasn't happening any time soon.

He spread Ian as far as his twitching muscles would allow, then when he couldn't take the teasing himself anymore, pushed past the tight outer ring and into the velvety depths. It was hard not to sigh in satisfaction. He probed and licked, feeling every flex of muscle against his tongue, resisting the desire to reach down and start stroking his cock at the same rhythm.

Ian's desperate moan sent a corresponding shudder through Lucas's skin. Sliding a hand down the taut flesh of Ian's inner thigh, Lucas pulled out of the succulent depths long enough to allow a finger to sink inside, stretching the tight passage in preparation for his aching cock.

They both groaned this time, when Ian clenched around the intrusion.

Lucas fumbled for the lube, his hand shaking. Could Ian tell? He hoped not. He didn't want to look like some horny teenager, getting his first piece of ass. He had this overwhelming need to make this amazing for Ian, not just for him. How was he supposed to do that when he couldn't even pick up the lube without nearly dropping it because he was so excited?

He paused before pushing back inside, to squirt lube onto the digit and the other fingers. On the next stroke, he twisted two into the passage, rolling his wrist to allow his knuckles to press and massage the muscle into relaxing.

"You're bloody killing me here," he heard Ian mutter.

Lucas smiled. Ian's coarser speech was always a sign he was

on the verge. It sparked him into moving. Sliding up the hard, hungry body. Covering it momentarily with his own. Taking Ian's eager mouth in a kiss meant to say what Lucas couldn't. Their cocks rubbed together, already slick with pre-come.

This time, it was Ian reaching to the side, Ian grabbing the condoms, Ian tearing open a foil packet and rolling the rubber down Lucas's shaft with trembling fingers. Lucas braced himself on his knuckles, nearly nose to nose with him, their mouths achingly close. He held back until the condom snapped into place, but the slight sting broke his stasis, crashing him back down to submerge again, his hips angling of their own accord to line up with the waiting hole.

Slowly, he began to press, wanting to feel every tight inch along his throbbing length, feel it grab and suck him deeper. Sweat burst from his pores from the restraint he somehow mastered over his limbs. Every instinct tore at him to take it all in one powerful stroke, but he wouldn't hurt Ian like that, not when his gasps for breath between kisses proved he had yet to adjust to Lucas's girth.

They both exhaled when he was finally seated. Ian's cock twitched wetly where it was trapped between their stomachs, and his legs curved to wind around Lucas and urge him even deeper. Lucas wished he could oblige, but his muscles had seized, the pleasure too much to bear. He bent his head and rested his brow on Ian's shoulder. It helped.

Ian seeking out his hand to entwine their fingers helped even more.

The rhythm they set was slow at first, a painstaking withdrawal meant to make it last followed by an even slower drive inward carrying the same purpose. The only problem was, he couldn't sustain it. It felt too good, the kind of good that made him forget to breathe, the kind of good that made the world shatter in pieces around him. He sped up, a little bit more with each drive. And he held on, when Ian turned his head to whisper in his ear.

"This is why I wanted to be on my back. So I can see you. I want to memorize every second, like how you lick your lips just before you kiss."

Lucas hadn't even realized that he'd done that, but the fact Ian had noticed ratcheted his desire another notch. He twisted his hips, while at the same time reaching between their torsos to find Ian's cock.

"Yes," Ian hissed. For such a tall guy, he was incredibly flexible, contorting easily. His hands joined his heels, clutching at Ian's ass, and with each stroke, encouraged him to pound harder, deeper.

Three pulls of his cock later, the vein pulsed, and thick, sticky come shot between their bodies. The smell mingled with their sweat, creating the intoxicating cocktail Lucas would always associate with sex. His body boiled from the need for release, and his balls tightened to the point of pain. He wasn't sure what he needed, except...more, that was it, that was the only connection his brain could make. More.

Ian gave it without Lucas ever uttering a word.

By ducking his head to graze his teeth across Lucas's chest.

Lucas ploughed into him one final time, his entire body locking as spasm after spasm swept through his flesh. How long it lasted was a mystery. A split second. Forever. Not long enough. His boneless body finally collapsed onto Ian's, effortlessly molding to his contours, his legs trapped by Ian's delectable thighs.

"That...was..."

Ian chuckled when Lucas's voice faded away. "Yeah." He

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stroked up and down Lucas's back, turning to let his lips rest on the edge of Lucas's damp hairline. "It was."

### CHAPTER 14

The advantage to staying at Beryl's house was its location. Ian hadn't considered that as a factor when he was trying to find a safe haven, but once he'd hit upon her as an option, it felt destined. Uxbridge stood at the end of the Piccadilly line, and while it wasn't the most direct route, it was a single ride from Uxbridge to Holborn, and then, just a brief walk to the museum. They would be the first passengers on the train, too, which guaranteed them seats, a priority since they would be traveling during rush hour. He could shave twenty minutes or so off their ninety minute travel time if they used the bus as well, but the Underground afforded a certain anonymity he thought they'd lose if they traveled elsewhere. The fewer places they might be spotted in London, the better.

The only aspect of the plan Lucas balked at was Ian going in

alone.

"What if something goes wrong?"

They sat on the swaying train, each with his own pack. Ian carried a binder with copies of all the Polaroids, while Lucas had his laptop, the originals, and the rest of the evidence. Neither was comfortable leaving it behind. Lucas had his arm over the back of Ian's seat, a casually possessive gesture that felt like a natural progression from their day in bed. Ian had been blindsided by how affectionate Lucas had been, far more so than usual. He made Ian feel like a lover, not a friend, and it was next to impossible either to wipe the silly grin from his face, or to stop Lucas from such obvious displays.

"What could go wrong?"

Lucas stared at him. "You did not just say that."

"I don't believe in jinxes," Ian replied with a smile. "And I'm serious. I'm not breaking and entering, I'm not stealing something that doesn't belong to me. I know everybody who works at the museum, so if I spy anyone who shouldn't be there after hours, I'll take advantage of the fact that I also know everywhere there is to hide in the building until it's safe to get out again." He held up a hand to cut Lucas off. "But it's not going to be dangerous, because we've done everything absolutely right. You confirmed the electronic trail your friends are leaving in New York, right?"

"Sultis isn't going to be happy with bread crumbs."

"Yes, he will, because bread crumbs are still better than nothing."

"I just think you're going to need me."

"And I'll have you. You have your phone, don't you?" They both already knew the answer to that question. They'd doublechecked both his and Ian's were fully charged before ever leaving the house.

"My phone isn't going to do any good if somebody jumps you."

Ian sighed. Part of him loved Lucas's protective nature, but his more rational side was getting tired of having to justify this decision. "We've been over this. My presence in the museum can be explained away. Yours can't."

A sly gleam appeared in Lucas's eye. "If anybody sees me, just tell them I'm your boyfriend, and you've dragged me in to brag about your fancy job."

The weight around his shoulder certainly helped add to the illusion, as tempting as it was. "Which would be so out of character for me, it would alert everybody something was wrong." He hated telling Lucas no, but this really was the best and only way to do this. Taking Lucas along would distract him, no matter what Lucas might think. Ian would spend his time too nervous about covering for him if they were discovered, and might miss something important as a result. "Look, there's a Starbucks right across the street. You can get a coffee, get online to ensure everything is still fine in New York, and be right there for me when I come out."

"It's a major chain across from one of London's biggest tourist spots. I'll be lucky if I get to order before you come out."

"Even better. You won't miss me in the slightest, because you'll be too busy fending off cute French boys who want to hear your American accent while you queue."

Lucas laughed at that, squeezing Ian's shoulder and shaking his head. "All right, you win. But you have to let me take you out to dinner afterward to make it up to me."

"How on earth is that making it up to you?"

"Because I plan on plying you with alcohol, then dragging you back to the house to have my wicked way before we crack the books, crack the code, and turn into international superstars."

The sheer buoyancy of his grandiose claims was too irresistible. Ian joined in his laughter, settling more comfortably into his seat and against Lucas's arm, all the while thinking Lucas's intentions probably held at least some grain of truth.

And realized, he sincerely hoped they did.

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The deeper they got into London, the more crowded the train became. Conversation became dangerous, or at least, conversation regarding their mission, and really, the mission was their purpose, regardless of their flirting, or feelings, or whatever it was they were doing. Ian didn't have a label for it. He was starting to believe he didn't want one. Labels carried weight not everything could bear, and he wasn't entirely sure he was willing to risk this newfound happiness—because he *was* happy, surprisingly, wonderfully, intensely so—by placing one upon it.

They got off at Holborn, pushing their ways against the crowds. Locals flocked to the trains to find their way home, while eager tourists streamed from behind to follow them to the surface. Everywhere they turned, Ian watched for anything out of place, but in the hub of so much activity, it was difficult to see much of anything. His favorite busker, a stocky woman in her forties with an alto like broken glass and a battered guitar that emitted the most angelic tones he'd ever heard, leaned against the wall near the stairs. She wasn't singing at the moment, but even with the squeals of the trains and the constant dull roar from the people, her strumming carried through the crowd.

Ian's hand was in his pocket before they reached her, and he tossed the coins he found there into her open case when he passed. Her eyes lifted and met his, recognition in their fathomless depths. Nodding to her was the most natural thing in the world. He did it whenever she was there on his way to work. The fact that she smiled and nodded back had to be a good omen.

This section of London always seemed warmer than others. The heavy traffic, the brash of bodies, the choking architecture...it all conspired to conserve heat, blasting across faces when they emerged from the seething Underground. The similarity to his experience in California struck Ian as they navigated around a group of teenagers bent over their phones. The cold and darkness of those hours seemed like a lifetime ago, and he, a different person.

He stole a glance at Lucas, walking alongside him. Certainly, he got partial credit, for encouraging his freedom, his contributions. But Ian suspected there might be more to it. He'd seen so much in the time since the dig had been attacked, lives taken, lives lived. People from walks of life he would only have read about, or seen on TV. Even if he had been a last minute substitute, he'd seen the dig as the means to push his boundaries as an archaeologist, open a new door for him professionally. What he'd actually experienced surpassed any expectation he could have had.

For all the fear and anxiety he'd felt, equal measures of satisfaction and excitement balanced them out. And now, he'd be able to finally tip the scales in his favor by contributing something more valuable than a plan or an extra set of hands at the driving wheel. He'd translate those tablets, if he had to travel to Egypt and excavate original texts to do it.

When they rounded the corner onto Great Russell, the queue for the Starbucks stretched out the door and down the walk. Lucas took one look at it and grimaced.

"Are you sure I can't just duck into a bathroom any time we see a security guard?" he asked.

"It won't be that bad. I'll be back before you know it." On impulse, he caught the back of Lucas's neck and held him still to lean in for a kiss. He saw the surprise in the other man's eyes the moment before their lips met, but there was nothing reticent about the hard kiss, or the way Lucas opened to him for the few seconds it lasted. The tips of their tongues touched briefly, long enough to make his taste buds pop, and then Ian was pulling back, matching Lucas's smile as he let him go. "Think about where you want dinner. I expect to be plied to the fullest tonight."

The sound of Lucas's laughter trailed after him as he jogged across the street to the museum. The distant thought of, *I did that*, carried him all the way around the building.

Working at the British Museum had never been a goal of his, but when the position had opened a few months after he finished his degree, it seemed inevitable he would apply. He'd held few illusions about actually procuring the assistant curator job, though. The British Museum had some of the highest standards in the country, and his father had been quick to remind him that applicants from all over the world would vie for the honor of working there.

"You're not competing against yourself," James Tunbridge had said over a cup of tea on a rainy Sunday afternoon. Dinner at his parents' was a tradition he had never been able to shake. "Anyone with a sense of respect will want this job. It's not every day the British Museum casts a wider net like this."

"I want this."

"Do you? Or did you apply for the prestige?"

Ian had resented the implication he was only in this for the glory. Nothing could have been further from the truth. The very next day, he'd swallowed his pride, locked away his fear, and taken the results of his Greek practical to the head of the museum himself, lying to every secretary along the way until he stood face to face with the man.

He'd been offered the job that night. Later, he found out he'd impressed Mr. Ball with his proactivity rather than his CV. He'd worked doubly hard after that to prove his education and mind were more than up to the task.

The employees' entrance was hidden away from the street, locked from the outside to prevent anyone from slipping in who didn't belong there. There were two ways to get in—the passkey each employee received upon hiring to swipe over the lock, and a keypad that allowed for a manual override for those people who lost or forgot their card. That number was larger than the museum would like to admit. They changed the code on the keypad at regular intervals to keep it as safe as possible.

Ian had to hope the code hadn't been changed since his departure. His passkey was locked safely away at his flat, and neither he nor Lucas had wanted to risk going there to retrieve it. If the code didn't work, they wouldn't have a choice, but they had agreed they had to at least try to get in via other means first.

He punched in the eight-digit code. Each tone quickened his pulse a few beats more.

When he pressed enter, the lock clicked free. Ian sighed in relief and pulled it open.

It was a very good thing Lucas wasn't around for him to worry about. His nerves were clearly too tightly wound already.

Rather than venture deeper into the museum, Ian took the emergency stairs immediately inside the entrance. Few people used them. The lighting dated back decades, occasionally flickering like some kind of horror movie, and the stairwell wasn't heated. The pithless air sharpened senses, the echoes of his treads down the concrete steps jangling at the base of his neck, the sickly burn of gas from the heat leaking beneath the doors prickling his nose.

He reached the first lower level and paused, leaning toward the heavy metal door to listen for any sounds on the other side.

Nothing.

Still, he twisted the knob slowly, careful of making any noise, on the alert of anyone who might be coming.

The corridor was empty, both ahead of him and to his left toward the central furnace. Ian turned in the latter's direction, away from the phalanx of offices and restoration rooms used by the museum's staff. His was located on the far end. To reach it normally, he would take the lift that descended from the common area used as an employee break room on the ground level, then walk past a third of his co-workers to get to his door. From the emergency stairs, it was a straight shot, but there would be no telling who might already be in their offices as he strode by.

Going around the central furnace to circumvent the main hallway ran the risk of running into someone from the maintenance staff, but Ian had deliberately timed their arrival for fifteen minutes before the museum's closing for a reason. Most of the curator staff would be either on the museum floor, in a meeting the senior employees were so fond of scheduling toward the end of the day to ensure people didn't leave early, or in a restoration room hard at

### ARIES: RIDDLE ME WICKED

work. He didn't have to worry about many of the research employees; they were closer to the library. The maintenance crew would be involved in the museum's shutdown, while the cleaners wouldn't arrive until well into the evening. The window of opportunity worked well for his and Lucas's electronic trail, too. New York would be deep into its lunch hour at the moment. There would be plenty of opportunities for them to pop up all over its streets.

For all his planning, though, his heart pounded against his ribs, and his palms grew increasingly damp with each step he took. He kept looking behind him, expecting to see a familiar face or be forced to acknowledge a colleague, but he reached the other side of the furnace room with no incidents.

The hand he rested on the knob shook. Bugger. If he was this anxious already, he would be an absolute wreck by the time he had to leave. More people would be around then. More chances to get caught.

Best to get a move on, then.

Nobody greeted him as he stepped into the hallway, but the faint ding of the lift behind him prompted him to double time to his office. No lock to worry about here. None of the junior staff had that benefit. He pushed it open wide enough to slip inside, then shut it silently behind him.

Ian exhaled as he leaned against the closed door. His career choice had obviously been the correct one. He was not cut out to be James Bond.

His body rhythms took a moment to return to normal, during which time he gazed lovingly around the room. His office was tiny, even by the museum's standards, but he didn't care. It was his and his alone. The academics were mostly consigned off premises,

#### ARIES: RIDDLE ME WICKED

since each department had varying needs and staff that required more space than the museum could supply. Some of the other junior curators had to share offices, but he'd been fortunate from the start. One entire wall was dedicated to shelves for his books, protected behind glass, which made the room even narrower. When he sat at his desk, he had to turn sideways when he wanted to rise because there wasn't room for his chair to push back all the way. He could have more room if he got rid of the lower half of the shelves, but that would mean culling his collection, and as far as Ian was concerned, that was unacceptable.

That same collection would be the reason he was finally able to give something back to Lucas.

He'd been working on this collection since he'd left home for university. It had started with a text from his father, a 1499 volume of Greek letters edited by the humanist and archbishop Marcus Musurus. Ian had accepted it, flabbergasted at his father's lavishness, and promised from that day forward to value the written word as highly as James did. That single book, recognized by his peers and professors at Oxford for its true worth, spawned years of hunting down elusive texts, acquiring manuscripts few others in the world had. A few were given to him, based on his growing reputation. Others were purchased using the museum's funds, with the understanding they would revert to the museum library unless Ian bought them outright. The rest were the result of every penny he had ever saved.

Lucas was not the only one with little financial hold on the world. Everything Ian had ever invested in was contained in this one small room. It was an eclectic collection, to be sure, but that was the exact reason it was the perfect tool to translate the tablets. Unlike others in his field, his classical knowledge spanned cultures, primarily because he was so widely read. If the language on the tablets truly was the result of multiple heritages, this was how he would best decipher it.

Dropping the pack onto the edge of his desk, Ian turned to face the shelves, rubbing his hands together as he scanned along the rows. He already knew which volumes he wanted to take, but something might have slipped his mind that could prove—

He froze.

Something was out of order.

His gaze jumped back to the start of the row, this time traveling slower along the spines. He only made it three books in when he realized what was wrong.

These weren't his books.

Or rather, a select few weren't his books.

He closed the gap to the shelves, his heart in his throat. There weren't any gaps in the line-up. Those that had been taken had been replaced with others of similar size and coloring. But he'd gone over these shelves too many times not to have them memorized. He knew these books as well as he knew his own body. Whoever had taken them hadn't wanted it to be known or discovered any time soon. In fact, the only person who would have probably guessed at all that something was wrong was Ian.

Quickly, he counted the proxied texts. By the time he reached eight, he realized the titles hadn't been random.

As he scrambled for his phone, he swallowed down the bile burning its way up his gullet. Most of the stolen books were one of a kinds. Irreplaceable.

But worse than that, someone had violated his sanctum.

"Are you done already?" Lucas's chipper voice made Ian cringe. "Where can I meet—"

"They're gone."

He stared at the shelves for several seconds before Lucas responded.

"What's gone?"

"My books. The ones I needed for the translation. They're gone. Everything I had on Egyptian and Sumerian has been replaced by something else." The panic was starting to blind him. His ears buzzed. "They were here, Lucas. Sultis was here."

"Get out of there." The order was crisp and loud. In the background, traffic got louder. "I'm coming to—"

The doorknob turned. Ian jumped away from the edge of the desk, nearly dropping his phone as he stared at the man standing in the doorway.

"This would have been so much easier if you'd simply stayed in the ground," Sultis said.

## CHAPTER 15

Though the background voice over the line was faint, Lucas had heard it too many times not to recognize it. Alarm battled with terror. Both emotions lost to pure anger. Anger at Sultis, anger at the situation, but most of all, anger at himself for not sticking with Ian, no matter what his arguments.

Though he had already been moving as soon as Ian had told him what happened, Lucas broke into a hard run, darting through moving cars with little thought about getting hit. One honked its horn as it whizzed by behind him. Another's brakes squealed to avoid collision. Lucas blocked it all out as he dove over the hood of an idling Mondeo, sliding effortlessly across the sleek navy metal to land on the other side. His tennis shoes hit the pavement hard, but he used the jolt through his ankles to sharpen his reflexes. Run faster. Get to Ian.

His phone slipped in his sweaty grip, and he switched hands. "Ian!" He didn't want to distract him, but he needed to know what was going on. No shots. He supposed that was a bonus. Sultis liked his guns a little too much for Lucas's liking. Especially around Ian. "Talk to me, man!"

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to call you back." Ian's voice was too calm, too even.

It made the hair stand up on the back of Lucas's neck.

"No! Don't-"

The line went dead.

The urge to throw the phone into the street nearly won. Lucas swore under his breath and shoved the device into his pocket.

He couldn't get in the same way Ian had. People streamed out through the doors, following the museum's instructions they were about to close. He zigzagged through the crowd, making a beeline for the front. Some tourists sat on the steps, a trio of girls here, a couple nuzzling several yards away. A preschool boy with thin blond hair whipping around in the chilly winter wind ran up and down the length of a middle riser, his mother oblivious to his wandering as she fumbled around in her purse. Lucas dodged around him, but the boy pivoted at the last second, running straight into Lucas's legs.

They both fell over to the side, though mercifully, the child landed on top of him. His cry alerted the mother, who, with widened eyes and a stream of German, raced over to pull the boy off Lucas.

Lucas started to wave off the mother's apologies, then saw the guard coming to the front door to view the slight crowd gathering around the accident. With his best smile in place, he knelt at the mother's side.

"That was a pretty nasty fall," he said in his rusty German. "You should take him somewhere to get him checked out."

Her watery blue eyes jumped from him, to her son, and then back to him. "Our rooms aren't close."

He nodded back to the museum. "Take him inside. I'm sure they have some kind of first aid station."

"Won't they charge?"

"No, I'm sure they won't."

"My English—"

"How about I translate for you?" His grin turned sheepish. "I feel kind of responsible for getting in his way."

Her face brightened, and she stepped back, giving Lucas room to scoop the boy into his arms. He followed her toward the front doors, only taking the lead when the guard tried to stop them from entering.

"Do you have a nurse on staff who can make sure the kid's all right?" he asked. "He did get hurt on museum property, after all."

The guard scowled at the implied threat. His shrewd eyes swept over the child, then took in the mother before he jerked his head toward the doorway. "This way."

"Thank you," the mother said to Lucas as they followed the guard inside.

"Don't mention it."

They were lead immediately off the primary entryway, taking a narrow door marked "Private" away from the vaulted ceilings and majesty. Though Lucas maintained his smile, his gaze kept jumping around, drinking in as many details as he could without making it obvious.

"In here."

*Here* was a small waiting room, with two narrow chairs and another door that opened when they entered. A large Pakistani man in a shirt and tie beckoned for them to come through.

"Are you the parents?" he asked.

"Oh, no," Lucas said. "Well, she is. I'm just the guy he ran into outside."

The doctor patted an exam table. There wasn't much else in the room except for the long counter and cupboards lining one wall. The boy scooted back on the black vinyl padding when Lucas set him down, turning frightened eyes to his mother and begging her to come close.

"You're German?" The doctor's accent was much better than Lucas's, his smile warm enough to draw her forward. He fired question after question at her, each one encouraging Lucas to back closer to the door.

He slipped out without either of them noticing. The last thing he saw was the boy glancing in his direction.

Inside, and out of the primary gallery.

Now all he had to do was find Ian.

\* \* \*

Ian refused to quail beneath Sultis's unblinking black gaze, or tremble when their fingers brushed as he passed over the phone. The loss only mattered in that it cut him off from Lucas. They'd purchased it specifically to be disposable and untraceable. They would simply replace it when they were reunited again.

"Your ankle seems to be improved," Sultis commented.

"Yes, it's doing much better, no thanks to you."

"You're the one who ran."

"Because I'm the one who got shot at."

"Because you ran." Sultis shook his head. "A circular argument, I'm afraid. Not really worth our time."

Ian retreated a step when Sultis entered far enough to shut the door behind him. Though he hadn't seen the man since California, he looked much the same. The corduroy coat had been swapped with a soft black leather one, though this jacket didn't close over his paunch, either. Under the harsh lighting, his skin appeared more sallow, sagging at the back of his jaw and beneath his chin, like his head hadn't quite caught up with the added weight elsewhere. The ponytail was still the same, though, as was the contemptuous gleam in his eye.

Ian doubted he had ever hated a man as much as he hated Sultis, and not necessarily just because he'd tried to kill him and Lucas.

"I know what you're after," he said. "Lucas told me everything."

"Yes, I supposed he would. He's a very...passionate man when he gets excited about a subject." Glancing around, he moved in several more steps, forcing Ian to back against his desk. "I wonder why he would want you to come back here, though. It seems preemptory."

Sultis didn't know Lucas had made copies of the Polaroids. That was one plus for their side.

"I wonder why you would bother chasing us down when it's clear we're not interested in working for you," Ian countered. "There are other experts in my field who would be more than happy for the notoriety you're offering."

"And you're not?"

"The Blood of Sheol is a myth."

His rattlesnake smile chilled every drop of Ian's blood. "Which makes its discovery all the more valuable."

"Why are you bothering?" The question was unstoppable. His curiosity drowned out common sense, and if he could keep Sultis talking... "Even if you do find it, it will be priceless. A major archaeological find like that is only profitable to the government who claims it, and the scientist who finds it. I would be more apt to gain from deciphering the tablets than you, by far."

"You forget the private buyers." Sultis tilted his head to scan the book spines. It turned his attention away from Ian, but Ian didn't feel nearly secure enough the man didn't have a weapon hidden somewhere he could reach before Ian took advantage of his distraction. "There is always someone willing to pay for the right to own a piece of history."

"Provided it even exists."

"Oh, it exists."

Sultis fell silent, then, lines forming between his dark brows. He was utterly absorbed by Ian's library, though when he reached out to open one of the glass doors, Ian's hand shot out to grab his wrist.

"I don't think so," he said through gritted teeth. "Those are rare volumes. You'll have to kill me to get to them."

His extreme response seemed to amuse Sultis, though the frown didn't entirely disappear. "Killing you defeats my purpose. I thought I'd made that clear when we met." He lowered his arm, though Ian didn't let him go. He felt more in control to have a hold on the man, as spurious as it might be. "This isn't your complete library, is it?"

The question made little sense, but Ian was reluctant to press for clarification. "Since when are you interested in books, Mr. Sultis? They hardly seem worth your time."

"They are if they're going to help you pinpoint where the Blood of Sheol is." He turned his attention back to the shelves, refraining from reaching for them this time. "I count at least four titles missing of those we assumed you would need for the translation. If they're not here, then where are they?"

Ian had a better question. If Sultis didn't know the books had gone missing, who had taken them from his office in the first place?

"The museum has full access to my resources," he lied smoothly. "Someone likely borrowed the texts. There's no mystery there."

Sultis's contemplative pause congealed into something heavy, stealing whatever air was left in the office until Ian was certain he'd be sick. He preferred it when Sultis was actually menacing. At least that was a threat he could recognize. The cunning silence left too many possibilities for harm, hazards he wouldn't be able to defend against until it was too late.

"An interesting choice of words," Sultis murmured. He tugged on his arm, easily breaking Ian's grip. For all the hint of being out of shape, he had an iron strength still capable of besting most men. "Perhaps we should go find your books, then. After all, they're why you're here, aren't they?"

His mouth pressed into a hard line. He wouldn't give Sultis the satisfaction in confirming anything.

The muffled sound of a ringing phone took away the onus of having to reply. Ian glanced at the pocket Sultis had slipped his cell into. The fact that Sultis didn't immediately stop the ringing by answering it implied he knew it was Ian's phone.

"You're not going to get that?" Ian said.

Sultis shrugged. "What do I have to say to Mr. Arpini?" "You need him."

"I needed him two weeks ago. I've had time to start investigating computer programs that will replicate his talents. You, on the other hand, have skills not as easily replaced."

"I guess that makes me special," he said with more venom than he'd wished to show.

"Yes." Sultis smirked. "I suppose it does."

\* \* \*

Lucas hadn't expected Ian to answer, though it definitely would have helped. He'd done it primarily as a means of appearing unassuming, when a pair of older gentlemen who most definitely worked for the museum stood outside the elevator waiting to go up when the doors opened up onto the basement level. His intent had been to look too busy to pay much attention, in hopes British reserve would insist on discretion and turn their heads away to keep his conversation private.

That part had actually worked.

The unexpected side effect was the faint—so faint it might have just been his overactive imagination, but God he was hoping not—ring of a phone from farther down the hallway. He dropped his arm to his side and strained to hear, forcing his body to utter stillness in hopes of making it out.

The chime from the elevator going up didn't help.

Neither did the rushing of his blood.

He couldn't tell. He just couldn't tell. It was entirely possible the ringing had been Ian's phone, but there was an equal possibility he was hearing exactly what he wanted to hear, which was the direction he needed to save the man who'd come to mean so much to him.

Instinct told him to go for it.

Murmuring voices behind him told him to get his ass out of the hallway before he got caught in an unauthorized area and was thrown out of the building entirely.

He ducked into the first room that wasn't locked, leaving the lights off as he pressed his ear to the door. Staff would be trickling away from the museum floor. He was going to be trapped in here.

On the flipside, so were Sultis and Ian. If they were even still in the building.

His phone screen glowed unnaturally bright in the dim room when he hit redial. Holding his breath, he divided his attention between the call and the people in the corridor, poised to take action in case he'd had the bad luck to hide in an office about to get its occupant.

When the phone went straight to voicemail this time, he squeezed his eyes shut and disconnected.

What options did he have now?

Had Sultis decided enough was enough and killed Ian?

Lucas didn't know. But he wouldn't give up trying to get to him, not while he had breath in his body.

\* \* \*

Ian hadn't expected Sultis to call his bluff. While it was distinctly possible someone from the museum had borrowed his books, he also recognized it was highly unlikely they would bother putting others in their stead to make it appear nothing was amiss.

However, if they went off in search of them and ran into his co-

workers, he could alert them to his predicament and get free.

Or Sultis could pull out a gun Ian had yet to see and shoot everyone in sight.

Based on what he'd already witnessed from the man, he didn't necessarily think that was such an off-the-wall possibility.

"If you know which texts I'm going to need, does that mean you know what the tablets' origins are?" he asked, stalling for time. "Lucas couldn't give me anything but guesses."

"Egyptian." Sultis nodded toward the door. So much for stalling. "Lead the way, Mr. Tunbridge. And if you even think about alerting anyone as to who I am, be aware you'll be putting Mr. Arpini into an unmarked grave."

Ian jerked at the obvious threat. "What are you talking about? Lucas is fine. He just called."

"Do you really think I'd approach you without making sure Mr. Arpini was under watch? It doesn't matter if he called. If I don't meet with my men at our arranged time, they'll kill him on the spot."

"Something tells me you're just going to kill him anyway."

"And lose my collateral with you? I am not a fool, no matter what you might think."

"I managed to elude you this long, didn't I?"

"Until you tried that ridiculous stunt in New York." He gripped the handle, ready to open the door. "I mean, really? That was rather pedantic, don't you think?"

Ian shrugged. "It worked well enough to get us out of the country. Perhaps there's a time and place for pedantic."

"Neither is here nor now." His expression hardened. "Now, if you'll-"

A sharp klaxon pierced the air. Both men jerked their heads

toward the corner of the ceiling near the door, and the small intercom mounted there.

"What's that?" Sultis demanded.

Ian quashed the adrenaline threatening to throttle him and cocked an eyebrow, hoping it gave him an air of insouciance. "I believe it's an alarm."

The look on Sultis's face was as close to a snarl Ian had yet to see on the man. Reaching around to the small of his back, he yanked a gun from beneath his jacket and used it to motion Ian toward the door. "Then you should hope the flames aren't high enough to kill you yet. Move."

He had no other choice, though he wished he knew what the alarm was for. It sounded nothing like the fire alarm they used for drills.

The hallway wasn't empty, but the gun all too ready behind him kept Ian from calling out to his colleagues. The klaxon still rang out, loud enough in the corridor to make him set his jaw. He had only taken a few steps away from the door when he heard a grunt of pain, followed by a heavy weight reverberating against the wall.

He whirled in time to see Lucas slamming Sultis into the wall again. One hand gripped the back of Sultis's neck, while the other had the man's wrist. Though Sultis tried to struggle, Lucas was too strong for him. He smashed Sultis's hand two more times before Sultis opened his fingers and dropped the gun.

Ian dove for the weapon as soon as it fell to the floor. He flashed on it going off when it landed, half-expecting it to explode in his hands as he snatched it up, then chided himself for how ridiculously Hollywood he was being.

Until he stood up again and pressed the muzzle to Sultis's

temple. He had to stifle the overwhelming desire to say, "Go ahead. Make my day."

Instead, he met Lucas's eyes and offered, "Your timing is as impeccable as always."

Not as memorable, but it earned him a brilliant smile, one bright enough to make his heart flip-flop.

That alone made everything worth it.

## CHAPTER 16

Ian had never seen so many police constables at the British Museum before, all at one time, and certainly never within its walls. They swarmed through the hallways, corralling people into moving outside as quickly as possible, barking orders to those they deemed too slow. Sultis attempted taking advantage of the ensuing chaos by twisting out of Lucas's grasp, but Lucas planted his foot into Sultis's backside and shoved him to the floor, while Ian repositioned to keep the gun firmly trained on him. They kept him like that until someone finally noticed Ian was armed. Then, time vanished in a blink of an eye as all three were promptly segregated from the others, pushed into cars, and whisked away.

He ended up in a tiny office without any windows, the scent of tobacco permeating the air like it had been soaked up by the building over the years, seated opposite a burly MPS inspector named McKendree. He had no idea where Lucas or Sultis were. They'd been separated as soon as possible. But he had no fears anymore. Truth was on his side, and even if Sultis tried to lie through his teeth about his presence at the museum, he had no doubt Lucas would at least corroborate some of what Ian had to say.

"So..." McKendree had short, stubby fingers, currently laced together as he leaned forward onto his forearms. "Care to tell me what you were doing with a loaded firearm in the middle of a bomb threat, Mr. Tunbridge?"

His eyes shot wide. This was the first he'd heard of what had been going on down at the museum. "A what?"

McKendree was unfazed by his outburst. "You heard me. Rather incriminating, don't you think?"

"I would have thought having a bomb in my hand would be more so," he said before realizing it was likely better not to antagonize McKendree with smart remarks. He dismissed the question of the threat to focus on smoothing McKendree's annoyance. "The gun wasn't mine, sir. It was Mr. Sultis's. The Hungarian gentleman that was brought in with us."

"But it was in your hand."

"Only after my friend disarmed him." He sighed. "I'm afraid it's a long story."

"Considering neither one of us is leaving this room until you tell it, I suggest you start."

Confined in an MPS office, taken in under such suspicious circumstances, Ian saw no other choice but to do as he was told. Haltingly, he began with the dig in California, and the attack that had led to the flight for his life. He described the lengths Sultis had taken to contain him, and how meeting Lucas had very likely saved his life. The more of the tale he told, the more he realized how much Lucas had actually done for him. At the time, he'd been convinced it was all due to his desire for notoriety, the way he needed Ian to find the Blood of Sheol. Now, after everything they'd gone through, after Lucas had been so adamant about leaving Ian alone—an excellent instinct, on hindsight—he knew it stemmed from more. The traits he'd thought too stalkerish when they first met now warmed him from the inside out.

Lucas knew him far better in the short period of time they'd been together than people who'd known Ian his entire life. Until now, he hadn't realized how badly he needed that.

He left out the specifics of Sultis's intentions, hoping McKendree would assume he didn't know, as well as the particulars of their various illegal acts, and focused instead on the entrapment and later flight, their attempts to get away from Sultis in California which culminated in their arrival in New York.

"London was the logical next step," he said. "My colleagues were here, my life. I only arrived this morning, in fact."

"Why didn't you go to the museum straight away?"

He did his best to appear sheepish, and vaguely wondered if he'd been this good at pretense prior to Lucas's arrival in his life. "I've slept poorly since this entire debacle began. I'm afraid I fell asleep. I went to the museum as soon as I was awake and cleaned up, though."

"Why would this Arpini bloke come with you?"

"To verify what happened, of course. I had no idea who this Sultis was, or if he had any connections with the museum. It could have come down to his word against mine, and then what would happen? I needed every advantage I could get." That part was true. Much easier to present.

"But Arpini isn't associated with the museum."

"No, he's not."

"Who is he associated with, then?"

"No one. He's a freelance photographer."

"So you let an unauthorized person into the building without first asking your superiors?"

It dawned on him, then, that Lucas had very likely used the bomb threat as a means of getting Sultis apprehended. The measure seemed too extreme, though when it came to Lucas, he couldn't say it surprised him. It did mean, however, he needed to be careful how he answered McKendree. Threats of any kind were a very serious matter. He didn't need Lucas going to jail because of this.

"Of course not," he said. "He was waiting for me at the Starbucks across the street. I'm sure if you asked anyone who was there, they'd identify him." He hoped.

"Then how did he come to be inside with his foot on the back of a man's neck, in the middle of an evacuation?"

"I honestly don't know. I rang him to let him know I was in my office, and while we were on the phone, Mr. Sultis walked in. Lucas heard him, and then, Mr. Sultis forced me to disconnect and took away my phone."

McKendree seemed less than pleased with this answer, harrumphing with a scowl. He sucked loudly at something in his teeth for several seconds, then unfolded his hands and sat back in his seat.

"Where's the phone now?"

"Mr. Sultis still has it. In his pocket, if he hasn't managed to get rid of it."

"Would be rather convenient if he has."

Ian stiffened. "Only for him. Because it will confirm everything I've told you. I sincerely hope your constables have managed to confiscate it."

McKendree picked up a pen from the desk between them and scribbled down a note. "So your friend was worried about you. Worried enough to find a way to get into the building to help you."

He hadn't posed a direct question. Ian held his tongue, unwilling to add fuel to the fire the inspector was trying to build.

"You seem like a smart bloke, Mr. Tunbridge. You must recognize what all this looks like."

"The only thing I recognize at the moment is that you have Mr. Sultis in custody, and I have every intention of filing charges so that he stays here. Considering what's happened to me the past few weeks, Inspector, that's all I really care about."

Ian kept his chin high, unblinking while McKendree weighed his statements. With a put-upon sigh, he tossed the pen onto the desk and stood, his chair squealing across the worn tiled floor. Not even that was enough to make Ian flinch.

"Wait here," came the terse order.

When the door closed behind McKendree, Ian finally exhaled and sagged back into his seat. He was beholden to Lucas for the phone call, but he really wished they weren't in their current predicament. If the police opted to be difficult about their suspicions—and considering what they had walked in on and how farfetched his story sounded, Ian couldn't entirely blame them— Lucas could face a prison sentence. English police took bomb threats very seriously, and falsifying one in the largest tourist attraction in London? Even worse.

Fifteen minutes elapsed. Fifteen minutes of playing every worst

case scenario over in his head. Fifteen minutes of trying to come up with a shortlist of people who might be able to help him. Fifteen minutes of worry Sultis might have contacts within the MPS that would see him back on the streets, regardless of what happened to Lucas.

Fifteen minutes of mounting terror that he'd seen the last of Lucas Arpini, and it was entirely his fault for ruining the other man's life.

Fifteen minutes of hell.

He jumped when the door opened and McKendree stood on the threshold. "Come on." McKendree gestured for him to exit.

As he rose to his feet, he realized the back of his collar was damp with sweat. Did he look as bad as he felt? "Am I being released?"

McKendree waited until they were both in the hallway before answering. "Eventually. If you're serious about pressing charges on Mr. Sultis, you need to file a report before you go."

His heart leapt. "I'm very serious. He's responsible for far worse crimes than unauthorized access. The museum is likely to want to add its name to the report, too."

"One at a time."

He didn't have time to ask about Lucas. McKendree walked ahead of him, no longer speaking, and took him up a narrow flight of chilly stairs. They emerged into a long, open room packed with desks and people. Police tapped at keyboards, others sat next to them in waiting. Victims or criminals, he had no idea. So many of them looked like they could have been anybody walking in off the street.

A young woman who seemed barely old enough to be out of college took his statement, forcing him to repeat everything he had

told McKendree downstairs. She asked more pointed questions than the inspector had, though mercifully, only those meant to expound on the details he'd already provided. Ian went through the process, taking his time to ensure he said nothing that would make matters worse. He was anxious to find out what had happened to Lucas, but he could only ask once he was done.

As it turned out, he didn't have to.

The stairwell door opened again. Ian only glanced over out of reflex, but the sight of Lucas following McKendree into the room had him sitting up noticeably straighter, enough for Simm, the constable taking his report, to pause.

"That your friend?" she asked.

Ian nodded, his heart in his throat as McKendree neared. Behind him, Lucas grinned, but it was a smile meant only for Ian, the type of wicked gesture that teased with pleasures to come. The relief it conveyed, that promise that the world was right again, nearly made him buckle in relief.

The grin remained as they came to a stop next to Simm's desk. "You're a sight for sore eyes," Lucas said.

He was still using his not quite right British accent, though nobody paid any more attention to them than they already were. His documents must have passed muster here, as well, so at least they didn't have to worry about his getting deported for using a fake passport.

"Are you being released?" Ian posed his question to both Lucas and McKendree, willing to get reassurance from either man. He'd deal with the bureaucracy as long as necessary if it meant the nightmare was finally over.

"Mr. Arpini has been cleared of any connection to the threat," McKendree confirmed. "The phone we took from Mr. Sultis confirmed your timestamps, and we have statements from two different museum employees and the tourist he helped explaining why he was in the building."

Ian glanced at Lucas in curiosity, who shrugged. "I'm not arguing with luck playing in our favor for a change."

"Are you about done here?" McKendree asked Simm. At her nod, he gestured for Lucas to sit. "I'll escort you downstairs, Mr. Tunbridge. You can wait for your friend there."

The last thing he wanted was to leave Lucas again, but Ian complied with the directive, stepping out of the way to trade places with the other man. He caught Lucas's shoulder before he sat and squeezed it in support, then left him behind with the image of his hard body lounging in Simm's extra chair burned onto his brain.

The first thing he was going to do when they were alone again was kiss the man senseless. The answers about how he managed to convince the police he hadn't made the call could wait until Ian was sure Lucas wasn't going to vanish. His life would have been barren if Lucas had been snatched out of it. Now, he would savor every moment he got for the treasure it was.

"What will happen to Mr. Sultis now?" he asked, following McKendree through the building's bowels.

"Not entirely sure," McKendree admitted. "I'm going to have to coordinate the investigation with the Hungarian and American embassies. We'll have to get jurisdiction sorted first. The fact that he's being less than cooperative in answering our questions isn't helping matters."

Ian snorted. Of course, he wasn't helping the police. The man was probably wanted in multiple countries for any number of crimes. It was a very real possibility he and Lucas only had the time it would take Sultis to get a solicitor have him released, but at least the police were fully aware of the situation now. The embassies would be now, too. He would have loved throwing the Egyptian government at Sultis as well, but then he'd have to explain how he knew they were involved. The risk wasn't worth it. Not yet, anyway.

They reached the final door, but McKendree hesitated to open it. "Why would he go to such lengths to kidnap you?" The question Ian had attempted to evade back at his desk hung between them, heavy and more loaded than ever. "What do you have that he wants?"

"I have no idea," Ian said without blinking. "And if you find out from Mr. Sultis, please let me know. I would love to know what could possibly be worth harming so many lives."

Whether McKendree would follow through remained unseen. He simply unlocked the release on the door and pushed it open, silently waiting for Ian to step through.

The waiting area had dingy lighting and narrow vinyl chairs in shades of red and blue he hadn't seen in circulation since the eighties, but the street was visible through the front window, and cars passed by in a semblance of normalcy. Freedom. Home. All within his grasp. McKendree walked him through the paperwork to get back his personal effects, then left him with a brisk nod and a terse, "We'll be in touch."

His pack was still in his office at the museum. He would have to go back first thing in the morning to retrieve it. He would also have to face the board and the department heads about what was going on. He didn't even know if they knew what had happened to the dig. There was every chance he would have to start from scratch, all over again.

He waited nearly an hour before the door opened again. Lucas

came through wearing the same cocky smile, though neither of them said a word as he went through the same process Ian had. McKendree repeated the same parting words, but this time, stood in the waiting room to watch them leave.

Ian waited to grab Lucas into a tight hug until they were on the pavement and out of sight of the inspector.

Lucas returned the embrace even harder than Ian, turning to bury his face in Ian's neck. The hot breath both relaxed Ian's nerves and boiled his blood, shifting what he'd meant to be a "thank goodness we both got out of this mess unscathed" hug into something far more closely resembling a "you're the sexiest man I've ever known and I want to shag you into next Sunday" one. His erection almost embarrassed him, like they hadn't spent their morning already having sex, and he willed away the most erotic of his thoughts to concentrate on the here and now.

"I have no idea how you convinced them you didn't do it," Ian murmured, "but I'll take whatever I can get at this point."

Lucas broke the hold, stepping back to gaze quizzically at Ian. "I didn't make the bomb threat. You think I'm crazy? You Brits are almost as bad as us Americans about that kind of thing."

Though he was glad to finally know, Lucas's denial raised an awkward question. "So it really was just luck it happened when we most needed to get out?"

Lucas showed no signs of being as perturbed by this happenstance as Ian did. "Guess so."

The traffic had thinned while Ian had been waiting, though the stream was still fairly steady. Ian scanned up and down the street, debating whether it was worth it or not to try and catch a taxi here or just head for the closest Underground station. With Sultis in custody, there wasn't the same need for discretion, and he rather fancied having some quiet time with Lucas to discuss what came next.

"Where's your pack?" Lucas asked.

"Back at the museum."

"So is that where we're headed?"

Ian shot him a curious glance. "You don't want to pack it in? It's been a long day, and we'd have to face my superiors if we went back. We might not even be able to get in, for that matter. The police could still have everything cordoned off."

"Yeah, maybe, but the sooner we get your pack, the sooner we can get back on the trail." He trotted to catch up to Ian's side when Ian decided to stop waiting for a taxi to magically arrive. "There's nothing holding us back now. We're free and clear to find the Blood of Sheol all on our own."

"Nothing, except for the minor detail that I don't have any of my books." Though they were still several yards away from the corner, Ian ground to a halt, remembering one of the details that had taken him so much by surprise during Sultis's visit. "When Sultis saw that the books were missing, he seemed surprised."

They had stopped between streetlights, and the shadows hid most of Lucas's face. "He was playing you. He had to be."

"No, I don't think so. He asked me where they were, so I lied and said someone from the museum must have borrowed them. He believed me."

"And that's not a possibility?"

"If someone had simply borrowed them, why would they go to the bother of putting others in their places to make it look like nothing was gone?"

"That sounds premeditated."

Ian nodded. "Which isn't exactly Sultis's style."

"That doesn't make sense."

"Neither does the fact Sultis claimed to have men watching you. Would they have let you get into the building if that was the case?"

"I'm not sure anybody could have stopped me."

Ian's gaze strayed beyond Lucas, blind to the street and hulking buildings surrounding them. Instead, his inner eye reconstructed the scene at the museum—Sultis's smug behavior, the confirmation of the tablets' origin, his shock at the alarm ringing over the intercom, the lack of men he claimed to have keeping Lucas under control. The only logical conclusion was the one that left his blood running cold.

"Why don't we go home and call it a night?" Lucas's query cut through his ruminations, redirecting him back to the moment. "You're right. It's been a long day. We can always hit the museum tomorrow."

When Ian didn't respond right away, Lucas caught his elbow and led him gently to the curb. Within moments, a taxi appeared at the corner, turning onto the street when he saw Lucas's hail.

He was grateful when Lucas didn't press him into conversation for the duration of the ride back to Beryl's. His thoughts refused to calm, swirling into new patterns with question after question, scenario after scenario, fact after fact. For all his purported exhaustion, deciphering the riddle of what was actually going on was far more vital.

Because if he was sure of anything, it was that. Something *was* going on, something they hadn't considered, something beyond Sultis's greed.

Lucas was the one who paid the driver, the one who pulled Ian gently from the vehicle, the one who reached into Ian's front

pocket to take out the house key and lead the way to the front door. The click of the latch crawled over Ian's skin, but then they were inside, wrapped in welcoming darkness, the familiar smell of Beryl's belongings helping to relax him again.

"Straight to bed?" Lucas asked, fingers squeezing Ian's lightly.

Ian opened his mouth to respond in the affirmative. The flick of a light switch in the adjoining front room startled him into snapping it shut again.

"Not quite yet, I'm afraid." A slight, slim man with coppery skin and graying black hair stood at the fireplace, with four other men scattered around him. Two of them seemed frightfully familiar, but Ian didn't dwell on placing them. His eyes locked with the stranger's, long enough for the man to give him a small smile. "It's good to finally meet you, Mr. Tunbridge."

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Lucas edge forward, only to check his step when all four bodyguards drew guns. "Who are you?"

The enigmatic smile didn't fade. "Mr. Tunbridge knows."

"Ian?"

"I don't. He's lying to us."

"Ah, not a lie. You might not know my name, but you're far too intelligent not to have a theory. Please. Share it with Mr. Arpini."

A theory. He wished he didn't. Because just by prompting Ian to tell Lucas, the stranger had confirmed it.

"You said it all along, Lucas," he said, his voice low. "Sultis is a thug. Narrow-minded. Incapable of appreciating the big picture." With every word, the stranger's smile widened. "Meet the big picture."

# CHAPTER 17

Confronting four armed men in the middle of what was supposed to be a haven had pissed Lucas off. Hearing Ian's conjecture about why they were there in the first place made him feel like a fool.

The big picture. He'd known all along Sultis had other contacts—the original interest in the Blood of Sheol, whoever he entrusted with the tablets, countless others if his stories were to be believed. Yet, Lucas had forgotten about them in his own crazed hunt for the artifact. He'd focused so much on Sultis as the enemy that he'd let the real enemy slip his mind.

Order he should have seen and didn't.

Anger at himself shifted into fury at the stranger. "You hired Sultis to steal the tablets," he said, jabbing a finger at the man.

The stranger shook his head. "No, I hired him to find the artifact. He stole the tablets all on his own."

"You still had innocent people slaughtered for it," Ian said through gritted teeth.

"That was Sultis's doing. I wasn't aware of the deaths until after the fact."

Lucas snorted. "Sounds like a convenient excuse to me."

"The truth. Which is sometimes convenient, yes."

"So what are you doing here?" Lucas knew his tone was sharp, and maybe it wasn't the wisest choice considering there were four guns aimed at his head, but he was too livid to keep it contained, not after the day—the month—they'd had. "Your buddy Sultis is sitting in a jail cell. Shouldn't you be down there bailing him out?"

The stranger's smile faded into a hard thin line. "Sultis is exactly where I want him to be. In the morning, he'll be extradited to face criminal charges in Egypt. He is of no concern to you anymore." He shifted his gaze toward the bodyguard closest to the door, and jerked his head toward the front of the house. "Go. Get the car."

The guard slowly slid the gun out of sight beneath his coat. As he approached Ian and Lucas in the doorway to go past them, his youthful features coalesced into something familiar, narrowing Lucas's gaze. Pale eyes that caught his all too knowingly. A square, clean-shaven jaw and a wide, generous mouth. The closer he got, the stronger the scent of cigarette smoke preceded him.

As soon as he recognized him, he gasped. "Riley?"

The guard hesitated, his gaze jumping between Lucas and Ian, then back to his boss. Before any permission might be granted, Ian stiffened, his breath catching the same way Lucas's had.

"You're the lorry driver who drove us to Oakland," he said.

"But how...?"

"Because I had him in place to help you," the stranger said. He waved a hand toward Riley, who pushed past Lucas and out the front door. "Though you took him by surprise by finding a way out of the caverns. He was quite worried he'd lost the pair of you until he realized you were on the main road."

The implications were insane, making his head spin. "Why would you mess with Sultis's plans like that? You two were working together."

The welcome in the stranger's face turned to ice. "He worked for me, regardless of what he might have said otherwise. His plans were never the same as mine. He made things far more complicated than they needed to be, because he lacked the vision capable of comprehending what I desired."

"You wanted us to escape?" Ian asked.

"I wanted you back in London," the stranger corrected. "It is far easier to work with the British government than the American, when it comes to extradition. If I had any hopes of having him tried in Egypt, I had no other choice."

"You couldn't have known we'd come back here."

"Your books were here. Granted, I lost track of you when you left California, but when you resurfaced in New York, I knew everything was proceeding as planned. Ensuring you made it through immigration without problem was a relief by that point." Headlights flashed across the closed curtains, making them glow. The stranger looked off to the side and smiled. "I believe it's time to go, gentlemen."

"Go where?" Lucas demanded.

No answer from the stranger. He gestured toward the three remaining bodyguards, the largest two of whom holstered their weapons and approached Ian and Lucas. Lucas tensed for a fight, but the third still had his gun on them.

"I don't think we have much choice in the matter," Ian murmured. He was stiff, his cheeks mottled in red from adrenaline. At his sides, his hands were clenched into fists, but as Lucas watched, Ian slowly unfurled them. "The one still armed was one of the men who chased me from the dig. He has no qualms about shooting."

The guard in front of Lucas grabbed the strap of his duffel and yanked it off his shoulder, tossing it back toward the stranger. Lucas lunged to try and get it back, but the guard was too quick for him, kneeing him in the stomach before catching his wrist and wrenching his arm behind his back. He gave no leeway, twisting the joint painfully, while his other hand clamped on Lucas's shoulder to shove him forward.

"You don't need my bag," Lucas ground out.

"And neither will you," the stranger said.

Lucas was pushed through the front door first. The wintry air was more brisk than when they'd gone in, though whether that was an effect of the dropping temperature or his flushed skin, he didn't know. Right then, he didn't care. All he wanted to do was get away, but his captor was too strong to break the hold.

"Out of the frying pan, into the fire," he muttered.

A long, dark sedan idled at the curb. Riley jumped out to open the back door, but as the guard shoved Lucas forward into the car's backseat, something sharp pricked the side of Lucas's neck.

The cry of surprise died on his lips as the leather interior jumped to meet his face. Vaguely, he heard Ian's shout of alarm, but even that sounded like it was coming through a wall of water. His eyelids drooped.

#### ARIES: RIDDLE ME WICKED

His last thought before falling unconscious was, *I hope they* don't do this to Ian, too.

\* \* \*

His brain woke up first. His body wasn't nearly as accommodating.

Lucas struggled to open his eyes. They felt like sandpaper, grating over his eyeballs, while the rest of his body had turned into the bubbling tar he'd seen once at the La Brea Tar Pits. Heat weighed him down. It filled his nose and glued his shirt to his chest. His crotch felt uncomfortable, too, but there was no way to fix that without squirming around, and right now, such a simple act exceeded his abilities.

It was a minor miracle he pried his eyelids open.

He wasn't in the car anymore. Someone had stretched him out on a narrow bed, the mattress beneath him thin and too short. The back of his ankles rested along the edge, though thankfully, somebody had taken off his shoes. As more of his senses came alive, the smell of diesel became the most prevalent scent, and his eardrums vibrated from the distant roar of engines.

"You're awake. Good." Ian's soft voice came from off to the side, but Lucas didn't have the muscle control yet to turn and look for him. As it turned out, he didn't have to. Ian appeared in his line of sight and knelt down, scooping one hand behind Lucas's neck to help him sit up. "Here. Drink this. It'll help you wake up."

The water was warm but refreshing. Lucas couldn't swallow the first mouthful easily, but the second went down more smoothly, the third even better than that. By the time he'd drained the glass, his head was clearer, his body more fluid, and he propped himself up on his elbows when Ian pulled it away.

He was in some sort warehouse, the ceiling vaulted high above his head. Bars caged them into a ten-by-ten cell, too narrow for a man to shimmy through. The heat that had him sweating through his clothes came from space heaters placed outside the perimeter, but to his other side, the wall was icy, like the world hovered in the wings, ready to remind him winter was only starting to rage.

"Where are we?" he asked, struggling upright.

"A private hangar."

"He's flying us out of the country? I guess we're going to Cairo after all."

"Perhaps. Or perhaps not." Ian waved toward something at the foot of the bed. Lucas had to sit up the rest of the way to see his sleeves of Polaroids and a stack of old books. "He's expecting me to translate enough of the tablets by morning to determine our next destination."

Lucas's stomach sank. "Those are the books from your office, aren't they?"

Ian nodded. "Our host admitted to the theft, though he has yet to tell me how he managed to get into the museum undetected."

"I don't suppose he told you what his name was."

"Actually, he did. Well, his first name, anyway. Masud."

For some reason, it sounded familiar, but Lucas dismissed it to focus on more immediate matters. "How long have you been awake?"

Now that Lucas was sitting up, Ian perched next to him, since the cot provided the only flat surface for seating other than the floor. "I woke just before we arrived. They probably gave you a larger dose since you're the greater threat."

He had enough motor control back to smile. "Obviously, they

didn't see you holding the gun on Sultis. I guess that makes you our secret weapon."

His attempts to lighten the mood failed miserably. Ian bent over and scrubbed his hands through his hair, rubbing at his scalp in frustration. "Some secret weapon. I walked us into an ambush."

"You took us home. That hardly counts as an ambush."

"We didn't have to stay at Beryl's. There wasn't any more reason to hide."

"We didn't have the keys to your flat. And all our stuff was at Beryl's. Not to mention this Masud has been watching us from the beginning. We didn't stand a chance." Resting his hand on Ian's shoulder, he frowned at the knots he felt there and started kneading, working over the top ridge in firm strokes. "Stop kicking yourself. We've been in worse."

Ian jerked upright and gaped. "Are you bloody kidding me? We're locked in a cage in the middle of who knows where, with a man who is just as likely to kill us when we've given him what he wants as Sultis was. You don't have shoes, I have a splitting headache from that damn drug they used on us, and I have six—" He jerked up his cuff to look at his watch. "Make that *five* hours, to figure out what nobody else has been able to decipher in centuries. Text nobody has even *seen* in centuries. And you're telling me, we've been in worse?"

Lucas kept his hand on Ian's back, refusing to back away. He knew this man well enough by now to recognize what was going on. Exhaustion, and the fear of the unknown, and the anxiety that he was in over his head, all worked against him. Ian carried it for as long as he could, and then snapped, lashing out when he could do nothing else. He'd done it in New York, and he would have done it on the plane if Lucas had allowed him. He wasn't going to give Ian the chance now.

"This Masud thinks he's calling the shots, but look at it. He *needs* us. He wouldn't have gone to the lengths he had if he didn't. He put men in with Sultis, because he didn't trust the asshole. Hell, look at what he did with Riley. If you think about it, he's probably the one responsible for the bomb threat, since he was so hot for Sultis to end up in jail." His hand slid up to grip the back of Ian's neck, trying to transfer as much confidence through his grip as he could. "He is not about to do anything that's going to jeopardize our lives. Not until he has the Blood of Sheol in his hot little hand. That is plenty of time for us to figure out how to get out of this." He waited until Ian met his gaze before grinning. "And if he takes us to Cairo, well, hell, you think I don't know people there, too?"

Ian stared at him for a moment, eyes uncharacteristically dark, then snorted and shook his head. "Have I told you lately how incorrigible you are?"

"Eh, you love it. Go on. Admit it."

He'd meant it as a joke. Something to lighten the mood and distract Ian further. But Ian took longer to respond than he would have anticipated, seconds upon seconds rather than the instantaneous smile he'd been hoping for.

What he got was a slow lean forward, an even slower slide of Ian's gaze to Lucas's mouth, and then the tentative brush of a kiss across his unsuspecting lips. Lucas parted for him to take more, but whatever the caress's purpose, it wasn't that. Ian retreated as unexpectedly as he'd advanced, a soft smile now brightening his demeanor.

"How does your incorrigible self propose answering Masud's demands for results in the morning?" he asked.

Lucas was more interested in hearing what had sparked the

kiss, but time wasn't on their side right now. He made a mental note to bring it up at the first opportunity, and restarted his massage down Ian's spine.

"I don't think he wants to hurt us," he said. "He could have done that at any point and chose not to. His goons didn't even rough us up."

"Unless you count drugging and kidnapping us."

"There are worse ways for that to happen. Trust me."

Ian cocked a brow. "Sometimes, I think you've lived a dozen lives already. You've seen so much. Done so much. I wonder if there's ever any way to catch up."

"It's not a race."

Another delay in answering. Lucas scanned Ian's face, wishing he could figure out what was going on in the man's head, but his handsome features were inscrutable.

"No, I suppose not," came the eventual reply. "And you likely have a point about the relative danger. They didn't hurt me, getting me from the car to the cage, and they were fairly careful with you."

"See? There you go." The muscles were looser now, no reason to continue the massage. Lucas dropped his hand and nodded toward the books. "Can I help you in any way? Maybe with both of our brains working on it, we'll actually meet our deadline."

Ian rose to cross and kneel next to the research materials. "If you could lay out the Polaroids, that would save me time having to do it myself." His hand hovered over the topmost book, like there was something blocking his way. "I can't believe I have to touch these without any gloves."

"That old, huh?"

"And valuable." A single fingertip touched the edge of the cover, then withdrew. "And not wholly mine."

Picking up the plastic sleeves, Lucas scooted to the end of the bed to give himself room to sort them. There might have been more space on the floor, but with the space heaters being at that level, it was too hot to be comfortable. "They're not expecting you to do the translation in the margins, are they?" When Ian's head shot up, the look of pure horror on his face, Lucas laughed. "See? It *could* be worse."

Ian finally found the courage to pluck the top book from the stack. He cradled it in his long hand, the spine nestled lovingly in his palm, and slowly opened it, keeping the pages at angles so the book didn't rest flat. Lucas paused in his sorting to stare, hypnotized by the delicate way Ian's fingers caressed the page edges, turning each one with such utter care the aged paper looked like it was floating. There was no doubt of his respect for the item in his hand, no uncertainty that he knew exactly what he was doing. His head bent, to better read the tiny, cramped script, and the stark line of his strong profile mesmerized Lucas even more.

"You know how else it could be worse?" he heard himself say. The lift of Ian's gaze was disappointing, because he didn't want the picture in front of him to change, even if he'd been the one to interrupt the other man. "If we weren't together."

For all his reluctance to shatter the image Ian presented, the sight of the delight in his eyes more than made up for it. "Yes," he said quietly. "I quite agree. One of the worst moments of this entire arrangement was when Sultis told me he could get by without you. The prospect of having to do this on my own, or that I wasn't going to see you again..."

He didn't have to finish. Lucas understood, whether or not the words failed Ian.

"Sultis has made it a point to destroy everything in his wake.

That's just who he is. There was no way I would have let him destroy you, too. I made you that promise from the start."

"Yes, you did." A flush crept into Ian's cheeks, and the shy way he ducked his eyes to bury his head in the book again made Lucas want to get up and kiss the man until they both needed a hell of a lot more. "I would never have held it against you, though. He's left so many casualties, and for what? A mythological artifact a university student told him existed. Someone without the training or full education to fully appreciate the complexities of what he'd found. It would be funny if it weren't so sad."

Lucas opened his mouth to correct Ian's assessment of Kafele Sinan's involvement, and then froze. He hadn't given the young Egyptian much thought at all since filling Ian in on Sultis and the history, as Lucas knew of it, of the search. He didn't like reliving the video of Sultis's interrogation, though echoes of the young man's screams occasionally haunted his darker dreams. But now he knew why their kidnapper's name was so familiar, and it wasn't because of its popularity.

He drank in the details of the hangar. Private. Indicated power.

So did having strings with immigration officials.

And being able to get into a powerful institution like the British Museum.

The pieces fell together naturally. Order among the chaos. Ian might have been the first to realize someone higher up than Sultis was behind certain events, but now Lucas finally understood who that someone higher up really was. And what he really wanted.

"We might have more bargaining clout than a finished translation," he said.

Ian broke away from his reading with a frown. "Why do you think that?"

"Because I know why we're here."

"But we're here for the translation."

"No, there's more to it than that. Do you know who Masud is? Did you pick up any more clues?"

"I told you everything I know. Where are you going with this?"

Lucas took a deep breath. Now that he had answers, everything seemed so much simpler. "He didn't give you a last name, because he probably thought you'd recognize him then. But his full name is Masud Sinan. He's Kafele's father."

# CHAPTER 18

By the time the hangar's murk began to lighten, insipid winter sunlight bleeding around the large bay doors, Ian's eyes were gritty, his fingers like sausages. He was accustomed to long nights, but the weak illumination combined with the tiny text in his books—not to mention the tablets—strained his energy reserves to the breaking point. At one point, he'd asked Lucas to copy some of the symbols onto his notepad so he could work from that, but when they had been less precise than he needed, he'd requested the man to stop.

Much to Lucas's amusement.

"None of it's going to matter when Masud gets here anyway," he'd said.

Ian had challenged his cryptic comment, but been brushed off

with a laugh and a, "Get back to work." He'd let it go then. He'd find out what Lucas meant soon enough.

Soon enough arrived far more quickly than he'd imagined. He was confident his original assessment about the language's origins were correct. The more closely he looked at it, the more he saw the Sumerian and Egyptian intertwined. The tablets were likely personal correspondence, rather than official, with at least one mixed household. The original shards would have to be carbon dated to determine when roughly they'd been created, but the two cultures had coexisted for millennia. Some overlap was not only feasible but probably inevitable.

No wonder Egypt had been so possessive of the tablets. If they were the result of cross-cultural interaction, Iraq could lay as much claim to them as they could. The last thing the countries needed was something else to add to the political strife.

Recognizing the language's roots, however, did not make the translation any easier. Some of the shards had broken in such a way as to lose parts of the symbols, though every time he found something like that, he commandeered Lucas's aid to finish it. After several moments of intense concentration—time when it felt like Lucas actually disappeared, leaving his physical shell behind—Lucas would pick up the pen and paper, carefully create the symbol, and pass it over to Ian. Ian always found its corresponding definition in his books. Further proof of Lucas's talent.

But that still left deducing the determinants, as well as attempting to understand the syntax when he didn't have direct translations available. He could always guess and speed things along, but it just wasn't in his nature. He had to plod along at his torturous pace the only way he knew how. That meant, when the hangar door squealed open, he had pages and pages of notes, and only two rows done.

Lucas stood as soon as the men marched inside and crossed to the bars, his arms folded over his muscled chest. The warmth kept his shirt perpetually damp, though he'd stayed as far from the space heaters as he could get, and he'd taken off his socks in a desperate attempt to cool down. But no amount of pit stains or gleams on the back of his neck could diminish the power and confidence he exuded in that moment. It was enough to make Ian's mouth go dry, and no, he was pretty sure that wasn't an effect of having stayed up all night.

Only two men accompanied Masud this morning, one of which was Riley, the truck driver. Ian still couldn't get past that one. Without the beard, he looked like an entirely different person. His association with Masud made his innocent acceptance of their story about why they were hitchhiking more understandable, though. It just amazed him that Masud had been so thorough in his surveillance.

"It's good to see you awake, Mr. Arpini," Masud said as he approached. He wore tailored slacks and a dark sweater beneath an expensive leather duster, further evidence of his wealth. Vaguely, Ian wondered how much he'd paid Sultis.

Lucas smiled. "I can't say that I'm glad I was knocked out, but I guess I can understand your reasoning." He paused, and then added, deliberately it sounded like, "Mr. Sinan."

Masud came to a halt on the outer edge of the ring of heaters. Mild surprise lifted his brows, but the slight tilt of his mouth suggested a certain respect. "You know who I am."

"It wasn't that hard to figure out once Ian told me what your first name was."

Masud glanced over Lucas's shoulder, prompting Ian to scramble to his feet. "And how was your evening, Mr. Tunbridge? Productive, I hope."

"Some," he admitted. "Though probably not as productive as you'll like."

"Why don't you let me be the judge of that?"

"You know what I don't get?" Lucas said. "Why you're even bothering. Is finding the Blood of Sheol supposed to be your ticket back into Parliament?"

Mention of the Egyptian government cast a shadow across Masud's face. It was nothing very big. Most people wouldn't even notice. But Ian watched him too closely not to see the reaction, how chilly it got, how angry he really was.

"My government betrayed both me and my son. I am not interested in returning to its ranks."

"But you still want us to find it. It can't be for the money."

"My motives are none of your concern."

"Oh, but see, that's where you're wrong. We're part of this now, and as much as you'd probably like to scare us into thinking otherwise, you're not going to kill us when this is all over. You've had too many chances to do that already."

"I needed you. I still need you."

"Yeah." Lucas gripped the bars and leaned forward as far as he could. They were set too close together for him to get his head through, though Riley and the other guard stiffened in response to his closer proximity anyway. "But not for what you think you do."

Masud sighed. Reaching into his coat pocket, he pulled out a keycard and handed it over to Riley. "I do not have time for your games, Mr. Arpini. Mr. Tunbridge, if you could please gather what you've translated so far, I'd like for you to come with me so I can

examine your findings."

Ian tracked Riley's path without moving, though Lucas didn't even bother with that much. His gaze remained on Masud, unflinching, waiting, even after the lock clicked free.

"I saw him die."

The wind whistled outside the hangar, but Lucas pitched his voice low, all games gone from his voice. Masud stiffened, his chin jerking up, and an odd glitter appeared in his dark eyes.

"That's impossible."

"Sultis had him recorded the whole time."

"You're lying. My men would have found the recording."

"He showed it to me. He wanted me to see what would happen if I didn't cooperate. I'm very sorry for your loss, Mr. Sinan."

Nobody was moving. Not Masud, not Ian, not even Riley at the cage door. Tension crackled between the two men, but Ian didn't dare do anything that might ease it. Even if he knew how.

"I know that's why you set all this up," Lucas continued. "To get back at Sultis. You found out he was behind your son's kidnapping, didn't you? You wanted revenge."

The corner of Masud's mouth tightened. "I want to clear my son's name. Sultis destroyed everything Kafele worked for. Everything he represented."

"He destroyed *Kafele*. That's what really makes you mad. And that's okay. You have a right to be angry. But you don't need the Blood of Sheol. It's not going to bring him back."

"Nothing is going to bring him back," Masud spat. Lucas's words had cut deep. This wound had been bandaged, not cauterized. "So I will do what I can to see his executioner in prison, and his name reinstated. I have been working for too long, and too hard, to fail him now."

"Because you already failed him once, right?"

Though there was no malice in Lucas's tone, even Ian flinched at the severity of the truth. Masud took a sharp step forward, jabbing his finger at Lucas.

"Do not make me regret protecting you, Mr. Arpini," he warned. "If Mr. Tunbridge has even some of the translation done, that means your part in this is done."

Lucas didn't back down from the threat. "You won't kill me. You're a better man than that."

"Perhaps. But I can alert the authorities that you've entered the country illegally. They can see to it that your life is far from comfortable if you pursue provoking me."

"But don't you see?" A soft sort of placating had entered his voice, meant to automatically coax the skittish into relaxing. Ian had been on the end of it more than once. "I'm not trying to provoke you. I'm trying to help you."

Masud dropped his hand back to his side. "You've already done so."

"I've helped you sort a few rocks. Big deal. You could have had a computer do that, if you'd been patient." Lucas mimicked Masud's retreat, releasing the bars to stand face to face with the man, no barriers between them but the cage bars. "Whether we want it to or not, family has its own order, its own kind of peace. And you loved your son. We both know that, regardless of whether or not you shared political views. I can help you find some balance again, Masud. I can show you where Sultis buried his body."

The simple announcement sent a tremor throughout the hangar. Masud's eyes widened. Ian caught his breath. Riley and the other guard both looked to their boss in frozen anticipation. The only one seemingly unaffected was Lucas, though Ian had the perfect view to see the tightness across his shoulders, like he braced for a blow he fully expected to come.

"You know where Kafele is?"

The low question was riddled with pain, hoarse and aching as his voice failed him for the first time. Ian couldn't even begin to imagine the kind of grief Masud must carry. It had fueled his manipulation of Sultis for months, shored behind protective walls to keep him safe and functional. But the hope Lucas offered was all it took to put a chink in those barriers, not just a crack but a crevice more than capable of a securing a powerful wedge.

"I can take you there," Lucas said. "I'm not sure if there's going to be enough evidence to prove Sultis did it, but you've already got him behind bars anyway. The important thing is putting Kafele's soul to rest. And yours."

From all their conversations, Ian had never envisioned Lucas as a spiritual person. He didn't talk about God. He didn't talk about faith, except in regards to having a positive attitude. He never struck Ian as someone who gave it much thought, but the words that rolled off his tongue now sounded completely natural and heartfelt, and in a flash, Ian realized he knew why.

People were drawn to Lucas for more reasons than the adventure that came with him. He was honest and good, and most importantly, he believed in the inherent goodness of others, often giving them the benefit of the doubt when they might not deserve it. Watching Kafele's death had hurt him deeply. He needed to know that the young man's pain had not been for naught. He wanted to believe it wouldn't have to last. He had to prove—to himself, to Masud—he wasn't part of the problem, but part of the solution.

Ian had never known anyone like Lucas before.

He'd certainly never fallen for a man like him before.

He sincerely hoped he got the opportunity to tell him after all this was done. He didn't even care if Lucas brushed him off with a smile and a wave as he jaunted off to his next destination. That was one menagerie he didn't mind being a part of.

"I thought..." Masud's voice broke, and he turned his head to cough discreetly into his hand. When his gaze returned, it was brighter than it had been before, his shoulders straighter. Whatever else, he'd gained strength in Lucas's offer. "I'm grateful for your kindness, but I'm sure it doesn't come without a price. What is it you want in return, Mr. Arpini?"

"Nothing you shouldn't do, anyway. Give up the hunt for the Blood of Sheol. You have the tablets. Take them back to Cairo, return them in Kafele's name, and let them finish what he started. You don't need to carry that kind of load, and frankly, Ian and I want our lives back."

Mention of him diverted Masud for a mere moment before he bowed his head. "If I recover Kafele, I'll return you to London with no further expectations."

"And my duffel bag?"

"And the museum's books," Ian interjected.

"The museum's property will be returned," Masud said. "As will your bag, Mr. Arpini, minus its contents."

Ian waited for the bartering to begin, but Lucas nodded and took a step away from the bars. "Fair enough. Now, can I have my shoes back so I don't have to walk around barefoot in the cold?"

\* \* \*

The listless clouds hugged the Devon horizon, as gray and

somber as the clutch of men congregated around the gash in the ground. Masud Sinan stood out of their way, though his penetrating gaze never left their steady work, while Ian and Lucas hung even farther back, unnecessary now that they'd found Kafele's final resting place.

They hadn't spoken since leaving the hangar. Ian hadn't even had the opportunity to steal a quick caress. Lucas sat in the front seat, offering directions, while Ian was left in the rear with a silent Masud.

Ian honored the quiet by not bothering the man. He had too much to process at the moment to be fussed with a near stranger offering his condolences.

There was no ceremony, no pomp to the lifting of the box from the ground. Ian's stomach turned at the sight of the crate. Sultis hadn't even bothered to make Kafele comfortable. The young man would have had to hunch into a ball in order to fit, though it occurred to him after he had that thought, that Kafele had likely been tied up first. The realization only sickened him even more, and he was forced to look away for fear of losing it.

Lucas remained steadfast. His sober eyes stared straight ahead, his mouth turned down. Even through their jackets, the tension came off him in waves. All Ian wanted to do was mitigate his melancholy, but he wasn't sure how. The best he could come up with was slipping his arm around the back of Lucas's waist.

Thankfully, Lucas didn't pull away. "I don't envy him," he said.

Ian was fairly certain he wasn't referring to Kafele. "You gave him what he's been searching for. Even if he didn't realize it."

"I wasn't sure he would go for it." At Ian's widened gaze, he finally glanced in his direction. "Disappointed?"

"Surprised. You seemed so sure."

"I wanted it to be true. Belief goes a long way."

Ian couldn't look away, even if he wanted to. *I believe in you*. Saying the words aloud, though, that was a different story. Because this wasn't about him, and his feelings, and his desire to distract Lucas from his pain. This was about Lucas, and all the weight he'd borne for the past couple months, and the need he had to make it right for a father who'd been prepared to move the earth for the sake of his son's name. He felt guilty about the mess he felt he'd created, too; Ian definitely recognized that. Ian didn't share the belief, but he'd already expressed his views on the matter. Lucas didn't need to hear them again.

Instead, he simply said, "I think you will always amaze me, Lucas Arpini."

Lucas smiled at that, and mirrored Ian's pose, easing his arm around him so their sides pressed together. "I'm glad we're both still around so I have the chance." The smile faded almost immediately, however, as Masud's men began to refill the empty grave. "If I never see another hole in the ground, it'll be too soon."

"Me, too."

A bird dipped along a sudden gust of cold wind, and Ian watched it correct its course and fly off toward a nearby power line, where it perched to witness the proceedings from above. Though the line swayed, the bird never moved, steady in what seemed so precarious.

When a second joined it, Ian sighed and turned in time to see Masud kneel at the side of the box. He looked fragile next to the worn wood, older than he'd first appeared. But as Masud closed his eyes and bowed his head, Ian knew those were illusions to hide the truth. There was the inner strength it had taken to do what he had to for Kafele, the longstanding determination to see it through to the end. Father for son. No more riddles, no more mysteries.

Order had been restored, even if there was a gap where once there'd been a vital young man.

His world was righted now, too, though the difference in his was opposite of Masud's. Instead of a gap, he had an extra piece, a warm, solid, astonishing man who had opened up the world to him in ways he'd never known possible.

All he had to do was figure out how to keep it open. And whether or not it was possible if Lucas moved on.

# CHAPTER 19

In two days, Lucas walked out the front door a grand total of one time. To get groceries at Tesco's so he wouldn't have to go out again. After all the traveling of the past two months, the notion of stretching out on Beryl's couch with a plate of sausage rolls perched on his stomach and *Blackadder* reruns on the television sounded a little bit like heaven. Occasionally, he got up to grab a piece of fruit, or use the bathroom, or change his clothes, but he always returned to the couch. It was a welcome reprieve.

His only regret was the solitude.

After Kafele's exhuming, Riley had been the one to take them back to London, dropping them off at the museum with apologies. Though Ian was exhausted, he'd wanted to talk to his superiors and find out what exactly was known about the dig murders and to confirm Sultis would be charged. He'd pressed Beryl's key into Lucas's hand, given him a soft but lingering kiss, and said he'd join him as soon as he could.

That night, Lucas got a call from a contrite Ian. The board wasn't taking the news well at all, which was to be expected, and he was being sequestered for further interviews, which hadn't been quite as anticipated.

"I'll ring you as soon as I can," he'd promised.

Lucas was still waiting for that.

He couldn't blame Ian for the delay, or really, if the contact never came at all. His entire life had been uprooted by the events of the past month. With Sultis in custody, there would be formal inquiries, and procedure evaluations, not to mention Ian's own role in the entire fiasco minutely scrutinized. For everything that had happened between them personally, he had no idea if any of it was strong enough to survive the segue into the real world—at least, on Ian's part.

For his, he wanted Ian back, maybe lying behind him on the couch, his arm around Lucas's waist as they simply enjoyed being in each other's company. He wanted those random kisses Ian bestowed when Lucas least expected it, the ones that made all his blood surge south and the back of his neck go hot. He wanted that shy smile, and the intelligent conversation that often went over his head, and the obliviousness Ian had to his own smarts.

Lucas sighed, realizing he'd just daydreamed through nearly an entire episode. Hell, he just wanted Ian.

A lapse in programming drove him to his feet and a muchneeded crack of his back. He should take a shower, then afterward, he could call the museum to see if he could catch Ian. The man had to eat sometime. Why couldn't they do it together? No pressure, just a meal shared between friends.

If Ian wanted to see you, wouldn't he have called already?

Lucas muzzled the little voice and headed for the bathroom anyway. He could still wash up, and maybe he could scald the doubt away.

The water helped. Beryl's shower lacked anything remotely resembling pressure, but the temperature did a lot to waken his indolent muscles, as well as clear the cobwebs in his thoughts. When he stepped out, he scrubbed the droplets from his skin with a fresh vigor, humming under his breath.

One thought had crystallized.

Ian couldn't know Lucas wanted him around if Lucas didn't tell him.

Problem solved.

With the towel wrapped around his waist, he wandered out of the steam-filled bathroom to get his clean pants out of the dryer. He'd felt a little funny about using a stranger's washing machine, but after teasing him about his propensity to leave spare bags with friends around the world, Ian had assured him Beryl would expect them to make themselves at home. He'd bought his own soap, though. He figured that would mitigate some of the abuse on her hospitality.

He stopped short when he realized the TV was off. He'd left it on, for the noise if nothing else. His nerves immediately jumped to high alert, and his gaze darted around in search of whoever might be making the drop on him this time. Could Sultis have been released from prison? Did Masud change his mind about leaving them alone?

Something banged in the kitchen, followed by the refrigerator opening. Lucas took two careful steps toward the sounds when he

heard, "Just how many sausage rolls does it take to satisfy you?"

The jolt of pleasure at the sound of Ian's voice carried him the rest of the way. He did his best to keep from skidding into the kitchen, stopping on the threshold as soon as he spotted Ian setting a small box of brown eggs onto the counter so he didn't look even more desperate. The distance gave him the space to drink the man in, too.

Ian wore a dark blue, long-sleeved shirt that somehow managed to both deepen the color of his eyes and set off his fair complexion. It was tucked into a pair of dark jeans, and, with his back to Lucas, gave the perfect view of the denim hugging his lean hips and tight ass. The combination was more than enough to make his cock come back to life, thickening noticeably beneath the towel. His only way to hide it was to come in and lean forward against the edge of the counter.

"You look like you finally got some sleep," he commented.

Ian's embarrassed smile finished the job his ass had started, throwing in some extra goose bumps for good measure. "I've been asleep most of the day, actually. McKendree and the directors kept me up for most of the past forty-eight hours."

Guilt shot through Lucas for ever doubting Ian's commitment. "Things all good on that front, then?"

"Perfect, actually. Several of Sultis's men have come forth to testify against him, in exchange for lighter sentences." He bent down to open a narrow cupboard and withdrew a small frying pan. "Did you buy any bread we can toast? Just eggs might be a tad boring."

Rather than reveal his arousal, Lucas nodded toward the far side of the refrigerator. "In the breadbox. Are you making me dinner?"

Ian froze, as if he'd been caught doing something he shouldn't. "Have you already eaten?"

"No, no, I just...you're taking me by surprise, that's all."

His denial unlocked Ian's muscles, and he finished setting the pan on the stove. "I didn't even think about bringing any food over, and I suppose we *could* go out..." He raked his gaze over Lucas's bare chest and then downward, a gleam sparking in its depths. "However, I rather prefer you in this state. Hiding it by getting dressed seems a crime against nature."

Unabashed delight sparked Lucas's answering grin. "If I didn't know you better, I'd say you were flirting with me."

"Then I suggest we spend the evening getting better acquainted, because that's exactly what I was doing."

Lucas gave up on trying to hide and came around the edge of the counter, pressing into Ian's back as he wrapped his arms around his waist. His erection ground into Ian's ass, throbbing even more when he smelled the fresh cologne wafting from the man's pores. He couldn't resist. He buried his nose in Ian's neck and licked along the taut sinew.

"I was getting ready to come out and find you," he admitted. "I figured two days was long enough to be noble."

Ian tilted his head a fraction, allowing more room for Lucas to nuzzle. "I'm sorry. I should have rung."

"Doesn't matter. You're here now."

It shocked him how good Ian actually felt. It shocked him even more how badly he'd missed it. Closing his eyes, Lucas breathed in Ian's scent, not moving for several seconds as he absorbed as much heat as he could. The best part about it was, Ian let him.

When he finally eased his hold, he did so reluctantly, loosening his arm to give Ian room to move again. "Do you want me to get dressed and run out to Tesco's for anything?" he asked. "I don't have a lot of supplies left. I don't even have any milk for tea if you wanted some."

"No, you don't need to go to the shops. But clothes might not be such a bad idea." He cast a sideways glance before setting to work on the eggs and toast again. "I was hoping we could pack your things and take them back to my flat. I have a proposition I'd like to make."

"A proposition, huh? And it requires you being on your own turf?"

"Well, no, the proposition doesn't. But my bed is bigger than Beryl's. Trust me. We'll be far more comfortable in it than the one upstairs."

He had seen more and more glimpses of this bolder Ian as time progressed. He'd found the nervous, wary man in the California caverns adorable, especially with the bursts of trust that came out of the blue. He'd relished the companion he found on their crosscountry trip, even in Shreveport when Ian had discovered Don and Maggie were his parents. Their date in New York had been surprising, and beguiling, and hot beyond anything he could imagine. At least, it was until they got to London, and the hours he'd spent wound around Ian, inside him, against him, had eclipsed everything else. With each passing day, each obstacle out of their way, Ian had opened up a little bit more.

The man who now stood at the tiny stove, cracking eggs for their rudimentary dinner, smiling at Lucas like he'd hung the moon, was everything Lucas had ever wanted—dreamed of—and more.

"You work on the food," Lucas said, already moving. "I'll take care of the packing."

Pulling on his cargos with a full-blown erection wasn't fun, especially when he couldn't get thoughts of the two of them naked for hours on end out of his head. Packing was a cinch, though. It was amazing how fast it could go when the destination was a hell of a lot more important than a few wrinkled T-shirts.

He returned to the kitchen to find Ian setting the small table, two plates laden with fried eggs and toast. Ian smiled as Lucas slid into the seat, but before he could straighten and move away, Lucas grabbed his wrist and tugged him down, catching the back of his neck to keep him still.

"Have I mentioned yet how glad I am you're here?" Lucas murmured, his lips grazing over Ian's.

He didn't wait for a reply. It was a rhetorical question anyway.

He stretched to close the distance, sealing their mouths together. The first contact brought a moan from his throat, and all he could think was, *I am not waiting this long to kiss him ever again*. Because nobody tasted like Ian did, or opened to him so readily. Nobody had ever made him feel like he was drowning before, just from a simple kiss. Their tongues twisted together, danced apart, found each other again only to start the seduction anew, and through it all, they held on, each with a hand around the other's nape, as if desperate to keep the other from disappearing.

When they parted, his head pounded, and his cock ached. Ian's pupils were blown, and the soft cant of his swollen mouth almost drove Lucas back for another kiss.

"I'll forgive you for not mentioning it earlier since you made up for it so nicely," Ian teased.

Lucas laughed and slapped him on the shoulder. "Let's eat and get out of here. I haven't even started making up for anything yet."

The eggs were a great surprise, firm whites with yolks still

runny enough to sop up with the toast. Ian watched Lucas in obvious amusement, taking one bite to every three of his, but once Lucas started, he found it impossible to stop until the eggs were all gone.

"Have you eaten anything other than sausage rolls since we got back?" he asked when Lucas set his fork down.

"Maybe you're just a great cook."

"And I think that answers my question."

"I haven't really given food much thought," Lucas said. "I've had other stuff on my mind."

"Oh? Like what?"

"Like my work. I haven't held my camera in way too long."

For a moment, he thought he saw Ian hesitate, his lashes flickering up as his brows drew together. It only lasted a second, though, and then Ian was eating again, taking the bite off his fork and chewing slowly.

"McKendree showed me some of your photos after we had the conference call with the California police," Ian said. "He was shocked I hadn't seen them before."

Lucas shrugged. "How could you? It's not like I carry my portfolio around with me. And we had more important things to worry about."

"Still. It felt like I should have known...more. Because it was extraordinary." A twinkle glittered in his eye. "You're even more talented than you said you were."

Though Ian had couched it in a joke, the compliment was still obvious, enough to bring a pleased flush to Lucas's cheeks. "So if I had my gear in New York shipped to your apartment, would that be a problem?"

The hesitation this time was far more pronounced, a freezing of

muscles and attention as Ian stared blankly at Lucas. "You're not going back?"

"Well, I'm not if you say it's okay for me to give them your address. I'm thinking it's time for an urban study. And I've never shot London before." The sudden thought Ian might not be willing to share his personal space so soon had him quickly backtracking. "I wouldn't be in your way for long. Just until I found someplace to rent or sublet or something."

His retreat broke Ian's stasis, hurtling him into fast forward. "No, no, you're welcome to stay as long as you want. You'll always be welcome. I mean that. No matter what you decide to do, or where you go. I want...I'd like..." He broke off with a flustered laugh, shaking his head as he set down his fork and reached for his glass. "I wasn't nearly this clumsy in my head on my way over here. In fact, I was quite eloquent. You would have been impressed."

Lucas watched his Adam's apple bob as he gulped down the water. "You were practicing something to say to me?" Hope he knew he shouldn't encourage flared hot and ready to take control. "What was it?"

"My proposition."

"You could give it to me now. Get some of your street cred back."

Ian snorted, but Lucas's small tease had worked to relax him again. "You've always been too generous in your estimation of me."

"And you've never been generous enough."

Ian resumed eating, somehow even more slowly than before. "I did do something unexpected during one of my breaks with McKendree. I'm not sure if you'd be impressed or not." "What?"

"I called my father."

He didn't provide further details, and Lucas wasn't sure he needed to hear them. After watching Masud Sinan's reactions concerning his son, he'd felt his own tugs to check in with his parents. He'd squelched them when they occurred, but their infrequent reappearances had been enough to turn his dreams into broken landscapes of memories and hopes for time with Ian, awkward amalgams that left him hard and guilty when he woke up. It was easier not to think about them at all. Denial was one skill he'd learned all too well from them, and while he'd done everything he could to eradicate it from other aspects of his life, in this, he was convinced it was best. For all of them.

It didn't have to be for Ian. Sure, he'd given Ian a hard time about trying to live up to his father's expectations, but at least his dad was still talking to him. His father still acknowledged his existence. Theirs was a fractured relationship at best, but he had to believe there was still hope for them. Especially if Ian had chosen to contact him.

No, he didn't need to know what had been said between the two men. All he needed was, "Did it help?"

Ian dragged his fork through the yolk, leaving sunburst stripes along the lip of the white china. "Yes," he said, as if the revelation surprised him. "He was...taken rather aback by what happened in California. He even threatened to go to the museum board to denounce their lack of security protocols, if something like this could happen on one of their digs. I told him that wasn't necessary, that it was hardly their fault Sultis was so heavy-handed. But it was nice to hear him get angry on my behalf for a change."

Lucas would have said *It's about time* but this wasn't the place

for it. "What about this proposition for me? This doesn't have anything to do with him, does it?"

"No, nothing like that." Ian spooned the last of his egg onto his toast, assiduously not looking at Lucas. He cleared his throat. "It's about the pack that got left in my office during the bomb threat, actually. The one with all the copies of your Polaroids."

In all the crash of returning to earth, amidst the longing for Ian and reawakened memories, he'd completely forgotten about the duplicates. All of his focus had been on the originals in his possession. Ian had been the one to take care of the copies, so he'd seen no reason to hold onto any fears about them.

"What about it?"

"I still have it."

"The police didn't confiscate it?"

Ian glanced up at him once through his lashes. "That would require them to have been told about it. No one knows of its existence but you and me."

His heart thudded furiously against his ribs. "What are you going to do with it?"

"Well..." He could tell Ian was playing this for effect, dragging it out now that he knew he had Lucas well and truly hooked. "It really is a fascinating exercise. And the museum has its books back, albeit a little worse for wear. I see no reason why I shouldn't see what I come up with, now that I have the resources and time."

"Would you give the translation to Masud when you're done?"

A smile blossomed. "Now, why would I do that when you so effectively convinced him he didn't really want the Blood of Sheol? It would be a shame to spoil all your hard work."

"And where exactly do I fit into this proposition of yours?"

"Well, I'd originally intended to ask you to stay on and give me

#### ARIES: RIDDLE ME WICKED

time to do the translation. But seeing as you've decided that already for me, my suggestion is this." Finally, he set down his fork and pushed aside his plate, folding his arms in front of them and leaning forward. Lucas couldn't remember ever seeing him this animated before, this excited, and this relaxed all at the same time. It was a look he was eager to cultivate. "Stay with me. Don't worry about finding a let. We live together while you work on your next project, and I work on this, and then, when we're both done, and if the translation says everything you always wanted it to, I'd like for us to go find it. Together. Because there's nothing I'd like more in this world than to still be your partner. In any way you'll allow me to be."

They were words he'd longed to hear. For hours, for days, forever it felt like. It was almost surreal he finally could, without any instigation or suggestion on his part. "What about your job?" he heard himself asking. A tiny but insistent voice inside his head screamed at him to stop questioning his good fortune and take it, but he was powerless to comply. He couldn't be that selfish. Not this time. Not with this man.

"I can take a holiday," Ian said. "I've accrued more than enough time, especially considering recent events."

"But you've always said it was a myth."

"It still could be. The thing is..." He reached out, his warm hand enveloping Lucas's. "We won't know until we try, now will we?"

Lucas turned his wrist to entwine their fingers together, using the join to tug Ian to his feet. The movement brought their bodies flush, hip to hip, chest to chest, everything excruciatingly sensitive to the slightest pressure, enough to make his skin feel like it was going to burst at the first prick. He sighed when Ian automatically wrapped his free arm around his back, holding him as if he never wanted to let him go, and closed the rest of the distance between them to steal one more kiss.

"More than just business partners," he said. "And that's a promise."

He felt Ian's smile. "You're rather fond of making promises." Another kiss, a tightening of the embrace. Heat pooled in his groin, but there would be time enough for that later. "It's a good thing I have firsthand experience you're excellent at keeping them."

Experience Lucas had every intention of reinforcing.

Whether in London, in Cairo, or halfway around the world beneath the California redwoods.

As far as he was concerned, their adventure was only beginning.

### VIVIEN DEAN

Vivien Dean has had a lifetime love affair with stories. A multipublished author, her books have been EPPIE finalists, *Romantic Times* Reviewer's Choice Nominees, and reader favorites. After spending her twenties and early thirties traveling, she has finally settled down and currently resides in northern California with her husband and two children.

For more information about Vivien and her books, visit her website at

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\* \* \*

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